

Chapter 1

When he was twelve years old Mad Dog ripped off Cootie Weiss's ear.

On the day it happened, Cootie—sitting at the desk behind him, as usual—drove his middle finger out from his thumb.

SNAP!

Pain seared through Mad Dog's ear like a voltage-filled wire. A high-pitched ringing began in his head. Heat throbbled through his face.

The teacher, Miss Moreno, was still writing on the blackboard. Mad Dog's face felt like it was on fire.

The finger snapped out again.

CRACK!

Turning, Mad Dog glared at Cootie. The older boy smirked.

The abuse had been going on for weeks. There was no civilized solution—not with Cootie Weiss. He'd been left back twice and was a head taller than anyone else. Everyone knew he was whacked out. Rumor was he sold drugs and was somehow connected. Cootie was a tough Brooklyn street kid, a real hard-ass. Nobody messed with him.

Miss Moreno was very attractive. And Cootie had been masturbating—every day, right there, behind Mad Dog. Their attached desks rocked back and forth as Cootie, hand in his pocket, rubbed away. There was muffled breathing and then the rocking accelerated

until Cootie climaxed.

It went on for weeks, in front of the other kids. Mad Dog was forced into accepting Cootie doing his thing. Finally, he turned and whispered, “Hey Cootie, why don’t you whack off at home?”

After that, Cootie repeatedly finger-snapped Mad Dog’s ear. By the end of each day, the ear felt like a hot ember. Mad Dog held his temper—stayed calm and cool, thinking Cootie would tire of his little game.

But it went on until the day Cootie took the humiliation to another level.

After the fourth ear snap of the day, Mad Dog felt something on his right ear. It was wet, warm, and without thinking, he touched his ear shell. He pulled his hand away and peered at it. Sitting on his fingertip was a slimy wad of snot.

It was typical Cootie Weiss; he reveled in his nickname and even demanded to be called “Cootie.” He often dug deep in his nose and smeared the pickings on the girls’ coats. He was a filthy guy who loved sharing his bodily functions.

Mad Dog earned his moniker because when he lost his temper, he fought like an animal. He’d learned to brawl at home. His father, a violent man, had been shipped to Attica when Mad Dog was just a kid—an armed robbery during which he’d killed two men. His mother’s boyfriend, Horst, drifted in and out of their lives. An abusive man, Horst punched and kicked Mad Dog mercilessly. Though he always got beaten, the kid usually landed some good shots. And there was the boxing club where he mauled kids far older than he was. So early on, Mad Dog learned to fight.

But challenging Cootie? A tough guy? One who was so crazy he insisted on being called Cootie? It was suicide. But Mad Dog had reached his limit.

He turned back, looked Cootie in the eye, and said, “Meet me behind Leo’s.”

Cootie smiled. For him, this would be a clinic in street fighting:

Punch-Out 101.

No one had ever—in the history of the earth—called out Cootie Weiss. It was off-the-wall-out-of-this-world. Word of the brawl-to-be spread through the school like a sea swell. For Mad Dog to punk out was guaranteed humiliation, complete disgrace.

“You’re nuts,” whispered Danny Burns, after class ended.

“I can’t take it anymore.”

“Look,” Danny said, “this isn’t Herbie’s Boxing Club. There’re no rules. This Cootie’s a serious psycho. Just ask Moreno to change your seat.”

It was pure Danny Burns. There were certain things Mad Dog loved about Irish Danny Burns. He was smart, had common sense, and always thought things through. But Mad Dog shook his head.

“He’ll kill you,” said Danny.

“Danny, you’re my best friend, and I usually listen to you, but I gotta do it.”

“I heard he carries a knife. Jesus, you’ll end up like your father.”

Mad Dog’s father was belly-shanked in the shower at Attica—where he died with his guts and shit pouring down the drain. A bunch of cons watched his life ebb away, laughing as he bled out and died. It was a neighborhood myth that got chewed and spit out, again and again.

“Like father, like son,” Mad Dog retorted. “I’m not scared . . .” He looked up at the hallway clock. Nearly two. By 3:10 he’d be facing off against Cootie Weiss.

“Look, kemosabe, said Danny, “you’re my blood brother. I’m gonna get Kenny McGuirk and some Bay Boys.”

