

Business Meetings

Maggie's World

Maggie Drake pulled her Toyota off the road—a path consisting of two shallow wheel ruts—and parked her car on the familiar worn parking spot that she'd made over the years. The keepers of the St. Louis Cemetery didn't seem to mind the damage she did to the grass. Maggie supposed that since she kept her mother's tomb, as well as some of the ones around hers, free of weeds, graffiti, and any other desecrations, the caretakers didn't mind the minor abuse.

The cemetery had seen much shinier years anyway. The rows and rows of tombs towered above the ground all around Maggie. Some of the vaults looked like little mansions complete with a front gate and angel gargoyles. Others were more non-descript, evidencing a lack of care or money from the deceased's family. Whether or not the graves were kept well seemed to have no correlation to the amount spent on the interment. Many of them hadn't been visited in years.

Maggie considered the angels topping the tombs near her mother as old friends. During the hours upon hours she'd spent sitting in front of her mother's resting place, she'd studied their stone faces in detail. Most were at least twenty years old, yet barely showed even a hint of the harsh weather that had washed over them.

Twenty years. Maggie found it hard to believe that her mother had been gone that long. Rachel Granger had been the best person Maggie ever knew. She died when Maggie was thirteen, leaving a confused, heartbroken girl behind. Warin Drake told Maggie that her mother had died of a heart attack, but she'd always wondered if that was true. Given what she knew of Drake now, his story rang highly suspicious.

Sitting down in the grass in front of her mother's tomb, Maggie looked at the stone image carved into the door. Five years ago she'd paid a local artist a small fortune to put her mother's profile there. Since she'd been coming to her mother's tomb almost weekly since her death, Maggie thought the personalized touch might be comforting.

"Hi, mom," she said, picking up a piece of grass between her fingers. "It's been a couple of weeks since I've been here. Sorry about that."

Therapy was too expensive, and Maggie had too fantastic a story to tell to invest in a psychologist. So instead of ending up in a mental ward, she'd allowed herself this strange ritual. She didn't really believe that her mother could hear her—though she did have some small hope that there was a heaven and that her mother was up there listening—but it made the young woman feel better to be able to tell someone about her problems. There certainly wasn't anyone else in her life that she could do that with.

"Drake has been on my case again lately, but that's no surprise. He wants to challenge me all the time."

Maggie wished her father would just leave her alone. Since she'd begun living with him, her life had seemed to be a series of tests and lessons. Drake fancied himself a teacher to all of his flock. Because she was his daughter, he always expected her to be a cut above the rest.

"It's not that I don't want to succeed. It's just that I don't really want to excel in what he wants me to do. I'm not cut out to be a part of his family, I don't think."

How her mother ever got involved with Warin Drake, Maggie could not even imagine. She was a kind, gentle, and passive person who had probably never harmed a fly. Maggie had never known her to go to any place where she could even meet a drug dealer, much less strike up a relationship with one. Drake wasn't a typical drug dealer, though. She supposed that Rachel could have changed after having a baby, but the thought of her cavorting with a man like Drake was not compatible with what Maggie knew of her mother's demeanor.

"I wish sometimes that I would have been able to go to college, get a job, and live a normal life. I would have, but I never had the option," she said softly.

Warin Drake had always been somewhat of a tyrant. While he wasn't always cruel, he kept close tabs on all of his underlings. Maggie had fallen under his wing, been swept in by him, and had been groomed for most of her life. Drake knew her completely. He knew her thoughts and her fears. He used them to control her and there was nothing she could do about it.

Maggie had no delusions about the lack of control she had over her life. She had no choice but to stay within the family and do her father's bidding. It was the only life she'd ever known.

"What's it like to be free?" she asked her mother.

The beautiful angel on her resting place didn't answer. Maggie sighed. She stood up and began walking back through the tombs. In a lot of ways, she couldn't wait to see her mother in heaven or wherever, so that she would finally have someone like her that she could talk to.



Wooden planks swelled with two hundred years of Mississippi River water groaned under her feet as Maggie Drake walked behind her father to meet their new business associates. She was dressed in a black leather jacket and black jeans. Her father had frowned at her selection of wardrobe when he'd seen her. Warin Drake preferred her to use her womanly gifts, as he liked to call them, as often as possible. He believed her to be an attractive woman and that her attributes could help them solidify business relationships. Maggie didn't worry about her looks and chose to highlight her better qualities only when she really felt like it. This night, she did not.

Drake the elder stalked down the dock in front of her, the street lamps overhead shining off his light hair. He wore a crisp silk suit with a starched minister's collar. In place of the white tab that would mark him as a man of the cloth, Warin Drake wore a necklace that held a red ruby amulet. He looked like he was either ready to step into a disco or attend a somber funeral.

Maggie followed her father in silence. He'd already told her that he would do the talking during their meeting, which actually went without saying since he always handled the communication. Given that they often did business with non-English speakers and Drake spoke every language, or so it seemed, letting him do their business made sense. Especially since he was a complete control freak.

