

# CHAPTER 1

“WHAT THE—” DREW READ IT AGAIN.

*Could I be seeing this correctly?* Again he read the last sentence, “The child was raised from the dead.”

His heart began to race. He wasn’t sure why. It had to be a mistake.



His day had started like every other day with hopes and aspirations. *Could this be the day I get my big break, that life-changing assignment that would launch my career and brighten my future considerably?* It seemed as though he had asked himself that same question every morning. He hadn’t been here long, just two years, and making a good impression was something he had worked hard at.

But one couldn’t tell looking at his desk now. At first he’d spent what seemed like unending hours keeping his desk in perfect order, but shortly after his first year, he saw how useless it would be. Slowly and relentlessly, the second law of thermodynamics was winning the daily battle over his desk. Papers stacked up, and it

took a long weekend of work without pay once a month to bring it back into order. From its appearance today, this weekend was shot.

An endless torrent of paperwork seemed to find its way to his desk every day. Research this. File this. Condense that. Fax these. Compile those. The tasks never seemed to end. His main responsibility was to do the research for the featured staff reporters, or FSRs, as they called them. His industry allowed them the freedom to concentrate on their stories rather than waste countless hours on the web or making phone calls digging for information. He spent the rest of his days doing all the mundane jobs no one else wanted to do. Every once in a great while, he would be assigned something to report on.

He walked over to the water dispenser and filled up the small paper cup. The cool water felt soothing as it ran down his throat. *Is it going to be another gofer day, or will I finally get something decent to report on? Could this be the day I get a story that will launch my career?*

The questions alighted on his mind again like an annoying fly that wouldn't be shooed away. It wasn't like he had a lot of options besides *The Press* to work for. He didn't graduate with honors, and the endless résumés he'd submitted resulted in nothing more than frustration and self-doubt.

The call from *The Press* was almost too good to be true. The hard-hitting internet newspaper had only been around for the past ten years, but each year it had grown in popularity and subscribers. It was on the rise, which its willingness to take on the most taboo topics and hit them with both barrels fueled.

When the HR department from *The Press* called, he didn't really believe the caller at first. He thought it was one of his old classmates pulling a prank. Almost to the point of rudeness, he answered the questions with little enthusiasm, but after several

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questions, he realized it was the real thing, and he sobered up and recovered enough to get a personal interview. Here, he met Dennis DeMarco, the hotheaded owner and managing editor. Incredibly intelligent and equally as coarse, DeMarco had a way of making one feel insignificant with nothing more than a glare. Drew was grilled for exactly twenty minutes and dismissed with a nod toward the door. Yet two days later, the call came to invite him to join *The Press* team.

The first few weeks were a whirlwind of confusion. There were scores of reporters all around the world, and each one submitted stories to be considered for publication. DeMarco had two round-table discussion groups, the United States being one and the rest of the world the other. Modeled after King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, DeMarco fell just short of naming managers "his knights." He loved the fable and spent his vacations at renaissance fairs all over the world. He was a bit eccentric, as many successful entrepreneurs seem to be.

The round table members looked over the stories and debated over each one's worthiness to be included in the daily edition. Little consideration was given to mundane common events that filled typical newspapers. *The Press* grabbed the attention of its readers by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. The more spectacular the story, the more likely it would make it into *The Press*.

There was one story about dogs mysteriously disappearing in the little town of Jackson City, Missouri. No one had a clue as to what was happening. Over a period of six months, twenty-seven dogs simply vanished. Finally a break in the case led authorities to a man's backyard. Buried there were the bones of over forty animals, mostly dogs but a few cats and some small rodents. The father of six had been unemployed for several months, and

food became scarce. So he resorted to killing neighborhood pets and making his wife prepare them for their evening meals. They apparently liked the dogs better than the cats.

But more unusual was the fact that the man had been back to work for months and was pulling in a six-figure income as the vice president of the Jackson City National Bank. They apparently just enjoyed the taste.

Another story that made the cut was about an Everglades tour guide. The guide called himself Tommy Two Guns. His name came from the .44-magnum pistol tattoos on both sides of each of his biceps. They pointed toward his head, so it was his custom upon introducing himself to a customer that he would flex his biceps and point to his head, stating. "That's me, Tommy Two Guns, at your service."

He would take his clients to his secret, remote spots in the Glades and summon up the gators by offering them food, usually scraps of meat that he gathered from the local butcher shop. He would slap the water with a paddle and then toss a few morsels into the agitated water. The alligators would surface and slowly swim toward the boat, snatching up the free offerings. By this technique, he was able to get the gators to come right to the boat, and many times they would even nudge it for additional servings.

Over time he became increasingly bold as he and "my gators," as he called them, interacted with each other. He got to the point to where these wild alligators would actually take pieces of meat right from his hand. This, of course, thrilled his clients to no end.

