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Opening Extract from...

Plugged

Written by Eoin Colfer

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CHAPTER 1

The great Stephen King once wrote *don't sweat the small stuff*, which I mulled over for long enough to realise that I don't entirely agree with it. I get what he means: we all have enough major sorrow in our lives without freaking out over the day-to-day hangnails and such, but sometimes sweating the small stuff helps you make it through the big stuff. Take me, for example; I have had enough earth-shattering events happen to me, beside me and underneath me to have most people dribbling in a psych ward, but what I do is try not to think about it. Let it fester inside, that's my philosophy. It's gotta be healthy, right? Focus on the everyday non-lethal bullshit to take your mind off the landmark psychological blows that are standing in line to grind you down. My philosophy has gotten me this far, but my soldier sense tells me that things are about to come to a head.

There isn't much call for deep thinking in my current job in Cloisters, New Jersey. We don't do a lot of chatting about philosophical issues or natural phenomena in the casino. I tried to talk about National Geographic one night, and Jason gave

me a look like I was insulting him, so I moved on to a safer subject: which of the girls have implants. This is one of our regular topics, so it's familiar territory. He calmed down after a couple of swallows from his protein shake. Me talking about issues scared Jase more than a drunk with a pistol. Jason is the best doorman I have ever worked with, a rare combination of big and fast and with a lot more smarts than he lets on. Sometimes he'll forget himself and reference a Fellini movie, then try to cover his tracks by giving the next guy through the door a hard time. Guy's got secrets; we all do. He doesn't feel like burdening me and I am absolutely fine with that attitude. We both pretend we're dumb and we both suspect we aren't as dumb as we pretend. It's exhausting.

Most nights we have time for chit-chat out front. Everything's quiet until ten thirty or so. Generally just a few small-time players, under-the-radar guys. The party crowd doesn't show up until the regular bars close. The bossman, Victor, who I will describe in detail later because this guy deserves a movie of his own he is such a dick and to talk about him now would ruin the flow; anyways Vic still wants a couple of bodies out front. Sometimes it takes two to shut down a fight if there are accusations flying around on the back table. It can get pretty heated in there, especially with the little guys. I blame Joe Pesci.

So I generally do the night shift, not that there's a day shift per se. Twice or three times a month I pull doubles. I don't really mind. How am I going to pass the time at home? Do push-ups and listen to Mrs Delano bitch?

Tonight I get in at eight on the dot. It's midweek so I'm

looking forward to a quiet evening chewing power bars with Jason and talking surgery. Just simple distraction, which is the closest to happiness I'm expecting to get in this lifetime.

Jason and I are watching this Russian throw around kettlebells on YouTube when I get a call from Marco on my headset. I have to ask the little barman to repeat himself a couple of times before I get the message and hustle back to the casino floor. Apparently my favourite girl, Connie, leaned in to slide cocktails on to a table, and this guy goes and licks her ass. Moron. I mean, it's on the wall on a brass plaque. Not ass-licking specifically. *Do Not Touch The Hostesses*, it says. Universal club rule. Some of the hostesses will do a little touching in the booth, but the customer never gets to touch back.

When I arrive, Marco is trying to hold this guy away from Connie, which is probably more for the guy's safety than he realises. I once saw Connie deck a college footballer with her serving tray. Guy's face was in the metal, like a cartoon.

'Okay, folks,' I say, doing my booming doorman voice. 'Let's get this handled professionally.'

This announcement is met with a couple of boos from the regulars, who were praying for a little drama. I grip Marco's head like a basketball and steer him behind the bar, then loom over the offender.

The licker has his hands on his hips like he's Peter Pan, and Connie's fingers have left red stripes on his cheek.

'Why don't we take this into the back room,' I say, giving him five seconds of eye contact. 'Before things get out of hand.'

'This bitch hit me,' he says, pointing in case there's some doubt about which bitch he's talking about.

His finger is coated with the remains of a basket of buffalo wings, and sauce on fingers is something that has always irritated me more than it reasonably should.

'We got a time-out room just back here,' I say, not looking at the brown gunk under his nails. What is wrong with people? You eat, you keep your mouth closed, you wipe your fingers. How hard is that? 'Why don't we discuss your issues back there?'

Connie is quiet, trying to hold her anger in, chewing on some nicotine gum like it's one of the guy's balls. Connie has a temper, but she won't slap without good reason. She's got two kids in a crèche over on Cypress, so she needs the paycheque.

'Okay, Dan,' she says. 'But can we move it along? I got people dying to tip me. This is an open-and-shut case.'

