

A daring rescue attempt leads firefighter Jack Troy to the love of his life. But the romance barely begins when he suspects that someone is trying to kill the young woman. Jack is determined to find out who and why, and prevent her murder.

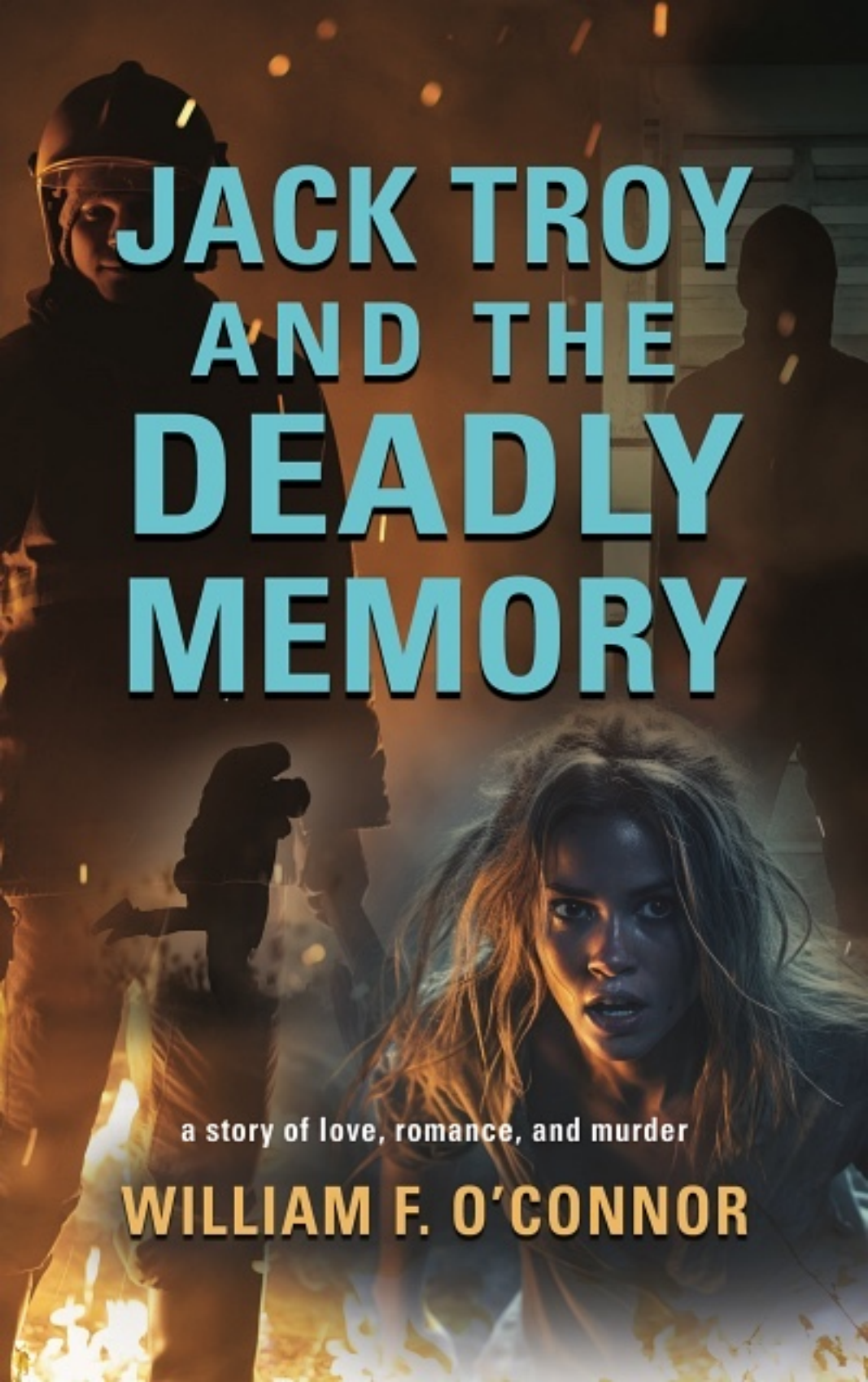
Jack Troy and the Deadly Memory

By William F. O'Connor

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JACK TROY AND THE DEADLY MEMORY

a story of love, romance, and murder

WILLIAM F. O'CONNOR

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CHAPTER 1

One powerful swing of his axe sent a shower of shattered glass and splintered wood raining down on the alley three stories below, and a dense cloud of heat and dark gray smoke billowed out of where the small attic window had been. The ghostly figure he had seen there only moments before had vanished, and he knew there was no time to waste. He filled his lungs with fresh air, crawled through the opening he had made, and disappeared into the blackness. He understood that this was the gravest danger he had ever faced in his three years as a firefighter, but Jack Troy was no coward.

