

BEHOLDEN

A
MARLOWE BLACK
MYSTERY

GABRIEL FW KOCH

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For my father. A man whose bravery taught me the meaning of life.

In memory of Mickey Spillane, creator of Mike Hammer.

To my wife and daughters with love always.

Chapter One

A total of 466 people died on the nation's highways over the four-day Fourth of July weekend.

A teenage kid playing a quarter of a mile from the Polo Grounds in a park on the Bronx side of the Harlem River fired a .45 automatic into the air in celebration of Independence Day. One of the rounds came back to Earth and snuffed out the life of an innocent bystander named William Boyle several blocks away.

And GIs died again, but this time in a place across the globe named Pohang Falls, Korea.

The calendar in my Flatiron Building's second-floor office remained on June 1950. I noticed it before I turned away from the only death that occurred during the long weekend that directly affected me.

He sat sprawled in *my* chair behind *my* desk and looked like he'd fallen asleep awaiting my arrival. The man wore an expensive but moth-eaten navy-blue wool suit with a wide red tie.

On second thought, he looked more like he had finished off a fifth of whiskey before he collapsed into the seat. Except for the garrote knotted around his neck.

His pale blue eyes were filled with the final horror of violent death, his tongue and lips crusted with a yellow-white scum. His flesh was the color of cigar ash.

I yanked open all the windows before I phoned the cops. The drizzle I escaped by coming inside splattered on the sills and leaked into the room. Hell, the rain made the room smell better.

Then I stepped into the hall, closed the office door behind me, and fired up a Camel cigarette, thankful that I did not have an open case.

The blue smoke clouded over my name stenciled on the entrance door: Marlowe Black Private Investigations Since 1948.

Nothing will be private about this one, I thought, and turned to greet the cops who pounded up the stairs from the street.

Tommy O'Brien, a third-generation New York cop, needed a shave. His ruddy complexion highlighted the effort required to lift his 280 pounds up two flights of steps to my landing. Exertion expressed the strain of his struggle in his strong Irish features.

The smoke from my Camel made his paste-green eyes narrow as he stopped in front of me. He also looked hungover.

Tommy liked his beer.

His partner, Joey "Bambino" Piggerlio, was a wiry Italian—an ex-Marine who survived Iwo. He loved to demonstrate his attitude as he caressed the gnarled butt of his Smith and Wesson .38.

I'd been told he'd shot and killed three criminals in the past two years, but who knows? Might have been street hype. Personally, I didn't give a damn one way or the other. A few criminals called out for death each morning when they faced the rising sun. They begged for it when they ran into a character like Joey with a crappy attitude.

Every guy in a blue uniform knows the type, men who seem glad to put an end to the misery of a life gone terribly wrong.

I waved them inside as Tommy said, "Whadja got?"

"A future client that got himself killed before I could talk to him."

"Don't know him?"

I shook my head and blew a cloud of smoke over his head. "No. Can't say I do."

Joey grinned. The movement lifted a pencil-thin mustache, showed a line of white misaligned teeth, but no humor. "What'd he do? Piss you off? Not pay his bill?"

"Future client," I repeated. "Waiting for me when I opened up... just like you see him. Dead as dried pigeon shit. Doesn't smell much better either. I never saw him before this morning"

The two of them took notes. I waited in the hall for my favorite detective to arrive.

Sergeant Paul Dunbar did not disappoint. He worked out of the thirteenth squad and acted as if the number affected his precinct by jamming it with all the filth the city dished out and randomly threw the dead at his feet.

He and I had fought side by side at the Battle of the Bulge. We were a couple of Battered Bastards of Bastogne, and we got along back then. If we hadn't both of us would have ended up six feet under. But that came up true for a lot of guys during the war.

The present was another story. After I'd put in three years listening to his crap and obeying his orders, I quit the force and became a private cop. Guess he took my decision personally.

He glared at me. His muddy brown eyes were surrounded by shadows and the deep lines formed by a constant frown. He winced dramatically as I exhaled in his direction.

