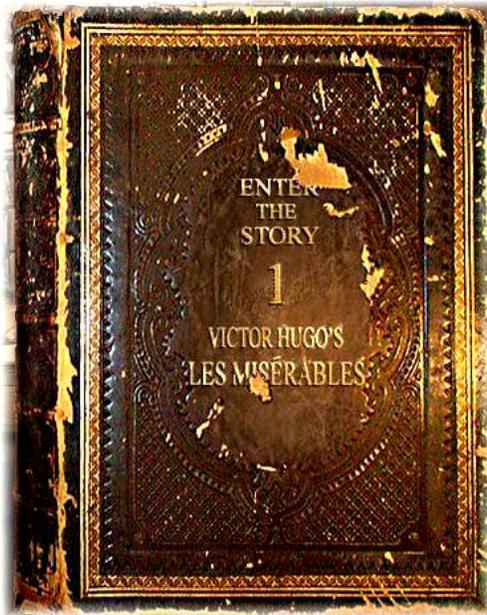


**“Now, I am become death,
the destroyer of worlds.”**
— *J. Robert Oppenheimer*

Chapter 1

Frank Dugan opened a book and discovered a message from a dead man.

The book was *Les Misérables*, a birthday gift from his late grandfather, but the note inside was a surprise. Frank stared at the small piece of paper tucked in the novel as the day shift prepared for its morning at the Martin County Sheriff’s Department in Stuart, Florida.



Frank caught the curiosity in Corporal Greg Martinez’s eyes as he looked on from his desk across the aisle.

“A love note, detective?” Greg asked.

“Kinda,” Frank said. “From my granddad, William.”

“Didn’t he pass away?”

“Years ago, but he loved to give me puzzles to solve. That’s what this is,” Frank said and flashed the note.

“What kind of puzzle?”

Frank read the hand-written note aloud.

““A famous play contains a reference to this Victor Hugo novel. The main characters in both works are on the run from the authorities. The theatrical character cites this book in a farewell scene with his children. Your challenge: Find that play and take in its beautifully-worded scenes. Its message will help you navigate the uncertain rapids of humanity. I thought this appropriate since it will serve as my farewell to you, my beloved grandson.””

“Wow, what a tough puzzle,” Greg said. “That the last thing you ever got from your grandfather?”

“It is now,” Frank said and rose from his desk clutching the book. “When I moved into my new house in Stuart, I found the book in a box I hadn’t opened in years. He sent it to me for my birthday when I was in Iraq. I read *Les Misérables* when I was in college, so I never opened this copy.”

“He sent it to you without knowing if you’d already read it?”

“Didn’t matter. This one’s a first edition, a collector’s item. He knew he was sending me something special. I’m taking it to the Stuart Library. Maybe someone there can tell me what it’s worth.”

“Thinking of selling it?” Greg asked.

“Oh, no. Just need to know if I should insure it and put it in a safe deposit box.”

“You were in Iraq? Desert Storm?”

Frank nodded.

“Army?”

“Marines.”

Frank’s eyes searched the busy sheriff’s office for his tardy partner, Carl Rumbaugh.

“Think you’ll find your mysterious play?” Greg asked.

“I’ll find it. William never posed an unsolvable puzzle to me.”

“You’re going to have a tough time with that one,” Greg said. “I go to a lot of plays. There are tons of ’em out there.”

Frank stared at the book and brushed a tiny white spider off its cover.

“I’ll find it.”

Chapter 2

Joe Dugan knew what they wanted, but a few face slaps weren’t going to make him give it up. Warm blood trickled from his nose and flowed over his lips.

Four feet away were two 9mm pistols aimed at his chest. The two men holding the guns wore Michael Myers masks with matted shocks of auburn hair draped from the high forehead and down the back. From years of being a Baltimore cop, he knew the guns were Beretta model 92s, with the firepower of 15-round magazines, plus one in the chamber. Funny, he thought, here

he was sitting with a glass of Jameson Irish whiskey in front of him and facing death, but all that concerned him was identifying the weapon poised to deliver it. Probably the booze was tunneling his vision. He always knew drinking would kill him, but not like this; not in his own home in the safest suburb in Maryland.

