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Gangsterland

Written by Tod Goldberg

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GANGSTERLAND

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GANGSTERLAND

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EXTRACT

When Sal Cupertine was going to kill a guy, he'd walk right up and shoot him in the back of the head. Shoot someone in the face, there's a good chance they'll survive. Sal never messed around with a gut shot or trying to get someone in the heart. It was stupid and made a mess. You get told to kill a guy, you killed a guy. You didn't leave it up to variations in the wind and barometric pressure and all that Green Beret shit he saw on TV. No, Sal knew, you just went up and did it. Be professional about it and no one suffers.

Still, he'd begun to appreciate that sometimes a little distance wasn't a bad thing, particularly since he'd been picking pieces of those Donnie Brasco motherfuckers off himself for the last three hours. One of the guys had a mustache and Sal was certain that the hair he'd finally been able to dig from beneath his thumb nail was from him, since it was coarse and light brown and didn't have any blood on it, which meant it probably got jammed in there when he was choking him out. A mistake all around, that's what that was. But what could he do now? Three hours sitting in the backseat of a Toyota Corolla aside Fat Monte, who wasn't even fat anymore since he'd done six months and got hooked up with some steroids and had apparently hit the weights pretty hard, and all Sal had come to conclude was that he was probably only a few hours, at most, from his own death.

Not that Sal was actually afraid, at least not yet. Fat Monte hadn't taken his cell phone from him, which was a good sign; but it kept vibrating in his pocket, which to Sal meant his wife Jennifer was wondering where he was. She knew he wasn't exactly a 9-to-5 guy, knew that when he was off doing Family business that he could be gone until the next day, or might need to jet down to Florida or over to Detroit, but even in those cases he was pretty good about giving her a head's up that he wouldn't be back for dinner. The bosses understood that he couldn't just disappear for weeks on end without a word, now that he had a kid. Because once the wives got talking it was everybody's problem. And on this day, of all days, he told Jennifer he'd pick up a prescription for her over at the twenty-four hour Walgreens. His son, William, was in preschool over at Mt. Carmel Academy and brought home a dozen infectious diseases a week, or at least that's what it felt like, all three of them constantly battling some kind of respiratory shit that winter. The codeine cough medicine was helping and Sal promised to pick up a refill on his way home and that all would have happened if he hadn't lost it on those Donnie Brascos. And now here he was, maybe two hundred miles outside of Chicago in the middle of the night, nothing but black farmland on either side of the highway, Fat Monte breathing through his mouth next to him, two young guys up front—a half-Latino kid called Chema riding shotgun and Fat Monte's cousin Neal driving, though he spent more time looking in the rearview mirror than at the road, which wasn't helping Sal's sense of dread.

He wasn't afraid to die, but he was afraid of how it would feel to leave Jennifer and William behind. It wasn't something he'd thought

about before, but today had been full of revelations. Dying was fine. He could handle that. He was only thirty-five, but he'd had enough close calls in the past that he wasn't mystical about the process. He knew there'd come a time when he was on the other end of a gun and that would be that. But he didn't want Jennifer and William to suffer for his stupidity. This whole deal was different. Preventable. That's what kept niggling at him: somehow all of this was going to roll back on them.

He fished his buzzing phone out of his pocket. If he was going to die tonight, at least he'd see his wife's name one last time.

"The fuck you doing?" Fat Monte said, though he didn't snatch the phone from Sal's hand. Interesting.

"It's been going off all night," Sal said. He didn't answer to Fat Monte, and he wasn't about to start, so he kept himself calm, went the honest route. "My wife's sick."

"Man, cops can triangulate that shit. You gotta lose that thing."

"You think they're looking for me?"

"Oh, you think your fingerprints aren't on record? Your first mistake, and it was a doozy. A little restraint, Sal, and you'd be home right now."

"Yeah," Sal said. "Well, things got clumsy. I admit that."

"You don't have to admit shit," Fat Monte said. "Everyone already knows it's true."

Everyone. Sal hated to think about what that meant. Monte still hadn't asked for the phone, so Sal just turned it off and stuffed it back into his pocket.

One thing for certain, if it was Monte who'd fucked up, Sal would have already killed him. That much he knew. And he wouldn't have bothered with any witnesses, either, especially not the half-Latino kid, whose neck Sal could see was covered in sweat; the bosses were all about diversifying lately, not keeping to the strict Italian edict, particularly not with so many good soldiers doing time. Supply and demand and a lack of good staff turned everything upside down. That's what got him in trouble in the first place.

Three new guys started hanging around the fringes of the Family, trying to get inside any way they could, coming up with stashes of top of the line televisions, heroin, even a truck full of leather office furniture, to the point that the bosses couldn't ignore them. The TVs and office furniture were one thing, but when they produced bags and bags of the highest-grade heroin—Sal was no good on heroin, it made him twitchy and overly aggressive, but he'd been convinced to give it a taste and had something like a religious sexual experience that night—the bosses began to wonder about where they were connecting from, since the Family had controlled the heroin in Chicago for the better part of a century. So they told Sal to dig around, learn what he could, and report back when he knew anything definitive.

This truth-digging expedition was a significant growth in his duties. He was good at the whole stalk-and-kill process, that was simple work, but now the Family wanted him to be the point man on the business side, too. Not just lurking in the shadows. Out in the daylight and everything. He hadn't ever shown his face to a stranger in the game. At least not a stranger who wasn't about to become a corpse. But this was a chance to become a legit player, no more midnight murders, more time with his wife and kid. Whatever. It was a chance for something better than the business of killing. He even hazarded to tell Jennifer that big things were coming for them,

that if everything went right, in the next year maybe they'd be able to take a vacation or see about moving somewhere warmer, both of them sick of freezing every winter in Chicago. Jennifer was taking art classes at City College—she enrolled at Olive-Harvey all the way down on the Southside so no one would recognize her, which Sal thought was stupid since no other wives we're going to go anywhere near a community college—and every other week or so she'd bring in a painting of the ocean or a drawing of palm trees swaying in the wind. Though she wasn't really much of an artist, Sal liked the idea of her one day sitting on a beach chair all day and drawing.

Plus, the down time between jobs could be maddening for Sal, to the point that he started doing outside work just to make ends meet around the holidays and such—it was nothing to drive down to East St. Louis to take out some Crip for a shop owner, or even over to Springfield to put one in the head of a cheating spouse—but that was also dangerous.