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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Razor Gate**

Written by Sean Cregan

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# THE RAZOR GATE

SEAN CREGAN

headline

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# ONE

The man was tall and gaunt, his face hidden in the shadows of his hood and the steam of hard-blown winter breath. He had less than two minutes to live.

Maya, mind wandering and head bowed against the cold, didn't see the man step from the deeper darkness of the narrow alleyway until she blundered into him. The smell of fresh sweat, alcohol faint in the background, white eyes glittering at her. She mumbled an apology and stepped back, letting him cross the sidewalk in front of her, watching him weave along the kerbside as if he was trying to find a cab. And good luck with that, she thought. Traffic was backed up all along Green Street, Newport City's evening rush in full swing. Crowds of people streamed along on foot, bathed in the glow of storefront fluorescents, while the blue light of LCDs advertising perfume, underwear, jewellery, shimmered cold and artificial from the slush and ice.

'I'm sorry, Maya,' Kevin McMahon at the *Newport Post* had told her earlier that afternoon. 'The board would never sanction my putting you on staff. After the Saganowski

case they won't let the paper touch you. There'd be too much bad press if we did, and the perceived risk of something similar happening would be too high. You know how it goes.'

'Sure,' she'd said. The *Post* had been her last chance of finding real news work short of cheap supermarket tabloids, and she still had too much self-respect to spend the rest of her career writing about Hitler being alive and well and working in Burger King.

'If it was up to me . . .'

'Thanks, Kev. I appreciate that. Worth a go, you know?'

'Yeah.' He'd sounded guilty. 'Look, if you come up with something special we can run and it's a solid story, I can take it off you freelance. Get you back in the game. Maybe we could turn it into a semi-regular gig if it works out.'

She'd thanked him again and hung up, looked around her depressingly empty apartment and headed for Mullen's. Had a couple of glasses of wine and a long conversation about jack shit with Paul behind the bar, which was about all she had left to do.

Nothing had gone right since the court vindicated Lieutenant Saganowski and killed her career – itself barely two years old. Maya was twenty-three and already done. The sources Maya had used in the story accusing the lieutenant of massive corruption had turned out to be less concrete than she'd thought. Certainly not enough to convince a libel judge, anyway. Part of her liked to believe he'd been bought off too. Better that than having made a

mistake writing the piece in the first place. ‘Maybe it’ll work out,’ she’d told Shaun during one of their increasingly brief good moments at the tail of the hearings. ‘The case isn’t lost yet. They’ve not proved it’s hurt her reputation, so the damages might not be too bad. Make an apology, suck up the legal costs, move on.’

‘Bullshit,’ he’d said, waving his wine glass like a judge’s gavel. ‘You’re fucked, Maya. They’re going to nail you to the wall. You should quit the news, come work with me in auditing. We got our shit together. I could get you an apprentice post; you’re pretty smart, the company’ll take you. You could really make a name for yourself. And we’d be workin’ together, too.’

She hadn’t told him then, but she was already having about as much of Shaun as she could take. She’d changed the subject and the evening had ended in the regular argument about nothing much and some brief, lacklustre make-up sex. Two days later the *Tribune* told her to clear her desk, and she’d taken the opportunity to get clear of Shaun too.

Dirty snowmelt seeped through the toes of her boots, the suede like an icy wet compress. No pay cheque, most of her money gone on legal fees, little chance of being able to afford a new pair for the rest of the winter. Maya cursed her luck, the city, and the world. Then she saw Dominic.

She’d known him at college as a grungy would-be photographer with a languid smile and a slow-burning loathing for authority. They’d gone out for six fun months,

and she'd loved him, fallen good and hard. Then he'd left her, broken her heart, and they'd drifted out of touch until a few weeks ago.

They'd met again on the subway, Maya running late following another fruitless meeting with her attorneys. She'd heard the shrill alarm sound, the doors of the D Train about to close and a half-hour wait for the next one beckoning, and had run for it. Jumped through as they hissed together, and collided with a stranger in tan suede and black canvas pants. She had been a couple of words into her apology when recognition sparked and she'd said, 'Dominic?'

A voice from only two years in her past, but it might have been another lifetime for all that had changed behind it. 'Maya? Jesus, what are you doing here?'

'Going home,' she'd said. Felt herself scurry for the safety of small talk and hated it. 'How about you? How've you been?'

'OK. Just out for a wander. You know, get lost a little, shake off everything "real world" for a while. Sometimes it's nice to get away.' He had shrugged. 'I've been following the case in the papers.'

'Oh.'

'It must be hard; Lieutenant Saganowski's a bitch. At least,' he'd added, 'that's the way she sounds. I thought about calling you, but I guess I didn't know if you'd want to hear from me. Listen, do you want to go get a coffee or something? Catch up properly? I don't know if you're free, but I'm not doing anything right now and it'd be nice.'

