



TWICE REMOVED

YOU HAVE TO TALK TO THE GUY

WHO TALKS TO THE GUY

WHO TALKS TO ME

By Richard Ramm

Twice Removed Chapters

- Chapter 1- At The Bar
- Chapter 2- The Talker And The Go Between
- Chapter 3- The Back Room
- Chapter 4- The Client
- Chapter 5- The Deal And The Details
- Chapter 6- The Beginning
- Chapter 7- It Was Time
- Chapter 8- There's Always a First Time
- Chapter 9- The Package
- Chapter 10- The Delivery
- Chapter 11- The Mark and The Pro Bono
- Chapter 12- Bread Crumbs
- Chapter 13- The Job North
- Chapter 14- The Time of Stress
- Chapter 15- The Mistake
- Chapter 16- The Collection
- Chapter 17- The Grand Opening
- Chapter 18- Back Together Again
- Chapter 19- Sammy's Ploy
- Chapter 20- It's Time for a Little Change
- Chapter 21- Finding Out More Than He Wanted To Know
- Chapter 22- The Final Catch
- Chapter 23- The Gathering and Influence-
- Chapter 24- Now We Have A Problem
- Chapter 25- You Want One You Got One
- Chapter 26- Rules Are Rules
- Chapter 27- The Linden Room
- Chapter 28- The Interrogation
- Chapter 29- It Really Isn't Over Yet

Introduction

Beware and be very much aware:

Blending real and imagined is a potent recipe for storytelling, blurring the lines between truth and fiction to create narratives that resonate deeply with readers.

What is to follow are fictional stories and characters inspired by real people and true stories.

Beyond the obvious

As you read these, remember that inspiration can be subtle. Real people and events can weave their way into fictional narratives in countless ways, even without direct references. A character's mannerisms, a plot point sparked by a news story, a setting echoing a specific historical location – all these threads can connect reality to fiction, enriching the reading experience.

So, as you delve into this fictional world, keep an eye out for those hidden connections between the real and the imagined. You might be surprised by how often reality whispers its stories through the pages of our imagination.

A note from the Author:

Stories can easily be written from true experiences in one's life :)

Rik

Chapter – 1

At The Bar

Tommy leaning over the booth in the bar that he frequents often in South Philly looks directly in the eyes of Jackie Presser and quietly says "why isn't that son of a bitch here yet"?

Sit tight says Jackie with a stern look on his face; he'll be here when he's here! How many more of those damn things are you going to light up?

Tommy Taylor of English heritage comes from a long line of family smokers. He is about five foot seven inches in height, with brown hair, and normally weighs right around one hundred sixty pounds. He is notorious for having a short temper, heavy smoker, absolutely no patience and he more than once had spent time in a juvenile detention center. As he grew older, he had also had been locked up for fighting, being drunk in addition to being disorderly on several occasions.

Tommy grew up in Willow Groves, a small town north of Philadelphia. Willow Groves the little town tucked beneath a canopy of willow branches whispers tales of its humble beginnings.

Once a patchwork of sunbaked fields and weathered barns, it sprouted from the calloused hands of pioneers who coaxed life from the earth. Generations tilled the fertile soil, raising families alongside swaying cornstalks and fragrant orchards.

The town itself mirrored the fields and a few old Victorian style homes still remain on Main Street. The town's heartbeat continues to echo the warm aroma of freshly baked bread drifting from Mrs. Groves's bakery. Though times have changed, the spirit of harvest endures. The land still whispers in the rustle of leaves, and the heart of Willow Groves remains anchored in the rich soil that birthed it.

In his late teens and for a short time Tommy worked at the local supermarket "Groves Market" which was named after the town's founder. He and his father Arthur who worked most of his life as a farm hand didn't get along. Tommy's mother Jane Ann, like a dandelion fluff on a restless breeze, couldn't be contained by the sleepy town's quiet grip. The predictability of Main Street and the scent of over-stewed coffee in the diner couldn't quench her thirst for the unknown.

One starlit night, with dreams dancing in her eyes brighter than fireflies, she packed a single suitcase and kissed Tommy's sleeping forehead, leaving behind a whispered promise of stories and a heart heavy with both longing and love.

Tommy was just reaching eight years old and to this day blames his farther for her disappearance. Tommy just couldn't accept that any mother could leave a child at that young age. The sun etched wrinkles into Arthur's face like lines on a weathered map, each crack tracing a lifetime of dawn-chilled mornings and dust-choked evenings. His hands, knotted with arthritis, spoke of calloused knuckles and broken vows; they gripped tools tighter than he ever held Tommy's hand. Their conversations were terse storms, punctuated by silences pregnant with unspoken resentment.

Tommy saw a tyrant in Arthur's sun-hardened gaze, a stranger who measured worth in sweat and yield, not dreams and whispers. The father son relationship was fractured under the weight of expectations and the misunderstanding of Jane Ann's disappearing left both father and son yearning for a language neither knew how to speak.

Tommy who had no intention of becoming a farmer following in his hardened father's footsteps had been fired from more than one job and it was mostly for fighting and suspected theft.

He had never been married and truly had only been in love once and even though they had long since parted ways his mind would often drift off into so many bittersweet memories. Vividly he recalls the stolen morning kiss from Grace Tomkins just outside her apartment, her amazing smile and the laughter that radiated warmth and pierced through his heart.

He was now 22 and working as a bag boy at a local supermarket. That's where he first noticed the young beautiful Grace. From the first moment he laid eyes on her he knew she was the one. As she approached the aisle that Tommy's was bagging his hands danced a frantic ballet of brown paper bags around the groceries, his usual smooth efficiency replaced by a tremor born of nerves.

Grace the one with the laugh like wind chimes and the smile that could light up the produce aisle – stood patiently by, watching his bag-packing performance with a smile that had his throat closing up.

He'd planned a witty remark, a casual offer to walk her home, anything to impress her beyond the mundane task of bagging broccoli. But his brain, caught in a runaway tumble dryer of nervous energy, could only offer, "Would you...like...double-bagged cantaloupes?"

The words popped out like startled frogs, and his cheeks were the color of overripe tomatoes. She laughed a tinkling melody that deflated his ego as surely as a popped balloon. Yet, somehow, it wasn't a mocking laugh, but one laced with warmth and an undeniable spark of interest. Maybe, just maybe, Tommy's flustered performance was charming in its own clumsy way.

Their romance and courtship were short lived as Tommy wasn't a man built for sunrises. Shadows were his domain, secrets his currency. The thrill of the con, the adrenaline rush of the heist, and a good bare-knuckle fight bolstered his ego. Grace with her eyes as clear as spring lakes and a laugh that chased away the darkness, knew very well she could never play in his life of crime.

The first time he'd brought her stolen roses, her smile faltered, replaced by a flicker of fear. Oh, how he tried to walk the straight and narrow. But the pull of the underworld was a siren he couldn't resist. One hushed deal turned into two, a daring gamble into a life on the edge.

They were together outside her apartment on the day the City cops showed up to arrest him. Grace's tear-stained face as she watched him led away new it was the final, crushing chord. He saw the love curdle into disappointment, the hope extinguished by the harsh glare of reality. In that moment, Tommy knew he'd stolen not just jewels and cash, but something far more precious, a future with the woman who could have anchored him to the light.

Years passed, marked by prison walls and fleeting shadows. Each clang of a cell door echoed Grace's absence, each moonlit night a canvas for memories of her lost warmth. There had been a number of other girls that Tommy had dated and enjoyed being with but always sort lived. None could match the feelings he still had for Grace.

That all changed and it's been a number of years since he last had a run in with the law. Tommy having just turned 26 often said his life changed when he moved to Philadelphia and met Jackie. It was probably when money came up missing at the Willow Groves Amusement Park that he was working at when he decided it was best to leave town.

“For Christ Sake Where the Hell”... Tommy stopped and went silent when he saw the glare in Jackie's eyes. He knew he was getting close to a line he had better not cross.

Jackie was only two years older than Tommy at twenty-eight and had a rough time growing up on the streets of Philadelphia. There had been times he had little food to eat; times he came home with a bloody nose from fighting with neighborhood bullies, and probably the worst of times when his father blamed him for his mother leaving.

Oscar, Jackie's father was a dock worker who drank heavy loved to gamble and was very familiar with the local lock up. Milly his mother was pretty tough herself and didn't put up with any of her husband's shenanigans; finally, when she had enough, she just up and disappeared.

Jackie was a quiet man and people who knew him knew he was tough but at times could be very violent. He had black straight hair, height about five feet nine inches and at one hundred seventy-five pounds he was a pretty good-looking guy.

He knew the streets of Philadelphia like the back of his hand and loved to hang out on South Street on the weekends.

South Street was the home to the Italian street vendors; Jackie was in augh as he walked the by the street vendors tables seeing mounds and slabs of bacon, goats hanging in the store windows, barrels of pickles, huge rounds of cheese tied from the store rafters, and table after table piled high with every imaginable type of green that could be grow.

Although he was German everyone at the Italian street market knew him and would often shout "Hey Jackie, "what-yak-gona do"? Most of the locals were puzzled about his line of work and yet no one spoke or asked about it. The two of them, Jackie & Tommy were often seen together and the on lookers just assumed there would be trouble.

It was actually in front of Paesano's sandwich shop on South 9th where Jackie saw a guy standing outside peering in the window.

Hey Buddy "what-a-you" looking at asked Jackie?

It was Tommy and with a smile on his face replied "I'm thinking of running in there and grabbing that big ass meat ball sandwich off that little turds table." Jackie laughed and said "that little guy and his two big brothers behind the counter will mop the floor with you." Then said "looks like you haven't eaten in a week tell me your name and let's go in and I'll get you whatever the hell you want!"

It may have been the shared stories of their poor very hard upbringing and mothers leaving them at an early age that the two of them have been close ever since.

Tommy is usually found wearing a hoodie, jogging pants and tennis shoes while Jackie is always dressed in blue jeans, tight shirt, and loafers. It was Jackie who drew the attention of the neighborhood girls and especially their fathers.

Once and awhile a third big heavy-set guy or a good-looking brunette would be seen with them. The big guy known as Henry and a talker could always be seen trying to make some kind of deal. His smile was wide and genuine giving off the look of a very trustworthy guy.

Henry was always seen wearing a gray or tan suit, pressed shirt, no tie and his shoes were huge and shined like liquid glass.

April the brunette has the shape of a model and as she walked the street heads would always turn in her direction. She was quick witted and not afraid to come right back at anyone who dared to make an off-colored comment.

One a guy shouted “Hey babe meet me later at Nino’s Pizza Place”; April shouted right back saying “Why sure honey” but bring your big brother or cousin “cause” I like the tall ones not the shorty’s like you!”

Growing up in Philly she was street smart, loved to roller skate, and had higher than average grades in school. If it hadn’t been for the lack of money she probably would have attended college and found some rich kid to latch onto.

It was at Penn's Landing while April was roller skating at the outdoor rink that she noticed a guy leaning on the railing watching her. Each time she looked in his direction he turned away until she rolled up to the fence and said "Hey-What's up?"

It was Jackie and all he said was "I like the way you look". That's it?

She asked with both arms raised and said "come skate with me!" Well, there are a lot of things I would do with you but "skaten" ain't one of them. April came back at him with "well what do you want to do with me?"

Jackie somewhat taken back remained silent for a moment then said "how about I row you around the Delaware for a while?"

"Naw, how about you take me on the Ferris wheel over there, or are you too afraid of heights?" Jackie paid the wheel operator for five turns without getting off and before it was over he had his arm around her shoulder and her phone number in his pocket.

Jackie lived in a row house or what was known as “the bandbox or trinity” which was the smallest and cheapest to construct. It served as housing for the working-class or servants of larger properties nearby.

These homes were often on courtyards behind larger properties or in narrow alleys that divided larger blocks. Usually no more than 16 feet wide or deep simplest in design, offering one room per floor. Typically, two or three stories high with a single front room on each floor, and a staircase tucked away in a corner. These houses are often described as a compact, no-frills architectural style that signifies resourcefulness and practicality.

Jackie’ place was on Bell’s Court off Saint Joseph’s Way and Tommy’s was a “city house plan” on North Marshall Street.

City house plans are the most iconic and prevalent type in Philadelphia dating back to the 1700s and 1800s, they are the fabric of the city's character and history. They are of brick construction having a narrow footprint, are multi-storied, and the interior rooms are arranged one behind the other.

Jackie owned two cars, both were sedans and both were black. He kept one on the street at his house and the other at Tommy's. His car was safe with Tommy because Tommy lost his license because of drinking while driving and wouldn't drive for fear of being arrested.

April the great looking brunette was the only one permitted to visit at Jackie's place. When everyone got together it was always at Tommy's and it wasn't just because Tommy's was a bigger house.

Rules are rules and you have to talk to the guy who talks to the guy and only if that guy new where to find the guy.

At the table Tommy glanced around and was impatiently awaiting the arrival of who he had dubbed "the talker" suddenly saw a dark haired tall stacked female wearing a black leather jacket that matched her dark black oversized sun glasses heading toward their booth. Move over Denise tells Tommy as she slides into the booth. I'll have what he's drinking she says to the waitress pointing at Jackie's beer.

Denise is another member of Jackie's crew and has been with him and Tommy for the past five years. Denise still lives in a house she bought at 436 Lombard Street after both her parents passed away from a horrific influenza epidemic that took many lives of Brooklyn family's.

April has been living with her for the past three years which has helped both of them with finances.

Denise arrived by Greyhound as it lurched into Philly, spitting Denise onto the gritted sidewalk like a sunflower seed from a cracked sidewalk. Neon signs bled red and yellow onto the greasy street, advertising cheesesteaks and hoagies she knew wouldn't hold a candle to a bodega bacon, egg, and cheese.

"Tough city," she thought, adjusting the duffel bag digging into her shoulder. Her stilettos clicked a defiant rhythm against the cobblestones. Denise, forged in the concrete canyons of Brooklyn, wasn't fazed by a little grime.

She'd come for a job, a fixer gig for a shady art collector rumored to hoard Picassos in his Rittenhouse basement.

Her Brooklyn hustle finding lost cats, tracking down deadbeat dads, navigating the greasy underbelly of the city she knew Philly would be a breeze.

The collector, Mr. Delacorte, lived in a mansion so grand it made the Chrysler Building blush. Gilded gates opened to manicured lawns where marble statues stared accusingly. Inside, velvet walls whispered of old money and secrets, the air thick with the stale scent of expensive cigars. Denise, in her ripped jeans and leather jacket, stuck out like a pigeon in a peacock sanctuary. Delacorte, a man as frail as a porcelain teacup, poured her whiskey in a crystal snifter. His voice, dry as old paint, rasped, "My Monet, stolen. Find it, and this is yours." He dangled a wad of cash that could buy enough bodega sandwiches to choke a starving rhino.

The Monet hunt took Denise from grease-stained diners to antique shops smelling of dust and forgotten dreams. She followed whispers, bribes, and hunches. She learned the city's rhythm, the way the shadows stretched across Ben Franklin's face at dusk, the staccato beat of a cheesesteak being chopped, the guttural groan of a streetcar rounding a corner.

And then, a tip from a barkeep by the name of “Bitters” with eyes like chipped obsidian. “Give Henry a call I’m sure he can help you find what you’re looking for.”

At the second meeting with Henry, she was told to meet up with a guy at 7pm sharp the following night at the Ruby Buffet in the Riverview Plaza. If you agree to 3 % of you take, he’ll give you the information you desire.

South Philly docks even at 7pm Denise felt a thrill dance down her spine, the scent of danger, the taste of a challenge won. The docks were a work of rust and diesel, the moon struggling to pierce the greasy film on the water.

You lost, little lady?" Denise, eyes narrowed to slits as she turned to see a dark figure staring at her. Then she hears “you’ll agree to 3 %?” and replies “yes.”

“Go to Washington Avenue Pier 53 there be a guy you’ll want to talk to.”

As quickly as he appeared the dark figure was gone.

At the Pier a man in a rumpled suit the color of a week-old bruise, sneered at her, "Monet? But Denise knew the language of fear. She played her Brooklyn hand, a bluff of tough talk and steely resolve. The guy's eyes flickered, his bravado cracking. In the end, it was a flicker of a cigarette lighter glinting off the canvas, hidden in a crate marked "Do Not Open," that gave him away.

Denise emerged from the docks victorious, the Monet tucked under her arm, a sunrise painting a canvas of hope on the Philly skyline. She picked up the wad of cash from the old "Geazer" and met Henry one more time. As Denise handed Henry \$15,000 which was the 3% she owed, she asked two questions.

Who was the guy that gave her the information and how does he know I'm not cheating him out of the money I collected.

Henry laughed and said "believe me that if he wanted you to know, you'd know" and seriously "you wouldn't want to cheat him!"

Their lives crossed again and became acquainted when both Jackie and Tommy beat the crap out of a guy that was attempting to molest Denise outside a bar in downtown Philly.

“Ok” Impatient Tommy says tell us! Denise looks squarely at Jackie and says "45 minutes", I talked to Henry and he said he's on his way. She then turns to Tommy and says "put both hands on the table or you're going to lose one". Tommy smiles, winks and complies. She then hears Jackie say "drink up and go tell April I'll see here later at my place". She finishes her drink, stands up and says "you got it boss" and leaves.

Chapter 2

The Talker And The Go Between

It was late evening and raining as Jackie and Tommy sat drinking at their usual hangout “Petey’s Upper Deck Bar”. Why in the world thought Tommy did they call a place “upper deck” that only had one floor and moreover there was no “deck”.



“Petey’s Upper Deck Bar”

Hey “Bitters” a couple more rounds when you have a chance but hurry up a smiling Tommy shouted to the bar keeper. “Bitters” was Ancel Parker’s nickname. A German who was not only the bartender but the owner of the bar that sat on the side street near Walnut & South Broad.

Actually, it was a dead end off of South 15th called Chancellor Ct. He was also known as toothpick because at almost 6 foot 2 he only weighed about 110 lbs. and his hair was always greasy.

He and Jackie became good friends, that was probably because they were both German and didn't put up with any crap from anyone. Ancel was known to carry a 5-inch knife & wasn't afraid to use it. As the story goes, he almost cut a guy's ear completely off when the guy was beating another patron.

Ancel's hands moved with the practiced grace of a seasoned conductor, orchestrating clinking glasses, swirling spirits, and the rhythmic tapping of a bar spoon against a stainless-steel shaker.

With his deep-set eyes and a stoic expression etched on his face, he was as much a fixture of "Petey's" as the oak bar itself. But what truly set him apart, what whispered beneath the surface of his quietude, was his love for cooking.

Every corner of the tiny flat above the tavern, his sanctuary, was draped in the enticing aromas of simmering stews, rising sourdough, and sizzling sausages. It was a love born in the rolling hills of Bavaria, nurtured by his Oma's calloused hands and the warmth of her laughter as she taught him the secrets of her family's recipes.

One particularly dreary Tuesday, as the rain lashed against the Petey's windows, a new melody entered Ancel's world. A young woman, barely out of her teens, slid onto a stool, her eyes wide with a nervous energy that clashed with the worn leather. Her order, a simple Pilsner, came out in a rushed whisper, barely audible over the din.

Ancel, with his keen observation, noticed the tremor in her hands, the way her gaze darted around the room, never settling. He placed the beer before her, the head a perfect, creamy crown.

A small smile, tentative as a newborn chick, flitted across her face. With a soft, almost hesitant voice, she asked, "Do you cook here?" Ancel, surprised by the question, simply gave a curt nod.

You smell like a cheese steak hoagie but "Do you...maybe make sausages?" she queried, her voice barely a whisper. A slow smile, genuine and warm, spread across Ancel's face. He leaned in, his voice hushed, "My Oma's recipe, with onions and sauerkraut."

And so, a silent pact was forged. Over plates of steaming sausages and crusty bread, stories tumbled out of the young woman, washing away the fear and uncertainty in her eyes.

