

Broken Angels

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Chapter 1

I grew up in a broken family. One moment destroyed even that.

Standing alone in the receiving line, I glanced at the door, wondering if he had the guts to show his face after all this time. And would I recognize him if he did?

The line of friends dressed in black stretched into the hallway. They moved slowly past the polished tables, heavy with flowers, then knelt beside the coffin and said a final goodbye to Lily DiLuca. Sad faces spoke in hushed tones about how sorry they were, but this wasn't their fault. I glanced at the door again. He killed her.

It didn't matter how many flowers they packed into that little room, the smell of death hung in the stale air. The drawn curtains gave the room a dusk-like quality, even though the late afternoon sun burned brightly outside.

I hadn't cried in almost twenty years. Jack DiLuca doesn't cry. It's a sign of weakness. At least, that's what I told myself. But today I struggled to keep it together.

Pop should have been there to share the burden of my loss, but I guess he had more important things to do. He'd stolen all my tears when he left. I didn't consider him family anymore. My hands tightened into fists. Did he even know she was gone? I took a deep breath and exhaled sharply. What kind of a man walks out on his family? The doctor said Ma died from an aneurysm, but I didn't buy it. Ma died of a broken heart.

I turned my gaze toward the casket, and my muscles relaxed. Ma looked peaceful—in heaven, for sure. From what I'd heard about the place, she wouldn't suffer anymore. Something told me she'd still watch out for me, but with a better view.

“Jack?”

An old friend stood at the head of the line.

Mickey “the Mouse” Nolan was short, maybe 5’4” with his shoes on. His dark-brown eyes were too big for his head and sat above a long, pointy nose. With a few more whiskers and the right lighting, he could probably pass for a rodent.

Mick and I were best friends, until we weren’t. He hadn’t spoken to me since a disagreement we’d had seven years ago. His eyes darted back and forth before they found mine.

“Hey, Mick,” I said as if nothing had happened between us.

His mouth formed a straight line, and his hands were balled up, barely visible inside a sport jacket with sleeves that were two inches too long. I couldn’t tell if he was about to burst into tears or take a swing at me. Given my significant height advantage, the latter would be a big mistake.

“I’m sorry, man.” The words spilled out like he’d held them in his mouth too long. Before I could say anything, he reached his arms around me and buried his head in my chest.

I glanced at the people who waited patiently in line behind him and shrugged.

“I’m sorry about everything,” he said in a muffled voice. “About your mom, about being a jerk for the past seven years, and about not being there when my friend needed me.” He lifted his head and fixed his swollen eyes on the wet spot he’d left on my jacket. “I’m sorry about that, too.”

I would have laughed, had I not been standing in a funeral home next to my mother’s open casket.

“It’s okay, Mick.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re here now, and that’s good enough for me.”

I assured him that we’d talk later and waited for the line to move again. I’d been on my feet most of the day, and my ankles burned. I wanted all this to be over.

Inside the church the next day, thick clouds of incense hung in the air. The odor of burnt flowers filled my lungs and turned my stomach. I might have gotten away with smoking a cigarette in the haze. I shifted around on the hard wooden pew and wished I had one on me.

Why did they have to make such a big deal out of death, anyway? I looked at the life-size statue of Saint Francis on the altar and shook my head. Ma had prayed to that guy all the time. So why couldn't he have helped her? I guess he wanted to see her in person. That's nice for him, but now I'm alone.

The standing-room-only crowd seemed to suck all the remaining oxygen from the room, and I struggled for each new breath while the priest droned on. When the congregation sat and the choir began to sing one of those tedious funeral hymns, I walked to the back of the church to find some air. Stepping outside might be considered disrespectful, so I stood beneath a stained-glass window. The lower pane had been pushed open into the cool April morning, allowing a soft breeze to brush the back of my neck. I watched the rest of the ceremony unfold in front of me like a bad movie.

The church was full of friends, but no family. The only relative I knew of, Uncle Frank, evidently hadn't cared enough to make the four-hour trip from Philadelphia. He'd come up for a week after Pop left, then one more time when I got arrested ten years ago. I hadn't seen him since then and probably never would.