“I don’t need Kenny McGuirk or the Bay Boys.”

“You’ll need backup. ‘Cause Cootie’s gonna have the Coyle Street Krauts there.”

“Doesn’t matter, Danny. I gotta do what I gotta do.”

“I’m getting Kenny and some Bay Boys,” said Danny.

The Sheepshead Bay Boys were a high school gang—tough, Irish,

Jewish, and Italian kids—a pack of beer-drinking dead-enders.

Kenny “Snake Eyes” McGuirk, fifteen, knew everyone in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn—the local bookies, gamblers, and toughs. Kenny ran numbers for some mob guy in Mill Basin. He had sway. He’d bring some muscle.

Mad Dog watched Danny hustle down the corridor and then disappear in a swarm of seventh and eighth graders. He glanced up at the wall clock again: two o’clock. A little more than an hour before the shit would hit the fan.

Mad Dog knew that as quick as his hands were, they’d have to be panther fast if he didn’t want to end up like his father.

Either Mad Dog or Cootie would go down.

■

The empty lot behind Leo’s luncheonette sprouted tufts of grass from the sandy soil. Cigarette butts and glass fragments glittered in the September sunlight. A breeze blew in from Sheepshead Bay, smelling of brine and motor oil.

Mad Dog’s legs felt like cement; his heart throbbed in his throat. The pungent smell of marijuana hung in the air. A horde of kids was there. Danny Burns stood off to one side with Mad Dog’s gang, the 19th Street guys, including Kenny McGuirk and ten Bay Boys, tough-looking high school thugs. Entering the debris-strewn expanse. Mad Dog knew the mob was itching for blood.

“Kill the kraut bastard, Mad Dog!” Snake Eyes yelled.

Cootie Weiss stood there, waiting. A group of Coyle Street Krauts gathered on the other side of the lot.

Sucking on a cigarette, Cootie squinted as Mad Dog approached.

Facing Cootie, Mad Dog’s bowels loosened and he thought they might empty.

“Well . . . ?” sneered Cootie. “What’s it gonna be?”

“You gotta stop botherin’ me, Cootie . . .”

Mad Dog heard a fear-filled warbling in his own voice. But then,

fear could be a good thing, he thought. Like just before a boxing match at Herbie's gym. Butterflies. That weak, sick feeling—but then would come a pumped rush of blood, the thump of fists, frenzied speed and motion.

“Whaddaya, some kinda faggot?” Cootie growled. He flipped his cigarette away, the same finger-snapping motion he'd used on Mad Dog's ear.

Be cool, stay calm . . . don't let him think you're scared . . .

Jolts of nervous energy shot through Mad Dog. He felt his bowels close off. He'd neither shit nor blow lunch. He watched as Cootie's hands curled into huge fists. Without thinking, Mad Dog tossed his jacket to the ground. He held Cootie's stare.

“Kick his ass, Cootie!” shouted a Coyle Street guy.

“Kill him, Mad Dog!” screamed Danny Burns.

“Last chance to back out, faggot,” Cootie said.

Back out? Too late for that.

Mad Dog crouched and circled slowly. Suddenly, Cootie swung—a wild roundhouse.

Slipping it easily, Mad Dog shot a fist into his belly. Cootie doubled over with a throaty gasp. Mad Dog threw a hard right to his jaw. Cootie's mouth—open as the blow landed—snapped shut with the impact. A tooth flew into the air; blood sprayed from his mouth.

Mad Dog's fists began a flurry of lightening-fast thumps to Cootie's face, a rapid-fire series of chopping blows.

Cootie staggered, wobbled and lurched to the side.

“Attaway, Mad Dog!” Danny shouted.

A raucous cheer went up from the 19th Street kids.

Cootie blinked, regained his balance and advanced.

Mad Dog slammed a fist into Cootie's nose—a quick, cracking blow. Blood jetted upward in a red spray. Cootie's head snapped back; he went down.

“Stomp his fuckin' head,” Snake Eyes shouted. “Kill him.”

“Don't let up,” Danny shouted.

Mad Dog waited for Cootie to get up.

■

Danny Burns felt his own blood lust rise from deep within himself. “Kill him! Kill him!” he roared as Mad Dog landed blow after blow.

Click. A steely snapping. Cootie’s switchblade swung out and locked into position.

