



AN
AMERICAN
KILLING

MARY-ANN TIRONE SMITH

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A Novel by

MARY-ANN TIRONE SMITH

A Marian Wood Book

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AN AMERICAN KILLING

1

The cathedral is still, as cold and silent as the stone it's made of. An uneasiness is settling in, a perceptible worry that the next speaker has forgotten his turn. We peek into our programs to see who the offender is and produce a muffled shuffling. But then a soprano's voice penetrates the vast space, singing the first bars of "Nearer My God to Thee." Her tone is like the clean note of a lone piercing flute, sharp, a sound uncapturable on a CD. It's making my chest hurt. I feel Myron's body mass lean against me. He whispers into my ear, "Denise?"

I lean into him and whisper back, "What?"

"Who the hell planned all this anyway?"

"The President."

"No shit."

"Sh-h-h."

I thought all morning about avoiding the memorial service, but my mother always said that if you shirk your duty, people will talk. She'd offer me her sage bits of advice just before keeling over, dead drunk. Sometimes her advice was more practical, as in "If you don't know what to wear, you can't go wrong with a suit." Then she'd belch. So I have

managed to get myself to Dulles, where I picked up Myron, and on to the National Cathedral, where I'm wearing a suit.

Myron and I are in the back third of the pews. The first third is filled with one percent family and ninety-nine percent friends of Congressman Owen Allen Hall, Democrat of Rhode Island. The family, taking up not quite all of the first pew, is a paltry gang of ice-cold blue bloods from across New England who live on purposely bucolic estates with acres of pastureland and nary a cow pie in sight. Owen has no immediate family, no wife or children. He never married.

The friends are Washington's real-life kingmakers and major sellers of influence: smug speechwriters, self-absorbed pollsters, and, his puffy gray head above the rest, our President. My husband, Nick Burke, Bill Clinton's domestic affairs adviser—former academic, now whore—is up there with all the President's men.

The next third of the church holds the in-betweens—prima donna anchorwomen, talking heads, lobbyists, the constituent bloc gangsters: all the patrons who never socialized with Owen, though he made them feel as if they did, faking them out with brilliant panache.

And then there are the rest: pitifully young aides hanging on by their fingernails, those besotted interns—indentured servants, all—and the vampires of the press corps. Smack in the middle of that band, Myron and me.

I could have been sitting with Nick, but I told him I should guard Myron and keep him from embarrassing anyone. From embarrassing Nick, mostly. Myron only came to the service to take advantage of any passing opportunity to drum up new business; he sees everyone, even Nick, as a potential book deal. His book deal with the congressman is now in an urn back in Owen's hometown, New Caxton, Rhode Island: What remains of Owen is in the family vault.

Myron says, a little more loudly, "I didn't know dead congressmen got state funerals."

Again I say, "Sh-h-h." But this isn't a state funeral. "It's a memorial service."

“Well, it’s certainly got all the trappings.”

It only seems like trappings. There has been no lying-in-state, no wake, no paying of respects, no services at graveside. Not in the Capitol or anywhere else. There will be no burial at Arlington. My friend Poppy Rice asked me if Owen’s family was planning to scatter the ashes. I told her that as far as I was concerned they should be made to eat them, with the citizens of New Caxton forced to serve them up. Poppy agreed.

There is not a single voting, taxpaying constituent of Owen’s seated in the cathedral, not even the mayor of New Caxton. They know their place; they are servants, riffraff. I envision the mayor back home on Main Street, passing out cups of Jonestown Kool-Aid, and all the people lining up, welcoming their punishment like the good soldiers they are.

Myron says, “That singer is sensational, isn’t she?”

She is a famous diva, but I am no longer surprised at Myron Harper’s provincial exclamations when he’s out of his milieu. He’s a fiduciary. He thinks he’s more than that, as all fiduciaries do. When he’s negotiating a contract, he’s authoritative, arrogant, a bully. When he’s looking to acquire a writer, his charm is such that he’ll slide you right into his back pocket without your feeling the maneuver at all. That’s how he convinced Owen Hall to consider him when he was ready to produce a book. Now he has to pretend he’s mourning the congressman rather than the lost fifteen percent of what could have been a trove.

I introduced them the night Owen showed up in New York at a cocktail party given each year by the Literary Guild for certain publishers, editors, agents, and writers. Everyone in the publishing world who is not invited and, lately, many in the movie business, also uninvited, crash it. It’s half invited guests and half crashers. Myron said to Owen, “Listen, Congressman, Denise here’ll tell you—I’m the best.”

