

Chapter 1

It was late, and Special Agent Michael Brennan was exhausted. In the course of one rather eventful afternoon, the federal officer had successfully alienated his boss and pushed the bureau's hierarchy well beyond their conservative limits.

Ross Tanner, Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Organized Crime Task Force, in New York city, had been *incensed* by Special Agent Brennan's behavior. This time he'd really done it. Tanner knew that *he* would be held accountable for his task force leader's meltdown. The question was, could he survive the fallout?

Predictably, Tanner knew the collective blood pressure of the third floor brass had to be well into the danger zone pushing "*TILT*" on its way to *combustible*. The fate of Agent Brennan had been passed like a hot potato through the department of humorless federal clones more interested in damage control than the agent's future. Denise, "DiDi" Parker, the newly appointed, power hungry, ass kicking deputy director, would be leading the charge for his permanent expulsion.

Assistant Director Tanner had been waiting most impatiently to be summoned to Deputy Director's private office, *unofficially* known as the "Devil's Den." There had always been an underlying animosity between the administration and the task force agents, who'd prided themselves on nonconformity and interminable insubordination. The "cryptic" Agents gracefully

accepted their sentence that had banished them to a damp, dark, ðdungeonö located deep in the bowels of the building.

While pacing the floor of his office, Assistant Director Tanner felt a surge of adrenaline hit his stomach like Niagara Falls. He stopped abruptly and began massaging his chest as if trying to ward off a particularly annoying bout of indigestion. It was quiet, and he was grateful for the reprieve. He reached into his desk for the decorative pill box that had been a gift from his late wife that held a dozen robin's egg blue tablets. Placing a tablet under his tongue, he sat down and closed his eyes. Relaxing into his faded black leather chair, he tried breathing slowly and deeply, praying for the tightness and burning to ease inside his chest. Several minutes passed before the weight lifted, but deep down inside he'd been terrified that the next episode would turn into the "big one," heart attack central. Tanner had been waiting for the consequences of Special Agent Brennan's breach of, well, everything, and half expected the administration to entertain the disbanding of the entire Organized Crime Task Force.

His thoughts were interrupted by the melodic tone of his BlackBerry announcing a new text message. So, it's been decided; he thought putting on his game face. Special Agent Brennan's fate had been sealed.

The Assistant Director stepped out of his office adjusting his necktie as the elevator doors swished open with a resounding "ping." Out stepped the over confident, hauntingly beautiful, fire breathing dragon lady, Deputy Director DiDi Parker, accompanied by her entourage of brainwashed do-gooders that didn't possess an original thought of their own. They all wore atypical dark suits, each as drab and boring as the next, and were accessorized with an unyielding sneer and a pompous attitude. He was disturbed that Special Agent Michael Brennan's future had

been decided by *this* administration, whose rigidity had preceded them. Shaking his head in disgust, Assistant Director Tanner feared that there wasn't a chance in Hell that he'd received a fair and impartial hearing. Of this he was sure. Agent Brennan's career was DOA.

Not only had Special Agent Brennan jeopardized his already tenuous future as a government employee, but he'd inadvertently challenged the very principles he'd fought to uphold. Pissing off the most powerful contemporary crime boss the city had ever had the misfortune to host wasn't his finest hour. His outburst may have compromised the team's eighteen-month-long surveillance operation, documenting every business deal the organized crime family had made. This time it seemed that Brennan's habitual insubordination and inherent aversion to rules in general made a city-wide black out appear *brighter* than his plight.

The Deputy Director announced flatly that Agent Brennan would be taken into protective custody *without* delay; furthermore, he would face the disciplinary review board for reassignment and possible dismissal. Protective custody, which was as good as a death sentence, was what they referred to as WITSEC, yet another acronym of which the government seemed to be so fond. He'd be secretly whisked off to a glorified federal prison *without* bars. Assistant Director Tanner was further informed that Deputy Director Parker would personally review his own culpability in this disaster. Additionally, she would be waiting for his insights on how to nurse the crippled investigation back to health.

After recently losing his wife to cancer, Assistant Director Tanner's tolerance for the agents' antics had fallen below the fault line and an earthquake was on the horizon. It took all his energy just to make it through each day. He'd just assumed fast-forwarding his life into the next millennia to somehow ease the pain of missing her. To combat his loneliness, he *zealously*

delved into the study of psychological profiling and had taken a special interest in the members of his Organized Crime Task Force. He had been forthcoming in sharing his wealth of knowledge with each individual agent, whether they wanted to be enlightened or not. Special Agent Michael Brennan, a rare unpolished gem and fearless leader of the aforementioned task force, coincidentally had been the latest victim of his psychological dissection. It was too bad the Assistant Director's psychobabble hadn't been delivered in time to save Michael from himself.