The 75-watt glow from a single lamp lit the seating area of the parlor, but the rest of the room fell off into darkness. Joe studied the men through sore eyes as if he were cramming for a college exam. One of them was huge, making the gun in his yellow-gloved hand appear to be nestled in a bunch of bananas. The other man was slim but well-proportioned like a track athlete and dressed in a black Baltimore Oriole sweatshirt, Nike crossovers, and pre-washed jeans. The big man wore a muslin duster-style overcoat which, on him, looked like a circus tent. The big man was watchful of the shadowed surroundings, while the other man burned his black eyes into Joe Dugan's flushed sweaty face.

"Remembering anything yet, Joseph?" the athletic man said, the measured tempo of his bass voice muffled by the mask's absent mouth hole.

Joe wiped the blood streaming from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Remembering ... ? Oh, yeah, I think I remember I took a whiz an hour ago and I don't remember where I put my johnson," Joe said and chuckled. "I'm in my seventies, for chrissake. What do you expect?"

"You look pretty good to me, old man."

"Joe."

"Okay, Joe," the man in the Oriole shirt said. "I'm Nick and this big guy is ... Bud."

"Yeah, sure," Joe said. "What do you want from me? My head hurts. I'm a retired old drunk and my memory's been shot for years."

Nick reached across the cocktail table and tapped his pistol on Joe's knee.

"That's why we're going to give you more remember medicine, Joe," Nick said and picked up a framed photograph of a young man in a Marine dress uniform from the end table, studied it for a moment, then nodded at his large cohort.

The huge man rose to his nearly seven-foot height, tucked his automatic in his belt, and pulled a maroon clamshell case from his coat pocket. He opened it and withdrew a hypodermic syringe filled with a pale yellow fluid.

"Got tired of banging me around, so now we try more truth serum?" Joe said. "Sonny, we used the same methods in interrogation. Never worked worth a shit. Booze is better."

"We'll see." Nick replaced the photo on the table and glanced at his partner with the needle.

Bud moved behind Joe's chair and yanked up older man's bloody tee shirt sleeve with his free hand. Joe tried to pull away, but the big man clamped a gigantic paw on his thin neck, twisting him so they were face-to-face, then slowly shook his Michael Myers head. Joe knew resistance to the colossus was futile and relaxed as the syringe emptied into his bloodstream.

"Hell, I don't mind," Joe said, exhaling stale whiskey breath, "It's like getting a couple of drinks on the house."

“We came prepared for free drinks too,” Nick said as he held up a narrow bag with the neck of a bottle protruding from the top.

“Excellent,” Joe said with a hint of a slur. “Party time.”

Joe polished off the remainder of his Jameson and banged down his empty glass on the mahogany cocktail table.

“First, let’s get back to business,” Nick said. “Your father, William, worked on the Manhattan Project, didn’t he?”

Joe picked up a tinge of an accent from his inquisitor. He figured he might be American-born brought up bi-lingual. Maybe Baltic.

“Could be. I don’t remember. Maybe it was the Brooklyn project. Who knows? The old man never said what the hell he was working on.”

“He was a physicist, wasn’t he?”

“*Nuclear* physicist,” Joe said, slobbering down his chin.

“Ever hear him speak of a man named Hapburg?”

“Never heard of him.”

“Your dad invented new things for the government during the war, didn’t he? Weapons. Powerful weapons to keep America safe. He worked right down the road from here in Washington, didn’t he?”

“Sometimes. Other times out west, overseas... Hey, I don’t feel so good,” Joe said, frowning. “I think I need a doctor.”

“What do you know about something called the Omega Formula?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. I need a doc.”

Joe rubbed his abdomen and grimaced.

“Maybe you need another drink,” Nick said and handed the bagged bottle to Bud, who filled the Jameson glass with the clear liquid and brought it to Joe’s swollen lips.

“What the hell is that?” Joe said, pulling back. “I don’t drink that crap.”

Bud squeezed Joe’s mouth open with one hand under his chin like he was medicating a cat, and forced the liquid down Joe’s throat. Joe sputtered and coughed, but the big man kept pouring until Joe swallowed most of the drink. Joe gasped for breath while Bud refilled the glass and returned to Joe’s face for round two.

“Let’s get out of here,” said another man’s voice from the blackness behind the two masked men. “He’s given us all he’s got.”

“But there’s more in this house,” Nick said, standing to face the voice. “I want that information, and I get what I want.”

“You worked him over, drugged him, and we searched the joint already,” the voice said.

“Then it’s someplace we haven’t searched. This old fortress is hiding it somewhere.”

“I think he’s too far gone to give up anything useful,” the voice said.

“Forgive the cliché, but I don’t pay you to think. I pay you to open doors.”

Nick turned back to face Joe.