He loved his job and how it could go from calm to crisis in mere moments. Only a few hours earlier, he was sitting outside Station Three, watching the full moon rise over the canal, and now, here he was, with lives potentially depending upon him. But this was what he trained for, and he was ready.

The commotion had begun about 2 a.m. when the alarm gong started banging out box one-thirty-two. All the station lights flashed on, and Jack could hardly open his crusty eyes against the glare. By instinct, he slipped into his night-hitch and headed for the brass pole. He knew that box one-thirty-two was at the College of Saint Brigid, and he hoped it wasn't something in one of the residence halls.

Station Three was a beautiful old brick and brownstone building that had been built in 1869 for the horse-drawn E.G. Halsey Steamer Company. It now held two modern pieces of apparatus: Pumper Three, still affectionately known as “the

Halsey,” and Truck Two, a hundred-foot hook and ladder dubbed “the big stick.”

As soon as his feet hit the polished concrete floor of the engine room, Jack donned his black rubber raincoat and heavy leather helmet. As he climbed up into the tiller seat on the back of Truck Two, he heard a report come over the crackling station radio of people possibly trapped. He thought, *Oh no, it must be a residence hall. This could be trouble.*

Pumper Three rolled out the door first and, after a momentary hesitation, turned left to go north on Third Street, which was one-way south. As Truck Two followed, Jack immediately understood why Captain Wilson, in command on Pumper Three, had decided to take the risky move of going the wrong way for eight blocks. From high atop his perch in the tiller seat, Jack could see a large column of black and gray smoke rising into the night sky, clearly illuminated by the very full moon that he had been peacefully contemplating earlier. An orange glow rising up in the column signaled that 1961 was no longer going to be a quiet year in the idyllic little city of Harper Falls.

After seeing the smoke, Jack thought back to the radio transmission and the report that people could be trapped. The night air cleared his mind, and his heart began to race. He knew that lives were at risk and that this probably would be the toughest test he had ever faced. He began to mentally rehearse what he needed to do once they got to the fire.

The “Halsey” and “the big stick” were rolling in tandem up Third Street with sirens wailing and red lights flashing when, out of nowhere, a man in a long, dark coat and black fedora ran

across the street between them. Once he reached the sidewalk, the man continued running south down the street. Jack thought to himself, *Looks like there are idiots out at all hours of the night. Guess a big fire brings out the craziest of them.*

Only for a split second did it register with Jack that the man was not running toward the fire but away from it. However, his mind immediately returned to the business at hand, and he thought about the man no further.

As they rounded the corner of State and Third, Jack saw that the situation was as bad as he feared. The fire was in McCarty Hall, a building that housed about sixteen female students. The old brownstone, second from the corner, was totally obscured in heavy smoke, and flames were starting to blow out of the third floor attic windows. The rescue squad guys were fighting their way through the front door while a dozen shivering and crying young women in nightgowns, pajamas, and bare feet stood tightly huddled on the sidewalk at the corner. One group of six was struggling to share a single blanket.

Jack and his driver, Liam Hannigan, skillfully maneuvered their rig into the alley behind the building and began to raise the aerial ladder. As the two stood on the turntable, they spotted what appeared to be a wispy female figure trapped behind one of the attic windows, struggling in a vain attempt to open it. Jack knew that he had to get up there fast, but by the time the ladder was in position three stories up, the ghostly figure was gone.

With his heart pounding, he raced up the ladder as fast as he could and grabbed the axe off the side rail. Under cover of the cacophony of wailing sirens, growling pumpers, and shrieking

young women, he was able to pretend he didn't hear Captain Wilson's order, "Don't go in there alone, Jack." Jack knew the risks of this move, but a life was in jeopardy. It was his job to save it.