The service ended, and I took my place with the other pallbearers. My friend Anthony stood on the other side, staring straight ahead like a soldier. Our neighbor, Mr. Rizzo, stood behind him and gave me a quick nod when our eyes met. It seemed morbid to have to carry your own mother to her grave, but I guess I wouldn't want a stranger to do it.

Heavy gray clouds threatened rain as we slid Ma into the back of the hearse, and when we finally set the casket down at the cemetery, I saw the grave site for the first time. When I thought of Ma being lowered into that dark hole in the ground, I didn't think carrying her was so bad after all. I wanted to look away, but my eyes wouldn't

obey. *It must be cold underground. I hope she packed an extra sweater.* I stepped back and took my place at the front of the gathering.

A quiet numbness washed over me, carrying with it a thousand moments I thought I'd forgotten. I closed my eyes. They didn't open again until a hand touched my shoulder. Startled, I turned to find Mr. Rizzo standing next to me.

"You'll come over to the house, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure. After the ceremony."

He frowned, and his bushy eyebrows nearly met in the middle of his forehead. "Are you okay, Jack?"

People had begun walking to their cars. *It's over?* I couldn't recall anything the priest had said or done, like it'd never happened.

"Do you want a ride?"

"Sure. Just give me a minute."

I took a deep breath, said my last goodbye, then walked down the drive to Rizzo's car. A smokin' blonde in a tight black dress walked in the opposite direction. When the distance closed between us, she stopped.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said.

I nodded politely and watched her walk away. In any other situation, I'd have gone after her. But hitting on chicks at your mother's funeral—even Jack DiLuca can draw that line.

After a small reception at the Rizzos' house, I returned to an empty apartment. I opened a bottle of beer, sat at the kitchen table with my head resting on folded arms, and wished the funeral today had been my own.

Chapter 2

Morning light filled the kitchen and coaxed open my sleepy eyes. The muscles in my neck protested when I lifted my head from the table. *Welcome to the rest of your life, Jack.* Dirty dishes overflowed the cast iron sink and spilled onto the counter. The rattle and hum of our old refrigerator, which I'd grown accustomed to over the years, sounded louder than usual.

I remembered seeing Ma during the night, but that was impossible. She came into the kitchen to get something to eat and told me she knew where Pop was, that he'd gone home to Philadelphia. It had to be a dream. I checked Ma's room, just to be sure, and found it empty like the rest of the apartment.

Back in the kitchen, I cut my toe on the broken linoleum. Our landlord, Mr. Marinelli, had promised to fix it, but he's getting old and forgets things. Pop could have done it if he'd stuck around. I guess I could have fixed it myself, but that felt too much like letting Pop off the hook.

Our house sat just beyond the shadow of Auburn Correctional Facility, and when I was a child, Pop had used its proximity to his advantage. Whenever I misbehaved, which wasn't all that often, he'd drag me out to the front porch and point at the massive concrete wall. No words were ever spoken, but the message was always received.

Ma and Pop had moved from South Philadelphia to this old Italian neighborhood in a small town in Central New York shortly after Ma had become pregnant thirty years ago. The first and only child of Max and Lily DiLuca, I was born John Francis DiLuca on July 18, 1982. We made a perfect little family.

Pop had been my best friend. He taught me how to catch a baseball, how to ride a bike, and how to talk like his *goombahs* from South Philly. He taught me all the swear words when Ma wasn't around. I learned other words too, like *chooch* and *stewnod* and *buttagots*, which translate to varying degrees of "idiot." Words like that come in handy more times than you might imagine.

We laughed a lot, me and Pop. He loved to impress me with his magic tricks, always making stuff appear out of thin air.

"*Ba-da-bing!*" he'd say as he pulled a quarter from behind my ear or changed a dollar bill into five bucks right before my eyes.

I loved to go on road trips with him to visit the zoo or to watch Syracuse Chiefs games. Once a year, he'd take Ma and me to the State Fair, a half hour bus to the fairgrounds in Syracuse. I tasted my first cheese steak there. Pop said they were pretty good, but not as good as Geno's or Pat's back home.

