

A BRILLIANT DEATH

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DEATH

A NOVEL

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For Melissa

PROLOGUE

I never met my Grandfather Kaminski. He was only forty-two when he dropped dead of a heart attack at the Nickel Plate Railroad yard in Dillonvale. He had just finished his coffee break and was putting together a train of empty coal cars to be filled at the Youghiogheny and Ohio Coal Company mine in Barton when he turned to Nippy Borkowski and said, “Dammit, Nippy, I think I’m dead.” Before Nippy could take the cigarette out of his mouth, my grandfather dropped like a felled pine between two coal cars. They called Doc Barnes, who ran down from his office over the Miner’s Bank & Trust Company, but my grandfather was likely dead before he hit the gravel ballast.

Doc Barnes said it was a massive heart attack, but my father said that anyone who knew my grandfather realized he died of acute estrogen exposure.

Walter Kaminski was five when his family immigrated to Ohio from the Oder River basin town of Bukow in western Poland. They settled in the coal mining community of Piney Fork, about ten miles west of the Ohio River Valley. He was fourteen when he began working on the railroad and twenty-six when he saved my grandmother from becoming an old maid, marrying her when she was nineteen. Over the next eight years, she gave birth to six children—all girls. She was ready to stop at four, but agreed to keep trying in order to give Grandpa Kaminski a son to carry on the family name. Alas, another girl—my Aunt Bess. When she became pregnant with baby number six, she announced that upon delivery of the child, son or no, it would be the last. Before she left the hospital with Aunt Victoria, she had her tubes tied and the baby factory closed.

Or so she thought.

Apparently, tubal ligation in its infancy wasn't that effective, and six months later she was pregnant again. She was furious; he was delighted, as it gave him one last chance for a son. The fates were against him, however, and she delivered not one daughter, but *three*. Triplets! This was extremely rare in the 1930s, long before the advent of fertility drugs. There were big stories in the papers, and the girls became local celebrities, known as "the abelles"—Annabelle, Marabelle, and Rosabelle.

He had a wife and nine daughters born within ten years of each other. My father said Grandpa Kaminski took the coward's way out, choosing to drop dead and cede all responsibility to my grandmother.

The triplets grew up, and in a six-week stretch in the fall of 1952, each gave birth to first-born sons. Marabelle gave birth to me on October 7. Rosabelle gave birth to Nicholas on October 30. Annabelle delivered Johnny on November 21.

We three cousins grew up in the same Upper Ohio River Valley region, dreaming of fame on the athletic field and hoping to escape the steel mills and coal mines. I was not the equal of my cousins in athletic ability or good looks, but I'd like to think God evened the score by granting me a modicum of common sense, which sometimes seems to be sadly missing in most descendants of Walter Kaminski, who have shown a tendency to live for the moment and think with their peckers.

My name is Mitchell Malone, and I grew up in the river town of Brilliant. Nicholas, who was known as Duke, grew up in Mingo Junction. Johnny, who in junior high insisted that he be called Giovanni, even though he was more Polish than Italian, grew up in Steubenville. We were bonded by family blood and the gritty air and muddy waters of the Ohio River Valley. Never in my vivid imagination did I dream we would ultimately have another common bond—murder. Duke and Johnny would see their adult lives knotted like spinning rope, and they have their own tales of intrigue, but not just yet. First, there's my story. It begins in the summer of 1953, when a river barge crushed a pleasure boat—*Lady Luck*—on the Ohio River. The disappearance of the boat's passengers would launch a mystery that would fuel the gossip mill and perplex authorities for decades.

And I am the only one who can tell the entire story.

CHAPTER ONE

From the Steubenville, Ohio, *Herald-Star*, June 7, 1971.

Brilliant Senior Class Salutatorian

Missing After Car Plunges into River

BRILLIANT—Rescue workers from five local fire departments searched the Ohio River today for the body of the Brilliant High School senior class salutatorian believed to have died shortly after midnight Sunday when the car he was driving plunged 110 feet over a cliff and into the murky waters beneath Hunter's Ridge just north of town.

