

# **Dawn Girl**

**A Novel**

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**\*\*\* Excerpt \*\*\***



# CHAPTER ONE

## READY

She made an effort to open her eyes, compelling her heavy eyelids to obey. She swallowed hard, her throat raw and dry, as she urged the wave of nausea to subside. Dizzy and confused, she struggled to gain awareness. Where was she? She felt numb and shaky, unable to move, as if awakening from a deep sleep or a coma. She tried to move her arms, but couldn't. Something kept her immobilized, but didn't hurt her. Or maybe she couldn't feel the pain, not anymore.

Her eyes started to adjust to the darkness, enough to distinguish the man moving quietly in the room. His silhouette flooded her foggy brain with a wave of memories. She gasped, feeling her throat constrict and burning tears rolling down her swollen cheeks.

Her increased awareness sent waves of adrenaline through her body, and she tried desperately to free herself from her restraints. With each useless effort, she panted harder, gasping for air, forcing it into her lungs. Fear put a strong chokehold on her throat and was gaining ground, as she rattled her restraints helplessly, growing weaker with every second. She felt a wave of darkness engulf her, this time the darkness coming from within her weary brain. She fought against that darkness, and battled her own betraying body.

The noises she made got the man's attention.

"I see you're awake. Excellent," the man said, without turning.

She watched him place a syringe on a small, metallic tray. Its handle clinked, followed by another sound, this time the raspy, telling sound of a file cutting through the neck of a glass vial. Then a pop when the man opened the vial. He grabbed the syringe and loaded the liquid from the vial, then carefully removed any air, pushing the piston until several droplets of fluid came out.

Dizziness overtook her, and she closed her eyes for a second.

"Shit," the man mumbled, then opened a drawer and went through it in a hurry.

She felt the needle poke deeply in her thigh, like it was happening to another person. She felt it, but distantly. She perceived a subdued burning sensation where he pushed the fluid into her muscle, then that went away when he pulled the needle out. She closed her weary eyes again, listless against her restraints.

The man cracked open ammonia salts under her nose, and she bounced back into reality at the speed of a lightning strike, aware, alert, and angry. For a second she fought to free herself, but froze when her eyes focused on the man in front of her.

He held a scalpel, close to her face. In itself, the small, shiny, silver object was capable of bringing formidable healing, as well as immense pain. The difference stood in the hand wielding it. She knew no healing was coming her way; only pain.

“No, no, please...” she pleaded, tears falling freely from her puffy eyes, burning as they rolled down her cheeks. “Please, no. I... I’ll do anything.”

“I am ready,” the man said. He seemed calm, composed, and dispassionate. “Are you ready?”

“No, no, please...” she whimpered.

“Yeah,” he said softly, almost whispering, inches away from her face. “Please say no to me. I love that.”

She fell quiet, scared out of her mind. This time was different. *He* was different.

# CHAPTER TWO

## DAWN

“What if we get caught?” the girl whispered, trailing behind the boy.

They walked briskly on the small residential street engulfed in darkness, keeping to the middle of the road. There were no sidewalks. High-end homes lined up both sides, most likely equipped with sensor floodlights they didn’t want to trip.

She tugged at his hand, but he didn’t stop. “You never care about these things, Carl, but I do. If we get caught, I’ll be grounded, like, forever!”

The boy kept going, his hand firmly clasping hers.

“Carl!” she raised the pitch in her whisper, letting her anxiety show more.

He stopped and turned, facing her. He frowned a little, seeing her anguish, but then smiled and caressed a loose strand of hair rebelling from under her sweatshirt’s hood.

“There’s no one, Kris. No one’s going to see us. See? No lights are on, nothing. Everyone’s asleep. Zee-zee-zee. It’s five in the morning.”

“I know,” she sighed, “but—”

He kissed her pouted lips gently, a little boyish hesitation and awkwardness in his move.

“We’ll be okay, I promise,” he said, then grabbed her hand again. “We’re almost there, come on. You’ll love it.”

A few more steps and the small street ended into the paved parking lot of what was going to be a future development of sorts, maybe a shopping center. From there, they had to cross Highway 1. They crouched down near the road, waiting for the light traffic to be completely clear. They couldn’t afford to be seen, not even from a distance. At the right moment, they crossed the highway, hand in hand, and cut across the field toward the beach. Crossing Ocean Drive was next, then cutting through a few yards of shrubbery and trees to get to the sandy beach.

“Jeez, Carl,” Kris protested, stopping in her tracks at the tree line. “Who knows what creatures live here? There could be snakes. Lizards. Gah...”