Danny’s heart tumbled. His breath left him and he began wheezing. His asthma was kicking in—big time. Fuck it; can’t worry about it. He’d jump Cootie from behind and grab his neck. Mad Dog could work him over and gut-punch him till he fell.

Danny lunged for Cootie, but two Bay Boys clutched him, thrust him down and held him. He writhed and thrashed like a snake, but they pinned him.

“Lemme go!” Danny shrieked.

He could smell the Bay Boys’ breath, rancid from beer and pot.

“The knife!” Danny screamed.

“The Dog knows how to fight,” a Bay Boy yelled.

Still down, Danny watched Mad Dog back away from Cootie.

“Run. Run!” Danny screamed.

Cootie advanced clumsily, weak and wobbly. The knife blade—lethal looking, long, glinting—protruded from his fist.

Suddenly Mad Dog turned, darted to a Dumpster behind Leo’s, and grabbed a metal trash-can lid. Holding the handle, he whirled.

Cootie advanced and then lunged.

Mad Dog parried the knife with the lid.

Another thrust. The makeshift shield deflected the blade.

Cootie made an arcing swipe with the knife. Mad Dog spun. The lid smashed Cootie’s face, and a jagged metal edge slashed his ear. A blood runnel ran down his face.

A knee thumped into Cootie’s groin. The knife dropped as Cootie crumpled to the ground.

Mad Dog’s punches rained down, heavy thudding blows. He

straddled Cootie and grabbed his throat. One hand went to the side of Cootie's face.

Suddenly, the Dog stood, chest heaving.

Cootie lay still, tongue protruding—senseless—blood seeping into the sand.

Silence. A damp breeze blew in from the bay; it smelled of brine and clams.

Danny blinked; sand and soil clogged his nose. He coughed and sputtered. The Coyle Street Krauts were gone.

Danny got to his feet.

Kenny McGuirk cried, "Holy shit. Look at *that*."

Danny felt fire in his lungs.

Then he saw it. Right there in Mad Dog's hand, something pinkish with frothy pulp and blood dribbling onto his friend's wrist. Mad Dog held it up for all to see.

There it was in the late afternoon sun.

Cootie's torn and bloodied ear was in his hand.

It was Mad Dog's day.

Chapter 2

Roddy Dolan flings his leather jacket over the razor wire atop the chain-link fence. With a sudden thrust he scrambles up the links, swings over the top, and then drops down on the other side. The night air is bitterly cold—ice crystals form in his nostrils. In the pale wash of light, vapor plumes stream from his nose and mouth.

It's dark except for a street lamp down the block. It's a silent winter night. The warehouse is a squat, two-story brick structure with a corrugated tin roof. The loading platform is stacked with crates. He treads lightly, flashlight in hand.

There's a sound—something coming very fast—and he whirls and snaps the flashlight on. There's a gleam in the light shaft: red eyes, curved fangs, and the dog leaps on him. Roddy goes down. The dog—a huge beast with hot breath—lunges for his throat. Roddy's arm goes up; the creature's teeth sink into it and tear flesh. Roddy punches at it and its jaws clamp onto Roddy's throat.

Roddy clutches the jaws, rips them open, and wrenches away. He pummels the dog with his fists, kicks at it, and bolts upright in bed. The pillow is soaked.

His body quivering, Roddy sits at the edge of the bed and waits for his heart to slow its stampede. Roddy casts off sleep's shroud and resurrects himself to a state of awareness.

Tracy lies on her side, her back to him. He doesn't want to wake her, but part of him hopes she'll say something and bring him back

to their lives, together—away from the dream.

The bedside digital clock reads 5:10 A.M. on this late August morning. He has a full caseload of surgeries today. He's due in the OR at seven.

"Is it the dream again?" Tracy murmurs.

"Uh huh . . ."

She turns and reaches for him.

He snuggles against her and inhales deeply. She smells sweet, of sleep and bed linen. Her honey blonde hair is spread on the pillow. He's always astonished by Tracy's scent, which flooded him the moment they first met.

"Maybe you should talk with your psychiatrist friend, Dick Simons."

"Oh, Trace . . . I don't know . . ."

"Honey, I read about some new medication for nightmares."