Authorities identified the man as Travis Franklin Baron, 18, of 138 Nichols Drive, Brilliant.

Baron, who only hours earlier had addressed his fellow seniors at his commencement, was fleeing police when he crashed through a barrier and went over the cliff. A police spokesman said Baron was last seen driving at a high rate of speed on Jefferson County Road 19 near the entrance to Hunter's Ridge Park.

By the time pursuing police arrived at Hunter's Ridge, the car was sinking into the Ohio River. There were no witnesses to the accident.

Sources said Baron had reportedly been drinking at several graduation parties before the chase began shortly before midnight.

"Obviously, we don't hold much hope of finding him alive," said Brilliant Volunteer Fire Chief Delmar Bernoski, whose son James also participated in the graduation ceremonies. "With all the rain, and the river flowing so swiftly, his body could be 20 miles downstream by now."

Ironically, Baron's mother drowned in the river 18 years ago this fall, not far from last night's mishap. Amanda Baron was on the fam-

ily's cabin cruiser the night of Oct. 17, 1953, when it was rammed by a coal barge.

Her body and the body of a male companion were never found.

Shortly after noon today, divers located the car, a black, 1957 Chevrolet show car owned by Travis Baron's father, Francis M. Baron. However, the body had been washed free of the vehicle.

The senior Baron, a truck driver, was out of town at the time of the accident.

Brilliant Police Chief Steve Maurer said Baron had reportedly attended several graduation parties where alcohol was being served. Maurer said witnesses reported Baron had been drinking heavily.

Baron was at a graduation party on Grant Avenue when he became belligerent and got into a fight with a friend, whom Maurer refused to identify. The chief said the host of the party asked Baron to leave at about 11:30 p.m.

Baron apparently left the party on foot but returned a short time later driving his father's car, which, according to Maurer, he did not have permission to drive. Brilliant Patrolman Cloyd Owens attempted to stop Baron after it was apparent he was intoxicated. However, Baron fled from the officer.

Owens chased Baron south through Brilliant to Riddle's Run Road. Baron then led the officer four miles northwest to the intersection of Riddle's Run and State Route 151, where he turned back east toward Brilliant. As they neared Brilliant, Owens said Baron had stretched a substantial lead on the police cruiser. Owens said he was at least a half-mile away when he saw the taillights of the Chevrolet leave the road. By the time Owens reached the spot where Baron went through the barrier to the park, the vehicle had disappeared over the embankment. Owens said he ran to the edge of the cliff in time to see the vehicle's taillights sink beneath the water.

Chief Maurer speculated that a combination of speed, alcohol, and unfamiliarity with the powerful car led to the tragic conclusion of a promising life.

"You've got to wonder what he was thinking," Maurer said as he

watched rescue workers drag the river bottom for the body. “Here’s a kid, the class salutatorian, with his entire life ahead of him, and he pulls a stunt like this. Now, everyone’s memory of graduation isn’t going to be of the good times, but this.”

Baron also was a member of Brilliant’s cross country and track teams and was a district wrestling champion in the 118-pound weight class. He was the only child of Francis and the late Amanda Baron.



The time frame established for telling this story was simple: I would begin the minute I was sure that Francis “Big Frank” Baron was dead. This plan was potentially flawed by the chance, albeit slight, that Big Frank would outlive me, but I liked my odds. Big Frank was twenty-five years my senior and a health insurer’s nightmare. He was a hundred pounds overweight, chain-smoked non-filtered Lucky Strike cigarettes, and could take a twelve-pack out of the fridge and polish it off before the last beer got warm. The possibility that he would outlive me was not a concern. My concern was for my own skin. If I wrote the book while he was still breathing, Big Frank Baron would hunt me down and kill me. Simple as that. Given Big Frank’s history, this fear was not unfounded. He was a violent man, and I have retained in my memory the vivid image of the day he backhanded his son for the heinous act of asking for three dollars to go to the movies. After Travis had cleaned the blood from his face and the splatter marks from the refrigerator, we sat on the steps of the back porch as he pressed an ice cube wrapped in a bloody dish towel against a split and swollen upper lip. There were still tears in his reddened eyes when he said, “I wish the bastard would die, but he’s so mean he’ll probably live forever.”

