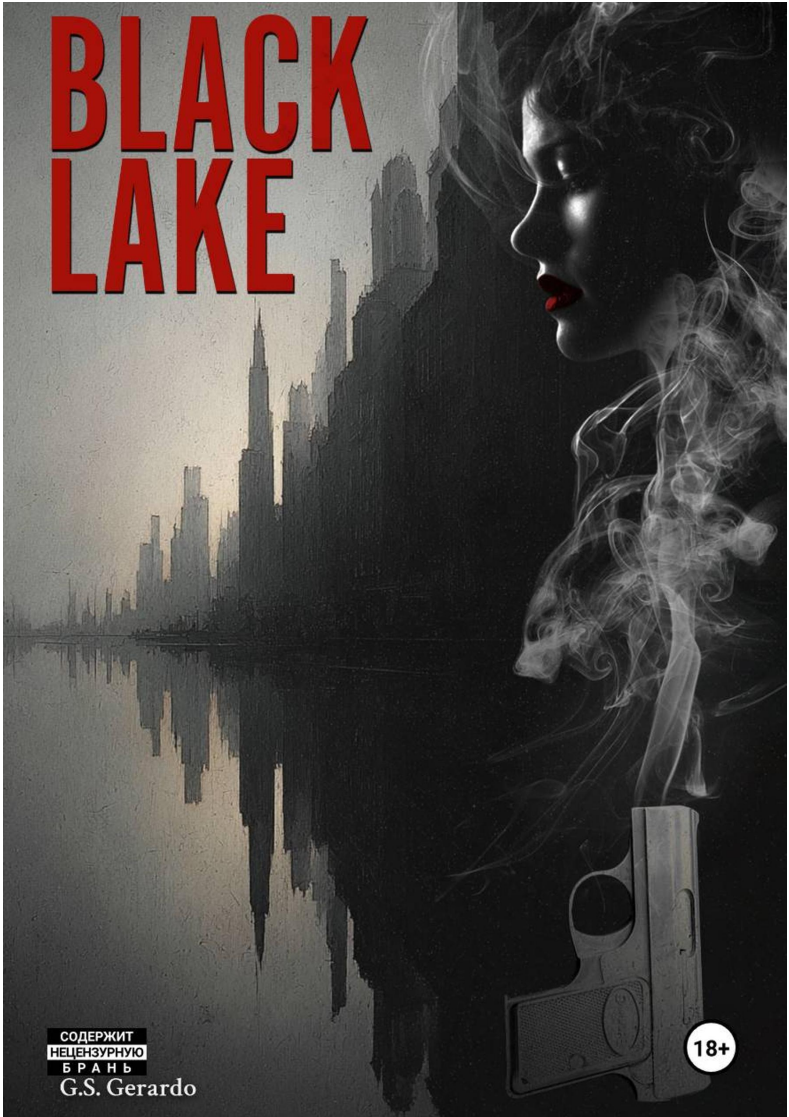

BLACK
LAKE
СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ
18+
G.S. Gerardo

G.S. Gerardo
Black Lake

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Аннотация

Corruption. Murder. Sex. Violence. Revenge.

Its 1946, and Black Lake has once again been named the worst city in America to live in.

Gangsters rule the streets in league with corrupt officials. Hitmen collect their payments and eliminate their targets—until one of them is ordered to kill someone who once meant everything to him. Boxers are paid to throw fights, but some refuse to stay down. Ambitious criminals have their loyalty tested when they greet their best friends with bullets instead of handshakes.

A hardened criminal facing the electric chair is offered one final chance at redemption. Meanwhile, dangerous women with beautiful faces and deadly intentions push desperate men toward violence, betrayal, and ruin.

In Black Lake, everyone has a price—and no one gets out clean.

Welcome to Black Lake, the city the sun forgot.

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G.S. Gerardo
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Black Lake
By
G.S. Gerardo

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Only a Dead Witness Keeps Quiet

The party is in full swing. Men in pinstriped suits sip booze like thirsty dogs lapping up water from a puddle in a dirty gutter. The great hall's glass ceiling endures a ferocious battering from the rain. The storm appears intent on smashing into the building and flooding the hall, like a biblical plague purging the city of its sinners.

There are many small tables decked out with the finest and most elegant of materials. The finest of plates cover them. The most lustrous cutlery shines and glimmers like diamonds when hit by the many lights above. Lined up around the plates and cutlery are gaudy wine glasses with a crystal design and gleaming gold-coloured bases. The drops of red wine that the guests had spilt onto the tablecloth resemble drops of blood at a murder scene.

There is a centre stage that extends from the front of the room all the way to the centre. The tables are divided at either end of the stage which resembles a ship parting the sea. A bar with a surly bartender serves drinks for those preferring stronger options than wine or champagne; on the other side, a large glass door opens to a balcony overlooking the city.

There is a view of the sprawling, rain-soaked metropolis that stretches far and wide, disappearing into the shadows that engulf

the city. The city's edges vanish into darkness. The darkness is like a ravenous beast with its gaping maw biting off a massive chunk of the city. A city the criminal underclass has already chewed up and spat out.

Gangsters, grifters, cops on the take, corrupt judges, all lowlifes alike populate the great hall. Despite being lawbreakers, they all come together at the same time and place, creating a scene akin to a sermon for the damned. They follow the dress code for the evening, with pinstripe suits being very popular. The local tailor producing them must be making a killing from the people that make killings happen.

The room is thick with the cloying aroma of alcohol, cigarettes, sweat, and sex. Sex without love. Only lust. Champagne glasses clinking fills the room, drowning out the sounds of illicit deals and desperate men hitting on scantily clad cocktail waitresses.

A jazz band provides the soundtrack. The sultry wail of a saxophone. A pulsating heartbeat of drums. The band wear dark matching suits and fedora hats to match. The tilted fedoras, in a gangster style, seem to pay homage to most of the guests at the event.

This place is a cold house for people with morals, which is why I fit in. I'm leaning against the bar, ignoring the empty stools to my side. I prefer to stand and survey the scene as I'm not here to party. The vodka on the rocks in my hand says I am, but the silenced pistol hidden by my blazer says I'm here to work. A

contract. I'm here for her, and she's about to become the centre of attraction as she takes to the stage.

The room hushes. Glasses cease to clink. There are no loud boisterous voices bellowing out lewd comments or insults. Quieting a hedonistic crowd to the level of a church sermon is not something every woman can do, but she can. Only her.

An intense melody plays, almost drowning out the sounds of the clicking and clacking of her red higher than high heels. The other women in the room admire the way she keeps her balance on those things. Her moves are as elegant as silk. She struts through the smoke-filled stage. Each step creating a quiet allure that pulls every man in the room into a captivating dance of curiosity and yearning.

The room's lighting fades, leaving only one bright light shining on her. It's like Heaven itself is casting its own spotlight on her. All eyes in the room know where to look. I know where to look. Her beauty does that for me. No spotlight needed. Her long luminous blonde curls, the dimpled chin, the purple eye shadow, and the dark complexion of her skin cloaks her in the guise of a Spanish seductress rather than another one of us God Fearing Americans.

She steps onto the stage, her movement as delicate as the last leaf hanging from a tree with an autumnal wind blowing against it. The noise has died down. The talking has stopped. Silence. There is a hushed fascination. She moves towards the microphone hanging from the ceiling. The form-fitting red dress

and matching heels on her body are captivating, like the finest art. Her features a silent siren, drawing all eyes and stirring all souls.

The band responds to her presence. A slow and seductive combo of the saxophone and the drums starting off at low volume before getting louder as she faces the microphone in front of her with a smile, as if she is meeting a date. Then she sings. While singing, she brings her lips close to the mic, almost like she's giving it a long, passionate kiss, while her husky voice seduces every man in the room. That voice can melt even the iciest hearts here, including my own. Whenever she sings, she captures the hearts of everyone in the room and can manipulate them as she pleases.

That is power. Raw power. True power.

