



IT'S NEVER TOO  
LATE TO DO THE  
RIGHT THING.

THE  
MAYOR  
OF  
LEXINGTON  
AVENUE

“Bold...harrowing...[an] assured first  
novel, which gets the blood up.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

JAMES SHEEHAN

## PART I

### CHAPTER ONE

*New York City, August 29, 1998*

Benny Avrile wasn't a bad guy. He just looked for the easy way out of things—like every major obligation in life. Consequently, Benny had to steal a little to eat and sell a little to get something for himself. Cocaine, marijuana, liquor—it didn't matter to Benny. Whatever he could get his hands on. He steered clear of heroin and crack, though. The boy knew his limitations. He wasn't an addict—at least that's what he told himself. He simply needed some help to deal with the stress of living on the street. People didn't understand the mental strain involved in not working, in not supporting a family, in not being responsible for a household. It was almost too much.

Another Saturday night found Benny at The Crooked Fence, a bar on the Upper East Side. The Crooked Fence had the perfect setup for a man with Benny's talents. It had a long bar near the front door with tables in the back. The place always rocked on Saturday nights. Benny would position himself at the bar, usually in the middle somewhere, and start talking—to anyone and everyone about anything and everything. He might have been homeless and at twenty-eight had abused his body more than the average fifty-year-old, but on a Saturday night, with a little shower, a little gel and a little Kenneth Cole, in the dark shadows of the bar, Benny looked okay.

“Nice necklace,” he said to the blonde on his left, who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, the optimum age for Benny’s conquests or, as was normally the case, his attempted conquests.

“Thanks,” she replied and then turned her back to him.

It was so perfect and he had it down to such a science. As she turned away, Benny, knowing exactly where her purse was, reached in and slipped her wallet out. Almost without looking—he had to take a little peek to be sure—he found the credit cards and put one of them in his pocket. If he took them all, she might realize too soon that she’d been robbed. With only one gone, she would probably think that she’d left it at home. Benny could do as much damage with one credit card as he could with ten, and it usually bought him more time because the victim might not report the card missing for hours, or even until the next day, unaware of his nefarious deed. He was very proud of himself for developing this system—he was a real thinking man’s thief.

A minute or two later, he tapped the blonde, who was talking to another woman, on the shoulder. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Can I buy you ladies a drink?” Benny asked, giving her his fabled L’il Abner-I’m-a-hick expression.

“Listen, stupid,” she began, turning more toward him to make her point. By the word “stupid” Benny had the wallet back in her purse. “You don’t take a hint, do you? Get lost! Do you understand that? GET LOST!”

“Okay, okay. Geez, I’m sorry.” Benny was already off his stool and headed for the door. “I didn’t mean to offend you,” he yelled back over the din of the crowd and the

music as he retreated. Then he was out the door and walking down Second Avenue. “I just needed your credit card,” he said to nobody in particular as he patted his back pocket.

Half a block down the street he felt something hard shoved into his lower back.

“Don’t turn around. Just keep walking.” It was a woman’s voice, and she was behind him just to his left. Benny assumed the hard thing was a gun and he had no intentions of trying anything. Violence was no longer his game. He chose to be a lover and a thief, not a fighter. The gun pressing into his back sent chills down his spine, but he said nothing. If there was going to be any negotiation, she would have to start. He could counter from there.

“I’d been working her for two days before you showed up,” the voice behind him said.

Benny breathed an imperceptible sigh of relief. It wasn’t the cops and he wasn’t going to jail. Another thief he could deal with. It didn’t happen often but sometimes he crossed paths with another member of the profession and they got in each other’s way. Benny was the guy who always deferred. It was easier that way.

This was probably the woman who had been talking to the blonde. He’d never run into a woman before during this kind of gig. *They can get money a lot easier than that*, Benny thought. At least it seemed easier to him.

“I didn’t know,” he replied to the voice. “I only got a credit card and you can have it, with my apologies.”

“Where is it?”

“My back pocket, right side.”

“Turn left at the corner,” she told him, still jabbing the gun into his back. They turned left onto Seventy-seventh Street. It was much darker off the avenue. They walked halfway down the block before she told him to stop.

