



**CITY OF
FOOLS**



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Patrick Coppola

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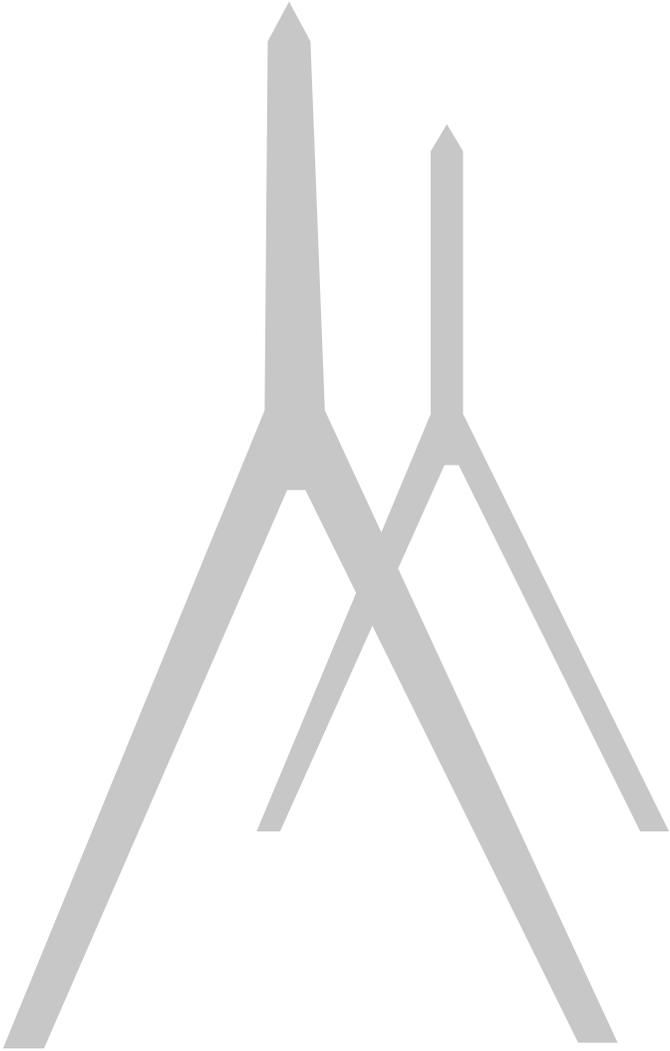
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It's not that easy bein' green...





April is Ugly in Boston

RAIN ... It arrived hard, heavy and cold, as if not to be outdone by the winter's record snowfall. Like crashing ocean surf, each wave of rain had dutifully followed the one ahead of it for the past seven days.

It was the kind of winter that made me ask myself why I still lived here. Why I haven't migrated south. Two blizzards a week apart in January had paralyzed the city for the month, and storm after storm that hit every few days like clockwork -- matched with a record cold -- had frozen out the city. Anchored by the fate of birthplace and two generations of blood before me, I labored through, year after year, until the promise of spring and summer took hold.



As I walked through the lingering cold mist, the lazy remnant of the day's downpour, I took a peek at the swift-moving clouds and noticed a bit of blue sky sneaking through. Maybe this was the break those squeaky little weathermen had talked about for the past few days. The winter chill hadn't left my bones, and betting on a weatherman was a bad bet. The dismal week of rain had saturated the tired streets of downtown Boston with an ugly mix of black water and winter sand.

Puddles filled the potholes, and chunks of asphalt ripped up by the winter's snowplows dotted the streets.

Hopefully, spring was near. The days were getting a little longer, prompting the hibernating Boston population to venture out onto the streets past dusk. I had skipped my Florida trip this winter. Why? Maybe because I had no one to go with; maybe I didn't want to go alone. I hadn't missed the annual Marco Island jaunt in five years. It was always good to warm up for a couple of weeks. Good to burn off that winter softness that hit around Thanksgiving and lasted until now. Too many loose ends and the bitter cold put a deep freeze on my mind, as well.

The Private Eye business was slow; at least it was for me. I had worked a couple of bodyguard jobs over the winter for Paramount Studios, who along with other Hollywood studios had invaded Massachusetts fresh off the scent of the twenty-five percent tax credit the state had implemented for film and television production in an effort to boost the sputtering economy. It was another well crafted, union influenced, backroom deal that promised to line the pockets of their pension funds and some politicians' offshore accounts, all at taxpayer expense. Paramount was scouting locations, and two high-end directors felt they needed an armed escort so I obliged their tender egos, for a grand a day. I wasn't pressing for work; I really didn't need the money anymore, so if and when a job came along, I thought about it first.

The past couple of years I had plenty of wives asking me to watch their husbands. But that seemed to have dried up. Suspicious wives had gotten the message that judges and society couldn't care less about a cheating husband. High-profile politicians, celebrities, and athletes were getting caught with hookers at a regular clip; their weak apologies played on every station with their quiet dumbo of a wife standing by her man, loyal to the end -- or so they'd like us to think. The powerful cheaters had the unfortunate sentence of their vengeful wives hanging over them forever. The fortunate ones got divorced. All a suspicious wife had to do now was turn on *Court TV* and watch bored, wealthy housewives run over their husbands with the shiny, new Mercedes the husband had just bought them, and claim as their defense that they were stressed out from cleaning the house and taking care of the kids. Now, they wouldn't call me to catch their husbands. They'd just cheat back, hire the most expensive lawyer, and file the divorce papers.

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I carried a plastic bag that held my new sneakers and walked down Washington Street past what remained of “The Combat Zone,” now a bastion of first class urban development despite the real estate crash. Politically connected developers were building office buildings and condos with fresh concrete, thick steel beams and shiny mirrored glass windows over a swill infested site -- a site where murders, prostitution, extortion and every other vice prospered for nearly forty years. The sordid business still lingered in the darker corners and the ever-expanding outskirts. Only a few dingy bars and a couple of sleazy strip joints remained hidden in an area that at one time spread over ten city blocks and was once labeled one of America’s most dangerous red light districts. It was where I took my first drink at sixteen with my buddies at the Caribe Lounge. How I laughed at Mike White when he unwittingly bought a skanky whore a twenty-dollar drink at a time when a beer cost a buck twenty-five. I remember how he nervously peeled off the money with some big black guy hovering over him, ready to rip his head off if he decided not to pay. The urban landscape had changed, but to me it still held its stink. Now the stench was poorly veiled in the shape of corporate greed, union welfare, and political payoffs.

I made my way through the theater district, past the winos, pimps and bargain rate hookers who reclaimed their streets at dusk to make a few bucks off the early risers. They wouldn’t disappear, continually moving like scurrying rats from block to block while Boston vice cops turned a blind eye as long as their pockets got filled. The top raters were still sleeping off their last blast of heroin in run-down apartments in Chinatown. They’d be staggering out with cheap mascara dripping from their bloodshot eyes and polluting the streets in a few hours, moving from corner to corner with ashy cigarettes hanging off of broken and half-chewed painted fingernails.

April is ugly in Boston. It’s empty, bare; it’s gray, cold ... and the weather is lousy, too.

I crossed Columbus Avenue, dodging the Friday night rush hour traffic. Some cars had their headlights on; others didn’t. It was that time of year when people were still adjusting to the longer days. I felt cold, I felt tired and I felt lost in my own city.



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The newsstand near my building was closing down. Bo Moore, the owner, spotted me and waited before he slammed his metal grate down.

"Need anything, Jake?" Bo hollered as I approached.

"Gimme the *Herald*," I said.

"All out."

I came to a stop in front of his stand and looked over his magazine selection. The stand had been there for over seventy years. Bo took it over about ten years ago. It had spouted news and sold cigarettes, candy and gum during World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, the Kennedy boys' assassinations, the civil rights movement, Bruins, Celtics, and Patriots championships, the miracle 2004 Red Sox and mostly, the everyday bullshit that we call life. It might have been painted twice in that time and was a non-descript gray for now, with spotted tones of green showing through from the chipped paint. Twelve feet long, six feet deep and eight feet high, it resembled an old baseball dugout. Bo had made it work for him by adding a breakfast menu that consisted of a thirty-cup coffee maker and a daily supply of a couple of dozen muffins and donuts. He sold out his breakfast every day and probably brought home an extra two hundred a week.

"I got a couple of *Globes* left," he said, hoping I'd take one.

I gave him a sideways look. "Too many pages, and too messy."

"And too left wing?" he asked with his twisted smile.

"Gimme the *Ring* magazine."

I handed Bo a ten for the nine-dollar boxing bible and pointed to my building's lower floor, which housed Tony's Bar and Grille. "You eat today?"

Bo shook his head. "Yeah."

"See you tomorrow," I said as I turned and headed for Tony's front door.

"Hey, your change."

"Keep it," I said turning back to him.

"Hey, Jake. You got a big rip in the back of your pants. Your underwear is showing."

I stopped and turned my head looking for the tear. "Where?"

"April Fool's!"

I smiled at him. "Good one."

Bo smiled his smile, unplugged the electric heater he kept under

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his stool, slammed the grate down and started locking up. I've been tipping him since Day One, and he never failed to ask if I wanted my change. He was always polite. The little guy was no more than five-foot-two, and was born with cerebral palsy, causing him to limp badly and kept him in constant pain, which he tolerated with no medication most of the time. He had an elevated shoe that kept him on the level, and he was always on the level with me. Bo was forty and had married a Filipino girl a couple of years ago. It was an arranged thing. He met her through his cousin's friend who had married another Filipino girl. She brought two young daughters along to start her new life in America. He seemed happy after being alone all his life, and I was happy for him. He had endured the brutally cold and snowy winter tending to that newsstand day in and day out, and the poor bastard deserved the buck tip. I fed him every day at Tony's. I was partners in the restaurant with my cousin. It was a good deal. Bo was like a watchdog for me. He kept his eyes and ears open, and in my business I need allies.

As I approached Tony's, I noticed water splashing down from the slate roof onto the sidewalk in front of the door. I looked up and spotted a downspout that had separated from the gutter causing the problem. "Pain in the ass," I said out loud. I couldn't care less about the water, but it was going to be near freezing later on and I didn't want some customer or local drunk slipping on my sidewalk and trying to sue me. I was proud that I owned the sturdy red brick building. I liked its layout: a successful restaurant on the first floor, my office on the second, and my apartment on the third. It was my only real asset besides my car. I was fortunate. Lucky and fortunate enough to buy it fifteen years ago, just when people were figuring out that the South End was going to be an expensive place to live. If I had waited a year or two, I could have never afforded it. Twenty-five years ago, I could have bought the whole block.

