

John McEvoy

BLIND SWITCH

A JACK DOYLE
MYSTERY

"The smells and sounds of the racetrack
...leap off the pages."

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DEDICATION

*This book is for
My wife Judy,
And our children
Julia, Sarah, and Michael,
And our grandchildren
Madelaine, Colin, Cecilia, and Amara*

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*Count no glory in beginnings and ends
Count the glory that I have had such friends*

—William Butler Ye

Jack Doyle became a fixer of horse races shortly after his fortieth birthday when he realized, with thumping finality, that Life sure as hell did have his Number and was crunching it.

He'd sparred with this realization for several years, using his old AAU middleweight footwork to evade and dazzle while dancing through a succession of hype-laden, mid-level marketing and advertising jobs and two surprisingly, at least to him, dismal marriages.

A free spirit, full of himself and liberal with usually unwanted advice for others, Doyle had suffered an occasional deep cut here, a bad bruise there, but his pound-for-pound world-class ego had always brought him back into the center of the ring, defiant grin in place, ready for another round. Then they caught him with his guard down.

It was an early April morning in Chicago, clear and clean and sunny in the Loop, and Jack had strolled into the office jaunty as ever, issuing greetings to co-workers as he headed for his desk. It was not there.

Ralph Olegard, Doyle's immediate superior in marketing at Serafin Ltd., stood looking at the vacated space, hands behind his back. Doyle looked around the large room. His was the only desk missing. A look of delight flashed across his face.

"Hey, Swede," Doyle said, "is this the day? They've finally come to their senses and moved me upstairs to the big time?"

Olegard said, "They've taken your desk away because they say you don't work here anymore. Why didn't you tell me you were going to quit?"

"I didn't quit," Doyle said.

After saying a hurried goodbye to Olegard, Doyle had confronted his Serafin Ltd. Team Leader Rance Coffey, who assured Doyle that there had been no mistake made.

"We're in the process of doing some right-sizing here. And you were among those chosen for termination.

"You just don't fit in here," Coffey had told Doyle. "I've had mucho bad feedback. Your account management record is pretty strong, but you rub a lot of people the wrong way." Coffey looked pained as he ran a hand through hair that appeared to have been slicked back with W2 motor oil.

"Actually," Coffey continued, "Ralph Olegard likes you." Coffey chuckled as he scanned the personnel file in front of him. "In one of his reports on you, Olegard wrote, and I quote, 'It could be said of Mr. Doyle what was first said of George Washington—that he was kind to his inferiors, civil to his equals, and insolent to his superiors.'"

Coffey's smile disappeared as he closed the file folder. "What I've seen more than anything from you, Jack, is insolence. I'm not going to put up with it anymore. Olegard may like you, but I don't. Case closed."

Doyle felt his face flush as he looked directly at Coffey's shifting eyes. He said, "Maybe I'm just tired of doing more spinning than a presidential press spokesman. Maybe I should never have gotten into this bullshit business in the first place," Doyle added as he departed Coffey's office. He had heard this sort of assessment of his work before, although no traces of it ever had appeared on Doyle's sanitized job resumes.

Still in shock later that day, Doyle went to his health club, Fit City, membership in which was paid for by Serafin Ltd. as a corporate perk. Doyle tried to shake off the hurt he felt in the club's boxing room, a place where he had worked off the effects of previous disappointments. His blue eyes narrowed and his sandy hair darkened with sweat as he first rattled the speed bag, then rocked the heavy one.

Out of the corner of his eye, Doyle noticed Moe Kellman come through the door. Kellman was a diminutive man in his mid-sixties who affected a white, electrified-looking haircut like Don King and who worked out daily at Fit City with ferocious dedication. To Doyle, he looked like a tough old dandelion.

Doyle and Kellman were often the only two Fit City members to use the boxing room, which was tucked away in a corner of the basement of this temple of cardiovascular modernism, far removed from the space-age equipment areas populated by glistening yuppies.