Their infatuation, if not love at first sight, is now total. Head over heels. While singing, she sways her hips from side to side like a sultry flame teasing the darkness igniting desires that cannot be extinguished. The band responds as their music gets louder, matching the power of her voice. She gets louder as she reaches the show stopping closer. She belts out the lyrics, her voice packing the power of a punch from a heavyweight champ. A real knockout.

The song ends, and the crowd gets to their feet, going wild with applause. She takes it all in with a wide smile, highlighting her dimples. A dazzling smile. The smile disappears as she spots me. Our eyes meet even with the sea of suited and booted bodies

between us. For a second, I lose track of everything else. All sound is mute. Everyone else becomes invisible. There is nobody else here. Only her. I wonder if she feels the same. She ignores the applause and wolf whistles from the crowd; her eyes fixed on me.

Only the two of us matter. Nobody else exists.

She comes back to reality as the room's bright lights are switched on at their maximum intensity. She turns her eyes away from me and steps off the stage. I steel my nerves by downing my vodka on the rocks in one go, slamming the glass down on the table as I pursue her. I sense the weight of the holstered silenced pistol against my side as I move. She slinks off, deflecting any attempts from the guys lining up to snag her attention. The crowd disperses as if she is Moses parting the Red Sea. Moving across the hall, she makes her way to the balcony at the far end of the grand hall, where she steps out into the relentless rain.

It has been raining all day. It will not stop for us. The heavy rain drums with a ferocious intensity. Relentless. It echoes the deep sorrow that hangs in the air like a mournful sigh. It's like the sky is weeping for her. Weeping for the heartache. Weeping for the fate someone has assigned for her. A fate sealed with cold cash. For a job that landed in my lap. The contract.

Despite the heavy rain falling in sheets like a great biblical flood, she walks across the balcony to the viewpoint. During the day, it gave viewers a postcard image of the city of Black Lake. A modern metropolis with its many towering skyscrapers. During

a night such as this, the skyscrapers seem to have emerged from hell, breaking through the cracked pavements of the streets. Massive dark monoliths stand tall, with only a few lights offering a brief respite from the city's darkness. Black Lake, the city the shadows have claimed.

As I head to the balcony, I can't help but worry the heavy rain will ruin my new suit. I wore it for this occasion. For her. I step out to see her looking out into the distance, lost in the view, staring outwards towards the endless skyline of infinite skyscrapers. She looks, but she doesn't see. I walk towards her on the black-and-white tiles of the balcony. The splatter of water that has lathered the balcony accompanies every step I take. she hears nothing. She shows no reaction to the rain or the stiff wind. She doesn't even shiver. The darkness absorbs her attention. Staring, but never seeing.

The black and white design of the tiles mirror that of a chessboard. I feel like a pawn trying to take a queen.

"You sang beautifully," I say. She stiffens as she recognises my voice. Then she relaxes once more, still looking out at the dark cityscape, as she now hears me step closer towards her.

"I always sang for you, and you were never there."

Still avoiding my direct gaze, staring into the black abyss of the night skies.

"I'm here tonight."

She turns to face me. Her lips part. Mascara trickles down her face. The raindrops splashing against her face mix with her tears.

A melancholic cocktail of ennui, despair, and fear. She closes her eyes for a full second before speaking, as if building up the nerve to speak, or ask a question.

"Are you here to hear me sing? Are you here for me, Sam?" she asks, looking me dead in the eye, as if she is seeing into me, hoping to know what lives inside me. Business partners and cops call me Samuel. Lovers and friends call me Sam. "Or…are you here for work?"

"All three."

She nods her head to acknowledge my answer. She knows what this means.

Think about the job, I tell myself. Think about the money, I remind myself. This is what you're paid for.

"That is the answer I fear the most," she says.

Despite the heavy rain, she still looks immaculate. In fact, she never registers how wet and cold it is. She just stands there looking at me. Watching me. She's studying my reactions to her questions.

Her hair's blonde streaks shine, brightening the darkness. Illuminating the surrounding gloom. She stands out like a flickering neon sign in a dark alley. She holds out her arm. Many men would have kissed her hand; however, I understand her desires.

I reach into my blazer pocket and retrieve a carton of Marlborough Reds. I slide out a cigarette towards her and instead of using her hand, she moves her head down and takes the

cigarette from between my fingers using her bright red lips. They match the colour of her dress. I feel them dab the skin of my fingers. Warm as a flame. Soft as a pillow.

I strike a match, too old school for a fancy zippo lighter, and keep it alive in the rain by shielding it with my hands, cupping the tiny flame, I hold the match near her face. The amber coloured flame illuminates the beauty of her face, her flawless skin, her brown eyes, and the blonde colour of her hair glistens like an angel emerging from the darkness.

This is work, I remind myself. Not a meeting. Not a rekindling of an old flame, but it's difficult when I see her face. It's hard when I immerse myself in memories of times long gone.

Think about the money.

"I wish I had heard you sing all those other times," I tell her, revealing more than I should, like a poker player giving away their hand.

"You still can," she says. A sense of pleading in her voice. It's unmistakable. I go warm looking at her beautiful face when I should be cold.

I shake my head, looking into her eyes, hoping the vodka kicks in faster. A bit of alcohol always makes some things easier. I place the end of a cigarette in my mouth and light it. I let the cigarette smoke massage the back of my throat. It relaxes me. It keeps me cool as the heat of those memories linger in my mind.

"The job still keeping you busy, huh?" She asks with a knowing raise of her eyebrow; she takes a drag of her cigarette

and exhales smoke that disappears into the night skies above us like ghostly apparitions.

"You know me too well," I answer.

"I've learned more about you than I intended during our time together," she says with a sigh. It isn't a sigh of relief, it's disappointment. Disappointment in me and her fate.

We're getting drenched as the sky continues to weep in heavy, unrelenting torrents. Each drop an echo of the heartbreak that hangs thick in the air like cigarette smoke. Neither of us seem to pay any attention to the downpour and nobody joins us on the balcony.

Our shared presence matters most now. Millions of people live in Black Lake. This city inspires countless tales, yet only one matters. Only two characters. Only two souls.

"This damn city and this life," she curses, turning from me to gaze at the cityscape. The illuminated skyscrapers stand in the distance like silent sentinels wrapped in the tight embrace of darkness. Their glass facades glinting with the dark secrets of a city that never sleeps yet always seems to exist inside a nightmare. She looks at them in disgust. "I thought I could just run away from it all and escape. Escape or at least hide. I always wonder how you can stomach this hellhole."

I answer her question with silence.

I surprise her with my next line.

"What you're hiding from, what you've always been hiding from, I can help you face it."

The way I say it, even I believe it.

She turns back to look at me, her eyes light up with hope. Optimism replaces pessimism in an instant. Even in the darkness, her eyes glitter like shards of shattered glass under a bright streetlamp.

"Let's escape, Sam."

She wraps her hand over mine. The night is cold and wet, but her hand feels warm. Soft and warm.

"Together. We get in a car and escape," she says, smiling as the tears continue to trickle down her cheeks.

"I can help you escape it all without a car. I can take you away from this city. Escape whatever you're running away from."

She flashes a smile so warm that it could melt ice. She closes her eyes as if she's about to sleep. A deep sleep.

She throws the cigarette onto the ground and steps towards me, and I obey as I wrap an arm around her. Our eyes close and our lips meet. I tell her I love her and always have. She tells me she is mine, and she always will be mine.

She's pulling me closer. She puts her hand on the back of my head as we kiss. Our tongues touch and caress each other's.

Her desire is to run, she says. I tell her she'll escape this place soon. She'll leave and never return to this hellhole. I reassure her, urging her to cast aside her fear. She tells me she's no longer scared. With me, she has the strength to face what is coming.

"I'm not scared anymore, Sam, I'm not."

Despite the layer of clothes we are wearing, I can feel her

heartbeat and her chest move with every breath she takes. We'll become one, lost to the world. We'll melt into each other's arms. The escape she wants and dreams about. We'll melt away from this party, away from this infernal city.