With his right hand, he pushed his snap-brim hat back off his forehead and wiped his brow with a clean monogrammed handkerchief he pulled from the inner pocket of his gray raglan suit.

Dunbar had a fast-receding hairline. He wore the hat indoors and out, but never showed any other sign of vanity.

"Who'd you shoot this time, partner?" He flashed a tight smile as he spoke, the way a man does when faced with something he finds distasteful, like he woke up with a hangover in bed with a two-bit whore.

"Found him like that when I came in. I never saw him before this morning."

Dunbar tried to read my expression. I watched his face without showing a hint of the emotion that roiled behind my eyes.

He glanced into the office and shook his head. I felt like Laurel and Hardy.

After I sucked the last of the smoke from my Camel, I watched him enter to talk with the uniforms. With my thumb, I crushed the smoldering butt in the sand-filled urn at the head of the stairs.

Not long after, the cops were joined by the medical examiner. He

had a way of carrying himself with dignity despite the responsibilities of his job, which was to clean up and explain the rash actions of anger and jealousy. Sometimes both at once, and don't forget to throw in greed.

Dunbar left my office with a brown leather wallet in hand. He wore white cotton gloves, the type he might wear when he donned dress blues. He carefully extracted a driver's license and read, "Gregory Twiggs." He glanced at me. "You ever hear the name before today?"

We had stepped aside and let the M.E. and a couple of cops stretcher-carry the body out and down the stairs.

"No. Who is he? Do you know?" I reached to fish out another cigarette, but stopped myself. I tried to limit myself to five a day. I'd already smoked two and it wasn't close to nine o'clock.

Dunbar read from the dead man's license. "Says here he came over from Jersey." He dropped the wallet into an evidence bag. "Who the hell uses a garrote these days?"

"A weird Parisian," I said. "Came over after VE Day, couldn't find a job, hung around the Versailles on East Fiftieth, got sick to death of the rumba. Who could blame him for turning to crime to make a living?"

Dunbar slowly shook his head and smiled, something that looked genuine. "You always could come up with a story for any situation." He lifted a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, opened it, passed it to me, and asked, "This mean anything to you?"

I read the badly soiled paper. "Pickens at the courthouse, 10:30 a.m. July 2nd." I handed it back to him. "No. Where'd you find it?"

"In his jacket pocket."

"Since I don't know the guy, why would I know about his messages?"

"Guess you wouldn't. Call me if you find out what Mr. Twiggs wanted from you. You've got the number, SP7-3100."

"I don't have to call you, Dunbar. Most likely he wished for the same thing any other new client would want."

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. He wanted help with an extremely

personal problem that only a man with your sensitivity could handle.” The sarcasm dripped slow, like cooling bacon grease.

“Now I understand how you made detective as quickly as you did, Dunbar. You’re almost clever enough to run for mayor.” I went into my office and closed the door. The hard stench of death and the sound of traffic as drivers fought to get one block further before they ground to a halt again surrounded me.

I dug out the phone directory and paged through the T’s until I located Twiggs. There were five in Manhattan, two in Brooklyn, two in Staten Island, and one in the Bronx. I didn’t have a Jersey book, and decided to start with the people who might be family he visited in town.

If I didn’t find anything there, I’d take a ride through the Holland tunnel and see what the Garden State had to offer in the way of assistance.

After I jotted down names and addresses in a new pocket notebook, I grabbed my hat and left the building.

There had to be someone in the city who knew why Gregory Twiggs had needed my help. I’m not your typical private cop, the kind of guy who looked for a cheating spouse or a missing kid or insurance fraud. I often picked up the pieces that the cops scattered around while they tried to solve a serious capital crime that turned out to be unsolvable, based more on their unwillingness to stretch the rules and bend the law than on whether they’re good cops.