She was a runaway, seeking refuge from a past too heavy to bear. Ancel, a man of few words, listened with his whole being, the warmth of his kitchen mirroring the unspoken empathy in his gaze.

That night, the rain slowed to a gentle drizzle, mirroring the shift in the young woman's spirit. As she stepped out into the dawn, a backpack filled with sausages and Ancel's silent support, she carried with her not just a full stomach, but a flicker of hope, rekindled in the warmth of a quiet man's love for cooking. Ancel, back behind the bar, wiped down a glass, his usual stoicism laced with a quiet satisfaction.

The symphony of the tavern continued, but now, within its familiar rhythm, throbbed a new melody, a delicate counterpoint composed of spices and shared stories, a testament to the magic that can bloom in the most unexpected places, nurtured by the silent language of food and kindness.

Bitters making sure no one noticed walked to the booth leaned over and said to Tommy “you need to go to the back room”.

Finally, Tommy exclaimed “the mouth finally made it here”. The “mouth” he referred to was Henry Wagner another German and close business friend of his and Jackie’s. The three were rarely seen together; when they did it was always at Tommy’s house, it always led to an adventure and more often to trouble.

Henry was a “talker” and once he got started it was hard to get a word in edgewise. It was often said he could sell hams in Israel; he was just that good and convincing. Henry was a big man, brown curly hair, at six foot four inches and pushing two hundred fifty pounds he definitely was intimidating.

He was a paradox in a rumpled suit. A walking whirlwind of contradictions, he could sell sand to a desert nomad, ice to an Eskimo, and a one-way ticket to Neptune with a twinkle in his eye. His charm was as slick as a snake oil salesman, but beneath it laid genuine empathy, a knack for understanding the deepest desires of those he met.

Henry was more than a salesman he was a true weaver of dreams and a merchant of miracles. Henry's true legacy wasn't the things he sold, but his ability to convince people not only trust him, but truly accomplish the thing they desired. And that, my friend, was a product worth buying, no matter the price.

Tommy as he approached the back room once again thought about his role as the “Go Between”.

In the business they were in Jackie was the man of action, Tommy's job was to keep Jackie isolated so he could not be connected to “the job”, and Henry was the only face the client ever saw.

Their motto was simple:

“You have to talk to the Guy”

“That talks to the Guy”

“That talks to Me”

Chapter - 3

The Back Room

As Tommy entered the dimly lit back room, there Henry sat bigger than life under a swinging overhead light at a small round table in the corner of the room.

There were only two chairs opposite each other and Tommy promptly sat down. With a smile on his face as it usually was Henry nodded at Tommy as he lit up another Chesterfield. Really Tommy, do you need to do that right now, Henry asks?

Henry, it took you five and half weeks, what in the world took so long?

As Henry slid a brown envelope across the table Henry exclaimed “Now-Now” Tommy, you know Jackie wants it right and tight.

Believe me this client is worth the effort although I had to continually give assurances as to the outcome.

What assurances? Is Jackie going to be pissed? Naw, once he sees what’s in the package, he’ll be fine with it.

Henry picked up his glass that still had a little bourbon left in it and said; “this broad” referring to the client who was hiring them is in my opinion overly cautious.

What took so long you ask, five damn meetings with our new client Ruth Manning Cole a beautiful blond bombshell that’s what! At the start of each of the five meetings she wanted to hear the assurances I promised. Every single meeting I had to recite “he will be physically punished but not maimed or disfigured”. She also is pushing to make him understand he’s done spending her money.

That’s the one part I haven’t figured out; how do we get it across to him to stop the spending without implicating her?

Ruth is a woman whose family had built an empire from the ground up but did not rely solely on their wealth alone. Her fortune continued to grow with the business skills she possessed. She is highly intelligent and knows her husband of 28 years was spending huge sums of money without a care.

Tommy, Henry says “have you ever heard of “Wawa”?”

Wawa’s success is due to Ruth’s family’s Quaker roots and her ancestors’ drive to constantly innovate. It was her great-grandfather, Audrey Manning, who first got into the dairy business, in the early 19 hundreds. Audrey’s grandson, Wilbur grew that business into the empire it is today by building the first brick-and-mortar Wawa store and the rest is hoagie history.

It’s his daughter and our client Ruth a “Temple-Grad” who oversees the operations of the now over 700 stores and who is responsible for doubling the “empires” wealth.

Ruth wasn’t born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but with a Wawa coffee cup clutched in her tiny little hand. Her family, the founders of the iconic convenience store chain, was practically Delaware County royalty.

Wawa is located in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, partially in Middletown Township and partially in Chester Heights Borough.

While her siblings reveled in trust funds, yachts and polo ponies, Ruth found her playground in dusty storerooms and cramped back offices. Numbers danced in her head like sugar plums; inventory lists were her bedtime stories and the hum of refrigerators her lullaby.

By 16, Ruth wasn't just stocking shelves; she was predicting stock trends, sniffing out profit margins like a bloodhound on a Hoagie trail. Her father, gruff and old-school, scoffed at her "spreadsheet sorcery," but the numbers spoke for themselves.

Wawa's bottom line, stagnant for years, began a gentle upward climb. Ruth, still a teenager in pigtails, became the family's unofficial financial guru.

College was a whirlwind of lectures on case studies Ruth already knew and professors who couldn't keep up with her financial gymnastics. She dropped out after a year, much to her family's horror, and went rogue. Borrowing against the family estate (much to her father's apoplectic sputtering); she acquired a struggling local chain of gas stations.

Within a year, she'd transformed them into mini-Wawas, complete with fresh-brewed coffee, hot food, and that signature orange glow.

Her success was a slap in the face to her skeptical family.

Suddenly, Ruth wasn't just the kid playing with numbers; she was the prodigy redefining the game. Her father, grudgingly impressed, invited her back into the fold. This time, not as a child to be humored, but as a strategist to be reckoned with.

Ruth, now steely-eyed and sharp-tongued, laid out her vision. Expansion. Innovation. Technology. She spoke of delivery apps, self-checkout lanes, and loyalty programs that would bind customers to Wawa like surfers to a perfect wave. Her family, still clinging to their brick-and-mortar mentality, balked. But Ruth was a force of nature now, unstoppable.

She spearheaded a pilot program in Tampa Bay, transforming a sleepy Wawa into a tech-driven haven. Self-ordering kiosks, AI-powered inventory management, and lightning-fast delivery drones took customers' jaws to the floor.

The pilot exploded, profits tripling in months. It was a domino effect. Soon, every Wawa sported Ruth's futuristic touch, becoming not just convenience stores, but community hubs, buzzing with activity 24/7.

Years later, Ruth sat at the head of the boardroom, the once-skeptical family now her loyal apostles. Wawa, under her reign, had doubled in size, become a national brand, and was on the cusp of an IPO.

As she sipped her signature black coffee, the scent of Wawa's success, a blend of fresh pastries and ambition, filled the air. This wasn't just her family's empire anymore. It was Ruth's legacy, built not on silver spoons, but on spreadsheets, grit, and a relentless love for that little convenience store with the big orange heart.

Henry now with deep furrows between his eyes and starring intensely at Tommy he says, “You better have a talk with Ancel”, you need to tell him the next client needs to not be so pushy! I’m sure whoever led her to Ancel knows she could be trusted and has the funds but “Bitters” needs to be more cautious.

Chapter - 4

The Client

Tommy returns to the bar with the package in his hands; tip his hat to Jackie signaling he was leaving and to meet him at the house.

When Jackie arrives Tommy is sitting in the "middle room"; the room that has only one entrance, no windows, and is check for "bugs" weekly; it the "Secure room".

Jackie sits down across the table from Tommy and says, "Go ahead, Open it up".

The package contains 500 \$100 dollar bills; that's \$50,000.00; and another \$25,000 for expenses.

Along with the bills a short but direct note:

"Physically punished but not maimed or disfigured" make him understand he's done spending my money.

The other half to be delivered to Mr. Henry upon completion.

Suddenly Tommy and Jackie hear what sounded like glass jingling; Tommy laughs and say don't worry" that just a big fat cat name Henry getting a beer out of my refrigerator!

Henry enters the "Middle Room" and hands Jackie and Tommie each a bottle of Long Neck Rolling Rock beer.

Henry sat down and with a smile begins providing a profile of Ruth's husband in a clear, organized way, including key details about his identity, background, personality, achievements, and interests.

Samuel, Ruth's husband, is a man carved from shadows and deceit, had woven a web of lies as intricate as his wife's success. He dipped his fingers in the hidden streams of her wealth, siphoning off funds without remorse a silent testament to his creeping greed.

The scent of pipe tobacco clung to Samuel like fog, a constant shroud around his deceit. His smile, once as warm as sun on baked bread, now chilled Ruth to the bone. His charming tales of faraway investments and booming businesses were nothing but cobwebs spun by a spider in disguise.

Years ago, Samuel had wooed Ruth with whispers of adventure and promises of a life richer than the crimson velvet lining their home.

She had built a comfortable haven, unaware of the termites he secretly bred beneath the floorboards. Ruth, trusting and blind, poured her inheritance into his "ventures," each one more fantastical than the last.

She had told Henry in one of her many meetings that it began subtly, a missing \$1000 here, a delayed remittance there. Ruth brushed it aside, attributing it to the fickle hand of fortune. But the cracks widened, the gaps growing like hungry mouths in their dwindling bank accounts.

One evening, a telegram arrived, a terse missive from a Florida merchant. Samuel, it seemed, had "borrowed" funds against nonexistent investments, leaving them adrift in a sea of debt. Ruth's world, meticulously crafted by his lies, shattered like a dropped porcelain doll.

His eyes, once twinkling with mischief, dimmed into pools of regret, or perhaps that was just the flicker of the dying coals in the fireplace.

He confessed, but his apologies were as hollow as the empty coffers. No grand gesture of remorse, no promise of restitution, just a whimper of a man facing the storm he'd conjured.

She confronted him; her voice was stern with each word a chipping away at his deceit. But Samuel a master of deception, spun tales of bad investments and market fluctuations, his eyes pools of innocence.

Yet, Ruth was no fool. She played his game, a silent predator stalking her prey. She feigned ignorance, her smile a mask of acceptance, even as she meticulously gathered evidence.

After years of being together she didn't want Samuel cast out but needed to teach him a lesson and to stop his arrogant misuse of her fortune. Ruth had grown tired of the whispers, the looks, the gossip of friends and business associates about "Poor Ruth" having an egotistic husband who is always "the life of the party" at her expense.

What was even worse was looking up at the mammoth portraits of her grandfather and Father and thinking "they are truly looking down upon me".

She wanted him punished but didn't know how until she confided her troubles to a young girl who worked in her office.

Cheryl who worked as the Office mail clerk had always been pleasant to Ruth and never asked for anything. One afternoon as Cheryl was delivering mail to Ruth's office, she observed that Ruth was in obvious distress and asked if there was anything she could do.

Ruth overwhelmed and trusting Cheryl poured her heart out about her devious husband after making her promise not to speak of it. Ruth over and over repeated that she just didn't know what to do or where to turn.

Cheryl reluctantly and quietly said she might know of a person who might be of help; his name was Ancel and gave Ruth his address after she asked Ruth to promise not to tell anyone where she got the information.

Cheryl had previously worked at Petey's Upper Deck Bar for Ancel and suspected there was more to the bar than sausages and cheese steak sandwiches. Cheryl had no regrets for leaving the bar and was great full for the job Ruth gave her and how well she was treated.

It was several weeks later and after Samuel came home drunk saying he was going to have to purchase a new car because he had totaled his "Benz".

"It wasn't my fault" his speech was slurred but managed to say "I know that driver had to have run through the red light crashing into my car, I'm telling you he is a buddy of the Officer who sited me for being at fault."

Ruth thought about how infuriating she became and angry she became when he laughed and said "well I didn't like that "Benz" anyway".

As rule followed her business principles, she weighted the pros and cons, once her decision was made, she followed through.

The following evening Ruth found herself on Chancellor Ct. reaching for the handle on "Petey's Bar Door." Ruth with heart pounding and hands shaking thought to herself "do I really want to do this, what happens if something goes wrong?" What am I doing? I need to walk away from this; "NO" he's got to be stopped and I have no other choice! Ruth pulls the door open and walks briskly and purposely into the bar.

Seated at the end of the long ornate bar she orders a Manhattan and says "if you are Ancel I need you help". Ancel explained that he would be in contact with a fellow he knew and that she would be getting a call from a man who goes by the name of "Henry."

Henry continued to tell Tommy and Jacike, Ruth's nerves hummed like a live wire, a constant vibration that kept her on edge. It wasn't that she didn't know what she wanted but at every meeting it started the same.

Ruth made me promise that the actions taken would only be what she was willing to pay for and demanded! It seemed that she rehearsed every line that came out of her mouth and it was full of "what ifs" and "maybes."

But beneath the layers of caution, Henry recognized there was a flicker of defiance. A part of Ruth craved the exhilaration of leaping into the unknown without a safety net.

I'm sure it was terrifying for her and yes there was a storm raging within her. Her fear wasn't paralyzing and she was full of determination.

Henry now with a grin on this plump face says to boys across the table "when I spoke about the compensation all Ruth said was "that won't be a problem" and at tonight's meeting she handed me that big fat envelope.

Laughing Henry said "Tommy, I knew you wouldn't open the package until you were with Jackie but I wanted you be sure to be careful; didn't want you to mis-place it."

And "Oh by the way; "I can assure you it's right and non-refundable"

Chapter – 5

The Deal And The Details

When Tommy merged from the back room he nodded to Bitters and said, “Let’s talk tomorrow”. Ansel with a puzzled and with a concerned look nodded that he understood. Ansel knew something transpired in the backroom between Henry and Tommy and it involved him.

Tommy headed straight for the front door and Jackie would soon follow. As they walked together on Walnut Street Tommy handed the brown envelope that Henry gave him to Jackie and said “Really interesting”; that could only mean there was a story to tell on this job. Tommy cleared his throat and said I’ll see you at my place.

Jackie dove home after the meet with Tommy and waiting for Jackie with a smile on her face and a drink in her hand was April Gordon.

Jackie’s close friend. As he entered the house he said, “Alley” we’re invited over Tommy’s to play cards tomorrow night and April smiled and nodded that she understood what he was saying; the job was at hand and details needed to be discussed.

Sharply at 6pm without a knock on the door it opened suddenly and it was obvious that someone inside had watched them approach. It was Denise and she greeted and welcomed them in. They followed Denise into the “Middle Room” a room that had only one door and there were no windows to be seen. There, sat Henry with Tommy who immediately said, “We took the time to sweep up”. That of course meant the house and especially that room was checked for listening devices; it was clean.

In the center of the room was a large round table surrounded by five soft leather chairs.

With everyone seated Henry began to explain the job at hand detailing once again the background on the client.

It was none other than “Manning Street” the old family home passed down from one generation to the next where Ruth Manning Cole lived. One of the larger meticulous cared for homes in the posh Rittenhouse Square district of Philadelphia. Rittenhouse Square is a charming and vibrant neighborhood in Center City Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It's named after the beautiful park at its heart, one of the five original squares William Penn envisioned when he founded the city.

The crown jewel of the neighborhood is, of course, Rittenhouse Square Park. This picturesque green space is a haven for locals and visitors alike, offering lush lawns and mature trees, perfect for picnics, sunbathing, or reading a book.

It has a central plaza with a reflecting pool and sculptures, providing a serene escape from the city bustle, events like farmers' markets, festivals, and concerts.

Surrounding the park, you'll find elegant high-rise apartments, historic townhouses, and charming boutique hotels. Rittenhouse Row, along Walnut Street, is a shopper's paradise, lined with upscale clothing stores, art galleries, and trendy cafes.

Numerous fine dining restaurants cater to discerning palates, offering diverse cuisines from around the world. Cultural institutions like the Philadelphia Art Alliance, the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Rosenbach Belle Epoqueum & Library add intellectual depth to the area.

Rittenhouse Square is known for its sophisticated yet welcoming atmosphere.

Young professionals, families, and retirees all call the neighborhood home, creating a diverse and energetic community. The park serves as a central gathering place, where people come together to relax, socialize, and enjoy the outdoors.

There was no other place in Philadelphia that the Manning Empire belonged; after all they were known as Delaware County Royalty.

Henry said “I won’t waste your time telling you about the frustrating meeting I had with our client other than she has no problem with funds we require. The only thing she insisted on was the degree of the actions taken.

As usual it was husband problems but not what you might think. Samuel Cole her husband had no regard for money and was spending her family’s fortune like it was water. Ruth kept her maiden name because of her heritage and business needs.

Henry continued to say, as I previously told Tommy & Jackie “She wants him physically punished, insists that he not be maimed or disfigured but somehow she wants him to know he’s done spending her money”.

That’s one issue we all need to figure out, how to make him fear spending without implicating her.

I’ve done some preliminary background gathering and in addition to the property on Manning Street, Henry continues as all eyes at the table are on him.

They have a little vacation home at 621 S Pacific Ave Ocean City Maryland it’s on the water and just might be the right place to take any action. I suggest that Tommy and Denise take a look and see what they think. It’s only about a three- and half-hour drive and round trip you could do it in a day.

Without stopping to sip his bourbon Henry than says, “April, you and Jackie could stay at the Princess Royale Oceanfront Resort which is within walking distance to the Pacific Ave address”. That would provide a great alibi; “lovers on vacation”.

Tommy seeing the glare in Jackie's eyes spoke up quickly saying loudly "what about transportation"?

Tommy was changing the subject as he knew Henry was clueless to the relationship between Jackie and April and also knew Jackie might easily get pissed and bestow a salvo of punches on "The Tubby Boy".

Henry thinking about what he had just said nervously said "The Trax" (Amtrak train) could get you there in about five hours riding in first class seats. A rental car is an option as well if you don't want to make all those train stops on the way.

Jackie spoke up and said "the train sounds good"; with that Henry breathed a sigh of relief. April chimed in saying she would begin to work on an alibi. Jackie then turned to Denice saying you know the type of hardware I'll need for this type of job so get to it and Tommy go and get me lots of pictures of the area. Henry, find out when he's going to be there and I'll want good weather information.

Denise spoke up and said she had a suggestion that might keep Ruth from being implicated.

Leave a message after the task is done saying “We’ve watched you and there are a lot of us”, it’s pathetic the way you treat your wife and the way you spend her money is sickening. Keep spending and it will be a lot worse next time”.

Jackie then said “It needs to be Stronger”; and Denise replied, Ok “you won’t survive the next time”.

“I like it”, said Jackie.

It was silent for a moment then Jackie passed out five brown envelopes each containing a share of the fee.

In this case the amount was 500 thousand shared and another 25 thousand to cover all expenses.

The fees were broken out by percentages of risk:

Jackie 50% or \$250K taking action

Henry 35% of the remainder or \$87,5005 thousand for the face to face with the client

Tommy 30% of the remainder or \$48,750 as the go between

April "Alley" 20% of the remainder or \$22,750 for providing the alibi

Denise 20% of the remaining or \$18,200 being the carrier of the tools Jackie needs for the job

Ansel 10% of the remaining or \$7,280 for being the client point of contact

The remaining \$65,520 and what ever is left over of the \$25,000 for expenses would go into an account they all equally owned.

There was no one at the table that would question the split.

Chapter – 6

The Beginning

Now back at Jackie's house April and seeing Jackie was in a good mood began to ask how in the world his dangerous life began; was it revenge for something that happened to you or was it because someone made you do it, she asked?

Nah, it was nothing like that I just need money. I kept seeing everyone around me getting ahead and buying whatever they wanted. No matter how hard I worked I just couldn't be satisfied. I wasn't about to rob a bank, breaking into a house, or beat up some old lady for money.

Jackie began by telling April "One day I was sitting on the bench in the subway tunnel waiting on the 7 train and this guy sits down next to me and says "hey bud you look like you need a job". I looked at him without saying a word and he knew not to screw with me. He said look I've got money and I'll pay you good. I didn't say anything first but then said "what's the job and how much"?