In a matter of seconds, he smashed out the window, sash and all, opening a wide path from which he could exit should he make it back this far. After filling his lungs with air, he slipped in over the window sill and began crawling on the floor in total darkness. At one point, he thought he felt the leg of a dresser. At another, he knew he had found a bed. He swept his hand back and forth under the bed, but there was nothing there.

Then, about twelve feet in, he came upon a lumpy form in the middle of the floor. Even through his heavy gloves, he could identify this as a human body, most likely the figure he had seen in the window. Jack picked her up and got her on his back. The intense heat was building, and the smoke was getting thicker. He knew they both had little time left.

For a moment, he became disoriented and wished he had listened to the captain's orders. But there was enough noise outside that he could hear where the window was and found his way back out.

Jack, face totally blackened with soot, descended the ladder faster than he ever had before, carrying this lifeless young woman over his shoulders. On the ground, coughing and gasping for breath, he handed over his precious cargo to the ambulance crew. They confirmed that she wasn't breathing and began trying to revive her. Jack thought, *If only I had gotten to her sooner.*

But there was no time to lament. As Jack turned around, flames were starting to poke out of the window he had just left, and he had to get back up there to help.

It was a long, hard night. At about eight in the morning, the fire was deemed out. Lucky for Jack, this was the end of his two-day shift, and he was happy to be relieved by a fresh crew.

Exhausted, Jack slept all day and all night. It was a restless sleep as he was haunted by thoughts of the young woman he had pulled from the fire. During waking moments, he prayed that she was okay. He got up around 6 a.m. and went to the front door to pick up the morning paper.

His heart sank as he read the front page, “YOUNG NURSING STUDENT DIES IN EARLY MORNING FIRE AT ST. BRIGID’S. ARSON SUSPECTED.”

The story went on, *“Firefighters, responding yesterday to an early morning blaze at the College of St. Brigid, battled heavy smoke to pull the body of a twenty-one-year-old nursing student to safety. Despite their heroic efforts, they were unable to revive her, and she was pronounced dead at Good Shepherd Hospital. Fire Chief Edgar Roberts says that the swift spread of the fire suggests arson.”*

Jack couldn’t understand how this happened. His job was to save lives. He had trained hard for this, and now, on his first real test, he had failed. He felt that it was because of him that a young life was lost. Tears welled up in his eyes. Jack crumpled the newspaper and, without reading it any further, threw it into a trashcan standing on the sidewalk. Then, in an uncharacteristic emotional outburst, he kicked the metal can as hard as he could, rolling it off the curb and into the street.

Jack was very angry. He was overcome with a sense of failure and almost despondent with grief. As he lay awake, he began to sense the fragility of human life and the preciousness of time. It soon came to him what he needed to do, and he decided not to waste another moment. *I can't put this off any longer*, he thought.

CHAPTER 2

Jack carefully made his way through the narrow gangway to the back of the rundown two-story house in the south end of Harper Falls. It looked a bit sketchy, and he wasn't sure he was in the right place. He thought, *Could Billy Wade have given me the wrong address?* There was no doorbell, so Jack just knocked on the frame of the aluminum door with the ripped screen. After waiting for a few moments, the inside wooden door opened part way, and a raspy, old voice asked, "What do you want, fella?"

A bit nervous, he responded politely, "Ah, I'm Jack Troy. Billy Wade sent me."

"Well, why didn't you say so? Come on in," beckoned the raspy voice.

The door swung open, and Jack found himself standing in a dimly lit kitchen. The small room was cluttered with open boxes and cans, and the sink was filled with unwashed cups, plates, and utensils. A litter box was along side an old refrigerator, and a wooden cane hung over the back of one of the chrome and blue-vinyl kitchen chairs.

The old man extended his hand to Jack and motioned for him to sit at the kitchen table. "I'm Jimmy O'Neil. I've been expecting you. Sit down right over here. Tell me, how do you know my grandson?"

"Well, we first met when he pulled me over for speeding on Congress Avenue one morning. I was daydreaming until I saw Billy's motorcycle with its flashing red lights behind me."