All the cops I knew were good cops. It’s just that a few of them were as dog-eared as a well-read dime paperback. Overworked, pressured into service when they needed serious time off. I didn’t know too many cops who still had a wife to go home to. I sure didn’t. Lost her within a year of joining the force. Hurt like hell at the time, but that faded like the sheen tarnished off the gold band I had slipped onto her finger.

As a private cop, I searched out clues with a lot less restraint than

the boys in blue did and therefore I had a high success rate. I used more bullets too.



Foot traffic ran light on East Twenty-third. I pressed into a small crowd headed south and checked my notes for the first address. The place was an older turn-of-the-century walkup near Gramercy Park.

The woman who answered my rap on the front door stood tall for a dame, broad in the shoulders with flat hair the color of chicken broth.

Her look was guarded yet quick. Shallow blue eyes narrowed when she saw me.

She wore a baggy flowered housedress and badly scuffed brown leather shoes. She wiped her hands on the lace-trimmed apron knotted behind her neck and waist. Her hands were those of a woman accustomed to hard work, might have been with Grumman Aircraft during the war. Judging by the wear and tear, I guessed her to be pushing fifty.

She did not resemble Gregory Twiggs in any way I could see except for eye color.

In the background, I heard the Harry James band playing “I Had the Craziest Dream,” and recognized the woman singing lyrics as Helen Forrest. The tune swooned smoothly from the radio and rode the airwaves into the crowded foyer.

“Mrs. Twiggs?” I asked and let her see my PI ticket, shoved the paper back into my wallet, and added, “Your husband home, ma’am?”

Her face slid into a look of acute boredom, as if she was unimpressed with the concept of marriage. She held up her left hand in a way that appeared to be reflexive, high enough for me to see her long, unadorned, work-hardened fingers.

“I’m not married.” Then she quickly let her hand drop to her side. “You can call me Miss Twiggs. What can I do for you, sir?” She had a

quiet but firm voice, sounded self-confident as if she'd been raised in a large family and had been the oldest.

"I'm inquiring around about a man named Gregory Twiggs." I removed my hat. "Looking for relatives."

Her steady gaze never faltered. The radio shifted smoothly into Irving Berlin's "Am I Blue."

"Never heard the name before," she answered. "Could be a lot of Twiggs in the city."

I tried to see over her shoulder. "What brand radio is that?"

She half turned to look back. "It's an old one I got from my father... a Kolster something or other."

"Plays good."

We stared at each other then, like one of us knew there should be more to say but could not form thoughts into words. I struggled to come up with another question of relevance.

Her pale blue eyes shifted and looked cold, like pond ice when it gets more than several inches thick.

"Is that your only question?" she asked, a touch of ironic, impatient tremolos in the words. "I work nights and I'm exhausted. If you don't mind..." She glanced down the way someone who is accustomed to servitude does when attempting to confront a person they feel to be superior.

The jerky movement gave the impression of being ill-timed and contradictory. I did not think she had ever felt less than equal to any man or woman.

I ignored her foolishness while I pulled a business card from my wallet and inquired, "Where do you work?" to try to be polite.

"I'm a nurse at Saint Vincent's...across town." She did not wear a nurse's white uniform. "I enlisted with the WACs during the war, trained on wounded GIs."

"Never shot any rivets then?"

Her expression sparked with humor; her mouth remained flat.

“No. No rivets. No Krauts or Japs either.” She took my card and glanced at it. “This you?”

She held the card up to let me read it, as if she believed I could not possibly be capable of being a private cop, although she had examined my license.

“Yes,” I said. “I got started young.”

“Veteran?”

“Yes, ma’am. Went in at sixteen and served with Patton in Europe.”

“You look young. I think I’ve read about you in the paper recently. Have you been in trouble?”

I was twenty-two and felt ninety after several years of combat during the war, and then a different type of battle on the streets of Manhattan. Sometimes living these days is trouble enough.

“That might depend on who you ask. Please call me if you think of anything, if you remember hearing about Gregory Twiggs. Maybe he’s a distant cousin.”

