

Canarytown

“City of Grief”

A Novel

M. Brooke McCullough
Joel E. Boydston

Copyright © 2019 by M.B. McCullough & J.E. Boydston. All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law, without the prior written permission of the authors. Reviewers may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*Through me lies the road to the city of grief,
Through me lies the pathway of woe everlasting.
Through me lies the road to the souls that are lost.*

—Dante Alighieri

Chapter 1

A gauzy mist crept along the deserted street, drifting in and out of the darkened doorways of late night Canarytown. Moved by the night breeze, it enveloped everything in its icy embrace. The muffled sound of a lone walker's footsteps came to a halt outside a pub door. The squeaking complaint of the door heralded a dark stranger's entrance into the quiet solitude of the interior.

The droopy-eyed bartender glanced at his watch with a shrug of his shoulders as Sade sang "Your Love Is King" from the jukebox. Four men seated at separate tables along the far wall of the room, all on their last hollow leg, bobbed their heads over cocktails, all dreading the inevitable last call.

The visitor, wearing a dark fedora, opened the top of his high-collared trench coat, approached the bar, and ordered a brandy.

From a distant corner of the room, two women studied the mysterious newcomer with narrowed eyes, vultures hovering over newfound carrion. They exchanged glances, confirming territorial rights, while taking the measure of the new one while he twisted the glass in his gloved hand, in no hurry to taste the liquid. The dark corner of the bar where he stood made him look even more mysterious to the hungry women. They exchanged a few words before the shorter and heavier of the two rose from her chair. She wriggled to straighten her clinging knit miniskirt and patted her teased hair before she ambled across to where he stood.

He guessed she could be Spanish or mulatto, but couldn't tell in the dim light. She slid onto the adjacent barstool and leaned in toward him, allowing her melon-sized breasts

to brush against his arm. Her cheap perfume did not mask the smell of stale tobacco that clung to her hair.

“Hello, honey. You look to be the sort of gentleman who’d buy a lady a drink before this hop house closes,” she purred as she rubbed her hand up and down the length of her fleshy thigh. The stranger nodded to the bartender without raising his eyes from the rock glass in his hand.

“My, aren’t you the quiet one,” she teased as she accepted the fresh drink. “That’s okay. I like the strong, silent type. Are you lonely, honey? Maybe new to this part of town? We don’t see many suits this side of Halsted.”

“What’s your name?” the man whispered.

“Whatever you want it to be, honey; names ain’t important in my line of work.”

“What’s your name?” he repeated in a raised voice.

The young woman fidgeted in her seat, alarmed by his abruptness, “Ruby. The name’s Ruby, ‘cause of my red hair and all.” She tilted her head closer to the man and pointed. “Look. You might think it’s dark brown at first, but it’s red. Got it from my old lady. She’s Irish, don’t cha know, though she always said my old man was Jamaican.”

“There someplace we can be alone?”

“Sure, sure. You wanna go now? Without even knowin’ my charge?”

“I’ll give you whatever you ask. Name your price. I’ll make sure you get what you’ve earned.”

“Say, you ain’t a cop or somethin’ are ya? I can smell ‘em a mile away,” she said, edging back a little on her stool.

His hand reached out for her so swiftly, she didn’t see it before he locked it around

her wrist, “No, I’m not a cop.”

The woman smacked her chewing gum and giggled, glancing around the room. Only two other people were in the bar now—both passed out at their tables. Her intuition screamed at her to walk away from this cold stranger; give him to her friend if she wanted him. She preferred the rough ones anyway. For several indecisive moments, she sat motionless and mute. She reasoned that she needed the money and convinced herself she could handle almost anything for half an hour. She turned to give a nod to her girlfriend and noticed she’d left already. The bitch had split after losing her shot.

“So are we on?” he prodded.

“Sure, sure, honey, I gotcha. It’s just you worried me there for a minute. A lady has to be careful ya know. I can’t afford another pinch by vice again this month. I’m a working gal and my rent don’t get paid if I’m locked up.”

