

FOR WHOM  
THE  
CURTAIN CALLS



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A NOVEL

IAN O'REGAN

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Black Castle Press  
San Antonio, Texas

Printed in the United States of America.

*Cover design: Black Castle Press*

*Cover photography: PD Photography c/o Flickr.com: Creative Commons Licensed*

ISBN-10 0615441149  
ISBN-13 978-0615441146





# *Chapter 1*

*Monday*

Willard Webster briefly entertained the idea of trying to raise his broken body off the ground – just a little. But his body wanted nothing to do with his plan, so he dismissed the thought and returned to his oddly satisfying new routine of lying in a crumpled heap, blinking repeatedly, and wondering why he wasn't in far more severe pain.

He forced his lungs to take in air through a series of shallow breaths and stared up at the artistic glory exploding from the arches and ceiling of the Palladium Theatre. In all the years he'd toiled there, had he ever really paid attention to the beauty that surrounded his every workday? The answer didn't matter; the hand-carved and meticulously painted splendor now mesmerized him. Willard took in the red and purple hues gracing the ornamental structures and felt a wave of peace wash over him.

Or maybe it was just the loss of blood. He couldn't really tell. And he didn't really care.

He heard quick footsteps moving back and forth behind him, but he didn't care about them either.

"Holy ... aw, jeez," a voice attached to the footsteps mumbled. Willard knew the voice, but couldn't remember from where. And though he couldn't see the man, he figured the shocked inflection in his utterance made it a good bet that he looked as bad as he had feared. He tried to block out everything but the dream-like architecture above.

When not sprawled across the floor of his workplace in a bloody, half-conscious stupor, Willard Webster had been compared by coworkers to an old cranky gorilla moving methodically across a caged pen at the zoo. But the appreciable fact that the only thing Willard would fling at people when angry was verbal abuse – an odorless projectile with almost zero ability to ruin a VP's \$1,000 suit – had always allowed him to remain slightly more appealing than his primate counterpart.

Willard had spent most of the last three decades working behind the scenes to ensure the hundreds of thousands of fans who visited The Palladium Theatre left the shows they attended thoroughly entertained. The management of the theater and visiting artists routinely praised his work while turning a perpetual blind eye to the multitude of faults he displayed at virtually all times.

Willard swallowed and tried to wonder how long he'd been on the ground. A minute? An hour? He didn't care about the answer.

"This is ... well ... this is a lot of blood," the voice said.

Had Willard been able to speak, he would certainly have complimented the voice on its observational prowess using the most colorfully hurtful language imaginable. But he couldn't

move his mouth – or his anything else for that matter. His own voice echoed in his head.

*Focus on the sky.*

Willard's detractors had most often pointed out his surly temperament, poor hygiene, and his somewhat inconvenient habit of showing up for work in a condition slightly short of sober. But the ownership considered scowls, random stinks, and routine inebriation small prices to pay for Willard's more than perfected understanding of backstage performance logistics and his robust knowledge of electronics. Indeed, this particular aptitude came in handy on a very frequent basis as he repaired Blackberries, phones, and laptops for frantic PR reps and spoiled singers who attached more value to their mobile equipment than they did to their internal organs.

And unlike the new punks Willard assumed the theater hired to meet some sort of federally mandated moron quota, Willard worked hard – very hard. He may have acted like those clowns early on, but he'd grown up quickly and accepted the tough and often thankless job of behind the curtain work as his calling.

A phone beeped behind him. The voice was calling someone.

"Hey, it's me," the voice said. "Grumbly's dead."

*Um ... what?*

Willard listened to the rapid, pacing footsteps and a series of grunted acknowledgements being made into the phone.

"Well I'm pretty sure. Someone did a number on him. His face is all beat in, and he's not moving."

Willard considered trying to prove the voice wrong, but couldn't muster enough interest from any of his appendages.

"So, what do I do now?" the voice asked.

