

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CHRISTINE FALLS*

BENJAMIN BLACK

EVEN THE DEAD

A QUIRKE NOVEL



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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ONE GLORIOUS MORNING IN THE MIDDLE OF JUNE IT OCCURRED TO David Sinclair that he was in the wrong profession. He was thirty-four now; after spending eight years training for the job, he was in line for the post of chief consultant pathologist at the Hospital of the Holy Family, succeeding his boss, Quirke, who was on extended and, if there was any justice, permanent sick leave. In those eight years, so it seemed to him, he had not once stopped to ask himself if he really wanted to be a pathologist. Nor could he recall deciding, in his school days, that this was what he would spend his life doing: slicing into the bellies of dead bodies, clipping their ribs and sawing through their sternums, his nostrils filled with their awful smells, his hands gummy with their congealing blood. What was it Quirke used to say? *Down among the dead men*. Was that really the place to spend a life?

The pathology lab was a windowless basement cavern. Banks of

fluorescent lights in the ceiling gave off a faint, relentless hum that today was making his temples ache. Outside, he knew, the morning sun was shining. Girls in summer dresses were walking by the river, and there were swans on the water, and flags were rippling in the warm breeze, and in Grafton Street there would be the rich brown smell of roasting coffee beans from the open doorway of Bewley's Oriental Café, and paper boys would be calling out the latest headlines, and there would be the sound of horses' hoofs on cobblestones, and the cries of the flower sellers at their stalls. Summer. Crowds. Life.

The body on the slab was that of a young man, early twenties, slight build. It was badly burned, and smelt of petrol and scorched flesh. At first light that morning, in the Phoenix Park, three members of the Fire Brigade had been required to lift it carefully out of the still simmering wreckage of a motorcar, a Wolseley, that had crashed into a tree just off the main road through the park and burst into flames. A cycling enthusiast out early on his racer had come upon the scene; by then the fire had died down, but a thick column of black smoke was still rising from under the car's gaping bonnet.

A suicide, according to the Guard who had come in with the ambulance men. Over the previous year there had been three similar instances of desperate young men deliberately driving their cars at high speed into highly resistant obstacles; unemployment was steadily rising, and it was a hard time for the young. The Guard himself was young, hardly into his twenties, and looked shaken, despite his offhand pose. Sinclair guessed this was the first dead body he had been called on to deal with, or certainly the first one in this scorched state, clothes burnt off save for a few blackened tatters, the flesh as crisp as fried bacon, the eyeballs bursting from their sockets.

“Any identification?” Sinclair had asked.

The Guard shrugged, pushing his cap with the shiny black peak to the back of his head. He had fair hair and blond eyelashes. “We’re on to the City Council, tracing the registration number.” He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the dead man’s groin and the shriveled black thing there, like a crooked little finger. “Poor bugger,” he said. “I hope he was knocked out before the fire started.”

“Yes,” Sinclair said.

Now, two hours later, the Guard long gone, Sinclair stood frowning at the dead man’s singed, leathery skull and the deep indentation above the left temple.

Knocked out. Yes?

THE TREES ON AILESBURO ROAD SEEMED TO THROB IN THE SUNSHINE, great bulbous masses of leaves shimmering inside a penumbra of grayish heat mist. Quirke stood to one side of the tall sash window, gazing down into the street. These days there were times when his brain clanked to a halt, like a steam train stopping, at night, in the middle of nowhere. He knew it wasn’t possible not to think, that the mind was always active, even in sleep, at no matter how subdued a level, but at the end of these blank episodes, when the poor old engine started up again, he would try to grope his way backwards to that dark halting place and find out what had been going on there, often with little success.

Philbin, the brain specialist, had said these latest lapses were probably the result of his general inaction and enervation, combined with nervous tension. In other words, Quirke thought, I’m under pressure and I’m bored. Takes a specialist to spot that, all right.

For months he had been suffering from hallucinations and what

Philbin would later call absence seizures, before giving in at last and going to see if something could be done about his state. By then he was convinced he had a brain tumor, but Philbin had shown him the X-rays, which were clear. Philbin's guess was that there was a lesion on the temporal lobe; hence the mental blanks and the momentary delusions. It was probably an old scar, Philbin said; as old, Quirke supposed, as the slight limp he still had from a bad beating he was given one wet winter night years before by a couple of hired thugs. How the past comes back to haunt us.

"Rest," Philbin had said, nodding sagely. "Just rest, try to relax, stay off the hard stuff, you'll be right as rain."