He looked around to make sure no one could hear what he was about to say and then said “I’ve got an old house I need burnt to the ground and I want to collect the insurance.” If you’ll do it, I give you \$500 right now and when it’s done, I’m give you \$500 more when I see you back here; what do say?

I simply replied “money and address and I’ll get it done”.

April, I had just turned seventeen and this was my first job, and with a smile said “well that kind of job anyway”.

The wind howled like a banshee, whipping flames into frenzy as they devoured the old Victorian house on 646 E Cheltenham Ave. My plan was simple, fill a bunch of plastic trash bags with gasoline and torch the abandoned eyesore, then go collect the rest of the money. But something had gone wrong, terribly wrong.

As I stood in the doorway throwing the lighter onto the big bag of gas, I really didn’t expect it to blow up in my face. I hadn’t anticipated the explosion, the searing heat that licked my skin, the force that sent me soaring through the air like a ragdoll.

I lay there, gasping for breath, the echo of the blast ringing in my ears, the stench of burnt wood clinging to my clothes. My face was a mask of soot and fear, as I stumbled out of the inferno, thrown clear by a sudden, thunderous explosion. I landed hard on the rain-slicked asphalt, adrenaline masking the pain for a moment.

Sirens wailed in the distance, growing louder with each passing second. Panic surged through me and all I could do is think about getting away, disappear before the flames revealed my handiwork. But my body just wouldn't cooperate. My legs were jelly, my lungs burned, and a searing pain throbbed in shoulder.

As I struggled to my feet, a figure materialized from the smoke, a dark silhouette against the fiery backdrop. Officer Milligan, a man I vaguely remember from my childhood, his face grim and shadowed. "Jackie" Milligan's voice cut through the chaos, a question hanging heavy in the air. Denial wouldn't work, not with the evidence swirling around me like ashes in the wind. "It wasn't me," I rasped, my voice barely a whisper. Milligan's gaze, sharp as a hawk's, pierced through the lie.

"There were reports of someone seen near the house before the fire," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

As the fire trucks arrived, bathing the street in flashing red and white, I watched the inferno consume the house. The flames, once a symbol of money, now danced with a chilling uncertainty. I knew I would face the consequences of my actions, whatever they may be, and yet all I could think of was how was I going to get the rest of my money.

I had spent six months in County jail before I went before the Judge. Six months because of an inept public defender. This guy was so useless, he's the one they ought to lock up for just plain being dumb.

Judge Menkey was old and defiantly looked tough; he asked "did you sent that fire"? I replied no sir I just saw the flames and ran to the door to see what was going on.

With a scowl on his face, he said it's "No Judge" or No Your Honor"!

Then he turned to the lead prosecutor and asked “where are your witnesses?” Seeing no one and with a a bigger scowl on the Judges face he asked Officer Milligan “what did he say when you arrived”?

Your Honor, he said he didn’t do it.

Judge Menkey turned to the bailiff and said “get him the hell out of my court, he’s free to go!

Ironically the one good thing that happened while Jackie was in lockup was that Tommy Taylor was in for fighting and the two of them got closer over their six months stay.

Chapter – 7

It Was Time

Part of the agreement Henry had made with Ruth was that she was to keep Henry aware of Samuel's movements. It was critical that his whereabouts were known at all times, especially if he was planning any trips.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when Henry received a message from Ancel saying his order was ready and he should pick it up before it spoiled. That was a clear sign of information from Ruth.

Hurriedly Henry rushed to pick up the package and then pass on the information to Tommy.

There it was, Samuel was headed for Ocean City on the 8th of August and he would be there for at least one week. There was a luxury car show there that he wanted to attend. Jackie had said it would be great if he could be there a few days ahead of his arrival, which would help throw off any suspicion as to why he was in town when certain actions took place.

The journey began at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station, a grand Beaux-Arts structure with a soaring glass and steel atrium. Jackie and April boarded the Amtrak Silver Meteor, sleek and stainless steel, and settled into their spacious 1st class seats, admiring the plush carpeting and comfortable legroom.

As the train pulls away, Philadelphia's iconic skyline fades into the distance. The train sped through the leafy suburbs of Pennsylvania, past Amish farms and rolling hills. Soon, they were hurtling through the bustling metropolises of Baltimore and Washington D.C., catching glimpses of towering skyscrapers and bustling streets.

Crossing into the Carolinas, the landscape transforms. Lush greenery gives way to vast stretches of coastal plains and marshlands. Spot graceful Spanish moss draping ancient oaks and playful dolphins frolicking in the azure waters. The pace slows as the train meanders through charming Southern towns, each with its own unique character.

As the sun dips towards the horizon, painting the sky in fiery hues, the anticipation mounts. Palm trees come into view, swaying gently in the warm breeze. The air thickens with the scent of saltwater and tropical flowers. Finally, the train pulls into Miami's bustling station, greeted by the vibrant energy of this sun-kissed city.

But the journey is more than just the changing scenery. It's a chance to unwind and recharge.

Strike up conversations with fellow passengers, enjoy a leisurely meal in the dining car, and even more important to establish witnesses to a couple heading for a great vacation.

They checked into the Princess Royal Oceanfront Resort and that evening sat and enjoyed drinks at the bar near the pool.

Denise had already checked into the Shangri La Motel a few blocks away and was making sure she was seen lounging by the pool. Denise reclines on a poolside lounger, her vibrant green bikini a beacon against the turquoise water. The two-piece suit hugs her curves, the emerald hue emphasizing her sun-kissed skin.

Tiny straps rest on her shoulders, framing her neck and drawing attention to her delicate collarbones. Her dark hair, damp from a recent swim, cascades down her back in loose waves. Shimmering droplets cling to her lashes, catching the sunlight like scattered diamonds. A pair of oversized sunglasses perch on her nose, their dark lenses hiding the mischief dancing in her eyes. Her lips, curved in a contented smile, are the color of a ripe strawberry, a stark contrast to the mint green of her suit.

As she stretches out, her long legs emerge, toned and tanned, and her bare feet wiggle against the warm concrete. The gentle clink of her poolside bangle adds a touch of musicality to the scene.

She kept an eye on the room she had making sure no one would see what she had stored there.

She would soon move the items needed to a locker at the train station that she and Tommy had secured weeks ago. The duplicate key and lock number had already been given to April. Light rain was expected the night of the 10th and Jackie thought it would provide the right opportunity to begin the planned operation.

April and Jackie had been there for three days enjoying the pool, the beach and the daily walks taking different routes going by the Pacific Ave address. Surveying the area Jackie decided the best way to take aggressive action would be to be in the house when Samuel returned from his late-night escapade.

Jackie also walked by at night just to see if he could hear any barking dogs or people roaming around, but none were seen or heard. So, there it was he would enter through the screen at the rear lanai and then jimmy the back door and wait.

On the evening of the 10th Jackie's girl April armed with a picture of Samuel walked around the automotive show listening but looking for any sign of Samuel.

April stopped abruptly, there he was flashing his diamond rings and watch trying to impress the Bentley salesman; April immediately sent a text to Jackie saying "hurry down I'll see you in the lounge". That was the signal Jackie was waiting for and now it was time for him to make his move.

Jackie had already picked up a curly brown wig, brass knuckles, and a heavy cane from the locker at the Train station. He left behind the baseball bat, cattle prod, and a few other items he decided would be necessary.

Paying close attention to any actions in the neighborhood Jackie quickly walked up the drive then down the side of the house to the rear lanai. As Jackie passed the window, he made sure and saw no one inside. Quickly cutting through the screen and then to his surprise he found the back door unlocked. Now inside Jackie sat quietly waiting for Samuel to return.

As Jackie sat there in the dark he thought about how he made sure he had nothing on him that would lead to his identification; even throwing the burner phone away that April had texted him on. Jackie smiled as he knew she would have dumped the burner she used as well.

Although it had been three hours since Jackie entered the house it seemed that he had just got there when he heard the familiar noise of a garage door opening. Jackie had prepared for light coming on and had already removed the hall light bulb near to door to the garage.

He had also prepared himself mentally in the event more than one person walked through that door. Jackie first hears the car engine stop, and then heard the garage door creaking and rattling as it closed. Next was the sound of keys jingling, the dead bolt sliding, and the door squeaking as it opened.

It was over in an instant; it was only Samuel who walked in and was quickly knocked out from the strike of a heavy cane to the back of his neck. He moaned as he was repeatedly struck with blows from brass knuckles to his head and body. His face quickly became swollen and he blacked out when his arm was bent until broken. He never felt or heard the crack of his leg.

Jackie sat and rested for about a half hour before leaving the same way he came in. As he sat there Jackie stared at the note that he had pinned to Samuel's bloody chest

Jackie wondered if the message that Denise had suggested would be enough to throw Samuel off the scent of his wife's involvement.

By the time he made it back to the Hotel the wig, knuckles, and cane were gone. April had left a room key card near the side entrance door under a plant, and Jackie in short time had showered and was on his way to join April in the lounge.

They sat, drank listened to the piano player by the pool bar and talked briefly with guests nearby. The following morning Ruth made a call that had been prearranged by Henry to the local Ocean City Police Department asking them to check on her husband since she hadn't heard from him for two days.

Samuel was still unconscious as the ambulance roared into the emergency hospital parking lot. A day later he awoke and as he looked around found himself laying in a sterile white room. The label on the door read 308 and his body felt like a battlefield of aches.

A cast encased his leg like a cocoon, his arm a rigid sling against his chest. The attack, swift and brutal, remained a hazy nightmare.

He remembered pulling into the garage and the roads were slick from a recent downpour. Beyond that nothing could be recalled only the searing pain that had swallowed him whole.

Now only the echoing silence of the hospital room was punctuated by the steady beep of the heart monitor, marking the slow march of recovery.

It had been at least a week with only hospital staff coming in and out of his room; sparingly a very cold call from Ruth asking if he needed anything. It was now the fourth week and Samuel sat on the edge of his hospital bed and was waiting for the Doctors release. His leg and arm were still immobilized but the swelling of his face had subsided. He was anxious to leave, return home and try to return to a normal life.

It was afternoon when he heard a hesitant tap on the door and Samuel quickly said please come in thinking he was about to be released.

But no, it was a young girl delivering a package saying a nice lady down stairs asked her to bring the box it to room 308. He thanked her as she left closing the door behind her.

It was a small box with a label on it with the name "Samuel".

Inside was a note with letters that had been cut out of a Philadelphia newspaper saying:

“Remember we are watching”

“Keep spending and you’ll not survive the next one”!

Samuel shuddered and thought about the police questioning him about the note that was pinned to his chest.

He shuddered again, closed his eyes and all he could think was:

“Who are these people”?

Chapter - 8

There's Always a First Time

Henry's cover job is a freelance salesman for several wine & alcohol distributors in Philly and even north to Valley Forge. While most people thought he is was connected to the mob he was not. Jackie's rule and it was law "do not bring them in to our business; if you do, you're out".

There had been a couple of times when Henry was approached by connected members and in his usual style Henry convinced them that the guy he knew was nowhere near their level of the type of service they were looking for and was really just small potatoes.

Make no doubt about it Henry is known as the first point of contact if someone needs special actions taken. They also know he will check their story and background out before moving forward. In the last five years only once did a client found to be lying and the end result was that client became the target.

Henry made sure everyone knew about that too and often said "nothing works like good advertising".

Henry always brought the job to Tommy and always met him in the back room of Ancel's bar. Ancel had never seen Henry face and when he got the call about a special delivery, he merely would unlock the Bar's back door and messaged Tommy about the time the delivery will be made.

It was during a very cold spell and in the middle of January when Henry looked across the table and saw Tommy take a deep breath at what he had just heard.

The job he had just negotiated was dead serious and very lucrative. The job was all about a large sum of money being owed to the client by a very wealthy Lawyer. Our client insists on remaining anonymous and he has agreed to 50% of any of his money that's recovered.

The brown envelope that sits on this table contains \$45,000 and the amount owed is \$750,000.00.

It was Mathew Sands of the Wealth Management Firm of Sands, Shill, & Porter who bilked our client out of his money over the past ten years.

Our client also said she wouldn't mind hearing that Mr. Sands suffered a little pain as well.

Tommy was thinking as he came out of "Bitters" back room, that this job is not going to fly with Jackie!

To his surprise after he gave Jackie a brief description of the job and passed the brown envelope to Jackie, Jackie just said "ok, figure out how we're going to do it".

It had already been six weeks that passed as Tommy was getting close to having all of the information from the deep dive into the background and habits of "Mr. Greedy Lawyer"; the name Sands was tagged with by April.

Tommy had compiled a complete dossier on Sands, where he lived, where his Office was located, what time he left his home for his job. It also contained when he went to the gym, was he married, did he have kids, and what bars did he frequent. Additional information provided if he has a girlfriend, or perhaps a boyfriend, who he socialized with, generally where did he come from, and most important where did he keep his money!

It was verified that Sands had been married only once and for about 21 years; no children, definitely had a couple of special bar hangouts and absolutely liked girls. Wouldn't say for sure that he was having affairs but he loved to flirt, tease, and make them laugh.

Eight thirty sharp everyday he would be on the road to the office driving his bright yellow Porsche Cayenne SUV, it was only on Thursdays that he was observed working late into the evening at the Office.

It was well known general knowledge that he would fire staff if he thought they weren't working hard or fast enough. He even fired the night cleaning crew when he saw one of them eating an apple and another yawning. He was defiantly born as they say, with a silver spoon in his mouth. Some would even say he probable had a gold one up his butt; family money had to have played a part in getting his Law degree.

Of the three partners of the firm Sands, Shill, & Porter it was Dennis Shill who was probably the most honest and didn't care for some of the tactics Sands used.

Bill Porter didn't care either way and looked the other way when Sands was engaged unfairly with a client. All three were graduates of Rutgers and all three held degrees in Law. Both Shill and Sands struggled to pass the bar and scoffed at Porter since he passed the first time. Porter was also the only one who was an athlete during his college years playing for the Scarlet Knights as the 1st baseman and was an average hitter.

In preparation to what was to come Denise had been playing her part hanging out of one of the bars the target frequented but so far, he's only winked and waved, no conversation as of yet.

Tommy had been checking out the house as well as the Office building trying to figure out the best way in. Even Henry was asked to try and figure out where these high rollers keep their dough.

April had a little luck when she got a thirty-minute free consultation with one of the partners. Under the pretext she wanted to be sure that he would fight for her and because her Ex-husband had cheated her out of money from the sale of their home. Mr. Shill she asked, "How can I be sure my cashier's check will be safe with you?"

His response was “Oh Mrs. Gordon you don’t have to worry we protect your funds in our Office safe until the Bank Guard collects it.”

“Bingo – great information”

Well, there it was the opening that they needed. The plan was coming together. It would happen at the Office on a Thursday night and whatever was in that safe Mr. Sands would grudgingly hand it over. The only thing left was to figure out how to get Jackie in and out without being seen.

Sunday evenings were the time when all the players got together to provide updates to actions, they were assigned and to discuss future needs to move the project forward.

As they gathered about the big round table Denise began by telling everyone that she had a break through with “Mr. Greedy”. She said, Sands finally offered her a drink and they sat and talked for almost two hours. Of course, he made sure I knew he was this all-powerful attorney with a huge office on the twenty seventh floor.

“I laughed”, Denise said, “Saying she would probably get a nose bleed if she had to ride the elevator that high”. He laughed too saying “just wait until the finish the construction on the thirty second; that’s where our new offices will be”.

She was surprised that he didn’t pry or was in anyway attempting to find anything about her, just a fun and pleasant conversation. He took a call on his cell and when it ended, he thanked me and said it was time for him to go.

Tommy piped in and said “That’s exactly the piece of the puzzle we needed”. Now we need to figure out how to get you, pointing to Jackie, to the construction floor on a Thursday night with the tools you need.

All construction workers are gone by six thirty and using the stairwell you can reach the twenty seventh without being seen. With that Henry clearing his throat says “well that’s all good but how are you going to find the safe let alone open it?”

That's when Jackie said, "Listen, over the last six to eight weeks the mark has always been there; I'll just ask nicely and have him open it."

The room erupted in laughter and didn't stop for at least a solid ten minutes.

It won't be a problem getting you up to the construction site. There's a construction buck hoist on the rear of the building. "A buck what April asks?" It's a temporary electric powered little elevator that the workers use to get to the job site.

It was five days later that April stepped off the train in Ocean City Maryland. She and a companion both wearing heavy coats and hats hailed a cab and were taken to the Princess Royal where April had made reservations for the two of them. It was the same hotel that she and Jackie had stayed at for the job Ruth Manning had hired him for.

Denise pulled the car over near the Temple University Campus on North 15th Street. Jackie and Henry quickly got out and walked to the alley behind the Law Offices and Wealth Management Firm of Sands, Shill, & Porter.

It wasn't the first time that Henry had to do more than sell a job and as Jackie said "You need to get your hands dirty this time".

In no time Henry had the lock snapped off and Jackie was on his way up to the thirty second floor. Meanwhile Denise had to only make one trip around the block before she found Henry waiting to be picked up.

Jackie quickly and quietly moved down the stairway to the twenty seventh. He first by passed the electrical contact on the door before opening it, had he not crippled the contact the security desk in the lobby would have been alerted. There were large double oak doors at every office entrance and the walls and floor were all cream-colored marble.

Jackie could hear someone talking coming from the last Office door on the right and as he approached he heard "No that's not a problem I meet you there as soon as I finish up here".

Once he knew the call had ended Jackie entered the room and found "Mr. Greedy" sitting behind his huge ornamental desk.

His eyes were as big as silver dollars and his mouth was open big enough to swallow a softball. Jackie in full face mask was pointing his 22 caliber semi-automatic fitted with a silencer that makes it look like a cannon directly at Sands forehead.

The next words Sands heard were “Move, Open the safe, or die”

The next thing “Mr. Greedy” heard was “NOW”!

Sands soon had the safe open and was pulling out several what appeared to be Rolex Watches, several diamond rings and 3 necklaces full of diamonds. As Jackie watched he could see a number of brown boxes stacked inside the large safe.

“Pull those out he commanded.”

“Oh Christ” Sands gasps”

“Open one of those”! Commands Jackie!

Sands cried out “Just take all the jewelry”

Jackie puts the gun to his head and says

“Open”

With his hands shaking he opened one of the small boxes and small gold bars fall to the floor.

Jackie then told Sands to move to a sofa that was on the opposite wall and not to move, if he wanted to continue to breathe.

As Jackie started counting the number of boxes he heard the movement of Sands. As Jackie turned, he saw Sands pulling a chrome plated revolver from his waist band; “clack, clack, clack” the sounds coming from Jackie’s silencer.

"The suppressed HK gave off a flat, hollow thud, followed immediately by the rhythmic clack-slick of the bolt."

Then there was silence and their lay Sands one hole in his cheek, one in his forehead and one in his chest. All wounds were streaming blood.

So, there it was

“The First Time”

Jackie quickly loaded 10 boxes into a back pack he had under his coat and then neatly place the jewelry back into the safe and turned the dial to make sure it was locked.

Then he quietly and swiftly scurried down 27 flights to ground floor into the below ground parking deck, up the ramp, and onto the street.

It would be about a two block walk south on 15th to the car that would be waiting for him with Henry and Denise who had nervously been waiting and anxious to see him.

As he walked and made his way toward the people who were waiting for him his mind played the scene on the 27th floor over and over.

All he could think of was:

“There’s always a First Time”

Jackie got into the backseat and the first thing he said was “Change of plans”. “Take me to “Royal”, use the burner and tell them I’m coming.

Denise and Henry knew by the look on Jackie's face and the tone in his voice that they needed not to question just do as requested and drive.

The car pulled over about a block from the Princess Royal and April and Tommy got in. Without saying a word Tommy changed jackets and hat with Jackie. Jackie handed the back pack to Tommy and said he would be in touch in a couple of days.

Jackie and April got out and walked back to the hotel.

The following day the local news was broadcasting a police investigation of a murder in downtown Philadelphia. Mathew Sands of "Sands Shill and Porter" was the victim and the police had not ruled out robbery, but were asking for the public to call if they had seen anything suspicious in the previous two days.