Money or love. Death or escape. It's time to choose one.

I have one hand on her lower back, holding her close to me. Hidden from her, my other hand rests on the silenced pistol. I flick the safety pin off the silenced pistol I've been carrying all night.

The choice is made.

The pistol speaks once. The silencer turns a loud, brutal shout into a soft whisper. She shudders in my arms, falling towards me. Her legs are about to give way. A single tear rolls down her cheek before it disappears among the raindrops on her face. The gun smoke vanishes into the pitch-black sky. The pistol whispers once more, and she stops moving altogether. I hold her close to me one last time. I give her one last kiss on the lips. I lower her body to the ground.

Anyone who was watching is now looking away. It is best they convince themselves they have seen nothing. It is an unwritten rule in the criminal underworld that only a dead witness keeps quiet.

Why someone wanted her dead, I never asked. What she wanted to escape, I'll never find out.

All I know is that this is Black Lake City.

Later tonight I will go to sleep and cash my cheque in the

morning for another job well done.

She gets her escape. I get my cash.

A fair trade.

The Loser

"Round one, what happens?" Joe asks me in his gruff voice. A voice that sounds like gravel being poured over broken glass. Roughened by decades of cigarette smoke.

I punch the speed bag with a bit more venom than usual for a quick warmup. The last hit almost splinters the speed bag into pieces like a needle poking a balloon. The impact of the punch stings my taped-up knuckles. I'm sure the skin on them is open. I can feel the warmth of my blood on them.

"I-I go down," I say, forcing the words out. He notices my hesitation and repeats the question. Despite the dim lighting in the locker room, he sees self-doubt all over my face. His face grimaces. He's pushing seventy. His face is all wrinkles. Dried up like a prune. His hair had long lost its colour and become as grey as the walls of this cheap, tiny locker room.

"Round one, what happens?"

He lobs the question at me once more, like a grenade into a trench.

"I go down."

I repeat my answer, louder, trying to show some enthusiasm for the plot.

It's just the both of us in this dark and dank locker room. A far cry from the locker rooms I had been used to. Carpeted floors,

painted rooms, and nice enough to bring a girl back after a fight, and maybe her friend, if I was lucky.

But this locker room is abysmal. It's just a cold hard floor, and a wall full of cracks with the occasional spider popping out to peek at everything happening. There is a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling like a solitary star in the sky. It shifts back and forth as if it wants to convey a message, but it's too afraid to speak up. The light itself is dim and in obvious need of changing, but I doubt the owners of this *fine* establishment care.

"You could have been something," he says. A jab to draw a response. If I go for the jab, he'll counter and hit me with an uppercut to bring me back down to size. "You had so much potential."

"Well, I'm waiting for the rest of your routine."

I rub my knuckles, trying to soothe them as they sting like a hornet. I know he's right. I had so much potential. Too much of it. But instead of unlocking it, I locked it in a box and threw it in the river.

"But you couldn't stay on track! You blew it all on dames and parties and then more dames and parties!"

Joe spits out each word with venom, like a coiled snake poised to strike. Each syllable dripping with disdain.

"Some people take up smoking. I took up women and partying, and as you can see, I'm a lot healthier for it."

I give him an ice-cold smile and flex my biceps. He responds by spitting his tobacco laced phlegm into the trash can across the

room with a loud splat.

"Classy, Joe, real classy."

I check myself out in the mirror. I'm pudgier around the hips, but I still resemble a prize-fighter. A prize fighter without a prize.

Joe only rolls his eyes before he reaches into his pocket for a bag of tobacco and some rolling paper. As always, old school, and homemade. No fancy filters. He continues his routine as he rolls a cigarette himself.

"You get a fight against Joe Louis, and you turn up out of shape and out of focus."

The bitterness of betrayal laces his voice.

"Then you get you get a fight with Sugar Ray, and you spend the build-up living life like it's the last days of Rome!"

"At least I didn't go down."

I fire back at him.

"Joe Louis never knocked me down, and Sugar Ray never knocked me down. I stood on my feet and took those beatings. I lost, but I never gazed up at the lights. Nobody ever knocked me down."

"But someone will tonight."

The tone and the curt smile across his face suggests he is getting pleasure from taking me down a peg.

"Look at where we are. Look at where you should be. Should someone as skilled as you settle for this?"

A thumping knock on the locker room door interrupts my answer. Had they knocked any harder, they'd have punched a

hole through the damn thing.

"De Sica," Joe mutters in a hushed whisper, as if he is worried that he'd be upsetting a deity.

"Our Lord and saviour."

I retort with sarcasm. Joe glowers at me, holding his hand up like a father about to strike his child for disobedience.

With the amount of power he has, De Sica might as well be God. Like a god, he can decide the fate of many in Black Lake. Who will be rich? Who will be poor? Who will live and who will die? He was now deciding boxing matches before they even happen.

With care and reverence, Joe unlocks the door, which then screeches in horror as it opens to reveal the sight waiting in the doorway. A young man in a navy-blue suit and tie steps into the room. I figure early twenties by his clean-cut look and smooth, unblemished face. He hasn't lived long enough to have the youth sapped out of him. Entering with a blank expression, he embodies the key trait of a lackey. He will only react if someone orders him to. Being De Sica's flunky means he is packing heat in his suit.

Now De Sica, *the Big Cheese*, trademark required, enters. He's decked out in a white suit, an almost pure and angelic white, with matching white shoes and a fedora hat. Anything he wears must cost more than most people's salaries.

"My boy," he says with a cheese eating grin on his face. Walking towards me, he hugs me and taps my face. He always

called me "my boy" with that smile. It annoyed me. "You're built like a tank! Sometimes, I wonder if I didn't eat so much…"

He points at his round gut with a loud laugh. Older wise guys often refer to themselves as men of experience and men of belly. The bigger the belly, the bigger the life experience. He turns to his lackey, who is silent and unmoved.

"I tell you; you should have seen this guy at his peak," he says with the smile of a proud father talking about his son. "He put more people on the ground than an undertaker. Pow! Pow! Pow!"

He highlights each word with pretend jabs to my face.

Joe senses I'm not in the mood and steps in to bring me my gloves. Once bright red, they now displayed a dark red blood hue, revealing signs of age and wear.

"We're all set on our part," Joe tells him. It is hard to tell whether this pleases De Sica. He keeps smiling all the same. He clicks his fingers, and the lackey reaches into his blazer pocket and pulls out two white envelopes, filled to the brim with cash. I catch a quick glimpse of a pistol hanging in his shoulder holster. The lackey throws the two envelopes onto the bench in the locker. They land with a hefty thud.

"Excellent news, Joe. You'll get the rest when the fight is done."

"Thank you," Joe says, grateful for the blessing being given to him by the god of Black Lake's underworld.

"Thank me, when the fight is over, and your pockets are even fatter, eh?" he says with a big guttural belly laugh. "Then the only

problem you'll have is how to spend it." He laughs again before signalling to his lackey it is time to go, leaving Joe to pick up the envelopes and count the cash.

Joe lets out a wolf-whistle as if he'd seen a leggy dame instead of a stack of paper with the face of a dead president on it.

"Be-ay-yu-tiful."

He strings out the word for extra impact. I tap my two boxing gloves together.

"Who am I hitting the canvas for?"

"Some guy. What do you care? Just count your money and then count your blessings that someone will pay you this much for it."

"Who?"

He looks at me with apprehension, but knowing me as well as he does, he knows I'll be like a dog with a bone. I won't stop until I get an answer.

"Ed Driscoll," he answers, "happy now?"

"Who?"

"Ed Driscoll," he repeats, a look of annoyance on his face.

"Again, who? That doesn't sound like the name of any boxer I've heard of. Ed Driscoll sounds like a middle-aged bank clerk."

"It doesn't matter who it is, right? You go down like a two-dollar hooker. First-round knockout."

"I fought for belts and now I'm dropping for this bum?"