I walked into the restaurant and spotted Tony standing by the bar talking to a customer. The food was great at Tony's, but Tony's personality was greater. He could have been a politician if he wasn't such a good guy.

"Tony, we got any rock salt for the sidewalk?"

From across the room he yelled, "For what?"

"The sidewalk's gonna freeze up."

Tony nodded and pointed. "The coat closet," he said, while continuing his conversation.

I grabbed the five-gallon plastic bucket and went outside sprinkling the rock salt and sand mixture all over the sidewalk with the tomato can that was in the pail. Bo was just leaving with his station wagon from the same spot he parked in for ten years. I went back into Tony's, dropped the rock salt bucket back into the coat closet, and walked across the dark hardwood floors to the bar. It was busy with the supper crowd, and Tony was now behind the bar helping out.

"We gotta fix the downspout tomorrow. It came loose from the building."

"I'll do it in the morning. Where'd you go, today?" Tony asked while pouring drinks.

"Odds and ends. Bought a pair of sneakers," I said, holding up the bag.

"Oh, yeah? Gonna start working out again?"

"Yeah, I think it's time."

"You hungry?"

I shook my head, 'no.' "I'm cold. How about a decaf, black, with a shot of Sambuca?"

"Perfect," Tony said, smiling as he poured for his favorite cousin in the world.

I picked up the cup and drank. The coffee was warm, and the Sambuca went through my veins like antifreeze in an old V-8. "Who's working the bar tonight?"

"Sally's running late. She should be here any minute," he said while checking his watch. "I'll tell her you said, 'hi.'"

"You do that."

"We're getting busy. If you want anything sent up, let me know." And with that he was off and running, tending to the Friday night crowd.

The place was getting full, and I was taking up a paying customer's seat. I gulped the final sip of the spiked coffee down, picked up my bag, and walked through the bar area into the kitchen exchanging hello's with our loveable round chef, Squints, and the rest of the help as I pushed my way out the back screen door which served to cool the kitchen, no matter how hot or cold it was outside.

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It was raining again. I trudged up the fire escape stairs to my office. I pushed my key into the lock of the heavy metal door, pulled it open, and slammed it behind me as I opened another door, a warmer looking, heavy oak one.

Finally I was in my office, my home away from home. Comfortable, warm, old-fashioned, like a *Private Eye's* from a forties movie. It was probably a little too big for my needs, but what the hell? My mahogany desk was in front of the big wall of windows facing the street. I had my name, "Jake Rossi," stenciled on it and the words "Private Eye" below it. The windows provided plenty of light from above, and there was always lots of action on the street below. I went to the answering machine on the side table. There were no messages. I threw my coat on the coat rack, turned on the stereo, and was calmed by the classical music from the radio. I flopped on the black leather couch, kicked off my shoes, and rested my eyes for a moment.



I opened my eyes and lifted myself off the couch, trying to get my bearings. Flashing blue and red lights were swirling through my front window. For a second I thought I was at a discotheque on Lansdowne Street and it was 1980. Not so lucky; it was now, and there was a mess unfolding across the street from me on Columbus Avenue. I counted six black and whites, a fire truck, an ambulance, and at least four unmarked detective cars. Four news trucks were set up for broadcast, with antennas reaching up into the night sky. Something serious had happened. It was a zoo. Should I go downstairs and check it out? It was old news to me. This area of town is still rough around the edges with the nearby Theater District, Chinatown, and Roxbury always spilling over. Another gang thing? Maybe. A drug dealer, a pimp? Who really cared? I looked at my watch and saw the time. Shit; it was 3:00 a.m. I had already slept eight hours. I was still dressed. What the hell? I went into the bathroom, took a leak, splashed some cold water on my face, and swigged from a bottle of mouthwash. I put on my shoes, grabbed my coat, and headed for the street.

The crime squad -- the CSI boys and girls -- had already yellow-taped the area. Several curious neighbors had come out of their

buildings, though most stayed inside; they had seen this sort of stuff before. I was just an onlooker like everyone else. I made my way for the Channel 4 satellite truck and the gorgeous blonde reporter who was just about to start her report. She wasn't the regular field reporter for Channel 4. Turns out she picked a good night to fill in. What a doll, I thought. 3 o'clock in the morning, and she looks that good. I stood behind the camera man, listened, and watched. She waited a few moments with the bright lights warming her face. She shivered slightly. It was damp and cold, maybe 30 degrees.

"Ready, Steve?" she nervously asked the cameraman with steam coming from her mouth.

He adjusted his lens, then held up his free hand and dropped it.

"This is Katie Conners reporting from the Channel 4 street team. Another murder in Boston this morning at about two-thirty a.m. The victim was shot twice in the chest at close range here on the corner of Columbus Avenue and West Newton Street. Witnesses saw a group of young men gathered on the corner when shots were fired, and the group dispersed in several directions. The suspects are all believed to be black males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The name of the victim will not be released until his family is notified. Boston Police detectives have secured the scene and crime scene investigators are working to gather physical evidence, trying to piece this together. We'll have more on this murder as the information unfolds. I'm Katie Conners, reporting live from the South End."

She was finished with her report, but stood still, staring into the camera lens until the cameraman gave her a hand signal and moved away from her.

The field producer, Jerry Rubin, a young balding guy, walked over and shook her hand as she let out a deep sigh. "Not bad for your first report," he said.

"Was my hand shaking?" she asked.

"I thought it was the camera," the cameraman joked. "Okay if I get some B-Roll shots, Jerry?"

"Yeah, snoop around, see what you can get," Jerry answered. "I gotta make some calls. Good job, Katie," the producer said as he walked off with his cell phone stuck to his ear, leaving his new reporter standing awkwardly alone.

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Katie Conners looked like she needed some company and so did I. "Pretty glamorous job, huh?" I asked from a comfortable distance. She looked at me wearily and just barely smirked.

"Sarah get promoted?" I asked.

She looked at me again. This time I sensed she felt a little more comfortable. "Yeah," she said shyly.

I walked a little closer to her.

"I'm a Private Investigator, and I know most of the reporters around town."

She looked at me with a bit more interest. "You're up late. Is this how you drum up business?"

I laughed. "No, I live right across the street." I turned and pointed to the building, and when I looked back she had already turned away looking toward Jerry Rubin. "You look cold. You want some coffee?"

"Anything open around here?"

"I'll get it at my restaurant."

She looked curiously at me. "I thought you were a Private Investigator?"

"I am. Be back in a few minutes."

She wasn't too sure of the offer. A pretty girl like her had a right to be careful.

I walked across the street and opened the restaurant. The rock salt had worked; there was no ice in front of my building.

I watched the blue and red lights blast through the restaurant's windows and bounce off the walls while the coffee brewed. It took about five minutes. It was a good brew.

She watched me walk slowly across the street, carefully trying to balance the tray with the coffee pot, a few paper cups, sugar, cream, and I threw on a couple of biscotti cookies for good luck. She met me half way and took the cups off the tray so they wouldn't tip.

"Thanks, I wouldn't make a good waiter," I joked. I placed the tray on the hood of a police car and poured. She took her coffee black. I offered her a cookie, but she didn't want one. "What's a matter, you afraid the cookie's going to stick to those pearly whites?"

"I know it's late, but someone might be watching."

"They'll run it on the early news, and you'll get some airtime," I told her. "My name is Jake Rossi." I stuck out my hand to shake hers.

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She shook my hand firmly. "Katie Conners."

"That's a good news name. People will remember that."

"We'll see," she said hopefully.

"How's the coffee?"

"Not bad," she answered.

Not bad? Where does she buy her coffee? That's the same coffee they use at the Copley Plaza, baby -- that's what I wanted to say, but I just nodded back and sipped.

"C'mon, follow me. I'm sure someone I know is working this one," I said as I walked away from her.

As I approached a uniformed cop I glanced casually over my shoulder and saw that she hadn't budged from her spot. Looking back toward the cop, I saw a detective who was a pal of mine walking my way. Not a chummy pal, but a working pal. I pretended to help him, and he pretended to help me. Sometimes we actually did help each other.

Tommy Benitez, was a homicide detective who came up through the ranks. He was street tough and knew how to handle things. I knew Tommy briefly when I was a Boston cop myself. We ran into each other a few times working as patrolmen. I met up again with Tommy ten years ago when I was working on a case for a defense attorney nobody liked except his high-paying clients. Tommy had assisted the Feds in an arrest of a suspected bookie who was linked to some drug dealers. He listened to what I had uncovered for the defense team and helped get the drug charges dropped. The bookie served two years in Pennsylvania at the Allenwood Country Club, which was a big win for him. The Boston cop brass didn't like the fact that I helped my client save time. In fact, the Boston cops and I couldn't stand each other, which was fine with me.

Tommy was a reasonably honest cop, which didn't mean he was completely honest. It just meant he wasn't as corrupt as the majority of them, and nowadays being called an honest cop isn't very common. He was fit and looked to be in his mid-forties, but I knew he was in his mid-fifties and counting the time he had left before retirement. He spotted me and smiled. I smiled back until I saw who was following him.

Behind him was Devin Hall, about thirty-five, another homicide detective, who after five years on the job still hadn't quite grasped the mechanics and finesse of detective work. I had a long-standing beef

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with her. She'd been protected by higher-ups and was an opportunist, a test-taker who had landed in her place by circumstance and open doors. Nowadays, a woman could go farther and faster in the Boston Police Department, and she took advantage of every quota and criteria job there was. Her coldness took away whatever beauty she possessed. Too bad she was such a bitch, because she was a good-looking lady cop. She stopped Tommy, and they began to talk.

"Hey, Tommy," I called to grab his attention.

He looked over his shoulder. "Christ's sakes, you show up everywhere. We wake you up?" he asked as he gestured toward my building.

"It was the flashing lights, Tommy. What do you got?" I asked.

"That's our concern, Rossi," Devin Hall snapped back.

Tommy rolled his eyes at me. He had to tolerate her.

"I see you brought the apprentice with you, Tommy," I smiled back.

Hall wasn't in the mood to trade insults. She just walked past us and headed for the crime scene van. She wore snug fitting slacks and a short leather jacket that showed off her *ass*-ets well. She was uncomfortable in this man's profession and always had her guard up. She seemed to have no use for men; at least she had no use for me.