When I picked up Myron at the airport, he told me Owen had actually contacted him. He’d signed an agreement with Myron to produce a book about the success of his liberal policies, formerly known as women’s issues. At first I thought Owen must have been trying to divert attention from himself, but then I realized it was to direct attention

toward him, because he would be better protected from controversy if he were in the limelight looking noble—a plan that was imploding as he lay dying.

Myron may be the best, but he doesn't know how to act outside his dissolute world. I said to Poppy once, "Myron really does need to be socialized." And she said, "But if he were, considering all you've said, it means he wouldn't be an effective agent, right?" Absolutely right.

With the hymn sung, the clergyman or bishop or whatever he's called begins going on and on about Owen's untimely death. The man puts great emphasis on the word *untimely*: ". . . cut down in his prime, at the height of triumphs wherein he'd begun to erase the line between the worthy poor and the unworthy poor. This *untimely* tragedy cuts deeply into all of us who care about the invisible but oppressed poor." He is hinting at government bailouts of corporations like Lockheed after their boards squander all their money and then come crying to Washington. But he is talking about Owen, who cared about poor children, Owen, who glared down at the President but couldn't sway him from signing the Republican welfare bill. Owen asked me at the time, "So which President do you think supported the original welfare bill? Saw to it that it passed?" I said, "Johnson." It was Nixon. Owen said, "Of course, it was back when the best thing for poor children was for Mom to stay home." Owen laughed then. Threw his hands up.

The bishop continues with his accolades: how Owen devoted himself to changing the world for the good, and what an *untimely* loss this is to all Americans.

But Owen's death is not untimely, it is unseemly.

They found Owen in a suite at the Willard Hotel, draped with ropes, lying amid broken glass ampules. A Chinese cord was hanging out of his rectum. "What in God's name is a Chinese cord?" I asked Poppy, who told me these details.

She said, "Haven't you ever been in a sex shop?" The question was rhetorical. "See, Denise, it's a kind of rope made out of string, string dyed gold—that's the difference between a cord and a rope, if you're

ever a contestant on *Jeopardy!*; cords are gold—and it's maybe a yard long and it's got knots tied along its length every six inches or so depending on individual preference. While you're having sex and the guy is about to ejaculate, he or you gives the cord a yank and out pops the knot and you get to delay his coming—or your coming, if you're the recipient of the cord. From the photos I've seen I'd say girls get to experience the thrill as well, but Jesus, Denise, I mean it's one thing to have to take time out to stick a diaphragm up your zip, but imagine calling time to cram a rope up your ass? Spare me.”

“Cord.”

“Yeah.”

Poppy was indelicate on purpose; she thought I needed a lack of delicacy in order to see what a fool I've been. To get me back on track. A reality check, as one is wont to say these days.

A woman was in the room with Owen. She didn't die until after the paramedics got her untied and untangled. Congressman Owen Allen Hall, womanizer extraordinaire, and an unidentified call girl killed each other via rough sex. He collapsed on her, wasted, accidentally tightening the rope, not cord, that was around their necks.

Very few people know all the gory details. They think they know them, but the sex paraphernalia was left out of news releases. My husband knows them because he is on the inside, another Yale law pal of the President. And Congressman Hall was a pal of Bill's too, not through Yale. Owen was a Rhodes scholar during Bill Clinton's all-play no-work year at Oxford, the reward for having finished the best schools at the top of their class. As if that bunch saw fit to protest Vietnam. They were far too busy carousing like the Young Turks they were.

My husband filled me in on every detail of Owen's death to punish me. Nick didn't know I'd already heard it all from Poppy. When he came to the part, “And do you know what a Chinese cord is, Denise?” he didn't hear me when I said, “Yes.” That's because Nick is an orator. Orators never wait for answers, they proceed to answer their questions themselves. So he told me what Poppy had told me.

But I'd already expressed my remorse for what I'd done the day I'd blurted out my confession. Our affair had been over for months now. It was as if Owen's death triggered a deeper resentment Nick had been able to put aside or at least been careful to hide. Or maybe it finally hit him that when I made my apology I wasn't apologizing for actually having had the affair. At the time, apologizing had just been an attempt to be civilized, the way Nick had taught me. Nick places great importance on acting in a civilized manner and placing your rage elsewhere. Instead of socking someone in the eye who has just done you wrong, you smile with pomposity and go out and shout at an inconsequential staff member that she's an embarrassment to the entire office and if she dares make such a boneheaded mistake again, she's out.

When he finished with the oration, I said, "More punishment won't make me tell you I'm sorry again. And why would you want to hear it? Do you think forcing me to continue lying to you demeans me further?" He wasn't listening. "Did he have you do that to him too, Denise?"

