

# **CROSS** **JUSTICE**

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# Prologue

**I FEEL PRETTY...**



# One

**LEAVING THE BODY SUBMERGED** in the bathtub, Coco entered the enormous walk-in closet wearing black silk panties, elbow-length black gloves, and nothing else. Trained eyes flickered past the casual wear, all fine clothing, to be sure, but not what Coco desired.

Couture gowns. Sleek evening wear. The drama and seductiveness of elegant pieces pulled Coco like a magnet draws iron. Expert eyes and clever gloved fingers examined a mouse-gray, off-the-shoulder dress by Christian Dior and then a white Gucci gown with a plunging back.

Coco thought the designs were brilliant, but the workmanship was not as precise, the execution not as taut, as one would expect for dresses with price tags of ten thousand dollars and up. Even at the high end of luxury, the craft of dressmaking was suffering these days, the old skills all but forgotten. A pity. A shame. An outrage, as Coco's long-departed mother would have said.

Still, both dresses went into a garment bag for future use.

Coco pushed more gowns aside, looking for the one dress that jumped out, the one that stirred deep emotion, the one that made you say, “Ahhh, yes. That’s my dream. My fantasy. That’s who I’ll be tonight!”

A cocktail dress by Elie Saab finally ended the search. Size 6. Perfect. Deep indigo, silk, sleeveless, with a plunging neckline and a diamond cutout in the back, it was spectacularly retro—late fifties, early sixties, right out of wardrobe for *Mad Men*.

*Calling Mr. Draper; you may drool now.*

Coco giggled, but there was nothing funny about this dress. It was a frock of legend, the kind that could silence all conversation in a three-star Michelin restaurant or a ballroom packed with the rich, the powerful, and the celebrated, the rare type of dress that seemed to have its own gravitational field and was able to draw lust from every male and envy from every woman within a hundred yards.

Coco pulled it off the rack, went to the full-length mirrors at the far end of the walk-in closet, and paused there for a bit of self-appraisal. Tall, lean, with a cover girl’s face and a dancer’s regal stance, Coco noted the oval hazel eyes and the flawless skin. Add to that the barest suggestion of breasts and the slim boyish hips, and if the world weren’t so cruel, this sultry creature would have been the toast of runways from Paris to Milan.

Coco stared for a moment in frustration at the only thing that had blocked a dream life as a glamorous supermodel. Despite the tape strapped beneath the black panties, there was still little doubt that Coco was a man.

# Two

**CAREFUL NOT TO SMUDGE** his makeup, Coco tugged the Elie Saab over his smooth, bald head and feminine shoulders, praying that the flow of the dress would hide any outward evidence of his masculinity.

His prayers were answered. When Coco smoothed the fabric so it clung to his hips and upper thighs, even with the bald head, he was, to all appearances, a stunning woman.

Coco found sheer black thigh-high stockings and slid them on carefully, sensually, before proceeding to the racks of shoes by the mirrors. He stopped counting at two hundred pairs.

*What was Lisa, the reincarnation of Imelda Marcos?*

He laughed and chose a pair of black stiletto heels by Sergio Rossi. The fit in the closed toe was a bit tight, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do when it came to fashion.

After tightening the gladiator straps and getting his balance, Coco exited the walk-in closet and entered the gigantic master

suite. He ignored the exquisite decor and went straight to a large jewelry box on the vanity.

After rejecting several items, he found a set of Tahitian pearl earrings and a matching necklace from Cartier that complemented but in no way overpowered the dress. As his mother used to say: *Know your focus, then accessorize around it.*

He put the pearls on and picked up the Fendi shopping bag he'd set down by the vanity earlier. He pushed aside tissue paper, ignoring the folded polo shirt, the jeans, and the dock-siders, and drew out an oval box.

Coco removed the lid, revealing a wig. It was more than fifty years old but had been maintained in flawless condition. The hair was lush, human, and not dyed, an ash shade of blond. Every strand retained its natural shine, bounce, and texture.