Tommy, Denise and Henry sat around the big round table wondering when they would hear from Jackie. They also knew what really went down was a first for Jackie and they all wondered how he was coping.

They know that Jackie is a tough street-smart guy but this was his first kill and it has to be tough even on a tough guy.

They had counted the number of gold bars; there were 40 bars in each box and there were 10 boxes. Each 1oz. bar of gold was worth approximately \$5,300.00 so the total value was \$2 million 120 thousand.

All three stared at each other and then counted again. All three agreed “Mr. Greedy” was an idiot to keep those bars in his safe.

Henry exclaimed “It’s the Silas Marner effect”; a term used in literary analysis to describe the process of a person moving from a state of total material obsession to one of social reintegration and emotional warmth. Henry goes on to say “It is named after the protagonist of George Eliot’s 1861 novel, *Silas Marner*, a weaver who loses his faith in humanity, isolates himself, and hoards gold.

Tommy looks at Henry and utters, “Jesus”

It was only after several shots of bourbon and the fourth count that Tommy announced he would discretely turn those bars into cash and would make sure their client received what was due to him.

Everything else would be on hold until Jackie was sitting at the round table.

Chapter – 9

The Package

It had been several days before Jackie ventured out of his hotel room and then it was only to the hotel bar. He and April talked about taking a trip farther south. That was a clear indication Jackie was not ready to go back to “Philly”.

April suggested Miami saying it was sure to be a lot warmer than Ocean City. Jackie said “I don’t care where we go just make it happen, let them know, referring to his crew, and see if you can find out any news.”

It was a short flight to Miami International and a warm ride to the hotel in BAL Harbor. April picked a black Cadillac escalade and booked an ocean front room at the Sea View BAL Harbor hotel. On the ride from the airport Jackie looked at April and said “Are you out of your mind”?

“The car cost more per day than the room!”

She laughed and said you need to read the text from Denise that I got on the burner.

The text read “The umpires are the only ones striking out” and even their best is pitching a no hitter! Hope you are doing great and there are “millions” and I do mean “millions” waiting to see you when you get back home.

That text meant the police and their best detective didn’t have a clue what happened to “Mr. Greedy” and the score must have been huge!

While sitting at the hotel bar Jackie overheard a couple talking and laughing about a comedy club at the Villain Theater they were at the night before. He told April “We ought to go” our short walks on the beach seem to be getting shorter and shorter!

April was extremely pleased to hear Jackie wanting to go out which meant he was getting back to normal. She knew that even though he had no choice; taking a person’s life has to be very hard.

The Escalade was left locked in a self-parking deck only a half a block from the Theater. The evening was warm and as they walked toward the flashing neon signs above the entrance doors April could finally feel at ease knowing Jackie had made peace for what he was responsible for.

As they were being seated the waiter informed them that all tables were tables of four and another couple would be joining them. Jackie attempted to pay the waiter to leave the other seats at their table empty but the waiter apologized saying all seats had been sold out and there was nothing he could do.

Seconds later a waitress ushered another couple to their table.

As the short stocky dark curly hair guy started to sit-down he stuck out his hand and said “Hey I’m Danny and this is my Wife Rita.” Danny & Rita Malo from Cleveland glad to meet ya!

Rita a tall red head with the biggest smile Jackie had seen in years and her breasts were close to popping out of her dress. She had her hand out to April as she said “I’m happy to meet ya”.

Next words out of Danny’s mouth “We here on a little business and a lot of pleasure” and at which Rita burst out laughing. Danny gave a curious look at Rita and then went on to say I’m a salesman. Who have we got the pleasure of meeting?

Jackie looked this guy over and thought “Salesman my ass”; and then says “Well I’m Jackie and this is April and I’m here for work; I’m a “Cage Fighter” and have a big fight tomorrow night!

Then it was April’s turn to bust out laughing; Danny’s eyes and mouth were as big as grapefruits and he was stiff as a board starring at Jackie.

It was at that moment Jackie busted out laughing and said “Naw, I’m joking” we are here on a little vacation from Philly and I’ve been a postal worker my whole life.”

Danny jumped to his feet, his face was as red as Rita’s hair and he began shouting, “Oh my God, you got me, you got me; “waiter” “waiter” bring these two whatever the hell they want and give me the bill.”

He yelled again “whatever they want the rest of the night you put it on my tab!”

At that point the whole table burst out laughing.

The more Jackie said he didn't want anything the more Danny insisted and begged to allow him to treat them saying he loved that Jackie fooled him.

“You said it with such a straight face I totally believed you.”

The comedy show was good and the two couples hit it off and enjoyed each other's company. Danny and Jackie shared a couple of rounds of Wild Turkey while the girls had a couple of umbrella drinks. The entire evening went on without a hitch and no one tried to delve into each other's private lives.

When the lights came up and the comedy acts were over Danny suggested they all go back to the hotel he was staying at for a few more drinks and more laughs.

Jackie saw that April was having a great time and said sure and since you came in a cab let's all go; I'll drive I've got a rental.

As they approached the Escalade Danny said, “Holly shit I didn’t know postman made that kind of money.”

April covered for Jackie and said “Danny, we were supposed to get an “Econo” but Hertz was out of little cars and gave us this instead; how about that for being lucky?”

As they sat at the hotel bar drinking Danny kept looking at Jackie and Jackie knew something was coming. And then it came; “Jackie “out of Danny’s mouth “I was wondering if I could ask you to do me a favor”?”

“Since you live in Philly I’ve got a couple of packages I need to deliver to some friends of mine; if you could get it there I will be in your debt and I definitely will make it worth your while.

It was at that moment Jackie knew what he had been thinking all along; salesman my ass he’s “connected.” Jackie looking directly at Danny replied “let me think about it and we’ll talk tomorrow”

Now it was Danny's turn, at that moment he knew "this guy Jackie" is no ordinary mail carrier".

The next morning Jackie and Danny took a walk down the beach and Jackie told him he would have a couple of his friends deliver the packages and asked if Danny wouldn't mind putting the packages in a locker at the airport terminal. Danny of course agreed and as he smiled he kept saying to himself, "I knew it – I knew it."

The burner call was made and Denise & Henry were on their way. They didn't ask, they just followed the instructions they were given.

Jackie didn't ask the amount of compensation he was to receive from Dany just that it be delivered in a brown envelope to a guy named Ancel at "Petey's Upper Deck Bar" on Chancellor Ct. in the heart of "Philly" and perhaps Danny could stop by for a couple of shots of "Wild Turkey" one day.

Chapter – 10

The Delivery

Now let's get this straight "Tubby" Denise mocking Henry; I've got no problem sharing a room on the way down but we "ain't gona" be in the same bed. Henry just looked at her and "winked".

We're looking at a 20-hour trip down so I figure stopping in Savana will be about right. As soon as we make the pickup we'll start heading back and stop when we think we should. April said to enjoy the ride down case because the ride back could cost you dearly. The packages you will be carrying are really special and very delicate.

She also said, and this is coming from Jackie. Don't ask about the packages; don't open the packages; don't let the packages out of your sight; don't let anyone see the packages; protect the packages with your life.

Above all else "only" and Jackie means "only" handoff the goods to Jimmy "H" at Con Murphy's Pub on 17th. And before you do "You ask him how Danny is doing" and if he doesn't respond with "Good he's with Tommy" you walk away!

Both Denise and Henry knew there was a lot of money and danger connected to the packages they were going to be handling. It had to be stolen jewels or drugs they would be delivering but it didn't matter. Jackie entrusted them to carry out this job and they were confident they could do it.

Denise asks Henry, "you know this Jimmy H.?" Nope not a clue! There was a well-known Irish mob guy who was the leader of the "Schuylkill Rangers" way back when. He ran the South Philly Waterfront for years but that guy has got to be long dead, so maybe a relative, who knows who cares just so he takes the packages off our hands.

Henry and Denise Park in the short-term lot at Miami International and make their way to Shula's Bar & Grill. There seated in the back corner was Jackie & April; Henry says "Tommy" sends his best. "It's good to see the both of you so let's eat and not talk", says Jackie with a smile. April asks "how was the trip?" That's such a long drive. Denise says the ride was ok but you know who snores like a damn elephant. Henry pipes in and says yeah but I don't know what she ate but she "farted" all night and I swear if I lit a match the room would have exploded.

As they finished their food Henry held his 4 fingers flat on the table and said “Jackie, there’s a million people on the highway”; Jackie knew Henry was sending him a signal that was something odd.

Henry said “the whole trip down I kept seeing the car I’d love to buy; lots of leg room in the front for two big guys and tinted windows so the sun wouldn’t blind you.

Jackie knew immediately that Henry was telling him that they had been followed the entire trip. As they all got up to leave and part ways April said “oh” I almost forgot I got you a little gift Denise”, and handed her a small bright lemon colored purse.

Jackie gave Henry a hug and said “Stay safe my friend and I’ll see you soon”.

Inside that purse were the locker keys that held the packages and a note that simply said “Watch your back”.

Opening the lockers Denise and Henry found two Seahorse heavy duty black suitcases and one tactical brown duffle. It wasn't long before the bags were loaded in the vehicle and the two of them were on their way back north.

The trip back to Philly was uneventful but the whole way both Denise and Henry were uneasy to say the least. They made one stop in Walterboro South Carolina and each took a turn in the Holiday Inn Express while the other stayed in the car.

And yes, the entire trip Henry kept saying "ok yes there's that car I'd love to have".

It was Saturday late evening when Tommy pulled up to the baggage claim at Philadelphia International Airport. As soon as April and Jackie were in the car Jackie wanted to know how Henry & Denise were.

Tommy began to laugh and said those two haven't talked to each other since they got back. Everything went without a hitch and we've seen no one and we've heard from no one; so, I guess it's done. Jackie replied "yes" it's done!

Sunday evening everyone was seated at the familiar round table in the “Middle Room” at Tommy’s. The only word that was spoken about the event that took Mathew Sands life was that it was Detective Dennis Palo heading up the investigation but it was apparent the case was getting very cold.

Palo was no rookie; he had been a beat cop, then Sargent and now for two years a detective. He was a big guy maybe 168 pounds and about five foot eight inches in height. He emigrated from Finland in the 60’s so he’s in his late 50’s.

He’s no fool but he’s handling a lot of cases so it’s not likely that he’s focused only on Sands. A warm fuzzy feeling of relief came over the group at the table hearing that “Palo” might be buried in unsolved cases and the “Sands case” was growing cold.

Tommy cleared his throat and said, “let me bring everyone up to date on those little bars Jackie came across.” “Well, I emptied the backpack and I was able to move the bars and got them exchanged for cash. There was a total of 10 boxes so I used two different sources to move them giving each 5 boxes apiece.

Tommy continued to explain that the cost of doing business was \$63.00 per ounce, there are 400 bars so that's at comes to \$25,200.00 we paid to exchange the 400 bars for cash. Now if you take the \$25,200.00 total exchange cost from the 2 million 120 thousand, we are left with \$2 million 94 thousand and 800 dollars.

There was dead silence in that room for a moment then Denise was heard saying "those greedy exchange bastards", more silence then the place erupted in laughter.

Jackie spoke up and said "don't forget our client"; Henry, meet with him give him the 50% we agreed upon and make sure he understands he has never met you, doesn't know who you are, and impress upon him that his life depends upon it!

Tommie responds, already have our client factored and hands Herny an envelope holding \$375,000 for the client.

Jackie looking at Tommy says, “make sure you take good care of Ancel, give him the envelope we talked about. Let him know if a guy shows up by the name of Danny tell Ancel he’s good and his tab is on me.

Jackie then passes out the brown envelopes to everyone and says, Henry, Denise and Tommy your envelopes contain a higher percentage than normal for what you did for me. After handing out our shares of the score, expenses, and delivery to our client we are left with a little and I’m holding it in reserve for all of us.

Henry speaks up and says “I did receive a call from Ancel” on my way over here and he wants me to bring him 2 cases of malt as soon as possible. Everyone knew that meant there were two new clients waiting and wanting help.

Chapter - 11
The Mark and The Pro Bono

“Ancel!”

Terry barked, her voice cutting through the noise. She jabbed a finger toward two men in battered, salt-stained Eagles sweatshirts. “Will you explain to these two idiots why they can't occupy both seats in Section 21?”

Ancel replies “Because you told them they can't”.

Terry turns to the pair and says “See, now go sit over there pointing to a high-top table”.

The booth, number 21 of course was reserved for Jackie and Tommy and nobody sits in those seats ever. Especially this night as “Bitters” had made sure all the wait staff knew Jackie was coming in.

Ancel was eager to see Jackie since it would be the first time back in the bar after his trip south. Ancel was informed by Tommy that if a guy by the name of Danny comes in to the bar stick him in Jackie's booth, give him anything he wants, and put his bill on Jackie's tab.

“In Jackie’s booth” Who was this guy “Danny” he wondered, must be someone special.

He was even more looking forward to thanking Jackie after he received that brown envelope that was delivered by Tommy.

As the front door opened Ancel could see that Jackie wasn’t alone. Normally he would only be with Tommy but this time both April and Denise are with him.

As they walked toward the booth Ancel stepped in front of Tommy and nonchalantly pointed his finger to the back room, Tommy nodded, picked up two glasses of Wild Turkey at the bar and headed for the back room.

Ancel now at the booth personally greeted everyone and took their drink order.

It wasn’t long before Terry showed up at the booth with a huge tray full of 6 different plates of food. Arranged on the tray was a “Brazillan” which is a huge salted pretzel, German Potato Salad, Braised Cabbage, Schnitzel, potato dumplings, and Bratwurst that made a great presentation and everything looked delicious.

As Terry emptied the tray, she suddenly realized someone had put their arms around her waist and had begun to squeeze. She doubled her fist and began to turn and swing as she saw that it was Tommy with a big smile on his face.

Terry shouted “You have no idea how lucky you are”.

Tommy replied, “Oh yea I do!” The pair had been more than just close friends for a period of time. Their relationship was an on and off depending on who pissed the other one off. They grew apart over time and when it ended, they continued and remained good friends.

As Tommy reached for a sausage, he opened the conversation by telling Jackie I forgot to tell you about a call I got from our good friend a couple of days ago.

Actually, he had gathered the information a few minutes ago in the back room with Henry. Listen to this. Two opportunities you might be interested in, the first is an investment with a great return and the second is making sure a deal is accepted which will also yield a good return.

Jackie snapped “listen let’s just eat and drink” I promised these ladies no business tonight just an enjoyable night out.

Jackie knew what Tommy was referring to, the first one was someone needed money quick and the second was someone needed somebody leaned on. The details would be laid out at the round table.

It had been well over a month since a discussion was held at the all-familiar round table in Tommy’s “Middle Room”. This night it was just Tommy, April, and Jackie. Tommy began by saying “Henry is still working out some details but here’s what I know so far.

He’s been approached by a guy by the name of Jimmy Candella who is the owner of a bar on Chestnut Street. And get this, it seems “Jimmy Boy” likes to gamble and he’s on the hook for \$133 large and it grows each week, the “Vig” is 3 percent. He needs money and he needs it fast otherwise he says he could lose his restaurant and bar.

Tommy further explained that Henry seems to think this might be just what we've looking for; a legit business that could serve to launder cash. Tommy continued by describing the victim and how the situation was even better.

Henry as usual checked into this guy's background and found "Jimmy C" is none other than a Distinguished Professor at Boston University and Director of the Center for Health Law, Ethics & Human Rights at Boston University School of Public Health.

He is also a Professor at the School of Law and School of Medicine. He is author or editor of 10 books on health law and bioethics, including *The Rights of Patients*, a member of the National Academy of Medicine and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Henry seemed very perplexed and kept saying over and over as he drank his bourbon, "Can you believe this guy? He holds degrees from Emory Law School, Harvard School of Public Health, Harvard College in the Field of Study Economics and on top of that he is a successful business owner; How can it be that this "Putz" "Sucks at playing poker' & betting on the NFL?"

Tommy went on to give the inner working of the plan, Henry says this guy is offering 25 % of the business but Henry knows he can get at least 50%, but he has a bigger plan to get it all and that's what he's working on right now.

The other job involves a woman who had an affair with an old college boyfriend. It seems she tried to end their relationship but he wants to continue. She says he has become belligerent, demanding and has even threatened her. She doesn't want him hurt but wants him to stop contacting her. Henry says there is one small problem. She doesn't have any money but could pay about \$3,000 if she could make payments.

Jackie, I shook my head and said to myself "Henry, are you kidding me" but Henry made me promise to bring it to you.

Jackie replied, "Well I like the idea of having my own business and even better if it's 100 % ownership". It will be interesting to hear what Henry has up his sleeve; I can only say it will no doubt be fascinating at least.

Jackie says “of course nothing can be in my name; I’ll have to be the silent owner so we’ll have to find someone, looking directly and pointing at April, to put “her” signature on all the papers.

Then Jackie turned to Tommy and said “As far as the other thing, you said Henry insisted you bring it to me because he knew I would do it.” Get me the details and let Henry know I’m doing this one for free.

It was late evening when Angelo as climbed the three steps to unlock the door of his Clymer Street apartment. Struggling with the brown bag of groceries and fumbling with his keys he finally gets the door open and enters.

After emptying the bag and hanging up his jacket in the hall closet he walks to the living room and turns on the living room lamp.

As he looks up, he becomes paralyzed and can’t believe what he is seeing. In the corner of the room sits a stranger but what is more chilling is the barrel of the gun pointing at him.

He stares at the dark clothed figure and shouts “who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing in my house?”

Angelo only hears “Sit Down” I just want to talk don’t force me to hurt you; I’m not here for that.

Angelo defiantly continues to stand in the middle of the room “barking” MONEY is it money you want or are you one of Johnny Maestro’s guys?

The Maestro crew was a rival gang that stayed primarily on the West side of Philly. They specialized in a vending machine operation and high stakes gambling. Johnny bought out an old abandoned A&P grocery store on Main Street where players would come with brief cases full of cash to play poker. He dubbed the building the “Main Street Social Club.”

There were days and nights that five tables seating five players could be seen with a pile of 20’s, 50” s and even 100’s in the middle of the table.

Each table had its own dealer and not only were they very good and paid very well, some had full time jobs and a couple of them were members of the Philadelphia Police Force.

Jackie replies I'm not here for money and I have no idea who this Johnny is that you're talking about. I'm

Listen asshole do you have any idea of who you're screwing with? I'm Angelo "Angie" Vitali and I belong to Joey Stalino's crew. You can bet I won't forget your face and I'll be.....

"Clack, Clack, Clack" that was the familiar sound of the silencer that Denise made sure wouldn't let Jackie down if needed. In this case Jackie had the need for his firearm and had no choice but to take him out knowing this guy would have come after him.

Jackie then makes the burner-to-burner call and says "you need to get over here and clean up a mess" bring help and shovels!

It was Tommy and Ancel who cleaned the Clymer Street apartment, making sure they had become invisible and the place was spotless. Even a bag was packed to make it appear that Angelo had left for parts unknown. They were certain that neighbors wouldn't think anything was out of the ordinary since the type of work this guy did, he was known to be gone for extended amounts of times.

There was no doubt that Jackie was pissed as mulled over what Angelo had said. Jackie did not know that Angelo was connected; obviously the deep background check that he expected didn't happen and put him in jeopardy.

Jackie spoke directly and sternly to Tommy saying "You tell Henry." He is to make sure the client believes her "friend" became so scared he left town immediately and she will probably never see or hear from him again."

In the heart of Philadelphia's Old City, nestled among the cobblestones and history of Chestnut Street, sits a gem that perfectly balances great cosine & charm at an attractive "medium" price point.

The "Amina", It had been almost a full month since the last incident and April is now the proud 49% owner of the restaurant on Chestnut Street. Amina is a "hot spot" that feels both upscale and approachable. It combines Southern hospitality with Arabic influences, creating a space that is visually stunning but not stuffy.

