

**FREE FALL**  
**by Chris Grabenstein**

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1

For a cop, there's nothing worse than hearing an old friend say, "I didn't do anything, Danny!" two seconds after you pull her out of a nearly lethal cat fight.

Of course, these days, that's just the icing on the cake. Or, as I like to say, the suds on the Bud.

Despite all the "Life Is Good" T-shirts on sale at the Shore To Please Souvenir Shoppe, life has not been so great lately down the Jersey shore in "sunny, funderful" Sea Haven.

First off, there was a hurricane (that turned into a super storm) named Sandy, which, until last October, was also one of my favorite Bruce Springsteen songs. All of Sea Haven was shut down for two full weeks. No one was allowed on or off our eighteen-mile-long barrier island, except, of course, the governor of New Jersey and the President of the United States.

Eight months later, our battered seaside resort has pulled back from the brink. It's early June and everybody's excited about the upcoming summer season.

Everybody except me.

Because of bumner number two: John Ceepak is no longer my partner.

Funny story.

See, late last August they made Ceepak the Chief of Police. By early October, he was tired of pushing paper, untangling paper clips, and wearing these "Buy One Get The Second At Half Price" suits his wife Rita found for him at the Men's Wearhouse. So, after pulling us all through Sandy (don't worry, some day I'll tell you that story, too), when things had more or less settled down in the new year, Ceepak initiated a search for his own replacement.

After interviewing dozens of candidates, the township council hired another new Chief of Police. An older guy named Roy Rossi. With the new boss on paper-shuffling duty, Ceepak and I were poised to become the SHPD's first team of full-time detectives.

But that never happened.

See, I forgot to mention last year's other big blast of hot air and swirling garbage: our mayoral election.

The guy we wanted to win didn't.

And the guy who got re-elected has never been very fond of Ceepak or me. About fifteen seconds after all the New York and Philadelphia TV stations declared that the Honorable (how they came up with that title for him, I'll never know) Hubert Sinclair had won re-election, the guy initiated budget cuts. Said we had to bring the deficit under control for the sake of our grandchildren. Tough choices had to be made.

That's what he said. What Mayor Sinclair *meant* was that people who ticked him off had to be made miserable.

Buh-bye SHPD detective bureau.

Ceepak is still chief of detectives. He just doesn't have anybody in his tribe. He is allocated "personnel" on an "as-needed" basis. So, mostly, I spend my shifts cruising the streets in a patrol car.

With my new partner.

Sal Santucci.

"You hungry?" Sal asks as we cruise down Ocean Avenue just after sunset.

We're heading toward the southernmost tip of our eighteen-mile-long barrier island where we'll make a U-Turn and head back up to the lighthouse on the northernmost tip. Down south is where the swanky people live in bajillion dollar beachfront bungalows. The kind of homes other people like to burglarize, especially during the first week of June, when the tourist season isn't in full swing and the island is still mostly empty.

"We ate an hour ago," I tell Santucci.

"I'm still hungry."

"Shift ends at eleven. Pick up something on the ride home."

"We should swing by Pizza My Heart. If you're wearing a uniform, they'll give you a free slice *and* a fountain drink."

"Which you don't take because it's against the rules."

Yes, in Ceepak's absence, I am the patrol car's Keeper of The Code.

"What rules?"

*The ones they told you about in that lecture you slept through at the police academy, I want to say.*

But, I don't.

Because 24-year-old Salvatore Santucci is the late Dominic Santucci's nephew. I was there when his uncle -- who was on the job with the SHPD for fifteen, maybe twenty years -- was gunned down by a psycho killer just outside the Rolling Thunder roller coaster. So I cut Sal some slack. We all do.

"We're cops, Sal," I say. "We can't accept gifts."

My young partner (well, he's three years younger than me) slumps down in the passenger seat to pout and fidget with the tuning knob on his radio. "I don't want a freaking 'gift,'" he mumbles. "I want a slice. Sausage and peppers."