“You know what I want, you old flatfoot, so you can quit the dummy act,” Nick said. “You’re going to tell me where it is, or you’re having your last drink.”

“You go straight to hell,” Joe said, spraying saliva and standing.

Nick made a gesture to his large partner to move between Joe and the doorway to the hall. Joe stretched out his arm to reach the phone on the lamp table at the far end of the sofa and tripped onto the Oriental rug like a 180-pound sack of flour. He crawled to the phone and yanked the wired handset toward his head, pulling the clattering phone body to the floor in one jerky move.

“I need a doctor,” Joe said and awkwardly punched at the buttons on the phone lying beneath his chin.

“Gonna let him use the phone?” the voice from the darkness said. “He could call the cops.”

Nick snatched the phone from Joe, who rolled onto his back on the floor, struggling for breath.

“He’s not going to need the cops,” Nick said.

“Then why am I standing in the dark while you two play Halloween?”

“These masks are keeping you alive,” Nick said.

“Yeah, but you said there’d be no killing.”

“Sometimes you have to adjust the battle plan,” Nick said as he turned back to Joe. “You have a son. A detective in Florida, I believe.”

Nick stepped to the end table next to the sofa and snatched up the photo of the Marine.

“This your son?” Nick said, thrusting the photo inches above Joe’s face.

Joe looked away, blinked his runny eyes.

“Haven’t talked to him in months,” Joe said flailing his feeble arms, attempting to sit up.

“Not since the Ravens beat the ’Niners in the Super Bowl. Lost my ass on that one.”

Joe gave up trying and flopped back, flat on the floor.

“Nice looking fellow. A Marine. You call him for money?” Nick asked.

Joe dismissed the question with a drunk-handed wave.

“Maybe we can arrange for him to come visit you,” Nick said. “Ask him some questions.”

“Good luck with that. He don’t even answer *my* calls.”

Joe saw the giant man catch a sign from his partner, and watched him withdraw a second hypodermic from his maroon case and check its clear contents.

Nick pressed buttons on the phone as Bud stepped to Joe and knelt beside him. Joe glared at the huge man as he aimed the needle at the side of his head.

“I’m not telling you squat,” Joe said and closed his eyes.

Chapter 3

The homicide division of the Martin County Sheriff's Department in Stuart, Florida was centered in a large open room with pairs of desks butted-up, face-to-face. Half a dozen workers scrolled through information on computer screens and spoke into phones while others entered data that streamed across their monitors.

The aroma of coffee perfumed the cool, air-conditioned space, and palm fronds thrashed against the high tinted windows from the Atlantic's late spring breeze. A young deputy checked the ammo in his Glock G23, then snapped the magazine back into the handgrip.

Detective Frank Dugan took his eyes off the activity of the room, thumbed through a wad of messages on his desk, and took a sip of his second cup of coffee.

His desk phone rang.

"Detective Dugan," Frank said and worked in another sip.

"This is Jennifer Melton at St. Luke's Hospital in Baltimore. Are you Frank Dugan, the son of Joseph W. Dugan residing at 1505 Elm Terrace in Catonsville, Maryland?"

"Yes. What's happened to him?" Frank said and put down his coffee.

"He arrived here at St. Luke's last night. I'm sorry to inform you that he was deceased when they brought him into emergency. We made every attempt to revive him, but he never responded."

Frank placed his elbow on the desk and pressed his palm against his forehead. Seconds passed before he spoke.

"What was the cause of death?"

"Appears to be cardiac arrest. The attending physician's chart cites complications likely brought on by alcohol."

"How did you know to call me?"

"The police gave us your information. Looks like they knew your father and you."

"I see."

"As the next of kin, we'll need you to identify and claim the body. I know you're in Florida, sir, but can you come to Maryland to do that?"

"I'll make arrangements."

"Thank you, Mr. Dugan. My sincerest condolences on your loss," Ms. Melton said and ended the call.

Frank slammed the receiver into the cradle hard enough to turn the heads of several people in the office. He had allowed that one day booze would kill the old man, so the call came as no real shock, but deep in his heart was a gnawing sadness. His father was dead. His only living relative was gone. He was never the poster boy for dads, but he was the only father he'd ever have. And now there would never be any chance to discuss the past with him, or re-enter Joe's

world and find ways to diminish the pain of so many abusive years. Frank had let time slip by with almost no interaction with his father. Now the door of opportunity had slammed shut.

