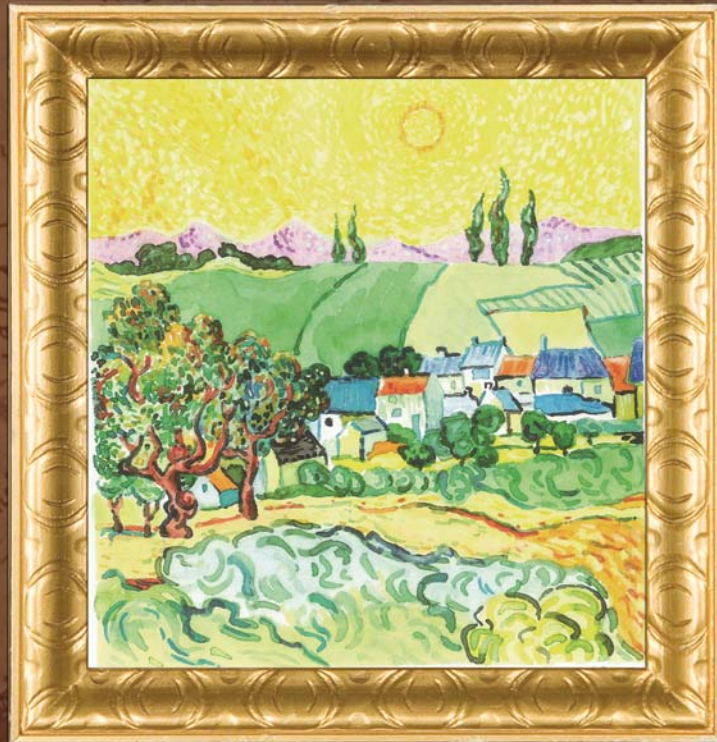


# *Finders*



# *Keepers*

Michael Dennis McDermott

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Michael Dennis McDermott

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*Dedication Page*

This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, Pat, without whom it's all just darkness.

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# Prologue

Everybody knows the New York City subway system. The images of hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of harried commuters have been flashed from one end of this planet to another. One would be hard pressed to find a coolie in remotest China or some animal herder on a Tibetan plateau that couldn't instantly bring to mind the visualization recorded deep in his brain. The herder especially, I would imagine, would summon a wan smile and shake off the image as one of madness.

It's ironic, when one thinks of London, Moscow, or Montreal, the same image doesn't appear. Regardless of the facts, the images of these transit systems are somehow more serene. Some of those systems are newer, some are older, but only one brings forth the chaotic visage.

And the noise, ah the noise. The mental image, no matter how fleeting, is always accompanied by that very particular squeal of brakes. Metal against metal, shoe against drum, with neither willing to yield. This is the mental image of sound. The ominous SQUEEEEEAL!

It's funny, but the mental image is always the squeal. Not the

tap, tap, tapping of a herd of leather shod feet, clicking and clacking, their echoes reverberating from ceramic tiled walls, to steel girder, to cast cement platform and ceiling. It's not the sound of the deepening Doppler murmur as the hordes descend and disappear into the depths. It's not the partial overheard conversation, the shriek of the schoolgirls, the mad ramblings of a street crazy, the boom boxes, or the insane click, click, click, clicking, the tsh, tsh, tshing that is your end of somebody's Walkman. The cacophony of the crowd is non-existent in the mental record.

It's the squeal, always the squeal.

She walked down Prince Street toward the station on the corner of Wooster, in Soho. At five-foot-eight inches and one hundred and twenty pounds, with head bowed to the wind, her purposeful stride said native New Yorker. Dressed in a long leather coat and half heels, her mien was one of confidence and self-assuredness. *New York in early November was not unlike Paris in early spring*, she thought. Cold that belied the forty-two degree temperature, potentiated by the dank humidity, gave a rawness that chilled to the bone.

Attractive, in a certain manner, but not drop-dead pretty, she had brown hair and a nice smile when warranted, and green eyes able to cut you dead when that was warranted. This was the package, a young, sophisticated New York woman.

