

Chapter 1 Catfish Guru

by Mark Terry

I was in the interview room. I wondered when the change had been made from interrogation room to interview room. What politically correct law enforcement consultant had suggested that everybody should switch from the vaguely threatening, Gestapo-esque *interrogation room* to the user-friendly *interview room*? As if when cops sit around asking you questions in a small square box with a cheesy laminate table and three orange molded plastic chairs they were, maybe, you know, like, hey, thinking of hiring you. We're just interviewing you, Dr. MacGreggor. We're not actually trying to find out if you know anything about the death of that guy you found on the beach.

We're not, actually, thinking that you might be a suspect in the murder of the victim. No, no. We wouldn't be thinking that at all. We've just put you in this room by yourself that has no window and no mirror and no way out except a locked door because we'd like you to answer a few simple questions.

The person I assumed was the good cop was Detective Francine Smithson, and she leaned forward toward me, real friendly and said, "Dr. MacGreggor..."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to go over it one more time."

She was probably a few years older than I was, late thirties. Short frosted hair, a little chunky, a little butch, but not unattractive. Her big eyes were the blue of shallow water in the bright sun, her complexion slightly ruddy. She folded her fastidiously manicured hands on the table and said, "Now, let's start at the beginning. You said you and your son were taking a walk along the beach...."

* * *

Except that wasn't really the beginning. The beginning was a telephone call from an old friend. And of course, the beginning really wasn't that telephone call if it was from an old friend. In order to understand that telephone call from Rebecca Dalton you have to understand that Becca was once an office-mate of mine, four of us crammed into a room the size of a pop-up camper in the Life Sciences Building at Michigan State University. Both Becca and I had been working on our doctorates in toxicology. I completed mine and went on to post-doctoral work. Becca dropped out to marry William Dalton, who was just finishing his law degree at Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan. He accepted a job in a big firm in San Francisco and she dropped out of school, never to complete that doctorate.

Becca and I had dated a few times. This was during one of her and William's cooling-off periods, and I should have known better. Becca, then and now, was a bright, attractive woman. She and William had been doing this relationship yo-yo thing for a couple years and rather than asking

her out when they were on a downswing I probably should have just minded my own business. But I had thought there might be something besides friendship between us, and maybe she did too. We went to a couple movies, caught a band or two at a local bar, and once or twice had progressed to some fairly serious necking that almost but not quite made it to the tumble-into-the-sack stage.

And we more or less mutually agreed that we were better off being friends and office-mates and that was it. I had been invited to her wedding and we sent Christmas cards back and forth and the occasional e-mail. They had two kids and eventually moved back to Traverse City, Michigan, a resort town at the crook between the ring and pinkie finger of the Michigan mitten. (And if you don't think of Michigan as a mitten, then you're not from Michigan). William opened up his own law practice and when the girls were older Becca started teaching biology and biochemistry at Northwestern Michigan College.

The phone call came in March of this year. Becca was hosting and organizing a week-long symposium on biotechnology at the college, would I be interested in being involved? Yes, I had said, I think I would.

My life was in transition. For eight years I had been the Director of Genetic Toxicology for a small biotech firm downstate in Ferndale. But the grind of the position, the bitter politics and the perilous state of my personal life had sent me looking for an academic position that would allow me more freedom to raise my son, Michael. Beginning this September, I would be faculty at Oakland University in Rochester, not far from my home in Oxford. The symposium in Traverse City not only seemed like a great way to spend a partially-paid vacation in one of my favorite resort towns, but it would give me a little experience teaching before I jumped into the real thing.

But I didn't explain that to Detective Francine Smithson, because that wasn't the order she wanted me to tell her things. She wanted to know about this morning, when we had found the body of Steven Ferrante face down in the waters of the Boardman River where it trickled into East Grand Traverse Bay.

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The Human Alarm Clock went off at 6:07. The Human Alarm Clock, otherwise known as Michael MacGreggor, stood up in his Port-A-Crib and hollered his head off. I catapulted out of bed, snagged him up in my arms and slipped back between the sheets, hoping that Michael would fall back to sleep. Sometimes it happened.

Sometimes all the planets align, too.

Although Michael was no longer yelling, he wasn't settling down to sleep, either. He tossed. Then he turned. When that got old he took to kicking me in the knee, thigh, hips, stomach and ribs.

I sat up and sighed. Michael, who had just turned a year old a week ago, sat up too, a big grin on his little round face. *Hi Dad, isn't morning great?*

No, actually, it wasn't.

