

The Pot O'Gold MURDER



Shaun Coen

What the hell, her morning already sucked, so she might as well return her creepy co-worker's call...

"Kevin, it's Eileen Ryan."

"Good morning, Detective Ryan," Detective Hickey said, in an annoying, telemarketer-type voice.

"What's up?"

"Are you anywhere in the vicinity of East 235 and Katonah Avenue?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, I've uncovered a piece of...how shall we say?...um..."

"Evidence?"

"Your choice of words, not mine."

"What did you find?"

"With all due respect, Detective, it's kind of a sensitive matter."

She rolled her eyes. Much more of this and she would be retching again. "I'm a big girl, Hickey. I can take it."

"I think it might be best if we discussed this in person. Say, about two o'clock, Romero's restaurant?"

What a shithead. Was he still trying to snag a second date? Where did he think this was going to lead?

"That's not going to work for me. Just spill it."

"Okay—is anyone around?"

Ryan looked up at the sprawling brick building atop the hillside. "No, nobody's around. Just tell me what you found."

"I found some hair fibers at the scene of Declan's murder."

"Yeah, and..."

"The fibers match..."

"Match what?"

"The hair fibers of one...um...Detective Eileen Ryan."

"What are you talking about, Hickey?"

"That's why I wanted to discuss this in person."

"Okay, fuck. Two o'clock, Romero's."

In a neighborhood full of secrets, everyone's a suspect.

Hard-living Detective Eileen Ryan is called to investigate the murder of a popular bartender in her hometown, a tight-knit Irish enclave in The Bronx, New York. But she can't quite remember the night of the murder and has to fight off the advances of a creepy forensics officer who places her at the scene of the crime. Ryan discovers secret societies and double lives, as she moves back into her childhood home to care for her father, a retired police officer who suffered a stroke, and comforts her confidante, the hardened Lieutenant Barry Durkin, another neighborhood alum who's binge drinking through an impending divorce. Will caring for family and friends prevent Ryan from catching the killer—or becoming the next victim?

KUDOS for *The Pot O'Gold Murder*

“A great thriller! Coen brings into vivid focus not only his characters but an entire neighborhood. You’ll read this in one sitting—guaranteed!” ~ Number One International Best-Selling Author Jeffery Deaver

“In this gripping, gritty tale, centered on a murder investigation, Shaun Coen brings the bars, back alleys, and unbreakable bonds between family and friends of the Woodlawn section of The Bronx to life. The finely drawn complex characters suck you in, the plot is dead-on, and the details and dialogue make each page crackle and buzz with electric authenticity...this is a killer debut crime novel you won’t soon forget.” ~ John Roche, Author of *Bronx Bound*

“The story is intriguing, the characters charming, and the killer really comes as a surprise. I would never have figured it out on my own. Bravo, Shaun Coen.” ~ Taylor Jones, Reviewer

“*The Pot O'Gold Murder* is a complicated tale of life as a single woman, a cop, and an Irish-American in The Bronx, as well as a chilling murder mystery.” ~ Regan Murphy, Reviewer

“Gritty and atmospheric, Coen's *The Pot O'Gold Murder* combines the best of noir with a tough realism. This book is not to be missed and I can't wait to see what Coen does next.” ~ Maggie Barbieri, Author of *Once Upon a Lie* and the *Murder 101* series

“If your mother told you, ‘Nothing good ever happens after three am,’ she was right! Hard drinking, hard living, and murder are on tap in the lurid bars at the northern edge of Shaun Coen’s gritty New York. It’s Raymond Chandler with an Irish sense of gallows humor.” ~ Susan Konig, Author of *Teenagers & Toddlers Are Trying to Kill Me!*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my parents, master storytellers and mimics, for all the love, support, and laughter, and for raising me in the right neighborhood.

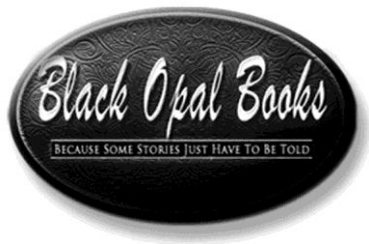
Thanks to my family and friends for listening and sharing their stories.

To the good folks at Black Opal Books, my appreciation, and to the men and women of the NYPD, my respect.

The
Pot O'Gold
MURDER

Shaun Coen

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MURDER-DETECTIVE/WOMEN SLEUTHS/CRIME THRILLER

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eBOOK ISBN: 978-1-626945-49-4

First Publication: OCTOBER 22, 2016

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DEDICATION

To the most wonderful children one could possibly be blessed with: Jack, Dan, and Jenn, who continue to amaze and enlighten. I am so fortunate to have you and am eternally grateful to the woman responsible for bringing you into this wacky world and making you who you are. Rose and kids, I love you and look forward to the next chapter.

PROLOGUE

Tommy “Slats” Slattery was hauling garbage bags down the alleyway between The Pot O’Gold and The Shanty at 6:15 a.m. when he found Declan McManus face down on the concrete, the barrel of a Coors Light protruding from his neck. Dark crimson blood, still wet, streaked down the alley toward a drain. Slats, the mildly retarded porter, often found drunks and fighters passed out in the alley, victims of the previous night’s debauchery and inevitable dust-ups. He would either cover them with a jacket or some garbage bags and drag them out of sight of the parishioners who were heading off to early masses and the commuters going to the bakery for coffee and a scone before boarding the number thirty-four bus to the number four subway. Declan, the good-looking, well-liked bartender of the new neighborhood hot spot, The Pot O’Gold, liked to play gags on the waitresses and the bar backs, and Slats was an easy mark. But this seemed different. It was too elaborate a prank, even for Declan. His black Rockport shoes were still polished, his white button-down shirt wasn’t overly wrinkled, and not a dark hair on his gelled head was out of place. Declan was a joker and a lover; he wasn’t a fighter.

“Come on, get up, Declan,” Slats said, as he flung a garbage bag into the metal Dumpster. “That’s not funny, man.”

Slats scanned the alleyway and looked across the street at Hooligans and MacGuffin’s, two of the other eight bars that lined Katonah Avenue. At some point or other, he had worked at all of them. He’d seen some crazy shit at this hour of the morning—naked men and women in various sexual positions, post-coital,

mid-coital, and passed out drunk. People he'd never imagine. Mothers and fathers, nurses and lawyers, old women and teenagers, and one time a priest, still in collar with a raspberry on his forehead and an empty wallet beside him. He'd seen tattoos in sensitive places and people defecating in planters, in garbage cans, and even right on the sidewalk. "Nothing good ever happens after three a.m.," his mother always used to say. Except that was when Slats went to work, and he liked to work. It gave him a sense of purpose. Even though he still took abuse from a few obnoxious drunks, it was nothing like the ribbing he used to take from neighborhood kids. Working these hours, he didn't see many kids anymore, which was fine by him. He might have been the only one in Woodlawn who was happy there were thirty-two bars within walking distance and that each of them at one time or another was willing to hire him to take the garbage out for minimum wage. Despite his disability, he'd been able to earn enough to pay the rent on his tiny basement studio apartment and even save some money. He long ago came to the realization that he'd never be able to drive a car or a motorcycle. His eyesight was awful. But he'd really like to ride one of those motorized scooters or wheelchairs to work. Those didn't require a license or good eyesight.

Slats reached out his right leg and, with an unlaced New Balance, the only sneaker wide enough for his feet, attempted to roll Declan over. The body nudged a bit and settled back into place. *So that's what dead weight means*, Slats realized, staring at the smudge his sneaker left on Declan's shoulder. Holding onto the Dumpster for leverage, he placed a foot under Declan's shoulder and lifted again, this time hard enough to roll him onto his back.

Declan's eyes were wide open, as if in shock, and his shirt was covered in blood. It wasn't bright red, or the color of ketchup, like it was in the movies, but a much darker shade. Maroon. Like the stuff kids paint on their faces when they pretend to be Dracula for Halloween. Only this stuff didn't look fake. Slats hoped that Declan would start laughing, or that Orla the waitress would jump out from behind the Dumpster and take a picture with her cell phone camera, but everything was silent and still. He looked around the alley for any sign of life but saw none. Slowly kneeling down, he closed Declan's eyes. Slats grabbed the bottleneck and yanked it, removing it from Declan's throat with a moist smack. A geyser of blood sprayed over both of them.

“Declan?” Slats asked. “Declan?”

He tapped his face a few times but Declan didn't respond. He threw the bottleneck against the brick wall. Broken shards of glass rained down on them.

“Declan! Get up!”

Slats kicked Declan's side in anger.

“Get up, Declan!”

His screams echoed off the brick walls of the alley until a light went on in an apartment above The Pot O'Gold.

Chapter 1

Eileen Ryan's cell phone blared from the nightstand, but at first she didn't budge. When she felt a pair of hairy legs under the sheets, she bolted upright and was somewhat embarrassed that she had downloaded the Neko Case "People Got A Lot Of Nerve" ring tone. Its chorus of "I'm a man, man, man, man, man, man, man, man eater. But still you're surprised...prised...prised when I eat ya" was catchy enough but not the sort of thing she wanted her nubile young bedmate to hear first thing the morning after. God, he was cute. What was his name again? She looked at the faint white initials she had carved into her wrist with a fingernail at the bar last night to remember but they had already faded. Looked like a D and a P. Or maybe it was DD? BB? No, definitely a D. DB. Before the chorus of her ring tone repeated, she picked up the phone.

"Why?"

"Rough night, iRye?" answered the gruff voice.

"Morning's usually rougher. What's up?"

"Got a stiff one for you," Durkin said.

"I'm flattered, Durk, but you're married."

"I mean a cold one."

"Little early for a beer, but I could use a little hair of the dog."

"Let me know when you're done with the comedy routine."

She reached for the Alka-Seltzer and Vitamin Water she always laid out on the nightstand when she knew her head would be banging in the morning and dropped two tablets into the plastic bottle.

"Okay, I'm listening," she said, watching the bubbles rise.

"I need you to investigate a homicide."

"Aren't there any morning people on the squad who can handle it?"

"This one's got your name written all over it," Durkin said.

"Why's that?"

"Word on the street is that the guy was gorgeous, well-off, liked to drink and gamble."

"Only the good die young."

"Yeah. A real lady killer, too."

"And one of these ladies exacted revenge?"

"That's what I need you to find out. Nobody has a bad word to say about this guy. It's weird."

"Nobody ever says anything bad about serial killers, either. They're always the quiet guys who kept to themselves."

The body next to her began to stir under the covers. *What a way to wake up*, Ryan thought. *Poor guy probably thinks he fell asleep watching Law & Order again. But he'll be happy to discover he's in bed with a naked woman.* He probably didn't remember much from last night, either. They were both pretty drunk.

"This is different, though," Durkin said. "A lot of people knew him. Nobody had a grudge."

"Where'd they find him?"

"In an alley with a beer bottle in his throat. He was a bartender in Woodlawn."

"Which bar?"

"The Pot O'Gold."

"Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Declan is dead?"

"Yeah. You knew him?"

Knew him? Ryan thought. *I blew him.* "Be right there, Durk."

Chapter 2

Always happens right as the shift's about to end," Officer Keegan said to his partner, Alvarez.

"I can use the OT this week," Alvarez answered.

"I can use a drink," Keegan said.

"I'll never get used to working nights," Alvarez said. "Even though I put in eight hours, come eight o'clock in the morning, I just can't drink a beer. I need coffee."

"Coffee keeps me up," Keegan said. "I need a couple pops to go to sleep."

"So nights don't agree with you, either?"

"The job doesn't agree with me anymore."

"Who else would hire you? And give you a gun?"

They parked the cruiser in front of The Pot O'Gold, facing the ambulance, and surveyed the scene before getting out. There were already some weathered-looking Irish men and women, their heads covered in tweed caps, hairnets and scarves, gathered around looking down at the EMTs unraveling a white sheet in the alley, talking in hushed tones with hands covering their mouths. Slats was banging his fists on the brick wall.

"I'll disperse the crowd, you take the retard," Keegan said.

"Don't call him that," Alvarez said.

"That's how I roll. I call spades 'spades' and retards 'retards.'"

"Why do you always get to disperse the crowd?"

"I've got seniority. And you're good with the retards."

Alvarez reluctantly put his hat on and turned down the volume knob on his police radio. Keegan strolled toward the small crowd

with a nonchalance that suggested he might just waltz right past them and enter the pub for a drink.

“Yo, Slats,” Officer Alvarez called out. “Slats!...Hey, Tommy, man, what’s up?”

“No!” Slats cried, as he continued hitting the wall. “No!”

“Okay, okay, ease up on the wall, bro,” Alvarez said. “You’ll break your hands.”

“They killed my friend,” Slats cried, charging at Alvarez.

Alvarez was stocky, five-foot-seven-inches and about 180, but he was no match for Slats, who was five-foot-ten-inches and at least 225. Bracing himself low to the ground, the way he was taught to block when he was a high school fullback on a passing play, Alvarez managed to keep his footing, standing Slats upright before embracing him in a bear hug. Keegan raced over to help secure him and push him against the wall.

“Relax, Tommy,” Alvarez said. “Relax. Who killed your friend?”

“I don’t know.”

“Should we cuff him?” Keegan asked.

“No!” Alvarez said. “I got him. You work the crowd.”

Keegan gave Slats a searing glance and then walked back toward the crowd.

“I’m going to have to ask you guys to clear out of here,” Keegan said. “This is a crime scene.”

Keegan saw the white News 12 truck coming down Katonah Avenue and wondered how they got the information so fast.

“What happened?” Bridie McCann, the owner of The Traditional Irish Bakery across the street asked, her red, bloodshot eyes nearly popping out of her pasty white face.

“Don’t know yet,” Keegan answered. “Watch the news tonight and find out.”

A Ford Taurus rolled to a stop and Kevin Hickey got out, dressed in his signature blue jeans, black Reeboks, white V-neck T-shirt, satin blazer, and three-day stubble. He’d been wearing the same outfit for twenty years now, since he was a kid listening to Jan Hammer.

“Hey, Miami Vice,” Keegan teased him.

“Keegan,” Hickey said, walking past him, a roll of yellow crime scene tape in hand.

Keegan hated Hickey since high school. Hickey was better looking, with clear skin, and in much better shape. He would stay home on Friday nights, watch *Miami Vice* and rest up before baseball games while Keegan would hit the three or four bars in Woodlawn that served minors and get shitfaced. Keegan watched from the bench as Hickey took over his starting centerfield job, even though he knew he was more talented. But Hickey put the time in the weight room and the batting cage while Keegan was riding the pine in Muldoon's and O'Shea's, knocking back shots like an all-star. Then Hickey got Keegan's girl, Maryjean McNeil, on prom night, while Keegan was passed out drunk in the limousine. And now Keegan watched as Hickey took over the crime scene and went to work dusting for prints while he and Alvarez brought Slats in for questioning.

Chapter 3

Katonah Avenue was abuzz all morning and afternoon. The Irish enclave in the Northwest section of The Bronx was usually a sleepy town, as odd as that would seem, being that there were thirty-two bars within walking distance. Compared with the rest of The Bronx, Woodlawn was a quiet pocket without a subway or elevated train tracks passing through its tree-lined streets that were crammed with narrow one and two-family, wood frame, three-story houses on twenty-five-by-seventy-five-foot lots. A well-placed match could set the entire community ablaze within hours, now that the New York Fire Department had closed its Woodlawn engine. A garage or a sizeable backyard was a luxury and a bonus not many enjoyed. Its four square miles had boundaries on every side, some natural, some manmade.

On one end was the Woodlawn Cemetery, which ran the length of East 233rd Street and was flanked by The Bronx River Parkway on one end and the expansive Van Cortlandt Park and Major Deegan Expressway on the other. Katonah Avenue cut through the heart of Woodlawn, from East 233rd Street directly across to the city of Yonkers, which didn't have a subway or an elevated train either. Many believed that the lack of easy access to a subway into Manhattan was what kept Woodlawn somewhat exclusive. If you wanted to work in the city, you had to pay two fares each way—a bus to take you to the subway and back again—or you had to ride the expensive Metro North, which abutted The Bronx River Parkway.

Many of the Irish transplants were long retired now, their social life consisting of having a few drinks in one of the pubs in the af-

ternoon, sitting in at one of the bakeries or diners for a cup of tea and a card game, or attending a wake at Dunphy's Funeral Home and a funeral at St. Sebastian's. The first and second generation Irish and the newer wave of immigrants took over the pubs at night. Each pub had its own clientele. Some catered to sports crowds, broadcasting soccer matches from around the world at all hours of the day, or the Gaelic games from Ireland, hurling and Irish football, and others to music crowds, many of them offering live, traditional music. And yet others catered to hardcore drunks, legless men who stumbled into the darkness for a drink or a nap on the bar. Woodlawners looked the other way, thankful it wasn't them and hoping it wasn't a relative, while outsiders wondered how it was possible or even legal to allow it.