He didn’t.

On February 16, 1996, just before nine forty-five in the morning, Francis Martino “Big Frank” Baron dropped dead in a snow-covered parking lot at the Shenandoah Truck Stop along Interstate 70 near Old

Washington, Ohio. He had been heading west to Dayton with a load of cardboard when he stopped at the Shenandoah to buy antacids for what the coroner later speculated was an incorrectly self-diagnosed case of indigestion. Frank was north of three hundred pounds and had the dietary discipline of a hungry alligator, so bouts of heartburn and indigestion were not uncommon. But this was anything but indigestion.

He dropped to his knees in a slush puddle in front of his idling Kenworth, a perplexed look consuming his face. His brows converged and his upper lip hitched. Perhaps he was attempting to analyze the eruption within his chest, or perhaps he pondered the possibility that there were, indeed, powers in the universe stronger than pure meanness. Whatever the thought, it was only momentary, for the screen scrambled and quickly went dark. He was dead before his forehead hit the asphalt, the unopened antacids still wrapped in fingers the girth of summer sausages.

An autopsy would later show that he died of a massive coronary.

When I happened upon his obituary in my paper, the *Ohio Valley Morning Journal*, chills raced up my spine like a million needle pricks. The obit was a sanitized accounting of Big Frank's life, a couple of terse paragraphs stating that he had died suddenly and was survived by a brother, Leonard. He was preceded in death by his parents, Dominic and Esther, a brother, Anthony, and a son, Travis. Visiting hours would be held just before services at William's Funeral Home in Brilliant, with interment at New Alexandria Cemetery.

What the obituary did not state was that Frank Baron was a loathsome human being who had ignored his only son and married at least five times. He had divorced three of his wives, one had died in a suspicious car crash on Dago Ridge, and another drowned in a boating accident on the Ohio River.

Maybe.

Her body was never found, leading to wild speculation that she had actually run off with her lover rather than face a lifetime of waking up next to Big Frank. This was the favorite scenario of most residents of Brilliant, as they were anxious to believe that she had escaped his wrath and was alive, happy and far from the Ohio River Valley. His only son

died in the river, too, and like his mother's the boy's body was never found. However, that is usually not the kind of information that ends up in a paid obituary, even for someone as despicable as Frank Baron.

There are many people in my hometown who would tell you that the death of Big Frank Baron at age sixty-seven was long overdue. Upon hearing the news of his passing, a goodly portion of these God-fearing Christians chuckled and said, "About damn time." Even my own mother, as charitable and forgiving a person as I've ever known, said, "Well, the son of a bitch is God's problem now."

I wasn't the least bit sorry to see Frank gone, either, although I had long since moved from Brilliant, and it was only on the occasional visit home that I might catch a glimpse of him, or he of me. The last time I saw Big Frank was in Kennedy's Market less than a year before he died. He was standing at the counter buying Lucky Strikes and didn't recognize me at first. When he did, he snapped his head and frowned, a subtle reminder that, despite the passing years, he hadn't forgotten, or forgiven. But his face was sallow, and the tired eyes were red and rheumy and had lost much of their venom. The arms that I remembered as thick and muscled had turned fleshy and weak. He looked to be exactly what he was—an old man whose best days had been lost to time and alcohol. He was no longer the intimidating figure of my youth. It would have been easy to feel sorry for him, but sometimes the years cannot diminish the bitterness, and that was the case with me and Frank Baron. I cannot sit here today and list one redeeming quality about Big Frank. Not one. Therefore, it was impossible to mark his passing with any sense of loss.