"That time of the month?" I asked Tommy.

"Hmmp! It's always that time with her. She wouldn't smile if she had nine inches in her."

"Let me know if I can be of service."

He laughed as he sized me up. "Yeah, I'll tell her," Tommy said. He noticed Katie Conners in the distance and perked up. "Who's the new girl?" he inquired while licking his chops.

"She's looking for some news. You might do," I told him as I led him toward her and Channel 4's satellite truck.

She spotted us approaching her but didn't react much. Women who look like her don't have to.

"Katie Conners, this is detective Tommy Benitez. He's the guy you should direct your questions to."

"Nice to meet you, Katie," he said sticking out his hand.

"Hello, detective," she said shaking his hand. She seemed to appreciate the polite introduction. "Would you mind giving me an on air interview?" she asked with bright, hopeful eyes.

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Tommy wasn't a camera person, and I could see him start to squirm. He looked around for help.

I grabbed the coffee pot and poured him a cup. "Coffee, Tommy?" I asked while handing him the cup, knowing that like all cops he never refused a free cup of coffee.

He reached for it as if it was a life preserver. He was safe for the moment. "Thanks, Jake. This from your place?"

"Yeah, all the comforts of home." I handed him a cookie, and he started munching on it.

"He's got good food in there. I mean it. Listen, Katie. I'm not too good with the cameras rolling," he said apologetically, while crunching the cookie in his mouth. "I'll get you our spokesperson, and you can interview her."

"Okay. Thanks, I really appreciate it," she said.

As Tommy walked away she perked up and wandered off looking for her producer and cameraman. I got the feeling I didn't leave the impression I wanted to, even with the coffee and introduction.

Devin Hall was approaching. Maybe she smelled the free coffee. "Joining the news crew, Rossi?" she barked out.

"Don't like the hours."

She stopped in front of us.

"Don't tell me? You're the spokesperson?" I asked surprised.

She gave me a blank stare as if I was insulting her, and then smiled indignantly.

"Shouldn't a spokesperson know what she's talking about?" I asked.

"You're still an asshole, Rossi," she said, unfazed by the insult.

"Help yourself to some coffee. You're used to helping yourself, aren't you, detective?" I smiled back just as indignant, as Katie returned with her cameraman.

The four of us stood there in an awkward silence until I reluctantly introduced Hall to Katie. They seemed to hit it off well. Katie began asking Hall newsworthy questions, and Hall seemed to be answering them, leaving me in the cold. I looked around for Tommy but couldn't find him. I figured it was a good time to leave, so I turned to Katie Connors. "Could you make sure the tray gets back to the restaurant?"

She nodded courteously, still preoccupied, talking to Devin Hall.

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"Just leave it outside the door. Goodnight," I said meekly, and retreated from the two engaged women.

As I walked home the drizzle started falling. I couldn't have felt more invisible.



It was 3:30 in the morning and I was wide-awake. I looked out from my window at the active crime scene below. They'd be there past daylight. Guess I can listen to some Sinatra for a few hours. I set my stereo up to handle six LP's. Yeah, I still played records. To me, there was no replacing the Hi-Fi sound of my console stereo. When you listen to Sinatra on a cold and drizzly April morning, you can turn to mush real fast. You put yourself into every song, into every situation. I was mercifully lulled back to sleep.

2 What a Difference a Day Makes

SATURDAY

I woke up to the grinding sounds of the newspaper trucks delivering to Bo's newsstand. The heavy metal grate grinded upward as I looked out my apartment window. There was Bo back to work, ready to put in another twelve-hour day. On Saturdays Bo slept in and opened up an hour later. It was 7:00 a.m., and believe it or not, the sun was rising.

Across the street a few uniformed cops were still in place keeping passersby away from the crime scene. A couple of news trucks remained ready to spout the same news they had given a few hours ago. They'll play this up, repeating the same stuff over and over until something breaks or they just get bored with the story, which is what usually happens. Murder isn't such big news anymore. I put the coffee pot on the stove and turned on the gas.

I picked up the *Ring* magazine I bought from Bo and started to read. An article on up and coming middleweights caught my eye. Jimmy Mason, a local kid who lived a few blocks away, and grandson to my very best friend, Eddie Mason, was featured as someone to watch. Jimmy was nineteen years old and had just finished a sparkling ama-

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teur career, winning the Golden Gloves and the AAU nationals. He had won his first five pro fights by knocking out all of his opponents, and then suffered a surprising loss when he was unable to continue in his last fight due to some sort of cramping halfway through the bout.

I used to help Eddie Mason run the South End Boxing Club, and I was close to Jimmy, though as he got older he spent more time with his friends, like most teenagers. Eddie was a solid man who was in his early eighties but looked like he was sixty. He was a musician, a tenor sax player, and had played with all the big ones: Ellington, Bassie, Ella -- yeah, Eddie had swung with them all. A fellow Navy man who saw heavy action in the Pacific during World War 2, he had earned everything he ever got in life and had faced the prejudice that comes with being black. One place he knew that color didn't matter was in the ring and he proved it many times as the Navy's welterweight champion from 1947 through 1949. He had the opportunity to turn pro but soon realized it was too corrupt for his blood. Besides, music was his true love, and the sax didn't punch back. He was a shrewd man who had done well and socked his money away. A confirmed bachelor, he occupied a nice six-room, two-level apartment in a big brownstone that he owned, and had seven rents coming in each month. Eddie was a fancy dresser and meticulous, from his two hundred dollar shoes to his shiny bald head and designer glasses. He drove a gorgeous Cadillac and always sported a younger lady with him, frequently eating at Tony's, though his companion of choice was Muriel Harting, a well kept neighborhood woman whom Eddie really connected with.

I hadn't seen Jimmy's sixth fight this past February. It was a snowy day and the drive to Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut seemed too formidable a task, so I stayed in hibernation mode, safely tucked away in the corner at Tony's bar. I was surprised to hear how he lost, since his conditioning had always been his strength, and cramping is not a common ailment for a young boxer.

Eddie had raised Jimmy since the age of five, when Eddie's only niece had been killed in an auto accident. Jimmy never had a father, so Eddie became his guardian and took on the roles of both father and grandfather with devotion and pride. When Jimmy turned ten and wanted to become a fighter, Eddie tried to dissuade him. But the kid was a natural, and Eddie realized he couldn't stop him from pursuing his dream.

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Jimmy was a talented fighter, but since his high school days he had become a handful for Eddie. Typical for the area, the high schools were breeding grounds for trouble; there were gangs and punks, drugs and guns, and a lot of wasted lives, so Eddie had Jimmy attend Cathedral High School, where discipline and a no-nonsense teaching approach were practiced. There were kids who wanted to be around Jimmy -- good and bad ones. He was someone who was going to be something, and Eddie did his best to protect him.

Jimmy was safe at school and in the gym, where Eddie tried to keep him as much as he could. Jimmy had grown cocky and a bit disrespectful as he entered his last year of high school, and Eddie had asked me to talk to the kid on past occasions. Whenever I did, he seemed to listen, realizing how wonderful a man his grandfather was. I even helped get an assault charge dismissed through a friend I had at the juvenile court. Jimmy was no juvenile now. He was a young man with the possibility of a promising future if he played his cards right.

The article spouted the same, dismissing his only loss as a fluke. But fluke or not, I knew that he could end up on the scrap heap where so many of these up and comers would land. It didn't mention what I had been hearing through the grapevine -- that Jimmy had been hanging with the Rox Boys, a gang that got its name from Roxbury, which bordered the South End and was a trouble spot in Boston, and where nightly drive-by gang shootings and murders were commonplace. Kids drift in all directions no matter what you tell them, and the way today's society is drifting, it's a wonder if anyone can come out on top.

My coffee had perked for eight minutes and was done. It smelled good as I poured it into an oversized mug. I was well rested but still needed to wake up.

I turned on the TV and watched the news. Katie Conners looked wonderful. They were showing her report on Channel 4, just as I told her. She was probably watching it right now in the studio with a big smile on her face. None of the channels seemed to have anything more to add to the story, so I shut the tube off and went over to the window again.

There was a little more movement going on, and the news teams began to scramble to get ready to broadcast. Two black and whites and two detective cars pulled up. Devin Hall, who was now at the tail

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end of her shift, pulled up in her unmarked car and began to talk to Joe Habberty, a stand up guy and crack reporter from Channel 5 who's funneled me tips on a few occasions. They walked under the yellow tape, and cameramen were setting up quickly, so I turned the TV back on to Channel 5 and watched Joe start his spiel.

"Thank you, Tom. Detectives are back on the scene searching the area for whatever clues they might find to help them make an arrest. Darkness and rain hindered their search last night, and they're hoping that with the daylight they may have better luck. Witnesses say that they saw a group of young men hanging on this corner of Columbus Avenue and West Newton Street late last night. Police are asking anyone with any information to contact them. The identification of the body has yet to be released pending notification of family. This is Joe Habberty reporting live for Channel 5 news. Back to you, Tom."

Not much more than what I already knew. I think Katie Conners had beaten him to the story.



With the sun shining as bright as my new sneakers, I knew it was time to begin my quest to get back into shape. I was supposed to start in January. I put on my gray sweatshirt and baggy sweatpants and started for the South End Boxing Club. I hadn't been there in about a year. It didn't open until noon officially, but a few of us had our own keys so we could drop in anytime. It was about a half-mile away and a good warm up jog for me.

I headed downstairs, waved to Bo, and started my run. I looked in Tony's doorway as I trotted past and spotted the tray and coffee pot placed neatly by the door. Across the street, a couple of news trucks and crews sat patiently waiting for action. The streets were still wet from the night's drizzle, so I was careful not to step in any puddles with my new sneakers as I started my jog.



It took me about five minutes to get to the gym, which led me to believe I wasn't too badly out of shape. I felt a little pain in my side, my shoulders, and lower back, but at least the sneakers felt good on my feet. I walked the last block and turned into the alleyway that led to the door of the gym. It was a real boxing gym location. Trash barrels lined

the alley, and three blue BFI dumpsters held the slop from the restaurants whose back doors bordered the alley. I could smell onions from the pizza joint as soon as I turned into the alley. Imbedded into the red bricks, the smell had been there for at least ten years, and who knows how long before that.