The Pot O'Gold was the newest pub on the avenue, having only been opened for six months. It caused a bit of a stir in the local press but most residents shrugged it off, with one old timer telling a News 12 reporter that "Sure, it's good for the community. There's no place to go for a quiet drink anymore."

The Pot O'Gold didn't offer live music, nor was it a sports hub. Its main attraction was that it was new, and that Declan McManus, the dark-haired, silver-tongued Irishman from County Mayo, was manning the stick. The girls thought he was gorgeous, the guys thought he was one of them. He had a sharp wit and a high tolerance for drunks and alcohol. Guys could spend a night drinking with Declan, and girls would swoon, showering him with tips and anything else he wanted. He didn't go home alone on many nights, but now he would be going home in a box, back to his family in Knock, County Mayo.

Chapter 4

Ryan jumped out of bed and dragged a brush through her shoulder length bleached blonde hair. She pounded the vitamin seltzer combo and briefly thought about marketing it as a hangover relief while she pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt, strapped on her holster and then nudged the shape under the covers. Who was that again? Started with a “D.”

“David?...David?...Come on, get up. You gotta go. It’s late. I have to go to work.”

Definitely wasn’t David. It was something Irish.

“Dermot?...Dermot!” she yelled. “Let’s go!”

She nearly tripped over a pair of Timberland boots and sweat-pants as she flipped on the overhead light switch. She went into the bathroom, gargled with Listerine, brushed her teeth with Gleem, then blew some breath into her cupped hands and inhaled. Still smelled like tequila. *Got to cut back on the shots*, she told herself. She grabbed her make-up kit and poked her head out the doorway.

“Donal?...Come on, Donal, get up!”

She applied some rouge to her cheeks and started with the eyeliner when she was startled by the sudden appearance of her young naked conquest in the mirror. Ordinarily, she’d have been frightened, but his chiseled six-pack abs and morning glory erection had her intrigued. Was there time for a quickie?

“It’s Danny,” he said.

Shit. Danny, of course. She had etched the initials D B into her wrist at the bar to remember it was Danny. Danny...Brady? Boyle? Burke? Looking into his navy blue eyes, she now remem-

bered they were singing *Danny Boy* and pawing at each other while singing off key to the jukebox in the back room of The Shamrock until the patrons playing pool told them to shut the fuck up and get a room. Now she remembered. Danny Boy. Said he worked in a meat packing plant. She watched him pee and wondered if the meat packing remark was a sexual reference or a pick-up line. Certainly was apropos. As tempting as it was, she decided she had to go see Durkin.

“Sorry, Danny Boy,” she said. “Party’s over. Time to go home.”

Chapter 5

Officers Keegan and Alvarez led Slats into the station and straight back into a dark room with an overhead light and sat him on a wooden stool before a metal table.

“You want something to drink?” Alvarez asked.

“I’ll have a Fanta,” Slats said.

“Fanta? I don’t think we have Fanta. How ’bout some water?”

“You have Fanta,” Slats said. “I saw it in the soda machine in the hallway. I want Fanta.”

Alvarez looked up at his partner and flicked his neck in the direction of the door. Keegan went into the hall to fetch the Fanta.

“I know you’re upset, Slats, but see if you can remember everything that happened this morning that may help us understand why Declan McManus is dead,” Alvarez said.

“I got up, same as I always do, at two o’clock in the morning, and went to work,” Slats said.

“You woke up and went straight to work?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re still living in that basement apartment on McLean Avenue?”

“Yes. I live at 921 McLean Avenue, Yonkers, New York, 10704.”

“Okay. Did anybody see you go to work?”

“Sheila.”

“Who’s Sheila?”

“Sheila’s the best waitress in the world. She works at The Comfy Corner.”

“Did you go into The Comfy Corner?”

“Yeah. I had scrambled eggs with cheese and toast, just like I do every morning.”

“So you didn’t wake up and go straight to work. You stopped off for breakfast.”

“Yes, same as I always do.”

“Okay, Slatz? It’s really important that you think hard and give us honest answers.”

“I am honest!”

“But you said you woke up and went to work but you really woke up and went to the diner and then went to work.”

“A man’s gotta eat.”

“I hear ya. It’s just that you can’t leave out any details. Nothing. Okay?”

“I’m telling the truth!”

“Okay, just relax. We want to help you remember all the events that led up to Declan’s death.”

“I don’t know the events. I just found him.”

“I understand that. I just need to hear how you found him.”

“On the ground. Dead—where’s my Fanta?”

Alvarez rubbed his face. Why did this shit always happen right before he was ready to punch out? Yeah, the OT was nice, and he sure could use it, as he was saving up to buy a nice little pontoon boat he had seen for sale on City Island. Working the night shift wasn’t so bad, he told himself, as long as he was catching stripers in the Long Island Sound by eight-thirty each morning.

“Let me check on that,” Alvarez said.

He poured some crappy coffee into a Styrofoam cup and wondered if the department would ever go green or at least switch to paper cups. If he went out of his way to buy fair trade coffee, couldn’t New York’s Finest buy some recyclable cups? He heard an officer typing out a complaint report and realized if the department hadn’t yet switched over to computers from typewriters and carbon paper, he could forget about drinking from a paper cup, unless he went to Costco and bought them himself. He saw Keegan talking with Lieutenant Durkin by the soda machine.

“Keegs, where’s the Fanta?” he shouted.

“We ain’t got no Fanta. There’s some Welch’s, though. See if the retard likes grape soda.”

Alvarez walked over to them. “I asked you not to call him that.”

"Why not? The fuckin' dude's retarded."

"Slats is a good guy. He's just a little slow."

"He's been stalking Woodlawn for years, terrorizing little girls and scaring old ladies," Keegan said. "That retard is dangerous."

"Lieutenant, are you going to reprimand him, or what?" Alvarez said.

Durkin, who stood six-foot-four and had thinning red hair and layers of bags under his eyes, looked down at Alvarez and remembered he had a retarded sister, or one with Down Syndrome or something. Whatever it was, he always threw Alvarez fifty bucks around Memorial Day, when he supposedly walked or biked for a cure for something his sister had. Durkin suspected he was partially financing Alvarez's annual Bar-B-Q but as long as he wasn't invited, he was happy to contribute without feeling obligated to go.

"He's right, Keegs," Durkin said. "You gotta be a little more sensitive."

"C'mon, Durk. The dude's retarded. Why can't we just say it?"

"Because we just can't anymore, okay?" Durkin shook his head. "Why did I ever let you work nights?"

"Take me off of nights, please," Keegan said.

"You'll miss the differential," Durkin said. "It's paying your alimony."

"That differential comes with a price. It's tough to get laid when you're working nights. Not many joints hopping at eight in the morning."

"Join a gym," Durkin said. "Lots of lonely housewives hit the gym in the morning. My wife does."

"No offense, Durk. But I'm not interested in seeing your wife in spandex."

"You'll never get off nights, Keegan."

"I never get off anymore period."

"Scuse me," Alvarez said, stepping between the two of them and sliding a dollar into the soda machine. Though the red light indicated that there was no Fanta left, he punched the plastic tab and out rolled a bright orange can.

"Look at that," Keegan said. "You got the touch. You oughtta play the number tonight."

"Are you going to help me get a statement from the witness?" Alvarez asked.

“You mean the suspect,” Keegan said.

“Slats? A suspect?” Alvarez said. “Are you joking?”

“He’s got blood all over him and his prints are all over the scene,” Keegan said.

“How do they know that already?” Alvarez said.

“Forensics ran the prints through the laptop,” Durkin said.

“Can you believe that forensics faggot Hickey has got a friggin’ laptop in his cruiser?” Keegan said. “I bet that prick is watching porn all night on it. When are we getting laptops in our car, Durk?”

“Never,” Durkin said.

“You really think Slats is a suspect, Lieutenant?” Alvarez asked.

Durkin shrugged. Nothing surprised him anymore. He had fourteen months until he could retire with a full, non-taxable pension of \$140,000, and he intended to make it without a shred of guilt. The sleepless nights of thinking over cases, the long hours sitting in courtrooms waiting to testify, the crappy coffee, the mutants of The Bronx—he couldn’t wait to say goodbye to all of it. He just wanted to bang out and get some solid sleep while the wife was at the gym.

“We’ll launch an investigation, see what shakes out,” Durkin said.

“There’s no way Slats could’ve done this,” Alvarez said.

“Why not?” Keegan said. “He’s got a record. We’ve picked him up several times.”

“Only when he defends himself from the kids that harass him,” Alvarez said.

“And what about the Cheryl Lind case? He just mistakenly entered her apartment one night and put his hands on her?” Keegan said.

“Cheryl Lind has had half the hands of Woodlawn on her,” Alvarez said. “Including yours. Let’s not forget she has a record, too. And a history of lying to the police.”

“Slats’s prints are on the beer bottle and the Dumpster, his shoe marks are on Declan’s shirt, and Declan’s blood is on his shirt,” Keegan said. “What more do you want?”

“How about a motive?” Alvarez said.

“Who the fuck knows?” Keegan said. “In case you haven’t noticed, Declan’s not talking. I think the retard just ran wild.”

“Don’t call him a retard!” Alvarez said. “Slats wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

A loud bang echoed through the station house. They turned in the direction of the interview room and through the small rectangular window saw the metal table upturned and Slats flinging his wooden chair against the wall.

“Then again, maybe he would,” Keegan said. “If it went after his Fanta.”

Chapter 6

Ryan had forgotten that Danny Boy lived in Brooklyn. Despite what she told him last night in the bar, she had no intention of driving him home. She dropped him off at the number four train, grabbed a MetroCard from the stack behind her sun visor—for those nights when she drank responsibly, parked the car, and took the subway home—and told him that she had an emergency. He asked if he'd see her again, and she shrugged. That's when he pulled a CD in a plastic, slim line jewel case out of his back pocket and dropped it on the passenger seat. She could see it had a phone number on it, written in a red Sharpie, along with two words in quotations: "The Man." He asked for her phone number and she made one up—it was actually the old number to Nico's pizzeria, etched into her brain since childhood when her family abstained from meat on Fridays, fish for the parents, pizza for the kids—gunned the engine, and sped off.

She entered the precinct with a twenty-two-ounce coffee and marched straight into Durkin's office. He was at his computer, poring over the CompStat numbers, which showed concentrated pockets of the precinct where crimes were being committed. There was an uptick in burglaries in the Bainbridge section and the usual late night assaults in Woodlawn, on Katonah Avenue and on East 242 Street, spilling over from the bars on McLean Avenue, which fell under Yonkers cops' jurisdiction.

He wondered if the Yonkers police stationed outside of Paddy Doyle's, the biggest bar on McLean Avenue, directed patrons to take their fights into The Bronx so they wouldn't have to deal with

them. Maybe he'd order Alvarez and Keegan to sweep East 242nd from midnight to four, when most of the fights broke out.

"Morning, Durk," Ryan said.

"Yes, it is," Durkin said, looking at his watch. "Three more hours to go."

He meant until noon, when he could go home. Pointing to her coffee cup, he directed with a wag of his index finger for her to dump some into the mug on the desk.

"I take it black," she said.

"That what she said," Durkin said.

"You never use that right, do you?" Ryan said, pouring some of her coffee into his mug.

"That's what she said," Durkin said.

"Okay, that works."

She glanced at his computer screen. "Burglaries are up, surprise, surprise. So is heroin."

"Yeah, doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. Economy tanks, people start using and stealing. Idle minds—"

"Can't wait for the graffiti artists to come back."

"Well, if we're going to revert to the '70s in this city, at least I hope the music comes back, too."

"You like disco?" Ryan asked.

"No, all the other stuff. Stones, Zeppelin, Steely Dan, Elton John..."

"Classic rock."

"Yeah, and the progressive stuff. Pink Floyd, Yes, jam bands like the Allman Brothers."

"Got news for you, Durk. There's a classic rock station on the radio. Plays nothing but. If you were to turn that box on your desk on and tune it to 104.3, you'd think you were in a time warp. They don't play anything after 1981."

"I'm not allowed to play the radio anymore. Certain members of the force didn't want to be subjected to my musical tastes. Complained to the white shirts."

"That's ridiculous."

"It is—but, there's only two hours and fifty-six minutes left."

"You used to count down the years."

"Now I take it day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute." He launched into the chorus of The Doobie Brothers' "Minute by Minute."

Ryan stopped him before he got to his embarrassing Michael McDonald falsetto impersonation. “So, what’s the deal with Declan?” she asked.

“The porter found him in the alley with a bottle in his neck. We picked him up for questioning.”

“Hulkhead?”

“Pardon?”

“The porter. They call him Hulkhead. Don’t you remember Hulkhead?”

“No,” Durkin said.

Ryan was reminded that Durkin was a few years her senior. Once she turned eighteen, she considered everyone the same age, but Durkin probably wouldn’t remember Hulkhead patrolling the neighborhood with his Sony Walkman and long overcoat, collecting empty cans and bottles from garbage bins.

“He’s been answering to Tommy,” Durkin said.

“Right, Tommy. But everyone, well, all of the mean kids, anyway, used to call him Hulkhead.”

“I thought his nickname was Slats.”

“One of many. Trust me, Tommy Slats was, is, Hulkhead.”

Everyone had a nickname in Woodlawn, sometimes more than one. Could make it tough for police officers and outsiders to keep track.

“You were one of the mean kids?” Durk asked.

“So were you.”

“You must have me confused with one of my brothers.”

That was easy to do. There were ten Durkins, all boys, each born a year apart. If you graduated from St. Sebastian elementary school from 1977-1987, you had a Durkin in your class. If you went to church that decade, a Durkin served your mass. The old pastor, Father Doyle, used to joke about them at the early masses, during the Prayer for the Faithful. The lector would recite the specific causes and the congregation would sleepily respond, “Let us pray,” and then Father Doyle would end with, “And for poor Mrs. Durkin...” and again, the congregation would robotically reply, “Let us pray.”

Ryan thought back to elementary school, remembered that Eddie and Marty Durkin were on the seventh and eighth grade boys basketball team, and that Barry was older than both of them. He used to come watch their games and in later years, collect them

from the bars when it got too late. Maybe Barry wasn't one of the mean kids. He always had a job, either a paper route or bagging groceries in the supermarket, and didn't spend all his nights on Katonah Avenue harassing girls, drinking beer, and smoking pot. Years ago, this all seemed legal, and cops were never on foot patrol. Teenagers would congregate on street corners with boom boxes and blast Peter Gabriel, Kiss, and Black Sabbath; smoke cigarettes and joints; drink quarts of Bud from plastic cups or nips in brown paper bags; sit on the hoods of cars; and intimidate anyone who walked by. Ryan remembered buying a quart of milk from the corner deli for her mother one night—she couldn't have been more than nine or ten—and having to pass by the group of teens in jean jackets and Pro-Keds. Her heart was pounding. She heard one of them make kissing and sucking noises at her, and she ran home as fast as she could. That was the first time she thought about being a cop. She initially thought about being a vigilante, like Charles Bronson in the *Death Wish* movie that her father loved. It seemed to be on Channel 9 almost every week, and she'd occasionally watch the black and white set with the rabbit ears along with her dad, as the mustachioed guy in a knit cap casually walked up to gang members and sprayed them with bullets. That's what she wanted to do to those guys on Katonah Avenue. But *Death Wish* ended with the widowed Paul Kersey on the lam. She wanted to come home to a family every night, not be out on her own. Oh, well. Not every wish could come true. As her father used to tell her and her three siblings whenever they voiced their desires, "We can't all play centerfield for the Yankees."

She never knew what he meant by that when she would ask Santa Claus for a bicycle for Christmas, but it started to sink in when she hit her teen years. When her older sister Maureen wanted to go to Vassar College and study philosophy, Ryan remembered hearing, "We can't all play centerfield for the Yankees," and when her brother Brendan voiced his desire to go to San Francisco to form a band, she remembered thinking to herself, "We can't all play centerfield for the Yankees." By the time Ryan told her father that she wanted to be a cop, all he said was, "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, not a cop. Please."

"He's in the back," Durkin said.

"Who?" Ryan answered, snapping to.

"Tommy. Slats. Hulkhead. Whatever you call him."

“Why? Is he a suspect?”

Durkin shrugged. “His prints are all over the crime scene. They’re on the bottles, the Dumpster, the garbage bags.”

“Why wouldn’t the porter’s prints be all over the scene? He worked there.”

“True. But his sneaker mark is on the deceased’s shirt, too. He said he kicked the body to roll it over, to make sure he was really dead.”

“The Hulkhead I remember wasn’t capable of killing someone, I don’t think.”

“Anyone’s capable of murder in the right circumstances.”

“What would be his motive?”

“Who knows? Did Declan stiff him? Steal his girlfriend?”

“Hulkhead has a girlfriend?”

“He may *think* he has a girlfriend.”

