

# SET IT STRAIGHT

*A Memoir*

by Greg Scarpa

*Gregory Scarpa Jr.*

SAMPLE — PROLOGUE AND CHAPTERS ONE & TWO

## PROLOGUE

### THE QUESTION

A while back, on one of my live streams, somebody asked me a question. People ask me questions every week now. About Gotti, about Sammy, about my father, about prison. I answer what I can. Some things I take my time with.

But this one, I didn't have to think about at all.

*If you could ask your father one question today, what would it be?*

"How come you didn't save me?"

It came out of me that fast. Like it had been sitting there loaded for fifty years, waiting for somebody to finally ask.

My father was Gregory Scarpa Sr. The newspapers called him the Grim Reaper. The Colombo family called him a capo. The FBI called him something else. That's the part that took me half my life to learn, and the other half to live with. For thirty years, they called him theirs.

He was the toughest man I ever knew. He was the most generous man I ever knew. He kissed my mother in the kitchen, and he frightened men who frightened everybody else. He could fix anything. A problem, a beef, a beauty contest if you let him, which is a story I'll tell you later. He fixed things for strangers, for neighbors, for guys in the crew.

And me? His son, the one carrying his name? Me he let walk straight into the life that buried me.

I did thirty-two years in federal prison. I did time in places they built specifically so the world could forget about the men inside them. I sat in a cell next to the most dangerous terrorist in America and did my country a service from inside a cage. That story's in here too, and I'll tell it straight: what I did, what I was promised, what I got instead. I got old inside. I got cancer inside. I buried my father while I was inside. Buried him from a prison cell, if you can call that burying a man.

He died in 1994, in a prison of his own. We were both inmates at the end. Him at the end of his life, me at the beginning of my sentence. Two Gregory Scarpas, two federal numbers.

Now I know how that sounds. Same name, same prison, and both of us, if you believe the papers, tangled up somehow with the FBI. So let me get in front of it right here on the first page, because it's half the reason I'm telling this myself instead of letting another stranger do it.

They're going to try to say it. Like father, like son. The old man was the Bureau's, so the kid must be a rat too. Runs in the blood.

No.

Whatever my father's business was with the government, it was his. It took me half my life to even learn about it. I didn't inherit it. I never gave up a friend to save myself. Never gave up a man in this life. Not one, not ever. What I did, I did to a terrorist. A man who wanted to put airplanes full of Americans into the

ground. And I did it from inside a cage that never opened a day early for the trouble I took. That is not what the street means when it says rat. That's a man doing one right thing in the middle of the worst thing that ever happened to him.

I carry my father's name. His eyes. A question he never answered. I don't carry his secrets, and I never carried his deals. Mine are mine.

He never got to answer my question.

So this book is me asking it anyway. Asking it the long way. Through Brooklyn, through the family, through the war, through the courtrooms where I found out who my father really was from lawyers and paperwork instead of from him. Through the cell next to Ramzi Yousef. Through twelve years in a concrete box in Colorado where the government keeps the men it wants erased. Through the day in 2020 a judge finally said I could go home to die, and I decided to do something better than that instead.

And there was a second question, from that same live. Somebody wanted to know: with everything my father made in that life, all those years, all that money, where did it all go?

I laughed when I read it. Because that's my question too. That's the question I never got to ask him either.

"Where did all the money go, Dad?"

Two questions. One about the money. One about me.

You want to understand the life? The real thing, not the movies? Those two questions are the whole story. Everything the life promises you, it takes back. The

money goes. The years go. The father goes, and you find out he was somebody else the whole time, and you're still his son, and you still love him, and you're still angry, and both of those things are true at once and they never stop being true at once.

I'm seventy-four years old. I'm free. I'm still fighting. The past, and a cancer that doesn't care that I've got things to do. And I've got grandkids who hang out with me until all hours of the night like we're making up thirty-two years one night at a time. Because we are.

People keep writing books about my father and about me. People who never sat where I sat. Some of them mean well. Some of them are cashing checks off my family's name. That's an old story too. Half this book is about what people did with the Scarpa name while I couldn't answer.

This one's different. This one's mine.

I'm not writing it to make the life look good. The life took everything. I watched it take the whole neighborhood, the whole family, the whole era. I'm not writing it to cry about what happened to me either. What are you going to do? It happened.

I'm writing it to set it straight.

That's what I named my community, that's what I say every time I go live, and that's the only promise this book makes. Not that you'll like everything in it. Not that the government will. Just that it's straight, from the only man still here who lived it from inside the family AND inside the walls.

My father never answered my question.

By the last page, you'll know the answer anyway.

Both answers.

