

THE BONE RECORDS by Rich Zahradnik

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Friday, August 19, 2016

Grigg's reunion with his father was brief—eight minutes to be exact—and ended when a man with a nickel-plated revolver shot Dad twice.

Three hours before the violence began, Grigg struggled through the crowd on the Coney Island subway platform. He was the last to reach the stairway to the station's exit. Again. Even the old folks were gone. His wrecked knee held him back.

Outside the station, Deno's Wonder Wheel turned slowly, towering over the amusement park that took its name from the ancient fifteen-story ride. The wheel's spokes glowed a hot neon white. Hazy coronas surrounded all the lights.

Tick-tick-tick-tick.

Grigg had started wearing his father's Timex soon after he had gone missing. He put the watch up to his ear, as he'd done too many times before. It wasn't loud enough to be heard. The clockwork noise was in his head. Maybe a reminder to keep looking. Maybe a reminder that six months was already too long in missing persons cases.

His father's watch read 8:18 p.m.

He limped away from Coney Island's amusement parks toward his house on West 28th off Mermaid Avenue. As he did, the street darkened. He checked behind him more than once. The neighborhood became far less amusing as night came on—and the farther you went from the fun parks. Mugging wasn't the thrill ride Grigg needed. He didn't want any more trouble. He had a lifetime's supply. His long days pinballed him between two jobs and the search for his father.

But despite Grigg's best efforts, the minutes and hours and days kept spinning off the Timex, found by the police in a Howard Beach motel room, the last place his father was seen before he

vanished into the thin March air. Their empty house waited to reflect Grigg's loneliness back at him. His mother had died when he was eighteen months old. His boss at the city's claims adjustment office rarely talked to him outside of giving orders. All of his connections—he couldn't really call them friends—in the neighborhood he owed to his father. Dad, like the rest of them, had immigrated from Russia. Unlike the rest of them, he'd married a woman from Jamaica, a union that guaranteed Grigg would always be on the outside in Little Odessa.

The rubber soles of his cheap dress shoes slapped the wet pavement. A thunderstorm had blown through while he was on the subway, leaving behind the sticky-thick humidity. His messenger bag tugged on his shoulder.

He went over the lead he'd uncovered tonight. Going door-to-door in a Midwood apartment building full of Russians, he'd talked briefly to a tenant named Freddy Popov, who recognized Grigg's father when shown a photo. Popov said a man—maybe a cop—had been canvassing the building with a picture of Grigg's dad four weeks earlier. Inside the man's apartment and shielded by Popov, someone said something in Russian. Popov got hinky, then said he didn't know anything more and slammed the door. Grigg banged on it until a woman across the hall threatened to call the cops. He left with only the knowledge that someone else—maybe a cop?—was also searching for Dad. Still, that bit of info was his biggest lead to date.

Grigg limped up to the small, two-story brick house—kitchen, living room, two bedrooms over a garage—a duplicate of the other attached homes on the street. He unlocked the steel gate, then the front door, and stepped inside.

The thunk of the door closing echoed through the house. Two days ago, Grigg had moved everything out except for the sleeping bag in his bedroom of twenty-seven years and a blue duffel, readying the old house for its new owners. He turned the deadbolt.

He shouldn't be staying here tonight. He'd spent all his free time on the search for Dad, right up until the closing on the sale of the house. Even at the end, he'd hoped for a breakthrough that would save him from selling. He'd signed the papers yesterday, writing a check for \$1,650—most of his savings—because the house was underwater on a second mortgage his father had taken out. Grigg knew the out-of-state buyers wouldn't be moving in for three weeks, so he'd kept a copy of the key.

Trespassing in my own house. Inviting trouble when I already have too much.

The plan was to use the next three weeks to find an apartment share, but the lead from Popov tugged at his thoughts. Would it pull so hard that he'd spend his free time searching for Dad and end up homeless? He ducked his own question and instead pictured going back to demand Popov tell him more. He shook his head. He could barely keep his mind on his housing problem for the space of a single thought. He took a beer out of the refrigerator, went up to his room, and rolled his sleeping bag into a fat pillow to lean against.

Grigg popped open the 90 Years Young Double IPA. Nine percent alcohol. The strong stuff he'd dubbed "floor softener." He downed two sixteen-ounce cans, and the ache faded from the muscles in his damaged leg.

He took out his phone. He'd run through his data allowance last week. Three days until the new billing cycle. At least he had his music. He played the Decembrists, their songs about revenge and ships at sea set to jangly indie rock. He followed with the Killers, then Vampire Weekend.