Roddy knows whenever the dream wakes him, he feels depleted for the day. And he's got a long one; after today's surgeries, there are office consultations into the evening.

Roddy's certain Tracy's drifted off. He's always marveled at her ability to sleep. In the fifteen years they've been together, she's never had a bad night's sleep.

Roddy pads his way to the bathroom. He regards himself in the medicine cabinet mirror. At forty-five, he's still brawny, although he can't boast the well-cut six-pack he once had. The weight training has helped, so too have the walks with Tracy through the nearby golf course, though they're not members. They aren't country club types. But still, he looks far younger than his forty-five years. The good life hasn't turned him into some flab-assed Westchester suburbanite.

The dream. How many years has it plagued him? Maybe Tracy's right; he might just talk with Dick Simons.

Roddy shaves; the razor glides over the contours of his face—it's the minor surgery with which he begins each day. And he always thinks about things while shaving. He recalls when he and Tracy met.

He was a surgical resident at New York Hospital in Manhattan—the center of the medical universe. Browsing in the library, he knelt at the lower shelves perusing a dizzying display of journals. He barely noticed a ladder on wheels parked to his right.

Suddenly, a blurred presence dropped from the ladder and she was beside him. Roddy recalls that strange and exhilarating moment: they stood there, breathless at the sudden intrusion, each on the other. They were so close he could smell her shampoo.

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped breathlessly.

“No. It’s me . . .”

“It’s you?” she asked with a smile. “Sorry . . . it’s *me*.”

She had gleaming green eyes. Her porcelain skin, Celtic features, and blonde hair were arresting. Her neck was long, pale, and inviting. Something elemental rushed through him. Amidst the musty smell of texts, her scent was intoxicating. Her skin *looked* delicious. He grew weak in the knees and knew in that second he could look at her forever.

A week later, lying naked with each other on the bed in his apartment, she laughed and said, “You know, Roddy, the moment I saw you I felt something . . .”

“What was that?”

“It was more than just attraction. I felt something go through me . . . something deep.”

“Like a rush?”

“Yes. A *rush*.”

“We were fated to be together from that moment,” Roddy whispered, luxuriating in postcoital contentment.

“Yes. And do you know what else I knew then?”

“Don’t tell me. I’ll tell you,” he said. “You knew we’d get married.”

“Yes, I did,” she said with a laugh.

After they married, they lived in Manhattan. But when Tracy was pregnant with their first—Thomas—they house-hunted, finally buying an English Tudor in Bronxville, just north of New York City.

The house had fairway views of the Siwanoy Country Club.

He got a staff appointment at Lawrence Hospital. He did mostly GI surgeries—stomach ulcers, gall bladder removals, pancreatic and large bowel surgery—along with appendectomies. He opened an office near the hospital, partnering with Ivan Snyder. There were no snags, no complications. The house was minutes away from Sarah Lawrence College where Tracy worked as a librarian. It was the life they'd dreamed of.

Roddy luxuriates beneath the steamy hot shower, contemplating the day's surgeries, wondering if any unforeseeable complications will pop up. But these—and a thousand others—are the unpredictable elements in every life. Roddy knows the hours in the OR—by now, thousands—are a gauge of the repairs he's done. They're the essence of good deeds.

Then, office consultations into the evening. Brenda, the receptionist, told him, "Your last one's at six. He wants your last appointment. His name's Egan, Kenneth Egan."

"He wanted the *last* appointment?"

"He was emphatic about it."

Back to the bedroom, he sees Tracy's side of the bed is empty. Usually she stays in bed. He always sits beside her and strokes that amazing, silken blonde hair. Caressing her is a luxury he anticipates, truly adores. He always plants a kiss on her neck, tasting the luscious tang of her skin.

He usually whispers, "I love you . . ." and she mumbles something—soft, unintelligible. Roddy's always amazed by the milky whiteness of Tracy's skin, as though it's never seen the light of day. Then he works his way to her mouth, those soft, pliant lips. And each morning he wants to rouse her from sleep and make love.

But not this morning. Not after the fucking dream. He dresses and heads for the stairs.

Tommy emerges from his room. He's incredibly tall for twelve with blond hair and those amazing green eyes of Tracy's. *A really*

good-looking kid, Roddy thinks.

“Hi there,” Roddy says, trying to quell the thrumming sensation in his chest.