I ease the steering wheel to the left and we roll into Beach Crest Heights. I give the white-shirted guard in the gatehouse a two-finger salute off the tip of my cop cap. He waves his clipboard back at me. It's Kurt Steilberger. We went to high school together.

"A gift," I say to Santucci, "means any fee, commission, service, compensation, gratuity, or —"

The radio interrupts my Remedial Graft lecture.

"Unit A-twelve, what is your twenty?"

I grab the mic.

"We're in Beach Crest Heights. Over."

"We just received a nine-one-one call. Report of Assault. One-zero-two Roxbury Drive. The caller says his mother is fighting with his nurse."

"We're on it."

I jam down on the accelerator. Tires squeal. Engines roar. We thunder down the road. I feel like I'm in the middle of a Springsteen song.

We screech to a stop in the driveway made out of interlocking pavers fronting 102 Roxbury Drive. It's a brand new, three-story, vinyl sided mansion with bright white deck railings all over the place.

"Caller is Samuel Oppenheimer, age thirteen," reports the radio. "He is still on the line with nine-one-one."

"We are on scene," I say into the radio.

"Will advise nine-one-one."

"Have them tell Samuel to let us in the front door, if he can do so safely."

If not, I'll let Santucci kick at the lock. I'm betting he was paying attention when they taught him how to do that at the Academy.

I toss the radio mic to the floor and swing open the driver side door.

"I'll take the lead," I say.

"Let's roll!" shouts Santucci, sounding totally stoked.

Inside the house, we hear a scream. Female.

And then another, younger voice. Samuel.

"Stop it! The police are right outside!"

I race up the steps to the front porch. Bang on the door. Someone yanks it open on the other side.

Samuel Oppenheimer is clutching a cordless phone. Looks terrified.

"Over there!" he shouts, pointing to a sunken, white-on-white living room.

I see the back of a raven-haired lady in a purple tracksuit. She is throttling a kinky-haired, younger woman in yellow scrubs who is wildly swinging her arms and trying to kick her way free. But the older woman has her hands locked in a vice grip on the younger woman's throat and that keeps the nurse far enough away that her slaps, scratches, and kicks don't land.

I move closer.

I can't see the younger woman's face. It's buried beneath a whirlwind of flailing curls.

"Break it up!" I shout.

"Knock it off!" adds Santucci.

I grab hold of the strangler's shoulder.

She snaps her head around. All sorts of chunky gold jewelry clatters on her neck and ears as she shoots me a dark and dangerous look. I half expect her to hiss.

But her brain finally kicks in and she realizes there is a uniformed police officer in her living room with his hand firmly attached to her clavicle.

Now her eyes go all wide and terrified.

She drops her chokehold.

The nurse gags and reflexively brings her hands up to her neck.

"Thank goodness you're here!" says the older woman.

I quickly scan her face. Her hair is jet black, her nose perfect, her skin taut and wrinkle free. She looks like she wears makeup in her sleep.

"That vile creature attacked me!" she screeches in my face.

"You...attacked...*me*," gasps the other woman.

"I did no such thing."

"Ma'am?" I say. "I need you to move to the other side of the room."

"This is my home —"

"Now!"

Yeah. I sort of shouted it.

"Mom?" says the boy, still clutching the phone. "Please? Do like he says."

"You heard, Officer Boyle," says Santucci. "Move it.

I look over to the nurse.

She's my age. Maybe 27, 28. A mountain of dark, curly hair. Olive skin. Chocolate brown eyes that aren't quite dark enough to hide her fear. And, of course, I know her.

It's Christine Lemonopolous. One of my old girlfriend Katie Landry's best buds.

"Christine?" I say, arching up an eyebrow, hoping for a good explanation.

Her lips quiver into what she probably hoped might end up as a smile. It doesn't.

"Can you breathe?" I ask. "Is your airway clear?"

She nods.

"What's this all about?" I ask.

"I didn't do anything, Danny."

"Liar," snarls the other one.

"I swear on Katie's grave." Christine's voice is raw and raspy. "I didn't do anything!"

Like I said, there's nothing worse than hearing that from an old friend. Especially when she drags the late, great love of your life into it.