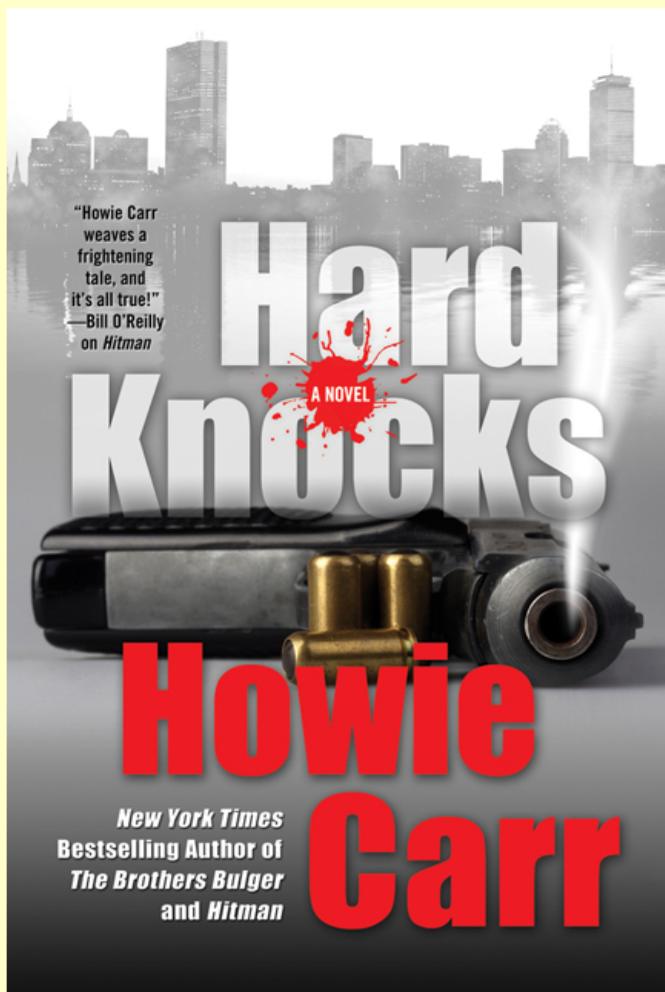


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

HARD KNOCKS

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Chapter One

MY JAILBIRD BROTHER got me into this whole jam. It wasn't the first time Martin T. Reilly had dragged me into something, but the difference this time was, he wasn't even around. He was doing another bit, this one in the federal prison up in Ayer at the old Fort Devens Army base.

The feds got a "tip" from a so-called Top Echelon Criminal Informant, and a combined FBI-ATF-MSP task force bagged him down on the Connecticut line, on I-84, driving a truckload of cigarettes that did not belong to him. Marty stood up, not that he had a lot of choice in the matter. Fuckups like Marty either keep their mouths shut or they get whacked. People think everyone in the quote-unquote mob who gets arrested nowadays immediately flips and goes into the Witness Protection Program, but it's only for guys a lot higher up in the hood hierarchy than Marty.

So my little brother was up at Devens doing federal time, which now means 85 percent of the sentence, and when he and all the rest of the wiseguys (there's a misnomer) aren't either working

out in the weight room or trying to concoct bogus technicalities for an appeal in the law library, they're yapping away, swapping lies, dropping names. And poor Marty, what did it say about his utter lack of stature either inside or outside the joint that the biggest name he had to drop was an ex-cop's, namely mine?

The day I got the call that started the whole thing, I was sitting in my house, which is actually the first-floor apartment of a three-story row house in the South End. That's where I've lived my entire life, except for three years in the Army and a few more in the suburbs when I was trying to do the family thing, which did not work out.

Business was slow, a not-uncommon occurrence in my current line of work, which is officially private investigations, although I'm not so much a peephole gumshoe as a—well, let's just say the services I presently offer include almost nothing you'd want to see embossed on a business card, if you get my drift. On top of that, or maybe because of that, I was pretty much tapped out. I was sorting my unpaid bills into two piles. One stack was the bills I couldn't afford to pay until the direct deposit of my monthly city disability-pension check, my kiss in the mail, into my checking account. The second pile included all the bills I couldn't afford to pay, period, until business picked up, assuming it ever did. That was when the phone rang.

