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Paradise City

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Extract

Prologue

The boy stared at the open coffin. He sat on the edge of a metal chair, his hands resting flat across his legs, his thin neck chafing under the heavy starch of a tight white shirt and black clip-on tie. He wore a black blazer handed down to him from a cousin in New Jersey he had never met and dark slacks with half-inch cuffs that brushed the tops of Buster Brown loafers. His thick white socks were stretched as far up as they would go.

His eyes, dark as winter clouds, never strayed as they focused on the face of the man in the coffin. The boy was three weeks removed from his fifteenth birthday and had never seen a dead body until this day. He had been to several funerals with his parents, but had always managed to keep a safe distance from the front of the musty rooms, relieved to let others grieve over the cold corpse of someone they loved. But this was one body he couldn't avoid. With this one, he was required to be up in the first row, sitting alongside his mother and next to his Aunt Theresa, her gnarled left

hand occasionally reaching over and patting him on the center of his back.

This time the body in the coffin wasn't a distant relative or a neighbor. It wasn't a family friend who was seldom seen or an individual whose local standing required that respect be paid. This time the body in the coffin belonged to his father.

The room was crowded; somber and sobbing faces filled seven rows of chairs spread out eight across, most of them women dressed in black, eyes shielded by veils. The walls were lined with men in uncomfortable clothes, heads bowed, their talking restricted to muffled hisses, eyes looking away from the man many had known since they were young and living in another part of the world. There were four tall lamps placed in each corner of the room, low-watt bulbs giving off dim glows. A series of white votive candles had been placed around the edges of the coffin, their flickering flames licking at the ceiling. The room had wall-to-wall thin-ply carpet with a dark blue pattern that was faded in the corners and at the center. There was no door leading into the chamber, which could be reached from the top of the second-floor landing. To the right of the coffin was the guest book, its pages held open with a black felt-tip pen jammed in the middle, ready to be signed by each mourner.

The boy would have preferred to be alone. To be allowed to spend time with his father in a private way, free of the cries and shrieks of family and strangers. To whisper words meant only for his ears. To say a final good-bye.

The boy paid little attention to those around him. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the waxy glaze of his father's handsome face, harsh makeup giving the cheeks an artificial glint. The heavy odor of the undertaker's fluids and powders made his nostrils burn, and the greasy gel spread through his father's thick hair gave off the aroma of rain on a humid night. An ill-fitting dark suit did little to hide his father's muscular chest, but it did cover the three bullet holes that had sapped the life from his body. Three bullets fired from a gun whose owner would never be arrested.

The boy, even at such a tender age, was aware of the closed world he lived in. He knew it was a sphere where secrets were kept for decades, where ancient customs and rituals of a faraway country overruled the laws of a new homeland. On the streets of his East Bronx neighborhood, those customs required residents to live under the thumb of the Camorra, the harsh and brutal wing of the Neapolitan mafia. While most of his neighbors had come to America in pursuit of a dream, like his father's desire for a better life in a sweeter part of the world, the Camorristas arrived to further spread their control.

It was the leaders of the Camorra who decided who would live and who would die. They chose the men who worked, offering them steady jobs in the businesses under their control—the West Side docks, the Fourteenth Street meat market, the midtown garment centers, and the three area airports—in return for kickbacks often as high as half their weekly wages. One

nod from a Camorrista and a man would be frozen out, forced to go without table money to feed his family until well on the brink of starvation, until he agreed to do the criminal's bidding. The Camorra arranged and approved marriages, always for a fee and often choosing the best brides for their own members. They lived without fear, as dismissive of New York's power structure as they had been of the elected officials in Naples. "They line everyone's pockets, especially their own," an old man once told the boy, his voice filled with a lifetime of bitterness, "only they use our money to do it. It's been true since I was your age and it will be true when you are mine."