*That didn't go so badly*, she thought, pursing her lips and nodding an almost imperceptible nod of satisfaction to herself. *That problem is solved and all I have to deal with now is Daddy*. That thought brought a tight-lipped frown. She shook her head and ran the forthcoming conversation through her head. She knew it would be difficult, but she also knew she was right, and that gave her the additional courage to see this matter through.

Holding tight to the handrail, she walked down the stairs and concentrated on keeping her heels from slipping on the moist, steel-jacketed treads. So deep was her concentration she didn't see the woman with the folded stroller waiting nervously on the landing.

She glanced down the platform and noticed it was all but deserted. She often took the train at this time of day and knew this was the usual condition. Closest to her on the platform was a

single male figure. She cast a quick glance as she walked past him; not her type. He was clean-shaven and neat with clean, pressed trousers and some sort of nylon windbreaker; in appearance a respectable twenty-five year old. Yet there was a subdued hint of brutality about him—definitely not her type.

He held a large golf umbrella and seemed to be having trouble opening and closing it. He'd open it, jerk it a couple of times trying to unstick it, and then close it. It would again seem to jam, but then pop open. She walked past him and instinctively, though no threat was even hinted at, clutched her purse, flap toward body, hard to her side. She continued down the platform.

Now in front of her, perhaps another twenty feet or so, danger loomed. A New York City street crazy walked in tight circles mumbling to himself. Twenty-five to thirty years old, she calculated, and dressed in the uniform d 'Generation: Green army field jacket, black watch cap, with filthy trousers and sneakers. He seemed right from central casting.

She slowed her pace, timing her passage so as to pass behind him as he turned from her. Once behind him, she quickened her step and the drama played out.

Beyond her lay the huge expanse of the platform. Another hundred feet, or maybe less, was the kiosk where she always bought her copies of *Art News* and *Art in America* magazines. She felt relief when she saw a New York City patrolman, Transit Division, leaning against the kiosk sneaking a cigarette. On a bench, some ten feet closer than the kiosk, were two black males, high school students she guessed, laughing loudly at some private joke.

She stopped, and as all subway riders seemed to do, she leaned over the platform to see if the train was coming. It's a futile thing, for as often as not the tracks are curved and vision is limited, but today this was not the case. Just as she leaned over the tracks, the train roared into the far end of the station. She felt the warm rush of moist air as it was pushed before the leviathan, and that was the penultimate feeling she ever knew. Her final feeling was too horrendous to describe as her body was hurled before the engine. The last thing she heard was the awful squeal as the motorman locked his brakes in futility.

The man in the street uniform maintained complete awareness of her approach; her purse hanging loose at her shoulder. She clutched it tight to her side. He pretended to ignore her, continuing his little act, and almost smiled to himself when he heard her footsteps change cadence, first slow, and then as he turned from her, sped up again as she passed him.

*Yeah rich bitch, he thought, don't get too close to the great unwashed.*

He turned in her direction, and to the casual eye was merely completing his latest circuit. In a glance, he took in the girl leaning over the tracks, the two teenagers, and the cop far down the platform.

There was no one on the other side of the tracks on the downtown line.

Three quick steps and he struck! He grabbed her purse with his left hand and held tight. Before she could react, he hit her with a vicious overhand right fist to her temple. Because her hand, in a reflexive grip, held tight to her purse, which he too was holding, she didn't go down. Her knees buckled from the blow, then the grip relaxed. Now instead of ripping the purse from her grasp, he held tight to it and pushed her to the rails.

Somewhere between his initial attack and the push sending her to an unspeakable death under the shrieking train, she let out an ear-piercing scream.

All the terror of death was in that wail, and though it soon blended with the squeal of the train, it did not go unheard.

With the purse now locked solid to his side, the mugger sped toward the staircase. The two teenagers, alerted by the scream, realized what was happening and raced down the platform in pursuit. Slower to react than the teenagers, the policeman lumbered in their wake.

As the mugger passed the man with the umbrella, he risked a quick glance over his shoulder and was terrified to see the boys, with huge flying steps, were all but on him! Up the steps, two at a time, he raced.

In another five seconds the kids might have caught up with him, but just as they were passing the man with the umbrella, he

turned into them as the umbrella popped open. The three of them went down in a sprawling mass. One of the teens went skidding forward on his hands and knees but the other one, though he fell, managed to go into a roll and soon regained his footing. Three more steps and he was taking the stairs two at a time with the transit cop hot on his heels.

