

# **Anchored**

**by**

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*This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*

*Shakespeare*

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## Chapter 1

Figures, she thought, the one day she hoped to sleep in, some knucklehead celebrity had to up and crash his plane. Barbara King propelled herself through the glass revolving door and into the lobby of the Phoenix News Channel.

Her old friend and producer Rip Danko was waiting for her, leaning against the lobby's security desk where the Saturday morning guard reclined in his chair holding a transistor radio tuned to a sports station. Danko, also seemingly oblivious to the blockbuster story their cable television station was about to cover, was slowly paging through a copy of *Rolling Stone* magazine. He looked up as Barbara charged over to him, her long, red hair falling out of its inadequate clip.

“Reading up on the plane crash?” she joked.

“Officially, it’s not a crash. Not yet.” Danko rolled up the magazine and squeezed it into the back pocket of his jeans. “Walk with me; talk with me,” he said, taking Barbara’s arm as he steered her through the lobby.

Barbara, still in her winter warm-up suit and sneakers, wanted to break into a run. This would be the biggest story their lowly third-ranked channel had ever covered: Grant Danes, acclaimed actor and amateur pilot, and his pseudo-celebrity new bride, were likely dead. If Barbara handled herself well in the breaking news shitstorm, she might be able to rise in the ranks at the Phoenix, or at least prove to her boss that she was cool in a crisis.

But running wasn’t in Rip’s repertoire. “Slow down; it’s only cable!” was his flirtatious warning to bodacious interns scampering about the newsroom. As Barbara walked with him, she detected the unmistakable whiff of the Pepperpot (the Phoenix staff’s favorite watering hole) emanating from Rip’s paisley print shirt.

“Go mano a mano with Johnnie Walker last night?”

“Jack Daniel’s, actually. And he won,” Danko sighed, running a hand through his longish blond-grey hair. “So. Danes decides to pilot his Cessna to the Hamptons for a showbiz shindig. He and the wife never show up.”

“When did they disappear?” Barbara asked. She wasn’t going to ask, “When did they go missing?” as the writers at the channel would have it. That phrase would have given her high school English teacher fits: “You don’t *go* missing.”

“The plane was off the radar after 8 o’clock last night—it was supposed to be a Teterboro to East Hampton, or, technically, Wainscott flight,” Danko replied. “We’re sending reporters to the airport, to Danes’s mansion in Southampton. The weather was lousy and he was a rookie pilot. Thinking is there might have been ice on the wings and he lost control. Don’t listen to any crap about them paddling to a beach waiting for a rescue boat. Water temps are in the 40s.”

“Should have stuck to playing a pilot in the movies, huh?” Barbara said, trying to sound like a cigar-chewing news veteran who’d seen her share of pretty flyboys crack up their airborne sardine cans. She certainly didn’t wish Danes dead; she’d enjoyed his movies, especially the one where he played a bipolar, one-armed Gulf war pilot who learns to fly, and love, again, thanks to a comely copilot. But Barbara had to admit she was giddy when Danko had paged her to come in, even if her beeper had awakened her from a dead sleep at 6 a.m. and spoiled her day of ice-skating with her husband and little boy.

“You’re on at 8,” Danko said, as they reached the end of the long lobby where one set of doors led to the newsroom, the other to the station’s offices.

“Eight,” repeated Barbara. “Yikes.” She needed to get to the newsroom for the conference call, then dash to her office to prep. She had to print out and speed-read every iota of information she could dig up on Danes: his early showbiz days playing a transgender serial killer on a 1980s nighttime soap, his snub by the Academy but Golden Globe nod for *Broken Wing, Mended Heart*, and his foray into directing. Barbara also needed to research the wife: her solo CD, which included a dreadful duet with a screechy-sounding Danes, her “friendship” with a rapper that led

to a brief break up with Danes, and her blatant lip-synching at an awards show which effectively ended her singing career.

“And Barb,” Danko said, his hand on the door, “You’re gonna have to yank Spencer out of the anchor chair.” Of course, Lois Spencer, Very Important Anchorwoman, had beaten Barbara onto the set.

“I could take her,” said Barbara, making a fist and flexing a bicep.

Danko grinned lasciviously. “I’ll bring the creamed corn for your wrestling match.”

“Roger that.”

Barbara flung open the frosted glass doors and entered the newsroom. It looked like a pinball machine, with pods lighting up as writers and producers flipped on overhead fluorescents and slammed into their work corners. They ricocheted across the room to the satellite desk where phones were blinking red and ringing. Next, they bounced to the bookers’ pod at the head of the newsroom to linger for a few moments before shooting back to their desks.

If the pinball game had a space-age theme, the rotating round news desk would be the floating mother ship. It was elevated, its height setting it apart from the rest of the newsroom, and it rotated at an infinitesimal speed, even slower than a merry-go-round coming to a stop. Barbara’s boss, Cal Carmichael, the Phoenix News Channel’s cheery leader, thought it would be a slick bit of showbiz aesthetics to have the set spin. This way the anchor desk’s backdrop would be a constantly changing shot of the newsroom in all its frenetic glory. Cal, a former soap opera actor attuned to stagecraft, thought the astronomically priced set was worth the money and would

generate buzz. Others pointed out that no one ever went home from a Broadway show humming the set. Sitting on it as it turned, Barbara felt like a rotisserie chicken.

Just as Danko had warned, Lois Spencer, with her long-necked 6-foot frame, was roosting in the anchor chair. As Barbara walked by, she made a point of not looking in her direction. Barbara headed straight for the conference room where producers and writers and production assistants were swarming in advance of the planning meeting and Cal's call. With everyone in sweats, scrunchies, and baseball caps, it looked as if the Phoenix staff had assembled for a station softball game.

