

THE
WHITE
HAND



a **RUTHERFORD MANOR** novel

KONN LAVERY

CHAPTER 1

BEST ON THE MARKET

Meat is a funny thing. It is what consistently makes up people and living creatures. At the same time, it is also something we consume. It isn't hard to make the distinction between the flesh that you eat and the kind that you don't. Eatable meat is often defined by social and religious constructs. One side of the world says it is okay to eat a type of meat while another part says no. Before the flesh is considered eatable, an animal must be butchered, or die of natural causes. *Then* it is merely meat with no distinction of what it was when living. This applies to people too. We look oddly similar to animals when we've been mutilated.

This was messy, thought the man. The mutilated body he stood over was near death, gargling the blood that oozed from his mouth with each weakening breath. The man's boot pressed

lightly against the trousers of the soon-to-be-deceased. He thought about moving but saw little point. It would take a lot more than pasty skin, open organs and a purple ribcage to induce nausea. Death did not bother him.

Truthfully, once you have been around enough flesh and death, you find the lines of horror and acceptance really begin to blur. Your notion of what is taboo and what is not dwindles. You find yourself on the outskirts of what it means to be human. The constant grimness leaves you balancing on the edge of your moral compass, not knowing if you will fall into darkness. In a way, you are in a fight for your own life—just like the butchered animals, and just like the mutilated man.

“Well, this should work nicely,” said a second man, who gripped a crooked wooden cane, complete with a leather-bound chicken foot for the base. He stared down at the man on the floor whose breath continually softened.

“The open wound concerns me, Spalding,” the first man said, looking down to his comrade’s youthful face, half concealed in the shadow from his top hat.

“Think they will notice?” Spalding asked.

“Wouldn’t you?” the first man returned.

Spalding extended his hand and shrugged. “I mean, this kind of thing I’ve gotten used to from you and my father. To a common lad? They might not know the difference at all. People get hurt all the time.”

“Sounds like you’ve answered your question.”

“Yes, I suppose? Maybe if I knew a thing or two about who we were delivering the body to, I could understand your concerns,” Spalding said.

“The client is . . . not typical either,” the first man replied while leaning down to grab the dead man’s boots. “Come, let’s get him wrapped up. Put that cane down. Why did you even bring that thing, anyway?”

“Out of respect,” Spalding said while gently leaning the cane against a pillar, causing the black feathers from the top of the stick to dangle above a blackened skull tied to the rod.

“Respect for whom? I don’t feel offended.”

“My friend,” Spalding said, looking at the skull.

“Ah, yes, Pierre Orléans. Didn’t you kill him?”

“Aye, that was a bit of a hiccup. That was my first kill too.” Spalding sighed, leaning down to take the body by the armpits. The two of them lifted the body up, manhandling him over to a large linen cloth laid on the dirt. They set him on the edge of the fabric, each grabbing a corner of the linen and wrapping it over the body. They then rolled the fabric and the body on the ground, wrapping it up to form a burrito. The muffled groans of the man were audible underneath the linen for a few moments, and then there was silence.

The first man stood up and looked around, examining the barn they stood in. The scene showed no evidence of the brawl they’d just had. No blood. No broken items. No one would know the difference.

A part of him wondered if anyone heard their fight with the farmer, but then again, this far out in the countryside, it was unlikely that anyone was nearby. The wife and kids had gone into town. The two of them were sure the farmer was alone.

“Alastor!” Spalding called out. “Give me a hand.” He waved towards the large two-door barn entrance.

Both men marched to the door, pushing it open and exiting in the direction of the setting sun. They had parked their black carriage just outside of the barn. The ambush plan had been simple: They'd approached the man pretending they were lost and then beat him until he could no longer move.

Spalding walked up to the carriage, opening the back door, and hurried back to the barn.

"Let's get this body out of here," Alastor said while leaning down to the dead man's feet.

"Agreed," Spalding said as he took the head.