On most summer Saturdays, we'd walk up to Dom's, a little Italian market about two blocks from our apartment. They made the best lemon ice right there in the store and served it in little paper cups. Pop would go in to buy a couple while I'd wait on the bench outside. He'd return a few minutes later and hand me mine with a little wooden spoon stuck in the top. The first taste always made my face scrunch up, and Pop laughed every time. With the possible exception of Sunday dinner, it was the highlight of my week.

Life was good ... until my eighth birthday.

I understand that life changes and that shit happens, but I think fathers should stick around for more than eight years. Something like that can really mess a kid up. Fortunately, Mr. Rizzo stepped up after Pop stepped down. He lived around the corner on Barber Street, and stopped by after work or on weekends to check up on me. He probably felt sorry for me because of Pop leaving. He didn't have any kids of his own, so there was that, too.

Over the years, I developed a mean streak that landed me in trouble more often than not. A year after high school, I got arrested for starting a brawl in some shithole

bar I shouldn't have been in. Mr. Rizzo bailed me out of jail and offered me a job in his construction company. He taught me a lot. I made him proud for the next nine years, at least at work.

After Ma's funeral, I took a few days off, and mostly spent them drinking Jack Daniel's straight from the bottle. On Saturday morning, I stumbled into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. I looked like hell. Of course, my hell was still better than a good day for most of the other guys I knew.

After a long, hot shower and a shave, I checked the mirror again. *That's better.* I ran my fingers back through wavy black hair, still damp from the shower. My eyes looked a little tired, but they were as blue as ever. I flashed the irresistible DiLuca smile that was just crooked enough to make you look twice, then grabbed a twenty from the coffee can in the kitchen and walked downtown.

The blonde from the cemetery sat alone at a corner table in Dunkin' Donuts. She looked in my direction and smiled. I flexed my hands and rolled my head from side to side. *It's show time.* I paid for my coffee and walked over to her table.

"You were at the funeral the other day," I said.

"So were you." She had an air of confidence, or maybe cockiness, about her. A fire smoldered behind her blue eyes.

"Yeah ... it was my—"

"Your mother. I know. I'm sorry for your loss."

I lowered my gaze for a moment, then met her stare. "How'd you know her?"

"I didn't," she replied matter-of-factly. "I know *you*." She picked up her cup and flashed a smile. "Please. Sit."

My eyes never leaving hers, I pulled out the chair across from her and sat. On a scale of one to ten, she was a twelve, with eyes so blue they were almost iridescent. Her unruly blonde curls splashed like waves on her shoulders, and I couldn't wait to get my hands wet.

"Have we met?" I asked.

"My name is Kate Pomeroy." She extended her hand.

"I'm Jack DiLuca, but it sounds like you already know that." We studied each other like wild animals study their prey. I held her hand a little longer than is customary.

She smiled, and I reluctantly let go.

"So, do you live around here?" I asked.

"Yes." She picked up her cup. "I have an office here in town. I'm a psychologist. *Doctor Pomeroy.*"

"A shrink, huh?"

She held her cup in front of her with both hands.

"We spoke at the cemetery," she said before taking a sip.

"Was that you?" I flashed a playful smile and turned up the twinkle in my baby blues. She was direct and a little intimidating, but Jack DiLuca was no pushover. Coupled with my classic Mediterranean good looks, as Ma liked to say, I was pretty much irresistible.

"We went to high school together," she said.

Surprisingly, I had no recollection. "You didn't look like—"

"I've changed a little since then." She smiled and brushed one of those gorgeous curls from her forehead.

"I don't imagine most men who meet you now forget very easily."

"I'm not interested in most men," she said as she brought her cup to her lips.

My day was suddenly looking up. Despite her fancy degree, I held my own and we sparred for another half-hour. We played a game, a mating ritual perhaps, and the tension built with every witty remark. She was good, but I like to think that I was better. What I didn't know was if *Doctor Kate Pomeroy* would play hard-to-get or fold like a lawn chair.

I finished my coffee and set the cup on the table. "You must meet a lot of nut-jobs in your line of work."

"You don't have to be a psychologist for that."

"Do you have a nice couch?"

"Would you like to make an appointment?"

"Do you think it would help?"

"It couldn't hurt." She flashed another one of those killer smiles and picked up her cup.

