

Databyte:
Chapter One.
Poker Face

“Special Agent Ellie Conway?” said the suit standing in my office doorway. He wore a visitor’s badge clipped to his lapel.

“Yes, and you are?”

He held up identification. Looked like a gold shield. Every man, dog, and parrot in D.C. has a shield.

“Aaron Keller, can I come in?”

“Please and show me that again.” I moved my mouse pointer to hide the work on my desktop. Just in case. “Have a seat, Mr. Keller.”

He showed me his shield again. He was a Metro cop, a detective.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions, if I may.”

It sounded like a request but it really wasn’t.

“What can I help you with?”

“This morning we found a hand ...” He paused, gaug-ing my reaction.

A hand? He didn’t get sent boxes of ass then, or have pizza delivered by a torso? A solitary hand won’t im-press me much.

“A hand? Do you have any more information than that?”

“Yes, ma’am. Fingerprints tell us the hand belongs to Edward Connelly.”

What now?

“Hang on, you’re saying it is Eddie Connelly’s hand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I chewed my lip. I knew a smirk would tweak my lips as the news set in. It’s very hard to explain to people who haven’t met Eddie how awful a person he is and how much I wouldn’t miss him, should he die a horrible slow death. I dared not hope that that had happened.

“That’s pretty damn careless of Eddie.” People don’t usually lose their hands. They’re not the sort of thing anyone puts down and leaves without. “Where is the rest of him and do his parents know?”

“We don’t know where the rest of him is. I was hop-ing you’d be able to help us locate the rest of Mr. Connelly.”

“I haven’t seen him in two years. There’s an ongoing protection restraining order against him to safeguard my daughter.”

“We know, ma’am. We also understand you threat-ened to kill him numerous times prior to taking out the restraining order.”

How would they know that? The times when I threatened Eddie, we were alone, or at his parents’ home. Oh, of course. Beatrice Connelly, the ex-mother-in-law from hell. Bet she couldn’t wait to drop that on the cop. The restraining order also included her.

“What can you tell me about the hand?”

“I can’t tell you anything. You’re a potential suspect.”

Well, that was honest of him.

I sighed. “I didn’t kill Eddie. Nor did I chop off his hand.”

If I’d lopped off a body part, it would’ve been his poi-sonous tongue in preference to his fat hand.

He looked a little uncomfortable.

Oh. Yuck.

“He wasn’t dead was he, when the hand was re-moved?”

“I can’t talk to you about the case.”

I moved my mouse pointer. Work filled my screen. At the bottom corner sat the icon for our intranet chat program. I double-clicked Delta A. The window opened. I typed one word – trouble – and closed the window.

“Do you have any leads or any suspects, you know, real ones, not me?” I said, rocking back in my chair. Kurt appeared in my open doorway. “Come in, Kurt.”

He walked into the room followed by Sam and Lee. The feel of the room changed, it tipped more in my favor.

Keller turned his head and faced with a wall of men, he scrambled to his feet and stuttered, “Aaron Keller, Metro PD, Detective Aaron Keller.”

Lee shook his hand. “What are you detecting?” he asked with a good-natured smile.

“Not much,” I interjected. “Seems Metro found Eddie Connelly’s hand and think I chopped it off.”

Detective Keller sat back down. I think he was trying to pretend the room wasn't stuffed with large men. Good luck.

Kurt suppressed a smile. "That's not likely."

Keller honed in on Kurt. "Why do you say that?"

"Because Agent Conway would be more likely to shoot him. She doesn't like being close to Mr. Connel-ly."

Eddie Connelly was the epitome of the bottom of an ashtray filled with bourbon, enhanced by body odor. Yeah, attractive.

Sam stepped forward. "So where is the rest of dear Eddie?"

Keller swiveled his head in the other direction to see Sam. "We don't know. We only have a hand."

"Is he dead or alive?" Kurt asked.

"We think he was alive when the hand was removed."

Possibly by someone wearing a level-A Hazmat suit. I thought about the hand removal for a moment. Bet someone lopping off his hand stung. I knew there was a stupid grin on my face.