“Then let’s go.” He reached into his pocket and threw several folded bills on the bar. She held her faux fur coat out to him, but when he ignored her, she threw it around her shoulders herself. As the door closed behind them, a cold chill flooded the room and the dim ceiling lights stirred on their brass chains. The weary bartender put the bills in his pocket and drank the untouched brandy left on the bar.

The shadowy, cloaked figure retreated unobserved from an alleyway that ran beside a weathered brick building a few blocks from The Pour House Tavern. Gusts of wind whistled through the street. The vengeful blasts blew with a force that fought the stranger’s progress down the deserted street. Flashes of lightning tore across the sky accompanied by muffled thunder. The streetlight blinked twice and went dark, signaling

an approaching storm. He leaned into the wind and moved swiftly now. When he reached the corner, he darted across the street clutching a pair of pink silk panties tucked in his coat pocket. He turned the corner and vanished.

Chapter 2

They were calling it one of the wettest springs on record. An early morning mist had graduated to a persistent drizzle that now became a steady, pelting rain when detectives Kyle McNally and Sam Weller arrived. Another hooker had turned up mauled and murdered in Canarytown sometime the night before. There were now three murders with nearly identical signatures. It looked to be the Canarytown Slugger's signature. That's the name given him by the force after the second one. Done in the tavern district of south-central Chicago, late at night, and with no identification found, she'd end up just another Jane Doe.

In the first officer's report, a patrol car arrived to investigate a victim found lying on the pavement in an alleyway with her legs splayed wide, underpants missing. She'd been bludgeoned to death and left with a folded Chicago White Sox baseball card inserted in her vagina. Visible signs of the brutality included blunt force contusions, blood splatters and viscera around the head, shoulders, trunk and mutilated flesh in and around the labia and vulva. The battering left the victim's face caved-in and featureless; nose crushed, eye sockets pulverized and flattened against what remained of formless indentations that once were the victim's cheeks.

By the time the duty medical examiner, aka the M.E., arrived, they had cordoned off, photographed, and begun an initial evaluation. Kyle identified himself and Sam as lead investigators. The baseball card found was of Hoyt Wilhelm, a pitcher for the Sox in 1965. Two previous victims had signature collector cards of Tommy John and Eddie Fisher, both members of the 1965 team. The M.E. reported severe vaginal trauma, and like the two

earlier murders, there were no traditional rape signs, including any evidence of semen; at least not from the initial on-site eval. He would not confirm the method of penetration before an autopsy. The perp used a baton or bat-like weapon, hence the "Slugger" moniker. After McNally informed him that the prior two victims had ketamine residue in their blood, he agreed to order toxicology labs STAT. They believed the attacker first choked his victims to disable them before injecting them with a low dose of ketamine, called Special-K on the street. That gave him time to relocate his victims before they regained consciousness, when he began his "artwork." The approximate time of death was estimated at 2 to 2:30 a.m.

While Sam did a walk around of the immediate area to verify security and search for evidence, Kyle made notes documenting the scene and the overall condition, placement, and appearance of the body. He assigned a member of his team, Detective Tony Petrocelli, to canvas the nearby neighborhood for leads.

Petrocelli had one interesting hit on a witness—a Mrs. Ziomecki, who lived nearby had heard something unusual earlier last night. Kyle would let him conduct the initial interview and then, if it looked promising, he'd follow-up.

The photographer had finished long before and McNally, rain-soaked and feeling frustrated at the lack of physical evidence found, was ready to head back to HQ.

"Hey, Sam, we're wrapped here. What say we get back to the department and take care of the paperwork. I'm ready to dry off and get more java in my veins," McNally said.

"I'm all in, amigo, but how about we stop for a burger on the way. Okay?"

"You gonna order one of your heart attack specials? Add in cheese, a slice of tomato, a lettuce leaf with an order of fries and you've covered four of the five major food

groups, right? All we need to do now is drive by an apple tree and you'll have covered them all." Kyle smiled with one eyebrow raised.