As the cop, preceded by the youth, attained the landing, the woman with the now open stroller turned into them. It looked as though her eyes first followed the purse snatcher and then turned to see what was transpiring. The teenager again went down after getting entangled in the stroller. This time his wrist snapped with an audible CRACK! He fell and screamed in agony as the transit cop fell on him.

The mugger, now blended into the street scene, grabbed a gypsy cab to freedom.

Within minutes the panic on the platform subsided and a quick response by E.M.S. and the Police department calmed the scene. Power had been shut off to the tracks and the Fire Department, along with track maintenance personnel, were working to jack up the train to retrieve the mangled corpse of the girl.

On the platform first aid was being administered to the two all but heroic boys, and the cop was making a preliminary report to the responding detectives.

The man with the umbrella and the lady with the stroller were nowhere to be found. Afraid of becoming involved? Afraid of being called stupid and clumsy? Who knows, they were gone!

Within a few hours the system was back to normal. A girl was dead, a family would mourn, and twenty-seven thousand commuters were inconvenienced. The late edition of the *Post* would scream in alliteration, "Crazy Kills Coed," and the Channel 1 News street reporter would finish her piece. And as they faded to black, all to be heard was the rumble of the train and the squeal of the brakes.



# Chapter 1

I just returned to my apartment and I wasn't happy. It's not that I was unhappy, I understood the nature of the problem and both sides maintained reasonable positions to a certain degree. So let's change unhappy to frustrated.

I'd grown up in a large brownstone in the Ridgewood section of Queens. My parents purchased the building from the estate of the deceased owner, a successful art dealer. The joke in the family was there was a Picasso hidden somewhere in the walls and finders keepers. Funny, it was always a Picasso and not a Rembrandt or Renoir. I don't think anybody even knew what kind of art the poor soul had handled.

That's where we lived and I grew up. No brothers, no sisters, only Mom, Dad, and me. My parents married somewhat late in life, and I suppose one child was all they thought they could handle. When I once asked my mother why I had no siblings, she told me I was so perfect there was no need for another child. At that point my father piped in with his usual teasing levity, "Your mother has it all wrong. You were so miserable a child we thought our hearts couldn't take the strain of another like you."

I told him he was “full of soup,” we laughed, and there it ended.

The truth is, I was a good kid.

As I look back now, high school was a blur and St. John’s University a little less so. Having no real passions, I majored in English and sleepwalked through the attendant liberal arts courses. Over the dinner table we talked of teaching, but the thought of that, too, left me empty. Just before graduation a classmate mentioned the test for the police department was coming up. I never even thought of becoming a policeman, but it seemed like it might make an interesting career.

I passed the test with flying colors, breezed through the academy, and by the age of twenty-two, I became a patrolman for the NYPD.

Those first three years I lived at home. My first assignment was to a precinct in a “High Crime Area”—Brownsville-Bed Sty. It’s a terrible place where I encountered every sort of human misery each day. The decent people of the area were held captive by their poverty, which was exacerbated by their lack of education. Not just formal education, mind you, but the education coming from a loving home life and caring community. Generations, one piled upon another, of poverty, of welfare, of drug and crime ravaged streets, left no shred of hope, no glimpse of the so-called American dream, no anything except despair. Slums, decay, ignorance, and vermin were the four horsemen who reigned over those sour streets, and the poor people who trod them believed those streets ran to infinity.

I worked in a terrible, joyless place, but then I made Sergeant and I transferred to a West Village precinct.

Although I knew it tore a small piece from my parent’s hearts when I did it, I got myself this apartment on West 73rd Street. It was time to grow up.

The brownstone my parents owned was a three family structure. We lived on the main floor: three huge bedrooms, kitchen, one-and-a-half baths, etc. The upstairs contained an identical apartment, the basement a very large studio.

They rented out the upstairs apartment and the basement studio, which provided my parents with a very nice supplemental

income. The upstairs apartment housed a conservative Jewish couple with two children close to my age. They were clean, quiet people, active in their Temple, and they tended to socialize with their own. We had very little social intercourse with them. They paid their rent on time and kept to themselves.

