

prologue

the bar

. . . *this tastes like piss-water.*

Hey, is this a Ballantine?" the hairy guy shouts, waving the green bottle in my face.

Sweat begins to gather in small beads along my lower back. I dig frantically in the red metal cooler, my slender hands trying to recall the chilly terrain. *Harp in left back. Budweiser on the right, Guinness cans beside the Murphy's Irish Stout. Rolling Rock mixed in somewhere with the Ballantine.*

"I wanted a Rolling Rock," he says, leaning over the bar, stubbly face in mine, breath heavy and sweet from a couple of hours of drinking. "I told you I wanted a ROLLING ROCK."

THE TINY PUB is crowded, and it's only 6:15 P.M. A light breeze sneaks through the windows off the Hudson River. On the opposite bank, I can see the fortresses of the West Point military academy glowing hot in the late summer sun. The yellow rays streak across the water and onto the backs of the men standing in this green-walled, green-ceilinged Irish drinking hole nestled between the river and railroad tracks. The pub, which is barely big enough to hold the old giant metal Coca-Cola cooler

2 | little chapel on the river

stuffed with beer, red-topped bar and five stools, is tacked onto the side of an old country store—almost as an afterthought. The seventy-six-year-old owner lives upstairs, as he has for more than four decades.

Today's crowd is Friday's typical motley mix of local blue-collar guys, boaters from the makeshift yacht club out back and commuters just off the train from New York City an hour south. They stand close but not touching, their collective posture one of possession and fine-tuned ease.

I know most of them by this point. There's Fitz, a tough-talking former U.S. federal marshal whose body is a topological map of scars. Most visible is the bite wound on his right forearm from when he broke up a fight between his unneutered dogs, Buck and Ranger. It's impressive, though not as thick as the scar around his knee where AK-47 fire hit unexpectedly in Vietnam. There are others, scars from Vietnam that is, but this last one is what he might show you when the beer is going down good and the memories anesthetized.

Two stools down from Fitz sits Dan, the white-haired liberal lawyer who drinks ten-ounce Pepsis and eats serial packages of Fig Newtons. Dan is more of a scotch and wine man himself but comes to this beer bar to escape his depositions and trade barbs with the ultraconservative Fitz. Currently, the lawyer is chatting with Ed, one of the two handsome Preusser brothers, whose mom runs the oldest high-end real estate agency in town. And at my right elbow I see, or rather sense, Old Mike, a hearty, good-natured fellow who always stands sentinel at the bar's end, Schaefer bottle in hand, like a traffic cop. He was introduced to me as Old Mike because there used to be a Young Mike—but nobody talks about that much inside here.

The one person missing is Jane, the bar's regular busty bartender, who's running late today, which is why I'm standing back here screwing up orders.

prologue: the bar | 3

The truth is, I've never tended bar in my life until this moment. In fact, since I got out of college nine years ago, I haven't done much of anything except churn out stories for the same national newspaper about the wheelings and dealings of big corporations. Right now, suffice it to say I always thought bartending would be a little easier. After all, it's just bottled beer at this joint. Pop the caps, take the money, smile a little. Right?

Instead, I'm frantic, trying to remember five orders at once, carry on multiple conversations and quickly add strings of \$3.25s and \$2.75s in my head each time someone buys a round. But rule number one here: no calculators. So I keep ticking off numbers on my fingers. And I'm getting confused because the guys have bought me a couple of beers, and they're going to my head. I don't know where Jane is. And now I've just served the wrong brand to some grizzly boater with the hairiest arms I've ever seen.

I LOOK MISERABLY at the open Ballantine bottle in his hand.

They're both green, I offer lamely, finally laying my hands on a Rolling Rock and hoping he'll be a good sport and cut me a break.

No chance.

"Yeah, except this tastes like piss-water," he says, plunking the Ballantine down on the counter before me.

My face reddens as the other guys laugh. They watch for a moment, waiting, and I sense I'm flunking some unstated, crucial test to hold my own back here.

Fine, I say lightly, setting the Ballantine aside and hoping no one notices my hand shaking. I'm just wondering, though, I ask, forcing myself to meet his bloodshot eyes. How do you know what piss-water tastes like?

A pause. And then the tide turns. "Heh *heh heh*." Fitz's trademark laugh sends my nemesis retreating to the back of the bar with his Rolling Rock. The veteran keeps peace, though, by buying

4 | little chapel on the river

everyone a round, including the hairy stranger. Ed Preusser checks his watch and says he'll stay for just one more. So I gratefully begin pulling out beers again, stacking coasters to keep count of each person's beer order.

Another rule here: no written bar tabs allowed.

WHEN I FINALLY look up again, I see the white-haired proprietor moving slowly in his kitchen, which opens into the rear of the pub. He takes the silver teakettle off the stove and pours hot water into his cup. Then he pokes his head into his bar, checks out the clientele and calls hello to a few. They all answer like respectful schoolchildren: "Hi, Jimmy . . . Hello, Jim . . . How ya feeling, Guinan?" Jim catches my eye. He nods and shouts over their heads—"You're doing just fine, luv"—and retreats back into his living room. After he goes, I slip a few dollars from my pocket into the wooden box that passes as the bar's cash register. That's to cover the Ballantine mix-up. Then I notice Fitz's Beck's is nearly empty. Leaning across the bar, I put my hand gently on his arm and invoke one more unwritten rule.

"Next one's on the house," I say.

THIS IS THE story of a place, the kind of joint you don't find around much anymore, a spot where people wander in once and return for a lifetime.

For most of its days, the place billed itself as a country store, but its true heart was the adjacent pub. There was a rusty horseshoe posted above one door and a gold shamrock embedded, slightly off center, in the fireplace hearth. The floor slanted toward the river, and the men returned to the same seats every Friday. Most people called it Guinan's (sounds like Guy-nans) after the Irish owner, Jim Guinan. Some called it the bar. One regular patron christened it his "riverside chapel," which seemed to me to fit best because for most of these guys, coming to Guinan's

p r o l o g u e : t h e b a r | 5

was something of a religion, with its own customs, community and rites of passage. There was even a pastor of sorts—Jim—who on a good night could tell a story that might run as long as a Sunday sermon.

Folks had been congregating at Guinan's quite a while before I showed up—forty-two years, to be precise—which was long enough for the place to have a memory and a cast of characters as constant as the hourly trains rumbling by its windows. For them, the cramped space was far more than a pit stop on the way home—it was an extension of home itself. Guinan's was where they came after a death to toast and remember, on holidays and birthdays to pay their respects and buy a round or two, or on a late winter afternoon when a cold wind made things lonely enough that you just needed to see a friendly face. When she was alive, Jim's wife, Peg, would welcome the men, scold them if their language turned rough and offer supper to those who had nowhere else to be. Here inside this family's mismatched stucco green walls, it was always safe.

When I stumbled upon this world in late 2001, I didn't know that all of this was on the brink of disappearing. And I wasn't looking for a story. In fact, all I really wanted was a quick beer and to get back to New York City. What came next—upending my life because of this hole-in-the-wall pub—suffice it to say, was never supposed to happen. At least not by any plan I'd laid out.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

There is a beginning, so let's start there. It is morning, and *the sky is a brilliant blue and clear, the air unusually warm for September. . . .*