The two men lifted the linen-wrapped body and hurried over to the carriage. The corpse was a bit heavy for Alastor, and he panted with the effort. Perhaps if he were ten years younger, this wouldn't be a problem. Sometimes age had a funny way of being put on the backburner when you're in desperate times.

The body scraped the base of the carriage, and the two men dropped it with a thud.

"Good show," Spalding said with a smile.

"Yes, not bad for the first," Alastor said. He closed the door and snapped the lock shut, patting his peacoat's pocket to double-check if he had the key for it. Yes, he did.

"Okay," Alastor said. "We need to leave now if we want to make it to the meeting point in time."

"Right," Spalding said.

Alastor strolled around to the front of the carriage, waiting for Spalding to retrieve his cane. That weird killing-ritual item of his. Spalding returned, tucked the rod away, hopped onto the seat, and engaged their horse with a "Hiya!" The brown beast let out a snort as it began to trot along the path, kicking up dirt

with each stomp of its hooves.

“When are you going to tell me more about this Bran Connolly character, our new client?” Spalding asked. “We’re supposed to be partners.”

“You’re right,” Alastor said. “Apologies for my secrecy.”

“You’ve always been private, but never kept secrets like that. Our families are full of secrets, even before America, but there are no secrets between the Fleshers and the Savidges.”

“I know. This one I wanted to be sure was a safe bet. It was for the protection of everyone.”

Spalding reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, putting one end in his mouth. He also grabbed a box and match. With one hand, he flicked the match and lit his smoke, saying, “Elaborate.”

“They’re the White Hand,” Alastor said.

“White Hand? The Irish mob?” Spalding said while exhaling a lungful of smoke.

“That’s correct. The White Hand are big players, rivalling the Italian Black Hand. They have a big influence in New York, but they are looking to expand in Illinois.”

“Is that why you kept this deal secret until now?”

“I didn’t want them to know who I was or anyone else to know what I was dealing with until I knew this was a solid deal.”

“Gangs,” Spalding said. “That’s a first for us.”

“They’re businessmen and so are we,” Alastor said. “They want our product, and we will sell it to them.”

“I wish you hadn’t kept me in the dark about this.”

“It won’t happen again. Please accept my apologies.”

Spalding stared at him for a moment before nodding.

“You’ve got plenty to think about, anyway,” Alastor said. “Where is Mrs. Savidge?”

Spalding let out a chuckle. “In the grave, if I reckon?”

“I mean your lack of a wife, not your mother.” *Wise ass.*

Spalding shifted in his seat. “It’ll happen, don’t worry about it. We have so much to take care of already, like taking this dead bloke to the White Hand.”

Alastor smirked. “You’re just like your father. Charming to your advantage.”

Alastor and Spalding’s father had been partners before he passed away. Now, Alastor and Spalding found themselves as the head of their respective households, ensuring that the future generation would survive, and that starvation was not on the agenda.

The two rode in silence with the smell of tobacco filling the air until their carriage reached a hill. The horse trotted along, reaching the top where they now had a clear view of distant lights inside tall brick buildings overlooking a large expanse of water. Chicago.

“Whoa!” Spalding called out to the horse, bringing the animal to a stop. Tall grass surrounded the area; a light breeze moved the stems side to side. Blackness engulfed them. Only the lantern hanging from the carriage provided light. No one else was present.

“This is it,” Alastor said while hopping off the carriage. He patted his back lightly to feel his sheathed dagger underneath his coat, confirming it was there just to relax his nerves. He wanted to be prepared in case their meeting went south.

Spalding got out of the carriage, unhooking the lantern, and

walked over beside Alastor. “We’re a bit early?” Spalding asked.

“Possibly. We’ll wait,” Alastor said.

The sound of galloping hooves picked up from the road leading to Chicago.

Alastor and Spalding stiffened their stance. Spalding kept his hands on his belt buckle, and Alastor had his hands cupped in front of him.