“There could be, but there aren’t,” Carl replied, seemingly sure of himself. “Trust me.”

She held her breath and lowered her head, then clasped Carl’s hand tightly. He turned on the flashlight on his phone and led the way without hesitation. A few seconds later, they reached the beach, and Kris let out a tense, long breath.

The light of the waning gibbous Moon reflected against the calm ocean waves, sending flickers of light everywhere and covering the beach in silver shadows. They were completely alone. The only creatures keeping them company were pale crabs that took bellicose stances when Kris and Carl stomped the sand around them, giggling.

“See? Told you,” Carl said, “no one’s going to see us out here. We can do whatever we want,” he said playfully.

Kris squealed and ran toward the lifeguard tower. In daylight, the tower showed its bright yellow and orange, a splash of joyful colors on the tourist-abundant stretch of sand. At night, the structure appeared gloomy, resembling a menacing creature on tall, insect-like legs.

“It looks like one of those aliens from *War of the Worlds*,” Kris said, then promptly started running, waving her arms up in the air, pretending she was flying.

Carl chased Kris, laughing and squealing with her, running in circles around the tower, and weaving footstep patterns between the solid wood posts.

“Phew,” Carl said, stopping his chase and taking some distance. “Stinks of piss. Let’s get out of here.”

“Eww...” Kris replied, following him. “Why do men do that?”

“What? Pee?”

“Everybody pees, genius,” Kris replied, still panting from the run. “Peeing where it stinks and bothers people, that’s what I meant. Women pee in the bushes. Men should pee in the water if they don’t like the bushes.”

“Really? That’s gross.”

“Where do you think fish pee? At least the waves would wash away the pee and it wouldn’t stink, to mess up our sunrise.”

“Fish pee?” Carl pushed back, incredulous.

“They don’t?”

They walked holding hands, putting a few more yards of distance between them and the tower. Then Carl suddenly dropped to the ground, dragging Kris with him. She squealed again, and laughed.

“Let’s sit here,” he said. “The show’s on. Let’s see if we get a good one.”

The sky was starting to light up toward the east. They watched silently, hand in hand, as the dark shades of blue and gray gradually turned ablaze, mixing in dark reds and orange hues. The horizon line was clear, a sharp edge marking where ocean met sky.

“It’s going to be great,” Carl said. “No clouds, no haze.” He kissed her lips quickly, and then turned his attention back to the celestial lightshow.

“You’re a strange boy, Carl.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“Other boys would have asked me to sneak out in the middle of the night to make out. With you, it’s a sunrise, period. Should I worry?”

Carl smiled widely, then tickled Kris until she begged for mercy between gasps of air and bouts of uncontrollable laughter.

“Stop! Stop it already. I can’t breathe!”

“I might want to get on with that make out, you know,” Carl laughed.

“Nah, it’s getting light. Someone could see us,” Kris pushed back, unconvinced.

“Someone could come by.”

Carl shrugged and turned his attention to the sunrise. He grabbed her hand and held it gently, playing with her fingers.

Almost half the sky had caught fire, challenging the moonlight, and obliterating most of its reflected light against the blissful, serene, ocean waves.

Carl checked the time on his phone.

“A few more minutes until it comes out,” he announced, sounding serious, as if predicting a rare and significant event. He took a few pictures of the sky, then suddenly snapped one of Kris.

“Ah... no,” she reacted, “give that to me right this second, Carl.” She grabbed the phone from his hand and looked at the picture he’d taken. The image showed a young girl with messy, golden brown hair, partially covering a scrunched, tense face with deep ridges on her brow. The

snapshot revealed Kris biting her index fingernail, totally absorbed by the process, slobbering her sleeve cuff while at it.

“God-awful,” she reacted, then pressed the option to delete.

“No!” Carl said, pulling the phone from her hands. “I like it!”

“There’s nothing to like. There,” she said, relaxing a little, and arranging her hair briefly with her long, thin fingers. “I’ll pose for you.” She smiled.

Carl took a few pictures. She looked gorgeous, against the backdrop of fiery skies, pink sand, and turquoise water. He took image after image, as she got into it and made faces, danced, and swirled in front of him, laughing.

The sun’s first piercing ray shot out of the sea, just as Kris shrieked, a blood-curdling scream that got Carl to spring to his feet and run to her.

Speechless, Kris pointed a trembling hand at the lifeguard tower. Underneath the tower, between the wooden posts supporting the elevated structure, was the naked body of a young woman. She appeared to be kneeling, as if praying to the rising sun. Her hands were clasped together in front of her in the universal, unmistakable gesture of silent pleading.