Big Frank was the father of the boy who, for the first eighteen years of my life, was my best friend. I have never had as good a friend since, and I doubt I ever will. Hardly a day goes by that I don't think about Travis. I still miss him and the days when we roamed the hills of eastern Ohio. Travis Baron loved living, and he did it with more spirit than any person I've ever known. The obstacles that were hurled in the path of his short life would have completely discouraged others, but they only made him more determined.

The night after Big Frank's obituary appeared in the paper, I went to my basement office and to a locked wooden trunk that was filled with the treasures of my youth—photo albums, my varsity sweater, trophies, old ball caps, scrapbooks, and the like. Hidden in the bottom was a black, hardcover tablet with the word "JOURNAL" embossed across the front in gold block letters. It had been a graduation gift from my grandmother Malone, and it was nearly full with my reminiscences of growing up in the river town of Brilliant, Ohio. The book's spine crackled when I opened it to the scrawled notes about Travis and our adventures, with newspaper clippings neatly pasted into place. I had written everything I could remember about Travis. I didn't want him to fade from my memory.

I made my first entry in the days after the car he was driving disappeared into the Ohio River. It had been twenty-five years since I made my first entry and five years since the last. The book I planned to write—this book—was contained within the pages of the journal. It included my personal memories, plus extensive interviews with Chase Tornik, Clay Carter, and others, which I had conducted on the sly and tucked away, waiting for the day when Big Frank would be no more. The last interview had been with Tornik while he lay dying of lung cancer at Steubenville Presbyterian Medical Center. We spoke for two hours, while he hacked blood into a hand towel and strained for breath. Despite the pain killers, his memory was resplendent, and I felt bad for the life and reputation he had lost.

The journal contained my memories of growing up in Brilliant, a place where being a varsity letterman or an Eagle Scout was still important. From the time I started first grade until the day I graduated, we began each day with the Pledge to the Flag and the Lord's Prayer, and no one ever made a fuss about whether it was constitutionally or politically correct. It was just something you did.

Graduates of Brilliant High School hung their blue and white graduation tassels on their rearview mirrors and left them dangling until they had faded gray. Most Brilliantites had lived there all their lives, and they supported the town. Everyone bought raffle tickets from

the Little Leaguers, chocolate peanut clusters from the Scouts, and light bulbs from the Lions Club. On Saturday afternoons in the fall everyone went to the Blue Devils' football games, which held nearly the same magnitude of importance as a baptism.

I miss my hometown and those simpler times. But the Brilliant I grew up in no longer exists. The steel mills up and down the river have folded, and the once-proud communities that lined the Ohio River have been reduced to decaying shells of grander days. I don't get up the river much anymore. As editor and columnist for the *Morning Journal*, most of my working day is spent in the office in Wheeling. My two young daughters seem to gobble up whatever time is left. My parents moved to the Outer Banks of North Carolina a few years ago and, except for an occasional class reunion, there is no reason to go back. But, when I do go visit, I always take the back road by way of Hunter's Ridge.

At the spot where the car left the road, at the entrance to the park, the adult Bible study class from the Brilliant United Methodist Church placed a white cross made of four-by-fours, with the initials "T.F.B."—Travis Franklin Baron—on the crossbar. I helped Jim Gilmartin haul the cross to the park entrance in the back of his International Harvester pickup truck. We took turns working through the rocky earth with a post hole digger to get below the frost line, and dumped a bag of quick-drying cement into the hole, along with water he brought in empty milk jugs. When he was sure the cement was set and the cross true, he asked me to bow my head, and he said a brief prayer, asking God to give Travis a better life in heaven than he'd had on earth. Two days later, I left for college. As the years passed and Travis Baron grew distant in the memories of many, the letters faded, the cross bleached out, and it was eventually claimed by the hillside.

Like the steel mills, Travis is gone. The loss of the mills and my friend only serves to remind me of the fragile state of life, whether it was a hulking, smoke-belching steel mill or an auburn-haired kid with a crooked smile.