On another level, Frank felt sorry for his dad, who was a retired Baltimore beat cop, a widower living alone in a cavernous old house. Most of his friends were dead, and drinking had been a problem for him even when he was active on the job and hanging out regularly with his cop buddies. As a boy, Frank had caught the brunt of Joe's drunken rages painfully and often. There were two Joe Dugans in Frank's life: the surly, ill-tempered drunk, and the contrite sober man who was the Boy Scout leader and baseball coach Frank wanted to love and be proud of. As the years passed, the surly drunk was the only one who ever showed up.

Frank picked up his desk calendar and tilted back in his swivel chair. His desk was situated next to an exterior wall with high windows that offered daylight but, for internal security, installed high enough to conceal workers from the outside. A concrete block wall was behind his chair and created the back corner of the large room. A sign on the wall read:

**Be gentle with gentle people.
Be tough with tough people.**

Detective Carl Rumbaugh, a short, overweight man of 35, looked up from his crossword puzzle and glanced at Frank from his side of their partnered desks.

"What's a three-letter word for 'first lady'?" Rumbaugh asked, clawing his red walrus mustache, a size overgrown for his pudgy face. "The president's wife won't fit."

"Eve," Frank said without taking his eyes off the calendar he was studying.

"Eve?"

"From the Bible."

"Oh, *Eve*. Like in the Garden of Eden."

"That'd be the one."

Rumbaugh wrote the entry on his crossword, looked at it for a moment and frowned. He tossed the newspaper aside, took a long swig of his tall orange juice, and stared at Frank.

"I think I'm going to give up crosswords and just do the *Jumble*," Rumbaugh said.

"Why?" Frank said. "Are they scrambling two-letter words now?"

"What's so fascinating about that calendar?" Rumbaugh said.

Frank lifted his eyes just enough from under his dark eyebrows to glare at Rumbaugh.

"Don't you have drunks to hassle at the beach?" Frank said.

"What was your phone call about? Find out she's sleeping with the pool boy?"

"Impossible. The pool boy has the warmies for you." Frank said as he rose and headed for the men's room.

"Thank God. I can cancel tonight's speed dating session," Rumbaugh said with a sweep of his arms, splattering his orange juice onto the floor.

Frank passed a line-up of gray-walled office cubicles and turned at the receptionist's desk where an overly-tan young woman sat playing solitaire on her computer. Her low-cut top advertised an ample cleavage Frank called "the line of ruin." She looked up at Frank and smiled as he passed, batting her blue eyes at his. Frank considered her possibilities for a second. *Nice bod. Maybe one day, but she probably likes to talk about surfing.*

He strode farther down the corridor and entered the naphtha-heavy aroma of the restroom, sat in a cubicle, and latched the banged-up door, which doubled as a graffiti medium. Frank liked this particular stall, which contained the phrase:

The world is flat. – *The class of 1491*

Frank liked it because it had the only tissue dispenser that evenly rolled out the paper instead of forcing you to scratch it off in shreds the size of Lotto tickets. It wasn't cozy, but it was where he could compose his thoughts. Today, anywhere was better than at his desk swapping insults with a dullard like Carl Rumbaugh.

The men's room door opened and thumped closed.

"Why don't you use the handicap shitter, Frank? Brain damage counts," Rumbaugh said as Frank caught a slotted view of him waddling for the bank of sinks.

"Why don't you ask the mayor to use his nepotism to get you a job where you're better suited? Like being a greeter at the morgue," Frank said.

"My father had nothing to do with me getting this job."

Frank stepped out of the cubicle and towered a full head over Rumbaugh standing at the nearest sink.

"Sure. And Porky Pig is setting up an airline," Frank said and pulled open the outer door.

"You're a mental case, Dugan. Time for a check-up, seriously," Rumbaugh said to the ruddy face in the mirror.

"I'll jot that down," Frank said and vanished into the hall.

Baltimore was a thousand miles up the road from Stuart, but Frank knew he was overdue for a vacation, and a death in the family was certainly reason enough to put in for leave. He figured their homicide division would survive for a week without one of its detectives, since Martin County wasn't rife with murders. Even Rumbaugh might be able to handle it.

Except for Oliver Smoot, the fifteen-victim serial killer Frank had put away during his first year on the job, less than a three homicides every couple of years was about par for the county. Even then, those were usually among the tourists and snowbirds, not the year-round residents.

Frank had transplanted himself five years earlier from the Baltimore City PD where murder had kept him busier—

About a-murder-a-day busier.