Holding their breaths, they approached carefully, curious and yet afraid of what they stood to discover. The growing light of the new morning revealed more details with each step they took. Her back, covered in bruises and small cuts, stained in smudged, dried blood. Her blue eyes wide open, glossed over. A few specks of sand clung to her long, dark lashes. Her beautiful face, immobile, covered in sparkling flecks of sand. Her lips slightly parted, as if to let a last breath escape. Long, blonde hair, wet from sea spray, almost managed to disguise the deep cut in her neck.

No blood dripped from the wound; her heart had stopped beating for some time. Yet she held upright, unyielding in her praying posture, her knees stuck firmly in the sand covered in their footprints, and her eyes fixated on the beautiful sunrise they came to enjoy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CRIME SCENE

Detective Gary Michowsky cursed under his breath, as he pushed open the door of the Palm Beach police Crown Vic. He bit his lip and tensed his weary muscles, preparing for the sharp pain that was going to shoot through his back the second he put his feet on the ground and tried to get out of the car. If he'd been deemed worthy of one of the new Ford SUVs deployed to police all over the state, maybe he'd have less trouble getting in and out of his vehicle. But no, not him, not yet anyway.

He waited for his partner, Todd Fradella, to get out of the car first. He didn't want a single whiff of his sciatica attack to make scuttlebutt in the squad room. Last thing he needed was a slew of stupid jokes perpetrated by smart-ass detectives and uniformed pricks, targeting his age, his ability to do his job, and most of all his self-esteem. He wasn't that old; only 49. A few months short of the big five-oh. No age reason for the sciatica attack, other than, of course, lifting weights without a belt, thinking he was still 20. The daily proximity of his young partner, Fradella, with his bohemian good looks, his shoulder-length hair, and endless supply of calls from hot chicks, didn't help a bit. He felt compelled to compete, to hold on to whatever youth he still had running through his veins.

Yeah, so for a few days he was screwed, having to work in excruciating pain, despite the painkillers he popped every couple of hours. He couldn't take time off, not with the new case landing in their backyard. The captain would raise at least one of his eyebrows if he even asked.

Fradella hopped out of the cruiser with enviable, youthful agility, and slammed the car door behind him. The shockwave sent a quick, sharp blade of pain to Michowsky's back, a reminder he had to take it easy. He grunted, then discreetly grabbed hold of the door frame with his left hand, using it as leverage to pull himself out of the cruiser. A couple of terrible seconds later, he was on his way to the cordoned area, walking with his back almost straight, even if he moved a little slower than usual.



The lifeguard tower was already surrounded by yellow police line on improvised stakes stuck in the sand. The first respondent team had been fast, doing their jobs at securing the scene. Michowsky stopped at the line, hesitant. Bending to go under the line as he usually did was out of the question. He decided to go around it, seeing that the line didn't extend all the way into the water. He walked as quickly as he could and managed to go around the line just as the coroner's van pulled in, its wheels half-buried into the soft sand.

He reached the lifeguard tower and caught the first clear view of the victim. He almost gasped. The victim's posturing was shocking, making her appear alive. Completely naked, she was kneeled on the sand, slightly bent forward, but her back was straight and her head upright. She was strikingly beautiful, even in death. He shook his head bitterly. Sometimes his job made him sick, disgusted with life, with the monsters of mankind.

"What do we have?" he asked, remaining a few feet away from the body.

A uniformed officer approached, his notepad open in his hand.

"Call came in at 6:48AM. Those two kids over there found her." He pointed at a boy and a girl sitting on the sand next to the cordoned area, hunched closely to each other, their shoulders touching. The girl cried quietly. "Carl Collunga, 16, and Kristen Bowers, also 16. You see that point over there, in the sea oats, marked with evidence tag 7? She threw up over there, the girl, Kristen. A couple of times. She was quite upset."

"I see. Parents notified yet?"

"Oh, yeah," the uniformed officer replied. "They're on their way."

"What did the kids say?" Fradella asked.

"They said they came to watch the sunrise and found the body there. Nothing else."

"Sunrise, huh?" Michowsky snorted.

"Yeah..." the officer laughed. "Some date they had, these two."

"Background on these kids?" Michowsky asked, leaning against one of the wooden posts supporting the tower.

"Well-off families, local, no records, all clear. They snuck out; they're going to get some heat for that when the parents get here."

"I bet. How about her?" Michowsky asked, pointing at the body. "Any ID?"

"There's nothing visible."