Or an illegitimate brother, I thought as I turned, put on my hat, and stepped onto her stoop.

“I suppose that’s always possible,” she said. “As distant as Dublin, Ireland. Good day, sir.” A light brogue tumbled her words.

I touched the brim of my hat and walked down to the street, tried to decide what it was about the woman that struck me as unusual. Then I got it. She had not told me her first name.

I decided if she did not know Gregory, I had insufficient reason to return and disturb her again. I did not need to know her Christian name. Guess she didn’t feel as inferior as she tried to get me thinking she might. Good subterfuge.

Nothing like a clever one to start the day, I thought. *Of course, it’s not as bad as finding a body on your chair.*

I pondered a second peculiarity about Miss Twiggs as I walked toward the Bowery. I still wear my Ruptured Duck lapel button. Occasionally the duck gets me a free beer in a bar full of World War

One vets. You might have seen the button on a guy you know.

The feds gave them out to returning GIs to let everyone stateside know we were legit. Since they had released nearly all of us at the same time, the paperwork backed up into the White House; maybe even had Truman's secretary typing in triplicate. The government couldn't issue discharges as fast as they sent us home.

On the small foyer table two feet beyond Miss Twiggs' front door, I spied a pair of women's white gloves and a gold Ruptured Duck button. The button might have been hers, but my gut told me otherwise.

I decided to contact a buddy from the Army. He worked as our company clerk during the war. Now he worked in records storage, still a clerk, a paper pusher in D.C.

Sherman liked to help out and reminisce. Hopefully, I could learn from him if Gregory Twiggs had a military history of his own. Although in this day and age, what guy didn't have a few years of military time under his belt? I skipped the Bowery.

But first, before I called Sherman Horst I needed to check up on the Giants. He was a dedicated Washington Senators fan—of course they had finished dead last in '49 with fifty wins and a hundred four losses—but he always wanted to know how my boys did that week, which would be better than they are if those damn Yankee bums were moved to somewhere else, say California.

If Stankey, Alvin Dark, and the rest of our guys had to meet the Bronx Bombers in the series, then forget about it. The Giants would kick their tails up around their ears. Ain't that a crock?

I grabbed a *Daily News* from the nearest paper stand and flipped to the baseball standings. A quick read-through of the latest stats let me know that my team slipped steadily toward last place after a so-so home stand weekend. I'd have to avoid a conversation with Sherm about the Giants...didn't want to jinx them. Of course, they did not need any help to fall flat on their faces again.

The year was beginning to look like it belonged to the Phillies, God

forbid. We were struggling to hang onto third place in the standings.

I turned back and reached my office building before noon, and lit up, dragged in a lungful of smoke, and felt better about the morning.

The mail was through the slot and scattered across the floor. I scooped it up and dropped the envelopes on my desk without looking at the return addresses.

With my jacket draped on the back of my client chair, I shoved my own chair from behind the desk and used the straight-back, not feeling too good about sitting where a dead man had been after his bowels loosened and the stains soiled the seat cushion.

At least the room smelled better than it had when I left. The cops had taken the ruined pillow from my chair. Evidence, I suppose, but of what I'm less than certain except, perhaps, what he might have digested of his final meal.

Sherman's phone rang several times before he finally answered, stating his title and location in a remote dingy Pentagon basement office in the Army wing.

"Sherman," I said. "This is Marlowe Black. I need you to research military records for a guy named Gregory Twiggs from Union, New Jersey."

"No problem. When do you need them, Deadeye?"

I ground my teeth. I hated nicknames, and especially that one. I became our platoon's first sharpshooter in basic training, hence the moniker.

Most of my friends call me Marl, or Black. However, Sherm always was special. I let it slide.

"ASAP, friend. That okay with you?"

"Yep. I'll call you when I get it done."

"Thanks." I dropped the handset onto its cradle, and reached to smash the remains of my smoke in the glass ashtray when the phone rang.

Fast, I thought, and answered, "What can I do for you?"