Tommy mumbles something, casts a sour look at Roddy, and disappears into the hallway bathroom.

Tommy—or, Thomas, as Tracy calls him—is by far the smartest kid in his class. Teachers have said that even without trying, he far surpasses the other students.

“But he doesn’t even *try*,” said Mr. Williams, his seventh grade teacher.

“Roddy, he respects you,” Tracy said last evening. “Can’t you turn him around?”

“Tracy, he resents anything I say.”

“Maybe you can push him.”

“If I push, he’ll push back.”

Lately, Tommy’s bloated with adolescent angst that makes him disdain all things, especially his parents.

In short, Roddy thinks Tommy’s a pain in the ass, a typical teenager.

Sandy comes out of her room. She’s ten years old, with golden curls ringing her pretty face. Seeing Roddy, she smiles. “Daddy, will you help me with my science project tonight?”

“Of course, sweetie. What is it?”

“I have to make a chart that shows how a heart works.”

“That’ll be fun. I’ll bring something home from the office . . . it shows the human heart. Okay?”

“Tonight?” she asks, her blue-green eyes wide with anticipation.

“Yup, tonight,” Roddy says, feeling the warmth of love so deeply it could devour him. Sandy wants to be a doctor. And Roddy’s certain she’ll succeed. She brings home straight As, is quite a soccer player, is popular, and loves science.

From her looks—even at ten—Roddy knows she’ll be as beautiful as her mother. And there’s none of that teen torment that’s so *de*

rigueur these days. At least, not yet.

■

In the kitchen with its granite-top counters, nickel-plated appliances, including a six-burner Garland range, Roddy watches Tracy prepare breakfast.

“The one good thing about that dream is it gets you to make breakfast,” he says, slipping his arms around her. He nuzzles her neck. The kitchen is filled with the aroma of eggs and toast.

Tracy leans against him. “Roddy, I think you need to talk with Dick . . .”

“I will . . . I promise,” he says, and begins making the coffee.

Roddy uses a rich blend of Sumatran and Colombian beans in the Krups coffeemaker. Tracy turned him on to mixing coffee beans soon after they’d begun living together. She’d taken a course at Peter Kump’s New York Cooking School, back then, and works culinary miracles. She turned him on to freshly prepared foods, too, not the bachelor shit he’d been consuming for years.

At the breakfast table, Roddy gazes out the window. He loves watching the garden as the morning air brightens. It’s like seeing it for the first time each morning—again. It confirms that everything he and Tracy have is real and good; it’s not ephemeral and meaningless, like so many things in this life.

“Do you want me to turn on the radio?” Tracy asks.

“Why bother?” he asks, thinking of the crises that fill the broadcasts. “It’s a disaster out there, and we can’t do anything about it.”

“Roddy, *you* do something every day. You *help* people . . .”

Yes, Roddy knows he rights wrongs, reverses the ills afflicting the human body. And he’s got a full schedule today, followed by office consultations, and the last one, that guy Egan. Then home and helping Sandy.

Roddy thinks of their Bronxville house. He loves the Tudor-style architecture with its wood timbering, stone-faced fireplace,

screened-in porch, and spacious sunroom. He admires the hand-hewn chestnut ceiling beams and the Old English casement windows. “It has all the craftsmanship that’s missing in things today,” he said to Tracy when they first toured the place.

And he thinks about his life with Tracy. She’s the smartest, most commonsense person he’s ever known. Roddy knows he’d never have dreamed he’d be living with this gorgeous, loving, intelligent, and sexy being—a woman with whom he shares a chemistry that’s combustible, organic. They just can’t keep their hands off each other, even all these years later.

“You know Trace . . . sometimes I can’t believe we have so much . . .”

“We should be thankful for everything,” she says, sliding eggs onto a plate.

At that moment, he knows that regardless of humanity’s troubles, life in Roddy Dolan’s corner of the planet is good. For him, it’s heaven on earth. There’s nothing else he wants.

And for all he has in this crazy and unpredictable life, Roddy Dolan is more than thankful.

Chapter 3

One night when he was seventeen, Mad Dog, Frankie Messina, and Kenny “Snake Eyes” McGuirk were at the Acropolis Diner—“the Greek’s” as they called it—on Nostrand Avenue. They sat at a Formica-topped table, amidst the fake chrome, plaster columns, and bogus leather booths.

