

Chapter One

March 17, 2003

“Happy Saint Patrick’s Day, Dad,” I whispered. I stood at my father’s grave, freshly tilled by a descendant of Jack the Ripper. The temperature bounced around the thirties. The gray sky teased rain. Water seeped through the porous nylon of my running shoes, sucking me into the earth, while I waited for a priest. I was thirty-two, single, in love with Tim Mangan, a gay man, running the family restaurant, and living at home, in Barra, a suburb of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Not exactly L.A. where, I guessed, the temperature lazed around in the seventies.

“Two-thirty,” Father Francis Coyne had said the previous evening, “is that convenient, Bree?”

No. “Sure, Father,” I had said, “Sara can close Mac’s.” *On the restaurant’s busiest day of the year.*

“I’m in hell, Dad. Where are you?” I asked the newly chiseled granite. I glanced at my father’s name, *Michael Patrick McNamara*, his date of birth, *October 27, 1944*, and his date of death, *December 15, 2002*. A tiny American flag waved above a medallion spiked into the ground. My father had served, along with dozens of others buried in Saint Brigid’s Cemetery, in Vietnam. I closed my eyes, inhaling the damp air, aching for his freshly showered scent, his guffawing laugh, a wink from his blue eyes. I had no idea about the afterlife, where my father’s spirit rested, but I knew for certain he didn’t reside in that ground under my feet, sacred or not.

In the three months since he died, I'd read a number of books on death and grief. According to one author, the dead have reappeared—no big news if you were raised Catholic. Some souls have returned within hours of their death; others months after passing. Not one gave the winning number to a Lottery, which told me you didn't know much more in death than you did in life. Me, I hadn't heard word one from my father. And he was a talker.

Jack Sullivan, the cemetery groundskeeper, leaned against his pick-up truck, a stream of smoke rising from his cigarette. His glare penetrated my body, sending a shiver along my spine. If I believed in auras, I'd say his was dark, black in fact, and a good two feet thick. But since I know little about auras and their meaning, I thought Jack Sullivan was a prick. Nothing specific to point to, just that shiver along my spine.

Jack waited for a sign from me that my father's memorial stone was in its proper place. To get rid of him, I nodded. He tipped his cap. He took another drag on his cigarette. A few minutes later, his truck pulled out of the service road.

By three o'clock, Father Francis Coyne, our good family friend, mediocre poker player, and great parish priest, was late, and Father Francis was never late. He never forgot an appointment, especially one as important to him as blessing my father's gravestone. He and my father had enjoyed a closeness reserved for fathers and sons. Despite the fact that all other memorial stone placements were scheduled for late spring when the ground would be soft, Father had pushed for my father's stone to be placed on Saint Patrick's Day. "That's the day God wants it blessed," he had said. Father Francis had a direct link to the Almighty.

Cold, bitchy, and worried, I headed down Franklin Street to Saint Brigid's Church. Ten minutes later, my muddy feet were carrying me across the church grounds. I knocked on the locked door of the parish offices. No one answered. I headed across the parking lot, only to find an ass crack sticking out of a garbage can.

"What are you doing?" I yelled.

"They had a party," Donnell Connelly said, pulling his pants up, shaking the dark green trash bag. The aluminum clattered. "A penny a can."

"Did Father say okay?"

He shook his head, then nodded.

Big deal. I gave Donnell a tight grin.

I knocked on the rectory door. "Father," I yelled. I walked slowly toward Father's home office. My stomach knotted. I waited for Gladys Sullivan, Jack Sullivan's sister and Father's housekeeper, to jump out from behind a wallboard, and scream, "Thief. Gypsy thief." My mother was an Irish Traveller, what Gladys called trash. Gladys and Jack Sullivan proved that anger and stupidity, like alcoholism, runs in families. The floorboards moaned. I stepped into Father's office and breathed a sigh of relief at not finding him slumped over his desk. The memory of finding my father dead in his easy chair jumped to mind.

"Father," I yelled again, heading back toward the kitchen, where the smell of ammonia brought tears to my eyes. My rubber soles squished and squeaked on the beige linoleum. A dirty plate, small bowl, and milk-stained glass, probably the remnants of Father's lunch, sat in the sink.

Frustrated, I headed toward the church, trying to make sense of why Father had missed our appointment. He had to be at the deathbed of a parishioner.

I banged on the heavy wood front doors, yelling, "Father, Father."

Daily, from dawn to dusk, the church was open. Day after day, Miss Mullaly, Saint Brigid's Administrative Assistant, sat stone-faced at the front desk.

I decided to head home where I expected to find a message from Father on my machine. Then, I spied Father's black Buick. I ran along the side of the church to the sacristy door, reached my arm above the doorframe, and slid my fingers along the lintel, searching in vain for the key that was always there.

