

## Chapter Two

"What the fuck?" Mick mumbled, as he rested his trumpet on the bed and angrily approached his apartment's front door. Flinging it open, overcome by the old building's constant odor of bug spray and cigarettes, he peered down the dimly lit hallway. A handful of people were milling about a dark mass lying on the concrete floor, not fifty feet from where he stood.

A young boy, wearing a tattered outfit, sauntered up beside him and nudged his arm. "Hey man," the boy wheezed, "got a smoke?"

"What's all the frickin' noise about?" Mick asked, as he ran a hand through his thick, dark hair.

"Somebody croaked, I guess. How 'bout that smoke?" the boy begged, between coughs and labored breaths.

"Sorry kid, ain't got none," he replied and quickly re-entered the apartment, slamming the door closed as if to seal out the image of the building's seedy inhabitants.

In his small cubicle of a bathroom, he turned towards the cracked mirror, stared at his unshaven face and wondered, how the hell did my life come to this? Sighing, he carefully opened a straight razor, his gaze lingering briefly on its brightly reflective surface and began to scrape away at the growth of days gone by.

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Mick, ruggedly handsome, of average height and thirty-six going on sixty, was born Michael Carrera to a middle class west side New York family. As a childhood musical prodigy, having rejected his father's wish for him to follow in his footsteps as an attorney, he attended New York's Juilliard where he studied the trumpet. Notwithstanding his musical prowess and the exhaustive demands imposed by his excellence, he gained renown as a mathematics whiz and computer programmer. Although his musical talent should have been sufficient for acceptance into the school's social inner circle, his remarkable intellectual skills only served to alienate him from the pack and alas, he had but one friend, Ebert.

Ebert, tagged the shrew by classmates for his obvious physical attributes, was a passable cellist and like Mick, a

social outcast. Oddly enough, the two young men had little in common but who could have guessed that the Shrew, with his obsession for the occult, would be responsible for setting in motion a series of events that would seal their fates forever.

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Standing before the mirror, once bright and hopeful, now dull and lifeless, his steel gray eyes stared back at him as he tried to recall the past. Why can't I remember? he wondered and then, as on past occasions, he gripped his face as pain gradually replaced the burst of unintelligible kaleidoscopic images that had momentarily obscured his vision. "I'm gettin' tired of this frickin' pain. The past don't mean shit, not now, not in the year two thousand and four and not while I'm frickin' frying in this dump," he murmured, as he padded back to the bedroom with a half dozen pieces of toilet paper adherent to his face.

Returning to the bed and retrieving his trumpet, he inserted the mouthpiece and began to blow a few notes when he was interrupted by a violent knocking. "Who the hell is it?" he shouted.

"It's me, man," the young, wheezing neighbor slurred.

"I told you," Mick shouted through the locked door, "I don't got any cigarettes."

"No, man, ain't about the smokes."

"Go away."

"There's somethin' you gotta see."

"Aw shit, why do they always find me?" he mumbled, while running the short distance to the front door and opening it. Where the hell is he? he remarked to himself, while surveying the empty corridor. Suddenly, his gaze locked onto an object in the distance and leaving the door ajar, he advanced to investigate. Just a shoe, he thought, must belong to the dearly departed. As he turned back towards his door, a flash of light caught his attention. "Hmm, gold frames," he mumbled, as he bent to retrieve them, "I wonder if they're real? Nah, probably fake, like everything else around here but they do look oddly familiar." He tossed them into the depths of the hallway and headed back to the apartment.

With the door locked for the night, he returned to the bedroom, took a seat by the window and marveled at the snowflakes as they fell from the dark Bronx sky. Man, one o'clock in the morning, I gotta get some sleep, he thought, as he scribbled a reminder on a note pad to call his agent.

The constant drone of sirens tearing through the streets generally proved soporific but not that night. A tinge of queasiness augmented his usual bedtime despair but he chalked it off to the can of chili he had warmed for dinner on the old gas stove. Finally, after counting the holes in the pockmarked ceiling, sleep overcame. Two hours later, although the room's temperature had dropped to fifty degrees, he awakened in a deep sweat. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, the old frame

creaking beneath his weight, he thought, with horror, they're  
back, the dreams, they're back.