Willard's eyes blinked rapidly and his mind quickly snapped back into place. He realized who belonged to the voice. He only knew one person dumb enough to require advice on how to

properly handle the discovery of a mostly deceased person in his place of employment.

*This* he cared about – a lot.

*Oh, God. Why him?*

As though on cue, he let out a low, patented grumble.

Everything about Willard had always seemed to grumble. He grumbled as he entered the backstage of the theater at five o'clock that morning, hours ahead of his nearest colleague. He grumbled at the idea of climbing the ladder which would take him twenty feet straight up to the narrow steel walkway which ran across the back wall of the theater and nearly the entire length of the stage. His overalls joined in the grumbling, seeming to protest Willard's insistence on wearing them even though they were at least a size too small.

"I am not touching him," the voice said with sudden firmness.

*Damn right you're not.*

Willard's brain began to reveal more of his morning to him. He remembered standing at the bottom of the ladder taking a quick hit of peppermint schnapps and thinking how he would soon hit the age limit for work which required climbing up into theater rafters. After securing the bottle in its special hideaway, he had grabbed a rung and began the arduous climb. For a man of his size, the climb to the catwalk was an effort. But it hadn't seemed near as grueling as previous trips. He knew he had just a few more climbs left to make before he ended stagehand days on his own terms. He had worked his way higher, taking deep breaths and imagining the day when he would find the letter in his mail that would change his life – and the lives of so many other people – forever.

He remembered pulling himself to the top of the catwalk and smiling, dizzy from all the forthcoming adulation.

But how he'd gone from a near hero to a floor cleanup project still eluded his dazed, foggy mind. One thing he felt certain of: the voice hadn't been wrong about his being dead. It had just been early.

"Okay, okay ... *okay*," the voice said. "Yes! I get it – I'm not stupid."

*That's right. You left stupid a long time ago on your way to ass-head.*

The phone clicked shut. The footsteps picked up again and moved away from Willard. He looked back up at the glorious and profound expression of art three stories above him. With the room now devoid of frantic pacing and asinine questions, a weight lifted from Willard's chest and he felt something he hadn't experienced for some time. He felt *good*.

Willard's concern about how a man with the sense of a deflated football would handle his situation eased. He knew it would be all right. The voice on the other end of that phone no doubt laid out the proper course of action for his dense friend. Willard closed his eyes and with the faintest smile allowed his mind to drift skyward. He stopped caring about everything. Yes, it was all going to be just fine.

Had Willard lived just a bit longer, his confidence in a logical resolution might have wavered somewhat – probably around the time his body burst into flames.



DENTON ROURKE SAT IN A WARM, comfortable booth at Ford's Diner with an unusually large piece of Boston cream pie on one side of him and a stack of ungraded English papers on the other. He regarded the items with equal respect, but less-than equal enthusiasm. Both required his attention, but he could only handle one at a time. Denton ended the internal debate quickly

and slid the pie front and center. The pie beamed back at Denton as he dropped a napkin into his lap. He kept his eyes focused forward so as not to meet the scolding glare of the shunned freshman essays.

"Sorry," Denton said to the lonely papers while still averting his gaze. "Maybe if you tasted better. But still probably not."

Henry Sorrell, owner of Ford's, appeared and poured Denton a cup of fresh coffee.

"On the house, Denton," he said with a quick wink.

"Henry, you don't have to keep doing this," Denton said.

"I know that, Denton. I know that. And one day I might stop. But not today."

Denton smiled as he watched Henry wander back to the counter, and then turned his attention back to the plate of dessert in front of him. The morning crowd had dispersed, leaving Denton in near-perfect peace. The clinking of the occasional glass and the smell of bacon and assorted breakfast foods hanging in the air gave the diner an easy, relaxed feel.