"I'm proud of Billy. He's my daughter's son, and he's a damn good cop," the old man explained.

"He sure is," offered Jack. "After checking my license and registration, he told me he clocked me going sixty-two in a thirty-five and asked sarcastically, 'Where ya going buddy, a fire?' He started to think I was a wiseass when I answered, 'Not right now.' But when I showed him my badge and explained that I was the tillerman on Truck Two, he just laughed and asked if I had time to grab some coffee."

"That's my grandson, always looking out for our own."

"Yes, sir, he's a good man. We ended up going to Dino's Coffee Shop that day, and we've been regulars there ever since. We hit it off right away and have become good friends. So, when I told Billy about my situation, he sent me to you."

"Glad he did, Jack. By the way, terrible thing, that fire at the college. Poor girl."

"That's for sure. It's been over a week, and I still can't read about it or talk about it. I can hardly sleep and have had to take a little time off."

"That's understandable," offered O'Neil. "And they think it was arson? Who would do such a thing?"

"I don't know. It would certainly have to be some depraved individual. The fire chief's first impression was that it was set, and that's what it looks like to me, too. However, the investigation isn't over. We have the best fire investigator in the state right here in Harper Falls. He's very thorough, and the analysis takes time. But I think he should have an answer pretty soon. With it being a fatal fire and all, he will probably bring in

someone from the state fire marshal to verify his conclusion, whatever it is.”

“That’s good. I imagine the family of that dead girl is looking for answers. What a tragedy,” opined O’Neil.

“Well, it sure has me shaken up, especially since I couldn’t get her out of there in time. It has reminded me just how precious life is and how we have little time to waste. That’s why I’m here.”

“Good, Jack. I’m happy to help. So, you want to see the stuff?”

“Love to.”

The old man got up from the table and said, “Let’s go into the dining room where the light is better.” He picked up his cane and led them slowly into an adjacent room that was barely illuminated by the ambient light coming through the heavy curtains. But when he hit the old pushbutton wall switch, an ornate chandelier came to life with a dozen 60-watt candle bulbs, as if transforming the room from a cave into an airport runway. It was so bright that Jack had to squint his eyes briefly.

“Sit down, Jack. I’ll go get the goods.” Then he limped off into a dark space that must have been a bedroom.

Jack looked around at the clutter that was similar to the mess in the kitchen. There were piles of newspapers, magazines, and stacks of papers everywhere, hardly a clear spot on the table. The aroma of cigar smoke permeated everything.

A collection of old family photos stood on the sideboard: parents, grandparents, kids, pets, and the like, each telling the story of things and days gone by. But there was one in the middle that caught Jack’s attention right away, and he picked it

up. It was a grainy black-and-white image of a tall, slender cop sitting on a vintage police motorcycle. The person in the picture looked very much like Billy Wade. But it couldn't be, as the bike was clearly from another era.

"Pretty good-looking guy, don't you think?" The old man startled Jack, and he almost dropped the photograph.

"Yes, sir. Sure is."

"That's me," offered the old man. "If I must say so myself, I was one hell of a motorcycle cop. In fact, I was the first and only motorcycle cop in Harper Falls in those days. I'm glad to see Billy following in my footsteps. That picture was taken in front of city hall in 1935, just a week before the accident."

"The accident?" Jack inquired cautiously.

"Yes, that's when I learned how precious life is myself. I'd been on the job for almost ten years and had earned numerous commendations. I loved riding that bike. It was my life. Then, it almost took mine."

Jack could see a bit of watering in the old man's eyes. "May I ask what happened?"

O'Neil went on, "I was responding to a burglar alarm at Harper Falls Savings and Loan one night, and an old man in a pickup truck made a left turn in front of me. He stopped short when he saw that he had made a mistake, and I couldn't help but plow right into the side of the truck."

"That's terrible," offered Jack.

"Sure was. I was in the hospital for three months. Almost lost my leg. Desk duty for a while, then retired. Never rode that bike again. My disability retirement and Social Security don't

amount to much, so I run this little business trying to make ends meet.”

“Well, let’s see what you’ve got,” asked Jack.