I changed and dressed him, then put on a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt myself, yanking an orange Adidas baseball cap over my unruly morning hair. William had left a short while ago and I could hear Becca in the shower, but otherwise the Dalton household was still asleep and I wanted to keep it that way. Quietly we slipped into the darkened kitchen. I filled a sippy-cup with whole milk and handed it to Michael, stuffing a bagel into the pocket of my green hooded MSU sweatshirt. With the stealth of burglars we left the house, crossed the small yard to the beach and began walking east toward the rising sun, just a smudge of pink on the horizon.

Becca and William Dalton's house was on the East Grand Traverse Bay. From Front Street, the main drag through town, the house looked like a modest ranch with a half-acre yard. There were three factors that made this ranch no longer modest. One, it had a walk-out basement onto the beach. Two, it was bigger than it looked with three bedrooms, an office and a guest room, which is where Michael and I were staying. The house had four-and-a-half bathrooms--one for each bedroom and a changing room downstairs--as well as a living room and family room. The third factor was the bay frontage. The Daltons owned approximately one hundred and fifty feet of beach on East Grand Traverse Bay. If you transplanted this house and this property to Oxford, Michigan, where my own ranch was situated, in the current market it would probably go for \$250,000, maybe \$300,000. Not cheap, but not dramatically ridiculous for a successful middle-class homeowner.

The Dalton house ran somewhere in the range of a million-three, due largely to the bay view. I took this to mean that William's law practice was doing well.

It was a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to mortgage there.

Michael and I walked east along the beach, he sipping at his milk, me pretending that I belonged here. By the age of thirty-six I had come to the realization that I was very comfortable, would probably remain so, but would never be rich unless something miraculous happened. Miracles happen every damned day, but they don't seem to include my income rising precipitously. I would very much enjoy owning a place like this and kicking back and enjoying endlessly shifting shades of blue, but it didn't seem to be part of my destiny.

Off to my left was the dark shadow of the Old Mission Peninsula, a twenty-mile-long peninsula of apple, cherry and grape orchards that split Grand Traverse Bay into east and west arms. The west was deeper, a darker shade of blue; the east was shallower, the blue lighter, the color of a favorite pair of faded jeans.

We had the beach to ourselves. It was a little chilly, probably about 62 degrees, but there weren't any clouds in the sky, not yet anyway. The water of the bay was as flat as a watery Kansas, so calm you'd think you could walk on it. Michael dashed on ahead, flirting with the water's edge. The water was cold, and even though Michael wasn't obviously aware of the temperature gradient, he didn't act enthusiastic about a full-face splash in Lake Michigan's early-June waters.

He was enthusiastic about the ducks though, quite a few of whom were sleeping huddled on the beach. Sleeping until a joyous one-year-old ran among them. Then in quacking disturbance they waddled off, not panicked, but annoyed by this youngster, this intruder into their rest. We made it up to them by tearing the bagel into little pieces and feeding it to them. You're not supposed to do that, feed wildlife, because they can become dependent on you. With a degree in biology and all the additional baggage of advanced degrees in life sciences, I certainly knew better. It didn't stop me from doing it, but I felt a little pang of guilt, the one that my parents and generations of Puritan ancestors had handed down to me just to make sure I didn't enjoy myself too much in any given situation.

We passed two houses, lights flicking on in bathrooms and kitchens, households stirring to life. Then we walked past the last of the residences, past the Traverse Beach Condominium complex, which is where I had originally planned to stay until Becca insisted we stay at her house. I wasn't sure I wanted to spend a week living with an old girlfriend and her husband and daughters. Becca had assured me it would be just fine and the girls would--for a price--babysit Michael while I was involved in the symposium.

We had the beach to ourselves except for a lone figure near where the State Park's beach began its sandy run east. There is a spot just east of the condos where the Boardman River drains into the bay. I would find out later that the reason, even in spring and early summer, that the river only trickles into the bay is because there is a dam very near the center of town that keeps it that way. Michael and I had taken this walk the day before, Monday, and found that to continue we had to take off our shoes and cross the river's mouth. Or more correctly, I had to, carrying Michael.

Lake Michigan's temperature was downright chilly, but the very shallow waters of the river were warm, at least in comparison to the bay. The water from the river was silt and tannin-stained, piles of sand drifting in from the beach.

Today a man in green rubber hip-waders was sloshing about in the river with a net. He was lean, maybe a few years older than myself, with dark curly hair streaked with gray.

"Morning," he said. His dark eyes danced as he watched Michael considering him.