The caller turned out to be Dunbar. “Got a bit of information you might find useful, Black.”

“What’s that?”

“Your non-client Twiggs? He lived in a Quonset hut over in Soundview Park up in the Bronx.”

“Not Jersey?”

“Apparently not, pal. Unless of course they moved the Bronx, but who in New Jersey would want it?”

“Right,” I agreed. “Anything else?” I extinguished the butt and remembered why the Soundview Park section of the Bronx sounded familiar.

A couple years back, before William Levitt got busy out in Island Trees popping up a few dozen twenty-five-by-thirty-foot homes a day, 765,000 GIs remained homeless and the city had trouble dealing with their disquiet and disappointment.

Our elected officials got together with the feds, brought in hundreds of twenty-by-forty-eight-foot Army surplus Quonset huts, and set them up in Soundview. Each hut was divided into halves, which allowed the veterans and their families to each live in one end...two families per hut.

Hell of a deal for returning heroes. The GI Bill bailed most of those guys out, but a few, I always thought, never could put their lives back on track enough to get settled outside.

“I didn’t know anyone still lived over there,” I said.

“A lot more than you’d suspect. It’s becoming a slum. Crime is pretty heavy at night. A lot of those poor suckers can’t put the bottle down, and then there’s the narcotics too.”

The thought of veterans wasting their lives after the sacrifices they made in combat got me angry, but I held it from my voice. “Thanks for letting me know. I’ll take a ride over there and see what I can learn from his neighbors.”

We hung up, and I lit another Camel without a second thought. Our country had not been prepared for war, but all of us guys pulled

together and won the damn thing. You'd think the least the government could manage would be to help a guy out after he came home. However, some of us were, I guess, too damaged for the feds to continue giving a damn. A number of families, too, turned their backs on spent GIs, or I'd been told as much by several of the guys I met at the bar on Friday nights.

I went out to the street and took a cab to the Bowery to give myself time to go over things in my head before taking the train up to the Bronx.

The Bowery hid its nighttime horror show under the sheen of respectability offered up by the businessmen who kept their shops open until five. After that, when the sun plunged behind the skyline, the Bowery became a no-man's land from which the average Joe might never return home alive: pawn shops, bars, whores, and flophouses.

I did not feel concerned as long as my Army-issue Colt .45 auto remained tucked under my arm and my fists could still hammer out a good defense. I boxed in the Army, and did pretty well for a guy who is five seven and weighs 140.

I climbed to the third floor after I located the right number for the Helen and Ronald Twiggs who had the courage to live in the heart of the neighborhood. The dark green paint on the door looked badly chipped, peeled off along the edges.

I knocked, could hear the television or radio as some guy I never heard before fired off dialog that sounded like he needed to separate two women who had gotten in a quarrel over the cost of a leg of lamb. You would think they might have something better to do.

I knocked a second time, pounded the panel. The noise from inside died and the silence that replaced it seemed out of place, made my skin crawl, and my hand reflexively lifted to locate the butt of my gun.

Locks were released and the door swung wide, revealing the startled brown eyes of a woman who looked to be close to ninety. On the wall to her right hung a gold star banner with three gold stars sewn

askew by a mother's hand.

Influenced, I felt, by a broken heart, grief she suffered that did not keep her from a powerful display of patriotism, or maybe her effort inspired a stronger sense of it.

She had lost three sons to combat.

I cleared the sudden liquid rush of pain that wedged like unspent grief in the back of my throat. "Ma'am," I said. "I'm trying to locate the family of a man named Gregory Twiggs."

Her face folded into a mask of wrinkles that expressed an emptiness I could not identify.

"Nope."

That was all she said.

My eyebrows rose. "Excuse me?"

"I said nope. You have a problem with your ears, young man?"

"No, ma'am. You surprised me with your quick reply."

"Well, now you know." She turned and I had to put my hand on the door before she could shut me out.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Twiggs, but do you think you might ask Mr. Twiggs if he knows of a Gregory?"