Nick saved that question till last, after his description of the leather thongs and the crack pipe in the shape of a penis—a few things Poppy left out. It was the drugs that actually killed Owen, knocked him out, causing his crushing, asphyxiating collapse. I'd sat through Nick's entire tirade, but with that last I stood up and slapped him across the face. Nick burst into some sort of uncontrollable hysteria, and I didn't know if he was laughing or crying. He was crying. I took him in my arms and he apologized to me. But he sold the beach house. He wouldn't admit he did that to punish me too, but he did. I loved that place. Loved it. I will never forgive him.

When he finally pulled away from me, he started to say something, but he stopped. Before he left the room, I saw in his face that whatever it was had to do with pity. Nick wasn't angry with me, he just wanted me to see how pathetic I was because of what I'd done. Actually, because of who I'd done it with.

A sudden electricity in the cathedral signals a change of players. Ted Kennedy rambles across the chancel to the pulpit and begins his eulogy.

Who else but Kennedy? Owen came in a close second to the senator in the ADA ratings. But Kennedy's cracking voice resurrects memories of all the other eulogies he's delivered over the last thirty years—for Bobby, for Dr. King, for his father, for his nephew, for his mother.

Right then I want to say to Myron, Let's get out of here. It's been tough enough listening to the bishop finish his tribute, mesmerizing the audience with Owen's genealogy and hearing Myron rasp, "I figured he must be a descendent of somebody, but not *Ethan Allen*. Shit." Shit means he could have asked for even more money for the book that is now consigned to ash. One branch of Owen's family went back to the rousing, drunken Green Mountain Boys, and on his mother's side to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, though alas, dear Myron, to one of the more obscure pilgrims, unnamed; not that it matters anymore.

But there is no getting out of here. Not when you share space with the First Family. Nobody moves until directed. Instead, after Senator Kennedy's cracked, scarred speech, I have to sit and submit to Bill Clinton, who cherishes his cohorts, clings to them even, commanding loyalty for his policies while begging affection for himself like an adorable pooch.

And he is adorable. He and his family spent a weekend with us at the beach house in Watch Hill, on the Rhode Island shore just a few miles from the Connecticut line. We played Trivial Pursuit with a special rule initiated by the First Lady—adults couldn't answer until a kid had a crack at the question. My son gave me the eye—imagine that, a mom who showed mercy!

Nick inherited the beach house from his grandfather; his sister took the family farm, the last dairy in Connecticut, which, when she gets tired of catered picnics, will be subdivided, and then a real fortune will come to her. Nick announced to me the day Owen died that he'd sold the house. He sold it for two million dollars. Could have gotten a lot more but he wanted it done with. The property included a mile-long spit of land and acres of marsh full of all sorts of interesting creatures: weasly animals, minks maybe, and masses of red-winged blackbirds, and, very recently, a pair of nesting ospreys. The sale was the result of Nick's

latent rage. Our kids loved it there just as much as I did, just as Nick loved it when he was their age, and so he punishes me extra by punishing them too. I want to kill him. But he is a teacher, my teacher, and he is determined to teach me a lesson I'll never forget.

The mass of people stand when President Clinton returns to his seat and then sit down again when a children's choir begins to sing one of those "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" songs. I gaze out over the backs of people's heads. I see Poppy's kinky mass of sandy blond spirals just off the aisle, halfway down. I wish I were with her instead of Myron. I look off to my left and catch another familiar profile: the prosecutor from Rhode Island. She's weeping. She's weeping, not for Owen but because Owen rejected her back when I was beginning the work he had instigated. When I interviewed her, she was hostile at first. But she became intrigued. She liked the idea of appearing in a book written by me. It would be my fifth book, and I'd gained notoriety. A serious writer like me gains notoriety when her books are made into successful movies with A-list stars, the same way nonserious writers gain notoriety.

But there was more. My last book, my O.J. book, was the most successful of all the O.J. books, the one most talked about, most controversial. That's because it's my contention that O.J. intended to kill his children, probably in front of their mother, before killing her. To punish her. She deserved worse than a beating this time. He knew he'd lost control when she was finally able to tell him to get lost. The poor waiter saved the children's lives. I concluded the book with the lament that the second-to-last decision Nicole Brown made was the right one, and maybe also saved her children, and that was to refuse entry to O.J. Her last decision was the wrong one. There was a knife found on the counter of her neat-as-a-pin kitchen. She was going to take it outside with her to protect herself, but she changed her mind at the last minute and left it behind. She'd never have won a knife fight with him, but she might have managed to inflict an incriminating wound or two and O.J. would have surely been brought to justice, race card or no. All that thinking

on my part was why, in the end, Nick's selling the house didn't surprise me. He punished me mostly by punishing the children.