Tick-tick-tick-tick.

His father's watch read 11:20 p.m.

He opened his notebook and wrote down "Day 191" along with what he'd learned. It was longer than any previous entry—yet not long at all. So many days. The silence in the house chilled him, sending goosebumps in waves over his arms and thighs. He got up and turned down the air conditioner. It wouldn't help. He missed his father's voice, the way it had warmed their home. They could talk about everything and anything, a lot of anything, but such interesting anything. Dad was always there with his questions, his curiosity, and his deep interest in whatever Grigg was up to. There were days his father was more intrigued by Grigg's job than Grigg was. Even that helped.

A fourth beer. He floated on the wood floor of his empty bedroom. Slept.

A thump. The floor hardened underneath him. Another thump. Half buzzed, halfway to a headache, Grigg opened his eyes. He heard it again. Not a dream. On the roof. He followed the steps above him to his father's empty bedroom. He was about to switch on his phone's flashlight when legs—silhouetted by the glow from the street across the way—dangled over the room's tiny balcony. They descended slowly, inching, hesitating, as if the intruder were no expert at this sort of move. The toes stretched to touch, and finally, the person dropped, stumbled, and landed on their knees.

Grigg didn't know whether to laugh or arm himself. If this was a robbery, then the joke was going to be on a thief who'd picked a house with nothing in it. Grigg decided discretion was the better

part of whatever, returned to his bedroom, and pulled the stun gun from his messenger bag. Ever since he'd been attacked when he was in the police academy—suffering the knee injury that forced him to drop out—he hadn't felt safe unless he carried the weapon.

He placed the messenger bag next to his duffel in the hallway in case he needed to get out fast. In the kitchen, he grabbed his second six pack as a backup weapon.

Of course, he could escape by the front and leave the intruder for the police to deal with. But if he did, then the buyers would be notified, and he'd lose the three weeks of temporary housing he'd been counting on.

He crept through the doorway into the main bedroom.

The figure, whose face remained in deep shadow because of the streetlight glow from behind, rattled the handle to the single balcony door, used his elbow to smash in the square pane nearest the knob, reached in, and turned the simple metal lock. As he pushed the door open, Grigg stepped forward, hit his phone's light, and thrust forward the stun gun.

"Get the f**k out of my house!"

The figure froze. "I'm not going to hurt you, Grigg."

Grigg moved closer.

"Dad? Dad!"

Full beard and longer hair, but it was him.

Grigg didn't know whether to hug his father or scream at him.

"I came to say goodbye," Dad said.

"Goodbye?"

"I'm leaving. For Russia. I don't know when I'll be able to return. It's the only way."

"I don't understand." Any of it. "You said you'd never go back."

"It's the only way to fix things."

"Things? What things?" *Popov's suggestion about a cop.* "Are the police after you?"

A click came from the front door, and Grigg spun. Seeing his father and not an intruder had put the brakes on his fear. Now, his heart raced. He squeezed the handle of the stun gun with a sweaty hand. *Keep it together.*

Chapter 2

Friday, August 19, 2016

The man was tall and red haired with a short beard and a flattened nose. He held a long-barreled, nickel-plated revolver. Looked like a .357 magnum.

“Shit.” Grigg grabbed his bags—there wasn’t time to recover the sleeping roll from his room and stuff it in the duffel—dropped back into the bedroom with his father, and shut and locked the door, though it wouldn’t hold for long. “Guy’s armed. Is someone after you?”

“Yes. But no, not *now*. That’s why I came across the roof.”

Grigg’s thoughts spun like he’d boarded the Tilt-A-Whirl at Deno’s Wonder Wheel. This was fucking nuts. His dad came back and moments later they were under attack. His stomach flipped as if he were actually on the ride.

A hundred questions.

A thousand.

Something hit the bedroom door hard.

No time for any.

“We’ll go out the way you came in.”

“I can’t make it back on the roof. I barely made it down.”

“I’ll boost you.”

They were on the balcony in seconds. Grigg grabbed his father’s thighs and lifted upward, bearing as much of the weight as he could on his good right leg. It wasn’t enough. He nearly fell over; instead, he leaned against the iron railing to regain his balance and shoved until Dad was able to drag himself onto the roof.

Another crash from the bedroom door.

Grigg tossed his duffel down into the backyard for later retrieval.

The bedroom door gave way after the third blow.