“Okay. Right.” The old man placed a velvet box on the table in front of Jack and opened it carefully. Inside was a collection of about two dozen diamond rings, one more brilliant than the next. Under the bright light of the chandelier, it was a spectacular display, rivaling any of the three jewelry stores in the little city of Harper Falls.

“Will any of these work?” asked the old man.

Jack pointed to one in the middle of the box, “How about this?”

“Yep. That’s a beauty. Two thousand for that one.”

“Whoa, I can’t afford that on a fireman’s pay. What can you do for around eight hundred?”

“Well, I’ve got one here, a .77 carat, blue-white perfect stone in a white gold setting. I was hoping to get a thousand for it. But since you are a friend of Billy’s and a firefighter, I can do the eight hundred. Besides, I like you, and I’m happy to help, especially given what you’ve been through lately and all.”

“Thank you, Mr. O’Neil. This is perfect.”

“Call me Jimmy, please.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Just one question,” asked the old man, as Jack counted out eight, one hundred dollar bills. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

As Jack folded the ring into a small piece of white tissue paper, he answered, “Absolutely. Nina and I had dated some in high school, but we’ve been dating seriously now for about

three years. She is the love of my life. Losing that girl in the fire at St. Brigid's the other night reminded me just how valuable life is, and I decided not to waste any more time."

"Oh, please don't take offense, Jack. I just love asking that question and hearing the various answers. Some guys don't have a clue. But you obviously have a head on your shoulders and are ready for this. I can certainly attest that life is precious, and we shouldn't waste a moment of it. Like I said, I almost lost mine."

As the two shook hands, O'Neil wished Jack good luck. Then Jack tucked his new purchase into his coat pocket and walked out the door.

CHAPTER 3

In the fire academy, Jack had mastered every knot known to man. But when it came to neckties, this full Windsor had always given him fits. On the third try, he finally got it. Now, he was ready to go.

This was going to be the biggest night of his life, and he wanted to look perfect: nicely creased khaki trousers, starched white shirt, navy blue blazer, fresh haircut, and spit-shined black shoes. Looking in the mirror, he thought, *How could any woman resist?*

With the tissue-wrapped ring tucked safely in his blazer pocket, Jack slid behind the wheel of his highly polished '49 Chevy coupe. He was filled with anticipation. He knew this moment was long overdue, and he regretted that he had not gotten his nerve up sooner. In fact, Nina had been hinting a bit lately and seemed to be growing impatient.

As he headed for Mildred's Flower Shop, Jack enjoyed reflecting upon all of the great times he and Nina Smith had enjoyed in high school. A mutual friend had fixed them up for their junior prom, and they hit it off right away. From there until graduation, they were pretty much inseparable.

Jack was an outstanding athlete, lettering in three sports. He was one of the top scorers in basketball and set several school records in track, including a four-twenty-five mile. As a six-foot-two football player, he was one of the best tight ends in all of high school ball.

Nina was captain of the cheerleading squads for both football and basketball. A slightly stronger student than Jack

academically, she was a member of both the National Honor Society and Student Council.

Together, they made a beautiful sight. They were probably the most iconic couple in Harper Falls High and were almost never seen apart. At their senior prom, they were voted King and Queen of the court. Everyone thought they would be together forever.

But as often happens, their adolescent relationship could not withstand the transition into adulthood, and they eventually went their separate ways. Jack was drafted into the Army and, after basic training, spent two years on active duty in Germany. They wrote to each other a couple of times early on, but the spark was gone. Jack dated from time to time, but he never found anyone who excited him.

Meanwhile, Nina entered the local Remington Business College in Harper Falls and trained to be a secretary. Nursing and school teaching, the other professions generally available to women, did not interest her, and a four-year college was not possible financially. She now had a nice position as executive assistant to Danny Murray, owner of Murray Insurance, the most prominent insurance agency in Harper Falls. Nina also dated off and on, but nothing serious.

Following active duty, Jack realized his boyhood dream when he was accepted into the County Fire Academy. As he drove along, he reflected on how much he enjoyed being a firefighter and how lucky he was that it led him to his true love.

