

CARTER MATHESON IN **KNUCKLE DOWN**

CHAPTER ONE: THE SNATCH

Midtown Manhattan, 11 A.M.

Donovan focused on the body lying on the table in front of him as though it were the last thing he would ever see. His concentration was unflinching. His hands moved delicately yet precisely.

“This is taking longer than expected,” his assistant Mo said quietly.

“Perfection takes time,” Donovan grinned.

While most people conducting this procedure would be sweating bullets. Not Donovan—even though she wiped his brow every few minutes.

“You good?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Very.”

“Nervous?”

“Never.”

Maiko “Mo” Wang was Japanese and had been Donovan’s assistant and girlfriend for the past ten years. She knew him well, and could tell when he was bluffing. Today, she wasn’t sure. Attentive, she admired the skill with which his hands worked and the effortless way the razor sharp tool sliced through tender skin.

“Have you decided what pattern you’ll use?”

“What?”

“Pattern, you know—” she hesitated.

“Three loop pulley.”

She nodded.

The temperature in the warehouse had lowered considerably, and had to be in order to keep the meat fresh and the surgeon sharp. The area doubled as a temporary refrigeration station for a nearby restaurant. Being underground also helped keep noise and interruptions at bay.

“High tensile strength. Less gap,” he quietly said. “Prevents ripping.”

“Of course.”

As the blade glistened from the bright overhead lights, Donovan caught himself staring at the angelic face of the child on his operating table—marveling at her porcelain skin and golden, soft hair. It was a sharp contrast to what lay in front of them.

“This is certainly one of your more...” Mo hesitated. “Ambitious scenarios.”

“Drastic times. Drastic measures.”

Making a last deep cut, he was careful not to lacerate internal organs. He likewise wanted to keep the scar minimal, although he knew the girl would be reminded of this moment, and the maniac performing the procedure, for years to come.

Donovan whistled, keeping his spirits up and nerves down.

Three Hours Earlier—

Young Abigail Burton was strolling through Central Park with her Nanny—french-born Stephanie Marcheaux, just as they did every weekday. Having just left the Zoo, the two were making their way to the Dairy Visitor Center & Gift Shop, when the distance between them stretched.

“Abigail, stay close!” Stephanie shouted, as the nine year old ran toward balloon artists who were busily making free souvenirs for a large gaggle of children.

“Oui, oui, Miss Stephanie,” Abigail giggled, as she joined other children who were likewise mesmerized by the colorful and animated clowns. Abigail was the only child of New York Mayor, Lukas S. Burton, one of the most admired leaders of New York—perhaps the entire country. He had been commended for dramatically lowering both crime and tax rates for three years in a row, and rumored to be considering running for President of the United States.

Summer had arrived early in Manhattan. The flowers were in full bloom and people were out in droves. That, and a 5K race for Breast Cancer Awareness, made for a packed park. The race was to begin in the middle of the park—where 65th Transverse intersected Center Drive, and would end a city block north of the Columbus Circle entrance—where 59th met Central Park West.

Stephanie was completely engrossed in her cell phone, when she glanced up to find Abigail missing.

“Abi?” she screamed, whipping her head around in all directions.

“Over here,” Abigail shouted, waving to her friends, as she ran toward her nanny.

Stephanie’s shoulders relaxed just as a woman approached from behind. She pulled on Stephanie’s sleeve.

“Please help me. I’ve lost my little girl,” the woman cried first in French, then in English.

Distracted by the hysteria, but pulled in by the stranger’s familiar accent, Stephanie first checked to see that Abigail was still nearby. There she was, alongside several children petting a large rabbit which was being held and stroked by a tall circus clown with yellow hair and a red nose.

“Please help,” the stranger shouted, still pulling at Stephanie’s sweater. “My little girl has run off and…”

Stephanie asked, “Where did you see her last?” Then abruptly stopped as the eyes of the hysterical woman suddenly shifted from terror to neutrality.

Confused, Stephanie whipped back to scan the crowd. She gasped aloud when she couldn’t find Abigail.

Also, there was no clown.

As well as no rabbit.

And no Abigail.

Shocked and distracted by the continual pulling at her sleeve, Stephanie spun back around to the hysterical stranger. However, he was suddenly face to face with a blind man wearing sunglasses and holding a cane. He appeared disoriented.

“*Putain de merde!*” Stephanie screamed in French, frantically fumbling for her cellphone, while scanning the park for help.

“Holy shit, indeed,” said the blind man.

Ignoring the man, Stephanie saw a police officer in the distance and felt momentarily hopeful.

Now as she turned back to the second stranger, *he* was gone.

In a flash, her tears turned to sobs, as her head buzzed with confusion and her heart sank with guilt. Standing amidst a throng of runners and sun-worshipping strangers, the Mayor’s number one employee of the past dozen years was paralyzed with fear, afraid she would be fired.

Or murdered and dumped in the East River, she sobbed.

Either solution would be better than being responsible for the loss of Abigail Renee Burton.

As his daughter was being snatched from Central Park, Mayor Burton was hosting a televised conference about a new super train he was promoting which would run the distance of Long Island. At the same time, Abigail's socialite mother, Clare Marie, was hosting a fundraising event atop the elegant Frick Museum on the upper-crusty East Side.

Simultaneously, Donovan's other assistant and second girlfriend, Margo "Hysterical Mother" Wheeler, along with Donovan's bodyguard, Ken "Park Clown" Dawson, and sidekick, Sean "Blind Man" Combs, were racing down the Westside Highway in an all black SUV adorned with police license plates, strobing lights, and a blaring siren.