They came to a dimly lit boat tied hastily to a three foot round mooring pole. It was too big to be a pleasure boat, but also too small to be a commercial vessel of any significance. The bow showed years of voyages through the paint streaked with rust, algae, and numerous nicks and scrapes. The name and home port were written on the side in letters that she couldn't make out because of the darkness.

Drake stopped at the edge of the wooden platform and waved a hand at the vessel. A man wearing an orange slicker poked his head out of the cabin and returned the gesture. A moment later he popped out completely. His hair was dark as the night and his skin a golden brown. His features were sharp and exotic. Maggie's best guess was that he was South American of some fashion, as she could easily imagine him in ancient Mayan warrior dress.

He climbed up onto the dock and took Drake's hand in greeting. Three other men, strong and silent, followed him. They stood behind the Mayan warrior with arms crossed and intense stares.

"It's my understanding from our mutual contact that we might make good business partners," Drake said. He was never one to prefer chit chat over getting down to business.

The warrior nodded. "You buy, I sell," he said, a thick accent trailing his words.

"Then I sell again. What do you have?"

"Right now, I have 500 pounds of heroin and twice that of cocaine," the darker man said. His toughs shifted on their feet behind him.

Maggie shook her head. She hated to be involved in the illicit drug trade. Her father didn't like it that much either. It seemed to be the best way for the Drake Family—which included more than directly related family members—to survive and thrive. Drake had apparently tried legal means to support his group in the past. All that had brought him was poor, hungry disciples who failed to live up to expectations. Their legitimate business ventures were now just a front. Becoming one of New Orleans more successful drug dealers didn't entirely please him, but Warin Drake was never that concerned with his reputation. He preferred not to have one, in fact, and leading a drug empire generally kept his name off people's lips.

Drake smiled and nodded. "That's an impressive inventory. It would take me a while to move that much," he said.

"That's the point," the Mayan warrior offered.

"The price our contact gave me still good?"

The man nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. For you, ten percent less."

Laughing, Drake turned to Maggie and put a hand on her shoulder. "Looks like we're getting the bulk discount."

She laughed an unhappy sound. If she had her wish, they'd leave these men and not deal with any others like them. Maggie knew her father, though, and he liked dealing with shadowy men. He preferred to keep his business off the beaten path.

Drake directed his attention back to the Mayan warrior. "When can you deliver?"

"Manana."

"We have a deal then," Drake said, his most deadly smile on his face. "And if this works out well, we can do business in the future."

Maggie stiffened as she heard footsteps somewhere in the distance. She looked back up the dock, the way they'd come. Two men walked toward them, and the heavy, equipped sound they made as they stepped told Maggie that they were policemen.

"Father," she said, putting a hand on Drake's arm.

He cut his eyes to her, irritated at being interrupted. Then he followed when she motioned with her head toward their visitors. Drake's demeanor transformed immediately, and Maggie could see his mind working behind his dark eyes.

"Leave," he said to the Mayan warrior. "Call me later at the number you used before. We'll make the final arrangements."

The dark man nodded and scuttled back aboard his boat. Drake tapped Maggie on the arm and they began moving toward the oncoming policemen. His steps were confident, more so than hers, and she knew he would show them no fear. Drake had lived a long, long time by always knowing exactly what to say and do in the face of danger. Even if on the odd night he was wrong, he had a backup plan to fix it.

The cops, their baby blue shirts catching the light off the streetlamps, kept their eyes on Drake and Maggie. The policeman on the right, whose middle had absorbed a few more doughnuts and beignets than his partner, put his right hand on the butt of the gun at his belt. They tracked to the left to make sure there was no mistaking that they intended to stop the Drakes.

"Evening," the doughnut cop said.

Drake, after a quick, warning glance to Maggie, spoke in even tones. "Hello, officer."

"You folks lost?"

"No, sir. Just out for a walk," Drake said.

The officer looked Drake and his tailored suit up and down. “This isn’t the best place to be takin’ a walk,” he said.

Drake made a show of glancing around the dock. “We haven’t seen anyone suspicious.”

“Not even those guys on the boat you were talkin’ to. You weren’t doing business with them, were ya?” Doughnut asked.

Drake shook his head firmly, pinning the officer with a hard glare. “No, sir. They were friendly, so we talked. Like I said, we’re just out for some fresh air.”

The round officer, his brow furrowed, stared at Drake for several moments. “I recommend you folks stick to the more traveled parts of the French Quarter if you want to go strollin’. You keep foolin’ around down here, you’ll turn up with your throats split.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Drake said. He put his hand on Maggie’s arm and began moving them down the platform.

It wouldn’t have surprised Maggie if the policemen had recognized her father. He’d never been arrested, but she was sure Drake was on the NOPD radar, at least at low levels. For tonight, she could be thankful that these two patrolmen hadn’t been warned about Drake and his family.

Maggie also knew, though, that even if he had been recognized, Drake always got his way.