"Reilly Associates," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

"Is this Jack Reilly?"

"Speaking."

"This is Bucky Bennett." It didn't ring a bell. "I know your brother." The bell was ringing now. It was an alarm. "I knew him down in Otisville." Another federal pen, in upstate New York, inhabited by a lot of Northeast organized-crime types, among them, at one point, my brother.

Marty's friend spoke softly, but he might have been trying to lull me. "He told me to give you a call sometime." That was mighty white of good old Martin T. Reilly. "I got a big, big problem, Jack." Ex-cons often do. "Hello? Are you there?"

"Yes," I said with a sigh. "I'm here."

"Jack, you don't know me, but I heard a lot about you. I heard you used to handle a lot of work for the mayor, the old one, and I know you were a cop, and now you're on your own."

That certainly was the CliffsNotes version of the life of Jack Reilly, a man teetering on that fine line between has-been and never-was. I sensed a pitch was imminent.

"I gotta talk to you. They're looking for me. I gotta screw before they find me."

"Who's they?"

A hollow chuckle. "Can I meet you somewhere?"

Some people claim they can smell money. Me, I can smell no money, and I can smell it a mile away. "Pro bono" is just Latin for "deadbeat." I decided to try to lose the guy.

I asked him, "Have you thought about calling the police?"

Another nervous laugh. "Marty told me you were a funny guy."

"Look," I said, staring at the two piles of unpaid bills in front of me. "I'm kinda busy right now."

"Please, man, I'm desperate. I know what I must sound like, but I got some stuff, I gotta make sure it gets into the hands of the right people or I'm dead. You're on Shawmut Ave., right? How far are you from Foley's?"

Oh great. Not only was I not going to get paid, now I was going to have to buy him a drink, in my own place on top of everything else. James Michael Curley used to say that it's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice. That's excellent advice, I suppose, if you're running for office, but who exactly was I trying to impress? Still, Bucky wasn't going to take no for an answer.

“I like old J. J.’s,” he said. So do I, especially if someone else is buying. This, however, was not shaping up as one of those magic moments.

“Lotta cops there,” he continued, talking more to himself than to me. “Almost Southie, but not quite. No-man’s-land, nobody’s home turf, so nobody hassles anybody else. It sure ain’t the Ace of Hearts.”

The Ace of Hearts? That was a gin mill on the other side of the bridge, in South Boston, where a lot of the local bad actors hung out. The guys my brother was “associated” with, as the prosecutors sometimes put it at his sentencings. Maybe I’d underestimated Bucky, or perhaps he was still engaging in that eternal jailbird pastime—name-dropping.

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll meet you at Foley’s in a half hour.”

“I’ll need about an hour,” he said. “Marty told me you look like him, only shorter and not as good-looking.”

BUCKY BENNETT looked just about how I’d figured he would. Somewhere in his late forties, early fifties, thinning dark hair, maybe five-eight but fairly well built. They’re all in great shape when they get out of the can. At least the organized crime guys. If you split your days between the Nautilus machines and the prison’s law library, you tend to come out physically fit and well read.

Bucky had a little paunch on him, though, which by my calculation meant he’d been out at least a couple of years. I knew my brother hadn’t been in Otisville for at least two years himself. His latest home-away-from-home, Devens, was supposed to be a hospital of sorts, although I was pretty sure Marty didn’t have anything wrong with him, unless terminal stupidity has been declared

a disease, in which case Marty will be eligible for SSDI the moment he hits the street.

Bucky had that furtive, darting-eye look of a guy from a tough neighborhood who's always been on the fringes, just close enough to the action to get seriously burned on a fairly regular basis. He was wearing sweatpants—thanks for putting on your Sunday best for the occasion, Bucky. I was decked out the way I used to dress when I worked at City Hall—Oxford shirt, no tie, V-neck sweater, and a blue blazer.