I looked up to see Kurt run his thumb under his chin and point to his mouth. I worked harder on trying to dislodge the smile. Sam was doing a great job of keep-ing Detective Keller's attention off me.

"Where and when was the hand discovered?" Sam asked.

"I can't discuss the case in front of Agent Conway, she's a suspect."

Sam smiled. It wasn't pleasant. "When was the hand discovered and when was it removed from the body? If Agent Conway is a suspect then she should be allowed the chance to refute the claims and provide an alibi."

Keller looked uncomfortable. I think he realized he wasn't going to get anywhere with Delta A sucking all the air in my office.

"Where were you last night, Agent Conway?" he said.

"I was at home, Detective Keller."

"Can anyone confirm you were at home?"

I smiled. "My house."

He looked confused.

I could have told him that the house monitors all comings and goings using a sophisticated computerized security system and stores data on an off-site server. I could have.

“You’re not being very cooperative.”

“I was at home. I didn’t anticipate having to provide an alibi, so I was at home, alone.”

Keller leveled his eyes at me and made a last ditch attempt. “I’m asking you to accompany me to the police station to continue this conversation.”

“You know, Detective Keller, I think I’ll give that a miss.”

“Do I have to arrest you?”

That was ballsy.

“If you want to arrest me, go ahead. I’d like to see your evidence and also, you might like to share your findings with SAC Grafton and Director O’Hare.”

“I ... ah ... just need to ask you some questions to rule you out of the investigation.”

“You did and I answered them. You won’t tell me anything ... I’m done.” I swung in my chair. “Just a heads up – Eddie has more enemies than anyone I’ve ever met. The list includes his ex-wife and his children.”

“I hope you have another line of inquiry because this one just dried up,” Lee said, leaning over Keller just a little.

Keller blathered, “Don’t leave town.”

“You don’t get to say that to me,” I replied. “If you’d like help with your case, you can give us a call.” I hand-ed him my card.

As if on cue, my desk phone rang. The display indicated it was the Connelly’s home phone number calling. No way was I going to take that call with a Metro cop in my office.

I stood up and offered him my hand. “Goodbye.”

He shook my hand and nodded. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I’m sure you will.”

My phone continued ringing then abruptly stopped. Dammit, there’d be a message. Kurt ushered Keller from my office. Sam and Lee sat down.

“This is not good,” Sam said.

“No, it really isn’t,” I replied. “For the record, I didn’t do anything to Eddie the ’tard, but I’m having trouble feeling sorry that karma has finally caught up with him.”

“Us all. Wonder where the rest of him is and where they found that hand ...” Sam said.

“Not on his arm,” I muttered. “Typical freaking Eddie, he’s always been trouble.”

The phone sat on my desk taunting me. I knew I had to listen to the message.

I lifted the handset from the cradle and pressed four numbers, accessing my voice mail. As soon as I heard Beatrice Connelly’s voice, I hit the speaker button.

“What did you do to my Eddie? Wasn’t it enough that you killed my youngest son, now you have to take my Eddie? And as for our poor granddaughter ... you gave her access to the drugs that killed her. I’m sure you are in jail by now. The police were here. I told them all about you and how you hate my family and are killing us off one by one and how you killed your daughter.” She disconnected.

The grins Lee and Sam wore at the start of the rant slid off their faces, replaced by unadulterated anger.

There was no way I could acknowledge the horror of Beatrice saying I’d killed my child, so I ignored it.

“It’s nice that we can always count on my ex-mother-in-law to be level-headed and sane,” I said. “I’m sure Detective Keller enjoyed her ranting and earnest declarations about how I’m killing them all off one by one.”

Maybe I should.

“As senseless as she sounds, he was just doing his job. She pointed her fat finger at you, he’s obliged to investigate,” Lee said, the struggle to keep rampaging anger from his voice obvious. “He didn’t have to go about it the way he did, though.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back ... Beatrice won’t let this go.”

She’s found a way to be annoying and lash out at me at the same time and she’ll make the most of it.

“That’s as sure as bears shit in the woods,” Lee drawled.