Philbin had a long narrow head, the top of which was a slightly flattened, shiny curve, like the crust of a loaf. He was entirely bald save for a fringe of suspiciously black hair—did he dye it?—at the back of his skull. When he dipped his head, a little lozenge of silvery light slid over that pale, polished dome, a faint, falling star. He and Quirke had been at college together but had never been friends. Quirke didn't go in for friends, much, even in those early days.

"What about work?" Quirke asked. "When can I go back?"

Philbin had fiddled with the papers on his desk, his eyes gone vague. "We'll have to see about that. For now, just take it easy, as I say, and stay sober."

He had done what he was told, had taken it easy, and rested, and drunk only wine, and only at dinnertime. He had pills to make him sleep, and other pills to keep him calm when he was awake. And so the days trickled past, each one much the same as all the others. He felt like Robinson Crusoe, grown old on his island.

Mal, his adoptive brother, and Mal's wife, Rose, had urged him to come and stay with them for a while, to convalesce, and he had agreed, against his better judgment. He didn't think of himself as a

convalescent, but on the other hand he knew he wasn't well, either. His mood swung like a defective pendulum. One minute he was sunk in despondency, the next he was fizzing with impatience to be back in the world, back in his life. Yet when he thought of the hospital where he had worked for the past twenty years in an airless room below ground, his heart quailed.

What would he do if he didn't go back? Even at this distance he could almost hear his assistant, Sinclair, rubbing his hands at the prospect of stepping into his shoes.

He was fond of Sinclair, in a muted sort of way, but he was damn well certain he wasn't going to let him take his job. No, he would bide his time, and one of these days he would take a taxi to the Hospital of the Holy Family and march down those broad marble stairs to the lab. He would hang his hat on the hat stand and sit down in his chair and put his feet on his desk and shove his assistant firmly back into his box.

He heard the door behind him opening. He didn't turn. He knew by her step who it was.

"You look like a man standing on a ledge and about to jump," Rose said.

Now he did turn. Rose was no longer young, but she was still a handsome woman—slim, sleek, straight-backed, with a cool smile and a mocking eye. They had gone to bed together once, just once, a long time ago. And now she was married to Mal. Quirke still considered it the most unlikely match. But then, to Quirke all matches seemed unlikely.

Rose came and stood opposite him on the other side of the window, and together they looked out at the broad, sunlit street. "What about a stroll?" she said in her smoky drawl; the side of Rose that was a southern belle would never age. Quirke shook his head. She

frowned at him. “You don’t go out enough,” she said. “Don’t you ever get cabin fever?”

“All the time. Especially when I’m out.”

“Oh, you!” she said, and laughed.

She crossed to the fireplace and took a cigarette from an ormolu box on the mantelpiece. Quirke watched her. He had always wondered about her life with Mal, and since he had been staying with them, the mystery had deepened. When husband and wife were together, at lunch, for instance, or sitting in the drawing room of an evening, they spoke in what sounded to Quirke like strained, superficial phrases, never seeming to say anything. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, he thought perhaps it was the effect of the house and its stultified atmosphere—it had been an embassy before Mal and Rose bought it. And there was his own presence, which was bound to be a constraint. Maybe when they were alone together they behaved entirely differently, in ways that Quirke could hardly begin to imagine. He tried not to speculate on what they did in bed. Mal and Rose embracing, the two of them naked in a sweat of passion—no, he couldn’t picture it, he just couldn’t. The prospect was too bizarre, too sad, and too funny.

“How are you feeling today?” Rose asked; it was what she asked every day. “I see you’ve stopped going about half the morning in that awful dressing gown.”

“Awful? I always thought it gave me a certain Noël Coward look, no?”

“No, Quirke, I’m afraid it doesn’t. The certain look it gives you is of an old alcoholic drying out—or taking the cure, as you say here.”

Rose was never one to pull her punches.

“It’s not drink that’s my trouble this time,” Quirke said. “This time, they tell me I’m sick.”

“Oh, you’re not sick. People like us have no business being sick, Quirke.”

He turned to the window and the street again. Rose, smoking her cigarette, stood with one arm folded, regarding him with a fondly skeptical eye. “But go on, tell me: how are you, really?”

“Really, I don’t know. Half the time my brain seems dead.”

“And the other half?”

He said nothing for a moment. He took out his own cigarettes and lit one. “I seem hardly alive,” he said. “I’m stalled, as if something in me had run down.”