It was a dark, rainy night when Jack's unit was called out to a multiple-car crash on the ramp to the Congress Avenue bridge. Jack approached a damaged car that had jumped the

curb and hit a pole. When he pulled the door open, the driver, with her head resting on the steering wheel, said she was not injured, just shaken up a bit. Then, as the young woman looked up into the beam of Jack's flashlight, he found himself face-to-face with his old high school sweetheart, Nina Smith. He was awestruck by what a mature, beautiful woman she had become. Without warning, the spark was rekindled, and a serious relationship ensued. Now, after almost three years of dating and procrastinating, Jack understood why Nina was getting impatient, and he was going to fix it.

Once at Mildred's, Jack went bouncing into the shop as if on air. The ding-a-ling of the little brass bell attached to the door alerted Mildred, and she came out from the back room. A rather rotund middle-aged lady, her belly started to bounce all over as she laughed at Jack.

"Well, Jack Troy, aren't you a sight for sore eyes. You're so clean and sparkling; I can hardly see for the glare. Guess you're not driving the big stick tonight?"

"No, Mildred, just my old black Chevy."

"Where're you going all sharpened up like this, and what can I do for you?"

"I'm headed to a very special dinner, Mildred. I've got reservations for two at Catalano's Country Inn out on Route 2."

The old lady flashed a seductive look at Jack as she peered over the top of her rimless half-glasses perched on the end of her nose. "Well, honey, I'm off work in another hour if you need company." Mildred's belly started to bounce again as she laughed.

“That’s a nice offer, Mildred, but I already have a date. And Nina would probably be upset if I showed up with another woman.”

“Nina?”

“Yes, Nina Smith. You know, we’ve been dating for almost three years now. She works for Danny Murray.”

“Oh sure, sure, I remember. But I thought you two weren’t seeing each other anymore.”

“Oh no, we’re still a couple. She’s the love of my life. Where did you ever get that idea?”

“I don’t know. I thought I had heard somewhere that you two had broken up or something. Oh well, I must have misunderstood or had my gossip mixed up. Sorry, Jack. Don’t pay an old lady any mind. Anyway, how can I help you tonight?” Mildred inquired, a bit more reserved.

“I need one nice, long-stem yellow rose, please. They’re Nina’s favorite.”

“Sounds serious, Jack. Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Yes, ma’am. I sure am.”

So Mildred reached into the cooler and selected the best yellow rose she had. As she handed it to Jack, she said, “This one’s on me, Jack. Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks, Mildred. You’re the best.” And out the door he went with his rose in hand, leaving the little brass bell ringing behind him.

Jack thought there was something strange about Mildred’s behavior or tone. He had known her for years, going to her for flowers for every occasion, but tonight was peculiar, odd even.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it, and he didn't have time to get into it now. She was probably just curious about the fire but was afraid to ask. Most everyone knew that Jack didn't want to talk about the girl who died. He thought, *But breaking up? Where the devil could she get such a crazy idea?*

Not giving his conversation with Mildred another thought, Jack headed up Central Avenue to the north end of the city. He arrived at Nina's house on the steep Fowler Avenue hill on the dot at 7:30 p.m. as planned.

Jack rang the bell for the second floor flat. Looking through the glass panel in the door, he saw the hall light come on, and in a few moments, Nina was coming down the stairs. She looked beautiful in a short red dress and black heels. Her jet-black hair was pulled up on the top of her head, and she carried a small black clutch.

"Hi, Nina," Jack said as he handed her the rose and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He had an overwhelming desire to pull the ring out of his pocket right then and there but used his discretion and chose to wait. "You look elegant tonight," he added.

"Thanks, Jack. You look nice, too. And thanks for the rose."

They descended the steep steps to the sidewalk, and Jack led Nina to the car. He opened the passenger door and guided her in. Then, Jack got in the driver's side and off they went.

After a bit, Jack announced, "I've made reservations at Catalano's."

"That's nice," Nina offered.

"That's your favorite place, right?" Jack asked.

"Oh yes. Yes, it is. I really like the veal scaloppini."

“For sure, Sal Catalano makes the best scaloppini in the world.”

“So, Jack, have you ever thought about getting a new car? This thing is getting pretty old. I don’t really feel completely safe in it. I mean, what will we do if this jalopy breaks down?”