The tired and drained Assistant Director and his detainee walked to an unmarked sedan that had been waiting for them at the rear of the building. The Organized Crime Task Force leader's fellow team members had cleared the area of any unauthorized guests. A well proven sniper had even been positioned on the roof for optimal coverage from a bird's eye view, ready and waiting to deploy the *kill shot* if their enemy was on the prowl.

Assistant Director Tanner and his charge rode in silence. When the car came to an abrupt halt, it had become painfully clear that this was the end of the road for Michael. Reluctantly he exited the vehicle and found himself on the doorstep of a dilapidated apartment in the heart of the ghetto that had been desperately in need of a face lift for *fifty* years. Michael thought, "Is this *really* the safe house?" It may have been a safe house back in the day, but today "*safe*" was interchangeable with "*crack*," which would define its true character more accurately.

The sedan that Tanner had procured looked harmless, or that was the presumption the bureau wished the general populous to believe. Under its generic, nondescript appearance, it had been reinforced with overlapping interlocked ballistic steel as strong as Kevlar and fireproof as well. The windows had been secured with laminated polycarbonate that could withstand the force of incoming projectiles, if they became target practice. It had been pimped out with a

console that looked like something out of a Bond movie and gadgets that had specific designations capable of supporting any counteroffensive action or evasive maneuver needed.

The sedan's passenger window hummed as it slid down. "We'll discuss your future tomorrow, if you still have one," his boss said despondently and then drove away without looking back.

Michael, still reeling from the events of the day, watched helplessly as his only connection to the world faded into the sunset. For once words escaped him, and now he was being exiled *because* of them.

Hastily departing from headquarters hadn't given Michael time to gather anything but his laptop and standard-issue backpack. The black nylon sack looked innocuous enough, but Michael kept it in his locker stocked with an impressive array of techno toys, prepared for any contingency, including, but not limited to his current debacle. Most importantly, it contained two extra clips and a box of ammunition for his 40 cal. Glock that never left his side. Sadly he suspected that these humble acquisitions may be the sum of all his possessions for days and maybe even weeks to come.

As a highly trained professional, Special Agent Michael Brennan automatically scanned the periphery of the neighborhood for potential security threats. No immediate threats had been detected, but it was obvious that the neighborhood had been polluted by the violence of gang wars and he'd been dropped at ground *zero*.

Gazing skyward and summoning the courage to move ahead, he felt the first drops of a lazy spring rain and caught the last rays of sunset in a stunning spectrum of reds and violets before disappearing into the horizon. He felt a sinking inside his chest as he realized that it too

may be the sunset of his career. After viewing the spectacular scene, Michael found it ironic that nature had created such an inspiring backdrop to showcase the perpetual infestation of urban decay.

Michael faced the door as if he'd been waiting for someone to challenge him to a standoff. When he produced the key that Assistant Director Tanner quietly placed into his hand, he examined the shiny piece of metal suspiciously, fairly certain that it would open the gates to Hell. Inserting the key into the lock, he held his breath as the bolt relinquished its control with a loud "clack," daring him to enter. He opened the door, which generated a whirlwind of dust that attacked Michael like a swarm of bees. After the dust particles settled, he could see that the accommodations were one star *below* a cardboard box and hours away from a wrecking ball intervention; not only had it been the porthole to Hell, but Satan himself was stoking the fire.

"Welcome to exile!" he cried miserably.

His heart sank. The apartment looked much like he felt; and worse, he could envision the administration toasting the imminent termination of one troublesome special agent. Take a number, Michael thought sardonically.

While massaging the back of his neck, he'd been momentarily distracted by a regiment of multi-legged critters scurrying frantically around to challenge the interloper for squatting rights. He stood there just staring into the room. *This* was to be his home until his boss could orchestrate his untimely death, fictionally speaking, or possibly, his death, in real time depending on whose side you were on. *That*, of course, would only be if the Assistant Director decided *not* to turn his sorry ass over to his arch nemesis, the infamous crime boss extraordinaire, Nicholas Costa.

