

# KEN BRUEN

IRELAND'S MOST ACCLAIMED CRIME-WRITER



*Headstone*

SOME PEOPLE HELP THE LESS FORTUNATE. OTHERS KILL THEM.



## About the Book

Evil has many guises, and Jack Taylor is personally acquainted with most of them. But nothing has ever truly terrified him - until he encounters a group called Headstone.

An elderly priest is beaten, a special-needs boy brutally attacked.

As another appalling act of violence alerts Jack to the horror spreading through Galway City, he realizes he must fight back.

But to do so, and win, he knows he must relinquish the remaining shreds of what makes him human.

And he's not sure that even he has got what it takes ...

From the author of recently released films *Blitz* and *London Boulevard*.

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About the Author

Also by Ken Bruen

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KEN BRUEN

***Headstone***

A Jack Taylor Novel

Philip Spitzer, agent extraordinaire  
Lukas Ortiz, *mi hermano*  
Joel Gotler, the Wizard  
Renate Hutton, who, wonderfully, buys the books

# Prologue

He drained the last of the pint, thought,

*'Christ, that was good.'*

Another Jay?

Tempting?

Phew-oh.

But he'd had two alongside the batter of pints already. Primarily, he needed a cig.

That tipped the balance. He could already feel the first hit of ferocious nicotine.

He moved from his stool, brushed the dandruff from his jacket. Normally he didn't notice it, but he'd caught sight of himself in the old mirror with the slogan MY GOODNESS, MY GUINNESS and a frazzled comic zookeeper chasing a pelican with pints of the black in his beak. Nearly made him smile; you just didn't see those ancient slogans any more. More's the Irish pity. He cursed anew those damn black jackets that showed up every fleck of white. Like stranded drops of snow. He said,

*"Night all."*

Got a few muttered 'God bless'es.

No warmth though.

Fecking media had given his profession the taint of leprosy. Grudgingly, he conceded that not paying for any of his drinks the whole evening might be a factor.

He thought,

*'Bad cess to ye.'*



Outside, he stared at the church. St Nicholas's. One of the two Protestant outfits in the city. They claimed some hoof-marks inside the door were made by Christopher Columbus before he set sail to find the New World. He figured they needed all the lures they could conjure. He got out his pack of Major, the strongest Irish cigarette - none of that Marlboro Light shite for him. Smoke or fuck off. He wouldn't be surprised if the decaffeinated-tea rumour was true.

Flicked his Bic.

Got the first lethal drags of smoke into his starved lungs. When the blow came to the back of his skull, hard,

he dropped the cig, nearly fell. Then a massive kick to his stomach brought him to his knees. The mix of Jameson and Guinness spewed forth like a nervous confession. He heard,

'Fucking bastard's spewing.'

Another forceful kick laid him flat on his back. He could barely see, had the mad thought,

*'Nothing good happens outside a Prod church.'*

Though he could barely see from pain, he registered three figures. Was one a girl? He heard,

'He's wearing his dog collar.'

And it was ripped from his neck with the chant of 'Woof-woof.'

A hand in his jacket, ripping out his wallet. Holding it up for the others to see, a male voice going,

'He's got a photo in here.'

The chorus,

'Who is it then? Britney? Lindsay Lohan?'

An answer.

'Some old cunt.'

His mother.

He made the drastic mistake of trying to get up; surely the young people still had some respect?

Right.

The next kick broke his nose.

He fell back.

The girl stood over him, sneered,

'Trying to see up my skirt, yah pervert?'

And shredded the photo into his face. She paused, added,

'Nearly forgot this.'

Spat in his face.

He heard,

'Who's for a pint then?'

As they moved away, he allowed himself a tiny flicker of hope, till one hesitated, came back and, with slow and deadly aim, kicked him in the side of his head and laughed.

'Forgive me, Father, for *you* have sinned.'

A light rain began to fall, drenching what remained of his mother's torn photo. She'd always wanted him to be a priest. As his eyes rolled back into his head, he muttered,

'Top of the world, Ma.'

# 1

*'A headstone is but a slab of granite lashed by an  
indifferent wind.'*

Caz, Romanian domiciled in Galway

THINGS WERE LOOKING up. Late October had brought a week of Indian summer. Was it global warming, the world going to hell?

Who cared?

We grabbed it while it lasted.

Eyre Square, people lying out in the sunshine. Ice-cream vendors peddling slush at five euro a pop. The country had on a second referendum said yes to the Lisbon Treaty. We took that for what it was ...

A brief stay from Death Row.

I was coming off the worst case of my bedraggled career. Literally, a brush with the Devil. I muttered,

‘Darkness visible.’

Had sworn,

‘Never, never going down that dark path again.’