“I’m not interested in this job,” Kenny said, tamping his Lucky Strike in an ashtray.

“Whaddaya mean?” Frankie said. “It’s a sure thing.”

“Sounds risky.”

“Hey, Snake Eyes, you’re a gambler. You take risks every day.”

“Frankie, gambling’s the art of *controlling* risk.”

“Whaddaya talkin’ about?”

“I always know the hand I’m dealt. That way I figure the other guy’s hand. This job? I don’t know the guy’s hand.”

Frankie’s low-lying hairline sank as he scowled. “Look, Kenny, this guy’s been workin’ there four years. The place closes at eight and he’s gonna leave the alarm off. Nine-thirty, he comes back and turns it on. We’ll have an hour and a half.”

“I wanna meet this guy.”

“Why?”

“To dope him out. I got one rap already,” Kenny said. “One more and I go away.”

The waitress approached, Silex coffeepot in hand. “Will there be

anything else?"

"No, sweetheart. Just you," Frankie said, ogling her breasts.

She sighed, looking bored and tired.

Mad Dog always felt embarrassed when Frankie—who fancied himself a Romeo—oozed his bewitching bullshit. Kenny looked uncomfortable. With a purple scar on his forehead, a broken nose, and weak chin, Kenny McGuirk never found a comfort zone with the girls. His true love was gambling, especially poker, and his main squeeze was the smiling queen of a royal flush.

Plopping the coffeepot on the table, the waitress ripped the tab from her pad and set it down. "Have a good night," she said, and then sauntered off.

"You too, sweetheart," Frankie called. "I'm telling you, it's guaranteed," he whispered to Kenny.

"Nothin's guaranteed," Kenny said. "And what about the kid here?" He tilted his head at Mad Dog. "One more rap, he does time."

"What're you, Kenny? His fuckin' father? Besides, for him it's juvie."

"Frankie, I gotta talk to your guy."

"You sound like that red-headed chicken shit, Danny Burns," Frankie said.

"Watch it, Frankie," Mad Dog warned.

"Yeah, yeah," Frankie said. "Don't get your Mickey Finn Irish up. Your best friend's gonna be a fuckin' accountant with his numbers."

Frankie's eyes followed the waitress down the aisle.

"Look at *me*, schmuck, not her," Kenny said. "You get me face time with your friend. Otherwise, forget it. *Capice?*"

"Yeah, yeah. I *capice*. I'm tellin' ya, my guy says the fence value in that storeroom is fifty, sixty Gs. Whaddaya gonna do with that kinda cash, huh?"

"*If I go for the job . . . and that's a big if,*" Kenny said, "then I won't work the Parisi card game anymore. I'll start my own."

"Yeah," Frankie said with a snicker. "Kenny never saw a bet he

didn't like."

"Only when I know the odds," Kenny said.

"And you, Dog?" Frankie asked. "What'll you do with that kinda money?"

"Get outta my house. Get away from that low-life bastard."

"That kraut, Horst?" Frankie asked.

Mad Dog nodded.

"You could box. Herbie Jew-Boy says you're the best light-heavy-weight he's ever trained."

"Yeah, and have scrambled eggs for brains."

"With those hands you're the toughest white guy I know," Frankie said.

"There's always someone tougher," Mad Dog said. "And I don't want another rap."

Frankie kissed his Saint Anthony medallion. I'll see if my guy'll meet Kenny. Then maybe we're in business."

■

Kenny jimmied the store's back door with a crowbar. No alarm.

He and Mad Dog clambered down the steps. Another door—fastened by a hasp and padlock. Wood splintered and metal creaked, as Kenny pried it open. Their flashlight beams fell on stacked cartons: Sony, Sharp, televisions, stereos—months of inventory.

"We're gonna need a bigger van," Kenny whispered.

They began hauling. Up the stairs out the back door. Box after box. Frankie waited at the van's rear and loaded it up. Kenny scrambled back down to lug another load. Mad Dog and Frankie packed the van.

A whoop shrieked through the alley. Mad Dog's insides turned to ice. Then a cherry light whirled on the brick walls.

A silent alarm. Frankie's guy fucked up.