The mayor always told me, and probably everybody else on his payroll, “Dress British, think Yiddish.” Five years off the city payroll, this was as close to dressing British as I could manage, but then, it was no skin off my ass if Bucky noticed the frayed collar on my shirt, or the missing button on my sport-coat sleeve. Bucky was just another con between cons looking for something on the arm.

He glanced around Foley's bar, where everyone was standing. Let the record show that I bought the first round.

“Got enough cops in here?” Bucky Bennett said. “This is like an after-hours club.”

“That's two doors down,” I said. “We call it For God and Country.”

At Foley's, the cop presence keeps the local hard guys out, and the bums from the Pine Street Inn a half block away know better than to come in and panhandle. The *Herald* is a block north, and when you threw in the reporters and the salespeople with the cops, Foley's was just a shade too downscale for most of the hipsters, either gay or artsy-fartsy or both, who live in the renovated lofts farther south on Harrison Avenue.

This afternoon, with the shift just changing at Area D-4, Foley's was a cop bar, and they were packed in shoulder to shoulder

at the bar, pounding them down, everyone on their feet of course, because there are no barstools at Foley's.

Bucky Bennett stood next to me at the bar and watched an older sergeant chase a shot of blended Canadian rye with a Pickwick Ale draft.

"You see that cop over there?" he said.

"Yeah." I told Bucky his name.

"He busted me once when I was a kid," Bucky Bennett said. "One night, after the bars in Quincy Market closed, I was down Mondo's with a bunch of guys, legless, and after we ate, we waited until the counterman turned his back, and then we all booked it out the door."

"The old chew 'n' screw," I said, staring straight ahead at my reflection in the back bar mirror.

Why me? Why do they always attach themselves to me? Do I look like a probation officer? Bucky must have noticed my exasperation with his aimless chatter, because he looked both ways to make sure no one was listening. Then he whispered to me, "Is there somewhere we can go that's a little more private?"

I nodded, picked up my beer without saying a word, and walked to the jukebox. Bucky followed as I turned left and kept walking until I reached the stacked-up empty beer cases at the back of what we call the Berkeley Room, on account of it's on East Berkeley Street. When I reached the last table, I put my drink down on it, and Bucky did the same. We both pulled up wobbly chairs and then I asked him, as noncommittally as I could, why he had sought me out.

"I'm from Charlestown," he began, and I resisted the urge to offer my condolences. "I got a problem," he said once again, and I nodded, politely, as if he were a paying customer, which he never would be, not in this lifetime.

“Like I told you on the phone,” he said, “I was in Otisville there with your brother. Lotta other Boston guys there too, as you probably know.” So far, no surprises. “Anyway, you know how it is inside. Guys say, when you get out, give me a call, maybe we can do some business, blah-blah-blah.”

“What were you in for?” I asked, just to keep up my end of the conversation.

“Armored car down in Holbrook, Jazzbo Mangan’s gang.”

I remembered Jazzbo’s little crew. They had a nice run there, but their last time out the FBI had been waiting for them at the bank, just like they’d been laying for my brother down on the Connecticut line. The general suspicion was that Jazzbo or maybe some of the other guys with him were getting a little too big for their britches over in Southie and that the guys who hung out at the Ace of Hearts had arranged for all of them to take a nice long vacation.

I said, “I thought you guys all got thirty years on and after for that machine gun.”

“Hey, you got a good memory there,” he said. “Come to find out, that machine gun they give us wasn’t even a working piece. It took me a while, but I finally realized, the two guys sent it over to fuck us.”

Is there no honor among thieves? Say it ain’t so, Bucky.

“But that’s what saved our asses in the end. They were too cute by half. It’s just like them two guys, they give you a gun that don’t work and they hope you pull it on the feds. You do that and the best thing that can happen to you is you get thirty years on and after, and the worst thing that can happen is you get your head blown off trying to fire a piece that don’t work, which this one didn’t. No firing pin, wasn’t that thoughtful of our friends from South Boston? But the way I look at it now is, if it’d been a real gun, I’d still be in there, like your brother, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“So we go up on appeal,” said Bucky, “and the judge says he can’t hand anybody, not even a so-called career criminal like me, thirty years on and after for pointing a toy gun at a fed. Not yet anyway.”