Whatever it was,

the Occult,

devilment,

Xanax,

delusion,

it had shaken me to the core. I still kept the lights on in the wee hours, in my apartment in, get this, Nun’s Island.

Who said God had no sense of the ridiculous?

To add bemusement to bafflement, I’d met a woman. After the Devil, I’d gone to London on one of those late-deal internet offers. Met Laura. An American, aged forty-two, and, to me,

gorgeous.

She made my heart skip a beat. She was a writer of crime fiction. At my most cynical, I thought I was simply material for her next book. A broken-down Irish PI, with a limp and a hearing aid.

Yeah, that would fly.

Did I care?

Did I fuck.

She liked me.

I grabbed that like the last beads of the rosary. She had rented a house in Notting Hill and was due to come and stay with me for a week. But hedging our collective bets, we went to Paris for five days, to see if there was any real substance in what we thought we had. February in that wondrous city. Should have been cold and bitter.

Nope.

Such gods there are gave us the Moveable Feast. Glorious freak spring weather. We had a lovely hotel close to the Irish Institute and were but a *bonjour* from the Luxembourg Gardens, where we spent most of our time. I was nervous as a cat, so long since I'd been in bed with a woman - a woman I hadn't paid for, that is. My scarred body, I dreaded she would be repulsed by it. The opposite, she seemed to embrace my hurt and pain. Whispered as she ran her fingers along one lengthy scar,

'No more beatings, Jack, OK?'

Worked for me.

In Hemingway's beautiful memoir, he writes of the miraculous time he and his wife had and how they felt it would last for ever. And wood was all around them and he never touched it for luck. I said that to Laura, she answered,

'You touched my heart, that's all the luck we need.'

Would it were so.

Sweet Jesus.

I'd sworn that despite the French and their customs, you'd never catch me eating food in the park. I'd never be

un-inhibited enough to grab a roll and eat it as I lay on the grass.

I did, loved it – a bottle of Nuits Saint Georges, amazing French sandwiches, wedges of cheese, the almost warm sunshine and Laura. Jesus, it was heaven. I even rolled up my shirtsleeves. Made her laugh out loud. She said,

‘My God, you heathen, you.’

Like that.

We did all the tourist crap and relished it. Got our photograph taken on Boulevard Saint Michel. I carry the photo in my wallet and never, never look at it now. I can’t. But it’s there, like the blessing I once believed I’d been granted. Went to the Louvre and made her laugh again when I said the Mona Lisa was little more than a postage stamp.

In Montmartre on the second-last day of our holiday, drinking café au lait in an early-morning bistro, she reached across the table, took my hand for reasons none at all, said,

‘You make me happy.’

Jesus, *mon Dieu*, me, making anyone happy. I was fit to burst.

Our last evening, in a restaurant on the Left Bank, she literally fed me escargots and I thought,

*‘Fuck, if they could see me in Galway now.’*

And then her idea:

‘Jack, if my next book deal comes through, would you consider living here for six months?’

Was she kidding? I’d have stayed there right then.

In bed that night, after slow lingering lovemaking, we were entwined in each other and she asked,

‘Are you content to be with me, Jack?’

I told the truth:

‘More than my bedraggled heart could ever have imagined.’

After, when I got home and we were arranging for Laura to come to Galway, I went to the church, lit a candle, pleaded,

‘I’ve never asked for much, but if it doesn’t screw with some inflexible divine plan, could I please have this woman with me, could Paris be indeed a Moveable Feast?’

And the candle flickered, went out.

An omen?

Maybe.

My drinking. She was aware of it, Jesus, how could she not be? But she seemed to think there was hope.

I abetted the illusion. No doubt I’d fuck it up. Sure as the granite on the walls of Galway Cathedral. But if this were my one last day in the sun, then I intended to bask.

My odd-times friend/accomplice/conscience was Stewart. A former drug-dealer who’d reinvented himself as a Zen-spouting entrepreneur. He’d saved my life on more than one occasion. I was never sure if he actually liked me, but I sure as fuck intrigued him.

I could hear strains of Loreena McKennitt carried on the light breeze from somebody’s radio. Worked for me, till my mobile shrilled.

I answered, heard,

‘Jack?’

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s Stewart.’

Before I could snap off some pithy rejoinder, he said,

‘Malachy has been badly hurt.’

Father Malachy, bane of my life. Close confidant of my late mother, he despised me almost as much as I despised myself. Stewart still clung to the notion that I could be redeemed. Malachy believed I had no future and my present was pretty much fucked too. His ingrained hatred of me was fuelled by the fact that I’d once saved his clerical



arse. He could have been the poster boy for 'No good deed goes unpunished.'

But I took no joy in him being hurt, unless I was the one who did the hurting. He was part of my shrinking history and I clung to the battered remnants like an early-morning wino and his last drops of rotgut.