“You know I can’t afford a new car, Nina. Besides, I’ve completely rebuilt every part of this one with my own two hands. I think it’s probably the most reliable car on the road right now, and it runs great. Don’t worry. I have dozens of tools, spare parts, and fluids in the trunk. If we break down, I can fix almost anything in minutes.”

But Nina went on, “I know, but it’s just so old, really out of style.”

The balance of the ride out to Catalano’s was somewhat quiet and uncomfortable. Jack had a sense that something was wrong, but he had no idea what. Nina had sometimes gotten like this when she became frustrated that their relationship wasn’t moving forward, but she had never insulted his car before. Jack understood that he’d been dragging his feet, but ever since the fire and his firsthand witness to how fragile life really is, he decided not to waste any more time. Tonight was the night, and Jack was certain that Nina would be elated when she learned that the day was finally here.

Sal Catalano personally greeted them at the door. “How is my favorite young couple this evening?”

As they exchanged a hug and kisses on both cheeks, Jack responded, “We’re great, Sal. Thank you.”

“Hey, Jack, I’m really sorry about that fire, the girl dying and all.”

“Thanks, Sal. It’s been a tough couple of weeks for me. Haven’t gotten over it yet.”

“Well, maybe tonight you can relax a little and enjoy a special dinner with your lovely lady. I’ll do my very best to make it memorable.”

Sal then reached for Nina, hugged her, and kissed her on both cheeks. “Miss Nina, you look even more lovely than the last time I saw you. I’m sure this is an evening you will never forget.” Sal quickly ushered them to the most romantic table in the dining room. It was next to the fireplace and had a wonderful view of the lake. *Perfect*, Jack thought. Before he left, Sal added, “Your waiter will be here in a moment, but if you need anything tonight, just let me know.”

Nina and Jack looked over the wine list and decided on a bottle of Chianti. That always went well with Italian. While they waited for the wine to be brought to the table, they engaged in small talk.

“How are things at the agency?” Jack asked.

“Oh, fine. We are quite busy lately. Danny says we are the fastest-growing insurance agency in the city. Revenues have never been better. Danny even bought a beautiful new Cadillac. It’s a red Eldorado Biarritz convertible. Very classy.”

“Wow. That’s great. Hope there’s a little something in all this business for you. You work hard, and I hope Danny appreciates you.”

“Oh, I know he does. He’s actually grooming me to be an agent myself. He says he sees my potential and that I have a bright future in the business.”

Nina then asked, “How are all your buddies at the fire house? Has Lieutenant Guerin’s wife delivered yet?”

“Not yet, but it could be anytime now. She’s a couple of days past her due date.”

“Well, tell the lieutenant I hope it all works out well,” added Anna.

“I will.”

The waiter brought the wine, poured a little in Jack’s glass, and sought his approval. Jack preferred beer and didn’t know much about wine, so he got some pointers from Captain Wilson. He wanted this to be an evening they wouldn’t forget, and a bottle of wine would make it more special. On Jack’s approval, the waiter filled both of their glasses.

The evening passed smoothly, and they had a very nice dinner. The food was filling and delicious, and they shared a homemade Sicilian cannoli for desert. They both had coffee, which they started to sip. Sal stopped by their table a number of times to be sure everything was to their liking.

The conversation had been cordial and light and included all the standard topics that they usually covered: his work, her work, friends, family, current events and so on. But Jack was growing increasingly nervous as he got closer to the moment when he would pop the question. He began to sense some restlessness on the part of Nina as well.

Just as he reached into his blazer pocket to retrieve the ring, Nina began to speak. “Jack, I think we’ve got to talk.”

He recognized that tone, and he froze. He could barely get the words out, “What do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve known each other for a long time now, and we’ve had a lot of fun together. I think you’re a great guy, but—oh, this is very hard for me.” She fanned her right hand in front of her face in an effort to keep the tears at bay.

Jack tried to speak, but Nina put her index finger to her lips, and Jack knew enough to be quiet.

She composed herself and went on, “I’ll never forget the proms we went to or the night of our homecoming dance—or the time we spent on the roof of the music wing, or our trips to the lake—or the balcony at the movies. I will cherish these memories always.”