The boy's father had been one of the few men who balked at the daily demands the Camorra made on his life. He had paid the bounty they claimed on his butcher's wages, but kept his distance, avoiding any contact with the gangsters who ruled the streets of his neighborhood. "Your father was a proud man," his mother told the boy the night of the murder. "A good man. No matter what others may ever tell you, you must always believe he died a hero."

The boy never said a word. He lowered his head and stepped out onto the fire escape that faced a long wall of tenements, ignoring the stream of visitors bearing sympathy and food.

He knew his father's killer was somewhere in the mourning room. He didn't need to turn his head or glance in the man's direction to know where he was,

standing in the back, shaking hands, receiving his due respect, as if he were the host of a festive function. The boy didn't know why his father had been targeted by the Camorra, what a man who hadn't missed a day of work in six years could have done to incur their wrath. But he knew that Don Nicola Rossi had the answers he sought. The boy had known Don Nicola all his life and had even been to the majestic three-tiered house the gangster lived in, just across the street from Woodlawn Cemetery. He knew that all the money the men of his neighborhood kicked back from wages and high-interest loans found its way into his pockets. He knew the ones who didn't or couldn't pay back the full price suffered whatever loss he deemed necessary. Don Nicola didn't control the neighborhood as much as own it, and the lives of those who lived on its streets. His word was the only law that mattered and his verdicts were always final. And the boy knew it had been Don Nicola's verdict for his father to be shot dead, his body left lying between two parked cars on a side street off White Plains Road.

The boy took a deep breath and stood, taking several steps toward his father's coffin. He could feel the room grow quieter behind him and then turn absolutely still as he knelt on a wooden slab, hands folded in prayer, his face inches from the only man he had ever loved.

Giancarlo Lo Manto said that final prayer to his father with tears falling down the sides of his face, his lower lip trembling, head bowed, eyes closed. He

followed the brief prayer with a silent vow and a promise. He would seek vengeance for his death as well as for all the other innocent men who had died as he had, on the vicious whim of a career criminal. He didn't know when or how he would do it, only that he would. Lo Manto pulled a folded note from his shirt pocket and kept it hidden in the palm of his right hand. He leaned closer to his father and gently slid the note into the side pocket of his blue jacket. He patted it in place, glanced down at his father, and kissed him gently on the forehead.

Lo Manto then stood and walked out of the room as silently as he had entered.

As a prince must be able to act just like a beast, he should learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion does not defend himself against traps, and the fox does not defend himself against wolves. So one has to be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves.

—NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, *The Prince*

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Naples, Italy
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Giancarlo Lo Manto had his back against a ragged stone wall, a nine-millimeter gun in his hands, one bullet slipped into the chamber. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, alert to any sounds in the vestibule closest to apartment 3E. He could smell burnt meat sizzling in oil and he heard Eros Ramazzotti singing "Dammi la Luna" on a dusty CD. He knew most of the other apartments were empty at this hour on a Sunday morning—husbands, wives, and children off to morning mass and a casual outdoor breakfast before spending the rest of the day with relatives. He also knew the four men who lived in the small apartment in the middle of the hallway on the third floor had no plans for their day other than to lay low and wait for the sun to set.

Lo Manto opened his eyes and looked at the two men standing across the hall. They were each about a decade

younger than he, dressed in civilian clothes but with Kevlar vests strapped over their shirts, guns in their hands and police IDs pinned to their jackets. They were nervous, their faces coated with thin lines of sweat, their eyes fixed on the dead-bolted door in front of them. Lo Manto glanced at his watch, then looked back up at the two officers and nodded. They moved to either side of the door and waited, hands wrapped around their weapons, eyes on Lo Manto, backs jammed hard against the wall. Lo Manto leaned his body into the apartment door and banged on it three times with the butt end of his gun. He waited through several seconds of silence, then repeated the knocks. He moved his shoulders off the door as soon as he heard the dead bolt snap free. He could feel the door give against the weight from the other side. He looked down and saw the doorknob turn slowly and then stop. Lo Manto took three steps back, stretched out his arms, and pointed his gun at the middle of the door.