“We’re not concerned with footprints, I guess,” Michowsky muttered, looking at the footprint-covered sand. He watched for a few seconds how the ocean breeze carried specks of sand to and from their crime scene, eroding, altering everything. Nature was the perfect forensic countermeasure, especially there, on the beach. “It’s pointless. This bastard is smart... We can’t pull any evidence from here. This is a body dump, anyway. There’s no blood. But we’ll have to dig under the body, just to make sure. Collect some of that sand.”

He approached the victim slowly, studying, observing details.

“Ah...” he said, pointing at the girl’s hands.

“Yeah,” Fradella replied. “I didn’t see that either, not at first anyway.”

Her hands were bound together with fine, transparent fishing line, almost invisible, holding her palms together in a prayer-like stance. From the line that tied her hands together, another line ran upward, tied against the wooden structure, holding her hands in place, and making sure her posture didn’t slip. The son of a bitch had put up a show for them.

Michowsky put on a glove, then touched the fishing line. It was taut and resistant. He pressed a little more, but the hands refused to move. Something else must have kept them in place.

“Let’s see if there’s more,” Michowsky said, squinting to see if other ties supported the body. “Check her head. It’s too upright to be natural.”

“I’m not touching her until Doc Rizza gets here,” Fradella replied.

“Smart choice,” Doc Rizza said, appearing behind the yellow line. He approached them, followed closely by his two assistants, carrying the usual piles of gear. “Let’s set up here,” he added, pointing to an area near the tower.

His first assistant, a young man they all called AJ, set down the stretcher and prepared the body bag, unzipping it. Then he opened a case and handed Doc Rizza the liver temperature probe.

Doc Rizza grabbed the probe, not taking his eyes off the young girl’s body. With his gloved hand, he gently examined her fingertips, then invited with a gesture the crime scene technician, Javier Perez, to come and scan her fingerprints. Then the coroner pulled back gently a few strands of her long, blonde hair, exposing a deep incision in the left side of her neck.

Michowsky liked to watch Doc Rizza work. He was old style, respectful and meticulous, taking his time, not constantly obsessing over stats and numbers and reports. He was trustworthy; he cared.

“I got preliminary cause of death for you,” Doc Rizza announced.

“Shoot,” Michowsky said, ready to take notes.

“I’ll go with exsanguination, due to sharp force trauma to the neck. For now. You know the rule. Don’t quote me on anything until I finish my report.”

“Murder weapon? Any hints?”

“I’ll have to take molds... most likely a scalpel. No hesitation marks. He’s done this before.”

Doc Rizza ran his gloved hand through his thinning hair, wiping the sweat beading on his shiny scalp, then stopped and stared at his hand for a split second. “Smart... really smart...” he muttered. He removed the contaminated glove and threw it in the waste bag, then put on a new, sterile glove.

“She’s not in the system,” Javier announced, putting the fingerprint scanner away and grabbing the high-resolution camera. “I’ll start with the photos.”

“Not yet,” Doc Rizza replied. “Give us a minute.” He searched for additional fishing line ties and found a few more. They were difficult to see in the shade under the tower structure.

Her head was held in place by a line tied below her jaw and another looped around her forehead, hidden in her hair. Her shoulders were suspended as well, with the line loops also covered by carefully positioned strands of hair.

“I would have expected more ligature points,” Doc Rizza said, moving away to make room for Javier’s camera. “What else do you need? Oh, yeah, time of death.” He checked the probe and frowned. “Preliminary TOD is between 12 and 16 hours ago, maybe more.”

“Then she was brought here hours after she died,” Michowsky said. “This beach is populated until 9:00, even 10:00PM every night.”

“Yeah. It opens up the distance to your primary crime scene, sorry about that,” Doc Rizza confirmed. “She could have been killed miles away.” He turned to Javier. “You done yet? Help me cut her down.”

AJ approached on the other side, supporting the girl's body, and Javier handed him the tools he asked for in a quiet, professional voice. He cut the fishing lines one by one, but the body maintained most of its posture.

"Are you sure you got all of them?" Michowsky asked.

"Yeah," Doc Rizza replied. "It's just rigor. Confirms my TOD estimate. Most likely she was brought here with rigor already set."

Michowsky turned away, leaving Doc Rizza and his techs to finish up. He walked around the police line to the two kids huddled together a few yards away and beckoned Fradella to join him.

When they got near, the two teenagers raised their heads and looked at them without saying a word.

"I'm Detective Michowsky, this is Detective Fradella. I understand you two found the body?"

"Y—yes," the kid replied. "I'm Carl, and this is Kris."

"And that's it? You just found the body?" Michowsky asked. "You didn't see anyone, hear anything?"

"We didn't. I swear," the boy replied a little too fast, triggering Michowsky's curiosity. Was he hiding something? Most likely nothing more than some understandable anxiety.