“But, Nina,” Jack put in. “You are making it sound like the end.”

“This is very hard, Jack, but I think our relationship has become one of habit and convenience. We just keep doing the same old things over and over, and there has never been a commitment to take it to the next level, to make it permanent.”

“But, Nina, I’m ready. I really am.”

“It’s too late, Jack. I’m really fond of you, and I know you will find somebody. But I think I can do better than a guy who’s satisfied driving an old car and the back end of a fire truck.”

“But... Nina.”

Again, she signaled him to be quiet. “I’ve been wanting to tell you this for quite some time but could never find the right opportunity or, quite honestly, the courage. Danny and I have been seeing each other for a few months now, and he’s the man I want to be with.”

With that, a tear formed in the corner of Jack’s eye.

“He’s smart, and kind, and a successful professional, just the type of man I can see spending my life with. He is very generous and thoughtful. He’s always giving me little gifts of one kind or another, candy once in a while. Sometimes, he even sends me flowers for no reason at all.”

Jack thought to himself, *This must be why Mildred was acting so strange when I stopped at the shop tonight. Of course, she had been filling Danny’s orders for flowers, and that’s why she assumed that Nina and I had broken up. It wasn’t about the fire at all.*

Nina continued to talk, totally unaware of how this news was crushing Jack. “I know he’s divorced and all that, but he has explained how his ex-wife was a crazy woman. She was jealous and domineering and just smothered him until he couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Jack finally got to speak when Nina took a sip of water. “This is a shock. I don’t know what to say. I had no idea.”

“There is nothing you can say, Jack. I’ve given this a lot of thought, and my mind is made up. These last few months with Danny have been like a breath of fresh air, and I feel so relieved now that I’ve told you.”

“Well, I’m glad *you* feel relieved.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. The right woman will come along when you least expect it, and you will be fine. But for us, let’s face it, it’s over and time to move on.”

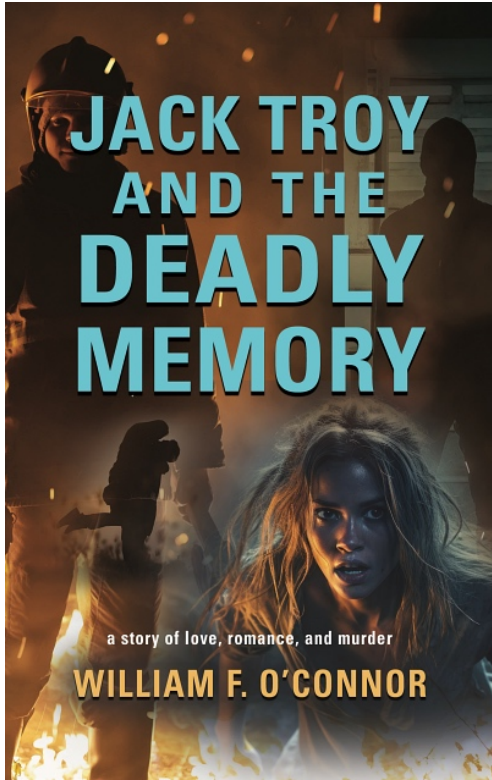
At that point, Jack went to signal for the check and realized that he still had a firm grip on the ring in his blazer pocket. He slowly released it and withdrew his hand. He paid the bill and walked Nina to his car in the parking lot. He was shaking and

could hardly walk on his wobbly legs. He thought this was the worst thing to happen to him since losing that young girl in the fire just a couple of weeks ago. He felt as if life had just slipped through his fingers for the second time.

They were both silent on the way home. When Jack pulled the car up in front of Nina's house, she leaned over and gave him a little kiss on the cheek.

“Don't bother to get out, Jack. Goodbye.”

As Jack drove off, he noticed the yellow rose lying on the floor and understood that this really was the end of the road with Nina. Tears streamed down his face all the way home. He could not have felt worse.



A daring rescue attempt leads firefighter Jack Troy to the love of his life. But the romance barely begins when he suspects that someone is trying to kill the young woman. Jack is determined to find out who and why, and prevent her murder.

Jack Troy and the Deadly Memory

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