Barbara took a seat at the conference table and glanced at the giant elementary school-style analog clock on the wall. 7:13 a.m. She'd set a new record in her drive into Manhattan on the Long Island Expressway to the studio that morning, but even if this meeting got going soon, she'd have a meager 40 minutes to change her clothes, research, print, read, and get hair and makeup before running over to The Rotisserie.

The conference room had filled up and was now standing-room-only, as producers and writers nervously eyed the old-fashioned clock. Barbara stared at the space-aged, winged, conference call phone, willing it to life. It looked like a plane, with speakers in its nose and wings, and control panel buttons in its fuselage. The plane. Damn. She needed to research Danes's model, its safety record, and the details of the instruction he'd received in piloting (apparently not enough). Where was Cal? Barbara tapped her foot.

7:15 a.m. "Good morning, campers!" came the voice crackling through the phone. Finally. Cal calling from his office on the 25th floor of their building. He never attended the meetings,

probably wanting to preserve his image as the unseen “Charlie,” communicating with his news “Angels.” She’d never met the man herself as he was on a mysterious medical leave when she was hired a year ago and few at the channel had. But she’d seen his publicity shot. He was somewhat Charlie-esque: a white-pompadoured older man, still dapper, if not a bit puffier since he’d played a doctor in soaps. Cal had moved on to directing and then left the soap operas altogether to work as a producer in a then new genre—the television talk show—where he turned a pudgy everyman host into a star. Cal’s new frontier was cable.

“What have you got? Southampton, you’re up first!” Cal sounded chipper as ever, even though he had to be feeling the pressure: he was delivering marching orders for covering a story that could actually get ratings.

A producer who’d been rushed to the Danes’s cordoned-off compound up-talked her update. “The reporter’s with the, um, truck? At Southampton hospital? In case, they’re like, okay? And maybe swam to shore? I can’t get into their like, mansion, so I’m outside? I’m trying to get someone? From the family?”

This girl sounds 16, thought Barbara.

“Alrighty,” chirped Cal. “East Hampton, you there?”

A deep-voiced young man who’d mumbled incomprehensibly into Barbara’s earpiece when he’d produced her show last week signed in.

“We’reatheairportliningupanofficialmaybeapilottoo.”



Cal, undaunted by what was to Barbara a nearly unintelligible response, continued, “And New York?”

Barbara’s eyes turned toward her rookie producer du jour, sitting across from her in the conference room. Jimmy O’Byrne, was it? The poor kid’s face was a map of anxiety prompting the stage crew to nickname him Zitty O’Breakout. He began, “King starts at 8 and we’ll rotate every hour with Spencer/Topper.”

“I didn’t notice young Will on television this morning,” Cal interjected.

Will Topper, Lois Spencer’s co-anchor, was a mess. The channel’s wardrobe mistress and minions were constantly in his office, collecting his frayed pants or ties that were stained with Lord knew what. He got away with a lot because of his cool Australian accent, but his malapropisms and mangled grammar irritated Lois to no end, what with her flawless English and fluent French. But Cal hired Will because he “popped” on television, and chalked up his linguistic difficulties to “cultural differences.” One of those differences was that he wouldn’t let work get in the way of an all-night rave. So now, while Spencer was anchoring the missing- plane story, Topper was likely still on the dance floor, pressing the heels of his hands skyward.

“Not sure of his status, Mr. Carmichael,” Zitty gulped. “We have a live shot from midtown, where we’ll be doing a little man-on-the-street, asking folks ‘How will you remember him?’ and...”

“Careful not to kill him before he’s dead!” Cal said brightly.

“Right. Right. Of course.” New, angry red pin-points were probably already pushing their way up to the surface of the producer’s skin.

“Make sure, however,” said Cal, “that the Specials Department puts together a Danes obit package. And have someone do a side-bar package on the wife—she was an actress or a model, wasn’t she?”

“A singer,” answered Zitty. “Sort of.” Zitty gave a nervous smile as his quip produced a titter in the conference room.

Rip joined the call from his office. “Cal. It’s Danko.”

“Good morning, Clarence!” The boss was the only one allowed to call Danko by his real name; they went way back.

“An entertainment print reporter who’s covered Danes since his TV days is on his way in to the studio,” said Rip. “He can help the anchors fill.”

“Terrific!” Cal dropped his voice. “Now, before we go....”

But before Cal could begin his inevitable pep talk, Lois Spencer cut in. From the set. Only she could have maneuvered her crew to punch in the conference call during a commercial break.

“Good morning, Cal. Lois Spencer here. Just wanted you to know that I got an exclusive. I’ll be interviewing the wife’s childhood friend in the 9 a.m. It’s an exclusive and the control room should monitor so they can record and replay the exclusive during prime time.”

Thanks, Lois, because we hadn't heard the word "exclusive" the first two times, Barbara thought.

"Great work, Lois!" Cal exclaimed. "So before we go, let me say a few quick words." When Cal started his missives, Barbara always wondered if they should genuflect, like a ball team before a game.

"It would seem that Hollywood has suffered a tragic loss. If this is so, the Phoenix News Channel wants to be first with the news. But always remember and never forget, our competition would be all too happy to accuse us of negative coverage. For now, stay away from any of the seedier aspects of the showbiz...shall we say...*lifestyle*." Assuming this referred to rumors of cocaine consumption on the part of Danes and his bride, the conference room crowd emitted a mild rumble of laughter. Cal continued, "Let's focus instead on a star who had great box office and was certainly loved by his fans." There were a few "mmm's" of agreement, but most of the assembled were already bolting out of their seats as Cal signed off, "Go make some great TV!"