

Punishment: A Legal Thriller By Linda Rocker

Chapter Two

If you're thinking about committing an interesting crime, West Palm Beach is a natural choice for location. The weather is good from October through June, and if you ignore the occasional destructive hurricane or tornado, there is little that stands between a competent killer and his prey. No nasty gloves or boots, no snow tires or scrapers, no slippery streets or sidewalks. All this environmental ease may account for a high crime rate, but the annual tide of sun seekers with deep pockets is at least as much to blame for the sobering statistics about the chances of harm on the Treasure Coast. Still, West Palm is a small town with its resident population of petty criminals, larcenous storekeepers; pill-popping, juiced-up armed robbers; and crazed rapists. And then there are the regulars.

Jack McGinty was definitely one of the regulars. He had his first drink at the age of seven. His mother sent him late in the morning of that day to find his grandfather.

“Start at the Dew Drop Inn, and go in every bar on that block. You'll find him at one of them, and if you don't, then you'll have to go to the park. He'll be asleep on a bench, no doubt. And don't you show him no disrespect, neither. He's your pa's pa.”

Jack retied the loose laces on his high-tops and took off at a sprint for the corner. He knew why Ma wanted Gramps back soon. Today was his sister's communion, and nothing was going to spoil Marie's big day with God—especially not an old drunk smelling of cheap scotch.

He got lucky. Gramps was on the first stool at the bar. *That was a good sign,* thought Jack. *When Gramps was really far gone, he moved to a booth, knowing that the stool was an accident waiting to happen.*

Whitey McGinty looked up just as Jack came through the door. “There’s my son’s son, by God, and he’s come to join his old grandpappy to celebrate on this fine occasion.”

Another good sign, thought Jack, *He still remembers what’s happening today.*

“A wee one for Jack here,” called Whitey.

The bartender looked carefully around the room. Although it was only ten in the morning, the place already reeked of stale beer and cigarettes, that olfactory trademark that distinguishes a true barroom from one of the trendy bistros that had recently appeared nearby. He wasn’t all that worried about being busted for serving kids, knowing that the neighborhood cops would do nothing but give him a warning. No, it was pouring more rotgut into Whitey that worried him. One or two more and Marie would be missing a grandparent at the communion.

“Let’s go, Gramps,” pleaded Jack, “Mama’s gonna kill us both.”

“Sonny, I’ll not have ya disrespect your elders. Now put your keister down there, and drink what’s set before ya, and say thanks to Almighty God that made this glorious day.”

The burn Jack felt when the whiskey hit his throat was a sensation he never forgot. Years later, when he had the lead at AA meetings, he not only described that hair-raising, gut-wrenching feeling, but he’d swear his body had perfect recall of it as well.

When he puked on the tree lawn walking home with his very drunk grandfather more than an hour later, he swore he'd never touch the stuff again.

That was forty years ago: forty years of binges, of drunk tanks all over the country, of stints in the county workhouse and a dresser full of DUIs. It was also twenty years of promises—to himself, to his mother, and to a long string of girlfriends. Twenty years of meetings, of holding hands with a bunch of sweaty strangers, of talking bullshit for their benefit and thinking only of a stiff Johnnie Walker while they recited the Lord's Prayer.

“What a joke,” he thought, as he stared at himself in the unframed mirror. *“The closest I ever came to ‘serenity’ was when I was passed out and didn’t feel the big hole in my middle, the one that ached for the first hit in the morning.”*

“Well, that was all peanuts, small-time stuff,” he crooned to his image as he tried to steady his hand with the straight blade, which was making unexpected bolts across his chin. As he reached for a piece of toilet paper to stick on the cut blossoming into a bud of red to the left of his mouth, he thought about his current situation and about his AA sponsor's words of advice: “Repentance won't do it this time, buddy. Vehicular homicide is damned serious stuff, and we're talking about killing a kid to boot. Whatever they offer you, even if it's eight to fifteen years in the slammer, I wouldn't go to trial on this one.” Jack had taken his words to heart, since he knew that his sponsor just happened to be one of the best defense lawyers in the county.

What Jack hadn't shared with his sponsor was the fact that he had the proverbial "friend at court" and this case was going to plead, all right, but without any jail time at all.