I'm sick at the idea of everyone thinking this no name chump could put me down.

Joe stands and slams the envelopes back down onto the bench.

"That's because you are a bum!" He barks out the words like a rabid rottweiler. "Look at where we are, huh? Is this what the highlife looks like to you?" He asks, gesticulating with his arms and spinning around to point out all four corners of the room. "You had it! You lost it! Now swallow your pride and swallow the truth, because it will be the best medicine for you."

Those words hurt more than any punch to the face. Joe knows the score and I don't. I prefer ignorance. I ponder my reflection in the locker room mirror as the door screeches open once more. A man in a shabby, ill-fitting suit arrives to lead us to the ring for the bout.

Joe steps towards me, his hands on his hips as he looks me dead in the eye.

"Are you going to do right by your pride? Or right by business?"

"Just walk me to the ring," I order, bumping my gloved fists together and hearing the satisfying thump of the boxing gloves smashing against each other. "I'll do the rest."

Joe's expression hints at sadness, the closest I've ever seen him come to looking sad. His stern face has softened. He nods his head and escorts me to the ring.

The ring seems distant. We stride through a lengthy corridor stretching with each step. It seems endless and snake like. The tunnel entrance appears to recede. The closer we get to it, the further away it seems to be.

A crowd's bloodthirsty cries become audible as we near the destination. The cheering, the applause, the whistling. It's like the plebeians of Ancient Rome baying for blood in the Colosseum.

We walk past the curtains to rapturous applause, and in the distance, I spot my opponent. He's not even worth standing in the same ring as me. From the distance, he looks scrawny. He's got some muscle, sure, but not much weight behind it. Joe Louis never knocked me down, but somehow, I'm supposed to go down to this bum. It makes no sense to me.

The venue as I walk to the ring is unlike the stadiums where I used to fight. It's smaller and more intimate, akin to a budget brothel. Smelling the musty sweat in the air mixed with carcinogenic tar, it even smells like one.

A rickety-looking ring in the middle of what looks like a jazz bar. Small tables surround the ring with the baying crowd sat around eating and drinking as they enjoy the night. The closest table to the ring just behind the judges is De Sica and his lackey. De Sica, looking like an angel without his wings in his virginal white suit, continues to smile with little reason.

Up close, my opponent looks younger than me. A prominent square jaw, bright blue eyes that seem to get brighter as the light hits them. A full head of curly slicked back blonde hair. He resembles a heartthrob. Youthful, handsome, and captivating. The type girls go crazy for. I hate everything about him already. Especially the fact that there's a feeling in my stomach that's making me sick at the idea of playing possum for this chump.

The idea that he could put me on my back sickens me.

I turn to see Joe standing in my corner behind the ropes. He gives me an uneasy thumbs up. I look at De Sica. His smile never disappears. The other tables closest to the front are full of guys in flashy suits, shiny gold chains, and watches that shine like stars in the night skies. One rubs his hands together with glee, one seems to smile and laugh as he holds his crumpled-up betting slip in his hand. His loud guffawing cuts through the wall of noise around the ring. It's like he's mocking me. He, or all of them, must be in on my humiliation. My personal hell.

I walk to the centre of the ring towards the referee and my opponent. The referee rattles over the rules, firing them out quick time like a Thompson machine gun. I barely catch a word. I just keep my eyes on my opponent's perfect face.

He could never beat me.

It looks like an artist carved his face from wood. It's so perfect. I yearn to shatter his face like it's made of glass.

He could never knock me down.

Who would believe this bum could even pose a threat to me? No amount of cheap booze will make anyone believe that. The tooth fairy's existence seems more believable.

We tap gloves. The crowd cheers. The bell rings and the first round begins. Hold on to your butts.

Alright, let's see what you've got.

He races towards me, throwing jabs. I bob and weave, dodging most of them with ease. It never really mattered who I was

fighting. Whenever fists approached me, time appeared to move in slow motion. I would move and adjust myself, just as I am doing now.

He tries again, unleashing a few more jabs in quick succession. None of them land. I dodge, move and counter, hitting him with a right hook. He staggers backwards, and I hit him again. Then once more, just for fun.

I don't know about him, but I'm now enjoying myself.

He sees red and rushes towards me, both arms swinging. I duck and move to the side. None of his hits connect. I hit him again, this time on the jaw. I hear the satisfying crunch of my gloved fist thumping his jaw. I enjoy it. This chump has no chance against me.

Ed charges at me again with his arms raised. He's all heart, but no skill. The punches are sloppy, ill timed, and easy to avoid. He unleashes a flurry of punches, rapid-fire. Yet most are easy to avoid.

My opponent stops for a quick breather. *I'm supposed to lose to this guy? This guy?* He's already taking deep breaths after the first few jabs.

Another tornado of desperate jabs come at me. I block each of them. He strikes with a punch. Misses. He continues by throwing another punch. Again, he misses. He swings a left. I dodge it. He tries with a right. I block it with ease.

I'm not even breaking a sweat, and he already looks like he's been fighting for five rounds as he runs at me, both hands

swinging.

He catches me with one punch. Instead of a punch, it's like a light tap. He has less business being in the ring with me than my grandad, and he's dead.

I throw a couple jabs back at him and a vicious strike he has no defence for catches him square in the face. I hit him with two more jabs. He grunts in pain before he raises his own fists up in defence. It feels good. I relish each direct hit as my fists smash his face.

He has a fist made of feathers. A face made of glass. There's no way he can beat me. Not in this world. Not in this city. Not here.

He tries to counter and hits me with a few more jabs. I dodge most of them. A jab lands in my gut, but I shrug it off as if it were nothing more than a light scratch.

I strike him with a quick jab above the eye, splitting the skin open. I draw first blood. The cut above his eye turns into a bloody hose.

If the girls thought he was handsome before our fight, I make a promise to myself they won't be thinking that after. Each punch lands as he backs up into the ropes. I spare his body and unleash every single punch on his face, jabbing at a rapid pace. He's on the ropes. His feet give way and buckle beneath him.

He's on the verge of going down, but I keep punching. I refuse to let him drop. Each punch tenderises his face like it is raw meat. Every punch lands with a loud splat and an ejaculation of blood

squirting out of the open wounds I create. Some of it lands on the judges' table, making a mess of the scoresheets. They won't need them anyway. The knockout is coming.

I retract my left as far as possible. He's about to fall. I fire my left fist at him like it's a missile, landing with an explosive impact. His eyes roll back, and his feet buckle beneath him, his face a bloody and pulpy mess.

Lights out.

I don't think he will recognise his own reflection later.

The bell rings. The records will still show, nobody has knocked me out. Even in a fixed fight. I look at my gloves covered in blood. It's dripping onto the ring mat, which now looks like the scene of an execution.

It's a knockout.

The ref holds my arms aloft.

I turn my attention to my corner of the ring. Joe stands still. His gaunt and craggy facial expressions combined with the lack of movement give him the appearance of a gargoyle statue found sitting atop a gothic building. He closes his eyes and mutters something under his breath. I'm no expert in lip reading, but I'd bet the house on it being unsuitable for the ears of children.

I look at De Sica. For once, he isn't smiling. Within his eyes, I see a contained fury. He's keeping it in check for appearance's sake, but with his blood red coloured face he looks like a stick of dynamite with a lit fuse ready to explode.

I look back to my corner, and Joe has vanished like this poor

sap's good looks.

The men in suits at nearby tables are also tearing up their betting slips, showing their involvement in the deal. A deal I've just voided.

Joe has made a wise choice if he's done what I think he's done. He is a craggy old man, but he's a smart craggy old man. For me, he did everything within his power to help. He shouldn't pay for my mistakes. My fists are raised in the air, the sound of the applause, and the taste of victory takes the tension out of the atmosphere despite the situation I'm facing. I take it all in.

It might have been my last fight, but I didn't go down. Nobody ever knocked me out. I never hit the floor. I never ended up gazing at the lights hanging from the ceiling.