Coffee was a little café off Adams Square and snow speckling the glass. The place smelled of roasted beans and cold damp evaporating from people's coats. Dominic had been friendly, warm even, all the way, but always guarded, his face never completely relaxed. 'Like you became a spy or something,' Maya had told him.

'Ha! I sometimes think of it the same way.'

'Work?'

He'd nodded. Sipped his espresso, looked about ten years older than he was. 'It seemed sort of cool when I started. When they first offered me the job. And it is. But it can get pretty heavy at times. It's certainly a long way from what I figured I'd be doing. Have you had that feeling at all since we left college?'

'You mean aside from this court case?' Maya had said. He'd laughed. 'Now and again. I mean, I didn't get to do much of the hard stuff until Saganowski, but some of what there's been has been tough. Did you hear about Chalienski?'

A ghost of something there on Dominic's face for a second, and it was gone. 'Yes,' he'd said. 'I remember.'

'That was my first big call-out with one of the senior journos. Heavy stuff. But I don't regret it. What is it you do at . . . Daedalus Venture, wasn't it?'

'Junior dogsbody,' he had said. 'Did you see *The Devil Wears Prada*?'

'Bits.'

'Well, that's me, and Amanda's Meryl Streep. It's more



serious than that, what we do, but the relationship's not a million miles wide of the mark.'

'You could quit if it's that stressful. We're still young, life ahead of us, blah blah blah.'

A smile then, and she'd seen a flash of what she'd once loved. 'Better to be happy than rich, damn the career and choose life, et cetera? It's not that it's stressful – most of the time it's not, although sometimes there's a lot riding on me – but . . . well, I *can't* quit. You just don't. Not where I am.'

'You enjoy it? This mysterious dogsbodying?'

'No. Yes. I don't know. It's like if a friend persuades you to try cliff-diving and you jump off the edge. You won't know whether you like it, not for certain, until you hit the water and find out if there are rocks there or not. Until then you've just got the fear, but you can't stop falling. Maybe you'll be OK and find you like the rush. Maybe you'll climb out of the sea and swear you'll never do it again. Or maybe you'll smash your skull open and die.'

Without thinking about it, she'd reached across the table and taken his hand. Said, 'And you're still falling? Still undecided?'

'If the metaphor holds, yes.' An embarrassed shrug. 'I made it sound worse than it is. And it's a long way until I'll hit the water, so maybe I'll just get used to it before then. But thanks for the sympathy.'

'I don't get why it's so bad. You haven't exactly gone into details.' Realised, as she'd said it, how true this was. On the

train, the walk here, everything, he'd said the bare minimum about his job. Dodged almost every question, turned them around on her. And she'd wanted to know why.

'I can't,' he'd said. 'It's not easy to talk about it. It puts me in a difficult position. Tell me, do you remember everything I used to say about the corporate world? Big business? People in suits and offices?'

'Sure.'

'It was all true,' he'd said. 'All true and worse.'

The tinkle of the bell above the door. Two serious-looking men in long dark coats and matching scowls. They'd stood just inside the café and stared at Dominic. He had looked at Maya, sad. 'Fun while it lasted.'

'They're here for you? Who are they?'

'Doesn't matter.' He had nodded at the men and stood up. Had leaned in close to kiss her on the cheek, and as he did it she felt him slip something inside her coat pocket. Said, 'It's been lovely seeing you again, M. Talk soon. Take care.'

'Take care,' she'd said.

A last unhappy glance sidelong at her as he had walked through the door, and Dominic was gone into the night. She had waited a few minutes before she had checked her pocket. In it was one of Dominic's business cards, but on the back he'd written a different cell number in ballpoint. Beneath it said: *Private no. Don't use the other ones.*

He wasn't off work this evening. He wore a suit like it was matte black body armour, held a sleek dark case in one

hand and had four guys with him like Secret Service. Walking out of the Bastion Building like he was the CEO of Earth. Maya couldn't tell whether any of the people with Dominic were the ones who'd come to collect him from the café.

'The business suit is the SS uniform of the modern world,' he'd told her once, back in college, after an evening of too many mojitos and some light Moroccan grass. 'It excuses the actions of the wearer, allows them a moral detachment, safety within the collective body, an indulgence against any sins they commit because the culprit is, in some way, not *them*. It's the corporation, the hedge fund, the bottom line, the bureaucratic machinery, the government department, *whatever*, that's responsible. They're merely the vector for the action. Anonymity, hangman's hood. Whichever way you want to think of it.'