Three horses bobbed up and down with men on their backs, reaching the carriage. They skidded to a stop, allowing their riders to dismount. Sharp shadows cast over their forms from the lantern light. The three men, dressed cleanly in blazers and wide-brimmed hats, casually strolled towards the pair who waited.

Alastor scanned the three. He couldn’t identify the two to his left but recognized the slim man to the right by his goatee.

“That’s Bran, to our right,” Alastor mumbled.

“The other two?” Spalding asked.

“Never seen ‘em.”

“Mr. Flesher,” came the booming voice of Bran. He stopped about four meters from Alastor and Spalding. The other two men stood still, their hands extended out slightly as if they were ready to draw weapons.

“Bran,” Alastor said while extending his hand, gesturing to the carriage. “We have what you requested.”

Bran nodded. “Show us, then.”

Alastor looked over at Spalding, and the two walked around to the back of the carriage. The three White Hand members followed as the fluttering of feathers came from the night sky. A grey owl landed on top of the carriage, its claws digging into

the wood.

“Beat it!” Spalding waved his hands up at the animal a couple of times.

The owl flapped its wings and soared away through the air.

“Thank you,” Alastor said while reaching for the key in his pocket. He took it out and unlocked the back door of the carriage, pulling it open.

The body in the back of the carriage was still wrapped up in the linen cloth.

Alastor stepped to the side, allowing the three men to see the wrapped-up body as Spalding raised the lantern for a clearer view of the blood-stained bundle.

Bran looked over at his two comrades. “Niles, Blyton.”

The two White Hand members marched up to the carriage and pulled on the fabric, tugging it away and revealing the man’s face.

One of the White Hand members placed his right hand on the man’s lifeless cheek, tapping the body with a long finger wearing a black ring with three spikes. “Christ, it’s still warm,” he said, pulling back and brushing the dark hair from his face.

Bran let out a deep laugh. “Brilliant!”

Alastor smiled. “See? I told you we would provide the best on the market.”

Bran walked to the carriage and placed his hand on the body. “Here I thought you would be nothing but jiggery-pokery.”

“We may not be from around here, but we are no cons.”

Bran stroked his goatee, saying, “I’ve never seen a resurrectionist bring one so fresh. Anatomists dream of this.”

Spalding looked up at Alastor. He winked back, saying to

the group, “With this partnership, we’ll change the market.” Alastor knew from Spalding’s expression it was one of those mixed looks his partner had given him in the past. A part of Spalding was obviously pleased with how the meeting was going, but he was also annoyed that he knew little of what their relationship with the White Hand was going to be. Alastor felt guilty for not sharing the news with Spalding sooner, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t worth the risk of endangering their family with the Irish mob until they had more information.

Bran waved his hand at the body, instructing his two goons to wrap up the corpse. He turned to face Alastor, his green eyes moving back and forth, analyzing him. “If I didn’t know better, I would say you killed this man yourself.”

Pretty good guess, Alastor thought. “Let’s just say we have some experience in the business of the dead.”

“Good enough for me.” Bran extended his hand.

Alastor shook it firmly as the two men smiled at each other. He couldn’t help but feel a wave of relief that the White Hand was pleased with what they’d provided. Their new business could be a source of good income.

Bran let go of Alastor’s hand and followed his goons back to the three horses.

Alastor rubbed his chin, eyeing the animals. “You three going to be alright carrying it?”

“We got rope,” Bran said as he stopped in front of one of the horses. He opened the saddle pouch and pulled out a tied-up linen bag.

Alastor looked over at Spalding, who was as wide-eyed as he was. That bag surely contained their payment.

Bran took a few steps towards them and then chucked the bag at them.

Spalding caught it and quickly unlaced the pouch to take a peek inside. Alastor leaned over to see a bag full of green paper—their earnings.

Rewarded as promised, echoed a wispy voice in Alastor's mind. Words of desire. He wasn't even sure if they were his own. He had been lost for so long trying to make coin; now, he had a large bag full of more than he could imagine.

"It's all there," Bran said while stroking his goatee. "Bring me another one of this quality next week, and I can see our business going spanking well."