"I'm gonna keep eating 'em as long as you insist on playing that crapical music on the radio when I'm ridin' with you, *Streetoven*. Yeah, so doubt me all you want, partner, but I bet I'll still beat you in a 40-yard dash."

Kyle laughed out loud as he drove away, "Right. Maybe if I gave you a 20-yard head start."

Chapter 3

Kyle loathed this nasty weather. Especially the icy wind, loud and persistent, screaming like hordes of tortured souls from the seventh circle of Hell. He smelled the rain coming, again. Already late March and it still hadn't made up its mind whether it was still winter or just stumbling around trying to find spring. Though they call Chicago the Windy City, named after a handful of blustering politicians in the thirties, he believed the name derived from the incessant winds that tried to blow the city off the map. As a boy, he'd loved thunderstorms; their persistent violence fascinated him. Nature had inspired him then. Now, it was only one more thing to irritate the hell out of him.

He had come to meet his informant, Ezekiel Love, who went by "EZ Love" in the neighborhood, to see if he'd caught anything in the wind about the Slugger. The three recent hooker vics had been murdered there; the latest one, yesterday.

He rubbed his eyes and frowned at the grim reflection in the rearview mirror of his wet hair curled close to his scalp. The circles under his eyes combined with his unshaven face gave him a sinister look. Why did it seem like every time he met with EZ it was during one of these hateful storms? *Fate, fortune, or an omen?*

Kyle cracked the window, started the car and popped the defrost fan to full blast. As the warm air settled around the close confines of the car, he watched with detached fascination as the first raindrops exploded against the windshield. The invading mist cooled his face. He watched as the wind gusts trapped themselves between buildings, twisting in search of escape. The wind lifted the rain upward in long, shiny tentacles that reached through the broken tenement windows, whipping the torn, wet curtains in and out of the

skeletal openings in the dozens of long-abandoned apartments.

He compared the city to a leviathan, with this place smack in the center of its bowels. Kyle found both this neighborhood and EZ equally oppressive and offensive. EZ called this place home. He chose it because of how easily he could disappear into the empty buildings.

These days Kyle flirted with the notion of dropping out of the rat race and finding a nice little sheriff's job in Podunk, USA. He imagined there crime meant the local high school boys drinking too much on Saturday night and "tipping" Farmer Jones's cows for fun. A wry smile crossed his lips.

Even his longtime partner, Sam Weller, told him he'd been working the streets too long. Maybe he was right. He viewed it all as a man-made shit pile camouflaged by a forest of steel girders and copper-tinted glass. Its beauty fooled so many here. Most of them hadn't a clue they lived in a city of artful works of architecture that disguised the monster in its belly.

He needed a break in this case soon. The press hadn't connected the dots that the three gruesome murders were serial crimes yet. When McNally came across the earlier site reports, he recognized the connections. First reports from the coroner only identified them as Jane Does. Given the neighborhoods they were found in, he'd pegged them as hookers. The thinking went they'd either strayed onto the wrong streets or were victims of unhappy Johns. Toe tags on unclaimed bodies. There'd also been little initial interest in the department as there were no missing persons reports filed. The media overlooked them as just more violent crimes against prostitutes. That's not uncommon in a city of millions. But an important piece of the story never made the police reports; in a well-intentioned effort

to discourage copycats, the baseball cards were omitted from the report.

It had only been a few weeks since the first body turned up under the Halsted El station. The second body turned up near Sherman Park and the third near the 35th Street station and Comiskey Park on Wentworth. All found with no identification. Without underwear. Hideously beaten with a club and raped after the assault with the same weapon. Faceless masks of torn flesh, their bodies left with few unbroken bones. All with collector cards inserted in their vaginas.

The guy had been cunning, so far. No finger or footprints, no bite marks, no blood or other site DNA of any kind. Nothing at all for the CSI team.