The walls were a mad rush of gyrating lights. "Stay where you are!" came a command down the alley. "Hands in the air where we

can see 'em!”

“Don’t move,” yelled one officer. “Not a muscle.”

They were patted down, head to toe. Mad Dog’s hands were thrust behind his back, cuffs snapped on.

He felt his flesh chill as radio static and whirling lights filled the air.

■

The Honorable Alfred Waterman—bushy-haired, bespectacled—looked austere in his black robe. The legal aid lawyer told Mad Dog and Frankie, “Don’t bullshit this guy. You already copped a plea and he’ll hear you out for a presentencing statement.”

They stood with their court-appointed lawyers.

“Young man,” Wasserman said, addressing Mad Dog first, “you’re only seventeen and this is your second offense. Grand larceny carries a severe penalty.”

Mad Dog nodded respectfully.

“And there were only two of you?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“You took a lot of merchandise in a very short time.”

“I’m sorry, Your Honor,” he said, wondering what happened to Snake Eyes.

“You’re on a bad road, son; it leads to prison.” The judge peered at him. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Thoughts streaked through his head. *No bullshit.*

“I’m sorry, Your Honor. I didn’t think of the consequences . . .”

“We live in a world of consequences,” the judge said. “Yours is a unique situation, young man. This is the first time I’ve ever been contacted by a youthful defendant’s teachers. They said you’re a brilliant kid . . . you have enormous potential.”

Wasserman seemed to be taking some kind of mental inventory. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’ll give you a choice . . .”

Mad Dog’s heart jumped in his chest.

“The first is two years in prison. It means one year at a state reformatory. And when you turn eighteen, you’ll be transferred to a penal institution.

“Your second is this: you join the army, for a three-year enlistment. You’ll get a chance to fulfill your potential. Now . . . which will it be?”

A year’s vacation in juvie followed by lockdown with the crazies? Or the army? Who knows? Could be a chance for something . . . who knows?

“The army, Your Honor . . .”

“And, young man, if you’re thrown out or discharged other than honorably, you’ll do those two years in a state penitentiary. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Maybe you’ll become something other than a street thug.”

Chapter 4

The office of Dolan & Snyder Surgical Associates is virtually empty. The consultations have gone well—a woman with an abdominal hernia, a teenager with a brewing appendicitis Roddy will take out first thing in the morning—but no emergencies. Only one more consultation, and then it's home for dinner and Sandy's project. Roddy telephones Tracy to tell her he'll be home by 6:30.

"See you then," she says, but Roddy detects tension in her voice.

"What, honey?"

"What, what?"

"What's going on?"

"I'll tell you when you get home."

"Give me a hint."

"It's Thomas . . ."

That familiar apprehension crawls through him.

"I got a call this afternoon . . ."

"From Dean Brookings again?"

"We'll talk about it when you get home, okay?"

More adolescent bullshit . . . and the kid's only twelve; it's just beginning . . .

"All right. Love you . . ."

"And I love you."

Roddy thinks he hears Tracy sigh.

Then there's a click.

A moment later the intercom trills. “Roddy, your last consultation’s here—Mr. Egan,” Brenda says.

“I’ll be right out. Oh, and Brenda . . . go home. I’ll close up.”

Roddy’s scalp tingles as a cold feeling spikes its way up his neck. He’s still thinking of Tommy . . . *Jesus, when he was twelve, the world was different. But doesn’t every parent feel that way?*

■

Egan is fairly tall, maybe six two. Looks to be in his mid- or late forties and well muscled. He could’ve been an athlete in his younger days. He has dark, glinting eyes set in a narrow face with prominent cheekbones; a long, sharply pointed nose; a strong chin; dark hair—thinning slightly in front, brushed back neatly. Uses a little gel. Egan has a well-barbered look, an expensive haircut—probably seventy-five dollars at a high-end shop, no doubt in Manhattan. He has manicured, buffed fingernails, and there’s a subtle hint of cologne—expensive stuff.

Egan strides in the consultation room. Roddy has the uncanny feeling Egan’s sizing him up, that his eyes are roaming all over him.

There’s an uneasy silence. Roddy can’t tell exactly why, but he feels a twinge of discomfort, as though he’s told a bad joke at a hospital board meeting where the snooty Westchester crowd gathers to discuss their latest pet project.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Egan asks, a hint of a smile on his thin lips.

