

# Deadly Diamonds

**Also by John F. Dobbyn**

**Neon Dragon**

**Frame-Up**

**Black Diamond**

# Deadly Diamonds



A Novel

John F. Dobbyn

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## CHAPTER ONE

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It was two a.m. when I pried my fingers off the keys of the piano at Big Daddy Hightower's Boston Jazz Club. I groped my way through the darkness around tables of die-hard listeners toward the anticipated smack of crisp autumn air outside. On the way out, I owed a quick wave of gratitude to Sonny, one of Boston's top ten bartenders, for the evening's flow of Famous Grouse Scotch.

As I leaned over the bar to catch Sonny's eye, I felt an arm around my shoulder the size of a wrestler's leg. I thought it was Daddy Hightower, owner of the club and legendary jazz bassist, saying, as he always did, "See you next Monday, Mickey." Only Daddy could make "Mickey" an acceptable nickname for "Michael."

It was a jolt to look back into blue eyes under flaming red hair on a six-foot six-inch titan who could only be a descendant of ancestors from the Emerald Isle. The grin on his face was, at first, comforting. The point of the blade just below my ribcage less so.

The accent was unmistakably South Boston Irish.

"No unfriendliness intended, Mr. Knight. Consider this a gentlemanly invitation. Unless, of course, you've a mind to decline."

I was frozen to the spot. I could feel the blade penetrating two layers of clothing and working through one layer of skin.

"I'm inclined to accept. Could I ask what 'gentleman' sends the invitation?"

"I think not. If he wanted you to know, he'd deliver it in person now wouldn't he? Shall we be on our way?"

The arm on my shoulder turned me away from the bar in the di-

rection of the door. I braced in that position for a second and showed him my empty hands. “Let me just do this.”

I reached slowly into my pocket and pulled out a twenty dollar bill between two fingers. I waved it at Sonny down the bar and tossed it in his direction. “Good night, Sonny. Tell Daddy it was cool. Especially, the Cole Porter.”

I could feel the blade begin to make more serious inroads. It was now through at least a second layer of skin.

“To be clear, Mr. Knight, I’m under instructions to deliver you in one piece. I could improvise on that if you get cute. Are we on the same page?”

“I’m not being cute. I tip Sonny every week. He’d be offended if I didn’t. Make sense?”

His only answer was to usher me in lockstep toward the door. I slowed our movement as much as I dared. The darkness of the club made it impossible to make out anything but moving silhouettes. I knew if we cleared the door, I was down the rabbit hole and no way back. I also knew that if that knife went in much farther, I’d be beyond caring.

In the slowest steps I could manage, we reached the door. I could visualize the sign, “Abandon hope all ye who—”

In that instant of incipient panic before the final step through the door, I felt the arm fly off my shoulder. I tumbled off balance onto the floor. My first instinct was to roll as far from the door as I could get, but I found myself frozen against a still form that was massive enough to block any movement. My second instinct was to scramble to my feet and grab the nearest chair for support.

Before I could do either, the lights came up, and I saw my six-foot-eight-inch guardian angel, Big Daddy Hightower, standing over the unconscious form of my Irish escort.

“I’ll never understand your taste in friends, Mickey. Who’s your buddy?”

It took a few seconds to get my voice out of soprano. “Thank you, Daddy. You were quick on the uptake. You got my message.”

I wanted to thank Sonny too. He and I had an agreement for a

lobster dinner at Durgin-Park twice a year on me in lieu of weekly tips. When I threw him the twenty, he knew something was off. He must have gotten the word about the bozo with his arm around me to Big Daddy, who remembered that the only Cole Porter we'd played all night was, "I've Got You Under My Skin." Daddy apparently put it together as I prayed.

I propped up against the end of the bar and took a minute of breath catching. "Let's let him catch a nap, Daddy. Would you check him for weapons? He's got at least one knife with a wet blade."

Daddy did a quick body search and tossed me his billfold. His driver's license showed a South Boston address and the name of Paddy O'Toole.