Doyle liked Moe Kellman—he was among the very few Fit Cityites Doyle could bring himself to talk to on a regular basis—but he ignored Kellman that afternoon. Moe shrugged off the rebuff and launched his workout, occasionally glancing over as Doyle hammered the heavy bag. Moe could hear Doyle muttering, “The bastards...the bastards.” Doyle pounded away until he could lift his arms no more.

Doyle had never before been fired, though he had dodged a few bullets via anticipatory earplugs at his departure. “Sorry, friends, I’ve sold enough gas guzzlers, I’m off to the lite beer league,” Doyle would announce in his practiced farewell and landing-on-his-feet style. Footwork—he’d always had it, he always would...or so he had believed.

But this dismissal from Serafin Ltd. Doyle found to be a crusher. He spent days reviewing his blotchy career, his sorry marriages. His initial foray into matrimony was made with a fellow public relations major at the University of Illinois. Two years of declining ardor and interest preceded Marla’s declaration that “I realize now that I fell in love with the *idea* of you. But I wound up marrying *you*. Big mistake.” Now, he confronted this question: was he really the “azzhole” he had been judged to be by his second wife, Erma the German?

“Ven vil you VAKE OP?” He could still hear Erma asking that. They had been wed only a few months, but this statuesque au pair he had rescued from domestic service in a Lake Forest mansion was onto his perceived failings in a hurry. Stormy marital months they were. Only Doyle’s clever footwork—he had never struck a woman in his life, and wasn’t about to start—saved him from a number of late night Final Solutions when the War Bride of the Nineties advanced. Erma was a beautiful girl with a matching appetite for progress, which she equated with eventually being ensconced in a home the likes of which she used to work in. Doyle had no way of getting her there.

“Honey,” he would say to Erma, “I’m doing the best I can. Nobody said it would be easy, even in America. If you can’t laugh at the script,” he once advised her, “the curtain will come down and smother you.”

Sometimes Doyle would issue these pronouncements face to face, other times he would grunt them into the heavy bag as he pounded away in the gym, hoping that somehow such fervently issued truisms would zip through space into Erma’s suddenly receptive consciousness. He was very fond of Erma. He was also very sure that he was doomed to disappoint her. Erma proved immune to the reality about their lives he was attempting to convey. Doyle concluded that the problem was the language barrier—the one between him and most women he had known.

Their marriage ended when Erma learned that even the promise of parenthood had been denied her by Doyle.

“God gave me a natural vasectomy when I was sixteen,” Doyle confessed to Erma one night. “It was called the mumps.”

“Vil you adopt?” she inquired tearfully.

“My life is already second-rate,” Doyle replied. “I won’t add any more second-hand stuff to it, I just can’t.”

Erma was gone for good the next day.

Two weeks after his desk and job had been concurrently removed at Serafin Ltd., Doyle finished his workout at Fit City feeling sharp, in form. He had been spending four hours a day in the gym and had pared six pounds off his already trimmed-down physique. Unfortunately, his limited life savings were undergoing similar diminution while the Chicago job market had not yet opened its arms wide to him.

Moe Kellman, his T-shirt sodden with sweat, entered the locker room as Doyle was toweling off following his steam bath and shower. Doyle grinned at the little man. “How many sit-ups today?” Doyle asked Moe.

“In the seven hundreds, kid. It’s the garlic powder pills I started. They’ve turned me around.”

Doyle said, “Turned you around? You’ve been knocking off sit-ups and pull-ups like a machine since I’ve known you in here.”

Moe blushed. “C’mon, lunch is on me,” he said. They went to Dino’s Ristorante on Chicago’s near north side. As usual, the place was jammed, with a long line of hopefuls at the reception desk. The restaurant was a popular one with the city’s movers and shakers, and those who ardently desired to join that category. Dino, the owner, quickly spotted Moe, who was slicing his way through the tall crowd like a Munchkin drum major. He was wearing a beautifully cut Italian silk suit, dark beige, with a tan silk shirt under a glistening white tie. Doyle, in his black sport coat, red and white checkered sport shirt, and tan khakis—he’d pushed his business suits to the back of the closet—followed close behind in Kellman’s wake.