I stuck my key in and turned the deadbolt. It made the same heavy click it always had. I opened the creaky metal door and instinctively reached to my left to flip on the switch for the fluorescent lights as I had done hundreds of times before. The fluorescents started to buzz and flicker, taking about thirty seconds to finally turn on. It was cold in here, but it felt like home and I'd been away too long. It was an old Police Athletic League gym. We called it the PAL for short, and it was once connected by a basement tunnel to the firehouse that sat on the opposite side of the block. They had cinder-blocked the tunnel entrance for security reasons, but if you were standing by the old tunnel when the fire trucks got a call you could still hear the muffled siren sounds and feel the vibrations of the trucks rolling out. There were plenty of firemen and police who used the gym regularly and volunteered with the kids trying to steer them straight. That may have been the saving grace, and why developers hadn't been able to gobble this building up. The old stereo was in the corner next to the office. It was so old it even had an 8-track player which got used when some disco music was needed to pump up the place. I turned it on and switched it to WILD, a local black AM station that I had listened to since I was a teenager. No crap rap, no rock, but nice slow jams and jazz: music I understood.

I started on the rowing machine to loosen up my arms and shoulders. I felt it all in my lower back. I lasted five minutes. Skipping rope was next. I set the rounds clock and skipped for three minutes then rested for one. Three rounds were all I was ready for. I was starting to really sweat now. I hit the sit-up boards and started crunches, twists, and hyperextensions. My abs were screaming, but I couldn't hear them because a slight layer of winter fat had muffled their cries. I wrapped my hands, put on the bag gloves and started slamming the fifty-pound canvas heavy bag, again with the rounds clock. I felt jolts of pain shooting through my shoulders with each thud of my fist crashing into the swinging bag. The chains that held it creaked slowly

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between punches. I lasted just two rounds and felt it everywhere. Forty-seven years old was tough even if you kept yourself in fairly decent shape. I may have been just five pounds over my best weight but my body was in shambles. I finished with three rounds on the speed bag and was dripping wet when I stopped. It felt good. It was 9 o'clock.

My jog home turned into more of a walk about halfway back. After all, I didn't want to overdo it, right?



Funny how quickly things dry up. In only a few hours, the sun had cleared a week's worth of rain, and for the first time I felt spring was close by. As I approached my building, I noticed that the activities from the crime scene had slowed down. Two black and whites sat empty; a few cops were drinking coffee by the yellow tape, and the TV trucks were gone. Bo was sitting alone at his newsstand reading a paper. He had already handled his morning rush, and business would pick up for him again at lunch time.

The restaurant was just starting to wake up. The tray was gone. I looked in through the glass and saw Squints, busy getting ready for the day with a couple of his kitchen helpers. Tony usually showed up around 11 o'clock and worked a twelve-hour day.

"Jake!" Bo hollered over as I was turning into my doorway.

His tone stopped me as I held my door. I looked back, and Bo was waving for me.

I walked over and saw Bo's serious face -- the face he had when he was about to give me some information. "What's up?" I asked.

"Eddie Mason was looking for you."

"What he want?"

"Didn't say, but he looked a little worried."

"Worried? Eddie?" I had known him a long time and could count the number of times Eddie was ever worried on one hand. "Thanks, Bo," I said as I headed up to my apartment.

My answering machine was blinking, and I played the message. "Hey Jake, it's Eddie. I gotta talk to you real fast. Call me, I'll be home." Eddie's voice was deep, slow, and raspy, as usual. But this message also sounded solemn.



I showered quickly, and rather than calling, I walked over to Eddie's house. I hadn't seen him for a few days, and judging by his message we would be facing each other soon anyway.

The temperature had hit sixty, and the morning workout had gotten my blood flowing again. People were out and about on this bright Saturday morning. It was a short walk along the old, uneven brick sidewalks of the South End to Eddie's house.

I rang the bell, and Eddie came to the door with a serious look on his face. He didn't say a word as I followed him into his kitchen and sat down. He was unusually quiet, so I observed him for a while. He wasn't making eye contact with me. He stared blankly at the walls.

"Your message sounded serious, Eddie."

He looked at me and let out a deep breath while remaining silent.

"C'mon, what is it?"

He paused again and then looked at me with his droopy eyes while whispering the name. "Jimmy."

As soon as he said it, more like halfway before he was finished whispering it, I felt a lump in my stomach. Jimmy was dead. He was the kid who got it last night. I was silent for a while and then whispered back ... "Jimmy's dead?" I asked hoping for a different answer.

Eddie looked at me and shook his head, 'no.' Then he started to cry. "They think Jimmy did it," he said as he choked back his tears. "Jimmy's no killer, Jake."

There was a second of reprieve, and then the lump in my stomach returned. "They arrest him?"

"No, they came by looking for him early this morning. Some anonymous tip. They looked the place over. Took his computer ... a few papers from his room."

"They have a warrant?" I asked.

Eddie nodded, 'yes.' "A search warrant."

"A warrant on a tip? This fast?" It didn't sit well with me. The murder was less than ten hours old, and they had a suspect already. "What did they ask you?"

"If I knew where he was. I told them I didn't."

"Where is he?"

Eddie shrugged his shoulders and threw his hands in the air. "I

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don't know. He didn't come home last night. He ain't answering his cell phone."

Eddie was vulnerable, and I didn't want to say the obvious. Why would Jimmy disappear after a murder if he had nothing to do with it? It didn't look good, but I couldn't tell Eddie what he already knew. I had to pretend that I knew Jimmy was innocent, even though I knew he was associating with street punks and this is the sort of thing street punks get themselves into.

"Who got killed?" I asked calmly.

"Lavar White," he answered gravely.

Lavar White was not white. He was black and a serious gang member of the Pan Man Klan, another wonderful group of disenfranchised youths from nearby Mattapan, which bordered Roxbury. Their sometimes friends and sometimes foes were the Rox Boys, whom Jimmy just happened to be chummy with. I knew Lavar from the gym. He wasn't a bad kid until he got to high school and ganged up. He wasn't a bad fighter, either. A lot of kids are good and have potential. Only a few stick around to play it out. I knew just from what Eddie had told me that trouble was starting to brew and that Jimmy was in the center of the web. Either way, Jimmy was in for it. If he did it and the cops grabbed him, he'd go to jail for twenty to life; if the Pan Man Klan got him first, he'd be dead on the spot, and if he was innocent and had nothing to do with it, the Pan Man Klan wouldn't believe it and would kill him anyway. What was definite was that there would be a war between the gangs unless Jimmy was found fast.

"When did you see him last?"

"He trained last night ... if you could call it that," he said critically.

"What do you mean?"

Eddie hesitated. "Since his last fight, the one he lost, he hasn't been the same."

"Maybe he's had the loss on his mind. You know what that does to a fighter."

"Maybe."

"What time did he leave the gym?"

"About eight o'clock," Eddie answered.

"Who'd he leave with?"

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Eddie shook his head helplessly. "I didn't see him leave. I went out back to help Sammy fix the steam room." He just stared at me as if I had an answer for him.

I thought about Sammy. He was close to Jimmy and had always been his second in the corner when Jimmy fought. "Talk to Sammy, yet?"

Eddie shook his head, 'no.'

"Who's he hanging with now?" I asked, without letting Eddie know that I might know more than he did about Jimmy's new friends.

"You know Jimmy. He's been a loner all his life. Since his mother died, he never trusted anyone."

I'd known Jimmy for fourteen years and could only name a few of his friends off the top of my head. "I've heard some things, Eddie."

Eddie knew what I was getting at. "You mean about his hanging around with the Rox Boys?"

I nodded back to him. "Yeah."

"I never saw him with any one of them, so I really can't say. I asked him about it and he told me that he only talked to them. That he wasn't stupid, wasn't joining a gang. Told me not to worry; that they liked knowing him because he was going to be a champ. What do we do?" Eddie asked weakly.

I hated to see such a strong man in this situation. "Eddie. I think the first thing you gotta do is get out of this apartment. These animals will kill you if they can't find Jimmy. The cops can't protect you."

"I don't need nobody protecting me," he replied proudly. Eddie walked over to his first floor bedroom and came out holding a 9mm Glock. "It's licensed, and I got a permit to carry. I ain't going nowhere," he said defiantly. "I've seen plenty of death in my times. In the Pacific, those Japs were charging me with guns and bayonets; it didn't scare me then, and it don't scare me now."

"Let's not go crazy here," I calmly said. I knew Eddie was serious. "Who'd you talk to? Which detectives came here?"

He took a card out of his shirt pocket and slid it across the table. It was the card of detective Devin Hall.

"Great," I said sarcastically.

"You know her?" Eddie asked hopefully.

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"Not in a good way, but I'll talk to her. See what this tip is all about. They haven't charged him, so he's not their guy yet. The cops are the least of his problems," I said. "I got Jimmy's cell phone number; maybe I can get in touch with him. Only call me on your cell phone. They're gonna tap your lines to try to find Jimmy, and they're gonna be watching the house. You have to be extra cautious now."

He nodded back to me.

"One other thing. Does Jimmy have any money in the bank, any cash around?"

"No, he spent every nickel he ever came across. More so lately. Always told me not to worry about having money, that he was gonna make it big."

He was making it big, all right. I kept Eddie company for another half-hour and then left his building carefully, looking around for any police or gang ruffraff. I didn't spot any. The jump in my steps I had on the walk over had disappeared.



It was around noon when I got back to my building. The crime scene had been abandoned, and the sidewalk was opened back up. The cops and their yellow tape were gone, and the street's traffic was flowing both ways again. I noticed the downspout had been fixed. The restaurant was open, and with the sun shining, Tony had put out the wrought iron tables and chairs on the sidewalks for customers who wanted to catch some rays.

Bo saw me and waved me over. "So what was it with Eddie?" he asked, sensing something.

"Bad. Cops say an anonymous tip placed Jimmy at the scene. Devin Hall went calling on Eddie this morning looking for Jimmy, only Jimmy wasn't there. They had a search warrant. Took his computer. He never came home last night."

"That don't look good."

"They think he's the shooter."

"You're shitting me. Who bought it?"

"Remember Lavar White?"

"Of course. He used to fight AAU."

"He's the victim. He's with the Pan Man Klan, and Jimmy's with the Rox Boys. See what I'm getting at?"

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Bo nodded. Being on the streets for all these years dealing with news gave him lots of insight. "Jimmy's in trouble no matter who grabs him first," Bo said, matter-of-factly.

"Keep your eyes and ears open," I warned him.