“The doctor said you’d get well, yes?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t in fact think it’s the damage to my brain, I don’t think that’s the trouble. Something has happened to me, something has—gone out.”

“Maybe you should go somewhere, for a holiday.”

He looked at her. “Oh, Rose,” he said, “come on.”

Stung, she took an angry drag on her cigarette and lifted her chin and expelled a thin, quick stream of smoke upwards. “You’re impossible, Quirke, do you know that?”

“*You* find me impossible? Think what it’s like for me, stuck with myself.”

Rose stamped her foot, stabbing her heel into the Persian rug she was standing on. “You make me so impatient,” she said. “Sometimes I’d like to shake you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was trying to be funny.”

“Funny? You? Please don’t bother.”

He sketched a little bow, conceding the point. “I shouldn’t have let you persuade me to come and stay here,” he said. “I knew it wouldn’t work—kind though the invitation was, of course,” he added, not without a sharp edge of irony.

“Then why did you accept?”

“Because it was you who asked me.”

They looked away from each other, and were silent. Old things that had once been between them stirred and flashed, like fish in a deep, shadowed pool.

Rose sat down on the arm of a brocaded chair, balancing an ash-tray on her knee.

“Mal is in the garden,” she said, “pretending to be a gardener. Have you seen his new sun hat? It makes him look like a cross between a coolie and a standing lamp.” She paused, casting about her with an impatient frown. “Maybe *I* should take a holiday. Let’s get in the car, Quirke, just the two of us, you and I, and drive down to—oh, I don’t know. Monte Carlo. Marrakech. Timbuktu.” She paused again. “Don’t you ever get tired of this one-horse town, this one-horse country?”

He chuckled, wreathing himself in cigarette smoke. “All the time.”

“Then why do you stay?”

“I don’t know. My life happened here, such as it was.”

“My sweet Lord, Quirke, must you always talk in the past tense, as if everything were over and done with already?”

“Or as if it never began.”

She narrowed her eyes. There was a lipstick stain on the end of her cigarette. “What would you do if I walked over to you now and told you to kiss me?” He turned his head slowly and stared at her. “Well?” she said, with an angry quiver.

He looked out onto the street again.

“The last time I was in St. John of the Cross, *drying out*,” he said, “there was a fellow there, not young, about my age, whose wife used to come and visit him every day—every day, without fail. She wasn’t young either, a bit dowdy, a bit scattered, you know the type. They were just an ordinary couple. But every time she came into the caf-

eteria, which was where we all went to greet our visitors, the first thing she'd do, every time, was grab his face between both of her hands and kiss him, full on the mouth, passionately, as if they were a pair of young lovers and hadn't seen or touched each other for weeks."

He crossed to where she was sitting and ground the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray on the arm of the chair beside her.

"That's a nice story," she said, looking up at him, sounding not angry now but wistful instead.

"The strangest thing was the effect it had on the rest of us."

"What was it?"

"We were embarrassed, a little, and amused, scornful, you know, all those things. But what we mostly felt was sadness. Just that, just sadness. It wouldn't have been the case if in fact they had been young, and good-looking—then we'd have been jealous, I suppose. But no, we were sad." He stood by the fireplace with his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the rug. "What it was that we saw in them, I think, this couple in their forties, standing there kissing, was a reminder of all we'd lost, or never had—all of life's possibilities that were passing us by, that we'd let go past, without even putting out a hand to stop them, to hold on to them. Don't misunderstand me, it wasn't a strong feeling, this sadness. It was like a—like a wisp of mist blowing against us on a hot day, making us shiver for a second and leaving us colder than we were before." He fell silent for a moment. "Sorry, am I being melodramatic? I hear myself talking sometimes and think it must be someone else saying these things. Maybe my brain *is* turning to porridge."

He frowned at himself, dissatisfied and cross. Rose stood up from the chair and went to him and lifted a hand and laid it against his cheek. He didn't raise his eyes.

"Oh, Quirke," she said softly, shaking her head, "what are we going to do with you, you poor man?"

There was a tap at the door. Rose left her hand where it was, caressing him, and said, "Come in."

It was Maisie the maid, a rawboned, pink-faced girl with red hair. She stared at them for a second, the two of them standing close together there in front of the big marble fireplace, then quickly composed her face into an expressionless mask. "There's a person here to see Dr. Quirke, ma'am," she said.

Rose at last let her hand fall from Quirke's cheek. "Who is it, Maisie?"