He sat down at the vanity, reached back into the shopping bag, and found a short strip of rug tape. With scissors from the vanity drawer, he snipped the tape into four pieces, each about an inch long. His teeth tugged off one of the long black gloves.

He stripped off the backing of each piece of tape and dropped the papers into the Fendi bag. Then he fixed the pieces of tape to his scalp, one at the crown, another three inches forward of center, and one above each ear.

After putting the glove back on, Coco removed the wig from the box, looked in the mirror, and eased it onto his head and into position on the tape, just so. He sighed with pleasure.

To Coco's eye, the wig looked every bit as dramatic as it had the first time he'd seen it, decades before. It had been styled by a master in Paris who had parted the hair down the middle, cut the back high, and then tapered the length so the forward locks on both sides were longest. The hair framed Coco's face

in a teardrop that ended just below the jawline and just above the pearl necklace.

Highly pleased with his ensemble, Coco touched up his lip-stick and smiled seductively at the woman staring back at him.

“You are gorgeous tonight, my dear,” he said, delighted. “A work of art.”

With a wink at his reflection, Coco stood up from the vanity and started to sing. “I feel pretty, oh so pretty.”

As he sang, his practiced eye returned to the jewelry box, and he plucked out several promising pieces that featured large emeralds. He put them in the Fendi bag and returned to the closet. There he pushed aside a rack of men’s starched shirts to reveal a safe with a digital keypad.

Coco typed in the code from memory and opened the safe, happy to find ten four-inch stacks of fifty-dollar bills. He loaded them all into the Fendi bag and closed the safe, then he stuffed the bag and its contents into the bottom of the garment bag, zipped it up, and tossed it over his shoulder.

On the way out of the closet, Coco picked up a set of keys. He spotted a geometric, black-and-gold Badgley Mischka Alba clutch purse and snatched it off the shelf. *What luck!*

He put the keys inside.

Out in the suite, he hesitated, then went back into the bathroom, which was the size of a small house, calling, “Lisa, dear, I’m afraid it’s time I go.”

Coco tilted his head toward his left shoulder, gazing in interest and sadness at the brunette woman in the tub. Lisa’s dead turquoise eyes were bugged out, and her collagen-injected lips stretched wide, as if her jaw had been fused open when the plugged-in Bose acoustic radio had hit the bathwater. Amazing

in this day and age—what with sophisticated technology and circuit breakers and all—that home electricity and bathwater still created enough of a jolt to stop a heart.

“I must say, girlfriend, you had much better taste than I ever gave you credit for,” Coco said to the corpse. “When it came right down to it, after a brief inventory of your wardrobe, I see you had the money and you spent it reasonably well. And from the bottom of my heart? You are beautiful even in death. Brava, my dear. Brava.”

He blew her a kiss, turned, and left the room.

Coco moved with purpose through the mansion, padding down the spiral staircase into the foyer. It was late in the day, almost dusk, and the setting Florida sun threw a golden glow through the windows, illuminating an oil painting on the far wall.

Coco thought the artist had rendered Lisa in all her glory, capturing her at the height of her feminine power, elegance, and ripeness. No one could change that. Ever. From this day forth, Lisa would be the woman in the painting, not that lifeless husk upstairs.

He exited through the front doors and stepped out onto a circular driveway. It was late June and insufferably hot inland. But here, so close to the ocean, a breeze blew, making the air quite pleasant.

Coco walked down the drive, past Lisa’s perfectly tended gardens, lush with tropical color and scented with orchids blooming. Wild parrots cackled from their roosts in the palm trees when he pushed a button on the gate and it swung open.

He walked for a block past well-manicured lawns and handsome homes, reveling in the clicking noise the stilettos made on the sidewalk and in the feel of the silk dress swishing against his silk-clad thighs.



A rare old sports car, a dark green Aston Martin DB5 convertible, was parked ahead. The Aston had seen better days and was in need of repair, but Coco still loved the car the way an insecure child will love and worry a favorite blanket until it simply falls apart.

He climbed inside, set the garment bag in the passenger seat, and put the key in the ignition of the roadster. It roared to life. After lowering the convertible top, he put the Aston in gear and pulled out into light evening traffic.