Denton remained focused on his tasty breakfast partner, determined to enjoy it as long as possible. The morning had already been something of a disaster, and with the afternoon still keeping its plans for him a secret, he figured his king sized slice of dessert could possibly mark the high point of his entire day. He readied his fork.

"Good morning, darling," he greeted the pie in a soft French accent that made him sound like a popular cartoon skunk. "You and I, we are not so different, you know. We belong together."

Suddenly self-aware, Denton looked around quickly. Satisfied that his idiocy had gone unnoticed, he stabbed a healthy bite and delivered it to his anxious taste buds. The cool, smooth combination of cream, chocolate, and cake woke his mouth and added a fresh complexity to the rich coffee he happily washed it

down with. He swallowed, smiled, and sent another bite to its fate with impressive speed.

“Looks delicious,” declared a calm voice Denton recognized instantly as belonging to a member of the local police department.

He raised his head slowly and looked at the tall black man wearing a pressed white shirt accented with a light purple tie, brown slacks and a camel-colored jacket. Denton greeted the man with half a smile.

“Heffo, Sarsent Sole,” he mumbled as he finished his bite and wiped his mouth. Sergeant Tim Sowell sat down across the booth and looked at him through an overly large pair of eyeglasses.

“How are you, Denton?” he asked.

“How’d you find me, Tim?”

Sowell smiled and pointed to Denton’s jacket. “Your phone is off.”

“I know.”

“I called Beth. She said to check here. She told me to look for the handsome, charming, dashing fellow filling his face with a record-sized piece of Boston cream pie.”

“Well, she got the dessert part right,” Denton said.

Sowell nodded. “Although, she didn’t mention that you’d be talking to it.”

Denton smiled without humor and pushed the pie away. Out of nowhere, Henry Sorrell appeared with a cup of coffee for Sowell.

“On the house, Sarge,” he said with the same wink.

Sowell thanked Henry, took a sip and looked at Denton.

“Tough day already?”

Denton nodded. “You could say that.”

The morning had started innocently enough with Rourke staring into his bathroom mirror, studying his eyes. Not the

hazel-to-green coloring that tended to change with the weather, but rather the tiny wrinkles forming around them. He looked at Beth's very expensive face cream and wondered if it would help hide them. Though he lived alone, some of Beth's possessions had found a way to plant themselves in his apartment when he wasn't looking. In the last few months Denton had noticed more and more of her stuff acquiring that clever talent.

He decided that pilfering the face cream would earn him several relationship demerits which he could not afford. And since he'd tried the cream several times before with no discernible results, continuing his petty theft seemed like a low-reward prospect at best.

"Let me guess," Sowell said, pulling Denton's pie plate in front of him, "Ring Gate continues?"

"It does."

"Still not sure about that name," Sowell shook his head and took a fork from a place setting. "Maybe 'Ring Debacle,' or 'Diamond Gate,' or 'Denton is a Complete Idiot' would be better."

"Those are clever, but not quite catchy enough for me, thanks," Denton replied.

"And judging by the size of this piece of pie, I'd say you and your scale weren't getting along, either," Sowell added, his eyes staring through Denton.

Denton cocked his head in a sideways nod. "See, that's why *you're* the professional police detective and I teach English at a community college."

Denton's longstanding nemesis, his Westinghouse 2000 digital weight scale, looked innocent enough. To the untrained eye, it appeared no more than a simple machine that simply wanted to help people measure their weight in a simple fashion. But Denton knew better. He saw through its inviting, easy to read digital display and wasn't fooled for a moment by the

helpful and handy body fat percentage gauge. Denton and his scale were not friends, and their history read like the story of two warring factions in medieval times – if one faction was a bit of cheap Chinese technology aimed at taunting the portly, and the other an overweight crank who continued to fight said technology without first arming himself with the weapons needed to secure a victory.

“I don’t know why you still own that thing,” Sowell said as he took a bite.

“Perseverance and determination,” Denton said quickly.