“We can poke around,” Sam said. “See if we can find any more of Eddie.”

“Or we could let it go and move on. Detective Keller will be back. Until then, we’ve been asked to look into a stalking case,” I said.

“Stalking?” Kurt said. “A serial stalker?”

A smile erupted into laughter as a mental image took hold. I pictured a crazy but pretty woman stalking the Frosty Flakes in Safeway. Maybe she liked tigers or maybe she just liked sugar. I suspected it was a package deal. Cereal stalker, indeed.

“No, not a serial stalker, at least not as far as we know,” I replied, sending the Frosty Flakes image packing.

“Who’s being stalked?” Kurt asked, taking his pen and notebook from his jacket pocket.

“A celebrity,” I replied. “LAPD have asked for our help.”

That made everyone focus.

“We’re going to Los Angeles?” Sam sounded hopeful.

“Not at the moment. Our guy is flying out east for some public appearances and also to vacation.”

“Why us and not Metro?”

“The threat assessment turned up something inter-esting.” I turned my gaze to Lee. “Want to hazard a guess what that might be?”

He shook his head.

I continued, “If I said his name was Michael Daven-port would that ring any bells, Agent Davenport?”

Lee smiled, just a little.

Kurt and Sam both frowned.

“I don’t know any celebrities called Michael Daven-port,” Sam said. He turned to Lee, “You have a brother named Michael, don’t you?”

Lee nodded. “Mike is my little brother.”

Not that much littler. or younger. My information said they were born in the same year. Irish twins. Lee was almost ten months older than his little brother.

“Celebrity? Does he look like a rocker, too?” Kurt said. “Because I could understand that.”

“No, he looks like an action hero,” I replied. “He looks a lot like someone from a very popular series currently on television.”

“He’s an actor?” Kurt said.

“Yep. Michael Fisher, aka Michael Davenport, aka Lee’s baby brother.”

Sam and Kurt digested the information.

Sam was first to speak. “You never mentioned Mi-chael was an actor.”

“No one ever asked,” Lee replied with a grin. “So when does the kid arrive?”

“I thought you would know the answer to that,” I said.

“Nope. He never mentioned he was coming out. I knew he was going away but I figured he was off climb-ing another mountain somewhere.”

“You’re close then?” I muttered.

Lee laughed. “We’re brothers. I’m sure he’d arrive on my doorstep at some point, and then I’d know he was in town.”

I pulled up the information we had on Michael and his situation. “Michael’s management and studio apprised LAPD of a threat situation two days ago.” Scanning the rest of the information on the screen, I said, “Security at the studio worked with a liaison officer from the LAPD to tighten up weak areas after both the studio and Michael received threatening letters, via his management.”

“Sounds fairly standard so far,” Sam said.

“Yes, it does. And this is where it gets a little messy,” I said. “LAPD saw the letters but were not permitted to copy them or keep the originals. It is unknown who is sending the threats. We do know the studio and his manager received a series of letters, stating that he would not leave Washington D.C. alive.”

“LAPD haven’t taken the letters into evidence?” Sam queried, his brow furrowed.

“No.”

“No forensic examination of the letters?” Kurt asked.

“No.”

“That’s highly unusual,” Kurt added. “A written death threat and these people won’t hand over the evidence ... makes no sense.”

My thoughts exactly.

“Did you know about this?” I asked Lee.

“Not about the trip to D.C. and no, I didn’t know about those letters. I knew he’d picked up a few stalkers on and off over the years and I gave him advice on how to deal with them,” Lee said.

“Does Michael know about the latest letters?”

That was where it all got a little bit tricky.

“I can only go on this request in front of me. He’s barely mentioned in the police report. He didn’t make the complaint. It was made on his behalf. Does he know? I have no idea.” I leaned back and looked at Lee. “If he knew, would he come to you?”

“Yes. He has done before. If this was a serious situa-tion, yeah, he would.” Lee said. “How the hell is he supposed to protect himself if he’s not given the facts?”

He took the words out of my mind.