The interior features warm, golden lighting, plush velvet seating, and intricate Arabian-inspired decor. It feels like a secret garden met a high-end lounge perfect for a date or a spirited dinner with friends.

You'll find a mix of locals from nearby luxury apartments and visitors who have wandered over after seeing Independence Hall. It's lively, often filled with the hum of conversation and the warm, elegant sounds of tradition and emotion.

Henry thinks the time is right and he wants to meet with everyone at the "Middle Room" as he is ready to make a move on the "mark".

Once everyone was seated and their glasses had been filled, Henry begins by saying "I know I said 50% and only delivered 49% but I can tell you for sure it's going to help on the next phase of this operation.

You would think that after we gave him the \$133 thousand to pay off his debt he would have learned. But no now "Professor Jimmy C" as I call him now is debt again, but this time he only needs \$78 thousand.

No, we're not going to give it to him but we're going to help him win it. I've told him we would stake him to \$50 thousand and get him a seat at a high stake's poker game. I've agreed to let him keep anything over \$75K and he's agreed to play.

He doesn't know the game and the players belong to us; were going to let him win and lose a little to keep him coming back.

By the fifth game he's so arrogant he will believe he's unbeatable and the stakes will reach almost a million. That's just when he thinks the big pot is all his and he'll lose it all. That's when he will come running to us and of course he will have to have his deed to the restaurant in hand.

On a typical Saturday night in downtown Philly, you can grab a cheesesteak at Leo's Hoagies on Walnut or savor a warm pretzel from Wawa. Join the bustle of shoppers at the trendy boutiques of Rittenhouse Square to the historic Reading Terminal Market, you'll find there's something for every taste and budget.

How about catching a show at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, or enjoy a festive atmosphere at Dilworth Park's holiday light display.

Maybe Bar-hopping in many of the city's diverse neighborhoods, like Old City, South Philly, and Northern Liberties, may be to your liking. From craft beer havens to speakeasies tucked away in alleys, there's a perfect watering hole for every mood. Catch a local band at a cozy pub, or experience the energy of a concert at a renowned venue like The Fillmore or The Trocadero Theatre.

No not for "Professor Jimmy C" he enjoying the smell of stale cigars and spilled bourbon hanging heavy in the air of "The Billy's Ace," a backroom gambling den tucked away in the bowels of Philadelphia. Around a chipped oak table, four figures sat, their faces etched with the telltale weariness of men who'd dealt in more than just cards.

There was Sammy, the Sicilian shark with eyes as black as olives and a smile that could charm the diamonds off a duchess and beside him, knuckles white on his cards, sat Finn, the Irish rogue. Across from them, a big man named Freddie, and beside him, the oldest guy in the room they called "Wisp" because every time he talked Sammy would yell "quite Whispering"!

Of course, they knew who their target was “The Professor”. The instructions were very clear “let him win some, lose sum, and make sure he walks away as a winner this first game.

The second night the game was like a dance. Freddie fed the Professor wins, just enough to keep him hooked. Finn spun yarns of luck and superstition, clouding his judgment. Fin rumbled with laughter, creating a false sense of camaraderie.

Wisp remained silent as a mouse, watched and weaved their collective deceit into a trap. The Professor who by the third night was drunk on easy victories and the fumes of his own ego, piled chips onto the table like offerings to a false god. The pot grew and the win and loss continued and yet the Professor continued to end the night as a winner.

Now and at the start of the fourth night “Jimmey C” believed he just couldn’t lose and wanted to raise the stakes of the game. Wisp & Freddie made a light gesture of objection but it was Sammy who pushed and pulled them into agreeing.

The entire plan had fallen exactly how Henry had said it would and the Professor was about to be taken for a ride.

The first three pots at about 300 thousand each went to the Professor, the fourth went to Sammy for about 200 thousand. Each time the cards were about to be dealt “Jimmy C” insisted they raise the limit.

The last 3 pots went from 700 thousand to 900 thousand, Freddie won the first, the Professor won the second and now it was the Professor who pushed all his chips into the middle of the table believing his full house Kings over tens had the pot.

Jimmy C’s face turned cold and gray when the Wisper turned over his four fives to win it all. In a high stakes game house rules were such that you signed and agreed to pay the sum owed. Players didn’t carry about suitcases full of cash but their word and signature had to have been backed by those who procured them the seat at the table.

As Jimmy C. sat in the long cab ride back home, he realized he owed not only the \$900 thousand but another \$75 thousand to his backer, Henry.

The acrid scent of stale smoke clung to the Professor's clothes like a ghostly accomplice. His blood felt like it was coursing through arteries of spun glass, each beat a tiny hammer against his skull. Nine hundred thousand that was the number pulsating behind his eyes, grotesque neon sign illuminating the wreckage of his life.

It was a gambler's fallacy, mistaking luck for skill, chasing the phantom dragon of a comeback.

The realization slammed into Professor like a freight train. Panic churned his stomach into a knotted ball. Now he sits in the same familiar booth in the back of a small café waiting for the response to his proposal that would end his nightmare. "My share of the restaurant has to be worth that much" he exclaims as he sits across the table from the big guy.

As Jimmy "Professor" Candella stares nervously into Henry's eyes he hears "Sign, and your troubles are over!"

The restaurant was more than bricks and coffee, an accomplishment that Jimmy was prouder of than all the college degrees he had earned. He watched it being built brick by brick, fueled by caffeine and dreams. It had become his haven, a refuge for artists, poets, and weary souls seeking solace in a steaming latte. Signing it away felt like tearing out his own rib.

Henry's rapacious eyes held no empathy.

With a ragged breath the Professor signed. The pen scratched a jagged line across his future, the ink a bitter stain on his soul. His world shrunk to the harsh clink of the pen on the desk.

Sammy, Fin, Freddie, and the Wisp each received \$20 thousand for a job well done and 14 days later April was now the sole owner of the newly named "The Amina Room" on Chestnut Street. In her hands she held a crisp white envelope with embossed lettering stating "April Gordon" proprietor; it was the deed to the "The Amina Restaurant." Her heart hammered against her ribs as she opened the single sheet of parchment. April's breath snagged in her throat.

The Amina wasn't just any restaurant it was a local institution, the aroma of smoked meats and grilled onions a permanent fixture on Chestnut Street.

A kaleidoscope of emotions swirled within her. Excitement warred with disbelief; joy mingled with apprehension. She closed her eyes, inhaling the phantom scent of hickory smoke and caramelized onions. The Amina wasn't just a restaurant; it was a haven; a community built on shared plates and hearty laughter.

A determined glint ignited in April's eyes. Fear was replaced by a fierce resolve. She would turn “The Amina” into a roaring success, an establishment that was elegant and worthy of those who dined and spread the word throughout Philadelphia.

Inside “The Amina”, the atmosphere was thick with the scent of charred spices and the mounting pressure of a Saturday night rush on Chestnut Street. April stood at the center of the storm, watching her restaurant teeter on the edge of a breakdown.

April had called Ancel and in a panic she simply shouted ‘You and Terry’ over here now!

April’s eyes locked onto Ancel, as he entered and was heading to the bar with a detached, professional cool look on his face. Terry on the other hand looked as if she was about to start throwing customers out the front door.

"Ancel," she said, her voice strained but urgent. "I need you in the back. The line is crumbling, the prep is behind, and I’ve got three tables waiting on oxtails that haven't even hit the pan. Put that kitchen in order before the chef walks out."

Ancel didn’t hesitate. He gave a sharp, single nod, tied his apron strings tighter, and disappeared through the swinging doors. Within seconds, his calm, authoritative voice cut through the sizzle of grease: "All day on the gumbo! Let’s move!"

With the back of the house secured, April turned to Terri. The fiery hostess was already pacing, her blonde ponytail swinging like a pendulum. April grabbed her by the shoulders to stop the momentum.

“Terri, listen to me. I’m putting you in charge of the floor. You’ve got the best hosting instincts in Philly, and you know this menu better than the chef. I need that expertise right now.”

Terri’s eyes lit up, a predatory grin spreading across her face as she looked toward two men in pilled-up Eagles sweatshirts loitering in Section 21. “I got this, boss. I’ll have them out on the sidewalk before they can say 'Go Birds.'”

“Wait,” April interjected, her grip tightening.

“One rule. A strict, non-negotiable rule”

You cannot punch anybody out. Not the guests, not the busboys, and especially not those two guys in the sweatshirts. Clear?”

Terri deflated just a fraction, her fist unclenching. “Not even a little jab? For efficiency?”

“No jabs,” April commanded. “Take over the floor. Move those two to the bar, buy them a round of cheap lagers if you have to and get that party of four seated. Use your words, Terri. Use that ‘charm’ you claim to have.”

Terri took a deep breath, smoothed out her black blazer, and marched toward the booth. She didn't shout. Instead, she leaned over the table, planting both hands on the marble with a thud that made the water glasses rattle.

“Alright, boys,” Terri said, her voice a low, dangerous purr. “Here’s the deal. You’re currently sitting in a booth reserved for a party that is actually going to order more than a side of fries. You have thirty seconds to move those beautiful sweatshirts over to the high-tops at the bar, or I’m telling the bartender you’re Cowboys fans.” The two men froze. They looked at the fire in Terri’s eyes, then at each other. Without a word, they grabbed their coats and scurried toward the bar.

Terri straightened her blazer, flashed a shark-like smile at the incoming party of four, and gestured to the now-vacant table. The floor was hers.

April blinked and thought, “Oh shit, it’s just because Jackie doesn’t want anything in his name!”

Chapter – 12

Bread Crumbs

"Mother of Christ!" why the hell can't anyone tell me where that son of bitch Angelo is, as a glass shatters against the bar wall near the dance floor.

The bar of course was Alma del Mar on 9th in the heart of the Italian district of Philadelphia belonging to little "Joey Stalino". Bobby, when was the last time you spoke or heard from him, demands Joey?

Little Joey, barely fifteen and already sporting a grease-stained fedora tilted low, sat tucked into a corner booth, a toothpick dangling from his lip. Not so little anymore, his knuckles scraped raw from collecting "protection" money, his eyes wise beyond their years.

Joey wasn't born into this life. He was supposed to be slinging cheesesteaks, not shakedowns. But when his old man, Big Sal, went down for tax evasion, the mantle of Philly's underboss fell onto Joey's scrawny shoulders. His mother, bless her fiery soul, nearly spit nails at the notion, but Joey knew what he had to do. Family first, always.

So, he learned the dance, the coded whispers over cappuccinos, the deals struck with a nod and a clenched fist. He navigated the city's underbelly like a shark, cunning and ruthless. He earned respect, yes, but also whispers of a reckless kid playing with fire.

One night, Joey sat facing Bruno "The Butcher" Scarletti, a man whose smile could curdle milk. Bruno wanted a bigger cut of the South Philly racket, his eyes hard as cobblestones. Joey knew backing down meant losing face, maybe even his head. But Bruno was muscle, a lion Joey hadn't yet learned to tame.

He took a swig of lukewarm coffee, the silence thick as fog. Then, with a smirk that surprised even himself, Joey offered Bruno a deal – a risky gambit that hinged on a new shipment of bootleg whiskey and a crooked city councilman. It was a gamble that could make them both kings, or leave them sleeping with the fishes.

Bruno listened; his gaze fixed on Joey like a hawk sizing up its prey. Finally, he let out a bark-like laugh, slapping the table. "You got balls, kid. Let's see if they're made of steel."

That night, Little Joey, the boy who dreamt of baseball cards and Tastykake's, became a man in the eyes of Philadelphia's underworld. He wasn't just the boss's son anymore. He was Joey "The Badger," a name whispered with a mix of fear and grudging respect.

But with power came shadows. The feds were sniffing around; their eyes narrowed on the young prodigy. And within the family, whispers of discontent stirred. Could a kid, however sharp, truly hold sway over seasoned wolves?

The future stretched before Joey, a labyrinth of neon shadows and whispered threats. He may have won this round, but the game was far from over. Little Joey, the boy who became a boss, now had to prove he could stay one. After all, in the concrete jungle of Philly, only the strongest beasts survived.

It's been a while says Bobby. "Joey" you need to calm down you know Angie takes off every once and while, he'll show up when he's ready or out of money! Bobby ducks as the half full class of bourbon narrowly misses his head crashing into the wall again.

“Bobby “The Pick” as he was known grew up with Angelo and both survived the streets of Philly stealing anything that wasn’t nailed down. Bobbie was always stuffing his face with the handouts from the street vendors on 9th street and that no doubt was the beginning of his weight problem.

Angelo was much taller but Bobby was much wider and to two of them joked about it. Angie was the one who tagged Bobby with the nickname “The Pick” when as a teenager Bobby used an ice pick in gang fights with rival Irish gangs.

“Listen you fast asshole says Joey”, no one in my crew goes anywhere or does anything without me knowing first you dumb ass and you know that barks Joey! I’m telling you Bobby “The Fat Pick”, I’ve got a bad feeling and I want to know where he’s at, and I’m telling you to find out, you understand what I’m saying?

Bobby knew full well that he was just assigned a job and he was certain Joey meant business.

Got it, replied Bobby! I know Angie was chasing some broad who was “roped” so I’ll lean on her and see what I can find out. Being roped meant she either was married or belong to somebody.

Jesus Jackie...exclaims April, this is the third time I’ve been at the “Butcher” talking with the kitchen staff and I’ve seen “Shill” and he keeps staring at me. Remember he’s the Lawyer I took the thirty-minute consultation with and found out about the safe!

What’s worse is the last time he was having lunch with that cop “Palo”; I bet he’s pointing me out.

Hey, don’t worry about its Jackie says, all you have to remember is you have a great cover story that Henry gave you so if you see him again just act calm and be cool. I’ll have Tommy talk to our friend “Ten” see if he can find out anything.

Jimmy Ten a Chinese patrolman joined the Philadelphia police department some fifteen years ago. When “Ten” found himself in financial trouble with a big gambling debt; Jackie had Tommy bail him out and ever since he’s been on Jackie’s payroll.

Jimmy Ten only knows Tommy as the rule is followed keeping Jackie “twice remove” from anyone.

As Tina turned down the can goods aisle at Ralph’s Sav Way market her grocery cart was bumped into by a short heavysset guy in a dark pin striped suit. Oh, I’m sorry Tina said the gentleman I just wasn’t looking where I was going. Tina with a puzzled look on her face stared at him and said “I’m sorry do I know you”?

With a steely-eyed glare “Hi I’m Bobby a close friend of Angelo’s!

Tina stood there frozen, gasped and couldn’t utter a word until she heard “listen I just want to have a talk”. Tina began to push her cart away saying “I have to go” when she felt the cart abruptly stop and seeing his nubby grip on it. Then she heard, “Well, I guess I could just ask Mark”; stopping her in her tracks. Mark is Tina’s husband and has no knowledge of her affair with Angelo and that scared her even more.

Tina then said “Tooti’s Coffee Cub” in ten minutes one block over on 10th.

Bobby nodded and continued to shop then proceeded to the checkout counter. As he walked down the street, he handed his bag of groceries to young boy who was passing by.

Tina walked briskly to the Coffee Club and found Bobby at a small round outdoor table, in a low voice said “what is it you want from me”?

Bobby replied “I just want to know where my friend Angie is. Tina looking at him directly saying “how would I know we broke it off months ago”!

Bobby knew at that moment Tina wasn't lying or hiding anything from him. He knew from his experience of interrogating and torture techniques he was going to get nothing else from her.

With that steely-eyed glare again Bobby said “forget about today and you don't know me”; and left her sitting there shaking.

On his way back to Alma del Mar Bobby knew since it's been over a week, he had to come up with something to satisfy Joey. “

God damn it Angie” he thought, if I don’t come up with something it’s going to be my ass in a sling.

So, where the hell have you been and “what-a-you got for me”? Joey says. Been to the apartment, nothing there and looks like clothes and a suit case gone, went to all his usual hangouts and nobody has seen or heard from him. I took a meet with the little Chicky he was fond of and she says they broke it off months ago, I believe her and you know I would know.

But here’s what’s strange, she said he had been acting weird; kept talking about being tired of all the shit he was doing and kept talking about someplace called Vernazza.

Vernazza what the hell does he know about Vernazza Joey says! His family was from Potenza clear across the country. “Che Cozzo” you can’t even get to that little town by car! Make an inquiry and see if he’s there!

Text message came in on April’s phone; “What do you say about bar hopping and dancing tonight”? April recognizes it’s coming from Denise and first of all they rarely go out together and Denise knows that April hates to dance.

That can only mean once thing; there's something important Denise wants to tell her in person and it can't wait.

At Tommy's place April learns that Denise got a call from Ancel saying that there was a red head named Rita who came in asking Terry about a cage fighter that said he hung out there and said you knew him. April immediately began to laugh and said "that's Rita the Red Head" she's great and part of the reason you and Henry spent time on the road!

Oh, for Christ's sake don't remind me! She left a number to be called what do you want to do? Give her a call and do a meet for dinner at "The Butcher"

.

As Danny and Rita entered the restaurant, they were greeted by Terry who was dressed to the nines playing hostess for the evening. As they approached Terry said "Welcome" this must be your first time dinning here" as if she and Rita had never met. Rita picked up on that fact and said "why yes" and we're meeting some friends here, Terry replied, "right this way."

Terry led them to a private dining room where Jackie and April were waiting. They embraced and laughed when Danny said “Cage fighter & Mail Carrier” my ass!

Jackie quickly replied “Ok Mr. Salesman I’m buying anything you’re selling” and that followed by even more laughter by everyone.

Jackie then points to a guy standing near the door and says “that’s Ancel” a very close friend of my and whatever you want to drink he’ll get and if it’s not here he’ll go find it

Danny with a big smile on his face says “Ancel”, come over here and let me shake your hand and I’ve very happy to me you. Rita pipes in and says “Hey didn’t I see you Ancel interrupts and says “yes you did” that’s my little place that keeps me from going broke; what can I get for the both of you?

Me, I was promised a “double-double” of Wild Turkey and this good-looking red head will have as I remember what April described as the greatest “Cherry Manhattan” on earth! Jackie chimes in “We’ll do the same.”

On the second round of drinks Danny held his class up to salute his friend said “listen I’ve got to “fess up”; when your two travelers were on the road I had Interrupted by Jackie With a smile he’s says “you understand it cost me a new black Genesis coupe they liked and saw so much...

Danny’s stood up with his mouth was wide open and his eyes again a big as grapefruits pointed at Rita and laughingly said “this son of bitch got me again”!

Once again, they all roared with laughter. Ancel brings in a bottle of Blanton’s Single Barrel Bourbon and does a generous pour in each of their glasses.

The women sticking with their Cherry Manhattans as April tells their guests “Please allow me to order dinner for all us; Ancel please ask head Chief Francene to join us.

When Chief Francene enters the room April simple says “We’re all hungry, please feed us”. Chief smiles and says as she leaves “it will be my pleasure”.

Jackie speaks up and says “don’t think you have to eat what the Chief brings in; hell, I’m ready for a great Philly Cheese Steak sandwich anyway! Once again, the couples are heard laughing.

The first serving arrives and its Foie gras torchon with fig chutney and toasted brioche, this luxurious starter features a melt-in-your-mouth foie gras terrine wrapped in delicate netting, accompanied by a sweet and tangy fig chutney and crisp brioche slices.

A crisp Sauvignon Blanc is paired with the Appetizer, Lobster bisque with saffron and caviar, decadent bisque made with fresh lobster stock, infused with saffron for a touch of floral aroma, and finished with a touch of caviar for an extra pop of luxury.

And now the Main Course arrives; first a Duo of lamb paired with a Pinot Noir; roasted root vegetables paired with roasted seasonal root vegetables consisting of parsnips, carrots, and potatoes in a rich truffle sauce that elevates the entire dish.

Then For those who prefer seafood, a buttery Chardonnay for the pan-seared scallops with risotto and asparagus; pan-seared scallops offer a delicate sweetness, perfectly complemented by a creamy risotto and fresh asparagus spears.