The Rhode Island prosecutor agreed to see me for another reason. She figured maybe there'd be a renewed opportunity for contact with Owen and he'd take her back. But as soon as she laid eyes on me, she knew that Owen, at least for the time being, had someone new. So she ended up treating me like a sorority sister. Seeing her now, I know for sure that I do not want to go to the reception following the service. I do not want to stand in a cold, empty White House hall chatting with Owen's associates, including her. I can perform just so much duty, and if my mother turns over in her grave, tough. Nick will have to explain my absence to people. That's his problem. He can use his imagination. He never used to have a shred of imagination, but he certainly has made up for the lack lately.

I press against Myron. "Listen, would you mind taking me out for a drink after this? I can't go to the reception. I feel sick. Have a drink with me and then you can go yourself. You don't want to be the first one there, anyway."

Myron's little wheels turn. Flying through the White House gates. Whipping out his entry pass under the portico. Dashing in late. He says, "Sure, angel." He was interviewed when Owen's body was discovered. "Oh, yes, I'm devastated," he said. "The congressman and I had wrapped up a solid proposal, and I was just about to show it." He then cooed about the need for top-notch political writing, and the whole time he is thanking God for the publicity. Fifteen percent of writers' income is peanuts. Access to those celebrities whose books earn him a wad of money is how he stays in business, how they all stay in business. I am a stroke of unanticipated good fortune. The wad I earned him meant he got to move to a corner power office with ceiling-to-floor windows looking all the way to the East River.

The last person to speak is Owen's brother, Charles. As soon as I heard that Owen died, getting himself killed in such a brutal manner, I

blamed Charles for driving him to it. Charles clears his throat and reads the Twenty-third psalm. That's it. Can't think of anything to say about a brother in the process of betraying him, congressman or no. I swear Charles makes eye contact with me just after closing the family Bible. I doubt if anyone is staring at him more intensely than I am.

And then it's over. Our pew gets the sign to stand, and when we file out I steer Myron down the far edge of the marble stairs and past the string of limos. We get in a taxi and I tell the driver where we want to go. "The Willard, please."

"Yes, mum," she says. The driver is a huge black woman wrapped in tie-dyed lengths of cloth. African.

Myron turns from gaping out the window and says to me, "The Willard? But—"

"A fitting place to pay our respects."

He sighs. "Jesus, you're a pip, Denise."

We zigzag through the traffic. The cabbie looks over her shoulder at us and says, "Now dat dead congressman, he done been some fine man."

West African. "Yes, he done been," I agree.

"Now some fine Democrat."

"Yes."

"Someday we go get some udder Kennedy President."

"Do you think so?"

"Now true. De Kennedys, dem dey breed like rats!"

Then she laughs all over herself. Myron says to me, "What the hell is she saying?"

"Nothing."

Over a drink, I think maybe I might cry. I haven't as of yet. At the Willard bar, I tell Myron to order me a scotch. He does, and then he says to the bartender, "I'll have a kir." I have no idea why I don't burst out laughing. Maybe that's what keeps me from crying, trying to contain laughter: the outrageous memorial service, the outrageous African taxi driver, the outrageous Myron, and his outrageous choice of drink. And

his patting me, saying, "I'm so sorry, Denise. That Owen was a hell of a guy." All so comical, really.

Owen was a hell of a guy despite everything. But he didn't need drugs to revel in sex. And there is no way he'd cram a goddamn gold cord up his ass, or anyone else's either. But would he do it if he intended to fuck himself to death? Even if it required such utter degradation? Maybe.

Later, after I part company with Myron and I'm sitting in my office staring at the wall, Poppy, who comes to see if I'm still in one piece, says, "Ya know, Denise, men do different things with prostitutes than they do with the women they love."

That's her idea of comfort.

2

I called in to my office machine from the lobby of the Willard when Myron and I left the bar. Poppy was on it. Her message: *I guess you're there since you're not over here at the mourning party. And if you're not picking up, I'll just assume you're writing. Glad you're feeling inspired. You get inspired at the weirdest times, Denise. I'll be coming over to check on you around five. If you're still there, I'll see you then.*

There were five other messages, but I skipped the first two from Nick and hit the stop button after Poppy's.

In five years' time, I've gone from a shared desk at the *Bridgefield Press* in a chichi town just outside New Haven, where Nick taught a seminar at Yale and didn't have to correct any papers, to my present desk in the Capitol, where I have an office that overlooks, appropriately, the FBI building where Poppy Rice runs the crime lab.

I met Poppy in Florida at my first trial. She was representing the people. She got a conviction. The murderer was sentenced to die. Poppy told me she was in Gainesville only for as long as she had to be. She'd said, "Since uncaught killers gravitate to the Sun Belt, Florida especially, that's where I decided to set up shop. 'Course, every other