

Irish Eyes by Marty Kay

Chapter 1

Michael pulled his thick tweed overcoat across his chest and turned the corner of Rising Sun Avenue onto Robbins Street. One block up, he turned into Argyle, where a tiny chapel of perpetual adoration nestled at the back of Saint William's Catholic Church. A cold north-easterly stung his face as he bowed his head to protect himself from the ravages of a Philadelphia winter and the drifting sheets of sleet that attempted to hamper his progress. On this bitter January night, the city of brotherly love offered little in the way of family affection.

He knew he could sit in this small sanctuary for a while, say a few prayers, reflect on his circumstances and prepare for another homeless night. In fact, he could sit here all night if he wished, but his deeply rooted faith and Irish upbringing, prevented him from coveting God's house as his own. It occurred to him though, that he would have a home of his own again some day, and God would be a welcome guest. This notion buttressed his flagging spirits as he pushed open the heavy stained-glass door and descended the stone steps into the chapel.

Inside, he smelt the familiar smell of polished floors, burnt incense and candle wax. He genuflected on both knees and found a pew where he propped himself against the wall and rested. His body shivered at the new-found warmth of the chapel and he closed his eyes to allow his mind to catch up to the sensation.

Taking out the rosary beads his mother placed in his suitcase eight years ago, the night before he left home, he said a decade of the rosary. Thinking about his family in Ireland, and his estranged wife and daughter in Philadelphia, helped him concentrate on his special intentions.

Since Rachel left and took Amy with her, his life had become empty and meaningless. Amy was five now and though he missed her, he was well aware of his precarious circumstances. He was at the mercy of his ex-wife's whims and without a green card, he could find himself deported. If this happened, chances were, he wouldn't be allowed back into the States again, and the thought of never seeing his child grow up caused him considerable distress. A week ago, he'd spotted a black car with a government licence tag parked outside his apartment, and when he saw the two well-dressed occupants, he became suspicious. He walked in through the front door, bolted down into the basement and out the back - returning only late at night on reconnaissance, and to scour the area for possible activity by immigration officers.

His little nest egg of savings had been severely reduced. Of the eighteen thousand dollars he'd accumulated, twelve had gone to Rachel, and three to Ron Pearlstein as a retainer for legal assistance. He knew now why most of the lawyers lived in the exclusive Main Line area and why, as a landscape contractor, some of his best customers were attorneys.

As he gathered his thoughts, Michael realised that at least the timing was

fortuitous. Work slowed up during the winter months and no one expected to see him this time of year - by spring though, customers would be requiring his services again. His pickup was parked at his friend Sean's house. Sean and he had headed out to the States together and while they had been friends back home, they had become more dependent on each other since coming to America. Sean had been in trouble from time to time over the years and Michael was always there for him. Adversity had reinforced their friendship.

He stared at the Eucharist displayed on the altar and resisted the temptation to look towards the door when someone entered. Fixing his gaze on the monstrance focused his mind on his problems and his present state of existentialism provided a clarity that helped him concentrate on reality.

He needed to go back to his apartment and get what remained of the money he had saved over the years. He'd hidden it under a floorboard in his bedroom where he knew it was safe. If he could do this tonight, he would be better placed to work out the next part of his plan. That was it - that's what he needed to do right away. Feeling a renewed sense of vigour and determination, he blessed himself, genuflected, and left the chapel.

The night had become bitterly cold. He stretched his woollen cap over his ears and pulled his coat collar around his neck. His apartment was about fourteen blocks east of Rising Sun. He made his way past the naval depot, across Roosevelt Boulevard and onto Cheltenham. Careful to take stock of anything that looked suspicious along the way, he noticed a white, Mercury Cougar parked at a Dunkin' Donut store close to his apartment. When he passed, he saw three men sitting in the front seat and heard the heavy bass beat of rap music. Federal agents didn't travel in threes and were unlikely rappers; he had nothing to worry about.

Approaching his apartment, he remained on the opposite side of the street and scanned the area. Realising he was in no danger; he crossed, unlocked his door and stepped inside.

His humble home felt warm and comfortable, but he couldn't afford to hang around. He dropped to his knees without turning on the light and crawled across the floor. Lifting the floorboard in the bedroom, he was relieved to find the money where he left it. For a moment, he thought about staying the night, then realised it was too dangerous. It was better to leave, find another place and move on. From Cheltenham Avenue he was only six blocks from Front Street where he could catch the elevated train that ran through centre city to 69th Street. Tonight he would disembark around 28th and Locust, beyond the brightly lit streets and find a quiet alley with enough shelter to allow him to get a few hours sleep.