I speed-dialed the number of a particular security service that I could literally trust with my life. In the two years that I'd partnered with the redoubtable lion of the criminal bar, Lex Devlin, to give legal defense to some strange clients in some strange walks of life, I'd had more than one occasion to do just that. In spite of the hour, Tom Burns caught it on the first ring.

"What's up, Mike?"

"Sorry to break your sleep, Tom. I need a good man, not without artillery, *post-haste*."

"I never sleep, Mike. You know that. Where?"

"Daddy's. How soon?"

"I just sent the message. Do you want him seen or unseen?"

"Seen. Tell him to come in. I'll wait."

"You won't wait long. He's almost there. He was in the neighborhood."

"You're golden, Tom. What's his name?"

"Depends on what he has to do to get you out of the fine mess you've gotten yourself into this time. Probably best you didn't know. Call him 'Charlie.' He likes that name."

I turned around and the open door was filled with the form of yet another giant. Charlie had arrived. At my mere six foot one, I was beginning to feel like the runt of the litter.

"Charlie, can you bring this bozo back to consciousness?"

I had sorted through the options that seemed obvious. First and most desirable—get the hell out of Dodge. Not actually the best choice. Whatever and whoever put Paddy O’Toole’s arm around my back in the first place would still be out there, and as a criminal trial lawyer, I’d be readily accessible to a second try.

The second option, less desirable, but safest in the long run, was to accept the invitation of whoever sent him—but on my terms. Charlie scooped up the now-groggy disarmed body of my escort and propped him against the bar.

I asked Sonny for a straight shot of Jameson’s Irish Whiskey and waved it under his nose. It speeded the process. When he was back to consciousness, I handed him the shot. He eyed it with suspicion, but the familiar scent led him to down it in one gulp.

“Good morning, Paddy. Now that you’ve had breakfast, let’s finish your mission. It’s not the most gracious invitation I’ve ever had, but I’m going to accept it. Let’s go.”

Paddy was the dictionary picture of ambivalence. The obvious question that stood out on his furrowed brow was whether or not to lead me to his undisclosed principal under the reversal of circumstances. I had to get him off dead center.

I handed him his cell phone, which was among the items Daddy found in his pockets.

“Call the man. Tell him I’m willing to come. It’s his play.”

He hit a speed-dial number and mumbled into the phone. Based on the flow of Gaelic invectives that must have strained the cell phone’s little earpiece, his principal did not suffer the turn of events gladly.

I grabbed the phone out of his hand. “This is Michael Knight.”

Abrupt silence. I continued. “I don’t know who you are, but, apparently, you know me, and we seem to have business. I don’t do command performances. On the other hand, if you want to meet and talk nice, I’ll be all ears. What’ll it be?”

More silence. I gave him a minute to get a grip on the change of procedure.

“Mr. Knight, I’ll apologize for the inappropriate beginning. I’m

used to dealing with a more crude element. And time is definitely of the essence.”

I could sense a distinct elevation in the level of intelligence. There was a calm in the voice that encouraged a second beginning. In a public place.

“How immediate is the problem? How about breakfast tomorrow morning?”

“No, Mr. Knight. I think not.”

“Then where and when?”

“Are you familiar with South Boston?”

“Are you familiar with Beacon Hill?” I was still not comfortable with the idea of meeting on his playing field.

“Won’t do, Mr. Knight. There’s something you should see. Understand, this is in the nature of a professional engagement. You’ll be paid. Extravagantly.”

That gave me more jitters than O’Toole’s arm around my shoulder. “I think you better understand. I’m a lawyer. Maybe not the type you’re used to. I intend to keep my bar membership intact. I think this conversation is coming to a close.”

“A moment, Mr. Knight. I know your reputation. I’m asking nothing that will, shall we say, tarnish it. That said, I think you’ll find this one of the more interesting meetings of your career.”

Now he had me. What I may lack in physical dominance, I, unfortunately, make up in raw curiosity. More than once, it’s driven me into what the Chinese curse refers to as “an interesting life.”