"Morning," I greeted right back. He had even white teeth and high cheekbones. I wasn't a woman, and wasn't properly wired to appreciate his looks, but I suspected he was a really good-looking guy.

"Out for a walk?"

"Mm-hmm," I said. "How about you? Fishing?"

"Nah," he said. "Collecting samples."

"Yeah?"

Michael, already bored, wandered toward the riverbank to investigate the contents of five Styrofoam coolers. He peeked inside one and hooted, pointing.

"He sees my fish, probably," the man said. "Catfish."

"You're a..."

"Ichthyologist," he said. "Teach biology over at the college."

"Oh," I said. "That's why I'm here. I'm involved with the biotech conference."

"Yeah? Rebecca Dalton's baby, right? Not really my thing."

"What is your thing?" I said, wandering over to look at what was so interesting to Michael. Inside the coolers were little fish, about an inch long. Were these called fry? Marine biology wasn't really *my* thing.

"Catfish are my thing," he said. "I've got commercial work and my population studies. I track catfish numbers throughout Lake Michigan and the inland lakes. Mostly I'm interested in interactions with environmental factors, pollution, that sort of thing."

"What's the commercial work?" I asked. "Oh," I said. "By the way, I'm Theo MacGreggor." I proffered my hand. "Everybody calls me Mac."

"Steve Ferrante."

We shook.

He said, "I consult with commercial catfish fisheries. You know, catfish farming? There's a little bit of it around here, but down south it's a big deal, something around \$600 million a year. I'm an expert on catfish, so I fly down and help keep them fat and healthy."

Michael was showing a real fascination for the catfish fry in the Styrofoam coolers, so we kept talking.

"How about you?" Ferrante said.

"I'm a toxicologist," I said, startled at the way he jerked his head toward me, suddenly more attentive.

"Really," he said. "You do much environmental work?"

I shrugged. "No, to be honest. My post-doc was in environmental toxicology, but I got sidetracked into industry and have been doing quality control work for a biotech company ever since. I'm making a shift to academia this fall, but I haven't really figured out what I'm going to do there yet."

"Got a card?"

I pulled out my wallet, not sure if I did. But I did, two business cards that didn't look too beat up. I handed him one. He tucked it into his shirt pocket. "I might call you. I've got tons of environmental data on my catfish to deal with, chromatographs of the water and the fish I've been collecting. I could use some help wading through it."

"Well, keep me in mind. I'm open to some consulting of that sort."

"Will do." We shook hands again and I pointed Michael further on down the beach. We continued our walk, past the State Park beach for nearly a mile until thoughts of breakfast intruded. Then I hefted Michael onto my shoulders, walked between two condominium complexes to Front Street and headed for a rendezvous with Dunkin' Donuts.

* * *

"Aren't you leaving something out?" asked Detective Bryan Falco. If Francine Smithson was the good cop, Falco was the bad. She tried to gain rapport; he tried to intimidate me. I didn't feel very friendly toward her and toward him I only felt annoyance, so it was possible the two of them were inept.

"I don't think so," I said. Falco was a big man with curling salt-and-pepper hair, thick bodybuilder's shoulders and strong, broad features. His eyes were brown, his skin tanned, his face sagging just a bit from its forty-plus years' battle with gravity.

"The part about you smashing him over the head with a blunt object," he said.

I gazed at Falco for a few seconds, then shook my head. I wanted to say, "Oh, yeah, that part." But Falco didn't seem likely to distinguish between sarcasm, irony and honesty, so instead I said, "I didn't smash him over the head with anything, blunt or otherwise."

"Why do you put it that way?"

"What way?"

"Blunt or otherwise. You know what his head was smashed in with?"

"No," I said. "When I saw him his skull looked dented in and there was a fair amount of blood, but I'd only guess it was something hard like, I don't know, a jack handle or a heavy wrench or a crowbar, something like that. Purely a guess, though."

"Uh-huh," Falco said. He wore white Nikes, black jeans and a white dress shirt under a lightweight navy blue windbreaker. He leaned back in his orange molded plastic chair and put one Nike-clad shoe over his other knee. "We found your business card in his shirt pocket."

"I told you about that."

"Convenient."

"It is," I said. "Particularly since I already explained it. I don't really know what he wanted me for exactly, but it sounded like it might have been interesting."

There was a knock at the interview room door and then it swung open and William Dalton stepped in. William—always William, never Bill or Billy or Will—looked like a high-priced lawyer should look. Tall and lean with dark hair cut short and graying at the temples. He had on a navy blue pinstriped suit with a white silk shirt and a burgundy silk tie.