I turn my attention to De Sica once more and give him a smile. It's almost as good as giving him the finger. I enjoy the sight of his mob buddies surrounding him with questions. Their loss of a new car or watch adds seasoning to the steak.

The door creaks open as I enter the locker room. The place is empty, mirroring my mind when I deviated from the script. I'm sorry, De Sica, I improvise, and I don't take direction. I flick on the light dangling from the ceiling, and at least my shadow joins me. Some company.

A second shadow appears, with an arm cocked at a ninety-degree angle, holding my prize for the fight. It's not cash. It's a loaded gun.

"No flowers?" I ask with a raised eyebrow as I turn to face

the person casting the shadow. It's De Sica's lackey. He seems to lack any sense of humour, but what he has is a revolver pointed at my chest. "Should I stand or sit for this?"

Again, no reaction. He just stands there. Still as a statue. I take a seat on the bench. Might as well make myself comfortable.

"Well, if you're going to do it, can you do it soon? That way, I don't have to worry about taking out the trash tonight."

He's armed with a revolver. I'm armed with sarcasm. Easy to bet on who will win this duel.

The door screeches open, followed by the sound of two loud footsteps announcing the all-white De Sica. His angelic white suit illuminated by the light above as he walks in and stares me down.

A crisp sound echoes. The lackey cocks back the hammer of the revolver. The barrel spins like a vinyl record and the bullet reserved for me enters the chamber, begging to be released as if it were an excited dog on a leash. He is about to pull the trigger. I face fate and hope for a bullet to the brain. De Sica ruins the moment by brushing the lackey to the side. Maybe an act of revenge on his part, depriving me of a quick and painless execution.

With his gun still in hand, the lackey takes a step back, ready to use it when needed.

"My boy," he says in the tone of a disappointed father about to tell off their son. It wouldn't surprise me if he resorted to the classic phrase, I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed. "Is there something you would like to say?"

I rack my brains for a second, thinking about what I can say. Nothing I say or do will spare me the bullet. I ask him about the one thing that matters to me in this situation. The one thing I care about.

"The records will say I won, right? Nobody ever knocked me down, right?"

I smile, but the man pointing the gun at me is not amused. The barrel remains aimed at my heart. De Sica smiles, but it's a smile lacking warmth.

"Yes, my boy," he says as he puts a cigar in his mouth. "The records will say you won. If anybody cares about a bunch of down-and-out palookas slugging it out in the middle of a makeshift ring, in the middle of a low-end club. Then yes, you are a born winner, my boy."

"That's good enough for me."

The smile fades from his face. I turn to the trigger man and give him my utmost sincere defiance.

"Well? What are you…"

He doesn't need me to finish the invitation, as the flame from the barrel of the gun illuminates the darkened room for a second. I feel a burning sensation in my chest, and the trickling of warm blood dripping down my chest towards my belly.

"Did…anyone…"

I muster the strength to say these words despite the burning hole in my chest. The trigger man is about to fire another lead slug into my chest, but De Sica's hand reaches out to grab his

forearm, which is enough to calm his lackey's trigger finger.

"Speak, my boy, I'll give you this minor act of mercy," he tells me, adopting a pious tone as if he was a priest delivering a sermon during Sunday morning mass.

"Did anyone tell you…just how stupid you look in those white suits?" I blurt out the question with a smile on my face, that of a teenage boy who has just offended their teacher.

De Sica's piercing blue eyes narrow and lock onto mine as he wrestles the gun out of the triggerman's hand and points it at me.

"My boy, you had so much potential." The déjà vu in his words makes me forget the severity of the moment for a second. Once more, the gun's flame brightens the room. The gun shouts. The room returns to its customary dim lighting until another flash of the flame almost blinds my eyes. A brilliant, powerful flame, hellish in its intensity. The gun shouts once more. This time its words are final.

I stay sat on the bench for one more second, fighting as I have been my entire career, but now I hit the ground. Back first onto the cold, hard floor of the locker room.

All I can see now is that dim lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. I hear the locker room door creak open, followed by the flick of a light switch. The door closes and then darkness envelops everything.

I hear the bell in the distance being struck to start or end a bout in the arena, and I close my eyes.

It's a knockout.

Gangster's Requiem

The phone's shrill shriek startles me out of my sleep. So much so that I reach out and grab the loaded revolver I keep on my bedside table. I always keep it there every night. My profession demands caution. Only a dead man takes chances.

My heart thumps in my chest and is in danger of escaping from my body by climbing out of my throat and mouth. Cold sweat drips down my face as if someone has thrown a bucket of ice-cold water on me. I'm wide awake as if someone has injected caffeine right into my veins.

The phone continues to shriek like the victim of a violent crime. I pick up the phone to shut it up by grabbing the receiver and holding it up to my ear.

"Michael," the voice at the end of the line says in a relaxed tone. "The boss wants to see you at the office. Seven sharp. Be there on time. You got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," I say.

Before I can say anything else, the call dies a quick and painless death.

The boss wants to see you at the office. The call's significance was clear. There is no going back to sleep.

I sit on the edge of the bed. Instead of reaching for the revolver on the bedside table, I reach for the packet of smokes. I pop open

the lid and remove a single cigarette from the carton and look through the gap in the curtains hanging in front of the window facing the bed.

In a life of rolling in the dirt, one of the few moments I have to cleanse my soul is seeing the sun rise in the morning and seeing it set in the evening whilst enjoying a cigarette. Watching the dark black sky of the night give way to the bright orange colour of the sun as it makes its ascent to the skies like a soul on a journey to the heavens above. Or watching the blue skies give way to the darkness of night.

Despite the urgency of the meeting, I give myself time to smoke the cigarette down to the butt like it's my last. I rise from the bed, switch on the old kettle, and spoon ground coffee into a mug. More than usual and I skip on the milk. I hear the water in the kettle boil, as if it's enraged at having been called into action in the early hours of the morning. The water's gurgle resembles a dog's threatening growl.

As I enjoy my coffee, I stare out of the kitchen window. Although the sun has not risen, I still savour the view while taking my first sip of coffee. I enjoy the fact that I live on the fringes of the city, and more towards the sticks.

This open space contrasts with Black Lake's confining skyscrapers. The skyscrapers block sunlight, looming large like prison guards overseeing your every move, trapping you inside.

Instead, out here, I can sip my coffee, smoke my cigarette, and just enjoy the view of the trees. The sun rears its head in

the distance, bringing light to the darkness like a lit candle. Hell, when I was a kid, my parents lit the house with candles because normal lighting cost them too much. Those were the days.

I look at my watch and it is time to grab the car keys. The engine of the car awakes with a roar like a bear that's woken up from its hibernation as my foot hits the accelerator. The car moves with a jolt as the engine and wheels kick into action.

I make my journey to see the boss in his office. In his office, the boss makes deals, unofficial ones—no contracts, no signatures, just words, many unsuitable for children. Those present decide life or death. They determine who will live and who will die. I know from experience, as someone once gave me the order to kill, and I obeyed.

I remember it was quick but slow. Seconds felt like minutes, and minutes were like hours. I remember the sounds, the loud bang, the sound of glass shattering. The small pieces of smashed glass falling like raindrops out of dark clouds. I remember the sound of blood splatter followed by the sound of the car horn as the guy falls forward in his car seat. His head leaking blood like a fountain as his face landed in the middle of the steering wheel.

Police sirens screaming and wailing forever echoed in my mind. Sometimes, I swear I could hear it in my sleep. I'd wake up in cold sweats and instead of my bedroom, for a few seconds I'd see myself in that same street. The same night. My hand held the same rusty gun; tape covered its handle. The same screams. The same guy with blood gushing from a hole in his head. His

head was still slumped over the steering wheel.

It's six fifty-five in the morning. I arrive five minutes before the meeting. I straighten my tie before I step into the building. One rule is to always appear presentable. No matter what. The organisation prides itself on the appearance of everyone involved. You had to ensure your tie was the right length, even if you ended up burning or throwing it away because of blood splatter. Pete, the Killer, whose nickname speaks for itself, spent most of his money on new suits.