“You mean, he may covet someone that Declan dated.”

“Dated, laid, whatever.”

“Any idea who?”

“Not yet. From what we hear, this Declan guy got around.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah. Why? Is this news to you, Ryan?”

“Ah, no, I guess not. He was attractive. And bartenders have been known to get lucky on occasion.”

She couldn’t believe she was jealous. It was just a one-night-only deal with Declan. That was the way they both wanted it. Still, her competitive nature got the best of her. *Oh, well. We can’t all play centerfield for the Yankees.*

“Well, this guy got lucky a lot. And one of the broads he got lucky with may be the one that Tommy wanted to get lucky with. You know The Comfy Corner diner?”

Didn’t everyone? It was a rite of passage if you grew up in Woodlawn to finish off a late night of boozing with an Irish breakfast at The Comfy.

“Of course.”

“You know this waitress, Sheila?”

“I haven’t been there in years. I wouldn’t remember any names.”

“Find out what you can about her. It’s the only name he’s mentioned.”

“Who’s doing the questioning?”

“Just Alvarez and Keegan so far.”

“I’m sure you have your reasons, Durk, but why am I being asked to investigate this murder?”

“Cause, you’re a good detective and they’re only beat walkers. The most they can do is secure a scene and ’tween you, me, and the lamppost, they’re barely capable of that. Keegan’s on the spectrum and Alvarez—he’s a good kid, but a little too...gung-ho or something. Heart’s in the right place, but I’m afraid he’s gonna be one of the guys you read about in the paper, and it won’t be on the sports page.”

Ryan slugged some coffee.

“And,” Durkin continued, “I got a hunch there’s more to this than it seems. People have been drinking in Woodlawn bars for a long time. A fair share of them have drinking to blame for their premature deaths, but they don’t just die in the alley after a rough night.”

Durkin swirled his coffee and fought it down. “How can you drink this shit black?”

“Once you try black, you never go back.”

“You’re talking about the coffee, I presume.”

“Shouldn’t make presumptions in your line of work.”

“I’m not supposed to say this, either, Ryan, but you got the best legs and biggest...eyes...on the force, and a better chance of getting to the bottom of this murder than anyone else.”

“I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes, Durk.”

“I need Keegan and Alvarez to patrol the streets, look into this rash of burglaries, and break-up fights, and I need you to solve a murder case. If those guys give you any shit, let me know.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Yeah, and this Declan kid should be home sleeping it off right now instead of getting pumped with formaldehyde.”

Right, thought Ryan. We can’t all play centerfield for the Yankees.

Chapter 7

Ryan peeked into the interview room and saw Keegan standing in the corner under the window fiddling with his iPhone and Alvarez sitting across the table from Slats, who had two cans of Fanta before him. She knocked on the door and thought she heard Keegan mumble “Easy Eileen.”

Alvarez got up and opened the door.

“You say something, Keegan?” she asked.

“No.”

“I thought I heard my name.”

“Oh, yeah, I just said, ‘Easy, Eileen’ when you knocked on the door. I didn’t want you to startle the witness.”

Ryan stared him down. She knew Keegan from years ago, before he was on the job, when he patrolled Woodlawn’s bars instead of its streets. He was always getting into fights. Cute kid, with a small dose of acne and a bad case of little man complex that got the best of him when he drank. Back in those days, Ryan had been branded with the unfortunate handle of “Easy Eileen,” because she fooled around with a couple loudmouthed boys who exaggerated their conquests. The fact that every jukebox in Woodlawn had a copy of the one-hit-wonder band Dexy’s Midnight Runners single “Come On, Eileen” didn’t help, either. Some asshole would always put it on and the jokes would start.

That was why she stopped hanging out in Woodlawn. A small town could be hell for a sexually confident female who was hitting her stride.

She motioned for Alvarez to enter the hall with her. “I’m taking over the questioning in this case.”

“Oh? Really?”

“Yeah. You don't like it, talk to Durkin.”

“I will.”

He looked her up and down and stormed off to Durkin's office.

“Keegan? You can leave now.”

“Says who?”

“Durkin has some assignments for you and Alvarez.”

Keegan slid the iPhone into his shirt pocket and waltzed passed her. He looked back at Slats and whispered into her ear, “If the retard gives you any trouble, call me.”

“Funny,” she said. “Durkin said the same thing about you.”

Keegan held his tongue. He had already been reprimanded for his politically incorrect rumbings, and the force had seen a rash of sexual harassment lawsuits. Like most of the veterans, Keegan was clockwatching to his pension now, too. He had an older brother of forty-five already retired from the force collecting his pension in Florida, working part-time as a security guard for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. It was a life model he intended to follow.

Ryan shut the door and smiled at Slats.

“Hi, Tommy, I'm Detective Ryan.”

“Hello.”

“You want to get out of here?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me.”

As they passed Durkin's office, she could hear Alvarez pleading his case for remaining on the investigation and Durkin calmly responding that the matter was out of his hands. He had done his job, Durkin assured him. Arrived at the scene, kept the crowds from contaminating any evidence, and brought in a distraught witness and possible suspect. Now it was time for the detectives to take over. The conversation brought back memories of her early years on the force as an overzealous foot soldier.



She cut her teeth around Yankee Stadium, stationed outside 161st Street and River Avenue, first in uniform helping with crowd control, then as a plain-clothes detective arresting ticket scalpers hawking counterfeit ducats and Red Sox fans who liked to do shots and smoke weed in the parking lots. Collars came quick

and easy and she worked her way up the ranks. Most times, if the people seemed in control, just catching a buzz before paying exorbitant prices for watered down swill inside the Stadium, she looked the other way. If guys were obnoxious and likely to ruin the experience for the kids in attendance, then she'd move in, confiscate their beer or drugs, and if they got testy, she'd run them in and let them sleep it off in the drunk tank.

Most games weren't a problem. Tuesday night games in May against Kansas City didn't bring the riff-raff that a Boston series on a hot summer weekend would. Those fuckers were arrogant. "Massholes" her colleagues had dubbed them. Even though she wasn't much of a baseball fan when she took the job, she had pride in her hometown and fond memories of the Yankees' World Series wins in the '70's, when it seemed like everything around them was ready to collapse or burn to the ground. Even her father, who preferred rooting for their perennial underdog crosstown rivals, the Mets, took pleasure in watching Reggie Jackson smack three home runs on three consecutive swings. Love him or hate him, who couldn't admire that feat?

Her assignment to the area coincided with the arrival of good-looking homegrown talent Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera, Bernie Williams, Jorge Posada, and Andy Pettitte, which peaked her interest not only in the team but also in its history and the neighborhood. Being stationed in and around the stadium for four World Series wins cemented a place in her heart for those teams and her job. She knew she was seeing something special and liked nothing better than arresting one of those Massholes with the funny accents who thought they were going to walk into her office, the hallowed ground at Yankee Stadium, and spray paint their name or piss on The House That Ruth Built. Not on her watch.

Her superiors noticed her skill and professionalism. Even after 9/11, when security at the Stadium was tight and nerves were on edge, Ryan was the epitome of cool professionalism. She never let assholes interfere with other peoples' good time, but she gave them the opportunity to redeem themselves. The chance to cease and desist and, if necessary, apologize was always offered before the cuffs came out. As professional as she was on the job, she was something of a legend off the clock as well. She could drink with any of her co-workers and had a reputation as a party girl—two things she made no attempt to hide. With two older brothers and

one older sister, she could handle herself in a street fight as well as a catfight. She didn't take losing lightly so she made a point of not losing at all. From darts to target practice to drinking games to hooking up, she usually came out on top. Unless, of course, she wanted to be on the bottom.

She did a stint as an undercover detective, too, dressing in garish make-up and gold lame shorts and patrolling Lexington Avenue in the Twenties, near the armory, and then up in the Hunt's Point section of The Bronx. It was more unpleasant than dangerous. She wore a wire, had a pistol at the ready in her purse, and backup was always nearby. In just a few hours each night, she'd rack up dozens of arrests. What she couldn't understand was why these guys just didn't go to a bar. It may cost a couple dollars more and the success rate wasn't as high, but at least it didn't go on your record that you struck out and your wife and children didn't have to find out about it. What surprised her most was that the majority of her prospective johns were married guys looking for quick blowjobs. No wonder half of all marriages ended in divorce. A few months on streetwalking patrol was turning her off of men completely. She asked for a change of scenery and the department obliged, and now she filled her days investigating murders, rapes, drug trafficking, the dissemination of kiddie porn, and the occasional abduction.

As her Jeep rolled passed The Pot O'Gold, she assured Slats that the windows were tinted and that nobody could see in.

There were still some old-timers standing around, pointing down the alley and sipping coffee from paper cups.

"I didn't do it," Slats said.

"I know you didn't, Tommy," she said. "We'll find out who did."

"How come you believe me and the other cops don't?"

"It's not that they don't believe you, but they don't know you. I remember you, Tommy. I grew up in Woodlawn."

"You did?"

"Yep. Not too far from your apartment. I used to eat at The Comfy Corner all the time, too."

"You did?"

"Sure. There was always a nice waitress working there."

"Was it Sheila?"

"I don't know."

“Sheila’s the best.”

“Yeah? You like Sheila?”

“She takes care of me.”

“How so?”

“She brings me my breakfast every morning. Most important meal of the day.”

“Yeah, it is,” Ryan said, remembering that so far she had swallowed nothing but an Alka-Seltzer and Vitamin Water cocktail and a quart of coffee, which she needed after the six tequila shooters and half dozen beers last night. That couldn’t be good for the stomach or the liver or any vital organ, for that matter. “Should we go visit Sheila?”

“Okay,” Slats said.

Chapter 8

They slid into a window booth at The Comfy Corner and watched as Sheila, the trim, toned waitress with the Dorothy Hamill haircut tended to the late breakfast crowd. Ryan thought back to her days as a teenager waitressing at Francesco's restaurant. The money was good and the owners were nice, but the bar crowd on weekends was disturbing. A bunch of paunchy, middle-aged Italian guys with slick hair-dos, pinky rings, and ankle holsters would drink Absolut and cranberry, get coked up, trade insults, and hit on the help. Ryan believed that the waitress costume, a button down blouse and tight black slacks, was an asshole magnet. She couldn't wait to trade it in for a gun and a badge. As she watched Sheila coasting from station to station, she realized that working the morning shift was much better for a waitress's self-esteem and faith in humanity. The old-timers smiled and said, "Good Morning" and "Thank You." True, the fifteen percent tip on an egg sandwich and tea only amounted to pennies, but when you factored in the harassment that went along with a three-course, five-drink dinner tab, at least you exited your shift with dignity intact, even if you were a little lighter in the wallet.

"You okay, Tommy?" Sheila said, sliding him an orange fountain soda and a straw.

"Now I am. The cops arrested me."

"You weren't arrested," Ryan said.

"That's all anyone's talking about this morning," Sheila said. "You and Declan."

"Declan is dead," Slats said. "When I found him he was dead."

"Oh, Tommy, I'm so sorry," Sheila said. "That's awful."

“I didn’t do it.”

“Course you didn’t,” Sheila said, grabbing his hand. “You poor thing—and poor Declan. God, I can’t believe something like that happened here.”

“It happens everywhere, Sheila,” Slats said. “That’s what the cops said.”

“Well, sure you read about it in the papers and see it on the news, but it’s still a shock when it happens to someone you know. Such a nice guy, too.”

“You knew Declan?” Ryan asked.

“Sure I did,” Sheila said. “Who’s your friend, Tommy?”

“This is Detective Ryan,” he said.

“Oh?” Sheila said, looking her over. She looked familiar but the hair was different.

Ryan held out her hand. “Eileen.”

“Sheila,” she said, taking her hand in a firm grasp. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“Yeah, I’ll have the Irish breakfast and do you have Vitamin Water?”

“No. Coke, Sprite, ginger, and orange.”

“Just coffee then. Do you have any little packets of Tylenol or aspirin?”

“No. But I may have something in my purse.” Sheila turned to Slats. “You ready for lunch, Tommy?”

“Um...”

“Tuna salad on rye?”

“Cheeseburger.”

“You had the cheeseburger yesterday. Have the tuna. It’s fresh.”

“Okay.”

“Be right back,” Sheila said, as she refilled a few coffee cups before retreating into the kitchen.

“She takes good care of you, that Sheila,” Ryan said.

“Yeah.”

“Does she work every day?”

“She’s off Sundays and Mondays.”

“Where does she live?”

“Hart Avenue.”

“In Yonkers?”

“Yeah.”

"Have you been to her house?"

"Never inside. But I walked her home a few times."

"Oh?"

"Sometimes she gets nervous if there's creepy guys hanging around."

"I see."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"That's personal. And you're not supposed to ask personal questions."

"I didn't mean anything by it. It's just, she's very pretty, don't you think?"

"She's beautiful, but she doesn't like if you ask her if she has a boyfriend."

"Have you asked her?"

Tommy blushed and fidgeted with his hands.

"Have you asked her to be *your* girlfriend?" Ryan asked.

"That's personal," Slats said. "And you're not supposed to ask personal questions."

He drained his orange soda and made sucking noises with his straw while Ryan looked around the diner. Place hadn't changed a bit. Same décor, same clientele. Red booths, Formica counter, Irish immigrants.

Quite a different crowd from the four a.m. set trying to stave off a hangover by scarfing down a bacon burger—as if an enormous fat and caloric intake pre-dawn would miraculously absorb and negate the effects of the alcohol—but everything else was the same.

Sheila returned with coffee and two yellow, oval tablets.

"This'll cure ya," Sheila said.

"What is it?"

"Solpadeine."

"What's that?" Ryan asked.

"A mild narcotic."

"Perfect," Ryan said. "Thank you. Where did you score these?"

"Brought 'em back with me the last time I was home. They're legal across the pond."

"You're joking."

"No. Go into any pharmacy and the first thing to greet you will be a stack of these boxes."

Maybe that's why the Irish drink so much. If there's no hangover to deal with, party on. Couple of these to get you back on your feet and a couple of drinks to knock you back on your ass. It's like exercise for the addictive personalities. Ryan swallowed the pills, whatever they were, and the promise of their effect made her feel instantly better. The power of suggestion. If only non-alcoholic beer had the same effect. Or better taste.

"What part are you from?" she asked.

"Galway," Sheila answered.

"Oh, that's where my grandparents are from," Ryan said.

"Is that right? Small world," Sheila said.

It sure is, Ryan thought, *which makes my job easier.* "What part was Declan from?"

"Mayo, I think," Sheila said. "But he'd been living in a flat in Dublin with a bunch of lads before coming out here." She sighed. "I still can't believe he's gone. He was the nicest guy. How could anyone do that?"

"It's strange," Ryan said. "It almost seems like a random act of violence but...do you know if he had any enemies?"

"Did you come in for the coffee or to interrogate?" Sheila said.

"I'm sorry, Sheila," Ryan said. "I don't mean to sound insensitive, but at the same time, I'd like to know who did this to a guy that everybody seemed to like."

"Not everybody liked him," Slats said.

Sheila and Ryan both looked at Slats, who continued fidgeting with his meaty hands, which were in dire need of a washing and a manicure.

"Oh no?" Sheila said.

"Who didn't like him, Tommy?" Ryan asked.

"Some members of the club didn't care for him. Jealous, I guess."

"What club?" Ryan followed up.

"The Five O'Clock Club."

"What's the Five O'Clock Club?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it," he said, putting his head down and rocking in his seat.

"Tommy, if you know anything about this, you really should tell the police," Sheila said.

He covered his ears and continued rocking.

“It may not mean anything, Tommy,” Ryan said, “but if you think you know something that may help us find who did this, you should let us know so we can check it out.”

He looked at both and then and rubbed his face.

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Sheila said.

“Don’t be afraid,” Ryan added.

“Damn it, Sheila!” he screamed. “Can you just bring me my sandwich?”

“Shh!” Sheila scolded him with a finger and then spun around toward the counter.

“And another orange soda! Please!” he said.

Chapter 9

Ryan checked her cell phone and saw that she had some text messages from Durkin and one from Kevin Hickey. She closed her phone. Too early in the morning for Hickey.

Tommy ate his tuna sandwich in silence, and Sheila went back to taking care of her customers. Ryan looked down at her plate of Irish sausages, blood pudding, white pudding, two scrambled eggs, bacon, and two slices of buttered toast and tried to tally up the calories. It was pointless. Just open the gums and throw it down, cholesterol be damned. Her mother used to make breakfasts like this every Sunday morning, and she managed to live into her mid-seventies, which was more than enough in Ryan's opinion. If you still had some teeth, hair, and faculties, you were ahead of the game. In fact, you won. Game over.

She'd watched her father hanging on through a heart attack and a stroke, struggling to get words out, and unable to dress himself and prayed that she wouldn't ever have to live that way. Not that she was much of a believer in prayer, but it couldn't hurt, even if it didn't help. She surprised herself by finishing everything but the bacon and pushed her plate away. What day was today? Wednesday? She wouldn't need a meal again until Friday.