There was no love lost between Special Agent Michael Brennan and Nicholas Costa. Both shared a history of mutual loathing, but they also respected one another's cunning and could only be separated by a pesky matter called *öThe Law.ö* Michael had broken the delicate balance of power, and the price was his life. He would soon face the wrath of Nicholas Costa, and it was going to get ugly.

The whole ordeal began after Special Agent Brennan suffered a bout of verbal diarrhea antagonizing the crime boss himself. Unfortunately, by the end of the conversation, promises were made and threats were implied. Michael swore to Costa on his mother's grave that he'd personally sabotage the entire Costa Empire and bring it down one piece at a time.

Nicholas Costa had no tolerance for such *insolence* and consequently ordered a contract hit on a certain *self-righteous* Federal Agent with a *big* mouth. He would make an example of Special Agent Michael Brennan. Nicholas Costa did not forgive *or* forget.

Special Agent Michael Brennan had masterminded the brilliant strategy mapping out the demise of Costa Enterprises and had been diligently working it for the last two years. Granted, he knew he had screwed up in a major way, but *nothing* could stop him from *working* the biggest case of his career-- *not* without a fight, and he had *plenty* of fight left!

What specifically triggered Special Agent Michael Brennan's meltdown had been the misfortune of investigating the gruesome deaths of five teenagers brutally slaughtered in a gang-related retaliatory strike. Unable to suppress his rage over the senseless violence, he lost control! His reaction had been impulsive if not suicidal. Unfortunately, the words he spoke resounded before his brain could catch up to his mouth.

The leader of the gang had been seventeen years old, while the youngest had been all of twelve and already working his way through tribal-like initiation. Both boys were shot in the head at point blank range as well as the rest of the gang. The Soldiers, as they called themselves, had been victims of life's circumstances. Collectively their parents had been the junkies, criminals, and prostitutes on the block lucky enough to have avoided prison or were currently between incarcerations on the temporary leave program commonly known as parole. These children were responsible for siblings as well as the household bills that had been paid with money facilitated through the sale of drugs or stolen property, that is, if the teenagers could successfully conceal the cash from their parents, who'd rob them blind to feed their addictions.

Camaraderie had been the gang's common denominator. Together they created a sense of belonging, no matter how distorted the view. The Soldiers fatal mistake had been in becoming too ambitious, with inexperience running a close second.

News of the turf-war massacre spread across town like dominos in a free fall. Nicholas Costa's actions spoke volumes to the masses, and he'd felt confident that the next ambitious entrepreneurs would have a little more respect for the Master's domain.

Special Agent Michael Brennan's tireless pursuit of the Cobra, aka Nicholas Costa, and his den of thugs had been unrelenting. Michael considered himself a fearless white knight fighting justice, even if he *had* arrived on a *black* horse. The duality of his character helped define his thirst for justice, and he was well acquainted with the gray area when it came to tactics. But he always got the job done. Bracing himself for the epic fallout, he knew that *change* was on the horizon. Nothing short of the "second coming" could've prepared him for what the future had in store.

Loose trash and cigarette butts whirled on the wind in a frenzied waltz scattering them down the alley end over end. The powerful gust had slammed the apartment door on Michael's bum, throwing him off balance and causing him to trip over a section of yellowed linoleum flooring that had lifted away from the foundation.

“Damn it!” he cried.

After righting himself, he saw a patch of black fuzz growing up the back wall. He'd been certain that by the way his luck had been running, it would surely be identified as *toxic mold*. His eyes focused on the carpet, and then he realized that *toxic mold* was the *least* of his problems. It appeared that he'd been taken hostage by a colony of mystery contagions strategically hidden in the carpet fibers lying in wait for a warm-blooded host.

On the opposite side of the studio apartment stood a narrow, questionably stable staircase that spiraled to a pathetic looking shelf that had been suspended from the ceiling and could be loosely defined as a loft. The décor offended style itself and must have been inspired by a visually impaired monk during his “minimalist” period challenging the very definition of “poverty” according to Webster.

By default, Michael appointed himself designated stair climber. He unholstered his glock and begrudgingly ascended the rusty steps wobbling in protest under his weight. Along the way, his eyes traced the impossible pitch of the roof and noted the steep slant of the ceiling in proportion to his head. Ducking a moment too late, he whacked his head on a sagging ceiling beam that nearly knocked him out, and then he wondered if it could possibly make an improvement.