Chief Francene enters with staff presenting a sweet Riesling or a Moscato to be enjoyed with a Chocolate soufflé with raspberry sorbet, a classic dessert that never disappoints, a warm, pillowy chocolate soufflé served alongside a refreshing raspberry sorbet for a perfect balance of sweet and tart.

Danny now on one knee looks up at Chef and says “This is a night I will never forget and if I could steal you away from these fine people I would.... Thank you- Thank you -Thank you....

As the two sat sipping their bourbon Jackie is thinking “Ok I wonder when he’s going to get to it” and then it came.

Danny starts, “listen Jackie I hate to ask but I’d like you to consider doing me another little favor”. The packages that were delivered were to stave off a reprisal from an incident I was involved in back home in Cleveland, Ohio.

How was I to know that Irish asshole was related to the one down here. The son of a bitch was cutting into my action and I had to make sure he understood the order of things. I admit I went a little too far and the guy still can't walk or talk but he deserved it.

As sure as I'm sitting here, I know the guy up there is going to come after me even though the guy down here he says we're even. I know it's a big ask but "one" I need someone out of state to handle this problem and "two" I'll hand you a blank check to take care of it.

Jackie sits quietly for a moment or two then pours Danny a double-double. With absolutely no expression on his face he stares at Danny and says, "Danny, I think you have the wrong impression of me" I don't do what I think you think I do.

After a pause and silence Jackie then says, "Danny because I like you, I will talk to a guy I know and see if he is willing to help you; that's if you want me to.

Yes, and only because I trust you here is a safe number to reach me.

The rest of the evening was touring the city of Philadelphia. Jackie's chauffer, "Tommy" drove the four of them around enjoying the sights and sounds of Philadelphia.

Rita's eyes sparkling brighter than the diamonds strung across the Philadelphia night sky. The air was crisp, carrying the scent of autumn leaves and roasting marshmallows from a nearby vendor. But it was the lights, oh, the lights, that truly captured her heart. Boat House Row, a vibrant ribbon of colorful boathouses lining the eastern bank, was awash in a symphony of illumination. Victorian gingerbread trim glowed with warm yellows and oranges, while modern glass facades pulsed with neon blues and greens.

String lights twinkled like scattered constellations, their reflections dancing on the dark water below. Rita felt her pulse quicken with inspiration. Each boathouse was a canvas; its unique personality splashed across the night in a riot of color and energy of the city mirrored in that reflected on the river.

Danny smiled as he looked at Rita knowing he was in for a very rough night when they returned to their hotel.

Chapter – 13

The Job North

Conner Haggarty of the Haggarty's of Philadelphia is walking but still on crutches sits down at what he claims to be his lucky table to play black-jack at Jack's Casino downtown Cleveland.

He nods to the good-looking dark-haired chick seated 3 seats to his left. She continues to look at the dealer as if Conner isn't in the room let along at the same table.

Normally he would say "hey what's up with you" but his jaw is still wired shut from the beating he took so even though she has a good size stack of 5-dollar chips in front of her he tosses her a 10-dollar chip.

Lisa picks up the chip turns toward Conner smiles and then tosses the chip to the dealer. Conner bobs his head up and down as if he's laughing and thinks to himself "I think I like this broad".

Weeks earlier they were all back at the "Middle Room" and Jackie was telling them about the proposal Danny Malo had made.

Henry liked the idea of the blank check but said he couldn't be the contact with Danny since he believed he would be recognized as the guy that made the delivery.

Denise says I'll do it; I was made up so much on that delivery no one could believe it was me.

Jackie says "No I've got other plans for you and I'm thinking of a guy who owes, Henry, do you think Jimmy Ten could pull it off?"

Holy shit Tommy blurts out as Henry says "that just might work with a little training from me".

Denise, I need you to take a little vacation to Cleveland, Ohio. Change the color of your hair and pick a name you haven't used before. Oh yeah, tune up your poker skills too. I've been a blonde to long how about jet black and don't think I've been called Lisa before. And by the way smiling Denise says anytime you want sit for "a grand a hand" just let me know!

In the backroom of Petey's Upper Deck Bar sits Jimmy Ten with his hands folded over his head moaning "I cannot do" no "I cannot do".

“Yes, you can and you will, you owe Tommy and you know it, says Henry speaking in a calm soothing voice.”

Let’s go over this one more time. You make a call, you tell him you’re a cop, you don’t give him your name, you’ve been instructed to arrange a meet, you tell him you’re the go between, you listen to what the guy wants, and you tell him it will be taken care of and leave.

Tommy tells Jimmy take this brown envelope and when it’s done come see me there’ll be another on waiting for you.

A small folded note is passed from one player to another until it reaches “Lisa” better known as Denise in private circles. She opens, reads the note, then turns to Conner and says “sure why the F.... not!

Lisa leads and Conner hobbles along as fast as he could to the “Seven Chief’s Buffet” at the south end of the casino. He hands her another note saying “sorry can’t talk got the shit kicked out of me; order anything you want and thanks for coming over here with me.

“Listen Bud” the only reason I did is because you didn’t get pissed when I threw your chip to the dealer. Conner head bobbles up and down again as if he was laughing.

Another note and this time are saying “hey lassie” I like you, and I couldn’t help but notice you have a smile brighter than a pint of Guinness, might I know your name, and what fair land to you hail from?

Lisa looks at him like he’s an alien and says “I ain’t smiling, call me Lisa, I ain’t from here, I’m headed to Chicago, and you only get one more god damn question so make it a good one”.

Ok Conner says how about this one “smiling he asks “would you like to share my bed?” Lisa busts out laughing and says “sure will as soon as you can open your damn mouth so I can hear you screaming”

Conner bobbing his head up and down violently, tears rolling down his face begins clapping his hands.

She knew right then and there that she owned him and would spend the next few weeks learning his habits and reporting them to Jackie.

Each morning Denise (Lisa) would call the same payphone on 9th street right outside the Crazy Horse Saloon and right on time Jackie would answer.

She told him the best place to meet was on any Tuesday night at “Fagans Irish Pub” in the Flats.

Of course, that was Denise’s way of telling Jackie where Conner would be and it was one of his best habits.

The plan was set and in motion there would be no stopping it now. The last words Jackie told Denise was to always be safe by taking a cab to go home.

Wednesday’s headlines read “Car bomb in the Flats kill two, known gangster Haggerty and an unknown woman die in blast.

Chapter – 14

The Time of Stress

The dim numbers on the clock on the nightstand read 3:14 and Jackie sitting on the edge of the bed is anxiously waiting for April to pick up her burner phone. Finally, he hears her voice and immediately he's asking if she has heard from Denise. No and I've been calling every 15 minutes and nothing, where are you and what the hell happened? The last damn thing I said and stressed to her was she was to be safe by taking a cab back home. I know damn well she knew what I was saying!

Christ the news is reporting an unidentified female killed by the blast. Where are you now April asks? I'm back at the hotel and should be on my flight and in the air by 7:45.

Both Tommy and Henry have been calling wanting to know if I know anything about Denise, they both were tuned into the national news and have heard about what's being called a gang-land slaying.

April, I think she's gone Jackie says in a low soft voice. Don't say that, April exclaims!! We don't know, let's wait! Let's wait, we can't be sure!

The news is on again and there talking about the car bomb outside of "Fagans Irish Pub" in the Flats but it's the same old bullshit "Haggarty the mob guy" and an unknown female! He's been identified so why can't the Id her? Now they are saying the plate on the car is "Haggarty's" so they think he was the driver.

It's now 6:10 am as he sits waiting to hear the call for boarding; it's only about an hour & a half in the air and all Jackie can think about is getting out of Cleveland and getting news of Denise.

April hesitates to answer a call coming in on her burner and the display says unrecognized number. April presses the answer key but don't utter a sound. Silence at first then she hears "APRIL" Oh my god she and yells "Denise" and starts to cry.

I've been out cold since 1:00 am last night, that son of a bitch Conner slipped something in my drink at Fagans and thank God for the waitress giving me a heads up.

Jesus Denise, don't you know what's happened! No, I don't and I'm still in a fog, all I remember is leaving the bar through the back exit getting a cab back to my hotel, I didn't know what that asshole was planning. I had to run down the block to find a drug store to buy a damn burner to call you, mine went dead. So, tell me what the hell is going on; and were the hell is Jackie.

Christ "D" Jackie thinks you're dead! It's all over the news about a car being blown up in the Flats outside Fagans; they think its Haggerty and an unknown female getting hit by the mob. Jackie's in the air right now on his way back and he's thinking he got you killed!

Holly shit! I've got to get the hell out of here and get my ass back home! No, no you don't! You don't make a move, you don't leave your room, and you don't do anything until Jackie tells us what to do!

Do you understand!

Yes, I got it and then "click".

As Tommy paces back and forth near the jet way at Philadelphia International he keeps looking and finally sees the monitor flashing that flight 267 has just arrived.

As he grabs Jackie's carry-on Tommy simply says "all is good" and Jackie's pale face turns back to its normal rust color. Jackie only says "In the car fill me in".

As soon as you drop me off go get her Tommy, April will make the call and let her know!

Later that evening Jackie says "April come read this"; on the 4th page of the Philadelphia Daily News the column reads "Victims Identified". Conner Haggerty the great grandson of "Wild Jimmy" Haggerty along with Victoria "Vicky" Bruni a known high end luxury escort were identified as the victims of a car bombing last night in Cleveland, Ohio.

An unnamed waiter from the bar told the investigators he saw them both leaving at closing and shortly after heard the explosion. No further comment has been made by the police only that it will continue to be "under investigation".

“Wild Jimmy” Haggerty was a criminal in Philadelphia and later in New York City during the mid 19th century. Jimmy Haggerty was the leader of the Schuylkill Rangers, a street gang which terrorized the South Philadelphia waterfront for over 25 years.

At 11:55 April’s burner lights up and its Tommy saying “we’re on our way to “Leos” to pick up a couple of cheesesteaks give me a holler if you want one. That was letting Jackie know he had picked up Denise and they were on the road back to Philly.

It’s been six weeks and there still looking says Tommy; they both haven’t got a clue. The cops in Cleveland pulled in Malo but Danny has a rock-solid alibi, in Vegas throwing money around like it was water.

And our friends in Philly are trying to track down a dark-haired woman who they believed was on her way to Chicago. Our buddy “Ten” says the word on the street Conner had either owed a couple of “bricks” or pissed off someone and the Philly boys think it was a hit coming in from Detroit or Chicago.

Henry chimes in and says “yea” a brick of coke today is worth about 80 thousand and a few of those not being delivered would be a sure path to being dumped in the Schuylkill River. Tapping on the big round table with a 50-dollar gold coin that Jackie liked to keep in his pants pocket he says “OK let get back to business”, Tommy “do it”.

Six brown envelopes are passed around the table and each contained \$50 thousand. Two “browns” were placed in front of Jackie. Tommy clears his throat and says Jimmy Ten informed me that “Palo” is still snooping and asking questions about April’s visit to Shill. It looks like he’s trying to piece a puzzle together by looking at anyone and everyone who was in their offices weeks prior to Sands being taken out.

“April” take a 100 K from the money we’ve been laundering at the restaurant to “Shill” and tell him to invest it in “whatever” to make you rich.

I’ll make the appointment tomorrow and that should throw a curve at “Palo”.

Chapter – 15

The Mistake

As they walked out of Ancel's bar Jackie asks Tommy "tell me again where did you exchange those little bright bars"? Tommy immediately reply's over on Ranstead Street near South 7th at Ethan's Confectionary.

I've known Ethan; it seems forever. Back in the day that's the place I'd take some "hot" items to get fast cash. His real name is Levi Ableman and he still works with Ernie Lenodello moving anything and everything you could possibly imagine. Tommy laughing then says "Tell Levi you need a poodle and he'll ask you black or white and then he'll tell you to come back the next day before noon to pick it up."

Ok, how about the other guy Jackie asks. Well Ernie Lenodello is a Jeweler and he's the other source I went to with the rest of the bars. Once he called me over to his home to pick up a package he needed delivered and when I walked in there, he sat with three other guys.

They all had those little things on their eye looking over all of the diamonds and gold jewelry scattered all over a little round table in the kitchen.

The only one that looked up was Ernie and all he did was point at the package and then pointed to the door.

Jackie says Tommy you know why I'm asking right? Tommy turns and replies "no need to worry", these guys have tight lips and even more so they have no knowledge of the connection between you and me. They know about our friend Henry but not about you.

Why? Is there something going on I'm not knowing about; asks Tommy. Yea, there is utters Jackie as he looks directly into Tommy's eyes.

"We may have a problem"

Ancel told me that when Henry brought in a new delivery, he left an envelope to be given to me and only me.

The envelope carried a message inside and it came from Jimmy Ten. The message read "Palo" is checking known fences that had prior arrests.

It continued to say a guy by the name of Ernie was brought in for questioning.

What do you think Tommy; do we have a problem?

No, I don't believe we do. Lenodello has been through this kind of bullshit before and he knows how to handle himself.

We need to get to "Ten" or Ernie to find out what the cops are looking for; I thought Shill and Company was covering up the missing gold bars. Tommy, I want you to get to Lenodello and tell Henry to make contact with Jimmy Ten. Let's get this done before we get together on Sunday at your place.

April was the last one to enter the "Middle Room" at Tommy's and finally everyone was seated eagerly to hear news of the interrogation by Detective Palo.

Henry put up both hands in the air and says when I cornered Jimmy and asked what's going on with Palo; first of all, Jimmy is scared shitless of Palo and this is what he told me.

He said that all he knew was Palo is pulling in a few known fences asking questions about jewelry missing from the firm “Sands, Shill and Porter”.

He said he heard Palo’s pal Detective Wahl say Palo has been asking about Rolex Watches and diamond necklaces. None of the people that have been questioned have seen or heard anything about those pieces.

What about you Tommy, Henry asks?

Pointing her finger at Henry Denise barks “Hey don’t ask Tommy, you ask me” I’m the one who was sent Jewelry shopping; when Tommy asks me to do something I do it! I leaned on that greasy hairless slime ball and he quickly understood why I was there; turns out it’s a totally unrelated case and get this, “Slimy Lenodello had nothing to do with it.

He did say Palo was asking about Rolex watches

All heads turned when the loud bang of Jackie’s hand hit the table; “Mistake Tommy big Mistake” I’m thinking either Shill, Porter or both are playing the insurance game. All of that jewelry was left locked in the safe!

No Jackie, no one connects you to Henry or Denise; if anything, they might think she's Henry's girlfriend. Denise's head snapped toward Tommy and as she doubled her fist both Henry and Tommy moved their chairs farther away from her.

April quickly changed the conversation to her appointment with Shill and the Wealth Management Group.

I sat for a short time in the lobby of their new offices on the thirty second floor waiting to see Mr. Shill. Nervously I had a gorilla grip on my little brief case containing my 100 thousand in cash.

Jackie busted out laughing seeing both Tommy's and Henry's faces turn red. Tommy let out a sigh of relief and believed that Jackie no longer thought a mistake had been made.

It wasn't long before this big tall guy came over and said, "Hello" you must be April I'm William Porter and please call me Bill. Denny is tied up and didn't want you to wait so he asked me to meet with you and I hope you don't mind.

April said she didn't mind, thanked him and then they walked down a gorgeous marble hallway to his office. She explained how nervous she was when she met Mr. Shill for the consultation, the concern she had about the security of her money, and now she was ready to put her trust in this Firm's hands.

I then handed him my little brief case and said with a big smile, "here please make this grow"!

When Porter opened the brief case, his eyes got bigger than two Georgia peaches; he looked at me and said "How much do you have here"? Oh, that's one hundred thousand but I'll have more in six months, and with another big smile "go a head count it".

Porter said "that won't be necessary, please follow me and we walked down another beautiful marble hall where there stood a gentleman that made us both sign in before we could enter a locked room.

Inside the dimly lit room were one small table and two metal chairs that weren't very comfortable.

Mr. Porter and I both signed a form that he had filled in the amount of money I had given him. As he walked back to a steel cage, I noticed camera in each of the four corners near the sealing. He then unlocked the gage door and motioned to me to come with him into another room that had even more cameras.

There it was, a big shiny vault door; I couldn't see the buttons he pushed but I heard a big click and then the door swung open. Porter placed my brief case with its contents on the middle shelf and said "I wanted you to see how safe your money is with our Company".

We walked back to his office and sat while he began telling me all of the different "vehicles" that my money would be invested in and what I should expect to see it look like in six months.

All the while he was talking, I was thinking about what else I saw on those shelves in that very secure room; those same little brown boxes that Jackie had carried in his back pack not too long ago.

As I was leaving Porter did ask what I might be bringing in to invest in six months; I merely replied “well if the restaurant keeps doing well maybe more than I bought this time” and that make him smile.

Silence came over the room and all eyes turned toward Jackie.

He looked up and said “NO” no more little boxes; Denise “NO” more Jewelry Shopping; and Tommy “NO” more mistakes, if I tell you to do it “You don’t send someone else!”

Henry, what else do you have Jackie asks?
Henry takes another short sip of his glass of bourbon and begins. Actually, there’s nothing on the agenda and I haven’t heard from Ancel but I do think there’s a couple of items we should look into.

The first is the issue of either Shill or Porter possibly falsely reporting stolen jewelry, which Jackie knows is false since no jewelry was taken. Yes, I’m suggesting a visit with one or both to allow them to share in their wealth.

The second takes a little more work and probably means we'll need to bring in a new member of our team. In addition to that we need to establish another legitimate business as a front to what I'm about to propose.

I'm proposing we infiltrate the Philadelphia Police Department. I've been courting Councilman Ronnie Newman for over a year now and I think he's the right guy to get us inside the Philly PD. I've also introduced Ronnie to a young guy who's been begging me to help him get a job.

Sammy Roth is his name and he's from South Philly. He's got no record and not afraid of good honest hard work, I've used him on a few deliveries to my regular customers.

Henry new infiltration danced on a razor's edge. To pierce the Philadelphia PD's steel heart, he needed a Trojan horse, not a battering ram. So, his gaze settled on Councilman Ronnie Newman, a man with ambition tangled in the roots of the police force.

Henry cultivated his relationship by frequenting Neuman's rallies, peppering him with stories of displaced families, his voice raw with manufactured anguish.

Neuman, eager for the human touch in his campaign, embraced Henry. Invitations to dinners flowed, introductions to key players in the city's power game followed.

Henry navigated this treacherous landscape with ease. He memorized Neuman talking points, praised his vision for a "safer Philly," while subtly planting seeds of doubt about the police's role. He became Neuman's confidante, sharing invented childhood woes of police harassment, each lie a meticulously crafted brick in the bridge Henry was building.

As trust bloomed, Neuman confided his frustrations - roadblocks thrown up by the "old guard" within the force, their resistance to his reformist agenda. Henry, eyes gleaming with feigned indignation, offered a solution, infiltration. He proposed planting someone within the academy, someone who could expose the system's rot from within.

Neuman, captivated by the audacity, saw an opportunity to cripple his opponents. When Newman said "if I could find the right guy, he would get him a spot in the police academy."

I gave the councilman the background on Sammy Roth which apparently satisfied him. Just a month ago Sammy finished and graduated from the academy.

I expect that Sammy will learn and hear the whispers of corruption, the unspoken rules, the code of silence as thick as Philly fog.

He will pass on information to Councilman Neuman and of course to me and intern we will have someone on the inside providing us with information we need to know.

Let me assure all of you that Sammy only knows me as the freelance alcohol salesman who has helped him out and has no knowledge of any of you!

Jackie, Tommy, April and Denise all sat there staring at Henry, it was quiet and as if the air wasn't moving until the words came out of Jackie's mouth.

Jesus Christ Henry I'm glad you're on our side!

Tommy chimes in saying "Wait a minute, what's the other business you spoke about?"

Henry takes a bigger sip of his glass of bourbon and begins again.

Well, this one involves Denise and before you throw something at me just hear me out first. I suggest we buy a little shop downtown and Denise opens up a very fashionable boutique.