I stepped back from the church, onto the lawn, and looked up to the stained-glass windows. Lights burned. I ran back over to where I'd met Donnell moments earlier. The bag of cans now lay on the ground.

Under my power, the garbage can rumbled across the driveway, stopping just below a church window. I jumped onto the can, peered down into the church, and finally saw Father Francis, a crumpled heap of black, next to the Baptismal Font.

I ran to Father's home office. I punched 911. "Help," I cried.

The dispatcher managed to get out of me where I was, what I'd seen.

"Stay on the phone with me," he ordered.

I didn't think so. I placed the receiver on the desk and ran. I knew CPR, knew that unless a police car or ambulance happened to cruise by Barra, help was at least five minutes away.

I ran back to the garbage can. With a deep breath and closed eyes, certain that Jack Sullivan would give me hell, saying, "So be it," I splattered glass with a decorative

garden rock. Using my jacket for protection, I punched out a larger space and cleared shards.

“Father, Father. It’s Bree. Breathe,” I yelled, balancing on the sill.

On hearing a siren, I tossed myself backwards, landing on the ground, turning over my ankle and collapsing on my back.

Tim Mangan, now a detective with the Scranton Police Department, jumped out of his white police Jeep.

“Father’s in there, Tim,” I gasped. I pointed overhead.

His hazel eyes locked onto me with concern. “Father Francis?”

“Damn it,” I said. My left ankle throbbed.

Another siren blared as a patrol car pulled into the driveway in front of the church. More sirens sounded in the distance.

“Why is the window broken?” Tim asked.

“Tim, you’re wasting time,” I said frantically. “The church is locked. I broke the window. Father’s on the floor.” I struggled to my feet.

“Where’s Miss Mullaly?”

A uniformed officer stepped out of the patrol car and headed toward us. He nodded to Tim, shot a quick glance at me and the broken window. “What’s up?”

I pointed to the church. “Father.”

Tim jumped in. “She thinks Father Coyne may be in there.”

Thinks. They headed toward the front door. “It’s locked. The church is locked,” I yelled, exasperated. “I called nine-one-one. Father Francis is inside. The church is locked. Nobody’s around.”

They rolled the errant garbage can back under the window. The officer asked Tim, “Who is she?”

“Bree McNamara, Mike McNamara’s daughter,” Tim replied.

The officer nodded. Looking at his belt filled with all the equipment a patrol officer needed, I doubted that he knew my father. My father had told me, “The younger the cop, the bigger the belt.”

Tim broke the glass easily with a nightstick, slid over my rumpled jacket and disappeared.

Moments later, standing impatiently at the front door, I heard the lock turn. The officer and I ran into the church. “Father,” Tim said, kneeling, blessing himself. My body froze as did my mind, steeling itself for the image of Father Coyne. Dressed in a black suit with his white Roman collar, Father Coyne lay with closed eyes, his left leg rested on his right, as if he had tried to stand. Blood pooled under him on the wood floor. He gripped the crucifix of his rosary. Lifeless, no need for CPR, no need for bags filled with bandages and airways, no need for oxygen.

“This didn’t just happen,” the officer said. His gold nameplate said Groghan. He pointed to the dark edge of the blood.

Tim pulled a notebook from his pocket. “Take Bree over there.” He nodded, indicating one of the wooden pews.

With the help of Officer Groghan, I wobbled to the last row. My ankle, ballooned to the size of a softball, landed on the bench with a thud. Tim and Groghan searched the church.

The ambulance arrived. Tim made calls on his cell phone, wrote notes, and asked Groghan to take care of certain tasks. The air reeked with the smell of cheap altar wine. I stood and limped along, the scent my guide.

“Tim,” I yelled, pointing at the broken bottle of red wine.

“Bree, go back where you were. I’ll talk to you in a minute,” Tim ordered.

As promised, several minutes later, Tim walked over to me. “Are you okay?” he asked. He sat down in front of me, bending his head toward mine. “Tell me what happened,” he said, reaching across, touching my hand, a touch as familiar as my own.

Determined not to fall apart, not there anyway, I looked straight ahead to the stained- glass window behind the white marble altar, to Christ floating on clouds, surrounded by angels. “Father served morning Mass,” I said. “Mrs. Condon and Mrs. Biglin were at Mac’s for breakfast. They told me that Father prayed for my dad. Father was supposed to meet me at two-thirty at the cemetery.”

Tim looked up at the vaulted ceiling. He pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks, determined as I not to cry.

“He never showed,” I said. “Father Francis is never, ever late.”

Tim nodded, well aware of Father’s intolerance for tardiness. He removed his hand from mine. He began to write.

“Why was the church locked?” I wondered aloud.