Kyle ordered his team to keep the collector cards out of the police reports. His supervisor, Commander Rouse, opposed it until Kyle reminded him it reflected on his management image and would draw bad publicity. The superintendent would appreciate his discretion until they delivered solid leads.

The victims worked the New City area in a district known as the Back of the Yards, a neighborhood that had seen its share of changes since the mid-nineteenth century. About then the first skilled German and Irish butchers began arriving to work in what would become the Union Stock Yards, made infamous in Upton Sinclair's book, *The Jungle*. A coalition of the biggest railroads constructed the stockyards during the explosive growth of the national railway system and major improvements to refrigeration methods. Those two factors turned Chicago into the perfect mid-continent staging area for meat processing and distribution. The ethnic makeup of the area changed with time, becoming variously Polish, Czech, Lithuanian, Slovak, Chicano, and now, mostly black enclaves. The death of the meat packing industry in the '60s, signaled the end of the middle class in this district.

Thinking about all that history only reminded Kyle of how much he hated change, whether in people, in partners, or in neighborhoods. *It's hard to give a damn when the carpet's always shifting under you.*

Chapter 4

Restless and uncomfortable in his car, McNally sniffed the air, then himself. A high school locker room came to mind. *I'd pay a hundred bucks for a can of Mitchum, a change of shirt and a bottle of Maker's Mark. Anything to burn away the scum. C'mon, let's move it, EZ!*

As he waited in the dark, he questioned his reasons for calling the meeting. Could he trust anything EZ told him? EZ became his CI when Billie Fong floated to the surface in the Chicago River with a bullet in his brain after the Chinatown fiasco. McNally still blamed himself for loaning Billie to Drug Enforcement. Good informants like Billie came around only once or twice in a cop's career, while EZ had the endearing attributes of the ugly kid at an Arthur Murray dance class—always picked last.

McNally sank back into the car seat and scowled at the darkness through the window. Even Vivaldi's second movement of the *Spring* season symphony playing on the radio did little to relieve the edge from his impatience. He attempted to stretch his long, cramped legs across the width of the seat. *I'd better get a break in this case soon, before the media pieces together that Chicago has a real live serial killer.*

EZ's distorted shadow snaked across the lot toward the car. EZ and Billie were as different as stink and scent. The best informants cleared good money between the feds and the city cops, but after the murder of Billie, EZ got skittish and greedy. He wanted both the money and the respect Billie had earned. But if he didn't stop talkin' shit, he'd end up like Billie. He claims a bad cop put the .22 in Billie's head.

To this day, EZ swears he knows the truth, but refuses to say any more without a

big payday. And, if he disappears, he promises a recording he's stashed will be delivered to *Eyewitness News*. McNally warned EZ he could be confirming his reservation in the caboose of a Hell-bound train. The DEA's field office believes he's a lying sack of shit and suggests he'd better watch his back. There are cops in the city who take that kind of talk personally. He was lucky to only catch a beating from CPD.

"Stupid son of a bitch," McNally mumbled. The Commander would own his nuts if he found out about EZ, even though he paid him out of his own pocket. But McNally hadn't cut him loose. Not yet anyway. Besides, EZ owed him a favor for taking him back in when everyone else treated him like he had AIDS. Kyle made him work a little harder for paydays now. EZ had no conscience, but an eager eye for a Jefferson twenty, and that worked in the detective's favor.

"Where the fuck have you been, dickhead?" McNally snapped. He left him standing in the rain and watched EZ fidget and dance as he pulled his oversized army jacket closer around his head. EZ, a tall, skinny, black guy with protruding lips and a lizard-like skull, reminded Kyle of the monster in the *Predator* movies. That head sat just beneath nasty, knotty dreads and a black leather cap with a Sox logo. His dirty jacket partially hid a Marvel comic hero t-shirt. Even in the dark, rain-soaked night, EZ wore mirrored sunglasses. He thought they made him invisible.

Out of breath and gasping for air from sprinting across the parking lot, EZ croaked, "You got my money, man? I'm gonna need plenty fo' dis."