His notoriety became widespread, and his tours were always booked months in advance. But there were two problems. First, it is against the law in Florida to feed alligators in the wild, and second, familiarity can be a very bad thing. He took his chances with the law because the fines were comparatively low versus the

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income he was making. If he got caught, it would cost him a half a day's earnings, no big deal.

So it was on that tragic day Two Guns was dangling a large chunk of pork shoulder over the side of the boat and an alligator he had named Big Gulp, because he was never satisfied, launched its eleven-foot scale-armored body out of the water. With its mouth wide open, it totally engulfed Tommy Two Gun's arm up to the barrel of his tattooed right arm. It clamped down, teeth penetrating to the bone, and when its eight hundred-pound body slid back into the murky waters of Lake Okeechobee, Tommy Two Gun's arm was gone.

The park rangers later recovered what was left of his arm after the alligator was killed. If it hadn't been for Private First Class Samuel Engersol, one of his tour quests, Tommy Two Guns would have died that day. Sam had served in Iraq as a medic, and his actions that day saved Tommy's life.

However, the story didn't end there. Tommy Two Guns, who was now down to "One Gun," then sued the National Park Service for not fining him severely enough, which he insisted would have caused him to stop feeding the gators and thus preventing his arm from being eaten. He was awarded \$3 million for pain and suffering because the liberal judge determined the National Park Service was negligent by not penalizing his illegal activities enough. The minimal fines failed to create a sufficient deterrent and thus prevent the horrific attack. The case was currently under appeal.

Their forte was political and religious scandals, and were the kinds of stories they diligently sought. The staff prided themselves as the only news agency looking out for the common man. It was their mission statement to protect individuals from government and religious abuse. Though neither a liberal nor conservative

organization, they had little respect for government and religious organizations that had even a hint of corruption.

Unlike much of the mainstream media, *The Press* attacked political corruption viciously regardless of the political affiliations. Religious organizations were given no mercy. Several large churches across the country fell under their wrath and ended up in bankruptcy due to the scandals *The Press* had exposed. More than twenty politicians were chased out of office.

On the flip side, they did highlight what they considered good works such as politicians who served their terms without any scandals, represented their electorate faithfully, and left after their second terms. They despised political lifers. Religious organizations doing exceptional acts of kindness often found their stories in *The Press*.

Megan, one of the round table managers, walked by the water cooler, stopped, and turned toward him. “Drew, did you get the email from Samuelson in Pennsylvania? He was going to send it to you yesterday. We really need something from that zone.”

“No, but I’ll check again.”

“As soon as you get it, let me know what he sent.”

The country was divided into twelve zones. Each zone was given space on the publication. It was part of DeMarco’s master plan: draw as many readers as possible from every corner of the country by giving them the feeling of importance. Readers simply clicked on their zone and were greeted with numerous fantastic photos, stories, and editorials on people and events close to their home.

“I’ll check right now.” Drew now knew the right responses. It was a rough few months at first, but now it was cake.

Drew was assigned Zone D, which included New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. He received several hundred emails a week from people all over this area, individuals vying for their

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story to be published and then be personally rewarded with the five hundred-dollar finder's fee. After that, payments were made according to the story's popularity. If the story were good enough and received enough clicks, the person would receive significant bonuses. The most spectacular that ever ran garnered the source twenty-five thousand dollars.

Drew had only been assigned a few dozen stories from Zone D. None was a field assignment. They weren't much and never made the cut. When he wasn't sifting through the emails, most of his time was spent running errands for the FSRs who were working on their own stories. He made phone calls and researched background information, but mostly he emailed people telling them that their story wasn't chosen, but "Thanks for sending in the information. Please keep looking for the breaking news that will reward you greatly and inform our valuable readers."

Drew opened up the email bin on his computer and looked at the first email. "Dog found dead in the school auditorium."

*Nope*, thought Drew. He opened the next one. "A child caught falling from a tree by his three hundred-pound neighbor lady. The boy is fine, but the woman broke her back."

"Ouch. Now if the woman sues the boy, that would be a story," he said aloud.

*I'll dig further on this one*, he thought. *Next.*

"Nine-year-old child hit by a truck and killed instantly. Dead for three days. Funeral service held today. Child raised from the dead."

"What the—" Drew read it again.

*Could I be seeing this correctly?*

Again he read the last sentence.

"Could this be true? Where is this from?" he asked himself. He felt his pulse rate increasing as he contemplated the magnitude of this lead.

“Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.”

“Who wrote it?”

“Janet Thompson.”

*Never heard of her*, he thought. *Not one of the regulars.*

He sat back in his chair. “What do I do with this?” he thought out loud. “Dennis DeMarco hates to waste time on obvious fabrications.” He marked and closed the email and then opened the next one. He spent the next half hour reading the rest of the submittals, but he could not get his mind off the one about the child raised from the dead.

He marked three as possible and twenty-five as rejections. He picked up the phone and called the first of the three potential subs, another name for the people who submitted a story.