Maybe that’s why Moe wears his hair frizzed up like that, Doyle thought, makes him easier to spot.

After Dino, a stocky, swarthy man had bowed, scraped, fluttered and fawned for a couple of minutes, and Moe ordered the garlic soup, to be followed by shrimp-garlic pasta. Doyle didn’t feel all that hungry; he opted for an Italian beef sandwich and a Bushmills Manhattan.

“So,” Moe said, “you got yourself bumped out of your job, I hear. What’ve you got in mind for yourself?”

Doyle sat back in his chair. The Bushmills was in there, doing its job. He felt relaxed, expansive. “No more bullshit jobs, I can guarantee you that,” he said. “I need to make some nice money. But I’ve got all through jollyng up to assholes worse than me. Like my Grandpa Mike used to say, ‘I’d rather curry horses than curry favor.’”

Moe smiled at this, then turned to signal Dino. Waiters charged forward bearing the steaming food. Dino hovered as Moe swirled a forkful of pasta, departing only when Moe had indicated his approval of the dish.

Doyle was irritated by the fact that Dino had made no attempt to check with him about his meal.

“I’ve had better Italian beef at the state fair in Idaho,” Doyle said.

The little man shrugged. “The beef here is dreck,” he said. “I would’ve told you that if you’d have asked. But you don’t do much of that, do you?” Moe nodded in agreement with himself. He went back to vacuuming up his meal, noodles and beans and shrimp disappearing beneath his neatly trimmed white mustache as if via conduit.

Doyle looked Moe in the eye. “You’re right,” he admitted.

“I know I am. If you’d just listen—and I know you’re smart enough to at least listen—I’ve got something for you.”

“Name it.”

Moe said, “I want you to fix a horse race.”

This little fucker takes the cake, Doyle thought. “Which one?” he asked.

What Kellman had in mind was a race at Heartland Downs, the big Chicago track, in late June during the third week of the thoroughbred meeting there. “My people,” Moe said, leaning forward over his empty plates, “want to cash a nice bet on a little horse called City Sarah.”

“What do you mean, ‘my people’?” Doyle asked. “The nation of Israel? Your family?”

Moe shook his head in disgust. “See, that’s what I’ve heard about you. It’s your mouth gets you hung out to dry for what, what are you, thirty-eight, forty years? Why don’t you shut it and do some business for yourself for a change,” he advised, adding, “There’s twenty-five grand in it for you.”

Doyle was stunned by this offer. He pondered it as he polished off his second Manhattan. No question, he could use the money. And he definitely needed something brand-new to do, having found himself absolutely unable to muster another charge at the corporate barricades. He realized that surreal as it might seem to him, Kellman’s offer was at least the extension of a helping hand—something that Doyle had, over the years, hardened himself to reject. Since late childhood he had created a persona of iron independence so strong that it might well, at this stage of his life, be threatening to crush him.

In the weeks since his firing, Doyle had found his life deteriorating into a succession of anxious days, fretful nights, pain-drenched dawns. He was starting to drink more, and more often, than he should. And he didn’t like that about himself. In the past, Doyle had managed to limit what he called his “Celtic dark periods” to no more than a few days of dipping into booze and the most mournful items in his jazz collection. He’d once played Billie Holiday’s version of “Good Morning Heartache” for nine hours straight while holed up in a darkened apartment, emerging hung over but cleansed.

Now, influenced by this latest Serafin Ltd.-administered life jolt, Doyle had begun to identify with the hapless creatures on the “Dogs for Adoption” show, a staple of early morning cable television toward which he frequently found himself channel-surfing. Peering blearily at the screen, Doyle had occasionally been poised to dial 1-800-PUPSAVE, but he never did. Most of the canines on offer, Doyle figured, were cute enough now when young, but would probably grow up to bite his nuts once they got to know him.