“I’m going to remove this gun from your back and I don’t want you to move.”

“I won’t,” Benny replied emphatically.

“Then I’m going to slip that credit card out of those tight pants of yours, so don’t get excited.”

“I’ll try not to,” he said, relaxing just a little. She’d noticed his tight pants. *Maybe once we get past the credit card issue . . .*

“Good.” She abruptly interrupted his thoughts, reached in and deftly removed the credit card from his trousers.

*Not bad, Benny thought, but I’m a much better pickpocket. With me, you don’t feel a thing.* He was starting to feel more comfortable.

“Turn around,” she ordered.

Benny turned around. He could instantly tell she knew what she was doing. Her right hand, her gun hand, was in her pocket and she stood far enough away from him so that she had ample time to react to any aggressive move on his part. One other thing he noticed: She was a very good looking thief—tall and dark with thick black hair that rested comfortably on her shoulders and brown eyes that at that moment were glaring at him in a menacing way.

“We’re not even,” she told him. “You still owe me. You fucked up my mark.”

“Like I said, I didn’t mean to. What can I do?” Benny was now sure she wasn’t going to shoot him. Besides, she was sharp. Maybe there was something in it for him.

She wasn't letting it go just yet. "I'd studied her, gotten everything I needed to know—and then you showed up."

Benny was starting to realize that he had fucked up a big score, something that he had no experience with. He didn't know what to say but he knew that he wanted to be a part of the next one. "Maybe I can make it up to you."

"You? What could I possibly do with a loser like you?"

"I don't know. People like you always got another score set up. Maybe I can help. You can always use a second hand. Besides, I wouldn't want much, just a little to keep me going."

"What do you mean, people like me?" she barked.

"You're smart. You set things up. You think about things. Me—I do the same stupid shit every Saturday night."

She started to smile. "You did all right," she said. "I almost missed you lifting the wallet and I'm in the business."

Benny nearly blushed at the compliment. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked her even though he was basically down to subway fare for his ride back to the South Bronx.

"No," she replied firmly, but then something changed. The tone of her voice became somewhat softer, her expression more congenial. It was almost imperceptible, but Benny noticed. "On second thought, I'll buy you a drink," she said. "I've got the credit card, remember? And by the way, it works a lot better when a woman uses another woman's credit card."

Benny just smiled. "A minor inconvenience. I say it's my wife's and that usually works."

“Walk on my right side,” she told him.

They grabbed a cab on First Avenue and went to a place in the West Village called The Kettle of Fish, where they had drinks for a couple of hours. Benny would have been all over any other woman by that point but he kept his distance with this one. He played that movie scene over and over in his mind—the one where the woman shoots the guy in the balls. *I ain't making that mistake*, Benny told himself.

A little after twelve, she finished her drink, paid the bill and stood up to leave. They'd been having a nice conversation about nothing in particular. He still didn't know her name. Now she was looking at him intently.

“If you want to make a score that will last you a while, be here Tuesday night at nine. And don't be dressed like a pimp,” she said gesturing at his Saturday night outfit. Then she was gone.

Carl Robertson was a creature of habit. He found comfort in ritual, and success in doing things right over and over again. Carl had started his career as an economist in an oil exploration business and ended up as CEO. He was now a retired multibillionaire serving as steward of his immense wealth. In “retirement,” Carl continued his habit of doing things right over and over again, and as a consequence his financial status had grown to the point that he was one of the richest men in the world.

Carl wasn't happy. He and his wife of forty years barely spoke. His three children saw him as a bank and nothing more. Carl knew he bore most of the responsibility for that and for many other things in his life. But the past was the past, and now in his early seventies he was just looking for peace and a little happiness.

He met Angie at a bar five years ago in New York. Carl and his wife lived in Washington, DC, but he spent most of his recreational time in New York City. Angie was young and beautiful with long legs, supple, round breasts and silky long blond hair that shimmered. She didn't even talk to him that first night. He was almost forty years older than she was. He remembered the look she gave him when the bartender told her that he wanted to buy her a drink—like he was some kind of a whack job. But he had his people find out where she lived and he sent her flowers the next day. By the time he came back to the same club the next week, she had found out who he was, and this time she accepted his drink offer. From there it was a matter of negotiation. He offered to set her up in her own luxury apartment and give her a monthly stipend. All she'd have to do was be “available” two nights a week and occasionally on weekends if *her* schedule permitted it. The rest of her time would be her own.