He nodded again. "What about Eddie?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "You know him. He pulled out his 9mm and made it real clear he ain't gonna take any shit from teenage punks if they come calling."

Bo smirked as I walked away and hustled up the stairs to my office.



Devin Hall wasn't at the station when I called, so I dialed her cell phone number. She was just as much a bitch on the phone as she was in person. She told me to back off, and warned that if I interfered with her investigation, she'd arrest me.

My next call was to Tommy Benitez. He was at home and sleeping when I rang him. After a tirade of a few choice four-letter words, he told me to call him later that night, adding that he wasn't working the case, and that Hall was the lead detective and was the person to call. I thanked him for his advice and told him I'd see him later. I tried Jimmy's cell phone from mine, and it went directly to his voice mail without ringing.

"Jimmy, this is Jake. If you need to call me, I'm here."



I was sipping a decaf at Tony's bar when Tommy tapped me on the shoulder and sat on a stool next to me.

He looked over the crowded dining room while nodding his little bald head. "Place is doing good, huh?" he asked confidently. "I'm happy for you guys. You and Tony." He looked at me for a few seconds. "Why don't you just become a cook or something? Why you gotta snoop around all the time?"

I laughed. "This one is personal," I said. "You eat?"

Tommy shook his head and patted his belly. "You know me and my fast metabolism."

"Tony, can you get us some calamari?" I asked, watching him streak across the floor heading towards the kitchen.

He waved back, signaling that he got the order.

"They're looking for the kid. If you or his grandfather knows where he is, you gotta get him to us," Tommy said bluntly.

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Tommy knew how close I was with Eddie and Jimmy. He also figured that I might know where he was hiding.

"I went to Eddie's this morning. The kid never came home," I told him. "What do you got on him?"

Tommy took a deep breath and gave me an unconvincing performance. "This is unofficial. A phantom gave us a tip that he was there."

"And did this phantom mention anyone else's name?" I asked.

"No," Tommy answered.

"C'mon, Tommy. That tip is bogus, and you know it. If someone knew he was there, they knew who else was there."

"Maybe he was the shooter, and the tipster doesn't want anyone else named," Tommy answered back.

"Or maybe the tipster's the shooter and is trying to frame someone," I replied.

"Well, with the circumstances being what they are, you gotta admit that Jimmy must've been there. If he wasn't there, he wouldn't be missing, right?"

"That, I give you. You guys pick up anything?" I asked.

"Funny you should ask." Tommy pointed to the TV above the bar. "Here's your answer."

I looked up at the TV and saw Katie Conners.

"This is Katie Conners reporting live from Boston Police Headquarters where we have just been told by lead detective Devin Hall that an arrest warrant has been issued for nineteen-year-old Jimmy Mason, a South End resident who disappeared shortly after three o'clock this morning following the shooting death of twenty-year-old Lavar White on Columbus Avenue. Mason is a recently turned professional fighter and is said to have a promising future in the ring. He is also believed to be an associate of the Rox Boys, a gang with roots in Roxbury. White was a native of Mattapan and a known member of the Pan Man Klan, a notorious gang that is suspected of many gang killings and is purported to control the drug traffic in the areas of Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and Dorchester. Area police are bracing themselves for what could potentially erupt into a dangerous gang war. This is Katie Conners, Channel 4 news."

Tommy looked seriously at me. "There's your story."

I felt a lump in my stomach, the kind you feel when you know you're helpless.

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Tony snuck behind the bar and slid the calamari in front of me. I slid it in front of Tommy.

"Ain't you gonna eat?" Tommy asked.

"I lost my appetite."

"Getting soft, Jake." Tommy started digging in. "This stuff is delicious."

I watched him for a few moments. "They couldn't have issued the warrant on just an anonymous tip. Am I right, Tommy?"

Tommy looked at me as if to say I was right.

"What else they got?"

"They found three .32 caliber casings, and this part you didn't hear from me ... his wallet at the scene."

"His wallet?"

"You didn't get that from me," Tommy repeated.

"Who leaves his wallet at a murder scene?"

Tommy shrugged. "Nobody on purpose. There might have been a struggle, a fight, the wallet falls out of his pocket, it's dark out, he doesn't see it. Who knows?"

"How many bullets hit Lavar White?"

"Two slugs in him."

"Where'd the third go?"

Tommy shrugged again. "Who knows?"

"Did they find anyone else's blood?"

"Lavar had B-positive, and that's all they found so far. He didn't bleed that much. He was dead instantly, and he had a heavy coat on top of a sweatshirt and another shirt. You know how they dress. Tell you the truth, there wasn't hardly any blood on the ground. He fell on his back. You know how long the blood tests can take."

"Thanks, Tommy. Enjoy the calamari," I said as I got off my stool.

"Where're you going?" Tommy asked with his mouth full.

"Snooping."

"Hey. Be careful. Both those gangs are animals," Tommy cautioned me while waving his fork with a hunk of tentacles attached to it.

"They're just misguided kids. A few hours of counseling, some hugs and love is all they really need."

Tommy's face was deadpan. "That's not funny."

"If I get into trouble, I'll call you."

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"No thanks," Tommy replied seriously. He reached for the marinara sauce, doused the calamari with it, and continued polishing it off.



I walked out through the kitchen exit and headed for the back alley. When I first looked into buying this building, I loved the fact that in this landscape of concrete and brick there was a two-car garage with a back yard that went along with it. The yard wasn't big; just forty by forty, but it had green grass in the summer and a decent-sized red maple sitting in the middle of it. I kept my 1970 Buick Electra convertible warm and secure in the garage. It was black, with red interior and a gray rag top. It had real chrome bumpers and trim. I loved driving it, even though it saw limited use. It started like a charm, and I rolled slowly out of the alley turning left on Columbus Avenue and headed for the gym.



An unmarked cop car was parked a block away, keeping an eye on the gym's alley entrance. It was a place they figured Jimmy might return to. They were wasting their resources; cops worked out at the gym.

I turned into the alley and spotted Tiger Kelley, a homeless, ex-pug who always would come around for a handout when the gym was busy at night, knowing it would increase his chances of getting some donations. Every time I saw him, it always surprised me that he was still alive. A couple of fighters who were leaving had given him some change. He was waiting for me to add to the score. I approached and waited for his famous line.

"Hey pal, can you spare an ex-champ a dollar or two?" Tiger recited the line as sentimentally as he could, as if he was in front of a motion picture camera shooting a 1950's melodrama.

He made the words dance as they came out of his mouth. When he said it, he sounded as though he really was a champ. His performance convinced me to the tune of five bucks. "Make sure you get something to eat with this," I advised him.

He plucked the dough out of my hands, smiled his nearly toothless grin, winked at me, and he was off. The finnik must've put him over the top, and he had no intention on eating.



The gym sounded like a giant machine factory, turning and grinding, using sweat as its fuel. About thirty fighters of all levels were training furiously. Hard to believe this was the same place I was in earlier! The first nice day of the year, as it had done to me, usually woke fighters up, and a mass exodus to the gyms was the result. I could smell that gym perfume, a mix of sweat, Vaseline, and Ben-Gay. Heavy bags were thumping, and the speed bags sounded like machine guns; rat, tat, tat, tat, tat, tat ... Two heavyweights were sparring, and both were gasping for breath as they did a slow dance in the center of the ring, despite the motivational screams of their trainers. A few lightweights were shadow boxing in the mirrors while rope skippers were doing their best Ali imitations; each skipper trying to outpace and out-fancy footwork the other. The New England Golden Gloves was in a month, and it was time to get serious. I walked past the ring, saying hello to the faces I recognized, and headed for the office which was located in the back corner of the gym.

Eddie was in there with Sammy. They were just sitting quietly when I walked in. Sammy gave me a weak nod. Eddie sat behind his old wooden desk in the old leather chair I had once used in my office. Sammy was sitting on an old wooden teacher's chair in front of the desk, with his familiar white towel draped over the back of his neck. The office was sparse, with a couple of additional chairs, a gray metal four-drawer file cabinet, and a full-sized refrigerator that held lots of ice in the freezer for when the action got too rough. A beat up pay phone served as the gym's phone. It had been there for twenty years and actually saw plenty of action before the world went cell phone crazy. The walls were made of cinder block, painted an ugly beige, and were covered with fight posters from as far back as the eighties.

"Hey, Sammy."

He nodded back. "Long time no see, Jake. How are you?"

"Okay, under the circumstances."

"Yeah, I know." Sammy looked at Eddie, then at me. "You want me to leave?" he asked politely.

Sammy Terrosian was as much a part of this gym as the ring was. He was at least fifty years old and about fifty pounds overweight. He

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never married, and lived with his mother in their three-family home in the South End. He was shy and unsure of himself, but had found his niche at the gym. It was all he had. He helped manage the gym with Eddie, and was used as a corner man by many of the fighters. He was always in Jimmy's corner. Sammy had worked as a postman as soon as he got out of high school, and after thirty-plus years of delivering mail, he took his retirement. He spent every bit of his spare time at the gym.

"Sammy, did you see Jimmy leave with anyone last night?" I asked.

"No."

"What time did you lock up?"

"It cleared out about nine; that's when Eddie left, and I did some cleaning up. It was just before nine-thirty," Sammy said carefully, trying his best to get it right.

"Who left after eight?" I asked.

"Jees, I don't know. Let's see. Rocco and his cousin Stevie were here. Joey Finnegan, Clyde Williams, and Willie Crenshaw were sparring up until nine. I gotta think some more." Sammy squinted as if trying to squeeze additional information out of his head.

He was easy to stress out, so I let him off the hook. "Thanks, Sammy. If you think of anything else, let me know."

"Absolutely."

"You mind if I talk to Eddie now?"

Sammy got up quickly. "Sure thing."

I grabbed him by the shoulder as he walked past me. "Sammy, you don't know anything, *capisce?*"

"Sure. Sure thing, Jake. I know Jimmy didn't do it. I'm sick over this. And with his career taking off the way it was ..." Sammy looked back at Eddie, feeling he may have said the wrong thing, and left the office quietly.

I sat down across from Eddie. "They found Jimmy's wallet at the crime scene."

Eddie looked at me with disbelief, then he sank deeper into his chair.

"That only places him there. Doesn't mean he killed anybody," I said, trying to keep Eddie's hope alive.

"That damn fool!" Eddie blurted out, loudly enough for a few of the fighters training by the office to hear and look in.