## CHAPTER ONE

# COMING HOME

Thirty-two years is long enough that when the gate opens, you don't trust it.

I want to tell you I walked out of there like a movie. Sun on my face, music playing somewhere. The truth is usually smaller than the movie. That's the first thing you learn reading a book by a real one instead of watching an actor do it.

What I can tell you is what was true that day. I was sixty-nine years old. I had cancer. The government that raised me had decided, after thirty-two years, that a dying man could go be dying at home. And I say the government raised me because they did, in their own way. In their buildings, on their schedule, longer than my own father had me.

Compassionate release, they call it. I'll take the release. The compassion showed up about a decade late.

Here's what nobody tells you about coming home after three decades: the world didn't wait.

I went in in 1988. Reagan was president. A phone was a thing bolted to a kitchen wall, and if you wanted privacy you stretched the cord into the hallway. When I came home, my grandkids handed me a phone with no cord, no buttons, no nothing. A little piece of glass. And on it was every person I ever knew, every

picture, every song, every newspaper story ever written about my family. All of it in my hand.

Thirty-two years of people asking "what was it like inside?" and I'll tell you the honest answer: inside was the same every single day. That was the punishment. It's out HERE that everything happened. I didn't come home to my old world. I came home to a different planet where everybody happened to remember my name.

The first meal out, she took me to a restaurant, and they had every kind of food you could think of, all along the table. And they gave me a fork and a knife.

I didn't know what to do with them.

I'm serious. I had not seen a fork and a knife in thirty-two years. In prison you get a little plastic spork. That's it. That's your silverware for three decades. And now I'm holding this heavy metal fork, and it feels strange in my hand, and I'm looking around the restaurant like somebody's going to tell me I'm doing it wrong.

Thirty-two years. A fork felt foreign. Sit with that.

And the neighborhood. People ask me all the time on the lives: was the neighborhood safer back then, when the family ran things? I give them the answer they've heard from every old-timer, and I give it to them because it's true and I watched it be true. Nobody robbed grandmothers on our blocks. Certain things did not happen, because everybody knew what would happen next. You can think whatever you want about the men who kept it that way. Half of them are in this book, and I'm not going to pretend they were saints, and I'm not going

to pretend the thing we were part of didn't eat its own children. It ate me. But the block was the block. Both things are true. Get used to me saying that. Both things are true. That's the realest sentence in this whole book.

The first family dinner, I just watched.

There were people at that table who did not exist when I went in. Whole human beings. Grown, married, kids of their own. They got born, learned to walk, went to school, fell in love, all of it, while I was in a cell. They knew me as a voice on a fifteen-minute phone call. A name the family said carefully. Maybe a story, if their parents decided they were old enough.

And now here's this old man at the table, and he's got their eyes, and he's got their last name.

I had a wonderful, wonderful time. You hear me repeat myself like that, that's not the writing. That's me. Some things one "wonderful" doesn't cover.

The grandkids and me, we stay up until all hours of the night now. Hanging out. Talking. They show me things on the phone; I show them things no phone has. People my age tell me I need my rest. My rest? I rested for thirty-two years. Every hour I'm awake with my family, I'm stealing something back.

You want to know what freedom is? It's not the gate. The gate is just a door.

Freedom is a kid falling asleep on your couch at two in the morning because being near you is normal to him. It took me one night out here to learn that, and it took me thirty-two years to earn the night.

I came home with a fight still in me, though. Two fights.

The first one's with the cancer, and I want to say this part plain, because I don't play games with it: I'm fighting it. Present tense. It's a fight I'm still in as I write this book. Some weeks I win, some weeks it does. The doctors do their part and I do mine. If you're reading this, I made it far enough to finish the book. That was one of the goals.

The second fight is the reason for the book.

While I was inside, the world wrote my family's story without us. Reporters wrote it. Prosecutors wrote it. FBI men wrote it. One of them wrote a whole book about how HE was the victim in the story of my father, if you can believe that. We'll get there. Authors I never met wrote books with my face on them, my father's name on the cover, checks getting cashed, and me in a cell with no way to answer. Now there's a movie. A big one, a real one. I'll tell you about standing on that set later in this book, because standing there, watching an actor be my father, was one of the strangest and most beautiful days of my life.

But a movie is somebody else's telling. A trial is somebody else's telling. Even the FBI files, thousands of pages about my father, my family, me: that's the government telling itself the story.

Nobody still breathing lived this from where I lived it. The son of the Grim Reaper. Inside the family and then inside the walls. Both things. Both true at once.

So pull up a chair. Let me set it straight.