“There is a final note at the bottom of this email from the officer who requested assistance. He notes Michael Fisher’s management decided the best course of action was to limit his knowledge, and put extra security in place.”

It was all so familiar. I’d heard Rowan’s management state dumber things in the interest of protecting their client. “We have been asked to step in, because LAPD believe this is a credible threat situation and they’re not getting anywhere with the management. Also, Michael will be under the biggest threat while in D.C.” I reached for the phone on my desk and found the phone number for Michael Davenport’s manager from the LAPD file.

“This is SSA Ellie Conway, FBI. Can I talk to Sara Rosen, please?”

“Speaking.”

She sounded like a twelve-year-old. “We’ve been asked to protect a client of yours, Michael Fisher. I’d like you to forward me the threat letters.”

“I’m not happy about releasing the letters, Agent.”

“You’re not releasing them. We require the letters to conduct our investigation, they are evidence. Without them this is all hearsay.”

“I don’t think that’s right.”

Of course you don’t, you’re twelve.

“The letters corroborate your story that there is a threat,” I said with mustered patience. “Without seeing them, we cannot determine the nature or seriousness of the threat to your client. Or even if there is one. A report from LAPD isn’t evidence. We need forensic testing on the documents.”

Silence.

“Ms. Rosen, we need those letters. I’ll give you an address of the nearest field office and you can take them there yourself.”

“When do you need them?”

“Preferably before your client arrives in Washington,” I said.

Really, she should have handed them over to police. It was only because the officer in charge of the case felt concerned about the level of threat that he bothered to let us know. With no evidence on file, he could have easily dismissed it.

She agreed to take the letters in herself. After divulg-ing the address and the name of an agent she should take them to, I hung up.

“Mike needs to wake up and smell the coffee,” Lee muttered. “That woman is not filling me with confidence. How good a manager can she be? Notifying police, not letting them have the evidence, or give them enough information to do their jobs, and not telling the client just how bad it is ... sheer stupidity.”

We were definitely on the same page regarding Mike’s management.

“I don’t know your brother, how will he react to this news?” I said. He’s an actor. I knew nothing about actors. If he was highly-strung, telling him could cause more issues. If he freaked out and handled things like a diva it would make protecting him a pain in the ass.

“Like you or I would,” Lee replied. “He’s my brother.”

Ah, wonderful. He’ll arm himself with knowledge and maybe a weapon and carry on as normal. I smiled. Very familiar. On hearing that, I wondered how much of him was in the character he played on television.

This would be fun with a capital F. As long as he didn’t get dead on our watch.

“Right, Lee get onto your brother for the travel de-tails. You don’t have to tell him over the phone what’s going on. In fact, we don’t know how tech savvy the stalker is, so probably say nothing.” I stopped in my tracks. “Scratch that whole idea. Do you two have a way of communicating that no one else knows about?”

My cell phone buzzed. I glanced at the text but it didn’t register.

Lee nodded. “Yeah, we leave messages for one another through a veterans’ website.”

I didn’t ask why: I have a brother. He and I leave messages for each other on a website using aliases. It’s one of those things. You never know when it will prove handy.

“Get onto it, tell him you need to know when to pick him up. He needs to be vigilant and looking for tails, et cetera. He will have an LAPD escort, they have him under surveillance but probably not a marked car. Tell him not to ditch the LAPD.”

Lee pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Don’t call him,” I cautioned. “You don’t know who is listening on his end.”

“Not calling,” Lee replied with a smile. “Texting a pre-arranged message so he knows to log in.”

“Nice.”

“Can I?” Lee pointed at my laptop.

“Go for it,” I said and stood up, picked up my cell phone and stepped away from my desk. Lee passed me and sat down.

“It’s not right,” he muttered.

“What’s not?”

“Sitting in a warm chair.”

I left him to it. Kurt, Sam, and I joined Sandra in the bullpen.

“This could be fun,” Sam said, giving me a nudge.

“Yep, or a total pain in the ass.”

Sandra poured me a coffee. “What’d the cop want?”

“He thinks I chopped off my ex-brother-in-law’s hand,” I replied.