I believe it will be very profitable in no time since Denise has an eye for trends and the fact we can launder our other monies through that front.

Even more important with Denise donating to our Councilman's campaigns will have him bought in no time.

Jackie speaks up and says "I'm buying into this", followed by Tommy "Me Too", then April "I love it" and then Denise "Christ Henry I'm actually beginning to like you!"

They all raise their glasses and begin to laugh!

Ok, Jackie say's "Tommy, give me a plan to visit Shill "April go with Denise and buy a store!
Henry, take a break go somewhere nice, enjoy yourself and send me the bill and it better be a big one!

Chapter – 16

The Collection

It was Tuesday right around eleven o'clock that Jackie saw the car lights flash on the front window as Dennis Shill pulled into his double car garage.

Jackie hunched deeper into the worn arm chair; he'd been sitting there quietly for almost an hour and half waiting on Dennis to return home. Was he alone or is Mandy his wife with him Jackie wondered.

Jackie had good background information on Dennis but he was uncharacteristically late according to the document Tommy had prepared. Even in their tempestuous on-again, off-again relationship, Dennis's delays usually held a tinge of drama, a deliberate cruelty to keep his wife on edge.

Dennis fumbled for his keys, it had been a long day, one of those soul-sucking Tuesdays that left him wanting to crawl into a cave and hibernate. Mandy had left him moving into a high rise 3-bedroom apartment on the North side of Philly.

She was tired of his lies, his schemes, and most of all his dishonesty with his clients. He pushed open the door, expecting the usual silence of emptiness dimness, however this night he hears “Don’t turn on the light and don’t move.”

Dennis’s heart begins to pound as his key fall to the kitchen floor, “take anything you want but just don’t hurt me” he exclaims! His heart hammered against his ribs like a frantic bird in a cage.

“Sit on the floor right where you are” commanded the voice from the dark living room.

Dennis complied and cried out again “please” but was cut short hearing “quiet!”

The silence was deafening, pressing against him like a physical weight. He called out again, desperation edging his voice, “what is it you want?”

But the walls only echoed back silence and his fear grew stronger. Then, a rustle from the living room and a soft, almost spectral sigh was heard. In a low whispering voice Jackie said “I want you to tell me about the watches and the necklaces”.

“Before you begin, I want you to think very carefully about lying to me, I know where they were locked away safely.”

“Oh God” is uttered from Dennis as he gasps for air. “Are you here to kill me too?”

I’ll not ask again “Tell me!”

“Yes, yes” I took them and told the police the guy that murdered Sands was the thief and yes, I collected the insurance. Jesus Christ, I’ll give them to you and more just let me go please I’m begging!

“Tell me about the More”; commands Jackie!

“Safe in the den” I’ll open it for you, just let me go!

Suddenly Dennis hears the sound of something sliding across the kitchen floor; “there’s a cloth bag right beside you, and a pair of cuffs, put the bag over your head, put the cuffs on and standup!”

Jackie leads Shill into the Den and turns the safe dial each time he’s given the number until it opens. Inside

Jackie collects four gold Rolex watches, three boxes containing two diamond necklaces in each, and four little brown boxes!

Jackie facetiously thinks to himself with a big grin on his face, “Gee I wonder what’s in those little brown boxes?”

“Now Dennis Jackie says, you say you don’t want to be hurt and if that’s true you’ll listen very carefully to what I’m about to tell you”

You’re done bilking clients at your firm and tonight this never happened, no robbery, no insurance. And because I don’t know how much you stole from the insurance company you going to be putting five grand in a brown envelope each month and you’ll be told every month where to drop it.

Now finally you can either have me knock you out with my favorite baseball bat or take the two little pills that are sitting on the desk in front of you. You’ll sleep for about ten hours and when you wake, you’ll remember that I’ll always be watching.

As Jackie loads up his backpack Dennis fumbles to put the pills into his mouth under the hood. Once Jackie sees him slump over in his plush leather office chair the cuffs and hood are removed.

Quietly the door closes behind Jackie and in the darkness of the night he disappears.

Chapter -17

The Grand Opening

The Philadelphia air crackled with a nervous energy that mirrored Denise's own. She stood before the unassuming brick facade of 317 Walnut Street, its dusty windows masking the potential she saw within. For months, this had been her obsession, the vacant storefront a blank canvas for her dreams of a high-end fashion boutique. She boldly stood before the carpenters and painters she had hired and said with a big smile on her face “Gentleman, Get the hell to work!”

Applause was heard from her sidekick April and then came a big huge hug. With her arms wrapped around April Denise says “what the hell am I doing I don’t know a thing about fashion”. They both laughed and then April said “If Jackie lets me, I’m gona make a call to someone I think can help.”

Inside, the air hung heavy with the ghosts of forgotten shoppers and faded grandeur. Cobwebs draped dusty chandeliers, and sunlight slanting through grimy windows illuminated shelves piled high with remnants of Weinberg's Shoe Store, long closed.

But Denise saw beyond the decay. She saw sleek marble floors, shimmering glass display cases, and racks overflowing with the *crème de la crème* of Parisian couture.

The negotiation with Mr. Weinberg, the store's aging owner, had been tough. He clung to the past; his memories intertwined with the creaking floorboards and peeling wallpaper. But Denise, armed with a meticulously crafted business plan and an unwavering belief in her vision, finally chipped away at his resistance. The deal was struck, and with a heavy heart, Mr. Weinberg handed over the keys, his eyes filled with a mixture of sadness and grudging respect.

The transformation began. Months of feverish activity filled the once-silent store. Walls were demolished and rebuilt, creating an open, airy space bathed in natural light. Skilled craftsmen restored the intricate plasterwork, and a team of electricians brought the space to life with a warm, inviting glow.

Denise, a whirlwind of energy and ideas, oversaw every detail, her meticulous eye ensuring that every element – from the imported Italian marble flooring to the hand-stitched leather ottomans – reflected her vision of understated luxury.

April pulls Denise aside and tells her she's got good news! Jackie gave me the go ahead and I called a friend and her ass is on a plane and will be here this afternoon.

It's the red headed bombshell from Cleveland Rita Malo. I'm telling you that woman has got it together and knows her clothes! Hope you don't mind but I told her she would be staying with us at your place. Let's go pick her up!

Mind hell no this is great and I think the three of us are going to have fun! I'm thinking you should tell Jackie to let his buddy Malo know if he needs to launder money for a cut, we'll make it happen! The three don't get out of the airport parking lot before they all agree the first thing they need to do is find a bar!

Rita and Denise hit it off right away as the three of them are on the second round of Cherry Manhattans! They all bust out laughing when Rita says "Oh, forgot to tell you there's a shipment of the latest fashions coming in from California and the best part is Danny doesn't know it but he's footing the bill!"

Denise yells “April I’m loving this girl already and another round of the Cherry’s and hurry!”

Finally, the day arrived it was “The grand opening”. Banners stretched across Walnut Street, announcing the arrival of "Belle Epoque," Denise's dream finally taking flight.

Evoking Philly's history and architecture this French term refers to the "Beautiful Era" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of elegance and prosperity that aligns with Walnut Street's grandeur.

Denise says it’s “The Gilded Thread” the name references the Gilded Age, another period of Philadelphia's architectural and cultural flourishing, and uses "thread" as a metaphor for fashion and connection.

Rita looks astonished and says “Denise how in the world do you know all this stuff?” “Shit, I just looked it up on the internet”, again all three busted out laughing.

The doors swung open, revealing a breathtaking space that shimmered with opulence and elegance.

Mannequins draped in the latest collections from Dior, Chanel, and Valentino stood poised like runway stars, while racks overflowed with exquisite handbags, shoes, and accessories. The air buzzed with excitement, a symphony of hushed conversation, clinking champagne glasses, and the soft rustle of silk.

As the evening wore on, Denise watched with a heart brimming with pride and a hint of nervousness. Would Philadelphia embrace her vision? The answer came, not in words, but in the gleam of admiration in women's eyes, the excited whispers as they tried on gowns, and the clinking of credit cards at the register. Belle Epoque wasn't just a store; it was an experience, a portal to a world of Parisian chic in the heart of Philadelphia.

The journey hadn't been easy. There were moments of doubt, nights spent hunched over spreadsheets, and the constant gnawing fear of failure. But Denise, fueled by passion and an unshakeable belief in herself and April's unwavering encouragement, had persevered. And now, standing amidst the success of her creation, she knew it had all been worth it.

Belle Epoque wasn't just a store; it was a testament to her resilience, her unwavering spirit, and her love for the transformative power of fashion.

And as the city lights twinkled outside the window, Denise knew that this was just the beginning. The Belle Epoque had arrived, and Philadelphia was ready to be inspired.

Chapter 18

Back Together Again

"Jesus, Henry, you're looking fantastic," Jackie remarked, his voice carrying a note of genuine warmth.

The crew had finally gathered for their long-awaited sit-down at the familiar, expansive round table in Tommy's house. It was the standard Sunday night ritual, but the atmosphere felt charged with a rare, buoyant energy. Everyone was in high spirits.

Henry leaned back, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. "Maybe I should disappear more often. Hearing how things have been moving while I was gone—April, Denise, spectacular work." His eyes twinkled as he added, "I hear we've even branched out into the monthly collection business."

Jackie's expression shifted instantly, his professional mask sliding back into place. "Never mind that for now," he clipped, though his tone wasn't unkind. "It's time for you to get back into the harness."

Give me the status on our councilman and that new police recruit."

"Wait, wait!" Denise interrupted, her excitement bubbling over. "I have to tell you—I've been invited to a gala for the councilman's re-election campaign. Apparently, I've made quite the name for myself in the business world. They think my 'success story' will be a major draw for the donors."

She paused for dramatic effect, leaning in closer to the table. "And you will never guess who walked into the boutique late yesterday afternoon asking for a private word: Ruth Manning herself." Jackie blinked, stunned. "You've got to be kidding me. What did she want?"

"Well, for starters, she bought the most expensive gown in the shop," Denise said, savoring the moment. "Since she knew, I'd been invited to the gala, she asked who was escorting me. When I told her I was going solo, she didn't skip a beat. She said, 'Perfect. My driver will collect you; you're dining at my table.' When I mentioned I'd be working at the store right up until the event, her eyes lit up. She told me she admired a woman who puts her business first."

Denise described the evening's itinerary with practiced ease: a black-tie affair at the Ritz-Carlton, brimming with cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, and the inevitable parade of speeches from the city's dignitaries.

"Ruth expects me to mingle, talk up the importance of the councilman's re-election, and maybe even auction off a piece from the boutique," Denise continued. "She pitched it as a networking goldmine—a chance to show face and enjoy a night on the town."

"Christ," Henry muttered, pushing back his chair to stand. He gave Denise a mock, respectful bow. "I couldn't have negotiated that better myself. Brilliant job, Denise."

Across the table, April let out a sharp laugh, jolting the silence. "Tommy, close your mouth before your tongue falls out!"

Tommy sat frozen, his eyes glazed and mouth slightly agape, looking as though he had just seen a ghost—or a miracle.

Jackie ignored the theatrics and raised his glass of bourbon high, the amber liquid catching the light. "Alright."

Not only are you going to make a sizable donation, Denise, but I want you to auction off a dress so spectacular it makes every head in that room spin."

His gaze hardened with ambition. "Let's get this man re-elected. Once he's back in, we start the push for Council President. With that seat, we don't just have a vote—we have the Mayor's ear." He took a slow sip, then set the glass down with a heavy thud.

"Now," Jackie said, his voice dropping an octave. "What about the cop?"

Henry began; Sammy Roth has successfully completed his first week within the 9th District. As expected, his "Golden Boy" persona from the Academy has provided a sufficient smoke screen, though the transition from theory to the street is weighing on him.

Roth has been paired with Officer Leo Miller, a twenty-year veteran with no appetite for office politics. This is an ideal placement. Miller is cynical and dismissive; he treats Roth like a "legacy hire," which inadvertently shields Sammy from deeper scrutiny by the rank-and-file.

As long as Miller remains convinced Roth is just a pampered kid with "friends in high places," he won't look for a wire.

Despite some initial hesitation, Roth is proving his utility. He has new getting the weekend patrol segments for the waterfront. He also secured a digital copy of the Lieutenant's notes regarding the upcoming nuisance property sweeps.

He's starting to see the other officers as peers rather than targets. So, I reminded him of the Councilman's influence over his new job and his own outstanding Academy debts.

I have instructed Roth to begin monitoring the Evidence Locker logs which may give us an inside track on what the Prosecutors are headed. Developing Sammy over time I believe will be invaluable to us.

Chapter – 19

Sammy's Ploy

Sammy, fresh-faced and wide-eyed, sat in the patrol car, the midday Philly sun baking the worn leather seat to an uncomfortable heat. Beside him, Officer Leo Miller, a grizzled veteran with eyes that held the secrets of a thousand moonlit nights, tapped the steering wheel with a rhythmic impatience.

Miller glanced at Sammy, a wry smile twisting his lips. "So, rookie, how's your first week been? Sunshine and lollipops, or you starting to see the grit under the polish?"

Sammy hesitated, the weight of Miller's words settling like dust on his tongue. What Sammy signed for and was guided by Henry and the councilman was to infiltrate and gather Intel on dirty cops, expose the system's rot, corruption, unspoken rules, and especially the code of silence among the force.

Sammy's knew he had to be very careful; he needed to play dumb and innocent. He needed his fellow officers to believe he had signed up for justice, for upholding the law, and his sense of idealism.

Miller with his gruff exterior and knowing silences, seemed to embody this enigmatic code of silence.

"I, uh... heard some things," Sammy stammered, "Stuff about... unwritten rules, looking the other way sometimes."

Miller's smile vanished, replaced by a steely glint in his eyes. "The streets, son, ain't a fairytale castle. There are shadows here, corners where the law don't quite reach. Sometimes, you gotta pick your battles. Fight the ones you can win, let the others slide if they ain't hurting nobody."

Miller sighed, the lines around his eyes deepening. "That's the tightrope, rookie. You walk it every day, balance on that thin line between justice and chaos. Do the right thing, sure, but remember, sometimes doing the right thing means knowing when to hold your tongue, when to swallow what you see and focus on the bigger picture."

Sammy turned to Miller saying "I'm here to watch, listen and learn, and to follow the examples of veterans like you."

He turned back around but know there was a smile on Miller's face and Sammy knew his plan was working.

The patrol car hummed along the sun-drenched streets, and Sammy knew his journey had just begun. He would have to walk that tightrope, find his own balance between upholding the law and navigating the murky waters of unspoken rules.

The whisper of corruption, the unspoken rules, and the code of silence – these were just the beginning of Sammy's baptism by fire in the Philadelphia Police Department. The sun beat down, and the road ahead stretched long and uncertain, but one thing was clear: Sammy's journey had just taken a dark and intriguing turn.

His report was always to Henry first and Henry would tell Sammy what information to give to Councilman Newman.

Henry tells the group at the table “Just in just a matter of weeks Sammy reported of the over six thousand officers in the Philadelphia Police department he's identified 17 who are on the mob's payroll and another 10 who are taking bribes from various businesses.

He also is aware there is a hierarchy within the force of corruption and is following his leads with extreme caution.

There is one final detail regarding Roth's orientation that warrants your attention.

I have begun the process of "socializing" Sammy to our broader network. Specifically, I have—with appropriate caution—disclosed my close personal associations with two key figures in his new patrol zone: April, the owner of Armina Restaurant, and Denise, who maintains a significant commercial footprint in the downtown district.

My instructions to Roth were explicit: as a Philadelphia Police Officer, his primary duty is to ensure these two remain undisturbed. I want him "watching their backs" in the following capacities: Ensuring their establishments receive priority attention should any "disturbances" arise. Discouraging other officers or city inspectors from lingering too long on their doorsteps. Alerting us immediately if any Vice or Narcotics units show interest in the foot traffic around these locations.

By framing this as a "favor for friends," I am testing Sammy's willingness to use his badge for selective enforcement. It's a softer entry point for him than straight theft—it makes him feel like he's "protecting" the community, while in reality, he's simply fortifying our infrastructure.

Chapter -20 It's Time for a Little Change

Jackie walking along side Tommy in “Pennsport
“a neighborhood located in the South
Philadelphia and says “I think it's time for a
change.”

Pennsport is an historic neighborhood located in South Philadelphia bordered by the Delaware River and it offers stunning waterfront views and a unique blend of old and new. Founded in the early 1800s, Pennsport is home to many well-preserved brick rowhouses and historic sites.

The Delaware Riverfront Trail winds through Pennsport, offering scenic paths for walking, biking, and jogging. Several parks and green spaces dot the neighborhood, providing opportunities for relaxation and recreation. From traditional pubs and delis to trendy gastropubs and international cuisine, Pennsport's dining scene caters to diverse palates.

Second Street, also known as "Two Street," is particularly vibrant, with many restaurants and bars offering outdoor seating and a lively atmosphere.

Situated close to Center City and other popular neighborhoods, Pennsport offers easy access to all that Philadelphia has to offer. The neighborhood is also well-served by public transportation.

Tommy raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What kind of change?" he asked. Jackie smiled. "A bigger one," "We're buying two houses one on 22nd Street and one on Wharton!"

Tommy's jaw dropped. "22nd Street? But that's..." Jackie cut him off with a swat. "I know, I know, they won't be in our names!"

I've got Henry working with a real estate agent and one will go in Denise's name and the other in April's.

Henry has also found an attorney, Beverly Gallo who will be working for us as well. Her first job and she's already begun is to set up a limited liability company for a rental property that April and Denise will own. It's a great way to protect their liability, get tax benefits, and the first two properties they will be buying will be our old houses.

Oh, did I forget to mention it will be another great way to launder our cash as well.

Beverly Gallo, a Philadelphia attorney known for her meticulous preparation and silver tongue, wasn't one for courtroom dramatics. She employs a strategy of chipping away at the prosecution's case exposing discrepancies and highlighting the lack of concrete evidence.

Her voice, calm yet firm, echoes through the courtroom as she meticulously presents her case. She doesn't belittle the prosecution, but instead engages them in a battle of wits, dismantling their arguments brick by brick.

With each successful rebuttal, the jury sees cracks in the facade, the possibility of another truth. In the end it's the meticulous piecing together of facts, the relentless pursuit of truth, and the unwavering belief in her client's innocence.

The verdict of not guilty is not because of a flashy performance, but because of Beverly's quiet determination and unyielding pursuit of justice.

Beverly Gallo is an attorney who not only knows Law but knows how to use the Law to successfully represent her clients.

“Listen Tommy, Jackie excitedly says” you and I both need to be able to show where we’re getting our money from so you and I are going into business too, we’re opening a seafood distribution center.

We’ll be filling the warehouse I bought on Suffolk Avenue with every type of marine life from New England to the Gulf of Mexico.

Don’t worry Tommy, Henry has already hired people to run it for us and he’s already having a schedule of products ready to be flown in.

Your new place is at 1634 South twenty second street, it’s only a four-bedroom 2800 square foot joint that’s costing you \$850 thousand. You’ll need to get to work right away and build a secure room for us to meet in. I’m buying one on Wharton that’s about two blocks over and it’s a little smaller.

Jackie looks directly at Tommy and says, “Maybe just maybe we’ll finally get away from the type of life we’ve had and go legit!”

As Sandy Reese one of the paralegals working for Beverly collects the signed documents from April and Denise she smiles and says, “Congratulations you’re now the sole partners of the A&D Realty Company.”

Both their heads turn back toward Beverly as she begins to tell them it will be only a matter of weeks when all eight properties will be legally owned by the A&D Realty Company. “Wait” Denise says, I thought we only had seven?

Beverly with a sober face says in addition to the houses on North Marshall, Bill’s Court, Lombard, Wharton, 23nd Street, there’s the Butcher on Chestnut, the Warehouse on Suffolk and the newest addition “Petey’s Upper Deck Bar; that makes eight.