The pointer laughs, like it's funny she should use that terminology.

I shepherd them into the time-out room, which is barely more than a broom closet; in fact there are a couple of mops growing like dreadlocked palms out of a cardboard box island in the corner.

'You okay?' I ask Connie, glad to see she's not smoking. Six months and counting.

She nods, sitting on a ratty sofa. 'Dude licked my ass. Licked it. You got any wipes, Daniel?'

I hand her a slim pack. You always carry a pack of antiseptic wipes working a bottom-rung New Jersey casino like Slotz. There's all sorts of stuff you can catch just hanging around.

I look away while Connie is wiping the barbecue sauce off her behind. You can't help noticing cleavage in this place, but

I figure you can avoid the lower regions. I try to keep my eyes above the waist; leaves everybody with something. So while she's cleaning up, I turn to the guy. The licker.

'What were you thinking, sir? There's no touching. Can't you read?'

The guy is going to rub me the wrong way. I can tell just by his hair, a red frizz sitting on his head like a nest fell off a roof.

'I saw the plaque, *Daniel*,' he says, pointing towards the casino floor. This guy is a pointing *machine*. 'It says do not *touch*.'

'And what did you do? You touched.'

'No,' says the guy, switching his pointing finger over to me, so close I can smell the sauce, which is putting me off barbecue for a month at least. Except ribs. 'I didn't *touch*. You *touch* with your hands. I *tasted*.'

He stops talking then, like I need a second for this brilliant argument to sink in.

'You think I never heard that stupid shit before? You seriously think you're the first guy to try that on?'

'I think I'm the first *attorney* to try it on.' His face lights up with smugness. I hate that look, maybe because I get it a lot.

'You're an attorney?'

More pointing. I'm tempted to snap this arsehole's finger right off. 'You're goddamn right I'm an attorney. You try anything with me and I'll shut this shithole down. You'll be working for me.'

'I'll be working for you, sir?'

Sometimes I repeat stuff. People think it's because I'm stupid, but really it's because I can't believe what I'm hearing.

The guy goes for option A.

'What are you? A parrot? A fucking retarded *Oirish* parrot? *Kee*-rist almighty.'

This is probably the way it goes in the office for this guy. He doles out garbage and people take it. I'm guessing he's the boss, or close to it. Only the boss or the mail guy can not give a shit how they look to this extent and get away with it. Suit and spectacles that could have been stolen from Michael Caine circa 1972, and of course the Styrofoam ring of ginger hair.

'No, sir. I'm not a parrot,' I say, nice and calm, like I learned in doorman school. 'I'm the head of security and you touched the hostess, whatever way you want to dress it up.'

The guy laughs, like he's got an audience. 'Dressing things up is what I do, Mister Daniel Head of Security. That's my motherfucking business.'

He says *motherfucking* all wrong, like he learned it from the TV. It doesn't sound right coming out of his attorney's face.

'It's your motherfucking business?' I say, saying the word like it should be said. I learned it from a Romanian mercenary working for the Christian militia in Tibnin. Anghel and his boys would tool past our camp most days in their beat-up VW, stopping to strike deals for long-life milk or pasta we'd traded from the French garçons. I liked Anghel okay; he never shot at me specifically, his whole head was a beard and I appreciated the way he said motherfucking.

Only one carton, Paddy? I give you perfect good mozzerfokken hairdryer.

Made it sound real; the double z. So sometimes if I want to

make an impression I say it the Romanian way. Often it's enough to confuse a guy, put him off his stride.

But not this guy. The ginger monkey is seriously unimpressed by my double z and proceeds to make his second mistake of the evening that I know about. He steps up to me, cock of the walk, like I don't have eight inches and fifty pounds on him.

'What is this parrot shit?' he says, and believe it or believe it not, he taps me on the forehead. 'You got a goddamn plate in your head? *Kee*-rist almighty.'

I am surprised by this tap on the head but also happy, because the guy has touched me now.

'You shouldn't have touched me, sir,' I say sadly. 'That's assault. Now I got to defend myself.'

This takes the wind out of his sails. Being an attorney this jackass knows the letter of the law regarding assault. He is aware that now I got the right to put a little hurt on him and claim I felt threatened. I practise my *threatened* face so he can visualise how it will look in court.

His pointing finger curls up like a dried turd, and he takes a couple of steps back.

'Now listen. You lay one hand on me . . .'

