

RUN

***An Episodic Suspense Thriller
by Maureen O'Crean***



Family is Forever

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By

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"During Derby Week, Louisville is the capital of the world. The Kentucky Derby, whatever it is—a race, an emotion, a turbulence, an explosion—is one of the most beautiful and violent and satisfying things I have ever experienced."

John Steinbeck

EPISODE ONE

“You broke the curse.”

It seems pretty innocent, doesn't it? They were the last words my father said to me. I could feel chills running up and down my spine every time I replayed the voicemail message. It was the worst thing he could have ever said to me. No one can break a curse. There would be no un-ringing the bell, no restarting the race, no take-backs. It was too late. The seed was planted in the soil of my soul. That was all a curse needed to ruin you. It only had to be acknowledged to give it life.

The postcard showed the glowing dome of the United States Capital against a starless sky. I flipped the card over and jotted down the same words I'd written hundreds of times before: *Wish you were here*. On the bottom of the left hand corner were statistics I knew my autistic baby brother would devour: 752 feet length, 350 feet width, covering three and a half acres. It didn't matter that Mickey was thirty-two, or that even when we were in the same room he was a virtual world away, and one I had never been privy to enter.

I wished I could tell him I was leaving the farm after the Kentucky Derby, but change upset him. In less than twenty-four hours, he and my father would arrive from Ireland for the Derby. This was a big trip for them and I didn't want to spoil it. We both had horses in the run and if Pops and I didn't kill each other before the race, it might just be a great experience. But I was getting ahead of myself. I didn't even have the job in Washington yet, and passing the background check would take nothing less than a miracle.

When your family tree is filled with con-men, gamblers and fortune tellers, it doesn't take long to learn that “Don't worry,” is my Irish father's sign to get the bail money ready. In the O'Malley family running away was an inherited trait. The mode of transportation was subject to personal preference, but whether it was death, sex, the bottle or a bet, the destination was always the same. Unfortunately, there are some things in life you can't outrun, like your bookie, addictions, or family. Pops had called minutes before, and by the familiar quiver in his voice I'd known he was being “economical with the truth.” There was nothing I could do about it in that moment, so I tossed the postcard into the glove box and put the car in gear. All I wanted to do was drive.

After an hour or so a raspy hum filled the night air and a flashing light came into view, calling my name. The pink neon bridge of the guitar was burned out, but the fifties Juke Joint sign still had the juice. Another era, a simpler time. The crunch of the gravel under the wheels of my red MG Roadster announced my arrival as I pulled in behind the bar. Held open by a rusting five gallon can of Wesson oil, the back door beckoned. *That's a good sign; easier to slip in and out*. My heel sank deep into the soft earth beneath the small grey stones, the black lace garter on my left leg popping as I teetered to catch myself. I pulled the stocking tight, stroking my calf as the warmth of the silk transported me to another world.

As the lights of the roadster disappeared around the curve, the man pulled his black Impala to the edge of the driveway, grabbing his camera off the seat. In seconds he was out the door and watching her hike up her skirt, her garter snapping back in place. *Bridie looks good*, he thought, a

brunette tonight, with those pouty red lips and legs that go all the way up to her ass. That generous rack didn't hurt either. After a few shots of her and the blinking neon sign of the bar, he returned to the warmth of the car. Sticking the black ballpoint pen into his mouth, he pulled the cap off with his teeth and opened a flip-top notebook. "10:47 pm, dive bar, TN/KY border." *Another long one,* he thought.

I opened the door, sidestepping old crates to make my way to the bar. In the corner a couple in their forties was canoodling. Her manicured hand navigated his thigh in a way that led me to believe they were married, just not to each other. A cloud of blue smoke hung above the last holdout of the Southern tobacco farmers, their spilled beer, menthol, and Jean Naté adding to the heady stink. Some habits died hard. I leant against the old mahogany bar beside a jar of pickled eggs that screamed 'botulism', and a mirrored Schlitz sign advertizing a beer that hadn't been sold in forty years. It had a thin coat of yellow from nicotine that matched the uneven teeth of the approaching barkeep.

"What'll you have?"

"Bourbon, neat," I said. "And some water."

His red face grew redder. "This ain't Kentucky, this here is Tennessee."

I sighed. "What would you suggest, then?"

It was easy to forget how territorial Southern folk could be about their liquor, but at least they were honest.

"Jack Daniels it is." As he poured the whiskey, he gave me the once-over. "You're not from around here, you a working girl?"

As he handed me the glass he held on to it a few seconds too long. I drew my hand away and pulled out a twenty. "Not in the way you're thinking, just passing through."

With a tight smile I took my change and the glass of water, but as I walked away the old geezer called out. "You left your drink on the bar."

"You have it," I said, walking to a table. I always left them on the bar, as no one liked someone hanging around and not spending money.

After thirty eight years of dealing with drunks, I couldn't stand the stuff. It had proven a downright death to intimacy, but that trait was overrated anyway. I stuck to my water, but I still liked bars, the track, and the odd game of poker...And the men those things attracted. Their type kept you on your toes.