"Mac," he said. "Let's get you out of here."

"We're not done questioning him yet," Falco said.

William glanced at his Rolex and said, "Did you take his statement?"

"Hasn't been transcribed yet."

William put on a forlorn look and snapped his fingers. "Darn. That's really too bad, Bryan. He'll just have to swing by and proofread it later."

"He's a suspect, Dalton. For god sakes, he—"

"He can go," Francine Smithson said. "He's staying with you, right?"

William turned to frown at the female detective. "Yes."

"You'll be aware of his whereabouts, then?"

"Of course."

"I imagine we'll have more questions as we investigate, but for right now I think we've done enough. Thank you for your time, Doctor."

I nodded, grabbed my sweatshirt and followed William out of the interview room, through the Law Enforcement Center's doors to the parking lot where William's white Lincoln Navigator awaited us beneath the shade of a massive oak tree. I said, "Becca call you?"

"Of course," he said. "Sorry it took so long." He turned, frowned, looking down at me from his six-foot-two-inch height advantage. "Michael's fine."

"Good."

William and I were not friends. We were friendly, at least as friendly as two grown men could be who had dated the same woman, even if that had been nearly twelve years ago. I didn't know if William was the jealous type or not, but I wasn't sure he approved of the warmth Becca extended

to me or if perhaps he had some suspicions about the depth of our relationship back in grad school days. Or perhaps it was simpler than that: maybe he just didn't like me.

We climbed into the Lincoln and I settled back against the tan leather interior. William stared through the windshield for a moment, lost in thought. Finally he said, "I'm not a criminal lawyer. It's not my area of expertise. If you need one, say so and I'll find a good one."

He didn't look at me when he said it, and I didn't care for the comment. I would have better appreciated, "This is all bullshit, Mac, you wouldn't be involved in anything like this."

I let it settle between us a moment, wondering if he'd apologize or modify, but he didn't. After a few seconds I said, "I just found the body. I didn't kill him."

"Then I'm sure I can handle anything that comes up. As a favor to Becca." He waited a beat then said, "And you."

"I appreciate that," I said. "There shouldn't be any problem."

He sighed, glanced at the Rolex again, then said, "I've got a meeting in a half an hour. Tell me everything while I take you...back home."

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At Dunkin' Donuts Michael drank orange juice and munched on a double chocolate donut, smearing it over his face. I was trying to be at least a little virtuous, so I had opted for a cinnamon-raisin bagel sans cream cheese. I tried to skim through the local newspaper, the *Traverse City Record-Eagle*, but Michael was really too distracting for that. When he had finally finished his chocolate facial, I did my best to wipe him down, then we crossed Front Street's five lanes of commuter traffic and made our way back to the beach by way of the Traverse Beach Condominiums' lot. I glanced east, expecting to see the catfish guy, Steve Ferrante, still at work.

What I saw in the morning's early light were his five Styrofoam coolers, but no Ferrante. I shrugged, thinking he'd probably gone to take a whiz somewhere or was sitting down out of sight making notes. I could have left it alone; almost did. But he had dangled the possibility of freelance consulting in front of my face and I was interested. I was leaving industry and a very healthy salary for academia and about half the money. Any additional income through consults would be welcome.

"Come on, Michael," I said. "Want to go look at the catfish again?"

Michael went along happily, dashing on ahead. He stopped near the Styrofoam coolers, peeking in. I caught up a moment later and looked around, puzzled. I wondered where Ferrante went.

Oh well. "Guess he took a break," I said, and caught Michael's hand and began to walk back to the Dalton's house, my stride a little heavy. I wasn't having a particularly good time staying with Becca and her family. For the last eight months Michael and I had been alone. We knew the

routine, knew each other's habits. I wasn't a great houseguest, and in the two nights I had been there, I had detected a significant amount of tension between William and Becca. I wasn't sure where it came from, but I suspected I was part of it. I was considering making a move to a motel before it got out of hand, not sure what would be more hazardous to my friendship with Becca, staying or leaving.

Then something caught my attention. A fleeting ghost of color in a place it shouldn't be. I turned and focused. The morning sun was lighting the east bay with shimmering highlights and at first that's what I thought I was seeing, the rising sun reflecting off the water. A flash of scarlet, like the title of a John D. MacDonald novel.

Red on top of the water. I took a step closer, puzzled. Some sort of algae bloom?

But my subconscious knew. My subconscious knew that I was seeing fresh blood on water. And then I saw Steve Ferrante, face down in about two feet of sluggish river as it drained from the Boardman into Lake Michigan.