I asked,

'How?'

Pause.

Stewart was trying to phrase it as delicately as he could, gave up, said,

'He was mugged.'

I nearly went,

'But he's a priest.'

The awful fact wasn't that priests were mugged in our shiny new country, it was that more weren't.

Stewart said that Malachy was in UCHG, the University Hospital, in Intensive Care. I said I'd get up there straight away. He said, hesitantly,

'Ah Jack, go easy.'

Then a thought hit me.

Hard.

Steel in my voice, I asked,

'You think I did it?'

'Of course not.'

I eased, said,

'Well, least you think I have some standards.'

He shot back,

'If you mugged him, he wouldn't be in the hospital.'

'What?'

'He'd be in the morgue.'

And he clicked off.

\*

Reluctantly, I left Eyre Square. Was it my imagination or was the sun already receding? The recession was in full

bite. We'd buried the Celtic Tiger ages ago. The papers carried daily dire forebodings of worse to come. The spectre of emigration was looming all over again.

And yet.

A huge new outlet for TK Maxx had just opened. '*Designer clothes at affordable prices.*' At the Grand Opening a week earlier, people had queued for seven hours beforehand. The line of recession-proof people had stretched from the statue of Liam Mellows, our Republican hero, past Boyles Betting Shop (free coffee for punters!), along Cuba nightclub's pink façade, and of course past the inevitable off-licence (ten cans of Bavarian Lager for ten euros) to the very doors of the new shopping Mecca.

On the great day, a local had invoked St Anthony's brief:

Flee, you hostile powers,  
the lion of the tribe of Judah,  
the root of David hath conquered ... Alleluia.

St Anthony wasn't available that day, the only alleluias we were familiar with were mangled versions of Leonard Cohen's classic by *X-Factor* wannabes.

Recession, my arse.

Swine flu continued to stalk, slowly but deadly, across the land. The death toll was higher than the government would admit. But hey, they had good news: we'd only a year to wait for the vaccine.

And just to add a kick in the balls, they said,  
'It will be administered according to priorities.'  
Meaning the likes of me weren't in the top ten.

I passed down by HMV, who were touting Season Three of *Dexter*, the serial killer who only kills the bad guys.

Maybe we could import him.

Then down past Abrakebabra, the home of the drunkard's beloved late-night kebab. I turned at what used to be Moon's shop and is now the posh Brown Thomas, selling the latest Gucci handbag at the amazing price of only three thousand euros.

I doubt my late dad ever saw three thousand pounds his whole wretched life.

I passed Golden Discs, now closed – the lease had run out – and reached the abbey. Recently renovated, it looked much the same, except the price of a Mass card had skyrocketed. I dipped my fingers in the Holy Water font, blessed myself and headed for St Anthony's altar. I lit a candle for Malachy and for my legion of dead and departed. At the rate those I knew were dying, I could open my own private cemetery, issue loyalty cards and, why not, air miles.

You want something from St Anthony, it's real simple.

Pay him.

I did.

Shoved a large note in the slot and momentarily was lost for words.

So many dead.

The best and the brightest, as always. I prayed for a little girl, Serena May, who still tore the heart out of my chest.

Back when I'd been trying to find who killed Stewart's sister, I spent a lot of hours with the Down syndrome child of my close friends, Jeff and Cathie. The little girl filled me with wonder and yearning; it was like I felt my life had some meaning. Her gurgle of delight when I read to her did what gallons of Jameson failed to do: it gave me ease. Her terrible death, literally in my presence, was a lament of such horrendous proportions that I had a complete breakdown and was in a mental hospital for months. Some things you never reconcile and Serena May was my daily burden of love and care, crushed beyond all recognition.

I prayed for Cody, my surrogate son, dead because of me.

Back in the time of the Tinkers, I'd taken on a young impressionable kid, one of those wannabe-American young Irish who saw the world through a cinema lens. In the

beginning, I'd given him literally errands to run, but over time we'd developed a bond, so that I came to regard him as the son I'd never have. It was a time of richness, of joy, of fulfilment in my shattered life. And what the gods give ... they sure as fuck take away.

Mercilessly.

He was cut down by a crazed sniper with a hard-on for me.

His loss was a cross I'd never climb down from.

Finally, I asked that I might find a modicum of peace.

## 2

*'It's not what you read, or even study, it's how you bend the material to shape and endorse your own dark designs.'*

Caz

THE BASEMENT WAS lit by thirteen black candles. A flat slab of granite in the rough design of a headstone was supported by beer crates and acted as a table. Three ordinary kitchen chairs were placed thus:

two on the right side,  
one, almost forlorn, on the left.