“Then where?”

“Please put Mr. O’Toole back on the line. He’ll be a more courteous escort in the future.”

Before handing the phone over, there was one more question burning a hole in the curiosity lobe of my brain.

“And just to prepare me for the meeting, your name is?”

“All in good time, Mr. Knight.”



## CHAPTER TWO

It was past three a.m. when our little convoy pulled up outside the Slainte Pub on L Street in South Boston. It appeared closed, as the law required at that hour. Paddy led me and my adopted shadow, Charlie, to a side entrance. We climbed a set of well-worn steps to a second floor office. Paddy rapped once. A voice I recognized from the phone conversation gave a brusque, “Get in here, Paddy.”

A seriously subdued Paddy led the way. I followed quickly enough to catch the daggered look toward Paddy from the sixtyish, white-haired individual rising to stand behind the desk. From a physical perspective, Paddy could clearly have bounced his five-foot, roundish body across the floor like a basketball. Equally clearly, that one look sent Paddy hulking to the side of the room like a cowed pup.

I was next in. The hand extended across the desk bode a warmer welcome than that given to my thuggish escort, Paddy. On the other hand, when my other escort, Charlie, came through the door behind me, the look froze and the hand retracted, leaving no doubt that Charlie was not only uninvited, but unwelcome.

“Mr. Knight, you and I have business. It’s private. I thought I implied that. Who’s this?”

We stood facing each other, Charlie behind me with his hands in his overcoat pockets, clutching heaven-knows-what form of artillery and giving me a sense of well-being that I didn’t fancy doing without.

“Call him ‘Charlie.’ He likes that name. Given the tone of your invitation—” I glanced over at Paddy, who had gone from cowering

to sulking. “—you can consider Charlie a permanent attachment. If that doesn’t work for you, I say we part friends. Your choice.”

The reddening of his complexion from the collar up indicated that he was more used to giving the choices—probably to those without options. Whatever caused him to think he needed me apparently put the lid on his natural instincts. A hand shot across the desk. I nearly jumped into Charlie’s arms until I realized it was the offer of a handshake.

“Mr. Knight, we’re off to a bad start. Let’s begin again. Have a seat, please.”

Based on the fact that the hand did not hold a gun, I accepted the courtesy. Before sitting, however, I needed some ground rules. I remained standing.

“Mr. Knight, I give you my word, you’re in no danger. My man here—” Another withering glance at Paddy, for whom I was developing unexplainable sympathy “—lacks the gentility to convey the tone I intended. I have a simple favor to ask. Again, you’ll be paid handsomely.”

“I’d be more convinced if I knew your name.”

A smile cracked the previously rigid features as he rose from the chair and approached Paddy. “I’m surprised you need to ask, Mr. Knight. However—”

He took Paddy by the elbow and led him to the door. “Paddy, be a good man. Take Charlie here downstairs to the bar. Anything he’d like. And Paddy, please, like a gentleman.”

He looked back at me to see how the plan went down. It was a gamble, but again curiosity trumped fear. I nodded to Charlie, who showed clear hesitation. He was under orders from Tom Burns, not me, and most certainly not our host.

“It’s all right, Charlie. This is why we came. I’ll be down shortly.” To emphasize it, I accepted the offer of a seat.

Reluctantly, Charlie followed Paddy down the stairs. I’d have bet my Bruins season tickets that nothing liquid passed his lips while he waited.

My host closed the door. He came back and leaned his backside on the desk in front of me. There were deep lines forming in his forehead above the white eyebrows that I couldn't quite figure, given the relative strengths of our positions.

Our proximity let him lower the tone to just above a whisper. "Do you have children, Mr. Knight?"

"Never married. And, again, this would be easier if I knew your name."

He nodded and walked around to sit behind the desk. "You're obviously not from South Boston. Can you tell me the name Frank O'Byrne means nothing to you?"