She grabbed the eighteen-dollar check and left a seven-dollar tip. Slats didn't make an offer to pay, but she wouldn't have let him anyway. Talk about a rough morning. Go into work and find a co-worker dead. Although she'd fantasized about that on occasion, she never actually meant for it to happen. "There's an asshole everywhere you go," her father always used to tell her. Turned out he was right about a lot of things. But the assholes on her job never

did anything to deserve a bottle in the jugular. What was it that would make someone want to do in Declan?

Much of their night together had been a blur, as those nights so often were. She remembered his gorgeous, navy, blue eyes. Movie star eyes—Paul Newman's, to be exact. And she remembered his strong jawline and dark black hair, and that killer smile. The devil's smile. She remembered looking across the bar to order a drink and seeing that smile.

"What'll ya have?" he asked, in that lilting brogue, and she couldn't get any words out. She just smiled right back at him.

"I don't get off until four, so what'll you have in the meantime?" he replied.

On a less attractive guy, his confidence would've could across as ugly arrogance. Maybe it was the brogue, but with Declan it seemed cute and playful, just like him. The rest of the night was sketchy. Her friend Karen was with her, of course, flirting and fighting off all comers. They drank a lot, Ryan remembered. Mostly Coronas, but then they switched over to some fruity concoction that Declan claimed to have created called the Devil's Punch. It was red, sweet, and she knew he poured cranberry juice and some clear liquor into it. Gin, vodka, maybe poteen? She didn't know. Whatever it was, it worked. They got wasted. Karen paired off with a laborer they called Miami Steve. He was short, with red hair slicked up in a giant pompadour like Bryan Setzer, in a sleeveless denim shirt and ropey gold chain with a crucifix. Cute, but not Ryan's type. Too much of a poseur. Karen went for that thing in small doses but he was nobody she'd ever be serious about. Declan was more Ryan's type: classically handsome, high cheekbones, well-built but not overly muscular. And he was witty, which was even more important to her. *We're all going to lose our looks*, she figured, *but a sense of humor never goes away*.

It was a Thursday night, she remembered. They closed the bar, got a quick bite to eat at the Irish Cafe...or was that with Kieran, the bartender from the Five Corners?...went back to her apartment, and made quick work of it. A little too quick for her liking but not bad. She remembered him leaving early, while she was still sleepy and drunk, and not much else, other than that he was definitely not circumcised. No information that would be useful in this investigation. And that was that. He never called and she hadn't been back to The Pot O'Gold. She had made a conscious

effort to avoid the Woodlawn bar scene and preferred going out in Manhattan, but on that particular night Karen had wanted to scour the old stomping grounds, either out of nostalgia or because of the easier commute home, and Ryan had willingly obliged. What are BFFs for?



Ryan took Slats back to his apartment to make sure he was okay. He said his head hurt but he refused to take anything for it. He said no to drugs, he told her.

The apartment was a wreck. Upturned milk crates served as furniture, and discarded fast food wrappers littered the floor. She noticed a stack of porn magazines by the mattress on the floor and saw the flickering blue screen light of an old television set that had been left on without sound in the kitchen area.

“This place could use a woman’s touch,” she said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s filthy, Tommy.”

“I spend all day cleaning at work. I don’t like to clean when I come home.”

She noticed a burger wrapper on top of a dresser next to a Hellmann’s jar that was half-filled with what looked like watered down mayonnaise.

“Shouldn’t this mayonnaise be left in the refrigerator?” she asked.

“Don’t touch that!” he yelled, lunging at her.

She evaded his grasp and instinctively backed up to the door, not taking her eyes off him.

“That’s mine,” he said, clutching the jar.

When she realized it wasn’t mayonnaise and considered what it might be, she felt the blood pudding rising up her esophagus.

There was no way in hell she was using his bathroom. Covering her mouth with one hand, she threw open the front door with the other and made a run for it. She got as far as the alleyway, to the base of the steps that led up to McLean Avenue, where she launched an Irish breakfast to the curb.

Chapter 10

Ryan drove her cherry red Jeep Liberty to the corner of East 235th and Katonah and parked across from the C-Town Supermarket. Before getting out of the car, she swallowed some Tic Tacs and checked herself in the mirror. The bags under her eyes were getting a little darker and the crow's feet a little longer. She'd have to take it easy this week, maybe hit the gym, get some sleep. She brought a pair of binoculars from under the seat up to her eyes and looked across at The Pot O'Gold. A weird feeling rumbled through her stomach. Not nausea, but the kind of anxiety one experienced when you knew you'd forgotten something important but you couldn't remember what. There were two Irish guys in about their sixties, she guessed, standing outside the pub, gesturing down the alley. The News 12 truck was still stationed in front, and she watched a technician come out of Seamus's Deli with coffee and a sandwich and climb back into the passenger seat. Too early to go snooping around, and she didn't want to wind up on the news, either. Putting down the binoculars, she whipped her bleached-blonde locks up into a ponytail and pulled a Yankees cap tight over her head, slipping the tail out the hole in the back. Then she opened the door, in need of air and more coffee to stave off the inevitable headache. Solpadeine worked miracles but nothing lasted forever. No wonder people got addicted.

She ducked into the Traditional Irish Bakery on the corner, a popular pick-up spot for day laborers. Now that the Celtic Tiger had gone into hibernation in Ireland, a new wave of immigrants had recently descended on Woodlawn looking for work. As bad as

things were in the States, they were worse in Ireland. Unemployment rates fluctuated between the mid-to-high teens, and many children were being raised without fathers, who had left on vacation visas for the States, where they planned to work illegally. But there wasn't much work to go around, and competition was fierce. Connections and persistence were necessary and, when neither of those won out, what little money they had tended to be spent in the pubs, where leads were pursued but only a buzz usually found. Americans didn't even enter certain pubs in Woodlawn because they felt unwelcome. They'd get looks as if they were CIA operatives crashing IRA meetings. Some pubs didn't have televisions, and one didn't even have windows. A dark, black hole built into the ground floor of an apartment building, its main lighting source was the neon glowing from a jukebox that played a steady rotation of Wolfe Tones and other rebel songs. When the door swung open and sunlight streamed in for a brief second, patrons would cower or shield their eyes. The bakery had a somewhat similar feeling, though not as intimidating. There was an eerie quietness to what used to be a bustling breakfast spot. Maybe they were all in shock over Declan's death. Ryan didn't make eye contact with any of the guys sitting at the corner, talking in thick brogues, walking straight past the glass cases of raisin scones and soda bread to the coffee urns, pouring herself a large cup of black. As she stood at the counter to pay, she could feel eyes on her ass. She managed a quick turn of her head to catch them, but they made no effort to conceal their stares. One guy with a ruddy face and red hair even smiled at her, like a sadistic Leprechaun.

"Top o' the morning to you, Eileen," he said. "Didn't expect to see you up so early."

She looked intensely at him but didn't speak. Who the hell was he?

"I almost didn't recognize you under the cap," he said.

Ryan felt trapped in a bizarre dream. Or a David Lynch movie. Or a bizarre dream sequence in a David Lynch movie.

"Have you lost your voice?" the man persisted. "Not used to all that singing, I guess."

Singing? He must have me confused with someone else. "I'm sorry...do I know you?" she asked.

The other men at the table laughed.

"Jaysus, we were grand pals last night, so we were," he said. "We sang half the feckin' jukebox at Finian's Rainbow."

Oh shit. No memory of that at all.

"You've got quite a voice," the man said.

Ryan rubbed her face and took off her sunglasses to get a better look, hoping that something would jar her memory.

"I've never heard a woman sing Van Morrison like that. And the Sinead stuff as well."

Sinead? Ryan hated Sinead O'Connor, and not because she ripped up a picture of the Pope on *Saturday Night Live*.

"Oh...ah...thanks," she said.

"Are you all right?" the man asked, rising from his seat and walking toward her.

He was actually much better looking up close. His cheeks had a rosy glow, the result of either sunburn, high blood pressure, or too much whiskey, but he had the most interesting green eyes, like a cat's. He had a bit of a beer gut but broad shoulders and the legs of a runner.

"I don't...I'm sorry...it's...just...I've just heard some disturbing news..."

"About Declan?" the man asked.

She nodded.

"'Tis awful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Ryan said.

"We were probably the last ones to see him alive," the man said.

"What?" Ryan said.

"They say it happened shortly after five o'clock. I'd imagine it's only a matter of time before the cops get 'round to asking us about it."

Why the hell would they be asking *us*, Ryan wondered. Was she a part of *us*, or was this guy confused? Some of his information was wrong. Slats said he found the body at 6:15. But then again, he could be mistaken. He wasn't all there, either. Who was?

"What was your name again?" Ryan asked.

The men at the table roared with laughter.

"Jaysus. I thought for sure you'd remember me. You gave me your number and all, said to ring you this week."

Okay, I have a drinking problem, she thought. She put the sunglasses back on and stormed out with her coffee.

“Eileen, wait.”

The man walked after her, following her to the Jeep.

“I didn’t mean anything by that,” he said.

She turned and looked into his green eyes.

“I’m not judging, you know,” he said. “I was pretty loaded myself last night. I mean, fuck, we’ve all been loaded, right?”

“Where did I meet you?” Ryan said.

“Finian’s Rainbow.”

“And where did we go after Finian’s Rainbow?”

“We did the crawl up and down the avenues—The Turntable, Beckett’s, Fibber’s, Hooligans, The Pot O’Gold.”

None of it registered. She opened the door of her Jeep and closed it behind her.

“Wait, Eileen—please,” the man said.

She turned the engine and put the Jeep into gear.

“Can I still call you? Please?”

She thought he looked a bit like the Lucky Charms leprechaun and imagined him plying her to eat marshmallow hearts, moons, clovers, and stars. She nodded yes, if for no other reason than she might need him to piece together the final hours of last night. He might be a witness or an accomplice to the murder, for all she knew. Or maybe a potential boyfriend.

A sadistic smile stretched across his face. “My name’s Conor,” he said.

Chapter 11

To avoid passing the News 12 camera crews shooting B roll of the crime scene, she made an illegal U-turn, drove down East 233rd Street, and entered The Bronx River Parkway North, exiting at the Kensico Dam.

She parked the car in the shady lot and started walking the footpath, punching Karen's work number into her cell phone.

It rang until her voicemail took over.

She called Karen's cell.

"What happened last night?" Karen answered.

"You tell me."

"I don't remember."

"That makes two of us."

"Oh, shit. Are you serious?"

"Why aren't you at work?"

"I just got home. I woke up in some disgusting crash pad in the middle of a bunch of guys. And apparently none of them work, 'cause they were all sleeping when I left. I called in sick. I had to come home and shower for like an hour. I feel so dirty."

"Oh, shit."

"What?"

"Karen, do you think we were drugged?"

"Oh, God. I hope not—I mean, we were drinking a lot."

"Enough for both of us to black out?"

"I don't know... maybe."

"Declan is dead."

"What? Oh, shit—Wait, which one was Declan?"

“The bartender from The Pot O’Gold. They found him with a broken bottle in this throat.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, shit—”

“Yeah. And I just found out that I was there last night and I don’t remember it.”

“Really? Was I there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wow, I can’t believe it—He was gorgeous.”

“Yeah, and now he’s a beautiful corpse.”

“Didn’t you hook up with him once?”

“Yeah, and now I have to find out who killed him.”

“Can’t you just call in sick, like me?”

“I wish I could. I feel like shit.”

“Where are you?”

“Walking it off in Kensico Plaza. You wanna join me?”

“I can’t get out of bed. I’m going back to sleep.”

“How can you sleep?”

“I have faith in our police department to find out what happened.”

“Please, Karen?”

“Why don’t you come over when you’re done walking? Bring some ice cream. And pizza.”

“Why? Are you pregnant?”

“You know that’s impossible. I’ve been on the pill since ninth grade and I still insist on condoms.”

Ryan was distracted by a shirtless man in headphones who was jogging down the path with a black Labrador. A thin layer of sweat glazed his hairless chest and perfectly chiseled, rock-hard abs.

“You there, Eileen?”

“No.”

“No?”

As the jogger got closer, Ryan took off her sunglasses and offered her most flirtatious smile. The jogger didn’t notice.

“I must look like shit,” Ryan said. “Some hot guy just jogged passed me and I gave him my best fuck-me eyes and he didn’t even notice.”

“He’s probably gay.”

“Thanks. That makes me feel better.”

“What are friends for?”

Ryan clicked off the phone and made a sharp turn toward her Jeep. Before she climbed in, she felt a familiar rising in her throat. *Oh, God. Not again.* She ducked down behind the opened door and hurled another round of Irish breakfast and coffee.

Chapter 12

The Jeep rolled to a stop in the parking lot amidst the bucolic grounds of the Browne Rehabilitation Facility in White Plains. Before Ryan exited, she listened to her voicemail messages. There were two from Durkin saying he may have leads for her to check out and one from Kevin Hickey.

“Detective Ryan, this is Kevin Hickey from forensics. Please give me a call at your earliest convenience regarding the investigation of the murder of Declan McManus, and...about some other things, too, so...ah, just give me a call.”

What a dick. He must've had his television permanently tuned to the '70s Cop Show Channel. Every incident involving Hickey sounded scripted by the writers of *Hawaii Five-O*, *Cannon*, *Kojak*, *The Mod Squad*, or *The Streets of San Francisco*, and he overacted like Jack Klugman from *Quincy, M.E.* She had made the mistake of accepting a dinner invitation from Hickey six years ago, and he'd been calling for a second date ever since, even though he was married to a Mexican woman he met while vacationing at a Sandals resort in Cancun. Rumor had it she was the cleaning lady and, in lieu of a tip, he left a marriage proposal and she accepted. Nobody on the force liked Hickey. And worse, nobody trusted him. The prevailing thought in every precinct was that Hickey would throw anyone under a bus to advance his career. A lot of guys imitated him but, in this case, it wasn't flattery. It was pure hatred, and in Keegan's case, jealousy and hatred. Keegan always used to say, “I'm Kevin Hickey, not only would I like to play a police officer on TV, but I like to play police officer in real life, too.” It wouldn't have surprised Ryan one bit if Hickey had approached

her when she was streetwalking undercover. But, what the hell, her morning already sucked. She hit send.

"Kevin, it's Eileen Ryan."

"Good morning, Detective Ryan," Hickey said, in an annoying, telemarketer-type voice.

"What's up?"

"Are you anywhere in the vicinity of East 235 and Katonah Avenue?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, I've uncovered a piece of...how shall we say?...um..."

"Evidence?"

"Your choice of words, not mine."

"What did you find?"

"With all due respect, Detective, it's kind of a sensitive matter."

She rolled her eyes. Much more of this and she would be retching again.

"I'm a big girl, Hickey. I can take it."

"I think it might be best if we discussed this in person. Say, about two o'clock, Romero's restaurant?"

What a shithead. Was he still trying to snag a second date? Where did he think this was going to lead?

"That's not going to work for me. Just spill it."

"Okay—is anyone around?"

Ryan looked up at the sprawling brick building atop the hillside. A few patients in wheelchairs were sitting in the courtyard with their relatives, most of them with their heads down in some degree of vegetative or sleep state.

"No, nobody's around. Just tell me what you found."

"I found some hair fibers at the scene of Declan's murder."

"Yeah, and..."

"The fibers match..."

"Match what?"

"The hair fibers of one...um...Detective Eileen Ryan."

"What are you talking about, Hickey?"

"That's why I wanted to discuss this in person."

"Okay, fuck. Two o'clock, Romero's."

That would give her two hours to meet with her father and try to figure out what the hell was going on. At least it was Romero's,

her favorite Italian restaurant on Arthur Avenue. And Hickey would be picking up the tab.

Chapter 13

The nurses all smiled as Ryan made her way past their station and tiptoed to her father's room. She didn't want to disturb him if he was resting. He had made a lot of progress since being transferred from Montefiore Hospital to Browne, which had a reputation as being the best rehabilitation facility in the area. It took her father a while to warm up to the staff, but he had taken a shine to one particular physical therapist who was his stubborn match. Her aggressive method of therapy involved throwing tennis balls full force at him. After the first two bounced off his chest, his athletic pride kicked in. He managed to deflect the third and fourth and he caught the fifth. It was the first time he had lifted his right arm since suffering the stroke eight weeks earlier.

He was sitting in a wheelchair, looking beyond the *Family Feud* game show on television, out toward the parking lot.

"Tha' you, Eineen?" he said, his speech still sounding like his tongue was swollen from a bee sting.

"Yeah, it's me, Dad."

She sat on the bed to face him. His flannel shirt was buttoned wrong but she thought it was a minor miracle that it was buttoned at all.

"You put your own shirt on?" she asked.

He looked down and what now constituted a smile spread across his face. Not all the muscles on the left side of his face had regained full elasticity but the glint in his hazel eyes was there.