On top of the table was an ornate throne, rescued from a theatrical shop – like most businesses, gone bust: the throne had been dumped in a skip. It had been cleaned up and now was alight with velvet cushions and a decorative banner, proclaiming THE NEW ORDER.

Behind, pinned on the wall, were:

a massive swastika,  
a black and white map of a school,  
a worn, battered T-shirt of one of the death-metal groups.

On the right side of the table were two brothers, Jimmy and Sean Bennet. They could have passed as twins but Sean was actually three years older. They both had long black hair that they seemed to take turns in flicking out of their eyes. They came from one of the wealthiest, oldest Galway families and had inherited, aside from shitloads of cash:

arrogance,  
entitlement,  
deep, seething, malignant resentment.

An Irish version of the Mendoza brothers, but it was unlikely they'd even heard of that infamous duo. Their

range of knowledge was limited, like products of all the wealthiest schools. They smoked continuously, Marlboro Red, and had identical Zippos, chunky ones with the logo:

#### HEADSTONE.

Opposite them was a girl. Currently answering to Bethany. That changed as frequently as her mood. Her current look was Goth: deathly pale face, black mascara, eyeliner, lipstick and, of course, raven hair to her shoulders. As Ruth Rendell titled her novel, *An Unkindness of Ravens*.

She was very pretty beneath all the gunk and she knew it. More, she knew how to use it. She was twenty-three, burning with a rage even she no longer knew the motive for. She had embraced hatred with all the zeal of a zealot and relished the black fuel it provided.

On the throne was Bine.

Older than all of them and so intoxicated by power he never even thought of his real name any more. In front of him was a small bust of Charles Darwin. He had studied the man and completely misunderstood what he'd read.

His crew were dressed as he'd ordered: black sweatshirts, combat pants and Doc Martens. With metal toes. To his side was a wooden crate containing:

six grenades,  
three assault rifles,  
a riot of handguns,  
eight sticks of gelignite.

Two years – count 'em, two fucking years – of bribery, cajoling, stealing, to assemble that arsenal. They were, he felt, almost ready. He gestured to Bethany, said,

'Drinks.'

Like most raised in a privileged fashion, he had no fucking manners.

A fleeting frown crossed her face, but she rose, fetched the bottle of Wild Turkey, the inevitable bottles of Coke,

*'cos everything goes better with it, right?*



Brought them to the table, thinking,  
*'Same old macho bullshit.'*

Jimmy, always anxious to please, fetched the heavy Galway crystal tumblers and Bethany poured lethal dollops of the Turkey, with a splatter of Coke, handed the first to Bine.

He raised his, toasted,  
*'To chaos.'*

As was the custom, they near finished the drinks on a first attempt and all managed to stem the 'Holy Fuck' that such a dose of Wild demanded.

Bine, his cheeks aflame, said,  
*'To business.'*

Sean stood.

Once, he'd sat while reporting and Bine had slashed his face with a Stanley knife.

Sean said,  
*'Attacks: we've hit the old priest and await your next target.'*

Bine moved his finger, meaning *'Refills.'*

That done, he seemed almost relaxed. He caressed his manifesto. By mangling Darwin, he'd managed to convince them of the urgency of ridding the city of:

the misfits,  
the handicapped,  
the vulnerable,  
the weak,  
the pitiful.

Bethany thought it was a crock, but Bine gave her an icy cold channel for her rage, so she acted like she bought into his motives. And though she despised herself, she had such a lust for him she was prepared to go along with whatever frenzy he'd envisaged. It sated her need to lash out alone.

Bine said,  
*'James?'*

Jimmy leaped to attention, went and got the nose candy, a mini headstone with cocaine done in nice consecutive lines, and, presenting a fifty-euro note, offered the gear first to Bine.

He did three lines fast, moved the stuff to Sean, who did the same, followed by Jimmy and, finally, Bethany.

She didn't give a proverbial toss that they were as chauvinistic as the very society they decried; she did four lines just to fuck with the system.

She smiled as the dope jolted and at their almost boyish cries of

'Sweet Jaysus,'

'Darwin rocks,'

'Bring it on, muthahfuckahs.'

She watched Bine carefully, even as she felt the icy dribble down her own throat. Christ on a bike, that was A-1 dope; she was in danger of speaking, such was the potency. She knew the K could take him either way:

magnanimous

or

malevolent.

He caught her stare, asked,

'The knife?'

She produced the new Japanese blade he'd ordered - serrated edge and as sharp as a bishop avoiding paedo allegations.

He studied it, asked,

'And this is for whom?'

She bit her tongue, said,

'As you desire.'

Fuck, even to her own self she sounded like a wench in an Elizabethan drama or, worse, a bad Russell Crowe medieval romp.

He moved his finger along the edge, letting the fine blade draw blood, and sucked at it, the blood on his lips. She knew sex would be rough and violent, and the stupid