“Should I?” Roddy says as a raw feeling invades him.

Remember you? From when . . . where’ve I seen this guy? Can’t be from medical school, or college . . .

Roddy hates this feeling. It envelops him whenever he doesn’t recognize someone, whether in the hospital, at a party, or in a restaurant. He’ll recall a name if there’s a reason to do so. But in his day-to-day routines, Roddy runs into scores of people—on the wards, in a clinic, at meetings—and there’s nothing more than a quick

once-over. Hardly a memorable event.

“No recollection, huh?” Egan says.

Roddy gropes for something familiar—in Egan’s voice, posture, his face, anything—but there’s not a glimmer of recognition. Yet, there’s a disquieting cognizance about the guy, a faint flicker of acquaintance. *Egan . . . Egan . . .* Roddy flips through his mental file cabinet, his cerebral cache of people and places from over the years.

Medical training has given Roddy the ability to observe physical characteristics, especially in the office or hospital where a diagnosis can hinge on something as subtle as a patient’s posture. Picking up a faint deviation from the norm can be the difference between life and death.

Roddy thinks the guy’s sort of rugged looking—street-wise, even tough in the sense you can tell he’s been around; he isn’t some panty-waist who’s had an easy life.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Egan . . . I just can’t place you,” Roddy says, beckoning to a chair facing his desk. But the guy stands there. It’s clear to Roddy this isn’t going to be a routine surgical consultation.

Egan wears a dark gray suit—midwidth lapels, jacket vented on both sides. Probably Armani. A powder-blue shirt is open at the collar. French cuffs on the sleeves. Probably custom made. Wing-tipped shoes—high-end, maybe Fendi—finish off the ensemble. The guy looks like he just stepped out of the pages of the *Times Men’s Fashion* magazine.

“No idea who I am, huh?” says Egan.

Is this guy toying with me?

“Kenneth Egan . . . Egan . . .,” Roddy murmurs. “I’m sorry, it doesn’t ring a bell.”

Edging around the desk, Roddy moves closer and notices spider veins on the tip of Egan’s nose and barely visible crow’s-feet at the corners of his eyes. Any sign of plastic surgery? Not really. Roddy’s become an expert at picking up those tip-offs of a surgeon’s knife. In women it’s the too-refined nose and the windblown look of facial

skin stretched like a drum top. With men, it can be a tougher call.

Roddy gets a better whiff of Egan's cologne, subtle but detectable.
Roddy feels his brow furl.

Do I remember him? It's gotta be from a long time ago. From before medical school . . . even before college . . . Egan . . . Egan . . . Egan . . .

"It's been years, and plenty's changed," Egan says.

It puzzles Roddy. How could a guy from his own past be so unrecognizable, so absent from his mental file cabinet?

"We all change with time, don't we, Mad Dog . . . ?"

Fucking *Mad Dog*? Did the guy actually utter that shit-ridden moniker? One he hasn't heard for decades. It's the sewage of a best-forgotten past.

Roddy wonders if this is some weird telescoping of time. Or maybe he's been dropped into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Mad Dog? He's never even told Tracy his old street name, though she knows plenty about his past. It was all centuries ago, on some distant planet. In another life.

His eyes roam over the guy, but it's a total zero. As though his brain has emptied. Is he—Roddy Dolan—going senile, turning into some doddering, underwear-staining imbecile?

Mad Dog? Mad Dog? Sheepshead Bay . . . Brooklyn . . . Coyle Street? Na . . . doesn't look German . . . he's Irish, for sure . . . 19th Street? The 8th Street Pool Hall? Leo's?

Roddy's brain virtually whirrs as names, images, sounds, even smells shuttle with mercurial speed through his brain. A flush seeps through Roddy. Jesus, it feels like his face is on fire.

Egan laughs. It's a jarring eruption that jogs something deep in Roddy's mind, a tiny seed of distress lurking just below the surface. At that moment—with Egan's laughter still in his ears—Roddy wonders if he doesn't want to remember this Egan guy, wants instead to erase the memories and forget whatever this lost connection might be.

"Hey, Mad Dog. It's *me* . . . Kenny. *Kenny McGuirk*. Snake Eyes! From the good old days in Brooklyn."