The words, "Oh, crap," bubbled up in my throat but never made it to the vocal chords. For the ten years I'd taken an interest in any part of the *Boston Globe* that didn't concern the Bruins or Red Sox, the name, Frank O'Byrne, was constantly linked with the word "allegedly," as in "allegedly the boss of all criminal activity in the Irish communities of South Boston, Charlestown, and Dorchester."

The expression on my face made playing dumb a nonoption. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr. O'Byrne."

"Good. That saves needless explanation. I won't bother telling you that much of what you've heard or read served more to sell newspapers than to expose the truth. I hope you've lived long enough to assume that."

"That said, Mr. O'Byrne, I have trouble imagining what I can do for you that an army of thugs couldn't do better. No offense."

I caught the faint crack of a smile. "You're a piece of work, Mr. Knight. I see we can speak frankly to each other. That'll make it easier. Let's get down to business."

"Let's not, Mr. O'Byrne. Not yet. A couple of preliminaries. Are you asking for legal advice?" I was thinking of the promise my senior partner, Lex Devlin, and I made to each other never to take on representation of anyone who made murder a tool of the trade.

He rubbed his hand across the lines that were back on his forehead. "I could dance around the definition of legal advice, or we could just get to the matter at hand."

“There’s a reason for asking. I can’t represent you.”

He looked at me for the length of a deep breath before speaking. “I’m not going to ask why. I’ll just say that it’s not me. It’s someone else I’m concerned about. Now can we stop the chess match?”

“Again, no. Whom are we talking about?”

Another deep breath. “My son, Kevin. And it’s not a court matter. Not yet. It could be.”

That was a horse of a different hue. The newspaper articles I was trying to pull back seemed to concede that the criminal life stopped with the father. The son was ensconced behind a Chinese wall, so to speak. He was, if memory served, a junior at Northeastern University.

“In that case, if you please, one dollar. Cash, check, or stamps. No credit cards.”

He looked puzzled.

“Mr. O’Byrne, I don’t want to have to go to jail for not answering a prosecutor’s questions about whatever you’re about to tell me. You and your family are magnets for grand juries. Let me have a dollar, and for the moment—understand, *for the moment*—I’m retained counsel for you and your son. That means attorney-client privilege.”

The furrows were gone, but so was the smile. He pointed a disconcerting finger in my direction.

“Let there be no misunderstanding on that score, Mr. Knight. If you were to disclose anything said in this room to anyone, prison would be the least of your worries.”

I had no answer. The cards were on the table, especially the ugly ones. My heart, soul, and mind reached a unanimous conclusion: *Get Charlie the hell up here and hit the street.* If I had fifty cents for every time in the next two weeks that I regretted not following that conclusion to the letter, I could retire to Bimini.

“I’ll take the dollar now, Mr. O’Byrne.”

He shrugged and reached into his pocket for a bill.

Without another word, he led the way down the back set of stairs and turned left into an alleyway. I’d have valued Charlie’s company, but Mr. O’Byrne and I were both alone.

Fifty feet into the alley, a bulb over a doorway picked up the gleam of a Cadillac, Black Diamond Edition, high end. I could make out the drooping figure of what looked like a boy in his late teens, head in his hands, sitting on the stoop beside it.

“Kevin, come over here.”

The boy looked up and squinted at us, silhouetted against the backlight from the street. The voice brought him to his feet. He was closer to my height than his father’s five-foot something. He looked lean and athletic with a confident way of moving, but even in that light I could see red rims around his eyes.

“Kevin, this is Mr. Knight.”

His hand came up automatically, but no sound.

“Tell him, Kevin.”

He looked at his father like a child actor being pushed on stage by his mother.

“Tell him. He can help. I know how these things work.”

He looked up at me from a slouch. I could hardly hear the words.

“I was with two other kids. We . . . I never did anything like this. One thing led to another. It was like a dare. Dad, I don’t want—”

A fist shot out of the father’s side that caught him in the ribs and straightened him up. The voice that went with it even straightened me up. “Speak like a man! You get into a man’s trouble, you act like a man.”

The boy was looking me eye-to-eye now. The stammer was gone. He seemed to want to get it all out in one breath.