"Really?" Time to lock and load. "Where did you say you worked?"

"I didn't."

"Maybe you could show me sometime." I raised my eyebrows and grinned.

She looked at her watch. "What are you doing in about five minutes?"

"I'll clear my calendar."

Kate smiled, apparently pleased with my answer.

After a short drive in her red BMW, I watched her unlock a door with her name on it in a large brick office building. I followed her in and she pointed to the couch.

"Have a seat," she said as she walked over to her desk. "I just need to check my messages."

I preferred to stand. A large abstract painting that made no sense to me hung on the wall over a leather couch. I ran my hand along one of the soft cushions and inhaled the smell of new leather. She must be good at what she does. I wondered what that might be exactly.

Kate's demeanor had changed since we'd left the coffee shop, her mischievous smile replaced by a more serious expression. She stood next to a large mahogany desk, phone to her ear. Was she messing with me, or maybe trying to *shrink* me? I walked up behind her and pushed her hair aside to expose the back of her neck.

"What are you doing, Jack?"

I kissed her neck.

Kate put the phone down and turned to face me. She wasn't smiling. "You really don't remember me, do you?"

"Refresh my memory."

Her mischievous smile returned. "We can talk about that later."

Maintaining eye contact, I leaned in until her breath felt warm on my upper lip. A little closer and my lips brushed hers for a moment. I stroked her shoulders and sensed a tiny shiver, a matching desire, but she followed my lead with admirable patience. Our lips finally met, and we moved in a gentle rhythm that quickly morphed into a frenzy of desire. Kate ran her hands down my back and pulled me closer. I tugged at her clothes.

While she worked on my belt, I put my right arm around her waist and picked her up. She let out a squeal. With my other arm, I cleared her desk, pushing everything onto the floor.

I've always wanted to do that!

I laid her down, and soon we were flesh against flesh and the frenzy began again. A wild ride with a finish so intense, it seemed to shake the solid wood desk beneath us. I rose up on my elbows and looked into Kate's blue eyes. When I opened my mouth to speak, she touched my lips with her finger. I'm not sure what I would have said. The blood hadn't fully returned to my brain.

We remained still for a few moments. She stared, and I couldn't look away as the silence grew uncomfortable.

"I gotta tell you, Kate, that was—"

"Mind-blowing. I know." Her hands tightened around my biceps. "We're not finished."

Is she for real? I couldn't hold back a stupid grin. It didn't last long. I felt a chill in her ice blue eyes.

"I had a big-time crush on you, Jack. Senior year."

"Me? I wish I knew."

"I don't think it would have mattered."

"How can you say that?"

"We had one class together." She raised an eyebrow. "Do you remember English class? Mr. Ferrari?"

My stomach twisted. I didn't like where this was going, and I certainly didn't want to talk about the past.

"I sat behind you, a couple of rows over. You used to look right through me."

"Kate ..."

"I sat between you and Margaret Lane. Remember her, Jack?"

I hadn't heard that name spoken for many years, but it haunted me still. I tried to stay cool, and hoped the reason she brought me there wasn't so she could break my balls about something that happened in high school. "I haven't seen her in ten years."

"I know. She moved away after graduation." Kate's eyes drifted. "I hated that bitch."

"C'mon, Kate. That's not—"

"You never looked at *me* that way, did you, Jack?"

"I'm looking at you that way now."

Kate slid her hands into my hair and squeezed until it hurt. She pulled me toward her, and we kissed again. Round two had begun, but I was somewhere else. Something had happened when I heard that name. Something I can't explain.

Kate pushed me away, and the ice blue stare returned to her eyes. She didn't even ask what was wrong. We dressed quietly.

I glanced at the mess on the floor and then at Kate. When I started to speak, she held up her hands to stop me.

"Just go."

I walked down Washington Street toward my apartment. To say it had been an unexpected morning would be an understatement. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven until I heard Maggie's name. I tried to ignore it. Why did Kate have to bring her up? I kicked at the dirt along the edge of the sidewalk.

Clearly Kate wanted another run at Jack DiLuca and that's exactly what she would get. One way or another. Did I mention she was hot?

"Bring it on, Kate."

I crossed the street against the light.