By the time the nanny had cleared enough headspace to call 911, they were in the underbelly of a subterranean warehouse in the Chelsea district of Midtown—disappearing without a trace.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PREP

Donovan had the attention of his crew who were watching their leader pace like an expectant father. Periodically scanning mid-town Manhattan, his eyes shifted from the city, to his team. The constant motion was not nerves, but energy. Staying fit with daily exercise kept him at the front of the pack. In every situation. His confidence, plus the drive to win at any cost, had always made him one of the elite in any of his former units. But his days of military service had run off the rails, evolving into a new mission.

His current squadron included Mo Wang—a woman he had known the longest. She was expert in computers and electronic surveillance. Besides being one of his two girlfriends, she was the only person he trusted with his life.

Another he trusted nearly as well was Ken Dawson—a comrade of twenty years. They had grown up together in their old Brooklyn neighborhood. That was before one turned to the military, and the other to law enforcement. Ken became Donovan's bodyguard about seven years ago, when Donovan found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time; something that didn't happen often. Ken was there to save his ass. It also became the tipping point where Ken exchanged his "life of Blue" for a life of crime.

When Donovan showed Ken his future could be infinitely more lucrative if he helped get his pal out of a tight spot, it was Game Over. Their secret sauce was how they had managed for Ken to keep one foot in the blue camp and the other working for *Team Scorpion*.

"It won't be long," Donovan said, checking his Tag Heuer, "Before the shit hits the fan."

"But you've planned meticulously," Mo smiled. "As always."

"She's right, Donovan," Margo added. "We've gone over the mechanics a dozen times. The snatch was flawless."

Sean nodded. "Copy that, boss. I'd beg anyone to put a bead on us."

"That's not my concern. You all performed perfectly. It's the unknown I'm always overly cautious about."

Donovan wanted his team always happy and ever loyal. Which is why he spared no expense in providing luxurious homes with a state-of-the-art fitness center and pool on the penthouse level of the building the entire team occupied. Add to that handsome salaries, huge bonuses, and all the toys one could want, and it was a win-win.

Avalon Tower was a glass and steel tower that skyrocketed toward the sky, passing all surrounding high-rises by dozens of stories. Among the best in the city, it offered modern construction, European amenities like a full-blown concierge service. The 1,225 foot residential tower placed it among the five tallest buildings in New York City—in between the Empire State Building and Bank of America tower. The only taller residential tower was 425 Park Avenue, climbing nearly as high as One World Trade—the proud replacement to the two World Trade Center buildings that collapsed on 9-11, which rose to 1,776 feet.

It was nearly five years ago when Donovan and his investors began erecting the modern structure on Eleventh Avenue. Being located in the heart of Hell's Kitchen, it practically sat atop the Lincoln Tunnel, had instant access to Air Pegasus heliport on 30th, was within minutes of

Penn Station, and not much further from Grand Central Station. The location, and more specifically Donovan's penthouse, provided perfect visibility of the George Washington Bridge to the north, the Holland Tunnel and Brooklyn Bridge to the South, and both the Queensboro Bridge and Midtown Tunnel to the East.

Having a bird's eye view of the island was not only a luxury, but a necessity. The office, and home to their underground labs, sat directly across the street in a nondescript eight-story brick building. Built in 1905, Donovan had purchased it a decade ago when his drug business was young and prosperous. The building had remained unchanged, with one exception. The building maestro had created construction magic by leaving alone all the office units which faced Eleventh and 45th Avenue, while the two sides which faced neighboring buildings were retrofitted like a Hollywood backlot, showing what appeared to be a live office. Lights turned on and off all hours of the day and night which provided a perfect cover for his underground business.

The center of the building had been cut out like an enormous tube, extending from the basement to the roof's skylights. This allowed any airborne byproducts to filter from the basement before dissipating through the roof. Thanks to advanced filtering systems, it called no attention. The subterranean warehouse was three stories deep, underneath two parking decks, and apart from hiding a monstrous drug lab, the depth of the building masked tremendous technology for all the monitoring that happened in Donovan's penthouse.

"This is why I chose you guys long ago. And why we're working together today," Donovan said, looking at each of his team.

"And we will see this through, just as we have from the start," Mo said quietly.

Taking a remote, he aimed it at a large piece of art on the wall. A panel quietly lifted into a pocket in the ceiling, as a bank of tall doors quietly opened and seamlessly pivoted before disappearing into the wall. All eyes were on a wall of TV screens which were monitoring most of the major intersections in Manhattan.

The team clapped as though he just dropped a winning putt. The technology, along with an enormous arsenal of weapons, made for one of the most expensive bank of toys Donovan had ever created.

When Donovan's underground lab at the former Nuclear Power Plant outside Havana was demolished—thanks to misplaced operatives who got embedded with a business partner of his, he needed an alternate place to expand his business, without having to travel overseas. Plus, the hometown boy wanted to make his mark in his own backyard.

"Is that the Governor's—" Sean began.

"Mansion? Yes," Donovan grinned. "And the Mayor's home," he said, pointing at another screen. "Over here is the home of our esteemed Chief of Police." Pointing to another screen, he added, "And just outside the *secret* entrance to the United Nations," Donovan said, crossing the room, "Is the Federal Reserve Bank. Oh, and we can't leave out the Central Park Zoo."

"Looks familiar, right kids?" Margo joked, punching Sean in the shoulder.

"And Times Square, One World Trade, The Stock Exchange, Penn Station, Grand Central," he continued clicking screens, "And all the tunnel and bridges, with entrances *and* exits."

"Talking about Big Brother," Mo chuckled. "Jesus."

"Nah," Donovan grinned, "You can just call me *Scorpion*."