"Yo! An what's at tell you? You ain't paying me shit."

McNally snarled and lowered his window and reached his arm through and patted EZ's jacket pockets.

EZ jumped back. “Yo! What the shit? I ain’t totin’. You got my money?”

“You know the routine, EZ. You better not be carrying around me. And, it’d be a favor if I threw away that shit you’ve been drinking. It’ll fry your brain and rot your liver. And I’ve already lost one informant.”

Since Billie’s murder, EZ had grown nervous. He bought a .22 and carried it with him almost everywhere. He’d close faster than a bear trap if he thought McNally didn’t trust him.

The CI licked his lips, dancing in front of the window. “Jeeez-zus,” he screeched. “Henry finds out I’m talkin’ to 5-0, this nigga’ gonna need to run hard. I been a fool telling you shit, man. C’mon, gimme a break, Mr. detective. Yo gonna get me in some deep shit.”

Even in the near darkness, McNally saw EZ Love’s body fidgeting and rocking from side to side. “Calm down, EZ. Take off those stupid sunglasses and get in. I want to see your eyes when I’m talking to you.” He nodded toward the front seat passenger side. “Just give me what you got and I’ll pay you. After that, you can go. Just don’t leave the city. Last thing you want is to piss-off me *and* your parole officer.”

In the car now, EZ stared into cold green eyes that didn’t say “good to see you again.” A chill shook his skinny frame. He understood the threat and remembered the last time he gave the cops bogus information to get a payoff. He received a beat down he wouldn’t soon forget.

EZ knew the Chinatown bust was bad from the start. Too bad for Billie. The Triads found out. Then Billie said the wrong things to the wrong people. He’d tried to tell them a dirty cop steered the deal wrong. But those were Billie’s last words before he took a bullet to the head. EZ saw him go in the river. He swore he’d never buy it the same way. He’d

seen the cop who offed him, but didn't recognize him. So for now, he'd stopped talking about it. It was a pig problem and EZ knew better than to mess with pig problems. Nothing but bad mojo there. But McNally treated him different. He came across righteous.

McNally smelled the thick, fruity scent of cheap wine on EZ's breath. "I see you're still getting twisted on Mad Dog these days, right? I'm thinking with what you make off me, you can afford something that wouldn't make your breath stink like a dog's asshole. And, who's this Henry you've been telling me about? Where can I find him?"

EZ showed excitement for the first time since he'd gotten into McNally's car. He turned and leaned toward McNally, his face and breath close enough to make Kyle's eyes water. "Yo, word is some cracker's beatin' Henry's hos. It ain't Henry. Heard this guy was tore up on crack or something. Henry's real mad and says it's some whitey who likes beatin' his trim, not fuckin' em."

EZ leaned closer to McNally's ear, "Henry beats his hos too. Some thinkin' it be Henry doin' the beatin' and sayin' it's the cracker. Word is that one got beat by the cracker an' got away."

By now, EZ's hot, foul smelling breath had created a dense cloud of suffocating noxious air. McNally saw the bulging whites of his eyes in the dark and sneered when EZ sprayed spittle against his dashboard describing the fear among the prostitutes in the neighborhood.

"So where do I find Henry?"

EZ began rocking back and forth. "Don't know, man. Dat nigga' ain't been seen fo' days."

"Where does he lay his head?"

“He movin’ lots lately.”

“So, what’s Henry look like?”

“He’s a big motha-fucka. Maybe seven foot big!”

McNally’s irritation at EZ’s answers was rising like a boil on his ass. “Is he moving drugs? How many whores?”

“Crack... yeah, an’ more. Seven, ten hos.”

“Does Henry carry a piece?”

“Nah, he don’t. Just a big-ass walking stick.”

Done asking questions and getting useless information, McNally sighed and said, “Enough! Sorry, EZ, but if that’s the best you’ve got for me...” He handed EZ a twenty and a ten. “That’s sad. Catch you later. Stay in touch.”