The bar was a watering hole for servicemen and women in their green camouflage fatigues, the watchful eyes of the local army base just far enough away to take the edge off. I passed them, walking to the wood and chrome Wurlitzer jukebox that called me through the smoke. It was loaded with 45s that crooned out love, heartbreak and forlorn cries for second chances; my mother's favorites, God rest her soul. Standing on the tops of her feet we would dance back in

Ireland, with our portable player and records two decades old. This box didn't disappoint. I pressed B13 and the sultry sound of Tony Bennett singing "Cheek To Cheek" filled the room. Closing my eyes, I started moving to the beat.

I missed her. Mother had always been able to handle the old man, and my last call with him had been unsettling. I knew he was lying, but what about? *Sweet Jesus*. I didn't want to think about that right now, I wanted to escape. My hips started moving with a life of their own, and after a moment I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"May I have this dance?"

I was a sucker for a man in uniform. Dressed in khakis with knife sharp creases in the sleeves and slacks, he commanded attention. He barely glanced as the soldiers straightened their backs and left the bar. I soaked up his broad shoulders and wicked smile. Even his salt and pepper hair, just visible on the sides, was a turn on. He held me close and I laid my head on his chest, taking in the scent of a hard working man. Sweat, Old Spice and Clorox from fresh white laundry, was better than any *eau de cologne*.

"You're a good dancer," I murmured.

"They call me Buck."

"Hmm, a name with promise."

He chuckled, pulling me in tight to whisper, "Come on, let's get out of here."

I'd always loved a man who knew what he wanted, and we sauntered over to the motel next door. I was sure it had seen its share of bar patrons over the years and could feel the rush of the forbidden; hot, wet, messy, and electric.

Buck pushed me against the wall and kissed me in the darkness, his mouth hard and demanding. When he finally pushed away to go and get a room, I closed my eyes and blocked out the world. Minutes later he strode back to me, a key dangling from his hand.

"Eight." I gave him a slow smile. "My lucky number."

I steered him to the door, pulling his jacket off as he struggled with the key. Hands slipping up under his arms, I expertly worked my way through the buttons on his shirt and wrenched that off, too. "Hurry up," I murmured, cheek nestled against the tight, white tee stretched across his back.

He grunted impatiently, and the door swung inward.

As it turned out, Buck did live up to his name. Great sex always put me in a good mood, and I was sorely tempted to run my hand over the well formed ass beside me. But our second round would never come; the inevitable was knocking. I grabbed my clothes, and quietly stopped to kiss him on my way out.

“Thanks,” I said.

He opened his eyes and pulled me down. “Come back to bed.”

“I have to get up early for work.” I touched his cheek. “Take care of yourself.”

“Let me walk you to your car.”

“It’s only across the driveway, I’ll be fine.”

He opened his eyes properly, peering up at me. “I don’t even know your name.”

“You can ask me that next time.”

We both knew there would be no next time, and I’m sure he found relief in the fact. Nothing made for better sex than anonymity.

The parking lot was dark and empty, creepier than I had imagined. I could hear my mother’s voice whisper, *Don’t tarry, Lass, the devil’s in the dark*. Fingers trembling, I got into the car and pushed the lock on the door behind me. With a deep breath I ordered myself to get a grip—there was nothing out there. Country radio KLS made for instant company, and I cranked up some Johnny Cash. At the top of my lungs with something close to singing, I cried, “Because you’re mine, I’ll walk the line.” It put a smile on my face as I pulled out of the bar and onto the highway.

A large, blue billboard zipped past proclaiming, “Welcome to Kentucky, Home of Unbridled Spirit”. The needle on the speedometer shuddered at eighty and seconds later flashing lights filled my rearview mirror. *Shit*. I slowed down and pulled over to the shoulder, out of the nonexistent traffic. In the side mirror a light bobbed up and down before a Kentucky State trooper rapped on the window. Motioning me to roll it down, I obliged.

“Do you know how fast you were going? License and registration.”

I leaned over and grabbed the papers out of the glove box, Mickey’s postcard snapping me back to the gravity of the situation. *Idiot*. I handed the documents over in silence and watched him walk back to his car to run my license. So much for my great plan—a quick escape from reality with no one-the-wiser. All too soon reality was walking back to the car with a ticket book in hand.

“Out of the car,” he said. “Have you been drinking?”

I climbed out of the MG, instantly regretting the six inch heels. “No officer, I’m just headed home to Lexington.”

He looked at my license. “Bry-dee O’Malley.”

“It’s Bridie. As in, rhymes with Diddy.” I’d read once that you were less likely to get a ticket if the officer liked you.

He didn’t like me.

“Says here you have red hair.”

“Well, isn’t a woman’s hair color her prerogative?”

When my saucy routine failed to warm him up I pulled off my short, brunette wig to reveal the long, red hair I both loved and hated.

“Okay, what’s going on? Are you a professional?”

Two times in the same night. Seriously?

“No, Officer.” I gave him a sheepish smile. “I was dressing up for my boyfriend at the base in Clarksville. He’s being transferred to the West Coast.” I shook my head and ran my fingers through my hair, pulling it forward onto my chest. “Can you please let this one go?”

I thought I had him as he walked around the back of the car in silence, and was expecting good news as he returned and opened the driver’s door, beckoning me to take a seat.

“Please wait while I write up the ticket.”

I dropped my head on the steering wheel as bad luck rolled in with the thick, cool certainty of a morning fog. Now was not the time.

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