"I'm here for the meeting," I say, declaring my arrival. A man with a wide face and a protruding belly, ready to burst the buttons on his shirt, gives me a thorough once-over. As if sizing me up for a fight. One I'm not sure I can win. He doesn't say a single word. He raises his left hand, pointing me towards the carpeted stairway with very little lighting that comes from a small lamp that hangs from the ceiling like a hangman's noose. When winter comes and the wind creeps in, the light swings like a body on the gallows.

I go up the stairs, each step emitting a pained creaking sound as if the weight of my feet on each step was torturing it until I reach the top. Along the corridor stood the door to the office which is already open.

There he sits at his mahogany desk in the centre of the room. He's sipping a small expresso from a tiny mug parked right in front of him on an elaborate-looking saucer that has a blue floral pattern and a gold-coloured outline around the blue leaves. The

small mug also bears the same pattern blue floral pattern with the gold outline.

The room is dimly lit. Despite the bright morning sunlight outside that can overpower the eyes, the venetian blinds blocks most of it out. The sunlight from the world outside seeps through the fancy venetian blinds casting parallel lines across the room. The lines cut across his face like blades, hiding parts of his face behind the shadows. Yet those bright blue eyes seem to shine like two sharp polished daggers.

He leans forward, studying me. His face is hard and stony like it's carved from granite. A once handsome man, his broad dimpled features now suggest an ancient statue. Rough and withered. From his perpetual lack of a smile, happiness vanished from him ages ago. The top of his head is smooth and hairless. It even seems to shine when the light from above hangs over him like a spotlight on a stage actor.

The icy blue colours of his eyes are looking into my eyes. He holds this stare without blinking. Seconds pass, and he doesn't look close to blinking. In fact, it is hard to tell if he is even breathing. He looks like a dead man who has died with his eyes open. Someone's words return to me. If a man died with his eyes open, he deserved it.

I remember the man I shot on that day, his head resting against the steering wheel. His eyes shut, giving the impression of a peaceful nap, while blood flowed from the bullet hole in his head. By that logic, he didn't deserve it, but I did it. I killed

him. Snuffed him out. Snatched his life from him the way a pick pocket snatches wallets.

Provenzano, the boss, blinks. A quick blink and then his cold blue eyes lock onto me once more from across the desk, the way a giant bird of prey locks its eyes on its target from the distance.

He gestures for me to sit down, and I oblige. I look over my shoulder. Behind me, a guy fiddles with a small piece of paper. I notice he is exceptionally tall, even seated. I imagine that if he stood up, he would put most professional basketball players to shame. His skin is a spectral white. If he gets any whiter, he will become translucent. There isn't a single hair on his scalp or face. Not even any eyebrows.

"Michael," Provenzano says looking me in the eye as he holds up his little cup of coffee. He takes a small sip and savours it. "I have a stone in my shoe."

He takes a quick and short sip of his coffee. He keeps his eyes on mine. Again, he doesn't blink, and I try not to blink as if we're locked in a staring competition.

"Perhaps you should take it out," I reply, and I blink, but he doesn't. In my parents' homeland, the Old Country, the older men speak like this. Outsiders found the old timers' speech puzzling. It's like they speak in riddles. Lucky for me, my parents stayed in touch with their roots and often used these expressions at home.

"That's why you're here, Michael."

No smile or expression on his face hints at any underlying emotions. It's a blank canvas. Hard to interpret. His husky

whisper, as though he always has a cold, reveals little emotion. The phantom, behind me, still fidgets with a scrap of paper. "You're going to help me solve a problem."

"What is the problem?" I ask, keen to know where this is going, but wherever it is going, I guarantee it is nowhere nice.

"I have a pest. It needs to be dealt with. You don't deal with pests then you get an infestation."

The phantom at the back gets to his feet and walks to the table. Each footstep is met with a loud thump. He places the piece of paper on my side of the table. His giant hand and thick sausage-like fingers keep the piece of paper hidden as if behind a curtain until he moves his hand to reveal what he is concealing. A small origami of a canary. It means only one thing.

"Someone is singing," I say.

"Unfortunately," he says. He takes another sip from his little mug, as he does so his eyes stay on me. I imagine this is how a shark watches its prey from afar before lunging in for the kill. "Some men are not grateful for the opportunities I give them."

My insides shift around. The phantom only smiles, whilst Provenzano continues to stare at me. His icy blue eyes send my temperature plummeting like a casket being lowered into the ground.

"I give opportunities for the those who need them. You know about that, right?"

I nod my head. The phantom moves in a way that seems so effortless and smooth. It's almost like he glides. His presence

haunts me like my rotten conscience. I can feel him standing behind me. What gives it away is the icy chill in my bones, being in his presence could turn a boiling hot day in the summers into a freezing cold winter's night.

"I made a fortune for myself. There's no denying that. I don't just live the American dream. I am the American dream," he says, pointing at himself with his right thumb to emphasize his identity, leaving no room for confusion despite referring to himself in the first person. "But…"

He stopped, pausing after the word "but" and stretched his hand out, his right forefinger pointed at the ceiling, gesticulating like a politician making an impassioned speech to rally the masses. When you order others to do your bidding, and that bidding involves everything from racketeering to murder, it is an advantage to have the gift of rhetoric.

"I use my fortune to help others, to help the *altri meno fortunati*." He has a habit of dipping into Italian when his emotions reveal themselves like a coiled snake lashing out at anyone who has the steely guts to disturb it. "But as they say, *la madre degli idioti e simpre incita."*

The last part translates as; the mother of idiots is always pregnant. A common phrase in the Old Country. A phrase that nothing in the English language can hold a candle to. Over my shoulder, the phantom continues to haunt me. Provenzano stares into my eyes. This feels like an interrogation. I am a nut he is trying to crack.

"A man who betrays those who help cannot call himself a man." He stops and ponders his words for a moment as if he is a professor, imparting important knowledge to his student. Provenzano then takes aim and shoots a question at me. "How do you feel about a man who never pays his dues?"

A deathly silence hangs in the air, following the question. It's as if a gun has been fired next to my ear. The silence is that loud. He sits there waiting for my answer. The Phantom. I can sense his eyes on me from behind. Provenzano studies me with his eyes, waiting for my response. The Phantom breathes down my neck.

"*Hai una risposta?*"

I take a breath and spew out an answer.

"A man who never pays his dues can never be a real man," I say. It's the type of answer these old timers and Moustache Petes like.

"Now, you'll find out why you're here."

He nods his head to The Phantom, who towers over me.

I shift in my chair as his eyes continue to study my every move and reaction. Moving to the table's side, the Phantom gazes down his nose, leaving me with a sense of insignificance. I glance at his chest and see a shoulder holster under his blazer jacket. He's carrying something, and it's not chocolate or well wishes. My face is drenched. Sweat streams down it like rain.

"One can never forgive betrayal, you know that. *Vero*, Michael?"

I feel my stomach do a backflip.

"You know what needs to be done. You know what needs to happen."

The phantom reaches into his blazer pocket. I close my eyes, expecting the worse. I wish I had never picked up the phone. He starts to read me the law of the land.

"Traitors pay with their lives. It's time one traitor pays the price."

I expect a loud bang and for the darkness to take me. Good night. The show is over. Thank you for coming. Don't forget to tip the waitress.

The final thing I will see is that pale white face, that supercilious smile, and the flame erupting from the barrel of the gun. I await the sound of the gunshot like a man on death row waiting for his execution. Instead, I hear a weighty metallic piece landing on the wooden table. I open my eyes. The table holds a small revolver between us. The phantom smiles an ice-cold smile.

In an abrupt reaction, Provenzano sniffs the bright red rose hanging from the lapel on his tuxedo like he's disgusted by the sight of the weapon parked on the table.

"Joey has been co-operating."

He looks even more disgusted. It looks like he might retch all over his mahogany desk.