Over the years, I had entered through the sacristy door, had prayed on each of the fifty-plus kneelers, had searched for my magical place to talk to God. I had stopped in after school, on my way home from the playground, on semester breaks from college. The sacristy door was usually open. If not, the key was always above the door.

Tim shrugged at this unanswerable question. "Tell me what else happened."

I filled him in on what I knew. I last spoke with Father Francis yesterday evening. I arrived at the cemetery at two-thirty. When Father hadn't shown past three, I went looking for him.

"Tim, who would do this?" I asked foolishly.

He shook his head.

The unmistakable usually well-modulated voice of Miss Mullaly screeched, "Just what is going on here?" We turned and watched as the prim secretary took several steps into the nave. She screamed. Then she fainted.

The ambulance crew rushed to Miss Mullaly's side. She came back to consciousness in a state of confusion. She tried to recall the last time she saw Father. "After morning Mass. No, before lunch. No, let me think." She glanced up at the broken window. She fainted again.

The paramedics decided to transport Miss Mullaly to the nearest emergency room. I refused to go to the hospital for an ankle x-ray.

"Tim, the garbage can moved when I was leaning over the sill," I said.

He glanced up from his notebook. "And?"

"Maybe someone, the killer, moved it."

"Why?" he asked, in the kind of patient tone you'd use for a child.

I shrugged. "Tim, maybe the killer's footprints are by the garbage can."

"We've tracked it up. The BCI will be along shortly."

"Bureau of Criminal Investigations," I said, recalling the department mentioned frequently by my father.

Tim nodded absently, his attention drawn to the church doors. I turned as well. Paul Mulroney, Tim's partner, scanned Father Coyne's body. Slender, with graying hair, a few inches taller than Tim's six feet, and a decade older than Tim's thirty-four years, Mulroney moved toward us, cinching up his tie.

"Bree. I haven't seen you since your father's funeral. How you doin'?"

My ankle hurt, my heart hurt. Okay seemed trite. I shrugged and pursed my lips into a tight grin.

"What happened here?" he asked Tim.

Tim opened up his notepad and told Mulroney the little he knew so far. They walked over to Father's body.

Officer Groghan soon escorted me out of the church to the passenger seat of his patrol car. The Scranton Chief of Police, the Chief of Detectives Dennis Hamilton, more detectives, and someone from the District Attorney's office arrived. Yellow tape stretched from the church past the rectory, the Parish Hall, and lawn to the sidewalks. Channel 16, 22, and 28 trucks were parked just outside the perimeter. Onlookers, three deep, crowded the sidewalks. Traffic crawled along Franklin Street.

I stared at the church, longing for someone to run out yelling, "He's alive. He's alive."

I had known Father Francis Coyne all my life. He was a member of what I called the Holy Trinity, a name I had given my grandmother, my father, and Father Francis when I was seven-years-old.

That day, on the eve of my First Communion, my father, my grandmother, Father Coyne and I had met in Father's rectory office. Everyone fidgeted. I had no idea what

was going on. Earlier in the day I'd made my first confession. I wondered if my family found out what I had said.

My father and grandmother stared at Father Coyne. He stared back at them. Father finally said to me, "Breda, dear..."

I held my breath, waiting to catch hell.

"Oh, dear," Father Coyne said. "Your mother..." He glanced down at his hands. "You are the image of her."

I looked down at the blue veins pulsing under my pale-to-transparency skin.

"On the day of your Baptism," my grandmother said, "you were ten days old. Your mother asked me to hold you. She told me she needed to go to the bathroom."

My grandmother and Father Coyne had waited for my mother to return. She didn't. My father was in Vietnam at the time.

"You never ask about her," my father said.

I had asked years earlier. He'd forgotten. I'd run home crying after a schoolmate had called me a dirty gypsy and told everyone not to play with me. It was then he told me my mother was an Irish Traveller. "Common people call Travellers gypsies," my Father had said. He was certain that wherever my mother was, she loved me.

Father Coyne said to me, "God wants us to be your mother." He pointed to my grandmother, my father, and himself.

"All of you?" I asked.

Father nodded.

I knew he was full of crap. I guessed that someone had seen me kneeling in front of the gazebo in our backyard after confession and mistakenly thought I was praying for my mother to come back. No way.

I smiled at my grandmother, my father, and Father Coyne, and right then named them the Holy Trinity.

That was twenty-five years ago. As I sat in the cruiser, I knew that my life was forever changed. Father Francis Coyne had baptized Tim and me and probably Officer Groghan and others who had rushed to St. Brigid's. He taught us why God made us, what was sinful. Even though I've disagreed with him over the years, he was my spiritual foundation.

Some time later, Tim and Mulroney walked up to the patrol car. Tim opened the door and said with formality, "We'd like you to come to the station with us, Bree." Mulroney stood behind him, watching my every move. He couldn't see my stomach knot or read my mind as I said, "Oh, crap, here we go."