“We saw a man leave the keys in the car. They dared me to drive it around the block. They thought because of my father I’d dare to do it. The man came back when I was driving off. He ran down the street screaming. I panicked. I drove here.”

“Where was the car when you took it?”

“In front of Patrini’s Restaurant.”

“Oh, crap in spades. Tell me you don’t mean Patrini’s in the North End.”

He just nodded. I looked over at his father who clearly understood the reason for the question.

“I don’t suppose you’d know, but did anyone follow you here?”

“I don’t think so. I was gone before they could catch up. It was dark, about midnight.”

“Who were these kids? Are they from the North End?”

“No. They’re just kids from South Boston. Classmates.”

“Not to be indelicately racial, but are any of them Italian?”

“No. Irish.”

“All right. Any race other than Italian’ll do at the moment. Do you know why I’m asking, Kevin?”

“Yes. But I was just going to drive around the block.”

“In a car that was undoubtedly owned by a made man in that little social club, *La Cosa Nostra*. You hit the jackpot.”

I turned to his father. “Out of overwhelming curiosity, why did you call me?”

His father took me by the arm and walked me ten steps away from his son. “Word gets around. You and your partner, Devlin, handled a case for the son of Don Dominic Santangelo. I hear they go back. This thing needs to be brokered.”

I just shook my head at the inappropriateness of me in all of this.

“Listen, Mr. Knight. I think you’re more savvy than you let on. There are, shall we say, territorial disputes between them and us.”

“You mean the Italian Mafia and the Irish whatever-the-hell you call yourselves.”

He caught the disdain and stifled a small eruption of what could be an Irish temper.

“The disputes I mention are mostly under the control of cooler heads, but at the moment—” He moved his hand in a way that said “dicey.” “This matter needs an intermediary with influence, but not aligned with either side. You and your partner come to mind.”

“How fortunate for us. And when the damned bullets start flying, guess who’s in the middle? Hear this. Mrs. Knight’s little boy, Michael, is not that mentally challenged. Hasta la vista.”

I thought it, and have frequently wished that I’d said it. Instead, I provided a logical solution.

“Look, Mr. O’Byrne, to hell with the brokering and all the complications. Let’s go with the KISS principle. From what your son said,

they probably don't have any idea who took the car. Simple solution. Have someone drive it and park it a few blocks from Patrini's Restaurant. Make an anonymous call to Patrini's and tell the maître d' where the car is. The odds are he'll know who owns it. He gets the car back in one piece, and life goes on. For everyone."

I started to turn and walk. He caught my arm.

"And yet, Mr. Knight, do you suppose I need you to belabor the obvious?"

"I wondered the same. And yet, as you say, here I am."

He nodded. "There's a minor complication."

He crooked his come-over-here finger and walked to the back of the car. It was a simple move, but it neutralized every soothing effect of the evening-long's seriatim sips of the Famous Grouse scotch. He waited until I was standing directly in front of the Cadillac's trunk and hit the release button. The light from the trunk was perfectly adequate to illuminate every feature of the very dead body of a man curled into the same fetal position in which he began life.

I've seen dead bodies. You can't be even partially Irish without chalking up more wakes than weddings, but this one had unique features. The knife in the back was the origin of a seepage of blood that surrounded the body like a backdrop. The noose around his neck underscored the labeling of the deceased as a traitor. The final touch was the wad of ten dollar bills stuffed into his mouth like the dressing in a turkey. Without an exact count, I'd have bet that there were thirty bills—the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas to betray our Lord. A bit heavy on symbolism, but the point was made.

My mind was spinning. O'Byrne was right. This was a complication. The thugs in the North End were unlikely to let this go as boys-will-be-boys. The Cadillac could clearly be traced to the owner, and the state of its current occupant could mean a life sentence for the killer if the boy who took the car went to the police. And, frankly, if I thought along their lines, I'd be inclined to play it safe and assume that he might.

All things considered, Mr. O'Byrne was right. It looked like the start of an "interesting" day.