*I am beautiful tonight, Coco thought. And it's a spectacular evening in my paradise, Palm Beach. Romance and opportunity lie just ahead. I can feel them coming to me already.*

*Like my mother always told me, if a girl has fashion, romance, and a little opportunity in her life, nothing else really matters.*



Part One

# STARKSVILLE



## CHAPTER

# 1

**WHEN I SAW THE ROAD** sign that said we were ten miles from Starksville, North Carolina, my breath turned shallow, my heartbeat sped up, and an irrationally dark and oppressive feeling came over me.

My wife, Bree, was sitting in the passenger seat of our Ford Explorer and must have noticed. “You okay, Alex?” she asked.

I tried to shrug the sensations off, said, “A great novelist of North Carolina, Thomas Wolfe, wrote that you can’t go home again. I’m just wondering if it’s true.”

“Why can’t we go home again, Dad?” Ali, my soon-to-be-seven-year-old son, asked from the backseat.

“It’s just an expression,” I said. “If you grow up in a small town and then move away to a big city, things are never the same when you go back. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Ali said, and he returned to the game he was playing on his iPad.

My fifteen-year-old daughter, Jannie, who’d been sullen

most of the long drive down from DC, said, “You’ve never been back here, Dad? Not once?”

“Nope,” I replied, glancing in the rearview mirror. “Not in...how long, Nana?”

“Thirty-five years,” said my tiny ninety-something grandmother, Regina Cross. She sat in the backseat between my two kids, straining to look outside. “We’ve kept in touch with the extended family, but things just never worked out to come back down.”

“Until now,” Bree said, and I could feel her gaze on me.

My wife and I are both detectives with the DC Metro Police, and I knew I was being scrutinized by a pro.

Really not wanting to reopen the “discussion” we’d been having the past few days, I said firmly, “The captain ordered us to take time off and get away, and blood *is* thicker than water.”

“We could have gone to the beach.” Bree sighed. “Jamaica again.”

“I like Jamaica,” Ali said.

“Instead, we’re going to the mountains,” I said.

“How long will we have to be here?” Jannie groaned.

“As long as my cousin’s trial lasts,” I said.

“That could be, like, a month!” she cried.

“Probably not,” I said. “But maybe.”

“God, Dad, how am I going to stay in any kind of shape for the fall season?”

My daughter, a gifted track athlete, had become obsessive about her workouts since winning a major race earlier in the summer.

“You’re getting to work out twice a week with an AAU-sanctioned team out of Raleigh,” I said. “They come right to the high school track here to train at altitude. Your coach even said

it would be good for you to run at altitude, so please, no more about your training. We've got it covered."

"How much altitude is Starksville?" Ali asked.

"Altitude," corrected Nana Mama, a former English teacher and high school vice principal. "It means the height of something above the sea."

"We'll be at least two thousand feet above sea level," I said, and then I pointed up the road toward the vague silhouettes of mountains. "Higher up there behind those ridges."

Jannie stayed quiet several moments, then said, "Is Stefan innocent?"

I thought about the charges. Stefan Tate was a gym teacher accused of torturing and killing a thirteen-year-old boy named Rashawn Turnbull. He was also the son of my late mother's sister and—

"Dad?" Ali said. "Is he innocent?"

"Scootchie thinks so," I replied.

"I like Scootchie," Jannie said.

"I do too," I replied, glancing at Bree. "So when she calls, I come."

Naomi "Scootchie" Cross is the daughter of my late brother Aaron. Years ago, when Naomi was in law school at Duke University, she was kidnapped by a murderer and sadist who called himself Casanova. I'd been blessed enough to find and rescue her, and the ordeal forged a bond between us that continues to this day.

We passed a narrow field heavy with corn on our right, and a mature pine plantation on our left.

Deep in my memory, I recognized the place and felt queasy because I knew that at the far end of the cornfield there would be a sign welcoming me back to a town that had torn my heart out, a place I'd spent a lifetime trying to forget.