Head found himself surrounded by shadows gracefully floating from one wall to the other leaving Michael a little unnerved. The deafening silence was broken by the scraping of a wayward branch from a gangly maple tree against the lone window featuring a view of the inner city. Beads of sweat trickled down his back like streamers in a parade as he slipped on his cop face. With his gun at the ready, he allowed a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and lowered himself to the floor while surveying his new surroundings. The space was reminiscent of a cell more appropriate for a dwarf's incarceration rather than the imprisonment of a six foot three inch man in fairly good standing with the law, well, at least for now.

After completing his preliminary inspection, head felt confident that the area was clear. Unless Nicholas Costa tapped into the realm of paranormal phenomenon and hired a disgruntled ghost to do his bidding, he thought with a chuckle. Michael returned his glock to a worn leather holster that had been strapped to his left shoulder and then carefully stepped to the window.

The real estate next door resembled an abandoned vacation condo for vagrants. Its proximity was close, like he could reach out and touch the brick canvas that displayed colorfully illustrated graffiti inspired by rage, and all of this had been compliments of the neighborhood delinquents on a fast track to nowhere. The dilapidated building had a revolving red door tattooed with the symbol of a dragon, a local gang's insignia. Inside was a potential crime scene waiting for the resident sociopath to pull the trigger on a fellow junkie looking for "magic crystals."

Michael breathed deeply and was quickly overtaken by the pungent stench of urine. Urine and the unpleasant scent of nicotine were in competition for most offensive odor that lingered

from times past, Air-- he needed air! He reached for the window, accidentally knocking the old vinyl blind from its brackets, and sent it crashing to the floor, where regrettably, his foot had broken the fall, quite possibly his foot in the process.

“Son of a bitch!” Michael cried, hopping up and down, cradling his injured foot. “F,” he cursed, still hopping. “M!” he shouted. “L,” he groaned between the waves of pain. “Too late, I already have.”

When the sharp pain quieted to a dull ache, he flopped backward onto the bed with his hands up in surrender. What followed was a loud crash as the bed frame collapsed to the floor. Instinctively, Michael tucked himself into a ball protecting his head and braced for impact. Convinced that the loft would detach from the wall, he expected it to crash to the floor sending him, special delivery, via air mail. When the structure remained sound, he slowly unfolded his long limbs and gave thanks, hoping that he hadn’t used up his allotment of luck, because “headlining” Costa’s to-do list required more than just luck-- it qualified for a divine intervention, that is, if God wasn’t angry with him, too.

Michael, massaging his temples attempting to ward off the mother of all headaches, believed he’d scored the penthouse suite from the *Underworld!* He enjoyed the movie playing inside his head and half expected Kate Beckinsale, sewn into a black, skin tight uni-tard, to materialize with twin 9 mm Wathers loaded with silver bullets. No werewolves, vampires, or Special Agents for that matter, would be safe that night.

The crescent moon shone a silvery gray, leaving him alone in the dark feeling vulnerable as he entertained all the different ways he could potentially die. Michael’s life had hit an all-time low. Feeling powerless, he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to take him.

Dawn's bright light filled the tiny loft through the grime streaked window targeting Michael's face like a bulls-eye. His eyes flew open followed by a moment of panic. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd been running late for an important appointment, like a job interview, which incidentally, might not be too far in his future. Reality hit him like a Sunday morning *hangover* after a particularly eventful Saturday evening. Michael's head began throbbing as he remembered the previous day when he'd declared war on Nicholas Costa. His life hung in the balance between the world of the living and the almost dead.

Out of frustration, Michael vigorously ran his hand through his tousled hair, as if trying to erase his epic blunder but was interrupted by the painful iron grip grasping his stomach. The spasm had taken his breath away like a sucker punch to the gut. Then he remembered that he hadn't eaten anything since noon the previous day. He groaned miserably, wondering how his life had gotten so out of control. Another wave of pain twisted inside his belly, as if it had been turned inside out. Under *normal* circumstances, Michael could solve any problem with the analytical precision of a computer, complete with projected probabilities and statistical data; but when it came to his current predicament, he came up empty, much like his stomach.

“Damn it!” Michael bellowed.

He felt trapped like a prisoner. Using frustration as momentum, he launched himself off the lumpy mattress but didn't get far before his head bounced off a ceiling beam, knocking him senseless.