"Dad! That's great!"

His laugh quickly gave way to tears. The nurses had warned her that the patients tended to get emotional during their recovery. When the little things like combing hair and brushing teeth and shaving and buttoning shirts could make a man cry—a man as tough and somber as her father—it was powerful stuff. *And still, we take our health for granted*, she thought, even though it had been a monumental task and a major accomplishment to tie her own shoes today.

“Pretty soon, you’ll be outta here,” she said, grabbing a tissue to dab at his tears. He reached up and took the tissue from her and did it himself. “Show off,” she said.

“How’s the job?” he managed to say.

She sighed. “Sometimes I think I should’ve listened to you a little more. You told me not to be a cop.”

He looked up at her but the glint was gone. This didn’t sound like her.

“I got a disturbing call this morning,” she said. “A murder in Woodlawn.”

“Woodlawn?” her father said. “Wow.”

“Yeah. The times they are a-changing, Dad. We never heard of anyone getting killed in Woodlawn when we were growing up.”

There were accidents, of course, and domestic disputes. Some kids were killed in automobile crashes, and an elderly woman died from carbon monoxide poisoning, but murder? If it had ever happened, she wasn’t aware of it.

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

“A bartender. Irish guy. So far no leads, no suspects. I’m sure it’ll be on the news later.”

He gave a flick of his head in the direction of the television. Other than baseball or basketball games, he didn’t much care for what was on it unless it starred Charles Bronson or Clint Eastwood.

“You don’t want to watch it?”

He shook his head no. She turned off the television.

“The nurses,” he said. “They like to watch.”

His speech had come a long way, too, but she was afraid that if she told him so he’d be reduced to tears again.

“You look great, Dad. You got a nice shave, and they clipped your eyebrows. You look ten years younger. And ten pounds lighter.”

"The foo sucks," he said.

"The food?"

He nodded.

"Ah, well. Once you get home you can go back to your own diet. Minus the red meat, fat, and cholesterol, of course...which leaves you with oatmeal and low sodium soup, I guess."

He sighed.

"It was fun while it lasted, Dad. Most people wouldn't live through what you have so far."

He waved that thought away. "I can't walk," he said.

"You will," she said.

He shook his head from side to side.

"Sure you will. You're talking again, you're using your right arm again. You may not be able to drive, but you'll walk."

"No, I won't," he said, and the tears started falling again.

Oh, well, Ryan thought. We can't all play centerfield for the Yankees.

Chapter 14

On the ride down to Romero's, she called Durkin's cell but it went right to voicemail. She imagined him escaping into his man cave in the basement to catch a nap while his wife was swimming at the gym or doing the shopping. What an odd pair they were. She was a total gym rat, a sculpted physical fitness buff, and Durkin was lanky but pudgy and shook like Jell-O when he laughed. He was a cerebral guy, never wanted to lift a finger if it weren't absolutely necessary, and despite downing gallons of coffee a day, seemed on the brink of sleep at all times while she raced around like a rabbit on steroids. Whatever lead Durkin had for her was going to have to wait.

She stopped to check in on Karen, forgetting to bring the pizza and ice cream, but she did bring a bottle of Vitamin Water and an Alka-Seltzer packet. It wasn't Solpadeine but it was the best legal hangover remedy she had discovered in this country, short of a Bloody Mary, and she didn't have time to stop off for celery stalks and tomato juice. If straight vodka worked, Karen was sure to have a bottle stashed under the bed. She claimed she kept it within reach in the event that one of her guests got out of line, but Ryan knew it was for those mornings when Karen couldn't even make it to the bathroom or the kitchen without a little hair of the dog. It was sad, but still, kind of funny. At least no kids were being hurt, Karen always used to say.

Despite several rings, Karen wasn't answering the doorbell, so Ryan let herself in with her spare key. She hated doing it, worried that someday she'd find Karen dead, or, like the last time, in bed with a guy. The television was blaring in the living room, tuned to

News 12, but Karen wasn't watching it. A middle-aged anchor with comically dyed red hair was recapping a gruesome discovery outside a local watering hole and turned over the live feed to a beautiful Latin girl with full lips who looked like she was going to swallow the microphone. Lolita Hernandez repeated that it was indeed a gruesome discovery between the suddenly Spanish sounding pubs, *De Pot O'Gold* and *De Shandee*, and a mystery that had the locals stumped, as the victim was well-liked and after saving up some hard-earned money had planned on returning to Ireland to help his wife raise their two children.

"Wife and children? He didn't mention anything about a wife and children!" Ryan screamed. "Sonofabitch!"

Karen came running out of the bedroom, her blonde tresses a tangled mess. A hungover Medusa. "Oh, my God! You scared the shit out of me."

"That scumbag was married. With children!"

"The guy you were with last night?"

"No, the guy they found dead this morning."

"Oh."

Karen took the Vitamin Water and chugged from the bottle.

"I can't believe it," Ryan said. "That slimeball."

"Wow. Sucks for his wife and kids."

Ryan thought about that for a second, took back the Vitamin Water, and had a sip.

"Yeah, it does. I should've known."

"How would you know?"

"He wore a locket. I bet it had pictures of his wife and kids in it."

"He wore a locket? That's kind of gay."

"He definitely wasn't gay. Unless he was a Method actor who didn't suffer stage fright."

"What's a Method actor?" Karen asked.

"They attempt to actually become the part they're playing."

"Isn't that what all actors are supposed to do?"

"Yeah, but this way teachers can charge more money for teaching the Method."

"Ah, gotcha. It's like gaining entry into a club or something."

"Right." Ryan sipped more water. "Did you ever hear of the Five O'Clock Club?"

"Is that like the Four-twenty Club?"

“What’s that?”

“People who leave work and get high at four-twenty in the afternoon.”

“Really?”

“You’re a detective and you don’t know that a lot of people get high?”

“Tell you the truth, we’re not that concerned about people smoking a little herb. Got bigger issues. How do you know about this club?”

“I work in an office. With other people. We have access to the Internet and email.”

“Are you a member?”

“I haven’t smoked pot since high school. And the only club that’s ever wanted me as a member is the Mile High Club.”

“And if my memory serves me correctly, you were a more than willing participant to gain entry. I was on that trip to Cancun.”

“God, I miss Spring Break. Don’t you?”

“No. Problem is, I *never* missed a spring break. Maybe if I skipped them and studied instead, I could’ve been something other than a cop.”

“You can get out in six years and do something else.”

Six years? Ryan didn’t think she’d make it. By then she’d be forty-three, with her full twenty years in on the job. The pension probably wouldn’t be enough to live on comfortably for the rest of her life, not if she wanted to travel a lot and keep a place in New York. She could go back to school and get a degree. But in what? She thought about being an elementary school teacher, maybe somewhere with a warmer climate. San Diego? Miami? Summers and holidays off would be nice. Then again, she’d have to deal with kids. She didn’t have the patience for kids. Maybe high school? Or college professor? No, she wasn’t cut out for that. Wasn’t intellectual enough and didn’t have the discipline. Maybe she’d just go back to waitressing. By then she’d be too old to be hit on. Or maybe she’d waitress in Florida, slinging blue plate specials for the blue-haired customers and marry an old geezer for his money.

“You think this was a crime of passion?” Karen asked, as Lolita Hernandez’s brow furrowed in confusion while she tried to decipher an old Irish woman’s answer to her question. It was a Northern Irish brogue, a rising lilt with every answer sounding as

if it were in the form of a question. The interview was beginning to sound like a comical episode of *Jeopardy*. The young reporter was too rattled to follow-up so she kicked it back to the studio anchor.

"I bet some jealous bitch he was screwing found out he was married and waited for him outside and killed him," Karen surmised.

"I don't know, Karen," Ryan said, gulping some Vitamin Water. "I don't have a friggin' clue anymore. Now I know how Durkin feels."

"Durkin?"

"Lieutenant Durkin at the four-seven. He can't wait until he retires. He's counting the hours."

"At least you guys can retire. I'll be a secretary for the MTA for the rest of my life. If they don't fire me, that is. This is my third sick day this month."

"You gotta be careful, Karen."

"I know. I'm a little worried that I can't remember most of last night."

"Me, too. Everything after The Shamrock is a blur."

"That's where I left you. Me and Aidan went to Paddy Doyle's for a drink, then The Dubliner, but then...I don't even want to know."

"I think I may have closed The Pot O'Gold."

"Really?"

"That's what some guy told me on Katonah Avenue this morning."

"Oh, shit. How are you still walking?"

"A waitress gave me some narcotics. And this helps," she said, holding up the Vitamin Water.

Karen took the Vitamin Water and drank. "This stuff's good."

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Great for a hangover. It's got B12 or B6 or something. You may want to get your own bottle, though. I've been puking all morning."

"Eww."

"Sorry. I gotta go meet Hickey for lunch."

"You've been puking and you're going to eat again?"

"You know what's even worse? Once I start feeling better, I'm afraid I'll start drinking again."

Chapter 15

Hickey loved this, Ryan could tell—sitting in the back of the restaurant up against the exposed brick wall, swirling a glass of Chianti the size of a fish bowl with one hand, the other slung over the empty chair next to him, striking his best Tony Montana pose. His poor wife. Life must be hell for a Mexican maid at a Sandals resort if coming home to a self-absorbed asshole like Hickey every night seemed like a good proposition.

She sat across from him without returning his smile. “Make it quick.”

The waiter, a rail-thin kid with a pencil mustache, approached and asked what the lady would like to drink.

“Water,” Ryan replied.

“Are you sure?” Hickey asked.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“The wine list is excellent. They have some nice Barolos and Super Tuscans by the glass.”

“That’s great. I’m having water. Tell me about these fibers.”

Hickey looked up to make sure the waiter was out of earshot. “Well, when I arrived at the crime scene, I began cordoning off the area—”

“I know the procedure. Tell me about the fibers.”

“Easy, Eileen, I’m getting to it.”

“Say that again and I’ll put a bottle in *your* neck.”

“What?”

“I mean it, Hickey. I don’t have time for your bullshit.”

“What bullshit? Eileen, I’m trying to help you out here. Your hair was found at a murder scene.”

"Where?"

"On the brick wall near the Dumpster...and..."

"And where?"

"On the deceased's body."

"You're full of shit."

"No, I'm not. And I'm not judging, either, but I thought you should know. This guy wore a locket around his neck, and inside was a bunch of hair. We ran them and one was a match. Yours."

Ryan's mouth fell open, but no words came out. The image of the locket was so palpable she felt as if she could reach out and touch it, the way she did the night she slept with Declan. It was a gold bar with a Claddagh design. He told her it was something his mother gave him before he left Ireland, and that she had worn it when she came to the States. It was supposed to help him find his true love and return home safely, the way it had for her. She met his father at a ceili dance at the Irish Arts Center and moved back to Ireland with him three years later.

Something about Declan's story seemed strange. She'd been lied to by many men, and she almost always knew when. There were so many tells: the averted gaze, a facial tick, a snuffle, an involuntary lurch of the eyebrows, a swishing of the lips to cleanse the palate of the untruth. Was this guy that good a liar? And did he really carry around wisps of hair from his conquests? Her job was to uncover the truth. Too often, she found that it carried over into her personal life.

"How do you know it's mine?" Ryan said, the lump rising in her throat again.

"All detectives' fingerprints and hair samples are on record, you know that," Hickey said. "It helps differentiate the good guys from the bad guys at the crime scene."

"Unless they're one and the same."

"I don't think you're a crook, Ryan."

"Oh, thank you, Hickey. I'm relieved I'm not a suspect in the case that I'm investigating. Let's not forget protocol here."

"I know all about protocol, but I also know for sure that the fibers found at the scene are yours."

He took a sip of his wine, peering over the rim of the glass at her. "You sure you don't want a glass?" he asked. "This is a very complex Chianti."

"I'm sure."

“Do you remember that time we went to dinner?”

“Yeah. It was six years ago. And it wasn’t Romero’s. It was some pizza joint with a kids’ birthday party going on.”

“I didn’t know about the party.”

“Whatever. We’ve both moved on.”

“Right. Well, after I drove you home—”

“You tried to put the moves on me.”

“I did not try to put the moves on you.”

“You started petting me like I was a dog.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were stroking my hair. It was creepy.”

He took another sip of his wine. “I don’t remember anything like that.”

“Selective memory.”

“What I do remember is that you left behind some hair that night, too.”

“What?”

“It was stuck to the headrest of the car. Just a strand. And, you know, out of curiosity, I scanned it.”

“You what?”

“It’s what I do. It’s fascinating to me.”

“You’re a weirdo, Hickey. And perverted.”

“There’s nothing weird or perverted about it. It’s just...science.”

“No. That’s weird. So is Declan’s hair collection. I’ve come across a lot of weird shit on this job but this is just a little too much for me right now.”

The waiter appeared and asked if they were ready to order.

“I’ll take the chicken parm over ziti,” Ryan said.

“Veal scaloppini over penne,” Hickey said.

“Wrap mine to go, please,” Ryan added.

Chapter 16

She nibbled on some Italian bread from Romero's as she drove back to her apartment. So much had happened in the past eighteen hours that she couldn't digest it. She couldn't even digest her food. It was all being regurgitated. All she knew was that Declan was dead, she may have been at the scene, he was carrying a strand of her hair and so was Hickey, whom she went out with once six years ago.

"Men," she sighed. "Fuckin' weirdoes. No wonder I haven't married one."

The underground garage was a little nerve-wracking at night, but she never felt nervous during the daytime. But there was that gnawing wrench in her gut. She'd been having it all day. Whatever she drank last night did not agree with her. Probably an ulcer mixed with nerves. She tried to talk herself out of it. What was to be nervous about? She had a piece on her. Something about underground garages just freaked her out. Even in shopping malls, she hated them. Dark, smelly, scary places. But it was better than dealing with the alternate side of the street parking on Johnson Avenue, and at least she was anonymous in this building. Nobody knew who she was or what she did and that was the way she liked it. Just before reaching the elevator, she turned sideways to walk between two parked cars, a black Audi wagon and a silver BMW SUV, when she thought she heard footsteps. Then she felt hot breath on her neck. She whirled around and came face to face with a white Bichon Frise, scratching at the barely cracked window of the BMW passenger seat. Drawing her pistol, she nearly shot it dead through the glass and probably would've if it weren't for the

fact that the marinara sauce from her take-out bag was now dripping onto the hood of the car. The lid remained in place, however, though the bag was totaled. She looked around and decided to leave it right there on the hood. Wiping the excess sauce from the side of the take-out tin, she dropped the napkins in a garbage can and rang for the elevator. Fucking dog. *What idiot leaves a dog locked in a car? Probably a man. Weirdoes. Both of them. Men and dogs.* She was glad she didn't share her apartment with either species. Maybe someday she'd get a pet. When she retired. But not a dog. Nothing that you needed to walk or scratch. An aloof cat might be fun. But then it would be hard to travel. Forget the pet. Couldn't you just rent those now when you need an instant companion? She boarded the elevator and pressed twelve.

She put her lunch in the fridge, hoping she'd be able to hold it down later that evening, kicked off her sneakers, dropped her coat, and unbuttoned her pants. She was getting a little paunchy. Rubbing her gut, she called out to Mother Time, "Play nice, you old bitch."

The site of the tangled bed sheets reminded her of Danny Boy. That was fun. At least, she assumed it was fun. She couldn't quite remember the details. He certainly was gorgeous. And strong. What did he do for a living again? She pictured him as a mechanic, working under a car on a lift, in a white tank top, his sweat mixing with the grease, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. *Yeah, that's it. I had sex with James Dean or The Fonz last night.*

Taking a long look down the Hudson toward the George Washington Bridge and New York City beckoning beyond it in the distance, she thought of how lucky she was to live in an apartment like this. Sure, the dishwasher never worked and it needed a paint job, the hot water always ran out between eight and eight-thirty in the morning, but the views were staggering: the GW Bridge and Manhattan skyline to the south and to the north and west, the Palisades. She'd leave the blinds open, lay on her back, and look out at the window right before she was about to climax and feel like a movie star, on top of the world. But now she closed them shut, grabbed a wastebasket, dragged it to the bedside just in case, and crawled back under the covers. She was exhausted.

She awoke at 4:15 a.m. with cottonmouth, reached for a Vitamin Water that wasn't there, and ambled into the kitchen. The cof-

fee hadn't been made, as usual, so she opened the fridge, drank a Vitamin Water, and made a batch. Her stomach still felt queasy but she remembered the chicken parm from Romero's. She placed it in the microwave and hopped in the shower. By the time she got out, she didn't feel like coffee or chicken. *What the hell was I thinking? Chicken at four-thirty in the morning?* She peeled off a hunk of still soft Romero's bread, grabbed the Vitamin Water, her phone, and keys, and left.