Grigg ripped free a can of 90 Years Young and hurled it hard into the shadowed darkness of the room. The man yelped in pain.

Grigg didn't wait to learn more. He moved to the side and climbed onto the balcony railing. Two loud gunshots, the weapon aimed at the space he'd vacated. He dropped the remaining beers and started pulling himself onto the roof. His arms were strong, but the left leg slowed him. Scrambling with all his strength, he made it up.

Below the asphalt roofing, in the attic, was the weapon he really needed, a registered .32 in a gun safe. No way to get it now.

Should've been better prepared.

"Run!" Dad whispered.

Run was right. There'd be time for should-haves later. Right now, Grigg had pissed off the gun-wielding asshole who was after his father for reasons unknown.

He went as fast as his left leg would allow, which meant he and his sixty-eight-year-old dad kept about even. They dodged around the boiler chimney and an AC unit. Neither structure looked tall enough to block a clear shot. They needed something bigger between them and that nickel-plated revolver. Like *now*.

They crossed to the roof of the next attached house and the next.

"How'd you get up here?" Grigg gasped, trying to picture a way down to street level and coming up empty.

"The Kiev Bakery at the corner has a fire escape."

That meant winning a block-long race over rooftops. Against bullets and a faster runner.

"Stop!" came a deep voice from behind them.

"Why's he after you?"

Instead of an answer, the report of the gun, then another.

Dad grabbed his side, groaned, and slowed but kept running, slewing off to the left. Grigg stayed with him.

"Get to Katia. Katia Sokolov—"

"Katia?"

Dad jerked and spun nearly in sync with the sound of the third shot. Hot blood sprayed Grigg's face.

His father listed hard to the left, veering toward the edge of the roof and the backyard two stories below.

Grigg grabbed for his dad's arm, but his hand slipped on blood.

He reached again to get a hold, but his father, as if driven by the red jet from his neck, took two more steps.

And disappeared off the roof.

Grigg stopped.

Stared at the twisted body below.

The next gunshot lifted the messenger bag hanging from his shoulder.

Shock made way for raw panic. Flee or die. The fire escape. Too far. He had to get down the way he came up. He dropped to the balcony of the house beneath him, then repeated the maneuver to reach the ground, bad knee screaming from the punishment of the twin blows, shirt drenched in sweat and blood.

His father's body lay face up with an arm under his back and the right leg bent at an unnatural angle. A two-story drop wouldn't necessarily kill you. But the neck wound ...

"Stay there or I will shoot you." The killer began taking Grigg's route to the ground.

The man had one shot left before he needed to reload. Or had he reloaded already?

Grigg knelt. Pressed his hand to his father's neck where the blood pulsed.

His father's eyes were open. With the slightest of movements, he patted at his blazer pocket. The jacket was no surprise. Dad always wore blazers. Weekdays and weekends. All seasons. *Why the hell does that matter now? Tilt-A-Whirl thinking.* A black tube protruded from the pocket. Grigg pulled it out.

Another shot.

Dirt leapt inches from Grigg's foot.

The gunman stood on the second-floor balcony and looked to be reloading.

Warning bells almost drowned out the unending ticking in Grigg's head as he held the tube up for Dad to see. "Is this what he's after?"

Dad's eyes didn't move. Stared upward. Locked in on something. Or nothing. His mouth was a black hole ringed with blood and spittle on thin lips. Grigg checked for a pulse. Neck first, then ear to chest. Nothing.

The gunman hung from the balcony, preparing to make the drop to the ground.

Fighting the nausea creeping up from his gut, Grigg ran as darts of pain shot from his left knee into his thigh. He climbed over the fence into the opposite yard, then into another next door, and found a shed to crouch behind.

From two backyards away, the gun went off.

A kill shot when Dad was already dead.

Grigg heaved up what was left of his dinner and the beers. Heaved again. Too much noise. Ground down his teeth to stop. He spat quietly to clear the taste of puke. Failed.

He couldn't see or hear the shooter, but he didn't dare move. Grief, anger, and fear threatened to swamp anything like clear thinking. A tidal wave against a rowboat. He needed to save himself. He needed to be a coward. Five minutes, then ten ticked off on his father's watch as he looked at the fence. Shadowed darkness. A deep purple oozed across his vision from staring too hard at the wooden slats.

Finally, he ordered himself to leave.

Be practical: the duffel bag.

He crossed two more backyards until he could approach his house—what used to be his house—from the other side. He saw no one in the yard where the body lay, looking from this distance like a dark mound. But the killer could be waiting somewhere to take him out. He inched with his back up against the wall (it was darkest near the houses), grabbed the bag, and slipped out to the avenue without incident.