Patrick Coppola

I went to the door and closed it. "They also found three .32 caliber shells."

Eddie's eyes bulged slightly.

"Does he have a gun?" I asked calmly.

Eddie paused, as if more wind had been taken out of him. When you've been a snoop for a while, you get that ability to read people, and I was reading that Eddie was feeling sick.

"Jake, I got another gun at home; a .32 automatic. It's from the war and it ain't registered. I've had it hidden in the basement for thirty years."

Even with all the gun control laws, it wasn't uncommon for people to keep an old, unregistered gun in the house, especially World War 2 veterans, so I couldn't get down on Eddie. Call it mistrust of the government or defiance of the law.

"You better go home and check if it's still there."

He got up and left the gym in a hurry as I looked for Rocco and Stevie DeLuca. It was easy to spot them once I focused my attention across the busy gym floor: two hulking heavyweights who loved to beat on the hundred-pound, black-leather heavy bags that swung from extra thick chains latched onto the thick oak beams in the exposed ceiling. They were in their glory, both pulverizing the two heavy bags that were stationed in the corner of the gym. As I got closer to them I could feel the power in their mighty hands. The bags jumped when they were hit the way their last few opponents had. They were in their early twenties and both weighed about two fifty. I had hired the cousins a couple of times as bodyguards for select clients who would call me for that type of service. If these two weren't fighters, they'd be hit men. Both of them had turned pro about the same time and had finished off a half-dozen victims in less than a year. They always fought on the same card, trying to create some hype. They were building up their records with stiffes on the quest to a big payday. Soon they would be moving out of the New England fight market and would have to start searching for a few old pugs that had at one time shown some promise. That's the way it's done, until you actually secure a fight with a fading name who gives you some credibility, thus a chance to be ranked and opportunity for the dough. They were managed by Muzzy Colella, an ex-light heavyweight who had won a bronze medal in the '76 Olympics. Muzzy was carefully

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watching over them both as I approached, catching his eye.

"Hey, Jake!" Muzzy yelled.

"Hi, Muz," I said as I extended my hand. He grabbed it with both his giant, battered hands. His grip was like an alligator's, and I knew it before I stuck my hand out, so I gave him a good, strong handshake which he appreciated.

"What do you think of these two?" he asked proudly.

"Keep them in line, and you should hit the big time in three years," I said.

He looked at me and smiled. "Two years! Hey, what about Jimmy, huh? All that potential ... and poor Eddie," he said sympathetically while looking over toward Eddie's vacant office.

"Did you see him leave last night?" I asked.

"I left about eight. He was still here." His eyes swept back at the DeLucas. "C'mon, thirty seconds left! Lazy bastards!" He smiled back at me. "I love breaking their balls." He watched them closely and still wasn't satisfied. "Bang it! Don't tap it!"

This time they listened. The bags started to dance again, and the DeLucas started to add grunts and sound effects to their barrage on the leather.

"Jimmy hasn't been training as hard, lately. Seemed to be going through the motions. It's bad when a fighter with that kind of talent does that," Muzzy said, never taking his eyes off his boys.

I took a long look at the DeLucas pounding the bags. They seemed to be trying to split the bags in half with each thunderous blow.

"Time!" Muzzy barked out after checking his stopwatch. "They did an extra thirty seconds," he said whispering to me and laughing that he had tricked them.

And just like that the bags and the thumping sounds stopped. Muzzy walked away to tend to some other fighters as I walked over to the DeLucas, who were breathing heavily and tearing off their worn bag gloves.

"Looking good, boys."

Rocco looked up at me and smiled. "Haven't seen you in here in a while. You training again?"

"I was here this morning. Listen, you guys left late last night. Did you see Jimmy Mason leave?"

Stevie yanked his glove off with his mouth. "Yeah, I saw him. He left with a couple of slick moulies."

Patrick Coppola

"Guys from here?" I asked.

"No. These guys were like foreigners or something -- black as the ace of spades. Maybe twenty years old. They talked like they was like, you know, Jamaican, Haitian, or some kind of that jig bullshit," Stevie said, still trying to catch his breath.

"And they were dressed sharp," Rocco added while wiping sweat from his forehead with his towel.

"Sharp like what?"

"You know, not the typical street nigger's look. One of them had a sport coat, silk shirt, nice shoes," Rocco said as he grabbed his water bottle and doused himself with it. "Ahhhhh!"

"The other one had on one of those, like, Nehru outfits. Like that Benny Hinn, the religious guy on TV," Stevie added. "Oh, and he had on these friggin' fancy gold glasses. They looked fake they was so tacky."

"They drive, they walk, what?" I asked

Rocco shrugged. "We hit the showers. I don't know how he left."

"The one with the glasses must've had a whole bottle of cologne on. When he walked by me I thought I was sniffing a smelling salts capsule."

"Thanks, guys. Keep up the good work."

They headed for the locker room, and I headed for the door. Sammy was back in the office sitting behind the desk reading a fight magazine as I passed by. "Sammy, Eddie won't be back tonight. Lock up."

Sammy looked up and smiled back. "Sure thing, Jake. Tell Eddie to hang in there."

I nodded and turned to leave.

"Jake?" he called out stopping me. "Come in ... close the door."

I did and stood across from Sammy. "What is it?"

"You know how I feel about Jimmy. I didn't want to say anything in front of Eddie, but Jimmy's been fading the last couple of months," he said with grave concern.

"Since the loss?" I asked, knowing fully that when a young fighter loses for the first time, his confidence is thoroughly tested.

He shook his head. "Before the loss," he said awkwardly.

I sat down. "I'm listening."

Sammy squirmed a bit and closed his magazine. "The cramping -- if there really was any -- wasn't a conditioning issue. If you ask me,

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Jimmy was using drugs."

"What?"

"Now I can't be a hundred percent certain, but he seemed out of it the last couple of weeks before the fight," he said nervously shifting his eyes back and forth the way he always did when upset. "I've trained him all this time."

"I assume we're not talking steroids."

"No."

"Pain pills? Coke? What do you think?"

"Gotta be something like that. He was dragging his ass. He only weighed in at a hundred and fifty-one pounds; that's four pounds lighter than his other fights."

It made sense. If he was hanging with the gang, the drugs were readily available, and they'd love nothing more than to bring Jimmy down to their level. "Misery loves company" isn't just an old saying; it's a way of life in the world of gangs, drug users, and alcoholics. "Does Eddie suspect anything?"

Sammy shook his head. "No ... I didn't want to jump to conclusions and tell Eddie."

"Didn't they test him after the fight?"

"He gave them a piss sample, but you know how easy it is to give them someone else's. They don't hold it for you."

"He ever talk to you about who he was hanging with -- a girlfriend?" I asked.

"No. You know how quiet he was. I wished he would have shared more with me."

"Okay, Sammy. This information is important. I'll ask around, and if Eddie has to know, I'll tell him. It would break his heart if he found out that Jimmy is on drugs. That was the one thing Eddie tried to keep him away from."



Before I got half way through Eddie's front door he immediately informed me that the gun was gone. Jimmy had obviously found it and may have used it.

"I just left it there for all those years. I took it for granted that it was hidden, Jake. There was a little box of bullets with it," he said in a guilty tone.

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"I'm not faulting you, Eddie. The kid's been living here for fifteen years. He probably found it ten years ago. Now he's running with those assholes. He feels he needs it, so he grabs it. Where would he go?"

"I don't know, I don't know," Eddie repeated helplessly.

"Girlfriend?" I asked.

"Couldn't tell you. He's probably running with the gang and a bunch of hoes!" Eddie was frustrated, blaming himself and thinking where he went wrong. He didn't go wrong; Jimmy did.



It was about 8:00 p.m. It had been a long day, and I was exhausted. I parked my car in the garage and sat quietly for a minute. It was good to sit in silence every now and then. But I didn't have time for silence, now. I got out and walked around front to the restaurant.

It was full, and Tony was flying around the place until he spotted me heading for the bar. "Oh, I forgot to give you this," he said handing me a business card. "It was on a tray that was outside our door," he added, looking a little confused.

"I served coffee last night," I told him as I took the card from him.

Tony was too busy to even ask me about it. He just left me with one of his patented perplexed looks.

I looked at the card. It was Katie Conners' business card. She wrote a big 'To Jake' on it, so I'd get both it and a thank-you with a smiley face. Her cell phone number was written across the top. Mmph? Maybe I hadn't lost it after all. Then again, it could just mean, thanks.

Sally Hart was tending bar. She was a doll; a Hollywood Golden Era knockout: blonde, blue eyes and a body that could have been sculpted by Michelangelo. She always looked just right with those snug black pants and white cotton shirt unbuttoned just to the right spot. I kept it professional, though no one who worked at Tony's ever treated me like a boss. I was more like a regular customer. It wasn't that I didn't want to explore the possibilities, but the timing just hadn't felt right. I had to show some tact despite the chemistry we shared.

"How about a nightcap, Sally?" I asked, taking a stool at the bar.

She turned and reached for the bottle and poured me a shot of Chivas. This girl even had great hands. She placed it carefully in front of me with a little white napkin, and hit me with her gorgeous smile. "Long day?" she asked.

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"Yeah, and it's just the start of something big," I said, as I lifted the glass and downed the shot in one gulp.

She went to pour another, but I waved it off. "I think that did the trick." I slid her a five-spot and got up.

"Hey, C'mon Jake. What's this?" she protested, sliding the finif back to me.

"It's a tip, gorgeous. Haven't you ever seen a tip before?"

She gave me a furtive smile and blew me a kiss.



I entered my apartment and was ready for bed. It had been a long Saturday and a long day at the office. Yesterday was just another mundane day of going through the motions, and then I got hit with today. What a difference a day makes. I placed Katie's business card next to my phone.



Just Working On The Story

EDDIE was waiting for me when I stopped my car outside his house. He had changed into a sport jacket and tie, and looked prepared for the worst. He stepped off the sidewalk and came to my door, patting me on the arm and thanking me for coming with him. I just nodded back and watched him as he let out a few deep breaths before getting in.

We drove to the city morgue, located on the corners of Albany Street and Massachusetts Avenue, in total silence. Eddie was praying it wasn't Jimmy, and I was afraid it was, remembering that Sammy had told me that's where Jimmy liked to run. Maybe he went to end it there. Maybe he fell in or jumped while on drugs, or maybe someone dropped him in there.

