



BLEEDOUT by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One - HUGH

But *why* did he kill them?

Try as I might, I cannot find an answer that satisfies me. Stephanie assures me that I would understand if I could see him, but I've been blind for a quarter of a century. I cannot make out as much as a man's outline in full sun. And yet even on the first day I met him, he gave off a sense of threat as soon as he entered the room. He was only a boy then, a couple of months short of sixteen, and already a multiple murderer who would have been on death row if not for his age. That could hardly be it though. I was used to murderers. I knew the rattle-clank of chains and leg-irons.

The more I think about it, the more I think it must have been the way he breathed; I swear I could hear his fury at the very oxygen that gave him life as he took it into his lungs and let it go. The Chernobyl meltdown had dominated the radio for almost a week, and I remember thinking, 'Rage is the nuclear core that powers the boy.'

All this intensity failed to tell me why he killed them. It still does.

Twenty years of living with the question, and now I find myself in the absurd situation of a man about to be murdered – without the hope of my answer first.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS: A Tuesday in mid-January

A truck approached along Route 97 out of Springfield, Illinois, going towards Petersburg. A slanting, bleak, early-morning sun shone; there was no warmth in it. This part of America is fiercely cold in winter. The truck slowed as it passed through the gates of Oakland Cemetery and hit the buckled road that is never repaired until spring. Persimmons and pawpaws grow here – nothing but bare branches now – and the south fork of the Sangamon River is almost close enough to see.

This is one of the most famous burial places in the country. It's the site of Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River Anthology and the grave of Ann Rutledge, beloved of Abraham Lincoln, 'wedded to him,' as Masters' poem on her gravestone reads, 'not through union, but through separation'. Edgar Lee himself is buried here. So are his wives, his parents, his grandparents, his children and their children. So are dozens of characters from his poems, Mitch Miller, Lucinda Matlock, Bowling and Nancy Green.

The paved road ends beyond the famous graves. The truck jounced along a dirt path and stopped in a secluded area, where there was only a single grave, a hand-carved stone rather like the ones found in English country churchyards. Several men bundled out and stamped their feet against the cold. The ground was solid ice some five to six inches beneath the surface that morning. In olden days, winter corpses piled up in the woodshed until spring and the thaw. No longer. These workmen set up a propane heater to defrost ground for the grave-to-come, fired up pneumatic drills to ream out holes for stakes, erected poles and strung ropes to build a frame. What emerged was a Fair Ground tent

with scallops around the edges: an unexpected summer gaiety in a winter cemetery. It was summertime inside too. Portable heaters warmed the air. Brilliant green AstroTurf covered the floor. There were banks of flowers everywhere. Chairs stood in rows, a heavy mahogany lectern in front of them.

This was an important funeral. The press would attend, and the crew sensed excitement in the air.