"What were you two doing here, anyway?"

"Watching the sunrise. Nothing else, really," the boy replied. "Who was she?"

"We don't know yet. If you remember anything else, please give me a call." Michowsky extended his business card. Kris reached out to take it.

"Can we please go home now? Please?" she asked in a subdued voice. "We—we didn't tell anyone we were going out. My parents will—"

"Don't worry, they're on their way. We called them already."

Kris started crying. "Why? We didn't do anything!"

"Don't go anywhere, you hear?" Fradella asked.

They walked slowly toward Doc Rizza's van, slowly enough for Michowsky to be comfortable.

"God, I need some coffee," Michowsky said, rubbing his chin forcefully. "I need to zap my brain with something."

“What do you think?”

“About the kids? I think they’re more scared of their parents than of the entire situation.”

“No, about this case. I’ve never seen anything like it. Do you think it’s a religious freak?”

“It’s hard to say. Sure looks like a ritualistic kill to me. All the posturing, how carefully he made sure she was going to stay in place until she was found, and the sick bastard wanted her found. He wanted a show.”

“Speaking of shows, we got circus,” Fradella said, pointing at two media vans pulling onto the beach. “Who the hell called them?”

From a few yards away, Michowsky and Fradella watched Doc Rizza threaten a bunch of reporters, unyielding until they’d backed their vans away at least 50 more feet. Then Rizza directed a couple of uniforms to put up another police line, pushing the gawkers farther out and cutting their access to the two kids.

“We need to get her ID confirmed, on the double,” Michowsky said.

Fradella nodded, jotting something on his pad. “Run missing persons?”

“To start,” Michowsky confirmed. “Maybe she’s been gone long enough to be in the system. Someone must have missed her.”

“Uh-huh,” Fradella replied. “Do you think it’s the work of a serial killer? I mean, look... the ritual, the posture, the balls on this guy to bring her here, God knows from where.”

Fradella, like most young people, immediately jumped to extreme conclusions. Yet this time, Michowsky couldn’t find an immediate fault to his logic other than the body count. Only one victim didn’t make a serial killer.

“We need three victims to call it a serial. For now, all I know is that we need help. This,” he said, extending his hand toward the tower, “this is much more than we normally deal with. I don’t think we’re equipped to draw the right conclusions here.”

“I’d like to at least try. Would make a nice collar for our team.”

Yes, he was ambitious, his new partner. He was quite promising too. He was sharp, motivated, and his heart was in the right place. However, sometimes he wished for a more seasoned partner, for someone who’d already burned through the enthusiasm of youth and had matured enough to know which battles were worth dying for.

“And risk finding another girl just like that tomorrow? Or next week? Because we missed a clue? Be reasonable, partner, we need help. There’s no shame in that.”

“I thought we could—” Fradella frowned, as he continued his argument but was interrupted by one of the reporters.

“Excuse me, detectives,” the man yelled, bent over the police line as far as he could without falling.

Irritated, Michowsky walked toward the reporter with big, angry steps, ignoring the jolts of pain he felt in his back. He approached the journalist and got in his face.

“You’re in my space,” he said quietly, pointing at the yellow line. “Back off.”

The reporter immediately took a step back, but still extended the microphone toward Michowsky.

“Detective, do you have the identity of Dawn Girl? Was this a serial killer?”

Michowsky sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm his taut, raw nerves.

“What’s your name?”

“Brandt Rusch, Channel Seven.”

“Mr. Rusch, I strongly advise you do not put the name Dawn Girl out there. If I see it printed or quoted anywhere—”

“Then what?” Rusch pushed back. “Freedom of the press, remember?”

“Listen, she’s more than a label you slap on a news piece to sell your verbal diarrhea. She doesn’t deserve that. She’s a person, with a name, a family, and loved ones. Don’t do that. Please.”

“What’s to stop me?”

“I can only ask. Nicely.”

“Then give me her name,” Rusch insisted, his crooked smile taunting Michowsky, driving him crazy.

“We don’t have her name, not yet. As soon as we confirm her identity, we will contact next of kin, then we’ll be in touch.”

“You’ll call me?” Rusch laughed. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Give me your card and I will call you. I promise. And no talk about no serial killer either. We don’t have any evidence of that.”

Rusch pursed his lips and shook his head, then shoved his card into Michowsky’s palm.

“You owe me,” he said and turned to leave, making his way through the growing crowd.

A second later, another reporter took his place, wielding yet another microphone.

“Detective, did I just hear that Dawn Girl was murdered by a serial killer? Can you confirm?”

It was going to be a very long day.