Durkin had left another message, wanting to know if she had anything yet and asked her to call back, but she needed some time to wake up. *I should really stop drinking*, she thought, clutching her stomach with her right hand and steering with her left. She drove down McLean Avenue and saw the last of the stragglers leaving Paddy Doyle's, a few of them legless. A taxi rolled to a stop before her and called out to the staggering trio. Two of them accepted the offer. The third one waved them off and zigzagged in the direction of The Comfy Corner. She turned onto Kimball and headed toward Katonah Avenue. Malarkey's was dark, as was Beckett's, MacGuffin's, and Hooligans, but there was a light on in The Pot O'Gold. She pulled over and reached for her binoculars. Through the window on the door, she could see a lone overhead light in the middle of the bar, shining down on amber liquid in a half-full rock glass. Or was it half-empty? There was no place for optimism at this hour on a weekday morning. As far as she could tell, no one was in the place. Maybe it was a tribute to Declan, leaving the light on above his favorite drink, blackberry brandy.

She banged a U-turn and headed back up toward McLean Avenue, when she noticed a familiar gait on the sidewalk. It was Slats, overdressed in a sweatshirt jacket and jeans, with a large set of orange earphones clamped onto his head, the kind worn by road crews operating jackhammers. She wondered if he even listened to music or just wore them to drown out the insults that mean kids had been hurling at him for most of his life. *Kids are cruel*, she thought. *I was cruel*. She remembered being in elementary school and how she and her clique made fun of the nerds and the girls who didn't shower every day. *God, we were mean. Good thing we grow out of that. Or at least some of us do*. Otherwise, she wouldn't be patrolling Katonah Avenue at five in the morning, looking for clues to help solve a murder.

When she saw Slats cut down the alleyway between the hardware store and MacGuffin's, she pulled over to the curb. She cut the engine, checked for her piece, turned her phone to vibrate, and exited the car. Her sneakers squeaked on the wet concrete sidewalk, but Slats was wearing those headphones. He wouldn't have heard a jumbo jet, never mind her Nikes. She peered around the brick wall down the alley. Empty. She quietly strode down to the end of the alley and stopped when she heard a familiar sucking sound. Then moaning. Just beyond the hardware store, up against the wall of the dentist's office, someone was getting a blowjob. Maybe that's why Slats wore the headphones.

She was going to call out "Get a room," but if they were that desperate, drunk, or passionate, it wouldn't matter. *Been there, done that*, she thought. Just the other night, as a matter of fact. With Danny Boy. That would explain her hair fibers on the alley wall near the Dumpster, but she didn't want to tell Hickey that. The stench of the Dumpster suddenly filled her nose, jarring her memory. The rank smell of the Dumpster was the reason they left the alleyway and went back to her apartment. Shit, she wondered, was Declan already dead in the alley while she and Danny Boy dry humped in the darkness beside him? She recalled coming out of the restroom and finding no one left in the bar except for...Conor. He was the one who told her Danny Boy went outside for a smoke and she went to look for him.

The quickening moans brought her back to the moment and she tiptoed past whoever was in the throes of drunken ecstasy, confident that her rustling wouldn't discourage them.

She heard a succession of knocks. Five quick raps. Then there was a five-second pause and five more knocks. Her watch beeped. Five o'clock. The backdoor of MacGuffin's opened, throwing a sliver of light across the concrete patio. The sucking stopped. Slats entered the saloon and the door closed again. The sucking and moaning started up again. So this was the Five O'Clock Club.

Chapter 17

There were no windows on this side of the saloon so she went back out onto Katonah Avenue and passed the front door to MacGuffin's, careful to duck beneath the windows, then cut down the narrow alley between the saloon and Iggy's barber shop. Turning sideways to fit between the fence and the wall, she sidestepped until she came to the basement window. She knelt down and cupped her eyes with her hands, cursing herself for not bringing the binoculars. Slats waltzed by, the earphones still wedged onto his head, rolling a plastic garbage can full of empty beer bottles. She watched him stack the bottles into cardboard cases and place them on a hand truck. There was a walk-in freezer behind him, and a door to another room, slightly ajar. Cigarette smoke wafted out into the hall. She could see a pair of legs in jeans, and another in black slacks, seated around a table. Her guess was a card game was in progress but she couldn't be sure. She shimmied farther down the alley, toward a second window that might supply a better view, knelt down, and peered in.

The unmistakable, pungent aroma of marijuana struck her nostrils like a swift jab. Sweet stuff, not the harsh, throat-scratching, expectorant that she sampled back in high school. The door to the room leading into the rest of the cellar was closed. In the corner, she noticed a head bobbing. She pressed her face against the glass and saw the white shock of hair and the thick, square black eye-glass frames of Father McLanahan. His eyes were shut as he leaned back against the wall and thrust his pelvis forward. His hands were clasped around long locks of brown hair bobbing before him. Ryan couldn't make out if it belonged to a man or a

woman. A rush of sickness overwhelmed her. She backed out of the alley and vomited on the sidewalk.

She heard the wheels of a car rolling to a stop and picked her head up. Great. The cops. Keegan was behind the wheel, with Alvarez riding shotgun.

“You okay, Ryan?” Keegan asked.

She nodded and waved him off.

“You need a lift?”

She shook her head no and motioned for him to keep going.

“You’re not driving, are you?”

Why couldn’t some guys take a hint? And Durkin was worried he’d read about Alvarez in the paper? She had an inkling that Keegan would wind up dead, the victim of an inside job. Someone on the force wouldn’t be able to tolerate his stupidity anymore and would just end him, citing impatience.

“I’m on the job!” Ryan said.

Keegan laughed. “Whaddya, undercover as a drunken bimbo?”

Alvarez shook his head, embarrassed for both of them.

“You are retarded, Keegan,” she said.

Even Alvarez didn’t object.

“Isn’t there a Dunkin’ Donuts that needs monitoring?” Ryan asked.

“Durk wants us to patrol the pub crawl strip, be on the lookout for possible thefts, assaults, drunken bimbos...one for three with a walk will get you in the Hall of Fame.”

Alvarez didn’t get the baseball analogy but Ryan did. Her father would tell her brothers on the baseball field that the difference between hitting .333 and .250 was going one for three with a walk instead of one for four. Moral of the story? Don’t swing at bad pitches. Be patient and make the pitcher throw you a strike, something you can hit hard, the way she wanted to hit Keegan’s smiling, pock-marked face and Dippity-Do gelled head at that moment.

He fancied himself a Ray Liotta-type tough guy. There was enough of his ilk on the job to fill a Scorsese movie, *Wannabes*.

Keegan’s expression suddenly changed as he looked beyond Ryan, towards the alley.

“Friends of yours, Ryan?”

She whirled and saw a young man and a woman walking past the hardware store. Must’ve been the couple down the alley.

"No," Ryan said. "Young lovers in need of a room, that's all."

Slats followed closely after them, dragging garbage cans to the curbside for collection—the sight, sound, and smell of which probably chased off the late night lovebirds.

"The retard works at MacGuffin's, too?" Keegan said.

"Don't call him that," Alvarez demanded.

Ryan envied Tommy's headphones at that moment and imagined that Alvarez would be willing to pay a hefty sum for them, too. Poor guy. What did he do to deserve nights with Keegan?

After making sure the lids were secure and impenetrable to raccoons, Slats looked in their direction.

"You following me?" he shouted.

"No, we're not following you, Tommy," Ryan said.

"What?"

Ryan motioned for him to take off his headphones. He obliged, reaching down to his belt and pressing a button on his Walkman. *My God, a Walkman.* She'd assumed it was an iPod or an MP3 player. She hadn't seen a Walkman in years. Her father had given her one for Christmas when she was in seventh grade, when she still bought cassettes. Van Halen and Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen and Sting and Brian Adams. Did any of those tapes exist anymore? Several had melted on the dashboard of her brother's Gran Torino on a spur of the moment trip to Long Beach one hot summer day in high school. Others came undone, could no longer be rewound with a pencil, and had to be trashed. She wondered whatever happened to her Walkman.

"What?" Slats repeated.

"We're not following you," Ryan said. "We're working. Just like you."

He stood silently for a couple seconds, couldn't think of a comeback, put his headphones back on, and retreated down the alley.

"Regular hotspot of activity that alley, huh?" Keegan said.

"You don't know the half of it," Ryan said.

"Oh no? What else going on down there?"

"I can't even say it."

"That bad?"

"Something illegal?" Alvarez said.

"Depends on your religion, I guess," Ryan said.

"What? They sacrificing lambs or something?" Keegan said.

“Something like that,” Ryan said.

Nausea was overcoming her again.

“I’d love to chat, but I gotta run,” she said, bolting for her Jeep without waiting for a reply.

Chapter 18

Private name and number came up on her cell phone. That would be Durkin.

“What’s up, Durk?”

“You are, apparently. Keegan tells me you’ve had another rough night.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“I think you might need some help, iRye. Maybe you should go up the river for a couple weeks and dry out.”

“Thanks for the offer, Durk, but I really don’t think that’s necessary right now.”

“It would be strictly confidential. You’d receive full pay and benefits. It’s covered, you know.”

“I appreciate the coverage and I’ll be sure to contribute to the PBA this Christmas but that’s not going to happen.”

“You sound sober.”

“I am.”

“So, is Keegan lying?”

“Durk, have you ever seen me puke from drinking too much?”

“No.”

“And I assure you, neither has Keegan. I either got some rotten bread at Romero’s, some bad Irish narcotics, or the sight of Father McLanahan getting a pre-dawn hummer is enough to make me vomit.”

“I lost you after the bread.”

“You heard me.”

“You went to Romero’s and didn’t invite me? You know that’s my favorite restaurant.”

“You can’t even think about it because it’ll make you sick, too. How many times have you received communion from those hands?”

“What’s an Irish narcotic? Jameson and Guinness? Isn’t that called a car bomb or something?”

“Solpadeine. It’s like the Irish version of OxyContin. Friend to hunchbacks, hangovers, and housewives.”

“Got it.”

“You got McLanahan, too, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Maybe *I* should go away for a few weeks.”

Ryan saw Slats making his way down the street, off to his next job, The Pot O’Gold.

“Shit,” Ryan said.

“What?”

“I can’t talk. Slats is coming.”

She thumbed off her phone and ducked down under the dashboard. Counting silently to herself, she got to sixty seconds and rose up. She looked out the passenger window. No sight of him. Whirling around, she screamed when she came face to face with him, his big head blocking the driver’s side window. His scraggily beard was in desperate need of a trim, his chipped teeth in need of a cleaning and his breath in need of Listerine. His beady eyes looked larger through his bottle-thick glasses.

“Tommy! You scared me!”

“Don’t follow me!” he yelled, banging on the glass.

“I’m not following you!”

“I’m innocent!” he yelled.

“I know you are. I’m just doing my job.”

He banged on the glass again. “Leave me alone!”

“Tommy, who are those men down there?”

He banged on her window with both fists. “Go away!”

“Is that the Five O’Clock Club?”

He kept punching her window.

“Tommy, stop it. You’re going to hurt yourself. Just tell me what those men are doing down there. I saw them, you know.”

He kept punching without answering. She couldn’t help but think—and knew it was mean—*Hulkhead mad*.

“Tommy, can you hear me? *Tommy can you hear me!*” she pleaded like Pete Townsend, her voice cracking. “Take off those headphones. Tell me what’s going on.”

He just banged away. Ryan was actually relieved when Keegan and Alvarez rolled to a stop across from her. Keegan got out of the car and strode purposely, tapping Slats on the shoulder. Slats spun around and swung at him but Keegan ducked down, grabbed him by the waist, and pushed him up against Ryan's Jeep.

"Assaulting a police officer, retard?" Keegan said. "Now you're going to jail."

Alvarez reluctantly got out of the car to help him contain Slats. Keegan slapped the cuffs on Slats and shot a fierce look of determination through the window at Ryan. He wanted a "thank you" but Ryan couldn't bear to give it to him. Slats still didn't deserve to go to jail but at least this would effectively put an end to Keegan's night. By the time he was done fingerprinting and filling out paper work, it'd be time to punch out. With Slats in the backseat, Keegan looked at Ryan one last time before gunning the engine and speeding off to the precinct. She breathed a sigh of relief, knowing Keegan would be off the streets for a few hours, and then called Durkin.

"They're bringing him back," she said.

"Who?"

"Keegan's got Slats in cuffs for attempting to assault a police officer."

"Did he?"

"Technically, yeah, I guess. But he didn't know it was a cop."

"Why do I work nights?"

"I don't know. I nearly assaulted Keegan myself and I know he's a cop."

"Believe me, I restrain myself almost every day. Should I give him a commendation?"

"Who? Keegan or Slats?"

"Maybe Keegan will break a fingernail or stub a toe and have to go out on disability for a month."

A white van made its way down Katonah Avenue and came to a stop outside MacGuffin's. Two men emerged from the shadows of the alleyway, each of them carrying a pillowcase, opened the back door of the van, and got in, closing the doors behind them. Then the van sped off up Katonah Avenue.

"That was interesting," Ryan said.

"What?"

“Two guys with pillowcases just left MacGuffin’s and entered the back door of a van that pulled up.”

“Slumber party somewhere?”

“Not likely.”

“Any writing on the van?”

“Negative.”

“You want to follow it?”

At that moment another figure emerged from the shadows and started walking north on Katonah Avenue, toward Yonkers. She recognized the unmistakable shock of white hair.

“I can’t. I’ve got to go to church.”



Durkin stared at the phone receiver for a couple seconds, wondering if he heard her correctly before radioing in to Keegan. “I need you guys to go back to Katonah Avenue and look for a white van.”

Keegan rolled his eyes then picked up the radio.

“Can’t right now, Durk. We’ve got a perp in custody and we’re bringing him in.”

“Put Alvarez on the horn.”

Alvarez picked up the radio. “Yes, Durk?”

“Spin the car around and find me a white van in the vicinity of Katonah and McLean, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Keegan grabbed the radio. “Durk, with all due respect, I don’t mean to question your authority or anything, but this perpetrator attempted to assault a police officer. I *am* bringing him in.”

“Keegan, drop the perp where you found him and find me the white van. Now.”

Durkin didn’t wait for a response. He dropped the receiver and got up to make a crappy cup of coffee. DeValia—the short, rotund black woman who favored curly-tressed wigs, long purple fingernails, and five-inch spiked heels—was dumping sugar cubes into her Styrofoam cup, making whistling and exploding noises as each one hit the liquid, sending droplets splashing onto the counter. When she wasn’t fixing shitty coffee, she processed the complaints in the precinct.

“Why do we work nights?” Durkin asked her.

“Because it’s better than working days at Midtown South,” DeValia said.

“That’s true,” Durkin said. He put in seven years at Midtown South, a non-stop carnival freak show on the west side of Manhattan. From ticket scalpers at the Garden to habitual flashers to raving lunatics to belligerent homeless men to domestic disputes to murder, rape, arson, child abuse and abductions, Midtown South had it all. Everything to make you lose faith in humanity and make you glad that you carried a gun. Dealing with Keegan on a daily basis was nothing compared to the Jesus freak who regularly stopped into Midtown South with clocks and fake dynamite strapped to his robe, threatening to bring them all down. Durkin put in for a transfer right after 9/11, when he became fearful that the next threat would be real. DeValia followed right behind him. Compared to Midtown South, the gig at the 4-7 was like supervising a daycare center, except that along with the domestic disputes and petit larceny there were occasional rapes and murders. There was no perfect precinct to retire in, it was still, after all, The Bronx, the poorest borough of New York City, but the 4-7’s coverage of Woodlawn, Wakefield, Williamsbridge, Baychester, Edenwald, Olinville, and Fishbay was about as cozy as it got for the NYPD.

Chapter 19

Ryan was surprised to find the church doors open so early. The first Mass wouldn't start for another twenty-five minutes but there were already several blue-haired ladies kneeling and trembling over their rosary beads. They fingered the chains with bony hands covered in liver spots while their mouths moved without making any sound, their heads shaking involuntarily. Despite the low hum of the organ playing "Here I Am Lord," Ryan heard Roger Daltry's voice singing "Hope I die before I get old."

A few men strolled in, all of them dressed impeccably. The type of guys who used to put on a suit and fedora to attend a Yankees game. *Funny how some traditions change.* She remembered watching clips of old Yankees games during rainouts, when the men in the stands—and it was mostly men back then—were decked out in suits and hats covering hair slicked back with Brylcreem. They'd smoke cigarettes and yell through rolled up newspapers at Maris, Mantle, DiMaggio, and Yogi. When she attended a game as a kid with her older brothers in the eighties, guys in cut-off blue jeans shorts sat in front of them, removed their shirts, drank draft Budweiser from waxy paper cups with plastic cling wrap lids, and passed joints to one another. Some groups were probably nostalgic for both days, but not her. She wasn't nostalgic for the church, either.