So much faux-intellectual student bullshit, pompous moralising about the world in general, but it had been genuinely meant; Dominic had been a lot of things, but never a fake. Obviously he'd ditched his student ideals in order to join the working week, and the strange career he'd now embarked on. She'd seen something of it when they'd met up before, but now, watching him on company time, she saw a clear projected coldness in his manner, and that same fear again. They jarred with what she knew of the private man, and the guy she'd loved in the past. Like seeing his twin, a perfect replica on the outside but wholly different within. An unsettling double from a parallel universe.

She watched Dominic walk towards a waiting Mercedes. If he saw her he didn't let it show. Maybe he couldn't, not while he was on duty. Then, beyond him, she saw the hooded man step out into the lines of near-stationary traffic. When he reached the middle of the road he raised his right fist in what looked like a silent salute, and exploded.

## TWO

She came to, aware, through a heavy grey veil, of the sound of screaming. In her mind, Maya pictured the source of the noise as a single wounded animal fleeing into the distance on some African plain, blind with panic. The sound took a minute or so to fade, and by then she'd picked out other individual noises: the frozen-rain tinkle of falling glass, the fairy-bell ring of metal fragments, faint moaning and, here and there, hollow terrified howling. People in agony. Other senses returned, but slowly. The smell of smoke, rancid half-burned plastics. The taste of hydrocarbons, and a crushing pain in her chest. It felt as if there was something on top of her, making it hard to breathe, but when she fought to push it off there was nothing there.

Opened her eyes.

Green Street was gone. She was lying where she'd been thrown by the blast against the corner wall of a clothing store. A few yards to either side and she'd have been tossed through the shattered fragments of plate glass windows that, in those first fractions of a second, would still have

been airborne, waiting like splintered crystalline spider webs to slice her to shreds. In front of her cars lay thrown around like trash, some flipped on to their roofs, others slammed hard and low into the traffic in front of them like steel and glass torpedoes. The wreckage formed rough walls at either end of the scene, a twisted metal hourglass with the pinch of the neck at the explosion's epicentre. Several of the vehicles were already on fire, reedy lines of smoke rising from fresh, hungry yellow flames, and more were leaking fuel.

The buildings on either side of the street were dark and broken, every window gone, most of their lights killed in the blast. Shards of glass fell like lethal rain from the upper floors on to the wounded and dead littering the sidewalks. The luckier victims had been picked up and thrown like Maya or pressed to the ground where they stood. The less fortunate had been ripped to pieces as the blast wave tore through them. All over, Maya could see dismembered body parts lying in bloody streaks on the ice. Only the centre of the scene was clear, a charred and shockwave-swept star at the point where the bomber had stood, now empty and quiet as a Zen garden.

The snow fell on in silence, turned a dirty grey by the soot, and for a time, with everyone who could run already fled, no one moved.

When breathing came more easily, Maya rolled on to her front and pushed herself gingerly upright. Her arms and legs were shaky and numb and her back was sore and pulverised

where she'd slammed into the wall, but nothing felt broken. She stood and immediately her stomach turned. She staggered back, leaned against the building for support, but it seemed to be shuddering in the wind. Saw a severed hand lying palm up in the snow a few feet away and threw up over and over again until all she could do was dry-heave with tears in her eyes.

By the time she'd finished a few more survivors were moving, sitting up, dazed, or rolling in pain, clutching broken limbs and open wounds. No paramedics, no police, no one who'd run had yet returned to help those they'd left behind. Maya had never felt so alone or vulnerable, so unsure of the world around her. Then she saw Dominic.

He'd been blasted to the sidewalk right where he'd been standing. His neck was twisted at an angle that set Maya's stomach shuddering again, and there was something very wrong with the shape of his ribcage. The men who'd been surrounding him were gone; Maya could see one of them buried in the twisted front end of the Mercedes that had been waiting for them, nothing of the others. Closer to the bomber than she'd been, they hadn't stood a chance. When she had finally reconnected with someone who'd once been so precious to her, to have him snatched away in front of her after just a couple of brief evenings together cut her in a way that seeing the anonymous wounded and dead could never have done.

Then someone scurried, low and fast, out of the service alley beside a wrecked clothing store and ran to where

Dominic lay. Grey flight jacket, woolly hat. A young guy, his eyes hard. Maya saw the firelight glinting off a trio of silver crucifix earrings, the dark outline of a tattoo up the side of his neck. When he reached Dominic, he began to hunt, somewhat nervously, around the dead man. Then he seemed to find what he was looking for and rolled the body over. Maya tried to call out, to shout at the guy, ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, but her chest hurt and she couldn't force the sound through her throat. Tottered unsteadily towards him, unable to do a thing to stop him. When the guy stood up again, he had Dominic's briefcase in his hand. He looked at her, just for a second, and then he was running and gone.

Blue lights were flashing in the distance, reflecting dimly off the faces of the dead. All Maya could do was wait for the rest of the world to catch up with her while she waited in the blood-streaked snow, wondering why this had happened.