I sit dumb founded, glued to the chair and I feel my heart drop into my gut. The Phantom taps me on the head and walks back to his chair, every footstep a loud, weighty thump on the floor.

I ask Provenzano if he has any evidence, and he only tells me

he knows.

Nothing more.

He just knows.

"I'm putting this in your hands, Michael. You're a good earner, but it means nothing if you're in prison."

My reaction to the announcement is what he studies. He's testing me. Provenzano wants to know if I'll go through with it.

He tells me that Joey would sell him out, the whole organisation out, and me with them. He tells me that the police had arrested him and that he had revealed everything like he had been gutted. In the interrogation room, he'd broken down like a damsel in distress. Given up everything and everyone. I protest by telling him I had grown up with Joey in the cramped apartments of Downtown Black Lake. Joey would never think of doing such a thing, let alone actually doing it.

He tells me there's no arguing with him. He knows. Now I know. That's it. Period. Joey must die.

I gaze at the gun. I see my haunted reflection on the shiny stainless steel of the revolver. Provenzano gestures for me to pick up the gun. A man who is always used to blind obedience from everyone under his command. I don't disappoint and pick up the gun as he observes me. The weight in my hand brings me back to the time when I took a life. His icy blue eyes remain fixed on me.

Before leaving, I ask a question to a man who has no experience of being questioned.

"Why me?"

Provenzano has a quizzical expression on his granite-like face. His features make him resemble a cliff face with eyes.

"You're the person he will least suspect. You're the person he'll see coming with a smile and a warm hug, not a gun."

It makes sense, but it doesn't make me feel better. In fact, it only made me everything worse.

My mind is a drive-in theatre. The only film playing is memories of our time together. Our first meeting was as young kids playing baseball in a local park. I remember our first day in the local school when an Irish kid tried picking on the Italian kids. We snuck up on him one day and used a compass to poke tiny holes into his back through his white school shirt which became spotted with flecks of blood until he got the point, in the most literal sense of the term.

I remember us running around as members of the Downtown Devils stealing watches or cash right out of peoples' pockets and then running like track stars when we saw a police officer. When we saw a police officer, I swear we could outrun Jessie Owens. I even remember the rich and aromatic smell of his mother cooking pasta with tomato sauce and basil, which she grew herself because it was better than anything in the local green grocers.

"Just think about your freedom. He is cooperating that means, there's more of a chance of you getting locked away. Or if it helps, think about the money, buy yourself a Rolex," he suggests, holding up his wrist to reveal a Rolex strapped around it.

I just nod my head and leave. I feel the weight of both my heart and head as I drudge towards the door.

"Hey, Michael," I hear Provenzano's voice call out from behind me. The Phantom blocks my exit as he stands before me. He doesn't say it, but he's challenging me to try going past him. I notice his eyes are a spectral light blue colour contrasted with the pitch-black pupils of his eyes.

I turn around one more time to see Provenzano still sat at his desk.

"You can become a made man. *Uno uomo di honore, uno uomo di rispetto, e uno di noi*."

The Phantom steps out of my way and my mission begins, and it is to kill a friend that I consider a brother.

I sense the six-shooter in my trouser pocket through the fabric of my pants.

Out on the street, I reach into my pocket and pull out a scrunched-up carton of cigarettes. My hands shake and shiver and it's not because of the cold. I contemplate everything that has just happened as the sun rises high above the surrounding buildings. The sun looking down on me like it's passing judgement on me. I'm scum and even the sun knows it.

The sky's bright blue now. The skies are so clear they seem to mock the shadows that cling to the streets below.

The information resonates within me, a cavernous echo. *Uno uomo di honore*. Becoming a made man is as enticing as the whisper of a seductress. I relish the allure of the power, respect,

and status. *Uno uomo di rispetto*. It is like a magnet attracting me to the title, pushing me towards it as if someone has thrown a tight rope around me and is dragging me along with them. *Uno di noi.*

As a man of honour, respect, and one of them means I would earn money beyond my imagination, and I would be bulletproof. Nobody could even think of touching me, let alone actually doing it. Hell, if they even dreamed about it then they'd have to wake up and beg for forgiveness.

I take a drag on my cigarette, and the warm smoke coats the back of my throat. Then the memories of years of friendship invade my thoughts of dreams and ambitions, smashing them to pieces as if someone has dashed glass bottles onto the ground. The memories flood my mind and will not relent. Everything we had seen and done together runs through my mind as I take another drag of the cigarette and blow out a puff of cigarette smoke.

The times as teenagers we had chased skirt in school together, the time we fought because we both got butterflies in our bellies over the cute bookworm. The time we worked as a duo to lift a bunch of swag from Old Man Guiseppe's corner store. We divided tasks; one spoke to the partially sighted Old Man Guiseppe, the other searched for items to fit in our coats. Candy, comics, and even booze. Cigarettes too, if we were lucky.

We started high school together and just about graduated high school together. We went on double dates together, competing to

see who could win the girl first, and he usually won. I remained single, and he got married. I was the best man. I remember putting my arm around him and telling he was lucky he had found the woman of his life to settle down with. Despite enjoying nights settling down with other women.

The memories and the feelings they evoke are too warm. Those feelings must disappear like cigarette smoke into the air.

I must think about the job. If Provenzano said he was talking to the police, he was talking to the police. He could sell us all out. Sell *me* out. There are no two ways around it. Joey must die. I would have to learn to live with it just as I had to live with the other body resting on my conscience.

I must get Provenzano's words in my mind once more. *A man of honour. A man of respect. One of them*. To give the man his dues, he has more silver in his tongue than a jewellery store.

My cigarette runs out like the fuse on a dynamite stick.

It's time to go, and it's time to act.

I drop the cigarette to the ground and stamp it out with my shoe, snuffing it out. He should have known the price he'd pay for singing. This is the life we chose. This is the life that chose us.

In the car, I hide the gun in the glove compartment among old paperwork for the car that I had forgotten about until now.

As I drive through the streets, my mind focuses on the task ahead, oblivious to the surrounding cars. My car glides through the streets. I'm behind the wheel, but I'm not in control of this damn machine. In fact, I'm pretty sure the car is driving me.

I don't blink. My eyes stare out into the distance. I look but I don't see. I hear sounds, but I don't listen to them. Fate guides me toward my destined future. A man of honour. To cap it off, a Rolex on the wrist would be a fine reward.

I stop off at a corner store and buy some bottles of beer. Two for me and two for him. In my mind, I have planned his execution. I've mapped it out from the grim start to the bitter end. I've even made space for a last drink together. After so many years together, it's the least he deserves.

Take him to the lake. It's out of the city and in a more secluded area. There shouldn't be many people around.

It's perfect.

Then have that one last drink with him before putting the gun barrel to his head and wrapping my finger tight around the trigger and giving it one quick pull. A quick shot to the head. A tender act of mercy. He would be dead before he could even notice, let alone react.

My car pulls up to the driveway of a small house. The embodiment of suburban living. A neat driveway, a nice house with an attached garage. A grassy patch borders a large, thick tree upfront, a makeshift swing hangs from a sturdy branch.

The car's engine falls silent with a flick of the wrist. The car is silent. Still as death. I take a gander at the glove compartment, imagining the gun inside. I inhale a deep breath, exit the car, and approach the entrance. In the city God forgot, Black Lake, a sunny day like today is a rarity.

My mind is racing like a getaway car careening and skidding through the wet streets of Black Lake on a rain drenched night. The gun. Joey's face. The man I had killed. The loud bang. Blood splatter. The gun in my hand. A Rolex on my wrist. Gunpowder filling the air. Screams, a man bleeds from his head, slumped in the car seat. His head resting on the wheel. Provenzano's words. Joey. The gun. A thunderous gunshot. All of it is on my mind suffocating me like two hands around my throat.