St. Sebastian's had recently been given a six-million dollar spit shine, according to the weekly bulletin left on the seat next to her. A new coat of paint had been applied, the bricks were pointed, and a new, twelve-passenger, handicapped-accessible elevator had

been installed at sidewalk level to accommodate the increasingly elderly population who could no longer climb the ten steps into the chapel. New carpets had been laid, tabernacles purchased, statues commissioned, gold-plated ceiling trim installed. The roof had been torn off down to the studs, with a new, slate shingle replica of the original replacing it. Incredibly realistic and bloody hand sculpted and painted renditions of the Stations of the Cross—inspired, perhaps, by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*?—had been mounted along the walls between the refurbished stained glass windows that were sure to scare the bejesus out of any toddlers along for the show with their parents. The early morning sun bouncing through the stained glass windows gave the painted red blood a bluish tint on station number nine, Jesus falls for the third time, under which Ryan sat. There was enough to look at in the facility to take your attention away from what was being spoken in it but the benches were still hard and uncomfortable. There was more leg room and softer cushioning on the kneelers but, still, not a seat one would want to have when subjected to one of McLanahan's patented twenty-minute sermons where he would reiterate that if we didn't step up our games, we were all going to hell.

A lone altar boy emerged from the sacristy in a cassock and surplus and lit the candles. They always used to serve mass in pairs. Her two brothers, Patrick and Brendan, were an altar boy tag team. They only did it to serve an occasional wedding and receive a tip and if they got the nod to serve a funeral during the week, they missed an hour of school. It was better than sitting out in the congregation they told her. If girls had been allowed to serve back in her day, she imagined she'd rather be up there on the comfortable chairs than sitting in the hard pews, too, and she'd probably take sips from the cruets of wine, just like her brothers did. They even managed to smuggle a bottle of wine out of the sacristy before the eighth grade dance but were caught red-handed and purple-lipped in the bathroom by Father McLanahan, who promised them they would be going to hell. For most fourteen year-olds, it was the type of promise that would serve as an impetus to turn their lives around but her brothers interpreted it as *carte blanche* to do whatever they wanted for the rest of their teenaged years and beyond without worrying about the consequences, since they were destined to go to hell anyway, or so they told their mother every

time they got in trouble. Ryan sided with them. If you were going to blame the church, why not go big?

She hadn't been in St. Sebastian's church since her mother's funeral. It was the last time she had seen Father McLanahan before this morning, too. Something about him turned her off. She was never fully convinced that he was genuine. He reminded her of the stories her father had told her—which he heard from his father—about priests in Ireland, men who opted for a lifetime of free food and clothing and a guaranteed roof over their heads rather than relentless hours in the field trying to bring in a profit from a turnip crop. “No priests ever starved during the famine,” her father always used to say, and he'd point out that every priest who ever served the parish looked as if he'd never missed a meal, either. Her mother was more of a holy roller, but she had doubts about her faith, too. She always put her envelopes in the collection basket every Sunday, “just in case,” as she used to say. It was the same approach she took to praying before bedtime and meals. Did it help? Couldn't hurt.

About two-dozen people, all but one of them over seventy, had shuffled in by 6:30, when Father McLanahan promptly appeared from the sacristy and stood behind the altar. He didn't bother marching up from the center aisle for the early mass, just motioned with his arms for the congregation to rise, which was no easy task for most of them. Speeding through the first two readings, a letter from Paul to the Corinthians and something else Ryan couldn't hear, he kept his head down, forgoing eye contact with the congregation. Ryan cased them instead. Were any of them paying attention? Or were they all there just for show—just in case, like her mother? They were nodding and speaking to themselves and patting their breasts with hands wrapped around rosary beads, the same as they did before the mass started. Their movements seemed involuntary, the result of aging or muscle memory, rituals having been drilled into them through repetition over the years. Father McLanahan seemed to be taking advantage of them, going through the motions, knowing that they couldn't really hear him anyway. Maybe they expected nothing more, but he certainly wasn't doing anything to shed light on the meaning of the scriptures. He didn't offer a homily, either. Too early for that, too, she supposed. He raced through the consecration of the gifts, jogged down to the first few pews to hand deliver Communion, and wait-

ed impatiently as the last of the patrons approached him for a wafer. When he threw his head back for the final prayer, it was the same look he had when she saw him just an hour earlier with his back to the wall in the basement of MacGuffin's.

"The mass is ended, let us go in peace," Father McLanahan said, before nodding to his altar boy and then half-sprinting down the aisle after him. Either he was showing off how spry he was for a man of his age, or he was in a hurry to get somewhere else. He didn't even bother to greet the parishioners as they filed out of the church, just made a beeline for the side aisle that would take him back into the sacristy.

"Excuse me?" Ryan called out to him.

He ignored her call. She slid across the pew into the aisle and started after him.

"Father! Father McLanahan!"

He spun toward her with a look of bewilderment. Did he know her?

"Father McLanahan...hi, it's Eileen Ryan."

"Eileen Ryan..." he said. "Eileen Ryan..."

He couldn't recall seeing her name on any church envelopes. This was a tithing parish, after all. It said so right on the front of the weekly bulletin.

"I had some older brothers who were altar boys. My mother was Dorothy Ryan...you said her funeral?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. Now I remember. Pardon me, but there are a lot of Ryans in the parish."

"Totally understandable." She cleared her throat. "I was wondering if you had a minute to chat?"

He looked her over. Not many women under fifty attended the early masses on a weekday. In fact, she would be the only one in the past fifteen years that he could remember, other than some Dominican home health care aides who took care of elderly members of the parish.

"Is it a confession you'd like to make?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to make one."

Chapter 20

The bloody nerve of you, to come into the Lord's house and talk to me like that," Father McLanahan said, as they walked toward Vireo Avenue.

He had agreed to give her a few minutes of his time, as he needed to administer communion to a sick, elderly parishioner who was at death's door. Trading in his vestments for civilian clothes, a beige windbreaker over a crisp Bill Blass white dress shirt, khakis, and topsiders, with a Yankees baseball cap covering his shock of white hair, he was not a man easily mistaken for a priest. And with that salty tongue, he sounded more like the clientele at Yonkers Raceway or could even pass for a major league baseball manager.

"I was taught that we're all sinners," Ryan said.

"Indeed we are," Father McLanahan said. "But there's a time and a place for everything. A church is a place of worship and prayer."

"I seem to recall Jesus getting mad on occasion, even flipping over tables at the Temple," Ryan said.

"Did you want to discuss scripture, Ms. Ryan?"

"No. I'd like to discuss the Five O'Clock Club."

He stopped and looked into her eyes. "What's the Five O'Clock Club?" he asked earnestly.

"You tell me."

"I haven't a clue."

"What goes on in the pubs after hours? Drinking, drugs, sex, gambling, what else?"

"You're asking me what goes on in the pubs? I'm afraid you've got the wrong man."

"Do I?"

He picked up his pace again and began walking briskly down Vireo Avenue.

"May I remind you that I'm a detective and that—"

"Am I under investigation, Ms. Ryan?"

"You might be. How well did you know Declan McManus?"

"Isn't he the young lad who was killed the other morning?"

"That's him."

"I didn't know him at all."

"I don't believe you."

"He may have come to church once in a while but we get a lot of people at church. I wouldn't recognize them all." He turned and glared at her. "How well did *you* know Declan McManus?"

"Not well enough. But I don't know why anyone would want to kill him."

Ryan was seething inside as she answered his question. It sounded as if he were insinuating something. She didn't like when the person she was interrogating had the upper hand, information she lacked.

"Oh no?" Father McLanahan said, almost mockingly.

"No? Why? Do you?"

"If you'd excuse me, Ms. Ryan," he said, turning up the stairs of an apartment building, "I need to administer to my flock. I don't have time for meddling in police investigations."

"But you have time for blowjobs in the basement of MacGuffin's before the early mass?"

His face turned red faster than an Irishman at the beach. "May God forgive you," he said. "And cleanse your filthy mouth."

"It's not my mouth you need to worry about, Father."

Chapter 21

The smell of Arturi's Bakery on McLean Avenue brought back pleasant memories of her childhood, buying homemade lemon and cherry Italian ices in a paper cup for a quarter. Now they offered almost a dozen flavors, everything from chocolate to watermelon to cream to pina colada and raspberry.

This place was heaven to a little kid. And dangerous to an adult woman. Just by looking at the cheesecakes through the glass cases she felt like she put on ten pounds.

"Any leads, Detective?" she heard a woman with a brogue say.

She turned to see Sheila, The Comfy Corner waitress, in line behind her.

"Oh, hi," Ryan said. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice you."

"You seemed a bit entranced by those cakes. I don't blame you."

"You on the way to work?"

"Took the day off. But when you're used to waking at three in the morning it's tough to sleep in."

"Yeah, I can imagine. I'd need a few pills or something."

"Oh, I know. But then you need the pills to go to sleep every night."

"That's true. It's a vicious cycle."

"Yeah. Don't want to be a hamster on *that* wheel." Sheila ordered coffee and a crumb bun to go and Ryan followed her out with a cinnamon roll and coffee. "So, do you have any leads?" she repeated.

"Hunches, but no solid leads."

"Did you find out any more about the Five O'Clock Club?"

"Seems to be an after-hours club of some sort. Drinking, gambling, sex."

"Yeah. That's what I figured."

"Detective's instinct?" Ryan asked.

"Waitress instinct. Some of them come in for breakfast. The usual crowd comes in right after the pubs close, four or four-thirty, but then later on, seven, seven-thirty, we get a few more. A lot of the bartenders. Some of the women they pick up."

Ryan had an a-ha moment. Now it made sense. The guys who served the drinks all night and maybe snuck a few along the way unwound after their shift. They got together at one of the pubs for some more drinks and a card game, plied some women with sweet talk or nose candy and, voila, the Five O'Clock Club. But what was Father McLanahan doing there? And would one of these debauched card games result in Declan's death? She thought back to her night with Declan. Didn't they close the bar and have a few nightcaps? Weren't there a few other people in the bar, too? Was there a card game going on? She gulped some coffee. *Holy shit, was I an unknowing, if not an entirely unwilling, participant of this club?*

"Do you know Father McLanahan?" Ryan asked.

"The pastor? I do, yeah."

"Ever see him around? Outside of church? In the pubs or anything?"

"He used to stop into the diner for the occasional cup of coffee but it would turn into work for him. All the old timers would bend his ear. 'Tis a big parish. With lots of elderly. And they're forever seeking out a priest for last rites and house calls, administering to the sick and such."

Ryan sipped more coffee. She had a very different image of him.

"Why?" Sheila asked. "You don't think he's a suspect, do you?"

"I was just curious about him. He's a peculiar man, isn't he?"

"I don't know much about him," Sheila said, ripping the plastic tab off her coffee cup. "But we're all a bit peculiar, aren't we?"

Ryan laughed. "Yeah, you probably think I'm nuts, the little you know about me."

"Not at all. Just trying your best to get by, like the rest of us."

Ryan felt an immediate connection with Sheila. It usually wasn't like this with her girlfriends. Most of them were like Karen, friends from early childhood and elementary school. They bonded through puberty and periods and high school and boyfriends and *General Hospital* and Duran Duran and Rick Springfield. Most of those friends had gotten married and moved away to the suburbs to raise kids so she didn't hang around many single women her age anymore, and she worked with mostly men so she found herself checking out other women's fashion and style and haircuts and mannerisms, trying to figure out who they were and if she should be more like them. With Sheila, what you saw was what you got. She was confident, honest, attractive, and comfortable in her own skin, not trying to fit it with the others and always on guard, afraid of being politically incorrect. Ryan felt as if she had slid into a booth for a cup of coffee and made a friend. She was always envious of those guys, complete strangers, who could walk onto a basketball court, start a pick-up game, compete against one another, and then go off and have a beer together and watch a ballgame. That just didn't happen with women. Maybe that was why she paired off so easily with guys instead...*shit, this is a lot of analyzing for so early in the morning*. She wondered if Sheila felt the same way.

"You want to sit in the park or something?" she asked.

"All right, yeah," Sheila said in a cheery lilt.

As they walked down McLean Avenue toward the benches at Stillwell Park, Ryan felt her stomach flutter. Not the nausea she had been experiencing but the excitement of a budding relationship, like she had just been asked to the senior prom by Emmitt Dooley, the power forward with the amazing pecs who never noticed her in high school. Probably gay, as Karen would say. *But I've never felt this way with a girlfriend before*, Ryan thought. *Could I be...nah*. Bedding another woman was on her sex bucket list, maybe even as part of a threesome. Also on the list was a black man, but the conversation at Devalia's bachelorette party scared her: "Let me tell you something, sisters, size does matter—but it hurts."

Ryan was also afraid that there was a smidgeon of truth in the old adage that once you tried black, you never go back and she wanted to keep her options open. And she wasn't sure if her father would ever approve, and the guy had already had a stroke, so...

Stillwell Park had also gotten quite a facelift. When she was a kid, there were two swings on one end and a metal slide with rusted steps and peeling paint that baked in the sun on the other. She used to climb those steps with her mother watching nervously, yelling at her to hold on and demanding that she not fall. There were no fond memories of playgrounds from her childhood, only in adolescence, when the teenagers took over the parks after sunset, with boomboxes and cases of beer. They'd pool their money and walk to bodegas on White Plains Road where they wouldn't get carded and buy cases of Schaefer and Budweiser and Stroh's, which they'd guzzle before they got warm rather than kick in another two dollars each for bags of ice and a Styrofoam cooler. And it wasn't because they were environmentally conscious, as evidenced by the shards of glass they left in their wake after a night of boozing on the baseball fields and basketball courts that made sliding a risk and every groundball an adventure. They'd sing along to whatever was on K-Rock and WNEW-FM, which was usually a steady diet of Zeppelin, Stones, Beatles, and Who. Teenage Wasteland indeed.

The parks were now devoid of broken beer bottles and the plastic jungle gyms looked much more enticing and suitable for tumbling on, but still, she couldn't imagine herself sitting on these benches watching her toddler teetering on the monkey bars and making small talk about nap times and rashes and gluten-free crackers with other women she hardly knew. It was enough to try to sleep and eat right herself. She wondered how women did it, the raising of kids and entering into surface relationships with other women just because they shared the violent experience of childbirth and spent a good portion of their days wiping shit off everything.

"Will Tommy be okay now that you've called in sick?" Ryan asked.

"Tommy's well taken care of at the diner, so he is, the poor guy. My heart goes out to him. Can't be an easy life."

"Yeah. Sometimes I used to think it would be easier. To be unaware of what's going on around you, but then you realize he knows exactly what's going on."

"Oh, he does. His mother did a fine job raising him. He works hard and he's pleasant enough to be around, as long as no one instigates him."

“Yeah.”

Almost as if she were reading her mind, Sheila said, “You don’t think it would be possible for someone to convince him to kill Declan, do you?”

Ryan shook her head. “I don’t think so. Unless it was someone who had a lot of control or power over him.”

“Like a boss?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he has lots of bosses. He works in all the pubs.”

“Yeah, or maybe a priest.”

Sheila looked into Ryan’s eyes. “Father McLanahan?”

“I don’t know. I’m just reaching for straws here.”

“As far as I know, Tommy’s not very religious.”

“It just doesn’t make any sense. Unless Declan was involved in drugs, or he owed someone a lot of money, or he had some scorned lover—”

“Knowing Declan, probably all three.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I mean, you’re the detective. Why do these things usually happen? Either a crime of passion, a fit of rage, or a calculated execution. I don’t think Tommy is capable of any of those things, but I know there are a few lads who are, once they’re fueled with the drink and riled up. I know a few women who are capable of murder, as well.”

“You’d make a good detective, Sheila.”

“Oh, please. I’m not even a good waitress. I can barely butter toast and pour coffee.”

“He was married, you know.”

“Declan?”

“Yeah.”

“Get out!”

“That’s what I heard on the news.”

“You can’t believe everything you hear on the news.”

“No, but that would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“More sense than Father McLanahan having Tommy murder him—unless you know something I don’t.”

Ryan picked at a piece of her cinnamon roll. “I probably shouldn’t tell you this—I shouldn’t tell anybody this—but, for some reason, I trust you, Sheila. And I have to tell someone. I’m

pretty sure I saw Father McLanahan this morning in the basement of a pub on Katonah Avenue getting a blowjob.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t sound so shocked.”

“Well, I know he’s a busy man, but I’d imagine he’d find time for recreation just like anyone else.”

“But he’s a priest.”

“I’d think a Bronx detective would be a little more jaded.”

“And I’d think an Irish waitress would be a little more surprised.”

“You mean naive?”

“Not naive, but—you are Catholic, right?”

“Haven’t been to church in twenty years except for funerals and weddings. Have you?”

“Other than this morning, no, not too often.”

“Have you been to Ireland lately?”

“Not in twenty-eight years.”

“You’d see a big change now. It’s not our parents’ Ireland.”

“It’s not our parents’ Woodlawn anymore, either.”