Maisie blushed and bit her lip. "Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am, I forgot to ask."

"Maisie, Maisie, Maisie," Rose said wearily, and closed her eyes and sighed. "I've told you, I've told you many times, you must always ask, otherwise we won't know who it is, and that could be awkward."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

Rose turned to Quirke. "Shall I go down?"

"No, no," Quirke said, "I'll go."

DAVID SINCLAIR WAS STANDING IN THE HALL. HE WORE CRUMPLED linen trousers and a sleeveless cricket jersey over a somewhat grubby white shirt. His hair was very black, smoothly waved, and a strand of it had fallen down above his left eye. He was Phoebe's boyfriend. Phoebe was Quirke's daughter. Quirke didn't know what being her boyfriend entailed and didn't care to speculate, any more than he had cared to speculate on the bedroom doings of Mal and Rose. He wished Sinclair wasn't in line for his job. It made the already complicated relationship between them more complicated still.

"I'm sorry, turning up like this," Sinclair said, not looking sorry at all. "I couldn't find the phone number of the house, and the operator wouldn't give it to me."

"That's all right," Quirke said. "What's the matter?"

Sinclair glanced about, taking in the antique hall table, the big gilt mirror above it, the elephant's foot bristling with an assortment of walking sticks, the framed Jack Yeats on the wall, the discreet little Mainie Jellett abstract in an alcove. Quirke had no idea what Sinclair's social background was, except that he was a Jew, and that he had people in Cork. The cricket jersey was an Ascendancy touch and seemed an anachronism. Did Jews play cricket? Maybe he wore it as a sort of ironical joke.

"I wanted to ask your advice," Sinclair said. He was holding a battered straw hat in front of himself and twirling the brim between his fingers. "A young fellow was brought in early this morning. Wrapped his car around a tree in the Phoenix Park, car went on fire. Suicide, the Guards think. The corpse is in pretty bad shape."

"You've done the postmortem?" Quirke asked.

Sinclair nodded. "But there's a contusion, on the skull, just here." He tapped a finger to the side of his own head, above his left ear.

"Yes? And?"

"There are wounds, too, deep ones, on his forehead, where he must have hit the steering wheel when the car went into the tree. They're probably what would have killed him, or knocked him senseless, anyway. But the bruise on the side of his head—I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

Quirke was gratified to find how easily and quickly it had come back to him: the tone of authority, the brusqueness, the faint hint of lordly impatience. If you were going to be in charge, you had to learn to be an actor.

“I don’t see how he could have come by it in the crash,” Sinclair said. “Maybe I’m wrong.”

Quirke was looking at their reflection, or what he could see of it, in the leaning mirror, his own shoulder and one ear, and the sleek back of Sinclair’s head. It was strange, but every time he looked into a mirror he seemed to hear a sort of musical chime, a glassy ringing, far off and faint. He wondered why that should be. He blinked. What had they been talking about, what had he been saying? Then he remembered.

“So,” he said, putting on a renewed show of briskness, “there’s a contusion on the skull and you think it suspicious. You think it was there before the car crashed—that someone did it to him, that someone banged him on the head and knocked him out?”

Sinclair frowned, pursing his lips. “I don’t know. It’s just—there’s something about it. I have a feeling. It’s probably nothing. And yet—”

If you think it’s nothing, Quirke thought irritably, you wouldn’t have come all the way out here to talk to me about it. “So what do you want me to do?” he asked.

Sinclair frowned at his shoes. “I thought you might come in, take a look, tell me what you think.”

There was a silence. Quirke felt a twinge of panic, as if a flame had touched him. The thought of going back into the hospital, after all this time away from it, made his mouth go dry. Yet how could he say no? He gave his assistant a narrow stare; did the young man really want his opinion, or was he checking if perhaps Quirke was never going to come back to work and the way was clear for him to lay claim to his boss’s job?

“All right,” Quirke said. “Have you the car?”

Sinclair nodded; it was not, Quirke decided, the answer he had wanted to hear.

Rose Griffin appeared on the landing above them, leaning over the banister rail. "Is everything all right?" she called down.

"Yes," Quirke replied gruffly. "I'm just going out, back in a while."

Rose was still staring as they walked off along the hall and pulled the front door shut behind them. Quirke had hardly ventured out of the house in the two months he had been staying here. Rose, who had never been a mother, felt as if she had just seen her only son set off on the first stage of a long and perilous journey.