Then they all waited for the first move.

Lo Manto had experienced a lifetime of these situations during his seventeen years on the Naples police force, the last eight working perhaps the most dangerous beat in all of Europe, the homicide division. He had enough scars on his body and enough long stays in hospital wards to know that what would soon happen would be decided within the snap of a second—and that luck as much as skill determined who died and who walked. He glanced at the two young officers assigned as

his backup, both woefully inexperienced for a one-man street takedown, let alone a break-in bust of four Camorra shooters. He could see their fear. They prayed to avoid moments such as those that were about to happen. Lo Manto's prayers, however, pointed in a different direction. His life was designed around pursuits, shoot-outs, and captures. He loved every second of being a street cop. He relished the piecing together of clues and working the streets to gather information he needed to build a case. He would circle his prey and then, once a criminal's mistake was made or an informant's tip proved accurate, make the move that would lead to either cuffs slapped on a pair of unwilling wrists or a body bag zippered over a hard-eyed face. It was during those moments of high tension, with lives on the line and where any one decision could prove fatal, that Lo Manto was most in control and in command.

It was a place where he truly belonged.

Lo Manto saw the door open a crack and made his move. He lowered his shoulder and rushed the door, sending the man behind it reeling, knocking over a chair and a flowerpot as he fell. Lo Manto rolled onto his knees and came up staring at four men, one on the floor and three spread across a tiny dining area, each with a gun in hand, cocked and pointed down at him. The two officers outside the apartment held their position as he had previously instructed them to do. "Who do I talk to?" Lo Manto asked, speaking in a full, rich Neapolitan dialect, his eyes moving slowly from one face to the next.

The skinny man in the center of the room nodded and lowered his gun. "Me," he said. "I'm in charge."

"Okay if I stand?" Lo Manto asked, easing one leg off the floor. "Makes it easier to talk."

"Leave the gun on the floor," the skinny man said. "And your hands at your side."

Lo Manto put his gun on the hardwood surface and stood. He straightened the collar of his thin black leather jacket and walked toward the table in the center of the room. He looked into the kitchen and saw a large pot of coffee resting on the front burner of the stove. "Why don't you pour me a cup," he said to the skinny man, "and I'll tell you why I'm here. Three sugars, but only if you make it strong."

Lo Manto pulled a wooden chair away from the Formica table and sat down, his eyes on the skinny man, his back to the three others. The skinny man jammed his gun into his waistband and stepped into the kitchen, reaching out his left hand for an empty cup. With his right, he lifted the pot from the stove to pour out a thin line of coffee. He put the pot back, walked to the table, and slid the cup toward Lo Manto. "We're out of sugar," the skinny man said. "You have to drink it the way I made it."

Lo Manto lifted the cup to his lips and swallowed two quick gulps. "It's a good cup of coffee, but not great," he said. "Has that harsh prison taste to it. You let it cook too long. You're not used to working with a stove after all those years brewing coffee by candle flame."

The skinny man reached for his gun, raised it, and pointed it at Lo Manto's chest. "You know how much I can make for shooting you dead?" he asked. "You have any idea what the Rossis would pay to see your funeral?"

Lo Manto casually finished the coffee and rested the cup on the edge of the table. "Two hundred and fifty thousand euros, last I heard," he said. "But they don't plan on paying it. That's why it's so high. So, if you kill me, they would then simply kill you. Which now brings me to the reason I'm here."

"I'm listening," the skinny man said, nodding at the three men behind Lo Manto. "We're all listening."

"I have a warrant in my jacket pocket to arrest the four of you," Lo Manto said. "That explains the business with the door and the reason for such an early visit."

"What's the charge?" the skinny man asked.