“*Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!*” he shouted as he flew down the staircase, hoping that if he ran fast enough, it wouldn't buckle under his weight. The next steps he took were out the door. Michael stomped down the street like a rebellious, misunderstood teenager who had just lost

privileges to the family car. He was on a mission in search of food and about a gallon of coffee; after all, he had an empire to destroy, that is, if Nicholas Costa *didn't* find *him* first.

Five blocks south of the safe *house of horror*, he discovered a small, whole-in-the-wall diner, identified by an old, pink fluorescent sign that hung askew above a generic storefront. The mingling aromas of freshly brewed coffee and fried meats were intoxicating, and the scent transported him back in time when his mother lovingly prepared him crispy strips of bacon, eggs perfectly fried over easy, and cinnamon rolls with gobs of icing the size of Queens.

After placing his order, he seated himself in front of the grill on a stool upholstered in candy apple red vinyl, faded and cracked from wear. When his order was up, he patiently watched the surly waitress pack up his breakfast in white Styrofoam containers and bagged them. She glared back at him with eyes that had known tragedy well and was curious as to why he was on her side of town. He'd been as conspicuous as a homeless man at the Met, but like marshmallows in a hot steaming mug of hot coco he was slowly assimilating to his new surroundings, it's too bad that it was too little, too late. Strangers watched him with suspicion, but the only thing on his mind was the primal need to eat, sinking his teeth into a swirly, scrumptious cinnamon roll. Unfortunately, his recklessness left him susceptible to neighborhood gang bangers and a highly motivated Nicholas Costa.

Michael smiled at the crass woman, whose heart had been darkened deeper than the ebony of her skin. He was mindful to slip her something extra for her trouble. The life worn woman, who'd given up on the American dream years ago, stared at the crumpled bill skeptically, then nodded her appreciation, and walked away with twenty more reasons to quit her thankless job.

The streets of New York were beginning to wake up. The prostitutes and drug dealers were wrapping it up for the night, which by now was early dawn. They counted their take hoping to meet their daily quota to avoid a brutal beating from their pimps and handlers that by now were stoned beyond reason from the latest batch of products they distributed on the streets. The vendors had been preparing their carts with tantalizing morsels while the merchants opened their shops for business. As the hustle and bustle of another workday morning ensued, Michael fell into the flow of pedestrian traffic anxious to get back to his hidey-hole from Hell before anyone discovered him AWOL. *That* would certainly fast track the destruction of his career, assuming there was anything left to destroy. Michael's cynicism had reached an all-time high.

He juggled the bag containing his breakfast in one hand and a large, piping hot coffee in the other and laughed. He thought if Nicholas Costa failed to kill him, the gazillion grams of trans-fats in his breakfast may very well induce a cardiac arrest saving him the trouble.

Stepping off the curb with a hop to avoid a pot hole roughly the size of Texas, he became hyper-vigilant about his surroundings. He positioned himself between two clunkers, decades old, and glanced up and down the street like any other responsible New York jay-walker would. At the end of the street he spotted a filthy black Cadillac Escalade with designer rims double parked in a loading zone. The vehicle's frame had been raised like a dueling monster truck that could've literally swallowed a sedan whole, but Michael, distracted by hunger, failed to recognize the potential threat.

Michael quickly changed his mind the moment he heard tires screeching on asphalt followed by the acrid stench of burning rubber. The imposing two-ton behemoth was just a blur as it barreled down the street heading in his immediate direction. Instinctively, he reached for his

weapon, but time betrayed him. There was nothing he could've done to escape the outcome. It appeared that Nicholas Costa had won this round, and Special Agent Michael Brennan realized that the details of his death were no longer a mystery.

In a last ditch effort to save his life, he dove toward the sidewalk. Unfortunately, the accelerating SUV, on a mission to intercept, successfully completed its primary directive. While avoiding a direct hit, Michael's body had been violently thrust into the air. The haunting guilt and anger burdening his soul dissipated, and then he felt nothing, nothing at all.

Michael lay still on a cold slab of concrete that served as an altar where he'd become the sacrificial lamb offered to the gods of misfortune. Numb by life's circumstances, the bystanders in the neighborhood witnessed the vicious attempt on Special Agent Michael Brennan's life. The crowd, seemingly fascinated by the violence, gathered around Michael's broken body with morbid curiosity. Broken, battered black victims were an everyday occurrence, but a white man in the hood was just too good to miss. Among the throng of uncompassionate onlookers, Michael quietly slipped into the darkness.