“Those words are synonymous, Mr. English. Besides, ‘stubborn’ and ‘self-loathing’ seems a lot more accurate.”

Denton didn’t feel like arguing. He had tried many things to get the scale to be his friend – apart from actually changing his eating habits or doing anything that most people would define as exercise. He bribed it with fresh batteries, spoke nicely to it, and even offered to introduce it to his most recent clock radio. But the scale could not be bought off, and continued its soulless mission to demoralize Denton on a weekly basis.

“And how is your gun doing? Recovered yet?” Sowell inquired.

“You know,” Denton said, watching the officer continue to dive into the dessert, “I come here to forget the stupid things I do, not to relive them in some nightmarish ‘This is Your Life’ rerun hosted by a skinny version of James Earl Jones.”

Sowell just smiled and stared at his friend. Denton shook his head and looked out the window.

“I’m fairly certain it’s dry at least,” he said.

Sowell raised an eyebrow. “Fairly certain?” he repeated and took another sampling of the pie.

“Yes,” Denton said. His eyes rolled up, and then to the side, hiding from Sowell’s gaze. “I’m not really sure where it is. But it’s in a towel – I can almost guarantee that,” he said.

Sowell stopped chewing.

One evening a month earlier, Denton arrived home from the jeweler's in possession of a life changing testament of his love for Beth. The long walk from the store to his condominium left him ready for a good soak in the tub. Denton loved baths and didn't care who knew it – as long as no one did. It was roughly the same principle he used in regards to Barry Manilow's music.

As the steam rose, Denton kicked off his shoes and realized he felt pretty darn good about himself. He sensed a newfound courage and assertiveness washing over him. Of course, this sudden emergence of confidence could be traced almost directly to the half-dozen martinis he'd received from well wishers and romantic advice gurus during his brief pub stop on the way home. Then without warning, Denton's vodka-seasoned brain pushed his confidence level from 'pleasant, can-do attitude' up to 'blind, idiotic optimism' and told him he should give his scale a try.

Denton agreed with his brain. He turned off water, swaggered/wobbled to the platform, and stepped up for yet another grudge match.

He lost again.

But on that evening, the scale's brutal, unwavering honesty pushed Denton too far. Denton grabbed the offensive contraption off the floor, held it over the tub, and threatened his heartless foe with a very thorough soaking if it didn't shape up.

The threat proved disastrous in a number of ways. The scale remained typically silent and Denton, after a few moments, felt very silly. And as he had shaken his digital antagonist over the tub, his pistol had slipped from the pocket of his jacket. This was no doubt part of an elaborate escape plan on the gun's part as it attempted to seek out a new and more interested owner. But the gun's timing was poor, and its breakout sent it from Denton's pocket to the bottom of his tub. Denton added insult *and* injury

to the gun by not noticing its hapless circumstance as he wandered into the bedroom and passed out sideways across his bed, still fully clothed, bath still full.

When Denton awoke at four in the morning to relieve himself and finally undress, he noticed the gun's watery accommodation. He fished it out, wrapped it in a towel, and retrieved his box of bullets so he could replace the wet rounds. But his throbbing head suddenly reminded him that it was, in fact, four in the morning and suggested that perhaps cleanup could wait for a more reasonable hour. Beth found it the following afternoon and tossed the weapon and the ammunition box into an unused drawer, never mentioning it again. Denton gave it not another moment's thought once he realized that he had no idea what he'd done with Beth's ring after returning home the previous evening.

"I probably *should* have called it 'Denton is a Complete Idiot,'" he said.

Sowell nodded. "It grows on you," he said, stealing another bite. "You could try talking to Beth about it."

"Yes, telling her I lost the ring minutes after its purchase is the best way to convince her I'm ready for marriage," Denton frowned. "Dr. Phil, you are not."

"I believe British women are known for their patience and understanding of even the most frustrating of situations," Sowell said.

"Is that true?" Denton asked.

