

ROOT OF ALL EVIL by Liz Milliroa

EXCERPT

Sally Castle studied the menu for a moment, then put it down. “I’ll try the Fero leMBERger and a tower of onion rings, please.” She looked across the table at Colin Rafferty, her colleague from the public defender’s office. The usual crowd at Lucky 7, men and women in varying levels of business and business-casual clothing, milled around their table. “Split them with me?”

“Sure. A bottle of Miller Lite for me.” He slid the beer list back in the holder.

“Miller Lite?” Sally asked as the waitress jotted down their order and walked off. “How long have you worked in Fayette County again?”

Colin shrugged. “Almost two years and I know. You have some great local brews. I’m not a beer connoisseur.” He fiddled with the position of the salt and pepper shakers.

Had it been that long? “Anything new this week?” she asked, leaning on the table, the dark brown wood reflecting the muted overhead lighting.

He pushed away the cut-glass shakers. “Got assigned a new case today. De’Shawn Thomas, misdemeanor possession. This will be the third time I’ve been in court with him for the same damn charge. What the hell is the point?” He averted his gaze, studying Uniontown’s well-dressed business-class, all relaxing at the end of a hard week.

Sally remembered the young hotshot who’d arrived believing public defense was rock bottom. Their regular end-of-week outings were part of trying to change that. Sometimes she thought she was getting somewhere. Other times, like now, maybe not. “Colin, I know it’s frustrating. But say you were in a high-priced private practice. Is defending someone’s trust-fund kid from his third DUI in six months any different?”

“No.”

The waitress reappeared with the beer and a glass of red wine. Colin took his bottle. “Red wine with onion rings?”

Sally sipped the wine, which had a unique aftertaste: a hint of oak and a slight peppery kick. The menu said it was good with grilled meats and she could taste why. “Sure.” It would go great with the classic bar finger-food.

They killed five minutes with small talk about their work until the waitress returned with the appetizer. Sally leaned forward to inhale the delicious sweet smell from the tower of fried snacks, then picked one off the top. “Got any big weekend plans?” she asked before biting into it. Sweet, salty, slightly greasy, and a burst of flavor from the herb seasoning in the crust. Yes, perfect with her wine.

He tore apart an onion ring and popped half in his mouth. “There’s a film noir festival tomorrow. *The Killers*. *D.O.A.* Might go to that.”

“Film noir. One of my faves.”

“Well, you’re welcome to join me.” He finished off the other half of the onion ring, wiped his fingers, and took another swallow of beer. “Then it’s my mother’s sixty-fifth birthday on Sunday. After the year she’s had, we’re doing it up big.”

“How is your mom?”

“Good. Three months out, the doc is still happy with her numbers. The big thrill for her? Her hair is back.”

Sally pointed at him. “Hair is important. Unlike men, women rarely look good bald. It’s terribly unfair.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Anyway, the party should end soon enough to get home to watch the Steelers game.”

She rolled her eyes and took a second onion ring. “You and your football.”

“Hey, I may not care much about the beer, but I do love the sports.”

The door opened, letting in a breeze that sent the pile of napkins on their table to the floor. Sally leaned over to pick them up. Above her, she heard Colin mutter and it sounded a lot like profanity. She sat up with the napkins and brushed hair from her forehead.

Colin’s lighthearted expression had evaporated. He rearranged the standup cards listing available desserts and beers, trying to obscure his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

He ducked his head, his chest almost flat to the table. “A guy I don’t want to see just walked in.”

Sally craned her neck as she looked toward the door, but even the height of the bar-style chair didn’t allow her to see well over the crowd. She lifted herself up.

“Get down!” Colin hissed, pulling at her sleeve.

“What the hell?” She dropped back into her chair, still not seeing anyone who would upset her colleague this much. “Who is it?”

His gaze darted around the room. He took a hurried gulp of beer and stood. “Never mind. I have to go to the men’s room. Be right back.” He headed toward the restrooms, snaking his way through the crowd, bending frequently to make sure he was behind other people, and keeping out of sight of the door.

Once again, Sally tried to see through the crowd, but no one caught her eye. Who had walked in who would upset Colin so much?