Instead of dialing, Doyle would force himself into sleep, where he frequently hosted the same dream: it featured Doyle confiding in a beautiful blond female psychiatrist who busied herself replenishing his cocktail glass while assuring him that his myriad fine qualities were soon to be universally recognized. With the dream’s departure, depression would come to Doyle with a *crack* like ice floes separating.

Depression was something Doyle knew about, going back to the year of his brother’s death. Ow

Doyle, Jack's only sibling, ten years his senior, was the acknowledged star of the family. Big, good-natured, a natural athlete with a natural penchant for charming and pleasing people, Owen had enlisted in the Marines right out of high school, wanting to toughen up for two years before accepting a college football scholarship. Eight-year-old Jack hated to see Owen go, for he idolized his brother. Nineteen months into his enlistment, Owen died in a Camp Pendleton helicopter training accident, and everything changed in the Doyle family.

Jack's insurance salesman father disappeared into drink, his mother into mournful silence. Nothing Jack ever did, no achievement of his, could ever match their memories of the beloved Owen. Jack became convinced his parents would trade him in a second for a return of their eldest son.

Jack found himself hating Owen, and hating himself for doing so. His grades plummeted as his high school discipline problems escalated. He felt his parents didn't give a damn what he did. Finally, his high school phy-ed instructor had channeled Jack's aggression into boxing. The sport was his salvation, providing Doyle with a sense of worth even though he never became much more than an average amateur fighter. As a resident of his emotionally damaged home, Jack had been an island unto himself. Enrolled at the university, escaped from that depressing scene where he'd grown up, he felt emancipated. But, as Jack well knew, the residue of Owen's snuffed-out life would always dust his soul.

Doyle looked across the table at Moe, who was drinking espresso and finishing off a half-order of roasted garlic that Dino had slavishly proffered.

"How would you do something like this?" Doyle asked.

Speaking in a soft voice, Moe said that Doyle would go to work for a horse trainer named Angelo Zocchi, a distant relative of the fawning Dino. Doyle would be on the menial shift at Heartland Downs for trainer Zocchi, walking sweaty horses back and forth after they had gone through their morning exercises, and also, with shovel and pitchfork, cleaning up their lower GI products. That would be the start. Further instructions would follow, Moe said, after Doyle's initial efforts were assessed.

"Eventually, if things work out," Kellman said, "you'll pull off the stiffereeno." Seeing the puzzled look on Doyle's face, he added, "Stiff the horse—so it doesn't win."

"Stiffereeno?" said Doyle. "That sounds like something Sinatra's Rat Pack used to call the boners." He shook his head. Then Doyle found himself laughing at this employment scenario.

"Are you kidding me?" he said to Moe. "I've shoveled marketing and sales and advertising shit for most of my adult life. Now you want me to work with horse shit? What are you, an ironist?"

Doyle pushed his plate aside. "Why doesn't this Angelo do this himself? Or have one of his regular employees do it? Why bring me in?"

Kellman looked appreciatively at Doyle. "That's an excellent question, Jack. First off, you look to me like a prime candidate for a number of reasons, one of which is that you're not the kind of guy anybody will walk all over out there at the racetrack. But the main reason is that Angelo Zocchi has held a trainer's license for over thirty years. We don't want to put him in any jeopardy of losing that license. He's got to be distanced from this thing—on the off chance anything might go wrong."

"Ah, the off-chance remote possibility factor," Doyle said. "In other words, you need a fall guy. Just in case this caper collapses."

"If you play this the way I know you can, nothing'll go wrong," Moe said as he rose to leave. "\$25,000, Jack, let's not overlook tax free, when the job is done. Think about it. Let me know. I'll see you at the gym."

