

BADGER

by C.M. McKenna

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Published in the United States by Brain Mill Press

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CHAPTER ONE

My name is Adrian Birch, and I'm nobody.

Don't mind me. Carry on doing your somebody things. I'll just be over here, taking up as little space as possible. No, really. I like it this way. This is how it's always been.

The best way to explain my childhood would be to have you imagine a kid's painting. Picture a rainbow—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. Add some grass if you want, a big-ass happy sun. Now add a small, muddy blob in the lower right, a toadstool or a rock. That's me. The rainbow is my sister, Amanda. You look at our family and you see the blinding, beautiful rainbow and go, "Wow, just look at that!" Then you spot the blob and say, "Oh, did your brush drip? Never mind, we'll cover that with a fridge magnet."

I wasn't a bad kid. Never a troublemaker, not much of a drama. But if you opened up Amanda's paint box, you had all the original ovals of colors, vibrant as the day you bought it.

Open mine, and you'd find a drab spectrum of brownish gray, everything blended together and no chance of a rainbow.

My sister's default is wide-eyed joy and possibility, and mine is a sort of involuntary gloom—not one I wallow or revel in, but not one I've ever been able to kick, either.

Amanda and I are fraternal twins, and our eggs were as different as Fabergé and scrambled. Amanda is fair and pink-cheeked, with irises like gems cut out of the pure blue sky. Whereas I'm thin and dark, with what my mother calls “gypsy eyes,” probably to try to make me feel mysterious or interesting. Hangover eyes. A bit squinty, their edges the color of a ripe bruise.

I was a deferring pregnancy, a wispy shadow hiding behind Amanda's robust fetus that my parents didn't even discover was a second daughter until nearly the third trimester. A uterine wallflower, that was me. Amanda burst forth screaming and vital, and I slipped quietly into the world behind her, never one to want a fuss made.

I stayed that way through high school, the invisible girl. Not odd enough to mock, not ugly or fat, just so remarkably unremarkable that I simply blinked out right before your eyes, blending into the wall, where I liked to be.

The only point in my life when I could've been described as anything resembling dynamic would've been the not-quite two years I spent addicted to Vicodin. For the middle portion of that period, I moved back in with my parents so they could keep an eye on me. Or keep an eye on the wild animal they'd invited to inhabit their house, sleepwalking through her days, hungry and snarling when the fleeting pacifism of chemical hibernation wore off. When I came down off those suckers and wanted more... I was ballsy. I was fearless. I was dumb as shit, and I stole anything that wasn't nailed down.

My record could be worse—could be breaking and entering instead of mere shoplifting—but it still doesn't impress potential employers. A little over a year ago I was caught stealing from a department store, the same week I turned twenty-six. It was for the best. It was my third such offense, and I got sent to a women's correctional facility for a month. While I was there I went through a sadistic but supervised withdrawal, came out clean, and was granted a “scholarship” to

rehab, then to a sober living home for six months. Now I live by myself in a shadier corner of Jamaica Plain, my little overpriced rented sanctuary just west of Boston.

I was really lucky, in some ways. Job searching with a criminal record sucks, but hey, my mom's talking to me again. And I'm no longer banned from family gatherings, as I was the year after I sold Amanda's engagement ring to a guy loitering outside the Sullivan Square subway station. I stole it off the sink while she was showering at my parents' house the morning after Thanksgiving, two years ago. Eighty bucks that half-carat solitaire earned me, which kept me happy and thoughtless for maybe twenty hours. Eighty bucks that basically amounted to me taking a shit in a chocolate box and handing it to my beloved twin, my greatest defender.

Fucking Vicodin.

But I don't like dwelling on all that. Those were an ugly couple years, a possession. "Adrian's Mr. Hyde period," Amanda calls it with a dismissive wave of her hand. I never got her ring back, and her fiancé had to buy a replacement. I don't think he's forgiven me, but Amanda has. She's way too good to me. Someday I'm going to make it up to them and hand over the thousand bucks the ring was worth.

If I ever find a goddamn job.

CHAPTER TWO

The very first time I saw the Badger, it was a drizzly Wednesday in late September, and I was bleeding from my chin and arm.

I'd been hit by a car—a Jaguar sedan, I think, a streak of gleaming gunmetal—which sprang like a sucker punch from a backstreet parking lot. I'd been crossing the wide alley on a shortcut to Downtown Crossing following a disheartening job interview, my third in two weeks.

A hot bolt of pain as my right wrist broke, a scraping burn as I hit the pavement. It was mid-afternoon, but there was no one off the beaten path to witness it. No one but the Badger.

I remember my ChapStick rolling from my purse all the way to the far sidewalk like it had someplace better to be. I remember staggering to Summer Street, where of course no one acknowledged my injuries or expressed any concern. This was Boston, after all, iciest of New England icy, eyes forward, don't engage lest you're accosted by a crazy person or a survey taker or a tourist in need of assistance with the spiderweb our forefathers passed off as urban planning. A blur blew past from the side street where I'd been hit, flying in the direction of the Jag, and someone shouted, "Dude, it's the Badger!"

I fumbled left-handed in my purse for my phone, since no one else seemed poised to dial 9-1-1 to get the bleeding girl a fucking ambulance.

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They called him the Badger because he was rabid and aggressive, black and gray.

They called him the Badger, but I thought he made a far better pigeon. He swooped out of no place and disturbed people on busy city streets, peppered clothes and cars with white paintballs like combat-grade bird shit. Black and gray on top from a striped hoodie, faded orange sneakers on his feet. People said he was dirty and feral, an urban transient. People loved or hated him, just like a pigeon.

Me, I like pigeons.

The Badger rode an old yellow Schwinn, faster than a bike messenger on meth. Which was exactly what I imagined he was, at first. He shot between the slow-moving cars on Summer, tugging something at his lower back. I found out later it was a U-shaped bike lock, one of those big steel numbers that hipster couriers somehow manage to stash in the back pockets of their too-tight jeans. I heard the crack when the Badger sank that thing into the maybe-a-Jaguar's rear window, another as he whacked the driver's-side mirror clean off. I read later on a Boston crime blog he got the windshield as well, then disappeared in the direction of the Common.

But when all that happened I was leaning against a building and stammering my whereabouts to a dispatcher. Soon the approaching wails of my rescuers drowned out the Jag's alarm and the honking of the cars around it. As I was helped into the ambulance, police sirens came and went. Soon I was heading to the hospital, and my hero was long gone in the opposite direction.

And for a brief time I forgot about the Badger, because all I could think was, *Who in the fuck is going to hire a writer with a broken wrist?*