He took a long sip of his beer as he pondered the troubling implications of the continuing erosion of the Bill of Rights.

“So I get out,” he said, “and I’ve got a phone number that turns out to ring in the Ace of Hearts. I go over there, just checking in, you might say. Paying my respects to the two guys there. Maybe pass on a message or two, like from your brother.”

“The two guys have anything for you?”

He smiled. “That’s not their style, you know that. Their style is, have you got anything for them?”

I was getting antsy. Enough with the teases, Bucky.

“One thing I should tell you,” he said, “even though I was along for the ride on that last thing with Jazzbo down there in Holbrook, I wasn’t in on all their other jobs.” He again looked both ways and then leaned across the table, lowering his voice. “What I am basically is a burglar. I’m real good with locks.”

I began silently counting and recounting the empty Bud Light beer cases stacked up against the walls. I sighed deeply.

“I know, you got other places to be,” Bucky said. “I’m getting to it. Long story short, you ever hear of Cooperative Trust?”

“Bank in Medford. Got burgled on a holiday weekend. They grabbed millions out of the safety-deposit boxes. Turned out a lot of them had been rented under phony names.”

“You do have a good memory. It was Memorial Day, two years ago.”

“The two guys at the Ace of Hearts did that?”

“Oh God, no. Like I told you, the only thing them two do is provide ‘protection,’ if you know what I mean. That, and maybe

kill you, if you don't buy what they're selling, which is protection for anything you want to do in their territory, which by their definition is anywhere they can get to before the ginzos."

I nodded. I was beginning to get the picture.

"So you pulled off this big bank burglary," I said, "right after you'd been in to see the two guys."

"Not right after. Six months maybe, which I guess was close enough so that they could claim I was holding out on them, by not cutting them in."

"They come looking for you?"

"Did they ever. And when they come lookin' for you, they generally find you. The way they figure it, if they know you, they own you. So as far as they're concerned, they had first dibs on me and my friends from the Cooperative Trust job."

When the two guys figure they got dibs on you, and you disagree, that's usually when you get a rocket in your pocket.

"Once they figured out who was in with me on the job," Bucky continued, "they went out and picked off the weakest link. He was a Townie like me, a junkie, been on dust ever since he was a kid—then Ecstasy, Oxy's, whatever. He meant no harm, basically, just another project rat looking for his next fix. They snatch him right off'n the street, take him down to some basement somewhere, in Southie or Quincy'd be my guess. Then they strap him into a dentist's chair and they pull out his teeth one by one with a rusty pair of pliers until he tells 'em where we got everything stashed, which they then go pick up."

He paused. "Long story short," he said, repeating that annoying phrase, "I don't get a dime off my own job."

"Even if he was in on the job," I said, "why would you ever tell a junkie where you stashed your loot?"

"Good question," he said. "But it didn't seem like such a big deal at the time. It's a little nothing bank, we thought we'd maybe

grabbed two hundred large, tops. You think we'd have even done the job if we knew every goombah in the city had a box there?"

Yeah, Cooperative Trust was very popular with In Town, which is what the indigenous wiseguys call the local Mafia. I was still thinking about the two guys' dental work. It sounded like an urban myth.

"How do you know all this?" I asked. "About the teeth and the pliers, I mean. This guy that got snatched, I'm assuming he won't be down for breakfast."

"That's a good assumption all right. But I know. You hear things."

"Wasn't there some story going around at the time," I said, "about how the two guys sold In Town on letting them take you guys off the board as some kind of public service to all wiseguys everywhere?"

"More'n likely that's exactly what happened," he said. "'Cause we had all kinds of jewels and stolen bonds and negotiable securities and shit that the wops had stolen off'n other wops. We had it stashed in a garage in Everett. The two guys got it all—every damn thing there was. Stole a truck and backed it up to the garage and took everything. Some of the loot I guess they gave back to In Town, but knowing them guys, I'd bet they kept most of it."

I asked Bucky, "How come they didn't grab you too?"

"No need to, once they had everything. I took it like a man, you know. What could I do?"

"You could try to shake them down. You didn't get any bright ideas like that, did you, Bucky?"