The basement apartment proved to be more problematic. Not suitable for a family, it tended to rent to more transient types. There were no problems with it, thank God, only a greater turnover.

Everything went well until Mom suffered a stroke in May of 1991.

German-Americans of a certain age know nothing of salad or sushi. Their tables are crowded with Braten or Wurst, potato dumplings sliding down like butter but sticking like mucilage, and the richest desserts of Strudel or Black Forest, and, oh yeah, some beer.

Not what you might call Dr. Jones' heart smart diet.

Mom's carotid arteries were all but blocked solid by an amalgam of sludge cutting off almost all the oxygen her brain needed to survive. She never knew what hit her, and at age seventy-two she died.

To lose a mother is a dreadful thing, but for all the pain of loss, it is never completely unexpected. Rather it is, after all, inevitable. Parents are older and no matter the suddenness as they are snatched away, the void is anticipated.

Not so, I don't think, between husband and wife. Their intellect tells them death looms, but they are the same age, on the same track, and one's mortality is seldom considered, and neither is that of the spouse.

As you can imagine, Mom's death hurt me, but Dad's anguish was impossible to access. Who knows what transpires between two people who have committed their lives to each other. We cannot judge the pain without first experiencing the pain, and any attempt to do so is futile.

The effect on Dad by Mom's passing was as palpable as it was poignant, and like the proverbial balloon leaking air, his life ebbed away.

Small things, big things, the usual rounds encountered. Trips to doctors, trips to labs, trips to hospitals and pharmacies, and on

and on until...

Can life travel at different speeds at the same time? Over the course of three years Dad faded, and yet in an instant he, too, was gone.

With Teutonic efficiency, Dad made arrangements while still able, and I became the sole heir. I inherited a very nice chunk of change, and the house, of course. My first impulse was to sell the house and convert everything to cash. Dad's lawyer advised against it.

The house, now with three rental units, threw off a huge income. The two large apartments brought in eighteen hundred a month each, and the studio around seven-fifty. The taxes were low and even after the huge hit by New York State for inheritance taxes, it was all upside.

Well, so I thought.

Soon after Dad's death I was approached by Mr. Rivkin, the upstairs tenant, about the possibility of his purchasing the house. I told him I would consider it but first I had to discuss it with the lawyer. When I told him of my intention to keep the house, he became angry and within eight months he bought a different house and moved out.

I was left with only Julie, a Bear Stearns secretary, in the basement studio.

To make a long story short, the lawyer made a deal with a local real estate agency and they soon found new, suitable tenants. They provide the tenants, but that's where their responsibility ends. I still have to manage the property. Nothing for nothing, the lawyer said.

What does "manage the property" mean? First, collect the rents. Not too unpleasant a task, I agree. The real pain is handling all the small maintenance problems.

It seemed I was always looking for someone to fix this or that. I'm not the handiest guy in the world, nor do I have the inclination to schlep out to Ridgewood when a light switch wouldn't or a door lock couldn't.

These petty annoyances continued until about two-and-a-half years ago. At that time, Julie informed me she was moving in with her boyfriend, and perhaps I should start looking for another

tenant. I called the real estate broker and put him on the case.

And he came up with Ted!

Ted was a union carpenter, divorced, about my age, and Ted proffered a wonderful idea. For a moderate reduction in rent he would see to all the repairs and maintenance. Not only a journeyman carpenter, he was also skilled in plumbing, electricity, painting, and a host of other skills.

He was a gift from an empathetic God. I checked him out, and he took only one pop for marijuana smoking. He could smoke salmon in the basement as far as I was concerned.

We became friends of a sort, and he took over almost all of my responsibilities. Hell, he even collected the rents.

There was one problem though: Ted is about as thick as Jackie Mason's accent. He is in constant disagreement with the other tenants. He berates them about excessive noise, not recycling, leaving garbage pails uncovered, and a plethora of other petty annoyances. It seems as though every three or four months I would have to meet with one of the other tenants and smooth some rumpled feathers.

I'd just gotten back from Ridgewood after settling another silly dispute, and about to pour myself a dram of my favorite single malt, when the phone rang.