“Hello, this is Drew Johnson from *The Press*. Is Carroll Barlow available?”

“Oh, hi. This is Carroll.”

“Hi, Carroll. I received your email, and we are interested in your story. Could you give me some more of the details?”

“Oh, sure. I’m so excited that you called. Hey, Adam, it’s *The Press* on the phone,” she yelled to someone in the background.

“Miss Barlow, I would like—”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so excited!”

“Did you see the child fall from the tree?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And you saw the woman catch the boy?”

“Oh, yes. Nancy caught him in her arms.”

“Nancy is the neighbor of the boy, correct?”

“Yes, Nancy is a wonderful neighbor.”

“So when Nancy caught the boy, what happened? How did she get hurt?”

“Well, when Evan jumped out of the tree, Nancy stretched

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out her arms, and he fell into them, but he landed mostly on her chest ... and you know, she is a big lady. And well, you know what I mean. He had a pretty soft landing.” Carroll giggled heartily. “Anyway when Evan hit her bosom, she fell on her butt and then her back. And then do you know what happened next? It was the funniest thing I ever saw. Evan bounced off her bosom and right onto his two feet. It was crazy!”

“Landed on his feet?”

“Yea. Right on his own two feet.”

“And what about Nancy? Was that when she got hurt?”

“Oh, yes! She hit the ground so hard, and you know she’s a big lady.”

“So Evan was not hurt at all, but Nancy broke her back?”

“Yea, isn’t that funny? I mean not funny, but you know funny.”

“Ironic.”

“Yes, ironic.”

He tapped the phone number of Janet Thompson into the phone. His heart again began beating harder. *What is going on?* he thought. The phone rang and rang and rang.

“Are you kidding me?” Drew exclaimed in exasperation.

*Subs know they are supposed to answer their phones between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m.,* he thought.

The answering machine picked up. “Hello, this is the home of Bill and Janet Thompson. We are unable to answer the phone right now, but please leave a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as we can. And have a blessed day.”

Drew took in a deep breath out of frustration. “This is Drew Johnson from *The Press*. I’m calling about your submittal. Please call me back, and we can discuss your story.”

After leaving his direct number, he hung up the phone. “Great,” he said aloud. It could have been a fantastic story, but

from his experience, he found that 90 percent of the messages he left were never returned. *Probably a joke*, he thought.

This realization somehow slowed his heartbeat to a regular pace. “Just a joke,” he said under his breath. After another deep breath, he was back to normal.

It was now 10:20 a.m. He had time to get a snack from the break room before he had to give the submittals to Megan. There was no message from Samuelson. *She wouldn't be happy about that*, Drew thought.

He walked into the break room and across to the pop machine. He plugged in fifty cents and pressed the Mountain Dew button. That eternal pause lasted just long enough for him to get apprehensive. Then he heard a deep thumping internal sound that signaled the pop can moving from storage to the dispenser. *Ah yes, Mountain Dew*. It was his coffee in the morning. He knew it wasn't good for him, but he reasoned that he was young.

Neal, one of the chief advertising executives who worked in the publication department, entered the room and walked to the machine. Neal made the deals that got everyone paid. *The Press* made most of its money from advertising, as did all news reporting agencies. The best stories attracted the most interest and thus the highest fees. The longer the story ran, the more clicks it received. And the more clicks, the more the ad was seen. The more it was seen, the more money *The Press* made.

Drew pulled up a chair and sat down.

Neal got his usual water and sat down next to him. “That stuff will kill you.” He pointed to the can. “How's it going?”

“It's going.”

“Any good stories coming out of your zone?”

“I have a couple potentials. One sounded too good to be true. Called, but no one answered.”

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“Oh yea. What’s the story?” Neal asked.

Drew and Neal had become close friends in just the short amount of time he had been working there. They shared many interests—sports and athletics mostly—but their fierce love of competition cemented their friendship so quickly. They competed in almost everything.

“A boy was supposedly raised from the dead,” Drew said almost apologetically.

“No kidding. Was he in a coma or something?”

“No, hit by a truck and killed instantly.”

“So they rushed him to the hospital and he was revived?”

“It’s not resuscitation. The kid was apparently dead for three days. They were about to put him in the ground.” Drew grew in confidence as he relayed the story.

“Really? That’s probably why they didn’t answer.”

“That’s what I figured.” Just sharing the story got Drew excited.

*Why couldn’t it be real?* thought Drew. *It’s just my misfortune.*

“Hey, two points!” Drew said as he tossed his can in the trash from seven feet away.

“Three pointer!” Neal lobbed his empty water bottle from the doorway twelve feet away. “Yes!” he said as it careened off the wall and into the container.

Drew went back to his desk and checked his emails again. *Nothing new. I need a break. I need a story that would compel people to log on to The Press, something that would rock the country, one that would give me some credibility as a reporter, the one that would give me the FSR title I so desperately want.*

Then his cell phone rang.