Angie didn't jump at the deal right away. He knew she wouldn't. But while she was making up her mind, he took her to the best places in New York and one time flew her to London for the weekend. Angie was from Omaha, Nebraska, and worked as a waitress while waiting to be “discovered” as an actress. Four weeks after meeting Carl, while her landlord was standing outside her door screaming at the top of his lungs because she was once again late with her rent, she picked up the phone, called the number Carl had given her and, as Carl had instructed her, told the person on the other end of the line that she had changed her mind. She had never regretted it in the five years since.

Every Tuesday and Thursday night, Carl would fly in from Washington on his private jet and drive himself to “Angie's place” in a car he left at the airport for just that purpose.

Carl was good to her, never asked her any questions about her personal life and gave her ten thousand dollars every month in cash in addition to her all-expenses-paid luxury apartment on East End Avenue. It was spacious and it had a doorman who opened the door when she went in or out and greeted her as if she was someone special. Carl even paid for her to decorate it. It wasn't just about money either. Carl was obviously a lot older than Angie but he was a vigorous, healthy, handsome man who, at six feet four, still stood out in a crowd. Six months after their arrangement began, Angie told her girlfriend Carol, "I hope he never dies. I can't go back to living like I did before."

It was love, of a sort.

Benny arrived at The Kettle of Fish on Tuesday night at 8:30 sharp. He didn't want to be late for his first big score. He had on a pair of black jeans, a black tee shirt and his boots. He'd been doing a second-story job one night when he saw the boots. Normally, he was strictly after money and jewelry—in and out in no time, traveling light. But the boots he couldn't resist. They were leather and black and shiny and they looked very rich. After he tried them on and they fit, he had to have them.

What's-her-name arrived exactly at nine dressed in black jeans, black silk shirt, black leather jacket, black silk gloves and stilettos.

*You don't want me looking like a pimp!* Benny said to himself. *You ain't exactly incognito in that outfit. And how the hell you gonna run from anybody with those fuck-me pumps on? Hell, most people would have a hard time walking in those shoes.*

But he kept his thoughts to himself." He still wanted—*needed*—a piece of the action.

“You guys back again?” the bartender said to them after they’d ordered drinks. The Kettle was a rundown little place and not one of the more frequented establishments in the Village. Showing up twice in the same week almost made you a regular and certainly caused Rick the bartender—whose living depended on the tips he could squeeze out of the paltry clientele—to take notice. Benny’s companion did not appreciate the attention, however.

“Let’s walk,” she said after they had finished their first drink.

As they walked, she talked. “The mark is going to be on East End Avenue and Seventy-eighth Street. He’ll arrive at ten o’clock sharp in a black Mercedes. I’ll show you where he parks the car. When he gets out, we’ll be there hiding in the shadows. I’ll do the talking and hold the gun on him. He’ll have ten thousand dollars in his inside suit pocket. You get the money while I keep him covered. You hand me the cash, then we take off in different directions. I’ll meet you on the corner of Ninety-fifth and Lexington exactly one half hour later. Don’t be late.”

She stuck her finger in Benny’s face to emphasize the importance of timeliness, and as she stepped closer she appeared to catch her heel in a crack in the sidewalk and went down like a ton of bricks.

“What the—are you okay?” Benny asked as he started to bend down to her.

“Does it look like I’m okay, shithead? I just twisted my ankle.”

*I’m not the one wearing those stilts*, Benny wanted to shout, but he saved it. There was still hope for a score here.

“Let me see,” said Benny as he started to crouch down.

She put her arm out to stop him. “I don’t need you to examine me. I know when I’ve twisted my own ankle. I can move it, so it’s not broken.”

“Okay, okay. Geez, I’m just trying to help.”

“Well then, help me get up. We gotta get moving. It’s a twenty-minute cab ride from here.”