He pulled a money-belt from a drawer, strapped it around his waist, thrust his savings into the pouch and zipped it closed. He lifted his mail on the way out and headed towards Front Street. Within minutes, he could see the lights of the terminal where an elevated train awaited.

As he climbed the steep flight of steps to the platform, he glanced at his watch.

It was now 11:30p.m. When he approached the turnstile, the train moved off so he sat down on a rigid steel bench and inhaled the pungent mix of high-octane fumes and residual smoke the departing train left in its wake. The grim, inhospitable station stood out in sharp contrast to the warm glow of the chapel he had just left. Two homeless people lay against a stain-encrusted wall as they shared a ragged blanket and propped each other up while they slept. The sight of them triggered a stark reminder of what lay ahead of him tonight. He looked beyond the deserted ticket booth into the empty night air and wondered about the plight of those destined to a life on the streets. Within minutes, he was summoned to his senses by the din of screeching brakes that signalled the arrival of another train.

Taking a seat by the window he stared across the street lights and flat, bitumen rooftops of north-east Philadelphia. From his vantage point, the city looked calm and he could see the first snow flurries begin to fall as the train jolted out of the station.

From time to time, he prodded the pouch on his belt to reassure himself his money was safe. After tonight, there would be no more sleeping on the streets. He would find a motel and base there for a while, until he located a new apartment.

He disembarked at 32nd and Walnut, near Drexel University, where he knew of a safe location he'd used in the past. Some of the old warehouses in this neighbourhood, while nothing fancy, provided adequate temporary shelter. He made his way up to the nearby Wawa to get a coffee and a few cardboard boxes for bedding. When he entered the store, a shop assistant recognised him.

"Hello Michael; how are you? What are you doing away down here?" she asked.

Caught off-guard, he answered: "Hello, Maria, I could ask you the same question. My friend Sean lives down this way, I'm headed over to visit him. You remember Sean, don't you?"

"Yeah, I remember Sean. You always looked like you were his big brother."

"That's me - Brother Michael," he said, amused at her disarming humour, and recalling the name of a Christian Brother who'd taught him in primary school. "Have you been moved down here, then?"

"Just for a few weeks...they're short staffed."

Maria came from behind the counter and stood beside him. Michael knew her from the Wawa store on Montgomery Avenue where he stopped for lunch every day during the work season. She was very pretty; of medium build, with brown eyes, long black hair and sallow skin. She spoke with strong South American intonations in her voice. She had moved to the States with her husband from Peru some years ago. Apparently, he worked in pharmaceuticals. One day, when they were chatting, she told Michael she came from Lima. Despite his weak knowledge of geography, he knew where Lima was. His brother was christened Martin, after the black saint, St. Martin de Porres from Lima, Peru. Growing up, his mother always encouraged them to pray to Saint Martin. On the first occasion he spoke to Maria, he shared this anecdote with her and it helped create a bond between them.

"So how's life been treating you?" he asked.

"Okay - just okay. My husband and I - we split-up."

"Ah, that's too bad. I'm sorry to hear that."

"It was on the cards and had to happen, sooner or later."

"What about you?"

"My wife and I are separated. I haven't seen her in a while now."

"And the kid?"

"Same goes," he said, wishing there could have been a better response.

"It must be tough, but you're weathering the storm - you look good." She stroked his face with one deft movement. "I like the sexy stubble - it suits you. You should call me sometime - we'll catch up."

"Aye," he said, with a self-conscious smile, "I must do that."

Maria moved back behind the counter, wrote her number on a piece of paper and handed it to him. He promised to call, bought a coffee and sandwich, then left. He made his way up the block and sat down in a vacant bus shelter to eat. His mind wandered as he thought about his encounter with Maria and her unashamed intimacy.

She awakened the memory of a Brother who had taught him many years ago. Brother Michael had worked for years as a nurse in the foreign missions. Later in life, he returned to complete his vocation in an all-boys primary school in Ireland. He was a kind man and the boys liked him. He had a little infirmary on the bottom corridor and any time someone feigned illness they were sent to him. Every boy received the same treatment - an aspirin and a cup of boiled milk sweetened with two spoonfuls of sugar. He diagnosed everyone using the same protocol. He placed a cold stethoscope on the chest, held the boy's testicles and said, "Cough lad, cough." No one appeared to mind his unconventional methods and everyone seemed to be miraculously cured when they returned to class. It was only in later years that his practice became the subject of great scrutiny and poor old Brother Michael had to retire - on the grounds of ill health!

Snow fell as he finished his coffee. Spotting a dumpster, he sifted through the waste for the best bedding and hurried towards Cuthbert Avenue where he intended to stay the night. When he came to an abandoned building he had previously used, he put his foot to the door and pushed it open. He hoped this would be the last night he would ever have to sleep rough.