“You want to find out what’s going in that case?”

“Hell, yes.”

“One moment, what was his name again?”

“Aaron Keller.”

Sandra typed fast while the three of us waited for her to work her magic.

“I’m not asking if you just hacked into the Metro computer system, but did you just hack into the Metro computer system?” I said in a hushed whisper.

“Would I? Really?” She almost looked innocent for a nanosecond. “I so hacked their asses,” she whispered. “They found the hand on the south side of the Washing-ton monument, displayed. There are photos.”

I slipped around to her side of the desk to see the photos. It was displayed. Eddie’s armless hand was flying the bird. I couldn’t help but smile. Even unattached, his body parts were offensive. Kurt and Sam peered over our shoulders. Sam chuckled. Kurt grinned.

“You think maybe he annoyed someone and they chopped off the offending appendage?” I asked. “God knows I’ve been tempted over the years.”

Kurt tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to move a little. He wanted a closer look at the stumpy hand.

“Sandra can you download these photos without anyone knowing?” he asked.

“I am a magician. It is within my realm of expertise.”

“If you wouldn’t mind forwarding them to me,” Kurt said.

“Not at all, consider it done.”

“What else have they got? Fingerprints or anything substantial?” I asked.

“The hand, nothing left at the crime scene. That’s it.” She typed some more. “And a transcribed conversation with Beatrice Connelly where she accuses you of killing her sons. Also, Mac’s dad, on record saying his wife is insane and that he is certain you have nothing to do with any of this.”

“Good to know.”

“I can check back, and poke around a little as the in-vestigation goes on.”

“That would be handy.”

My cell phone went again; another text message from Assistant Director Owen.

Instead of reading it, I ignored it. She is not my favor-ite person. The only reason she texts me is to harass me about something, probably the Connelly situation, without my team knowing she was trying to contact me. She’s sneaky like that.

Because I knew what she was like, I forwarded her texts to the entire team and to Caine, our SAC. Caine called me within minutes.

“She’s on the warpath,” he said. “Hold off replying to her today.”

“I have no intention of replying to her at all.”

“You’ll have to sooner or later, just don’t do it today. Leave the building. Be hard to reach.”

“Why am I in her sights, after all these years?”

“She’s one for holding grudges. You dressed her down in front of others once ... she’s heard about Eddie and is running with it. I know her. She’s looking for a way to crucify you.”

“Good luck. I didn’t do anything.”

“That will make no difference to her,” Caine growled. “In her mind, this has been a long time coming.”

“Awesome. I can end this now and go to O’Hare.”

“I know ...”

“But?”

“But I think you should give Owen some rope and let her hang herself.”

“I like how you think.”

“Keep your head down and get out of the office for the rest of the day.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hung up and grinned at Kurt. “Caine wants me out of Dodge for the rest of the day.”

“I’m up for a road trip. We could accidentally happen by the Metro crime scene.”

“Yeah, nah, they’ll figure out we’ve been snooping, or worse, think I actually did it!”

“We don’t want that.”

I hurried back to my office and checked on Lee.

“He gets in tomorrow morning. I’ll pick him up.”

“Great. I need to get out of here for a bit.” I also needed to outline my plan for Mike Davenport’s protection while he was in D.C. “Before I go – as long as your brother is in our care, so to speak – he is to be accompanied by one of us at all times. I don’t want him checking into hotels using his own name or announcing his presence using any form of social media sites. Let’s not make it easy for anyone to get near him. I know he has public engagements while in the city but until he fronts up to the venues, I don’t want his whereabouts known. We’ll need details of security at the venues and will supplement as required ourselves. Can you and Sam get on that, please?”

“Sounds good. Sam and I will handle the venue security.”

“We’ll revise once we have those letters, if necessary. I’ll see you and your brother here tomorrow.”

“We’ll be here.”

My cell phone buzzed as it dropped a text message. Mitch: Grab a coffee?

I paused before pulling on my jacket and texted him to say I’d be at his office in ten. Kurt wouldn’t mind and I felt like being around a friend, not a colleague-slash-friend-slash-minder.