He can't finish the threat, because I got a free shot and he knows it. At this point I would dearly love to take that shot and put this attorney out of everyone's misery. But Connie's got her kids in the crèche and the last thing she needs is a court appearance hanging over her head. Plus the courtroom is this guy's arena. Before the judge he's a gladiator. I can just see him, jumping around like a little ginger monkey, pointing

like there's no tomorrow. And in all honesty, my *threatened* face ain't all that hot.

So I say, 'How much money you got in your wallet?'

The guy tries a little bluster, but I'm giving him an out and he knows it. 'I don't know. Couple hundred maybe.'

Bullshit he doesn't know. Attorneys and accountants always know. Generally they stash little wads of notes all over, in case they get stuck with a pushy dancer or hooker later in the evening. This guy probably knows how much cash his sick momma has rolled into her tooth jar.

'Gimme three,' I say. 'Gimme three hundred for the hostess and I won't have to act in self-defence.'

The attorney physically flinches. 'Three hundred! For a lick. *Kee*-rist almighty.'

He'll go for it. I know he will. The alternative is explaining to his high-roller clients how he got his face rearranged in a dump like Slotz, where we got mould on the carpet corners and toilets with chains.

The guy is fumbling with his wallet, like the bills are putting up a struggle, so I grab it, making sure to squash his soft attorney's fingers a little.

'Here, let me count that, sir. You're shaking.'

He's not shaking, but I want to plant the idea that he should be. This is not a tip I picked up in doorman school. The army shrink gave me a few conflict tips before my second tour.

It's true I snag the wallet to hurry this whole thing along, but I also want to help myself to one of this guy's business cards. It's good to have details about troublesome customers. Let them know there's no place to hide. Once I have his card,

I can find his wife, and I'd like to see him try the taste defence at home. His monkey head would be on a plate and no jury would convict.

I count out six fifties and toss him his wallet.

'Okay, Mister Jaryd Faber,' I say, consulting the card. 'You are hereby barred from Slotz.'

Faber mutters something about not giving a shit, and I can't really blame him.

'We thank you for your business and urge you to seek counselling for your various issues.' Standard *get out and don't come back* spiel.

'You're making a big mistake, *Daniel*,' says Faber, something I hear so often they should carve it on my tombstone. 'I got serious friends in this town.'

'We all got serious friends,' I say, and surprise myself by coming up with a mildly witty rejoinder. 'I got an army buddy hasn't smiled since Desert Storm.'

Nobody so much as acknowledges the effort and Faber mutters something else, possibly a *fuck you*. Still a little fire left in this attorney. I decide to extinguish it.

'Take your ass home,' I growl. 'Before I hit you so hard you'll be pressing charges from the afterlife.'

That's not a bad line either, but it's a little Hollywood. I've used it a dozen times and it's all Connie can do not to groan when I trot it out again.

I crack my knuckles to make my point and Faber wisely decides to leave. He's a bad loser, though, and tosses another two hundred at Connie from the doorway.

'Here,' he sneers. 'Buy yourself a boob job.'

I fake a lunge and the attorney is gone, door swinging behind him. I feel like hurting this guy, I really do, but I know from experience that it won't make me feel much better. So I swallow the instinct like it's a ball of medicine and put on my funeral face for Connie.

'You okay?'

Connie is on her knees, fishing for one of the fifties that has floated under the couch on the breeze of a flapping door.

'Screw him, Dan. This is two nights with a sitter.'

I lever the couch with my boot so she can snag the note and avoid all the other crud under there.

'Is that Al Capone's missing rubber?' I say, trying for some humour.

Connie sobs. Maybe it's the bad joke; more likely it's the last straw that this jerk Faber probably was, so I put my arm around her, raising her up. Connie is the kind of girl a man feels like protecting. She's beautiful like she belongs in a fifties movie; Rita Hayworth hair that ripples when she walks like lava flowing down a mountain, and wide green eyes that still have some warmth in them in spite of a shitty job and shittier ex.

'Come on, darlin', he's gone for good. You'll never see him again.'

'No one says *darlin*' any more, Dan. Only in the movies.'

I squeeze her shoulder. 'I'm Irish, *darlin*', we're different.'

Connie adjusts the polka-dot bikini that passes for a uniform in this place.

'Yeah? *Good* different, I hope. That creep was *bad* different. What would you call a worm like that in Ireland?'

I think about this. 'In Ireland he would be referred to as a galloping gobshite. Or a worm.'

Connie smiles a watery smile, but at least it's something. Better than the despair in her eyes when I came in here.

'Galloping gobshite. I like that. I gotta visit Ireland; I say it every year. Little Alfredo would love it, and Eva too. Green fields and friendly people.'

