

# Broken Angels

David Homick

©2018 David Homick

## Chapter 1

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

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?"

I looked up. 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 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 best 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 just 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 was 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.