We pulled into a small parking area that the ambulances and hearses used for pickups and drop offs.

"Let's hope it's not Jimmy," I said.

Eddie thought for a while and looked across to me. "I'm praying."

He didn't want to get out of the car, so I pushed my door open forcing him to follow.

The depressed, four-story building, nicknamed the Southern

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Mortuary, had been in service since its completion in the early 1930's. I had been inside twice in my life, once as a cop in a training class and once while on a case to ID a body. I remember the day when the Medical Examiner, a crusty, old, crazy son of a bitch named Doctor Klug, ripped back the sheet that was covering a badly decayed corpse and grinned as my fellow trainees threw up, passed out, or ran out of the room. He asked me why I wasn't affected, so I told him that this was kid's stuff. He laughed loudly, told me I was crazier than he was, and proceeded to munch on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

We made our way into the poorly lit, ornate marble lobby full of symbols of life and death. The morgue was constructed with an Egyptian-revival theme popularized by the discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1922. Over the main entrance door was a sculpted hourglass, eerily reminding all who entered that life has a time limit. A couple of clearly posted signs led us down the steps where two oversized brass sphinxes stood sentry, guarding the dead. As we descended, the pungent stench of formaldehyde got stronger, hovering over the marble steps like a fog of death. Each step echoed, in the cold gray stairwell, and I could hear Eddie breathing harder. He was preparing himself and gripped the heavy brass stair railings tightly. His breathing was quick and deep, yet still had a calming rhythm to it.

We were met by a police officer and a morgue technician whom I recognized at the entrance to the cold room. They knew who we were, so the introductions were skipped.

"The body's been dead for about a week now. There was no ID on it," the cop said tactfully.

Jimmy had been gone a week. His wallet was found at the scene of Lavar White's murder. We were bracing ourselves.

"Would you gentlemen like a mask?" the technician asked extending two paper masks to us.

We both declined.

"You were in here a few years ago, right Mister Rossi?" the technician asked.

"Yeah."

The technician was about fifty, and had been greeted by death every morning for many years. He was unaffected and walked with a swagger, as if he was entering Fenway Park for the season opener.

He led us down another long, stark hallway lined with cinderblocks painted a dull yellow. As we walked, the chemical smell got thicker, and the air got cooler. He led us into the cold examining room. The technician went around to the covered body and got ready to pull the sheet off, as he had done a thousand times before.

Eddie stopped in his tracks and waited. He looked me in the eye. "You do it, Jake."

Eddie had seen plenty of dead bodies in his days from WW II, but looking at this one was scaring him. Jimmy was his grandson, and the thought that Jimmy was under that starched white sheet froze Eddie.

I nodded to Eddie and noticed that his forehead was perspiring in this room that couldn't have been more than 40 degrees. I sat him down in a chair.

I stepped forward and stood over the sheet. The technician lifted it slowly. The body was bloated and grayish-blue, with some head wounds that it might have gotten from a fall. It was a black male in his twenties and could have resembled Jimmy, but his mouth was open a bit and the teeth were crooked and spaced. Eddie had made sure Jimmy wore braces while a teenager. Jimmy didn't like the braces, but had perfectly straight teeth that he loved to smile with. I looked over at Eddie slumped in the chair and shook my head.

Eddie was relieved. He slowly lifted himself out of the chair and walked over to take a peek. "Kinda looks like him, huh? Poor kid."

I looked at the technician. "It's not Jimmy Mason."

He nodded back and covered the body.

As the cop walked us out, he asked Eddie to sign some papers about identifying the body. Eddie gave him the John Hancock without reading it, and the cop left us at the foot of the stairs and stepped into an office.

Our pace increased as we got closer to the exit doors. We both felt smothered in there, unable to breathe. We passed under the busts of two women who were supposed to bid us a good voyage, like the figureheads carved on a ship.

We burst open the doors and stood outside in the fresh air. It felt good to breathe again after being in that dank building. Eddie had a look of relief on his face for a few moments. Then the reality of Jimmy snuck up on him and his expression changed back to doubt. He began

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to sweat again and looked a bit sick.

"You okay?"

He nodded that he was, but he wasn't. "Now what?" he asked, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Back to work." I said it to keep him going, maybe to get him focused on the job at hand, or maybe just to give an old man some hope. It was looking worse for Jimmy. We both knew it but wouldn't say it. There was no reason to point out the obvious.

Eddie gathered himself. "Where to?"

As he asked, a Channel 4 news truck drove up and stopped. I waited and watched Jerry Rubin pop out, then Katie. What the hell was she doing here, I asked myself, knowing fully well why she was here. She was continuing with her story and wanted Eddie to be part of it.

Eddie stood tall with fire in his eyes. He was pissed off. "Did you tell her we were coming here?"

"She was on the other line when you called me," I said defensively. "I just told her as a matter of fact. I didn't know she'd follow us."

"Keep them away from me," Eddie said, half mad and half disgusted, as he made his way to my car.

I dashed over to Katie and Jerry. A light was already on, and a cameraman was getting ready. "What's going on, Katie?"

"Is it Jimmy Mason?" she asked in a tone that was too much like a reporter, rather than a concerned friend.

"No. What are you doing here?"

She didn't think she was doing anything wrong and smiled at me. "Just working on the story."

It hit me hard now. She was a reporter one hundred percent of the time and would cross any boundary to get her story, and more importantly she was making me look like an asshole. "Look, Katie, you can't stay on this story forever. Other things are happening around town. You can't smother Eddie."

Katie looked embarrassed, but only slightly.

"This was confidential!" I told her loudly.

Jerry Rubin came to her aid. "It's news, and we're just reporting it. The cops kept this quiet. We got the tip, and we went with it."

Rubin struck me as the kid who got picked on in high school.

He had a big job now, so he liked showing people up. His smarmy attitude didn't sit well with me. I wanted to hit him a short jab in his nose, but knew better.

"Tip? I gave you the tip, you little asshole!" I looked back at Katie. "It wasn't supposed to be a tip."

Katie's smile dropped. "Sorry, Jake."

I wasn't sure if she was sincere or just trying to get me to leave. Jerry Rubin acted as though I wasn't there and started telling his cameraman where to set up. I took one last look at Katie and walked away disgusted.

Katie followed me and grabbed my arm. "Jake, I am sorry. After we spoke, I called Jerry to let him know." She looked back at him. "He's really driven; I couldn't stop him."

"He's driven? What about you?"

"He just wanted to get some coverage."

"Coverage? Look, Katie. I like you a lot, but don't get confused with this story. Eddie is one of my best friends, one of a handful of people that I would die for if I had to. If you're putting this story ahead of him or me, then we have a problem."

Katie looked hurt over my ultimatum. "No, I like you a lot, too. The story is second, but it's my work"

"We're ready, Katie," Rubin yelled out in an emotionless tone.

Katie turned to him, then back to me. "Will I see you later?"

I thought about it. "I've gotta work tonight."

She tried kissing me on the cheek, but I backed off and went to my car. When I got in, I felt the anger Eddie was trying to control. She had made me look like a fool. "Sorry, Eddie."

He reached over to me and squeezed my shoulder. "Not your fault. She's one ambitious woman. You sure you want that?"

"You never get what you want," I said philosophically, as I started the car.

He thought about what I had just said. "You ain't kidding. Where to?" Eddie asked.

I looked him in the eye. "You're going home to rest."

He immediately started arguing with me, and he continued trying to convince me that he was feeling fine. He argued with me for most of the ride back.

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I didn't listen, and when I pulled into his driveway, Muriel Harting was waiting by his door, holding a big, silver pot.

"What's she doing here?"

"Looks like she's being neighborly," I said innocently.

Eddie looked at me suspiciously. "You called her."

"Before I picked you up. I didn't know what the night was going to bring us. She came to comfort you. You need to relax and spend a quiet evening with someone. Who better than Muriel?"

Eddie got out of the car slowly and waved sheepishly to Muriel. She was a good-looking black woman who had been a girlfriend of Eddie's for many years. They were good friends and had always been there for each other. She may have been sixty-five but she kept herself in great shape. Her expression was somber.

When Eddie and I got to the door, she gave him a peck on his cheek and Eddie reached out for her and hugged her with one arm as he opened the front door with the other. "It wasn't Jimmy," Eddie said thankfully.

Muriel smiled slightly. "Thanks be to God."

I took the pot from Muriel and handed it to Eddie as he swung the door open. "Put it on a low heat, Eddie."

Eddie took the pot from me, reluctantly. "What is it?"

"Chicken jambalaya, your favorite," Muriel said warmly.

That forced a slight smile out of Eddie as he went into his house, leaving Muriel and me standing on the stoop.

"Thanks for coming over, Muriel. He needs company. Trying to find Jimmy is taking a toll on him."

Muriel hugged my arm. "You know I'll take good care of him, Jake. I've called him several times this week, and he always tells me he's fine. I feel so bad. Gotta go through this at his age."

"Just get him to bed early and don't be too rough with him."

Muriel laughed and blushed, then slapped my arm. "You ..."

"I know how you kids are."

She enjoyed the joking and gave me a final hug, then went inside, closing the door behind her.



It was about 5:00 p.m. when I parked my car and walked into Tony's. I went to the bar and plunked down on the stool. I was

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exhausted. My plan for the evening was to follow the embassy kids. I figured they would be doing something on a Friday night.

Sally came over and put a napkin in front of me. "Looks like you need a Chivas tonight."

"Do I look that bad?"

She was being kind. "Not bad, just wiped out."

"I'll take the Chivas."

She turned, grabbed the bottle, and then poured, all in one fluid motion. I lifted the glass and saluted her.

"How's Eddie?"

"I got Muriel over there watching him. He needs some rest."

"Looks like you do, too."

"We just came back from the city morgue. They thought they had fished Jimmy out of the Charles. It wasn't him."

"Thank God."

"Yeah."

Sally looked concerned. "If you can't make tomorrow, I understand."

"No, I'll be there. What's the weather gonna be?"

"It's supposed to be about sixty in the morning. Finally some spring weather."

"Good. What time you want me there?"

"I get out of here about eleven tonight. How's about nine a.m.? You can meet me at the loop at Spot Pond. Know where that is?"

I nodded. "Nine o'clock." I drank the Chivas. "How many miles is the pond?"

Sally smiled. "Five."

"Oh, God."

"We can walk and jog. I won't put any pressure on you. You can shower at my place, and I'll make you a nice light lunch."