“What! This all?” EZ whined staring at the bills in his hand. “How you expect me to eat?”

“Get a job.”

“I ain’t fooling wit you cop! This all I got. Why you trippin’ on me, man? You don’t fuck with dat nigga’. His boys smoke anybody gets in his face. Yo! Henry got his own law. You don’t cross him, not if you like breathin’ in and out. Man, every ho in the hood freakin’. They ain’t workin’. They ain’t doing nothin’. Ol’ Henry making no snap and he motha-fuckin mad. Bad like nobody remembers. He crazy fucked up. Dat all I got. Why you dissin’ me now?”

McNally pointed a threatening finger at EZ’s face. “Now listen up, asshole. I don’t give a shit about *your* personal problems. The number of dead women around this town is piling up and you’re giving me jack shit to work with. Do you think I’m stupid? You tell

me some giant black guy who carries a big stick might be doing it, but that same black guy may know about a white guy that gets high who might be the perp. And there's a whore that got beat up by a white guy but she got away and you can't tell me who she is or where she went. She's mysteriously vanished. Nice try EZ. Most pimps in this city beat their whores. You can't sell me that bullshit!" McNally reached across EZ and opened the door, "Now get the fuck out of my car."

"Yo, man. Why you trippin'? Henry don't need no piece. He got a big fuckin' stick. He takes it everywhere," EZ pleaded. "I seen it, man, you gotta believe I seen it. He'd soon as twist my cap off he hears 'bout me talkin' to you."

McNally grabbed EZ by the collar. "You find me Henry, and don't stop until you do. If another woman dies, EZ, you'll beg for Henry's stick before I'm done with you. Now take you and your shitty Mad Dog breath out of my car!"

EZ started to leave. "Aight, aight, I hear something, I do dat, man."

"Keep the money and consider yourself lucky," McNally said. "I want you to get word on the street that I need to talk to Henry. Say there's a lot of money in it for the person who finds him. There's a C-Note on the other side of that news. So, say anything, EZ, but find him. You've got my pager number. Use it."

EZ backed out of the car, never taking his eyes off the detective. He stuffed the money into his pocket and, under his breath, muttered, "Yeah, an' fuck you too."

Then he was gone. McNally considered what he'd learned from EZ. Henry couldn't hide for long. He didn't get much, but at least he had a name, and his CI craved that C-Note.

McNally's thoughts drifted back to Chinatown. A year's worth of grinding setup

while working in cooperation with the Organized Crime Unit (OCD); painstaking time spent trying to catch up with the Chinatown drug operators. Rival gangs were blowing each other's brains out all over the area, and most of their coke, crack and smack came from somewhere around Archer Avenue. So far, from an unknown source. There'd been no solid leads, though they were getting close. The mob blamed the Triads for the blood spilling, the Chinese blamed the black gangs and the blacks blamed the Mexicans. Who blamed the mob? The U.S. Attorney, naturally.

The hit on Billie was professional, a .22 caliber bullet to the head, typically the mob's way of marking their kills. Love's claim of it being "in house" held no credibility in the squad room. McNally couldn't confirm or deny.

The department took a lot of heat for the bad bust. After all their background work, the Organized Crime Division, aka OCD, made it clear they were there as backup only. Funny though, when the deal went south, the Chicago P.D. took almost all the heat. When heads started to roll, Detective Liz Dumont and McNally topped the list. She'd been temporarily assigned to Kyle, while his usual partner and best friend, Sam Weller, was out-of-pocket with a long-delayed court testimony commitment. OCD blamed Mac and Liz and his commander unjustly pulled them off the case.

EZ just might make good for all the problems he caused if he delivered Henry. *I'll kiss EZ's twitchy black ass on the fifty-yard line at Soldier Field during a Bears game if Henry turned out to be the Slugger.*

The howling wind and relentless rain were growing in ferocity, becoming deafening. McNally cursed the dark, knowing the storm was only beginning.