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Dead Line

By Brian McGrory

Atria Books. 352 pp.

As this wonderful third entry in Globe columnist McGrory's thriller series opens, Jack Flynn sits in Fenway Park enjoying "one of those crystal clear late September nights when Boston seems to be the absolute epicenter of the entire world." The otherwise clear-thinking Boston Record reporter has fallen prey to the hopeful Red Sox fan's autumnal delusional system.

But it's government lawyer Hilary Kane who "had become a bad cliché." Her parasitic fiance cheating on her, desperate to feel desirable, she sleeps with Boston Mayor Daniel Harkins, which salts rather than salves her ego's open wound. While the mayor snores, she sees on his computer, and prints, a file labeled "Toby."

According to F.B.I. Special Agent Tom Jankle, mobster Toby Harkins, the mayor's estranged son, may be about to broker the masterpieces stolen in the \$300 million Gardner Museum art heist. Jankle asks Jack Flynn to print this suspicion. Jack does, then Hilary Kane takes a bullet in her head.

Fearing he provoked the young woman's death, Jack seeks clues by sneaking into her apartment where he finds a photo of Hilary with Mayor Harkins and, in turn, is found there by Hilary's pretty sister, Maggie.

Whoever killed Hilary now wants Maggie dead. Jack saves her from an assassin in Boston and pursues her as she flees to Rome, then Paris, running a gauntlet of blows to all parts of his body along the route.

Readers familiar with the earlier Jack Flynn novels know that Jack suffers deeper pains than these. Five years earlier, his beloved wife Katherine died in childbirth along with their daughter. In *The Nominee*, though hardly healed, Jack at last found some peace with touchingly devoted Elizabeth Riggs, regional reporter for the New York Times.

As *Dead Line* begins, long-suffering Elizabeth still suffers. Lovely inside and out, she's reached her frustration level, too pained at feeling insufficiently cherished: "You tried, Jack, but you can't do it, at least not with me. You lost more than your wife and your baby in that delivery room.... You lost a part of your soul."

She appears right. "Shouldn't time heal even the deepest wounds?" Jack wonders, but Lord Byron long ago provided the answer: "What deep wounds ever closed without a scar?" Jack means it when he tells Elizabeth "I love you," but she knows his love flutters on broken wings, that he professes love as Twain said women use profanity: he knows the words but not the music. Elizabeth heads to San Francisco to become Times' bureau chief.

Present urgency and danger leave Jack little pause for personal reflection, fortunately, as he's losing more sources of connection than anyone since Hamlet: there's Katherine, their baby, Elizabeth, an ominous illness in his much-loved golden retriever, the puzzling elusiveness of pal and retired detective Hank Sweeney, and the imminent departure from the Record of one of McGrory's greatest creations, reporter Vinny Mongillo, Jack's loyal friend and "the purest, most relentless information gathering machine I have ever met."

When Vinny first appears, on his phone as always, he's telling a fickle source, "If I think you're leaking to the *Traveler*, I'll personally squash both your testicles and present a scientific analysis of your impotence on the front page of the *Record*. Got it?" When an obnoxious newsroom Romeo tells him, "I had her screaming for over an hour. Screaming," Vinny answers, "Yeah, I can hear her now. 'Todd, I can't feel a damned thing! Todd, I can't feel anything!'"

Through Vinny—and Elizabeth, Hank, even the golden retriever—McGrory displays a mastery elevating him beside Les Standiford as the most artistic writers in the thriller genre. With a thriller, the plot must grip us, but it serves only that one novel. His tight plots fresh with new complications just when we think we've got things figured out, McGrory finds this part easy. What hooks us to a series, though, is the hero's characterization, his ongoing life and reappearing supporting cast. Here, we're delighted to see Vinny again, disappointed not to find Chelsea bookmaker Sammy Markowitz, unsure if Elizabeth will return, engaged by new characters like Maggie.

A scene where Jack recalls Katherine expiring in childbirth proves eye-mistingly poignant, but we'd expect that. Less expected is the tender beauty of Vinny—100 lbs. overweight, perpetually smelling of pepperoni and sweat—describing his love for art, the sublimation of his longing for love and beauty in his life.

McGrory's increasing depth of characterization shows best in Jack himself, his resourceful courage, capacity to endure pain and oddly endearing self-infatuation. Clearly aware of the truth in poet Mark Doty's words, "To love anyone is to make a pact with grief," Jack doesn't let that keep him from caring for a growing number of people or, for all its thorns, embracing his life.