Jim Duncan took his bottle of Black Magick imperial stout and thanked the bartender. Why had he agreed to meet Zelinsky here? The bar, popular with the downtown Uniontown business scene, was way too crowded. He should have insisted on a quieter place to catch up with his fellow Pennsylvania State Trooper. Someplace where he could sit, get a bite to eat, and get Zelinsky’s impression of his new trainee.

As Duncan scanned the crowd for Zelinsky, his gaze lit on another person. Sally Castle, sitting all by herself. Maybe this was a good place after all. Zelinsky could wait a few minutes. Duncan took a circuitous route to Sally’s table and came up beside her. “Only you would pair red wine and onion rings.”

She started, but relaxed when she recognized him. “Red wine goes with anything, I’ve told you this before.” She lifted her glass and winked.

A good sign. “You here by yourself?”

“No.” She pointed at the empty chair and a Miller Lite bottle. “After work drinks with a friend.”

“Your friend likes Miller Lite?” Clearly a friend without good taste.

She suppressed a laugh. “Colin isn’t a beer snob, Jim. Not everyone has your discerning palate.”

“Colin.” Sally was here with another guy. A bad sign.

“Colin Rafferty. We work together.” She grinned. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were jealous.”

A man in a dark blue suit edged behind Jim. “Sally, we’ve been friends how long?”

“A year or so.”

“You have other friends. Some of them are men. I wasn’t jealous of what’s-his-name, the baseball trainer.”

She brushed hair from her face. “Anyway, why are you here? This isn’t your scene, all the suits.”

“I’m on training duty for a new trooper. It’s her second month. I want to talk to the previous FTO, get her impressions.”

Sally took a bite of onion ring. “Is there a problem?”

“No. I don’t like to let what happened before color my opinion, but I feel like I’m having a hard time connecting with Aislyn McAllister. That’s the trainee’s name. Thus far, she’s not very talkative. Hasn’t shared anything besides the fact she’s from Natrona Heights in the two shifts we’ve worked so far. I hope it’s not me.”

“I’m quite sure it’s not you. You’re one of the nice guys.”

He lifted his beer in thanks. “It’s a point of pride. I can count on one hand the number of folks I’ve had to fail out of training.” The Black Magick was excellent, bourbon flavor with chocolate notes. “By the way, I’m working first shift tomorrow. Supposed to be a great day if you’d like to go out on the reservoir with Rizzo and me.” Rizzo, his golden retriever, loved Sally. The weather forecast was calling for a perfect fall day: blue skies, mild temperatures, fluffy clouds. The water would be filled with boaters trying to cram in as much outdoor time as possible before the winter snows froze everything solid.

“I might be meeting Colin for a film noir festival.” She took in his expression and a smile spread across her face. “Ah ha! You *are* jealous.”

Duncan had a horrible track record with women. Just ask his ex. However, after a year of friendship, maybe this was Sally’s way of telling him she was sick of waiting for him to make a move. “Do you want me to be?” He studied her face.

Sally flushed and turned her attention back to her food.

Okay, maybe not. He paused. “You come here a lot?” With the friend who drinks Miller Lite?

“Every Friday. I’ve been mentoring Colin this last year and it’s part of our ritual.” She tore a piece of onion ring off the stand on the table. “Speaking of Colin, where the hell is he?”

Ah, she was mentoring. He should have known Sally wouldn't date a man who made such horrible choices in beer. Duncan looked around, even though he had zero idea what this guy looked like. Everybody was paired up, chatting, and snacking after a hard week's work.

"He said he was going to the men's room. I didn't think guys took that long."

"Not usually." Duncan set his beer on the table. He stood and stretched to his full six-foot-three so he could see over the crowd. "Caucasian, early thirties, white shirt, dark suit, gold tie?"

"That's Colin. You see him?"

"Yeah, he's by the restrooms. Looks like he's arguing with someone." Duncan dropped back down, the crowd of people blocking his view.

Sally's eyebrows puckered. "Who's he arguing with? Can you tell?"

Duncan took a pull from his beer. "A guy in a suit. He had his back to me. Hold on." He stretched up again, pushing up on the table to try for a bit more height, and looked in the direction of the restroom.

Rafferty was nowhere in sight.