She looked over her shoulder without turning around. "If I don't, he don't. We're not young enough to go anywhere alone."

"But maybe he knew Gregory years ago?"

She frowned angrily. "You with the cops?"

"No, ma'am. I'm private." I showed her my ticket.

She squinted and read the paper carefully. She gazed up to examine my features. She nodded. "I'll ask. You wait right there."

I spied a stack of Pocket Books on a small table a foot inside the door, reached carefully, listened to the mumble of voices, and pushed the paperbacks to scan the spines. An eclectic mix of authors greeted me: J. D. Carr's *Castle Skull*, S. S. Van Dine's *The Dragon Murder Case*, Vicki Baum's *Grand Hotel*, and Rex Stout's *Case of the Red Box*, with a murdered dame sprawled on the cover. She still wore both of her red

stiletto high heels.

Only Stout or Spillane could get away with that, I thought.

The Twiggs' discussion ended abruptly as if one of them said something that got the other mad.

I stepped back, stared at the book on top with the *New York Sun's* review.

She stopped before she reached the doorway and shook her head. "Nope."

A woman of many words.

I thanked her, glanced again at the banner, and still found that the thought of verbalizing how the sight of it made me feel forced me to close my eyes. I knew she watched me.

She scooped up the books and turned away before I could pay my respects to a brave and noble woman. Her door closed quietly, as if to emphasize her dignity.

I stood on the street corner a moment and tried to collect what thoughts I had about Twiggs and got interrupted by a timid male voice.

"Sir? Can you help us?"

My eyelids narrowed when I saw him. I expected the soiled remnants of a wino, or an old man on the bum who looked for two bits to buy a bit of pig snoot and sauerkraut or lamb goulash at the one-arm joint down the corner.

What I got instead proved to be a misplaced pair of tourists who acted as if they were petrified of the need to approach a stranger.

Caution is always a safe bet in that section of the Bowery. He flinched just enough for it to be visible, held his New York guidebook between us like a shield, wore a gold band on his left ring finger.

"Sorry. What's your problem?" I looked him over. *Definitely a lost tourist. Probably newlyweds.*

He wore a wild suit coat made of some cheap blue fabric that looked like crepe paper. His tie was white, real wide, and bore little red and blue icons of New York landmarks. I really wanted to laugh for

the comic relief he offered in the middle of the Bowery. Except that he was serious and nervous.

His redheaded wife looked like she was sixteen and way out of her league. She wore white socks and black loafers under a pleated plaid skirt. Her gorgeous blue eyes glanced away when I met her examination.

“We wanted to get to the ferry that goes out to Miss Liberty.” His voice quivered.

I wanted to say, *Miss Liberty. Is this a joke? You’re not from around here I’ll bet*, but saw the concern that raced through his wife’s innocent, unlined features and nodded. “Sure.”

I rested my hand on his shoulder like a big brother might, turned him, and pointed south.

“You can ride the IRT or the BMT subway down, or take the number six bus.” I explained how to reach any of the three alternatives. Then out of the goodness of my heart, added, “The ferry will cost you seventy cents each...you got kids?”

“No. We’re newlyweds,” the husband told me as if he thought their status was not obvious.

“Well, it’s a good thing you don’t. It’d cost you another thirty-five cents for each kid.” I pushed my hat back and wiped sweat from my brow. “Hope you enjoy your stay in our town. Watch out where you end up. Some parts of the city are not real friendly to people from elsewhere if you get my meaning.”

They walked off arm in arm, talked about how nice some New Yorkers were despite what their parents had told them.

They looked and sounded like a pair of hayseeds and would be smart to not press their luck in the Bowery after dark.

I left and grabbed a cab to the bar and grill at 940 West 57th Street for lunch. I frequently dropped in nights for a cold beer when the Giants played and watched the game on their new television.

I ordered a burger and a beer. The day had fast become a Rheingold Ale kind of day.