"It's possible."

Denton glared. He and Beth had been dating exclusively for close to two years and she had started hinting at taking "the next step" a few months ago. Beth showed remarkable patience with Denton in all things, and Denton had been doing his best to playfully kid with her that he couldn't find the ring he'd bought. She had played along for awhile, but the joke had run its course

and no longer made her smile. And while that morning's discussion had not been particularly intense, Denton still felt desperation creeping over him. He had exited his apartment clumsily and made his way to Ford's for some much needed solace – which he found in the form of the greatest pie known to mankind.

And so solace had faithfully awaited him on a cool dish until it had been ripped away by the appearance of this pie-stealing law officer. Denton sipped his coffee and watched his happiness continue to disappear into Sowell's face.

“Why are you here, exactly?” Denton asked.

“I've got a case for you,” he said without looking up.

“No, you don't,” Denton replied. “You've got some horrible, tedious task that no one in the department wants to deal with, and you're coming to me because you think I can't say no. Well, no. I've got papers to grade and a ring to find, and I just can't add another police department snooze-a-thon case to my plate right now.”

Sowell wiped his mouth. “This case is different, Denton.”

“How so?”

“It pays well, and it's interesting.”

Denton's ears perked up. One of the reasons Sowell and the local police relied on Denton frequently was because he often worked for free and didn't care about getting credit for solving crimes. It was a win/win for the police. For Denton, each case provided him with more notes he could use as reference material for a book he planned to write – eventually. The trouble, Denton had discovered early on, was most of the cases the department invited him to review would be looked upon by any mystery lover as hopelessly mundane. “Boring” would also be fair. Denton thought “coma-inducing” worked well, too. From trying to figure out which neighbor stole a lawnmower that had actually been borrowed by an in-law, to tracking down a missing 70-year

old aunt who had simply gone on the road to follow the Rolling Stones, to the most recent case when a wealthy citizen lost track of her prized parrot, only to have Denton find what was left of it in her cat's bed and litter box. Denton had decided this arrangement was doing wonders for the police but very little for him.

“A paying job?”

“A *well* paying job,” Sowell corrected. “The client has deep pockets and wants the matter resolved quickly.”

“I may have to replace a ring, Tim. This could help.” Denton eyed the papers for a moment, and then turned to meet Sowell's gaze.

“How interesting is this case – really?”

Sowell finished Denton's pie. He took off his glasses and rubbed them on his jacket. He looked hard at Denton as he began to speak.

“Millard Phillips, age 64, CEO of AeroTransport.”

Denton leaned in. “Yes?”

“Mr. Phillips has twenty three dress socks which are now missing their matches. His dryer is our primary suspect, but we haven't been able to tie it to the crime. We'd like you to tail it for a few days, find out who it's talking to and hanging out with.”

Denton grabbed his papers. “Good-bye.”

Sowell chuckled softly and put up his hands. “Denton, I wouldn't do that to you. Just come with me. I promise you're going to love this.”

Henry appeared again. “Gentlemen, anything else?”

Sowell put up his hand. “No, Henry, thank you. We'll see you again very soon, I'm sure.”

Denton looked at him. “*That* good?”

Sowell gave a non-committal shrug. “We'll see.”

Denton gathered his papers quickly and followed Sowell out of the café.

"Where are we going?" Denton asked as they hit the pavement.

"The Palladium Theatre," Sowell answered without breaking stride.

"Oh come on, Sowell, the Palladium?" Denton said. "Let me guess – some pampered singer lost his favorite diamond studded frock before his big solo."

Sowell continued to walk.

"No. This is a possible homicide investigation."

Denton stared at Sowell for a moment. Then he jogged to catch up to the stoic officer.

"Homicide? *Possible?* What happened, Tim?"

Sowell stopped in front of his squad car and opened the door. He slid into the seat and smiled up at Denton.

"That, my friend, is what I hope you can tell me."