'Not so much of either any more,' I confide. 'Not since the country got moneyed.'

'You could bring us, Dan. Show us around. Give us the authentic tour.'

My stomach flips. 'Any time, Connie. You know how I feel.'

Connie reaches up and tugs at the band of the black watch cap I wear every waking hour.

'So how's it looking, baby?'

I am sensitive on this subject generally, but Connie and me go back nearly two years, which is a lifetime in this business. We got history, as they say. One weekend a few months back, she got a sitter and we had ourselves a fling. It could have gone further but she didn't want a new dad for her kids. *I just want to feel young for a couple nights, Dan. Okay?*

Twenty-eight and she wants to feel young again.

Every guy's dream, right? Couple of no-strings nights with a cocktail hostess. I didn't push it; now I'm thinking I should have.

'It's looking fine,' I tell her. 'I got my check-up with Zeb tomorrow.'

'Can I see?' she asks, long nails already peeling off the watch cap.

My hands jerk up to stop her, but I force them back down. About time I got an opinion.

She folds the cap into her long fingers, then pushes me back under a recessed spotlight.

'Zeb did this?'

'Yeah. He had a few nurses too, preparing the follicles. Students I think.'

'This is not a bad job,' says Connie, squinting. 'I've seen plenty of hair plugs before, but this is good. Nice spread and no scars. What is it, rat hair?'

I am genuinely horrified. 'Rat? Christ, Connie. It's my own hair. Transplants from the back. They'll fall out in a couple of weeks, then the new hair grows in.'

Connie shrugs. 'I hear they're using rat now. Dog too. Tough as wire, apparently.'

I reclaim the cap, spreading it over my crown like a salve. 'No canine or rodent. Irish human only.'

'Yeah, well it looks okay. Another session and you won't know the difference.'

I sigh like it's cost me a lot of dollars, which it has. 'That's the idea.'

I roll the hat back down and take Connie's elbow, steering her back to the floor.

A Formica bar, low lighting that's more cheap than fashionable. A roulette wheel that bucks with every spin, two worn baize card tables and half a dozen slots. *Slotz*.

'Here,' she says. 'Take fifty. You squeezed it out of him.'

I fold the note back into her hand. 'It was a pleasure, darlin'. The day he licks my arse is the day I take fifty.'

Connie laughs full and throaty and something stirs in my stomach. 'Oh, baby. The day he licks your *arse* is the day I buy tickets to witness the consequences.'

She's back on an even keel, but it's temporary; this place really takes it out of decent people. A toll on the soul.

'You okay to go back on the floor?'

'Sure, *darlin*'. You know Victor will dock me for the whole night if I quit now.'

I lean down to whisper in her ear, smelling her perfume, noticing not for the first time how long her neck is. Feeling her peppermint breath brushing my cheek. Remembering.

'Between the two of us, Victor is also a galloping gobshite.'

Connie laughs again, something I would pay money to hear, then she grabs a tray from the bar and she's back on the floor, hips swaying like a movie star from back when movie stars had hips worth swaying.

She throws a couple of tantalising sentences over her shoulder.

'Maybe we got another weekend coming up, baby. Maybe a whole week.'

Connie darlin', I think, then raise my gaze.

Stick to the code. Eyes up.

Eyes up, for now. But me and Connie have unfinished business.

One more look at the hips, my dark side whispers. *Then back to work.*

As is often the case, my dark side wins.

I give myself a moment to get my head back in the game. That's the most common rookie mistake in the security business: complacency. Thinking I'm big and scary and what fool

is gonna take a swing at me, even to impress his girl. The key word in that sentence is *fool*. They come in all shapes and sizes and most of them are juiced, coked or both and would take a shot at the devil himself if they thought it would buy them a little respect from their crew or a special treat from a hostess.

So I shut the drawer on Faber and Connie and give the crowd a once-over. Couple of college boys eyeing the hostesses, a few divorcees, and old Jasper Biggs playing the big shot. Tossing in one-dollar bills like they're hundreds. No danger signs. Still, I decide to send Jason back here to throw around the steroid stare. Can't hurt. Sometimes trouble begets trouble.

Unfortunately, I am not wrong. Before the ghost image of Connie's hips can fade, a dozen yeehaws barrel through the double doors. One of them either has a very dainty dick, or a flick knife in his jeans pocket.

Jason, I think. *These guy should never have made it in the room*.

As Bob Geldof once sang, *Tonight, of all nights, there's gonna be a fight*. Unfortunately, Bob's not wrong either.