"See you at nine." I got up and walked upstairs. I needed a nap if I was to watch these kids tonight and run the pond tomorrow.



The Lido Club was located in Kenmore Square, close to BU and Fenway Park. Set in the basement of an enormous brownstone office building, the entrance was in an alleyway that ran off of Commonwealth Avenue. The exterior was decorated with neon lights and had a sort of Ricky Ricardo-esque Latin Mocambo theme to it. It was the current

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hot spot for the rich kids of Boston, boasting a twenty-five-dollar cover charge and twelve-dollar martinis. The rich kids who were under twenty-one were able to show their well-forged ID's and enter the club with no problem.

It was 10:30 p.m., and I was driving about fifty feet behind them, following as they drove their big Mercedes with its flapping flags into the alley. They pulled it over near the entrance and got out with a flourish, as though they were at a Hollywood movie premiere. Kwazi Mugabi flipped the keys to a waiting valet, and the rest of them -- Johana, Tomas, and Livingston -- sauntered toward the long line of patrons that waited outside the club. The doormen spotted them as soon as they pulled in and had opened up the stanchions. They would not be waiting in line. Unlike the rabble that waited to get inside, these people were greeted with handshakes and kisses. Kwazi, who was wearing the fancy gold glasses Stevie DeLuca had told me about, slipped the doorman a bill, and they were escorted in.

I figured I might try the same approach, so I pulled my car in. Everyone turned to look at the Electra. After all, it was a classic, and the chrome must have looked good in the rays of the neon lights. I got out and flipped the keys to another valet, then approached the door on the side the line wasn't. The doorman gave me a look over. I was twice as old as anyone in the club, and from the stares I could tell they weren't used to my age set entering. I approached him with the air of someone who belonged there, and he didn't question the situation; he just opened the stanchion and let me in. I was probably his father's age, so he wasn't about to stop me.

"Nice wheels, man," he said as he let me pass.

"Thanks, kid."

I slipped him a twenty and made my way down the neon-lit stairwell and into a lounge area that looked straight out of Havana in the 60's. Sinatra and the Rat Pack would have loved the place; it had class. This was a bit of a buffer zone before you headed into the main room, where the pounding Latin music and crazy lights were. The booths that bordered the teak walls were full of well-dressed rich kids. This wasn't a place for your average college student to be hanging out. This was for the kids whose parents were footing the fifty grand a year

bill without batting an eye.

I spotted Johana walking out of the ladies room, so I put my head down and walked to the far side of the bar, which was almost as long as the room. She stopped at the near end of the bar and sat next to an Arab guy who looked about twenty-five. He helped her onto a stool and quickly had his hands all over her. She kissed him back. They were more than friends. Her actions didn't surprise me, since nothing does anymore. But it got me mad, thinking about what she had told me about Jimmy. What about her strict Muslim father? What was going on here?

A pretty bartender who had passed by me a few times finally decided to approach. She wore a halter top that barely covered her assets, and of course sported the pre-requisite tribal tattoo on her lower back above her ass, along with a few Chinese letters that stood for who knows what. I laughed at the thought of these clueless kids and their tattoos. They didn't belong to a tribe, and they weren't Chinese. It's all about follow the loser, I guess. I ordered a Chivas, and paid her the twelve dollars with a twenty. When she came back with the eight bucks, I told her to keep it. She did and walked away no more thankful than if I had given her a dollar tip, and all without even saying hello to her generous customer.

I sat patiently and sipped on my Chivas, suffering through the filtered pounding music that came from the main room, until Johana and her friend left their stools to join in on the mayhem.

The bartender glanced my way, so I signaled her over. "What's your name, kid?"

She hesitated and looked beyond me. "What's wrong? The PTA mothers not showing up?" she said trying hard to insult me with a cocky smile.

I didn't like her smart mouth or her attitude. "You have quite a mouth for a young kid. Too bad someone didn't slap it when it was just turning sour."

She stepped away from the bar, no longer so cocksure of herself.

My answer had spooked her. She was used to getting away with her sass to all the young male club patrons who didn't know what respect was. Most likely by the looks of her she didn't have a father around long enough to at least try to straighten her ass out.

"Was that your come-on line?" she asked, as if offering an apology.

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I needed her to answer some questions, so I lightened up on her and laughed at the assumption. "I'm not trying to pick you up, honey."

She smiled back but looked a little embarrassed. "My name's Brenda. Want another Chivas?"

"How about some information?"

Her smile dropped a bit. "I knew you were a cop."

"I'm not a cop, so you can relax. What are you -- about nineteen?"

"I'm twenty."

"It must be nice being twenty."

"I don't know. I'm just making some money that's all. I go to U Mass and I'm trying to get into BU next fall. If I do get in, this is a good way to help pay the tuition."

"I'm a Private Investigator."

Her face dropped a bit. "What do you want to talk to me for?"

"Didn't I tell you to relax?"

She was still nervous, but at least her bitch act was gone.

"I have a good friend at BU. Maybe she can help," I said hoping to calm her a bit. I've always had good results when doing something for someone first.

"Yeah? I need all the help I can get."

"You look like a responsible girl. Can I trust you to keep your mouth shut if I ask a few questions?"

She nodded.

"The girl who just went into the dance area, Johana Mugabi. You know her?"

"She's a regular. Comes in once a week or so."

"Who's her friend?"

"That's her boyfriend, Ahmed Said. I don't like him. He drinks for free, so he's a big shot with his tips. He throws a lot of money at us bartenders, so we pretend to like him. Know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean." I was getting angrier by the minute. Johana was playing us for fools. What the hell was Jimmy doing with this little whore? "How long have they been with each other?"

"I've been working here about four months and they've been together at least that long, as far as I know."

"Did she ever come in here with another guy? A young black kid?"

"Not while I was working." She thought about it a little more.

"She could have. I don't remember everything."

I looked at her for a few moments and smiled. "Neither do I," I said, while reaching into my coat pocket and pulling out a picture of Jimmy. "This is the kid I'm asking about."

She looked at it closely and then looked up at me with a serious expression. "That's the kid the cops are looking for, right? He started the gang war."

"So they say."

"Never saw him in here. Saw him in the paper and on TV. What's he got to do with her?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. You ever see anything that seems out of the ordinary in here?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "You mean like drugs? They snort coke after the club closes sometimes. Right here on the bar. Try to get me to do it with them."

"I guess that's not so out of the ordinary nowadays."

"I don't do drugs," she snapped defensively.

"Smart. Anything odd? Secretive?" I asked.

She looked nervously at me. "You're not gonna tell me I'm working for fucking terrorists, are you?"

"No, no. I'm just asking some questions."

"Because that's what everyone thinks, you know. That they're all terrorists. My mother says it all the time," she said, trying to convince herself that they weren't.

"I'll take that Chivas now."

She poured the drink, and I gave her another twenty. She was smart enough to keep the change this time without asking and smart enough to thank me. She waited on a few more customers then walked back over. "Any other questions?"

"What about her brother and their friends?"

"I don't like them, either. They've all tried hitting on me. They like to treat American girls like shit. They think they own the place, just like all the other foreigners in here."

"Who does own this place?"

"Ahmed's uncle. His name is Amir Said. Usually stops in once a night to check on things and count his money."

"What does he look like?"

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"Oh, you'll know him if you see him. He wears a black turban; a real pretentious bastard. Hangs at that end of the bar, waiting to swoop in on any fresh meat. If I could send them all back, I would."

I smiled back at her and held up my drink, seconding the thought. "You sound like a bright kid."

"I'm from Southie, and my aunt died on Flight 93."

"We all lost something on that day," I told her.

"Some more than others," she said, not batting her cold, blue eyes.

I pulled out one of my cards and wrote down Polly Welch's name on the back of it. "Call BU on Monday. Ask for Polly Welch. Tell her you're a friend of mine."

She was still a little leery, but took the card. "Thanks. Now that we've talked, I wish you had been trying to pick me up."

I took the compliment gladly and smiled at her. "Good luck at BU, and if you see anything out of the ordinary in here, please call me." I picked up my drink and headed into the main room.

It was even louder than my disco days on Lansdowne Street. The bass almost knocked me on my ass. The club was hopping with activity. The main dance area had a plastic floor with lights that bounced to the beat, reminding me of the 2001 Odyssey nightclub in *Saturday Night Fever*. There were spinning lights, smoke, and strobes, all whirling across the room at breakneck speed. It was enough for me to turn around and get out, salvaging what would be left of my ear drums. However, I had some more work to do, so I bounced as inconspicuously as I could around the perimeter of the club, looking for Johana Mugabi and friends while dodging inebriated kids.

I found them on the second level sitting in a lounge area above the dance floor with a few others. There were two waitresses running around for them, serving drinks. They thought they were royalty and wanted to be treated like it. A big, dumb-looking, white bouncer with arms the size of legs was stationed nearby, offering them some sort of unofficial half-assed protection from the rest of the clientele.

I stationed myself across from them on the other side of the balcony. I was probably about sixty feet away from the group when I saw Mohamed El Zawiq walking toward them. They all seemed to stop what they were doing when they spotted him, and immediately got up to greet him. It was a greeting that let me know that this was

not just a friend or a professor. They showed him a reverence that went beyond friendship. They saw this guy often at school, yet acted as though they hadn't seen in him in a long time. There were kisses and hugs, and their traditional Arab greeting. I watched closely as their mood shifted from happy club-goers to serious students. El Zawiq sat in the middle, and they gathered closely around him. They were mesmerized by this clown, and I was getting another bad feeling. He spoke to them in an animated fashion, and they continued to listen. El Zawiq paused a few times looking over his shoulder when a club patron happened to walk nearby, and would then continue his ranting at a higher level. These bastards were up to something. I was only sixty feet away, but lost.

I managed to survive in The Lido Club's main room almost until midnight. I found an empty seat at the end of the bar in there and kept an eye out. They got up to dance a few times, though El Zawiq never left his chair. He seemed to enjoy watching the action and the young kids having fun. He polished off two bottles of champagne by himself and was visited by Amir Said for half an hour.

When I re-entered the lounge area, I waved good-bye to Brenda. She waved back and smiled as I walked past her. Although she was smiling, I saw a sad face behind it.

I walked up the neon stairwell and into the quiet of the alley. The valet recognized me immediately and got my keys. He had left my car right behind the Mercedes. I handed him a finnik, got into my car, and drove home, with the beat of the music still pounding in my ears.