I ring the doorbell and my mind clears itself. I listen to the ringing and the ambient sound of the suburbs. Birds chirping and the occasional car passing by. I observe a mother strolling with her kid along the roadside. She holds the hand of the young toddler enjoying a rare day of sunshine in a place that is often enshrouded by dark grey clouds and relentless rain. The sunny weather wouldn't be half as good without the dreary rain drenched days Black Lake is accustomed to. Just as happiness wouldn't be so good if it wasn't for sorrow.

His wife finally opens the door. She stands in the doorway wearing a dress, an apron, curly bobbed brown hair, and a smile. Their young baby girl in her arms.

"Michael, what are you doing here?" Molly asks, smiling yet perplexed and wondering what I'm doing at her door unannounced with a face as serious as sin. In contrast she flashes her bright pearly white smile that reveals a summery warmth. I try to force myself to smile, but I can't as the baby in her arms stares at me. Her big blue eyes staring bug-eyed at me.

"Is Joey around?"

She stands there quiet for a second before nodding as the smile disappears from her face.

Watching me, she calls out to him. She yells down the corridor. She keeps her eyes on me. Joey arrives at the door armed with a smile and outstretched hand.

The warm smile that had adorned her face is nowhere to be seen.

"Mikey!"

He greets me with enthusiasm, pulling me close into his arms for a masculine bear hug. His large hands smash my back. "What brings you to this area?"

Joey stands there in a sauce-stained tank top that just about covers his belly, which has bulged since he tied the knot with Molly. He's wearing a pair of slacks.

"Joey, how about taking a ride and cracking a couple of beers?" I ask, trying to feign some sort of enthusiasm. If he buys this, I deserve an Academy Award.

He looks at me doe eyed, uncertain, his round face with a crew cut and his eyes as brown as his hair stare at me. His wife stands in the house's corridor observing us, her eyes fixated on me after my sudden appearance. The baby also keeps her bulging eyes on me. It might sound insane, but it's like they both know why I'm here.

Joey leans closer towards me and whispers.

"Is it work?"

He asks in a hushed whisper so that his wife can't listen. Like every man in this business. They keep everything "work related" away from the women in their lives. The women always know, no matter how much we try to hide it.

"N-no, not work related."

He sighs with relief. I note it in my mind, wondering if it's a sign he's expecting someone to come for him.

"Just a ride and a few beers."

I reassure him.

I lie to him.

He considers it for a second. His wife and the little baby in her arms are still watching the scene with curiosity.

"Sure, give me a second and I'll be out in a bit," he says. The door closes, and I hear raised voices muffled by the front door.

I sit in the car waiting for him with a lit cigarette between my lips, wondering if he'll come out of the house, or if he's fled through the backdoor, knowing what is in store for him, what fate has in mind for him. A headshot followed by a crude drop into the lake.

My eyes dart between the door and the glove box, time dragging. The glove compartment's contents—a gun—are visible to my eyes. Despite the fact it's closed, I see it. It's primed. Waiting for me to use it, anticipating the moment when I take another life.

I remember the time I killed a man. I remember holding the gun tight in my hand. The handle of the gun in my sweaty palm

as I pulled the trigger. Right now, my palms are so sweaty that I fear losing my grip on the gun when the moment comes.

I glance back at the door. There's still no sign of him emerging from it.

I remember the gun's recoil as it launched the bullet at the target. I've always wondered how much longer he was alive for. Did he feel any pain? What was the last thing he saw? Was it the steering wheel as he fell face forward on to it? Was it the sight of me holding the smoking gun?

I'll always remember the time I killed a man. Just as I'll always remember the second time that I will kill a man.

There's a sudden thump on the window as I jump out of my skin. I see Joey smiling. A wide smile. He's dressed in a light brown suit with a white shirt and tie that matches the colour of the suit. A brown fedora hat tilted to the side, just the way he likes to wear it.

I gesture for him to get in the car, and he follows through with the order as he jumps into the passenger seat, riding shotgun.

The car pulls away from the driveway of his house. I spot his wife sitting on the DIY swing hanging from the thick tree branch, the baby still in her arms. They swing, moving back and forth by what looks like a few millimetres. Her face was as serious as the barrel of a gun. Joey waves at her with a smile as the car moves away. She doesn't smile. She nods her head. I drive us away and begin our journey. Joey's last journey.

His end has only just started.

We spend the entire ride talking about the good old times. Our memories becoming museum exhibits that we revisit. Imagining how much better everything was when we were kids, breaking rules and doing whatever we wanted made things so much better. If there was one thing we excelled at as teenagers, it was breaking every rule possible. As a double team of wise guys, that skill was transferrable.

The clouds darken as we make our way, threatening us with rain, which is fine by me. Less chances of onlookers. The heavens unleash a vicious rain upon everything below. Rain streaks blur the windshield like overflowing tears, hindering my vision on this long, winding road. The streets are empty like the end of a dinner party in the early hours of the morning but without the joys of being drunk or leaving with a cute girl.

Joey questions if it's wise to go for a ride amidst the relentless rain pouring down on everyone below. I tell him there's nothing to worry about. It's only raining. We may be getting older, but we aren't old enough to cancel plans on account of rain, wind, sleet, or snow.

I think about what I must do. Provenzano's words in my mind working their magic. Provenzano could sell water to a well. I imagine my wrist weighing heavier a few days later with a Rolex wrapped around it, even with the weight of Joey's body on my mind weighing even heavier, like an elephant on a sea saw. I think of how much fatter my wallet will get with hundred-dollar bills. No need to carry singles.

The rain continues to pour down on the car as if it is trying to submerge us beneath the water and drown us. I keep driving, my eyes stay focused on the road ahead. My mind on the gun in the glove compartment, and my mouth answering Joey's questions. The longer the journey goes on, the more the questions repeat themselves.

"Do you remember the time when…?" He asks again, pulling out memories like so many nickels and dimes out of his pockets.

I wonder if he knows what is coming. I ponder whether I should just pop the glove compartment open, retrieve the gun and fire straight at his head, making a bloody and brainy mess all over the passenger side window.

Do you remember the time when…?

My right hand reaches for the glove compartment. If I'm quick enough, I can catch him off guard when he's gazing out of the passenger side window.

Do you remember the time when…?

I hear sirens wailing out loud, almost like a constant screaming in my ears. Someone screaming for dear life. Both hands back on the wheel. Am I already under arrest for a crime I haven't even committed yet? I heard the police response times were improving, but this fast before you've even committed the crime is ridiculous.

A cop car overtakes us. It zooms off into the distance, leaving a trail of water behind it. The water spray behind the car is mist like, it seems to hang in the air, suspended in time like a memory.

Joey lowers his window, hawks a mouthful of phlegm, then curses the speeding police.

I think about whether he is only doing this to prove he wasn't singing. An act. A thespian on the theatre stage pretending to play the part of the loyal soldier when he is selling the entire platoon out to the enemy. Within touching distance of reaching our destination, I take a harsh turn off-road to cut through the field and head towards our old hangout spot on the side of the lake.

We arrive at our destination. The sound of the engine is silenced. All is silent in the car. We gaze out through the drenched windshield of the car.

The rain has subsided, but the clouds remain grey in contrast with the picturesque lake that stands before us. This was the hangout spot for teenagers to smoke cigarettes and down booze whilst enjoying the scenic view of the dark blue lake. The lake lays still and dark. Its surface is a glassy mirror that reflects the brooding skies above. Shadows stretch long across the blades of grass that surround the lake. The blades of grass whisper dark secrets in the breeze. Sparse trees stand with their twisted branches reaching out as if to hide something beneath the canopy.

A small, two-person wooden boat, with paddles, sits on the shore. The place is quiet and empty on account of the unpredictable weather.

The dark blue water of the lake has also seen a lot of red in

its time. This lake holds the bodies of many "missing" people. Either that happened, or individuals dumped their guns here. Digging would reveal a whole armoury down there. Pistols, revolvers, shotguns, and maybe even machine guns.

"Hey, Joey," I say, and he turns his head to face me. I'm only looking at the lake ahead, avoiding his gaze. "Go get the beers. They're in the car boot."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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