His destination: the Conquistador Arcade in the Coney Island amusement area. He worked there most evenings. He had a key.

Cleaning the blood from his face and arms and out of his hair took an hour. Might have taken less time, but he kept scrubbing long after his skin was clean. If only he could scrub tonight away. After searching for six months, he'd had mere minutes with his dad before the attack. Grigg was too exhausted to cry. He knew the shirt was a write-off but left it soaking in the sink anyway, now the least of his lost causes.

He needed to go to the police. He knew that. But they hadn't given a shit when Dad disappeared. Grigg had been the only one looking. Murder was different than missing, right? Then again, he knew of too many unsolved killings in Coney Island.

He found it hard to think. Ideas, memories, discrete facts were fireflies inside his head. They whirled, collided, and spun off into the darkness. The lights led nowhere. Connected nothing. Would it help if he could catch them all in a jar like he had on an upstate trip with Dad? Or would that only mean the same confusion jammed in a smaller space?

He exited the bathroom of the arcade, which had closed hours ago, and moved to the Skee-Ball machines against the back wall. Rows of blinking arcade games shielded him from the front windows. He sat down. It was ironic. No, just sad. Grigg had dreamed of becoming a cop since he was a kid. The police academy hadn't worked out. Worse than that, it'd cost him his knee. Failed. Failed to find his father. Then Dad found him too late. Another failure. Exhaustion pressed down on him like the air had thickened, had weight. Maybe he'd lie down in the lane of this machine. He absently pulled out the black tube he'd taken from his dad's pocket. The shock again. He'd forgotten all about it. He took off a blue rubber band. The flimsy, plastic-like material unrolled: a super-thin black disc with a hole in the middle, like an old record. One of the arcade games flashed, and Grigg caught sight of something in the translucent black material. Film? He played his phone's light through it from behind, and the image of a skull materialized. He held the light closer. An X-ray of a skull, though like no X-ray he'd ever seen. For one obvious reason, it was circular; on closer inspection, the edge was uneven, like it had been cut by hand. The disc bore handwritten Cyrillic lettering. Grigg couldn't read or speak the Russian language, but smaller English script had also been written on the film: "Not Fade Away," right above the skull's eye sockets. He tipped the disc sidelong and scanned the surface. *Wait ... are those grooves?* Grooves, three inches' worth, cut into the X-ray disc, but only on one side.

Grigg would have sworn he was holding an old-fashioned record album—if an album were thin, translucent, and had a skull X-ray on it but no proper label.

He turned it over again. Connections came together in his head. The sting of memory going back six months, the night before his father disappeared, the second to last time Grigg had set eyes on the man.

Dad had stood in the living room, whistling and sorting through the mail: a couple fliers, a bill, and a manila envelope. He had opened the envelope, and Grigg had glimpsed a black thing—maybe disc shaped—slipping from it.

Was it a disc? Maybe he only wanted it to be. It seemed so long ago.

The way he remembered it, Dad froze, stopped whistling, then turned away from Grigg to hold the object over a table lamp before hurrying to his bedroom. His father hadn't come out again—no goodnight, no nothing—and was gone when Grigg awoke the next morning.

In the aftermath of his father's disappearance, he'd forgotten about the envelope and the black thing.

Grigg reached further into his memories but could find nothing else. That period had become a blur. He'd been overwhelmed by the search—plus two jobs and money running out fast. Finding his father had seemed more important than figuring out why he'd left. Maybe he had gotten it backward. Maybe the why came first.

He looked at his phone, useless as a tool to identify the object for certain. That would have to happen in the morning. And on the chance it played like a vinyl record, he needed to listen to it before he turned it over to the cops.

The strange disc generated enough adrenaline to further clear the fog in his brain. His father's last words: get to Katia Sokolov. If his thoughts hadn't been scrambled by the murder, he'd have wondered at that name sooner. First, probably. He couldn't talk to the cops until after he spoke with Katia, something he hadn't done in more than a year. Still, there was no way he'd sic a pack of homicide detectives on her. He owed her that much. More.

Thinking of how he'd lost Katia took him to losing Dad for good and wrenched sobs from him for twenty minutes, a half hour. He wasn't sure.

God, I so need sleep.

Grigg risked the chance of being seen, snuck out, and bought a four-pack of strong ale at a bodega on Surf Avenue.

He was asleep midway through the second can.