“Times change. Whether it’s progress or not, I don’t know. But you’d be hard pressed to find anyone my age in Ireland who thinks the sun shines out of a clergyman’s arse anymore.”

“Would anyone think they’d be capable of murder?”

“They’re people, just like us. And if people weren’t capable of murder, there’d be no Catholic Church at all, would there? There’d be no need for a police force, either, for that matter.”

Ryan sipped some more coffee. “What are you doing tonight Sheila?”

“I have a date.”

“Oh.”

“With Haagen-Dazs and the tele.”

Ryan laughed. “I thought you meant—”

“I know what you meant. I just broke off with my boyfriend. The eejit walked right by the window of The Comfy Corner with his arm around some blondie.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. No offense, the bottle suits you, but here I am just out of bed, slinging coffee and hash browns to some trucker, and there he goes off with some bleached blonde Barbie doll. ’Twas like needles in my eyes. I nearly ran after them with the pot of coffee

and dumped it on the two of them. Then I came to my senses.” She sighed. “So, I know how these things can happen. Had I a broken bottle in my hand and a few drinks in me, believe me, I was very capable of plunging it into the fucker’s neck, so I was.”

“You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think we need to get into the Five O’Clock Club.”

“What’s this ‘we’ shit?”

“It beats Haagen-Dazs and the tele.”

“Depends what’s on.”

“Are you up for it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun. I’ll call my friend Karen and the three of us will go out. We’ll have some drinks and some laughs and check out some guys and—”

“Solve a murder?”

“Maybe. What do you say?”

“I don’t know. I think *Law & Order* is on.”

“Isn’t that always on?”

“’Tis, but it’s over in an hour and sounds a lot less dangerous.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I don’t think so.”

This is what it must be like for guys who keep trying to score dates, Ryan thought. Only she never played it this hard to get unless she thought the guy was a complete asshole. *She must think I’m an asshole.*

“Give it a chance. You may like it.”

“Give me your number and I’ll ring you if I have a change of heart,” Sheila said, taking out her cell phone. “But don’t wait up for me. No offense, Detective, but I’m leaning toward the tele.”

Chapter 22

Ryan couldn't believe how excited she was. Not to solve the case but to go out with Sheila. She was fascinated by her looks—the high cheekbones, pale skin, full lips, and close cropped, black hair—the kind only a woman confident in her sexuality could get away with wearing without someone thinking she was a lesbian. Then there was her brogue, her sense of humor, her vocabulary. *'I'll ring you.'* Her mannerisms and frankness were a welcome relief, as was her total lack of self-consciousness. Ryan immediately called Karen to tell her about her new friend.

"Sounds like you're in love," Karen teased.

"I know. I think I am."

"I would be so jealous."

Ryan laughed. "You so would not. What do you say? You up for it?"

"If I take another day off, I'll get fired."

"So don't take off."

"I can't go out drinking all night and go to work anymore. Not that I ever could, but I just can't anymore. Not now. Heads are rolling. Opportunities are scarce for secretaries who take a lot of time off."

"Please, Karen?"

"No can do. I am officially on the wagon again. Go with your friend Sheila. I don't want to be the third wheel."

Ryan sighed. "Okay. I'll call you on Friday."

"Good luck, and remember to use protection."

Ryan didn't laugh. All of a sudden she had an extraordinary burst of energy. She had all day to get ready for this potential date

and didn't know what to do with herself. The apartment could use a cleaning. What if she brought Sheila home? OMG, she had nothing to wear. She'd have to stop off at the mall, maybe buy a new dress. Something casual. Would that seem weird? Too dressy? Maybe just a new top and some jeans.

Macy's was having a sale so she bought all three, along with some new bras and underwear from Victoria's Secret. Lacey, black, thong underwear and clear strapped bras. God, she was horny. When was the last time she had sex? Oh, right, Danny Boy. Just a couple nights ago. Too bad she was too drunk to remember most of it. *Did I even come?* Couldn't have. She was so wet she nearly masturbated in the dressing room mirror, the paunch be damned.

She threw her packages on the front seat and noticed the CD Danny Boy had dropped on it, now on the floor of the car. He had instructed her to drink some wine and think of him while she listened to it. She scoffed at the hand scrawled title of it: "The Man." She slid it into the CD player as she drove out of the parking lot, the familiar opening horns of "Real, Real Gone" blaring from her speakers. Ah, so the title meant Van "The Man" Morrison and wasn't a reference to himself, thank God. Probably should've told him she was fluent in the catalogue of the Belfast Cowboy, which occupied every jukebox in Woodlawn. Van was one of a handful of artists that both the locals and immigrants could agree on, along with Springsteen, The Beatles, The Stones, U2, and for a time, odd as it seems now, Garth Brooks. But it was Van more than anyone who provided the soundtrack to life in Woodlawn. Passing by any of the pubs at any given hour of the day, one would encounter his familiar growl or farting saxophone. She was thankful the CD didn't start with "Gloria" or "Brown-Eyed Girl," and not because her name was Eileen and she had blue eyes, but because those two songs had been played to death. Never hearing either of them ever again would be perfectly fine with her.

She pulled into a strip mall on Central Avenue, remembering that she really needed to clean the apartment. Loading up with gloves and detergents and mops and sponges at the supermarket, she then stopped at the liquor store. When she reached for the Private Selection bottle of Robert Mondavi Merlot, an easy, inexpensive fallback when overwhelmed with choices, she noticed a magnum of the same wine for nineteen dollars. Always in search of a

deal, she put back the 750 ml bottle for \$12.99 and bought the 1.75 liter magnum. Back home, she plopped The Man CD into the Bose system, popped the cork, squirted some Spic N Span over the kitchen tiles and set to work. The up tempo "Real, Real Gone" was a great house cleaning song, perfect for a commercial, she thought, as the grease and grime disappeared from her kitchen floor tiles while she vigorously scrubbed. She sang along to "Enlightenment," belting out its chorus of "Don't know what it is," but found her mind wandering through the next ninety minutes of ruminations on God and mystics and a "Queen of The Slipstream," whatever the hell that was. By the time the saxophone intro wailed on the last song and The Man inquired "Did Ye Get Healed?," she found herself answering aloud as she looked at the nearly empty magnum, "No, I got drunk."

The CD didn't have the effect that her conquest had desired. Not entirely, anyway. She was drunk and wouldn't mind a roll in the hay, but she was tired. Had he been in the room with her, great, but she certainly wasn't driving out to Brooklyn to fuck him and if she called and invited him over, she'd be asleep by the time he arrived. She could hop a taxi over to the Deuce and pick up a willing Manhattan College coed for an early afternoon quickie, but he'd hardly measure up to Danny Boy, and she'd hate herself for it afterward. She wrote him off as another hopeless and geographically undesirable romantic with a great body and good taste in music. *If I only had a nickel for every one of those*, she told herself unconvincingly and collapsed on the bed, still wearing her bright yellow dishwashing gloves.

Chapter 23

When her cell phone rang at 8:30, her heart skipped a beat. Shit. Four-hour power nap. *OMG, is it Sheila?* Ryan was never this nervous about taking a phone call from a guy. *What is going on?*

"Hello?" she answered, like an anxious schoolgirl in the days before the big dance.

"You got anything yet?" Durkin's gruff voice answered.

"Oh, it's you."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Durkin said. "Sorry to disappoint you. Did the day bring you any surprises or leads?"

Other than that she had feelings for an Irish waitress? "No," Ryan said. "Nothing. Other than McLanahan."

"Yeah, we touched on that already."

"Sickening, isn't it?"

"I'll probably go to hell for saying this, but I never really liked that guy," Durkin said. "He always seemed like a hypocrite to me."

"Bingo. Do as I say not as I do."

"Right."

"Do you still go to church, Durk?"

"You know, I do the big ones—Easter and Christmas, an occasional Palm Sunday. Unless there's a game on."

"Durk, I have brothers. I know they watch games on Christmas. Definitely football, sometimes basketball."

"Okay, you got me. I don't do much church anymore, and every Sunday's Palm Sunday for me."

"You still believe in hell?"

"I think there's gotta be something after this life, whatever it is...hell? I don't know...heaven? I hope so...but there better not be any purgatory, 'cause this right here is purgatory enough for me."

"You'll make it, Durk—to retirement, anyway. I don't know about heaven."

"Well, if I don't, I'll keep a seat warm for you."

"Isn't hell supposed to be hot?"

"Then I'll try to keep the beer cold."

"Are you insinuating that I won't make it into heaven?"

"No, just that I'll die before you."

"I don't know about that."

"Trust me. I will."

"This is getting a little morbid for me, Durk."

"Sorry, don't mean to ruin your night."

"You didn't. I'm going out with a hot Irish waitress."

"That doesn't sound right coming from you. For a second there I thought I was talking to Keegan."

"You don't call Keegan, do you?"

"Only when he's late for work. You don't date women now, do you?"

"I haven't made a habit of it but there's a first time for everything."

"Who I am to judge? Whatever floats your boat, kiddo." He fought down another gulp of awful coffee, sensing it burning a hole in his esophagus as he swallowed. "Did you know that Declan McManus was the first homicide in Woodlawn in twelve years?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. And I'd like to hope there isn't another. Not on my watch, anyway."

"What if it wasn't a homicide?"

"You think it was suicide?"

"Too much of a stretch?"

"From what I hear the guy had a pretty good life—"

"Or lives—"

"—looks, money, women—"

"—wife, kids, debt."

Durkin sighed. "Did I catch you at a bad time, Ryan?"

“No, it’s just, don’t you think that a guy like that would be depressed? He left a wife and kids, had a bunch of empty sexual relationships—”

“My heart’s breaking for the guy.”

“—was involved with drinking, drugs and gambling.”

“It’s not exactly Vegas.”

“Don’t you think he was searching for something?”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Sounds like he found it.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Maybe he *thought* he found it. Or maybe he didn’t. I didn’t know the guy. But regardless of how empty he felt his life was or wasn’t, I don’t think you end your shift, walk outside your office, and stab yourself in the throat with a beer bottle.”

“No.”

“That’s why you’re getting paid to find out what did happen.”

“That’s all you got for me, Durk?”

“I get paid to deal with Keegan.”

“Any advice for me?”

“Don’t fall in love with the waitress. I made that mistake once and I’m still paying for it.”

“If your wife ever heard what you say about her—”

“Make sure she doesn’t.”

“Where would I see your wife? I never go to the gym and you never take her out.”

“I’m taking her out tonight, as a matter of fact. It’s her birthday.”

“Oh, nice.”

“I’m thinking Romero’s.”

“That’s *your* favorite restaurant. Shouldn’t she choose on her birthday?”

“She doesn’t even know about it yet. It’s a surprise. I could take her to Applebee’s and she’d be happy.”

“Don’t.”

“So Romero’s it is, then.”

“Enjoy.”

“You, too. But you’re on your own tonight. No phone calls while I’m eating, okay?”

“I better not hear from you, either.”

“Deal.”

Chapter 24

Ryan rounded the corner of Hart Avenue and saw Sheila standing on the porch, smoking a cigarette, just like Ryan used to when she waited for dates to pick her up. She never let her boyfriends come into the house. None of them would pass muster with her father or brothers. Sometimes it felt like she had three fathers growing up. If her brothers saw her out at the Kent Cinema double feature, or in bars with guys they didn't like, they'd make it clear that they didn't approve with not so subtle gestures such as grabbing them by the shirt collar and telling them to "leave my fuckin' sister alone," and on one occasion, punching a guy in the face and explaining afterward that "my sister doesn't date douchebags."

She didn't realize until much later that they were right about that guy, Denny Dooley, a total dick if ever there was one. "Dool The Tool" became his nickname, though he did have the cutest dimples when he was seventeen, and he had invited her to *Goodfellas*, which she really wanted to see. Had she known her brothers would be sitting three rows behind her and ready to pounce like Joe Pesci when The Tool made his move, she would've chosen another theater.

Sheila saw Ryan's Jeep approaching and stubbed out her cigarette on the porch. She plopped into the passenger seat and said, "Would you believe they didn't have one feckin' pint of Haagen-Dazs at the deli."

"Just my luck," Ryan said.

"This better be good, Detective."

"It'll be fun, I promise," Ryan said, checking out her lip gloss in the rear view mirror and stealing a look over at Sheila's cleavage. The push-up bra was a miraculous invention. If she ever served eggs and coffee in that get-up, she'd be wiping more than crumbs off The Comfy Corner counter. "Where to?"

"You're the detective. You figure it out."

"Do you want to stay in Woodlawn?"

"I don't care. I'm only after a couple drinks and a few laughs. Wherever we can find them."

"Technically, I'm supposed to be working."

"Well, if you can squeeze in solving a murder or gathering a few clues, that'd be all right, too, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

Sheila lit another cigarette. "Do you mind?"

"No," Ryan lied.

She hated cigarette smoke. It nearly killed her father, who once had a two packs a day habit before having a massive coronary when she was getting ready to go to her high school graduation. Neither of them had smoked since.

"Did you know that there are thirty-two bars within walking distance of Woodlawn?" Ryan said, turning onto The Bronx River Parkway heading south.

"One for each county in Ireland," Sheila answered.

Ryan had never thought of that. The images of the ubiquitous bumper stickers that used to plaster the backs of well-worn work trucks and station wagons in the 1970s re-entered her memory: $26 + 6 = 1$. Now she knew what they meant. Twenty-six counties in the south of Ireland plus six in the north would equal one united Ireland. There were lots of IRA supporters in Woodlawn when she was growing up, and they made no effort to hide it. In fact, they were so proud of it, they even advertised it on their cars. There was another popular bumper sticker from that era, as well: *But Who Is Kitty O'Shea?* Maybe Sheila could shed light on that mystery before the night was over, too. Otherwise Kitty's identity would be left in the hands of Google and Wikipedia, two sources Ryan didn't totally trust.

"I doubt you could walk to all of them," Sheila said. "Not in the same night, anyway. Unless you were only drinking water."

"That's true."

“You’re not planning on attempting that tonight, are you? ’Cause you may have to find yourself a new partner.”

“No, I’m just curious how many of them are involved in this Five O’Clock Club.”

“I’d imagine most of them would be.”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t pretend like you’re some stranger to the after-hours crowd.”

“Oh, I’ve seen my share of after hours,” Ryan said. “Not that I’m proud of that.”

“No law is going to stop people from doing what they like.”

“That’s what keeps me in a job.”

“You’re lucky in that respect. You’re recession-proof.”

“That’s true. Police work is recession-proof.”

“But you’d have to be bulletproof, too.”

“Never been shot at yet, thank God.”

“So you do believe in God?”

“Well, someone’s watching over me. They say He loves a drunk, right?”

“That’s just the booze talking.”

Ryan got off at the East 233rd exit and drove along the Woodlawn Cemetery toward Van Cortlandt Park, stopping at a red light at the intersection of Kepler Avenue.

“Ever been in that place?” Ryan asked.

Sheila looked out the window at a dreary looking pub, The Dungeon. Through the window she could see the flicker of a television screen that resembled the patron sitting below it: old, gray and round.

“Too depressing,” Sheila said.

“Their motto hangs above the bar, ‘Come on in and have a seat, it’s better here than across the street.’”

Sheila looked across the street at the cemetery, then back at The Dungeon, as an elderly pot-bellied man with a red, bulbous nose dressed in a tweed cap and wool overcoat came stumbling out of it.

“Somehow I doubt it,” she said.

As the light changed, Ryan rolled on toward Herkimer Place and parked the car. “Ever been to The Red Herring?”

“No, I don’t usually come over this far. McLean Avenue is much closer to my house.”

"I know, but that's not my jurisdiction. That's Yonkers."

"What if you're work brings you there?"

"Then we're supposed to share in the investigation, possibly turn it over. Gets complicated."

"Well, let's keep things simple tonight. And safe."

"There's nothing to worry about."

"Easy for you to say. You're packing a gun."

"I have an extra one in my ankle holster if you want it."

She always carried her department issued Glock 19 in her waistband when she was on duty and her Smith & Wesson Lady-Smith 60LS Revolver in the ankle holster. Couldn't be too careful, and the LadySmith's smaller J-frame and shortened trigger to accommodate a woman's fingers made it a cinch to conceal, grab and fire in an emergency. Despite its lightweight twenty-one ounces, it had the power of a .357 magnum, capable of bringing down a brown bear at close range.

"Jaysus. I wouldn't know what to do with it," Sheila said.

"Just point and shoot. Like operating a camera. It's easy. And kind of fun."

"I try to make a habit of never pulling the pistol on a first date," Sheila said, lighting another cigarette and puffing quickly before entering the bar. "I'd like to be thought of as fun. But not necessarily easy."

Everyone's got habits, Ryan thought, some good, some bad.

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About the Author



Shaun Coen is an award-winning playwright, columnist, and feature writer. *The Pot O'Gold Murder* is his first novel.