"I didn't read it all the way through," Lo Manto said. "But from what I did see, it fits your usual pattern. Attempted murder, drug possession, conspiracy and—I'd have to look again to make sure—kidnapping. With your records, a conviction on any one of those charges would have you making coffee by candlelight the rest of your lives."

"You're not arresting anybody," the skinny man said with a crooked smile that showed off a row of darkened lower teeth. "Not today and not with four guns pointed at you."

"I don't want to arrest you," Lo Manto said. "And with your help and a little bit of luck, I won't have to."

"What do you want?"

"A name," Lo Manto said bluntly. "And a place where I can find that name."

"Whose?"

"The man who killed Peppino Alvatar," Lo Manto said. "I want him and you know who he is and where he is."

The skinny man shook his head, the smile fading from his face. "I let you arrest me, all I get is a prison sentence. I give you that information, I get a death sentence. And I'm not looking to die."

"Take a minute and try to think smart," Lo Manto said. "Sooner or later, the Rossis are going to look to lose baggage like you. For all the good you do, you also cause a lot of grief. With each arrest, that's only going to get worse. They know your kind breaks and talks and they won't ever let that happen. Before that day comes, I can have your sentence for these fresh charges kept to a minimum. *But* I need a name and a place."

The skinny man held Lo Manto's look for several seconds, his breathing coming heavier, fingers stroking the sides of his handgun. "Maybe that's all true," he said. "But maybe all that goes away if I bring the Rossis something they've always wanted."

Lo Manto smiled and sat back in his chair. "Me?" he asked.

"You," the skinny man said. "Dead on their doorway.

After all I heard this morning, that sounds like the best deal of all."

"Some deals are tougher than others to close," Lo Manto said.

"Not this one," the skinny man said, raising his gun and cocking the trigger. Behind him, Lo Manto could hear the other three men step in closer.

Lo Manto kept his eyes on the skinny man and then slid off his chair and lifted the Formica table by the two front legs and swung it around the room, using it as a shield. From outside the apartment, the two officers tossed in three hissing smoke grenades and followed them into the tight quarters, guns drawn and aimed at the three men firing at the table. Lo Manto grabbed his nine-millimeter and fired off three quick rounds in the direction of the shooters, the apartment now completely engulfed in smoke. He heard two drop and left the third man to the officers who would be positioned against the walls closest to the foyer closets, giving them both leverage on the shooter and protection from any wayward shots. That left only the skinny man. He had run through the kitchen and was climbing over the terrace railing, his hands gripping the black iron bars of the railing. Lo Manto kicked aside the table and walked into the kitchen. He stopped at the base of the terrace and saw the skinny man hanging on the edges of the curled bars with two hands, gun buried inside his waistband.

"We got two down and one in cuffs, Inspector," the youngest of the two officers shouted out to Lo Manto.

"Wounded or dead?" Lo Manto asked without turning his head, eyes on the skinny man.

"One's alive," the officer said. "At least for the moment."

"Call for an ambulance and the morgue truck," Lo Manto said. "Then take your prisoner in to be booked. I'm going to spend a few more minutes with my friend."

Lo Manto looked past the skinny man and down into the tight backyard three floors down. "It's a broken leg at the very least," he said. "But that's if you fall right. You get yourself hung up on one of those lines or brush against those trees, who knows what can happen?"

The skinny man turned to look down and then back at Lo Manto. "Help me up," he said.

Lo Manto put his gun back against his spine and rested his arms on top of the iron railing. "I was only kidding before," he said to the skinny man. "I really did like that coffee you made. I'm going to get myself a second cup. While I'm gone, try to remember that name and place I was asking about."

"Help me up first," the skinny man said, his fingers starting to tremble from the grip he held on the curved bars.

In the kitchen, Lo Manto found a clean cup and poured himself some coffee, the smoke from the grenades washing past him like clouds. He looked toward the skinny man and smiled. "Are you sure you don't have any sugar?" he asked.