He hailed a cab and she hobbled over to get in. She kept rubbing at her ankle during the ride, and when they got out at Seventy-eighth and York, she wasn’t even daring to put any weight on it.

“I don’t know if I can do this tonight,” she said, grimacing as she leaned against a wall. “Maybe we’ll have to put it off until next month.”

“No, no, no, no!” Benny was almost crying. “I can do it alone! You just stay off in the shadows.”

“No way. I’m not letting you fuck this one up on me. I need that money.”

“I won’t fuck it up, I swear.”

“I’m supposed to trust you? I don’t even know you, for Christ’s sake.”

“Look, I ain’t gonna cheat you. I need the score. You need it too. I won’t take off without you, I promise.” Benny was giving it his all even though he had no intention of ever seeing this bitch again, or of sharing one thin dime with her.

“All right, all right,” she finally relented. “I’ll let you do it. But if you fuck me, I’ll search the ends of the earth to find you and then you don’t want to even think about what I’ll do to you.” Benny couldn’t believe such venom was coming from such a beautiful creature.

“Okay, but now that I’m gonna be doing this, I need the gun.”

She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a revolver and handed it to him. "Here, take this," she said.

Benny took the gun gingerly and held it in his hand, pretended to be looking it over as he tried to feel comfortable with it. He hated guns, hated being around them at all.

"Do you even know how to use it?" she asked and started to reach to take it back.

"Sure," he blustered. "You just aim and pull the trigger." He started to point the gun at an imaginary target but she grabbed it from him.

"Gimme that," she said. "It's got a hair trigger. There's no safety or anything on it and you don't have to cock it. Just point and shoot. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," he said a little indignantly as he took the revolver from her again and palmed it, trying to at least look comfortable with it.

"Don't even think about using it," she told him. "He'll give you the money. Ten thousand to him is like pennies to you and me. Just point the gun at him and tell him to hand the cash over. But be careful. Like I said, it's got a hair trigger."

Benny nodded. "Okay. So what's the split?" he asked.

"What split?"

"The money. I figure it should be fifty-fifty since I'm doing everything now."

"You'd be doing nothing if it wasn't for me, shithead. Remember that. It's a seventy-thirty split, that's it. Take it or leave it."

Benny was a bit surprised she hadn't brought the subject up herself. Anyway, he had his answer. She was going to fuck him, so it was okay for him to fuck her first. He felt a lot better now.

"I'll take it," he replied.

She then pulled something else out of her jacket pocket. It looked like a makeup case. She found a stoop nearby, hobbled up the steps with the aid of the banister and sat down.

“C’mere,” she said. “I’ve got something to give you a little confidence.” Benny walked up the steps and saw she was laying out a few lines of coke on the mirror of her makeup case. She offered the mirror case to him and he gratefully accepted. The lines of coke disappeared up his nose in an instant.

“One more,” she said and repeated the ritual. Benny had smoked a ton of dope before he’d left for The Kettle of Fish for the same reason—to work up some courage. Now he was flying so high he barely knew what planet he was on.

“I’ll be up the block waiting. We’ll get a cab. Remember, stupid, don’t even think about fucking me over.”

Benny gave her his best L’il Abner, innocently shaking his head back and forth. His own mother would have believed him.

Carl arrived promptly at ten and parked in his parking spot, the one he had paid the city a fortune for. The one that had its own sign: “No Parking Anytime. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.” Carl knew that for the right amount of money you could get anything, including your own parking space.

As he emerged from the car, he was surprised to see the wide-eyed young man in front of him holding a gun. No need to panic. He’d been in this situation before. It was surely about money and, therefore, negotiable.

“What can I do for you, young man?” he asked, looking down at Benny, who stood five feet eight inches tall *with his boots on*.

Carl never got an answer. Instead, he heard a sharp *crack* and felt a stinging pain in his head, a pain so severe it caused him to lean over the open car door so far that his head crashed into the window on the opposite side. Then he slid to the ground in front of the driver’s door. While he was lying there in shock wondering what had happened, he felt the man’s hands reach into his inside jacket pocket and pull out his cash—the money he had brought for Angie. Carl wanted to stop him but he couldn’t move. Then everything went black.