We start in Brooklyn, where everything starts. But before I take you back there, you need to understand what I was carrying home in my chest that first

night, at that table, watching those kids. The question I told you about in the prologue. The one my father never got to answer.

Because every mile of the ride home from that prison, I swear to you, I wasn't thinking about freedom.

*I was thinking: Dad, you knew where this road went. You walked it first. You had thirty years of chances and a badge in your pocket I didn't even know about.*

*How come you didn't save me?*

Brooklyn's where the answer starts.

## CHAPTER TWO

# MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

Here's a math problem for you.

A man goes to prison at thirty-seven and comes home at sixty-nine. How much time did he lose?

Wrong. Trick question. You lose the thirty-two years, sure. But that's not the number that gets you. The number that gets you is everything that happened during the thirty-two years. Weddings. Funerals. Births. First steps. Graduations. Whole marriages started and finished. Kids became parents. My Brooklyn became a different Brooklyn. You don't lose thirty-two years. You lose the version of every single person you love that existed while you were gone, and those versions are never coming back.

So when I came home, I had a choice. Grieve the arithmetic, or start stealing.

I chose stealing. It's what I know.

Every hour now is a job. That's not a complaint. You never heard a man happier about being busy.

The grandkids and me, we hang out until all hours of the night. I've said it on the lives and I'll put it in print: all hours. Two, three in the morning, somebody's on my couch, somebody's showing me something on a phone,

somebody's asking me a question they'd never ask in front of their parents. People my age are supposed to be in bed at nine. I did thirty-two years of lights-out on somebody else's clock. Nobody tells me when to sleep anymore, and nobody young enough to be worth talking to wants to sleep either. It works out.

And I had to learn the world. Let me tell you something nobody prepares you for: the phone.

Not using it. That part the kids taught me, and they enjoyed every minute of being smarter than the old man. I mean what the phone IS. When I went in, if you wanted to talk to somebody, you called their house, and if they weren't home, that was that. You tried again after dinner. Now every person I've ever known, every person who ever heard my family's name, every person on the planet with an opinion, they're all in my pocket. All day, all night.

The kids thought they were teaching me a gadget. They were actually handing me the thing that changed my whole life out here. Because that little piece of glass is how I found out something I never expected.

People wanted to talk to me.

It started small. Now it's a thing we do, regular. I sit down, my wife next to me reading the questions off the screen, because I'll be honest with you, my eyes and that little type never made friends. And we go live, and people come in from everywhere. Brooklyn guys. Guys from the old neighborhood I haven't seen in fifty years. Kids in other countries who found out about my family from a documentary. The regulars, the same names every week, saying hello like we're neighbors. Because by now we are.

And they ask me everything. Did you know Gotti? What was Sammy like before? Was Sinatra really connected? Was the neighborhood safer back then? What's the food like inside? All of it. Those answers are coming later in this book, the same ones I give on the lives, only here I've got room to finish the story.

But here's what the fans gave ME, and I don't think most of them know this.

For thirty-two years, I was a case number. Everything about my family got told by other people. Reporters, prosecutors, authors, the government. My name only came up when somebody else was making a point with it. You want to know what that does to a man? It makes you a passenger in your own life story.

Then I come home, I sit down at a kitchen table with a phone propped up against a coffee cup, and a couple hundred people show up just to hear ME tell it. Ask ME the questions. Straight from the man who lived it. No filter, no middleman, no chapter written by a stranger.

You know what I named it? Set It Straight. Same name as this book, and that's not marketing. That's the whole mission statement of the rest of my life. Fifty years of other people's versions. Now you get mine.

I want to be straight about the other part too, because this book doesn't play games.

I'm doing all this, the grandkids, the lives, this book, while I'm in a fight. The cancer came home from prison with me. It's a fight I'm still in while I write this, and some weeks are better than others, and that's all I'm going to say about the score because the fight isn't over.

But understand something: the cancer is half the reason for all of it.

A man with unlimited time gets around to things. A man in my position doesn't get around to anything. He does it tonight. That's why the grandkids get me until three in the morning. That's why I answer every question on every live like it might be the best conversation I've got left. Because you know what, it might be. Thirty-two years taught me exactly what a day is worth. The doctors remind me what a day is worth. Between those two educations, I might be the only man in America who actually knows the price of a Tuesday.

So no, I'm not making up for lost time. You can't. The time is gone. I buried it with my father and half the neighborhood.

What I'm doing is better. I'm refusing to lose ONE. MORE. HOUR.

Come on. Let me take you back to where the whole thing started. Brooklyn first, the country I was born in. And then a dining room table out on Staten Island, and a kid who's about to find out what his father really does for a living.

Bring your appetite. There's a sandwich involved.