Doyle watched the dandelion head bounce through a field of phonies clustered near the restaurant

front door. Moe nodded at some of the waiting people, smiled at others, shook a few hands as he neared the door. ~~“Goodbye, Mr. Kellman, goodbye, Mr. Kellman”~~ members of the wait staff chorused as the little man departed.

“I’ve got a little buzz on,” Doyle said to himself. He sat at the table for a few minutes, thinking about all that Moe had said. He couldn’t help but smile at just the thought of the job he’d been offered.

Doyle found himself strangely pleased that Kellman not only thought him capable of carrying off some kind of racetrack scam, but that he’d recognized Doyle’s readiness to do something that would be, for him, so completely different.

As much as he was surprised at the offer, the possibilities involved, so was he somehow flattered. “Thanks, Moe,” Jack whispered to himself, grinning. “You’ve got your man.”

Summoning Dino, Doyle put a final Bushmills on Moe Kellman’s tab. “In for a penny, in for another round,” Doyle said to the now unsmiling Dino.

To Jack Doyle, the racetrack was a revelation. Like most Americans, his knowledge of thoroughbred racing was minimal, gleaned primarily from an occasional office outing in which an afternoon at the races meant losing his ass betting the so-called “expert” tips provided by a punk clerk from accounting.

Working in the stable area at Heartland Downs was an eye-opener. For one thing, Doyle had never before observed in one place more ugly men and healthy-looking women.

Doyle was surprised at how quickly he adapted to his new routine. It involved rising at 4:30, leaving his north side apartment at 5:00, then driving the twenty-five miles in his leased Honda Accord to arrive by 5:30 at the track’s secured lot where he parked amidst the vehicles, most of them dinged and dangling Chevy beaters, that had transported the other grooms and hotwalkers. These amigos soon decided that Doyle was a dilettante horse owner who reveled in the menial stable tasks because he wanted to maintain a hands-on approach to his investments. Evidently, there were a few such misguided souls who populated America’s backstretches in the mornings when they could have been home sitting on their assets. Doyle did not disabuse his co-workers of their inflated notions of his status.

What Doyle discovered that he liked best was the horses, amazingly powerful but for the most part docile creatures; the clear morning air at trackside, filled with the sounds of these beasts pounding through their exercises; the odor of the horse barns, a combination of liniment, horse manure and hay; and, finally, the upfront hustling of people who were trying to win something directly off their fellow horsemen without any bullshit nineteenth hole conniving or three-martini *mea culpa* lunches buffering the combat zone. Every man’s hand against that of every man...and the women, too. I love it, Doyle thought.

Doyle’s first meeting with his new boss, Angelo Zocchi, took place on a bright Monday morning. It did not go well. The sixty-year-old Zocchi, a weathered piece of work who had been on the racetrack most of his life, hadn’t hired a male gringo in years—“they all drink too much back here,” Zocchi contended—but the Word Had Come Down.

Zocchi’s first words to Doyle, after he had appraised him with a look of disapproval, were: “Don’t fuck up.”

Doyle grinned. “People pay thousands of dollars to attend seminars and get such advice,” he said. “You’ve got state-of-the-art leadership skills, Angelo.”

Angelo produced a laser-beam look. “They’ll tell you what to do when the time comes,” he said. “I don’t deal in this crap except when I’m told to. They don’t need this money they try for—it’s a power trip for them, from the old days, just a gig. They try to pull one off every two, maybe three years, and they always find some chooch like you to tool it.

“Just do what you’re told,” Angelo added, “that’s all. Then get out.”

Doyle was required to obtain a state license before he could begin working as a groom for Zocchi. On the line of the application that inquired about felony convictions, Doyle wrote in “none,” which he was thinking to himself, *so far*.

Other than Angelo Zocchi, who seemed to regard him with a mixture of fear and contempt, Doyle’s fellow workers were an amiable lot, particularly E. D. Morley and Maggie Howard. Morley was

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