With a sigh escaping from April’s lips, her back sinks deeply into the cushion of the Office chair as she raises her hand and excitedly asks, “Does Ancel know about this?”

With somewhat of an annoyed expression on her face Beverly continues to inform April and Denise of the elements that have been put in place on their behalf.

Your offices at 1738 Pine Street will also fall under the Companies ownership which will take a little longer due to certification.

Henry has already hired an office manager, two receptionists, and four highly qualified real estate agents. Accounting and payroll will be outsourced to Beal and Masters Accounting and your salaries are yet to be determined however all other staff contractual agreement have been conducted and agreed to by Henry.

Your offices will be completely furnished by end of this week and it's strongly suggested that both of you make an appearance next Monday when all of your employees report to work for their first day. Now, if there are no questions or concerns from either of you, I'll be leaving as I have to be in court in thirty minutes.

Both April and Denise sit quietly alone in Beverly's office staring at the walnut bookcases that are filled with volumes of Law manuals.

Chapter – 21

Finding Out More Than He Wanted To Know

Sammy adjusted his cap, the late August sun beating down on his neck. His six months on the force had been rough, the grime of the city clinging to him like grease on a cheesesteak. But nothing prepared him for the shock that awaited him in the dingy alley behind South Street.

“I agreed to infiltrate the department but I didn’t think I’d get this far this fast, Sammy thinks to himself.” I’ve got to have a sit down with Henry and get some guidance as to what information I should give to Councilman Ronnie Newman.

Responding to a tip about a drug deal, Sammy stumbled upon two officers roughing up a kid, fear etched on the boy's face. One, Sergeant Muldoon, a mountain of a man with a permanent sneer, barked at Sammy, "Move along, rookie. Just routine business."

Something nagged at Sammy. The fear in the kid's eyes, the casual brutality - it didn't sit right. He recognized the other officer, veteran cop Harris, from the academy lectures on ethics.

Harris, the golden boy, always spoke of serving with honor. Yet, there he was, looking away.

Unease coiled in Sammy's gut. He knew rocking the boat could jeopardize his career, but the image of the terrified kid burned in his mind. That night, fueled by instant noodles and anxiety, Sammy dug. He combed through arrest reports, retracing Muldoon and Harris's steps. And there it was: a pattern of excessive force, planted evidence, and dismissed complaints against the duo.

He connected the dots - Muldoon and Harris weren't just bad cops, they were the tip of a corrupt iceberg. They were part of "The Shield," a shadowy organization within the department, skimming protection money from local businesses and orchestrating illegal operations. Panic gnawed at Sammy, but the memory of the kid fueled his resolve.

He confided in his partner, Gina, a jaded yet fiercely loyal cop. Gina, hardened by years on the streets, was initially skeptical, but Sammy's conviction swayed her.

As Gina continued to attempt to convince him it really wasn't worth going up against his fellow officers Sammy began to believe that Gina too was part of the corruption.

Sammy decided to use it to his advantage and began to convince Gina he was turning a blind eye but she also knew he absolutely refused to take part in any corrupt activities.

Sammy knew he finally had enough - concrete proof of The Shield's operations including recordings of incriminating conversations. But during his conversations with Henry he knew taking down an entrenched organization by going through official channels would be futile. The Shield had its hooks everywhere.

“Yes, the time is right Sammy” Henry explained turn everything over to the Councilman and he will expose the local corruption. He will gain power within the City, possibly becoming the President of Council and who knows maybe someday even Mayor.

Yes, he will take all the glory and receive all the accolades and you Sammy will go unnoticed and unrewarded.

But remember this “Your Councilman Neuman” will be beholding to you and one day you’ll be able to cash in all those chips!

The news broke like a thunderclap. Philadelphia was in an uproar. Internal affairs launched an investigation, but The Shield wasn't going down without a fight. Threats escalated, culminating in an attempt on the Councilman’s life. Sammy was totally surprised that it was Gina, quick on the draw, who saved him in a harrowing shootout.

Public pressure mounted, fueled by the Councilman’s relentless investigations and the hard evidence that he presented. Arrests were made, and The Shield slowly crumbled. Muldoon and Harris were exposed, their careers and freedom lost.

Sammy continued his patrol, the city lights painting the night sky. He adjusted his cap, a newfound determination etched on his face. He chuckled knowing that now one not even Gina suspected that it was he who was behind the take down of The Shield.

He may have been a rookie, but he knew what he had accomplished and someday he may even become the Chief of the Philadelphia Police Department.

He smiled and thought about the one guy who would someday help him reach that goal; yes, it will be Ronnie Neuman!

Chapter -22

The Final Catch

“Well Tommy, what do you think?” Jackie asks with a big smile on his face? This place is huge and smells like fish exclaimed Tommy! April chimes in saying “Jesus” Jackie I’m going to have to throw these clothes away before I go into the house!

Jackie laughing tells the two of them to follow leading them to a set of metal stairs. I’m taking you up to meet Amelia, a gal who I hired to run this joint and be careful because she bites!

The salty tang of the Atlantic hung heavy in the Philadelphia air, a fitting prelude to the Final Catch seafood distribution warehouse. Tucked away on the gritty edge of the dockyards on Suffolk Avenue, it hummed with the frenetic energy of a thousand tides.

Inside, towering stacks of crates held the bounty of two vastly different worlds: the icy bite of the New England coast and the sun-kissed warmth of the Gulf of Mexico.

At the helm was Amelia, a woman whose weathered face mirrored the storms she'd weathered at sea. Her family, hailing from generations of Gloucester fishermen, had traded the nets for distribution, but the ocean remained their lifeblood. Amelia navigated the warehouse like a seasoned captain, barking orders with the authority of a foghorn and the warmth of a galley stove.

Shortly after she took over and on one crisp morning, a shipment arrived from Maine, laden with plump lobsters and glistening scallops plucked from the frigid depths. Amelia inspected each catch with the practiced eye of a connoisseur, her calloused fingers tracing the shells for imperfections. Meanwhile, a truck rumbled in from the Gulf, its cargo a symphony of vibrant hues: plump shrimp, ruby-red snapper, and oysters that whispered of sun-drenched beaches.

These deliveries were more than just transactions; they were stories woven into the flesh of every fish. Amelia knew the fishermen, their struggles against the elements, and their quiet pride in their haul.

She knew the Gulf shrimpers, their weathered faces etched with the salt and sun, their families bound by the rhythm of the tides.

But the heart of Final Catch wasn't just about the seafood. It was about the people it touched. The bustling kitchens of Philadelphia's finest restaurants relied on Amelia's expertise, their chefs weaving culinary magic with the ingredients she provided.

The corner fishmonger, a gruff man with a heart of gold, depended on her fair prices to keep his shop afloat, a beacon of fresh seafood in his working-class neighborhood.

Inside the Office Jackie began to introduce April and Tommy but was interrupted when Amelia stood up from her desk and walked directly to Tommy. She pointed her finger at him and said “You look like a guy who could shuck a few oysters”; then turning to April she winks saying “I can see why Jackie likes ya!”

At that moment the screech of a horn is heard and as Amelia headed for the door she shouted “got to go I’ve got a shipment to inspect, have a look around but don’t touch anything!”

And with that she disappeared among the crates of fish being off loaded from the semi-trailers.

As the three of them sat in the heavy wooden office chairs Jackie tells them the story of how Amelia became known as the “Sea Witch.”

One day, a storm raged across the Atlantic, delaying a shipment of Maine lobster Jackie began. Panic rippled through the city's restaurants, their menus thrown into disarray.

Amelia, ever the resourceful captain, sprang into action. She contacted her Gulf contacts, securing a shipment of jumbo shrimp at a fair price. The chefs, initially skeptical, were won over by the succulent sweetness of the Gulf catch.

News of Amelia's quick thinking spread like wildfire. She became known as the "Sea Witch," a woman who could conjure up seafood from the depths, no matter the storm.

But Amelia knew her magic was simply a combination of hard work, empathy, and a deep respect for the bounty of the sea.

Amelia knew she wanted the Final Catch to become more than just a warehouse. She wanted it to be a community hub, a place where fishermen, chefs, and everyday Philadelphians came together, united by their love for the sea and its gifts.

Amelia, with her salty wisdom and unwavering spirit, stood at the helm, ensuring that the final catch was always not just seafood, but a story of resilience, community, and the endless bounty of the ocean.

The air on Suffolk Avenue didn't just smell like the ocean; it smelled like the ocean's debts coming due.

The South Philly warehouse was a gray monolith of corrugated metal, sweating salt and diesel exhaust under the flickering streetlights.

Jackie turned to April and said "Amelia doesn't care about your Yelp reviews or how many Five-Star plates you move at the restaurant. In this building, she's the law. They call her the Sea Witch for a reason."

April smoothed her silk blouse, a sharp contrast to the grit of the shipyard. "Jackie, darling, everyone has a favorite song. You just have to find the right key."

The heavy steel door groaned open, revealing a cavernous space filled with the hum of industrial refrigeration and the rhythmic thwack of cleavers hitting wood. In the center of the ice-slicked floor stood Amelia. She was a woman carved out of driftwood—tall, silver-haired, with hands that looked like they could snap a crab shell without a cracker.

Amelia finally looked up, her eyes as cold and gray as the North Atlantic. You're the owner of "The Butcher. You're the one who thinks my Bluefins are 'suggestions' for your menu and you sent back three crates last month."

The tension in the room spiked. April just smiled not the rehearsed smile of a hostess, but something warmer, more grounded.

"I sent them back because they weren't worthy of your name, Amelia," April said, walking right up to the blood-stained counting table.

"A woman with your reputation shouldn't be letting sub-par catch leave her dock. It's an insult to the fish, and a waste of your time."

Amelia narrowed her eyes. "You've got a sharp tongue for someone who works in silk."

I want a restaurant that's the finest in Philly and to do that I need the help of the best manager of best seafood supplier and "I work in a kitchen," April countered. "And I know that behind every great plate in this city, there's someone like you doing the dirty work that no one else has the spine for." April reached into her bag and pulled out a small, heavy glass jar. "I brought you some of the house-cured salt-pork. My grandmother's recipe. It goes better with a stiff drink than it does with a salad."

Amelia stared at the jar for a long beat. Then, she reached out a calloused hand and took it. She popped the seal, caught the scent, and a microscopic softening appeared at the corners of her mouth.

"Suffolk is a hard street," Amelia grunted, finally tucking the jar into her apron. "But I suppose even a Sea Witch needs a decent meal now and then."

She turned to Tommy, pointing a finger. "She stays. You, go get the truck around to Bay 4. I've got a haul of Razor Clams that never made it to the official manifest."

As Tommy walked away, stunned by Ameilia's order, he saw April leaning over the ledger with Amelia, the two of them whispering like old conspirators. April hadn't just made a friend; she'd secured the supply line.

As April & Jackie headed for the door she heard Ameilia say, "yep, and that's why I know Jackie likes ya"

Chapter – 23

The Gathering and Influence

The Florida sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the expansive lawn of Ruth's estate Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia County. The air thrummed with anticipation, the melody of cicadas weaving a backdrop for the clinking of ice in crystal glasses and the murmur of excited chatter.

Tonight, Ruth was throwing a black-tie event in honor of Councilman Neuman, a rising star in local politics whose charm and charisma had captivated many, including, it seemed, Ruth herself. There was no doubt that his work exposing the corruption within the Police Department propelled him into the spotlight.

As guests arrived April, ever the pragmatist, opted for a sleek black pantsuit that exuded understated power. Denise, with her infectious warmth, radiated sunshine in a canary yellow dress that twirled with every step.

Jackie, April's ever-faithful confidante, sported a classic tuxedo, his jet-black hair neatly combed back

.
Then there was Tommy looking rough and young arrived impeccably tailored, a wolf in sheep's clothing amidst the glittering gathering.

Henry, ever the charmer, weaved through the crowd, his silver tongue working its magic. His jokes were well-timed, his compliments genuine, and his pockets full of business cards. He was the oil that kept the social machinery running smoothly.

Beverly Gallo wearing a flowing gown in emerald green reflecting her confidence and authority choose pieces that make her feel powerful and poised.

Inside the opulent mansion, a string quartet played classical music, their melody weaving through the spacious rooms adorned with fresh orchids and flickering candlelight. Laughter and conversation danced in the air as guests mingled, their voices a symphony of ambition, veiled agendas, and polite social niceties.

Councilman Neuman, the star of the evening, held court in the center of the room, his smile as polished as his shoes, his words laced with promises and veiled innuendo. He engaged in discussions about policy and progress, his ambition tempered by a folksy charm that resonated with the guests.

The chandeliers of Ruth's palatial home cast a warm glow on the impeccably dressed guests, their laughter tinkling like crystal against the backdrop of a grand piano's melody.

Tonight was a night for Councilman Neuman, to test the waters as he maneuvered to become the City's council president.

Henry without fail did not miss the opportunity to introduce Jackie to the Councilman; making sure he understood that it was Jackie who guided Sammy through his endeavors to aid Councilman Neuman to soon become President of Council.

The clink of champagne flutes and murmur of conversation filled the opulent living room, transforming the evening into a swanky soiree. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow on April, Denise and Ruth as they discussed future business ventures together.

Ruth was impressed with the success stories she had learned of the Realty Company owned by April and Denise.

April, ever the strategist, sipped her champagne, her sharp mind already calculating the potential political alliances and hidden motives swirling around her.

Beverly joined the conversation and make sure Ruth was aware how much she was impressed by the Councilman's deeds and even more with the event that Ruth was solely responsible for.

Henry of course was at it again; he had corralled four of the City's councilman and was leading them into a discussion of future candidates for Mayor of their great City.

Henry surveyed the polished marble floors, the weighty silence in the room as thick as the cigar smoke curling from Councilman Miller's nostrils.

Four other council members sat around, each harboring their own ambitions, agendas, and secrets beneath their stoic facades. Tonight, Henry aimed to crack them open just enough to see who they'd support for the upcoming mayoral election.

He chuckled, a sound that danced between amusement and mischief. "Gentlemen, we all know the dance. Campaign posters are multiplying like rabbits, promises sweeter than candy floss is flying, and yet..." He leaned back, eyes twinkling. "Who truly has the city's best interests at heart?"

The silence morphed into a tapestry of coughs and mumbled responses. None dared commit to a candidate yet, the political tide too uncertain. Henry smiled. He wasn't looking for confessions; he was planting seeds.

"Remember the water treatment fiasco?" he asked, his voice dripping with mock innocence. "Who fought tooth and nail for transparency, while others hid behind legalese?"

Councilman Davis shifted uncomfortably, the memory of his public flip-flop still stinging. Henry noted the discomfort, a silent point scored.

"And the education cuts?" he continued, his gaze landing on the ever-frugal Councilman Edwards. "Who championed after-school programs while others clutched onto every penny?"

Edwards bristled, a flicker of anger betraying his usual stoicism. The seed was taking root.

With each pointed question, Henry painted a picture, not of the candidates, but of the council members themselves. He highlighted their past actions, their voting records, their hidden alliances. He forced them to confront their own ideologies, their priorities, their fears.

As the night wore on, the silence shifted. Tentative opinions emerged, disguised as hypotheticals, qualified with "ifs" and "buts." But the seeds had sprouted. They were no longer simply councilmen; they were individuals with personal stakes in the mayoral race.

By the time the first rays of dawn peeked through the window, they weren't just colleagues, they were adversaries, allies, even confidantes, each revealing their true colors through their veiled support for different candidates. Henry hadn't forced their hand, but he'd painted a canvas where their allegiances became self-evident.

With a final, knowing smile, Henry rose. "Gentlemen, the choice is yours. But remember, the city deserves a leader who reflects its values, not just fulfills its budget."

They left in pensive silence, the weight of his words hanging heavy in the air. Henry didn't need their declarations; he'd seen the gears turning in their minds, the calculations being made. He'd nudged them, not towards a specific candidate, but towards the critical introspection that would guide their vote.

As the sun painted the sky in vibrant hues, Henry knew the real campaign had just begun. Not the one of rallies and soundbites, but the quiet, introspective one within the hearts and minds of those who held the city's future in their hands.

And in that silent battlefield, Henry had played his part, a puppeteer pulling the strings of perception, leaving the final dance to the true power players – the councilmen themselves.

As Councilman Neuman raised his glass to Jackie congratulating him on his “Seafood Enterprise” nodded toward Henry and said “Now there’s a guy I need to manage my next political endeavor!”

Jackie, do you think you could help me out with Henry?

Sure, I'll make an arrangement.

Oh, by the way I wanted you to know your rookie cop is about to receive a promotion, it will be the first of many I'm sure Newman says.

As the orchestra's final crescendo faded, a hush fell over the black-tie clad crowd. The keynote speaker's voice resonating with quiet conviction, highlighting not just the divisions of the political landscape, but the common ground beneath. A ripple of applause broke the silence, growing into a wave of appreciation that washed over the room.

As guests departed Ruth and Councilman Neuman agreed they needed to get much closer to Henry's friends.

Chapter – 24
Now We Have A Problem

The glass of half full gin is now splashing all over the night stand as April struggles to answer her cell phone lighting up the room, continuously ringing and displaying 2:17 am and “Tommy”.

Tommy what’s wrong April asks?

I need Jackie, I’ve got Henry and those bastards beat the living shit out of him. He’s really bad, I’m headed to Penn Hospital on Spruce then I’m gona go shoot every one of those sum-bitches!

Wait Tommy wait! Jackie’s right here holds on!

Tommy, you don’t do anything! Jackie frantically Tommy says, before Henry passed out, he keeps saying over and over “find Denise hide her” “find Denise hide her”.

I’m on my way and we’ll talk when I get there, you don’t say nothing to nobody!

You got it! I got it – hurry, Tommy hangs up.

As Jackie walks in the front entrance of Penn he sees Tommy sitting on a bench in the lobby with his head in his hands. His face is a red as a beat and it looks like he's been crying.

Jackie takes a seat on the bench as close as he can to Tommy and asks, what the hell is going on and where is Henry?

They've got him in surgery, sewing him up and trying to save his life!

Tommy jumps to his feet and in a loud voice he telling Jackie that he's got to find Denise and warn her they are coming for her next!

Jackie points his finger at Tommy and tells him to sit down and keep it low. He says don't worry about Denise, she's on a mission for me, she out of town. April is calling her burner to stay away until she hears from me.

Now who the Sam-Hell are you talking about?

Henry said it was the guy they delivered the package to; they tried to get him to say it was Danny Malo who blew up his son!

Jackie staring directly at Tommy and says “listen to me very carefully”; I’m telling you to stay here with Henry; you don’t leave and you keep April updated on his condition; use her burner. You don’t leave here until you hear it from me! You got it?

Tommy head nods signaling he will comply.

Jackie finds Ancel and tells him to get Jimmy Ten to meet go to the Gryphon Café, near Hope and North Front at 6:45 and be in in plain clothes. Tell “Ten” he’s meeting a guy from Cleveland and he’s one of Malo’s people.

Give Ten the name Lenny, no last name but to look for a guy with a patch on his eye. Give this paper to Ten and tell him to hand it to the guy.

As Jimmy walks in the café, he spots a guy with the patch sitting in a booth near the exit in the back of the coffee shop. Jimmy’s hands are shaking and noticeably sweating as he sits down in the booth across from the guy. This is the first time he’s ever met with a guy he believes to be connected to the mob.

Are you Lenny, Ten timidly asks? “What do you need” is the response.

Ten is very direct I’ve been sent to give you this paper and this burner. The guy with the patch reads a request for a meet for Jackie with Joey Stalino and three days after that another meet at a neutral site for Tommy with that asshole Irishman Wild Jimmy Haggerty.

Use this burner and call it when you have the date; the number is the only one on that phone. When the call is done call dump the burner in the river.

Lenny looks up and tells Jimmy Ten “get out”, Ten leaves by the back exit.

The following morning Jackie’s burner rings but it wasn’t Lenny; it was April, she was crying as she said Tommy had called to tell you that Henry was gone.

Minutes of silence which seemed like hours to April then Jackie said “Tell Tommy to go home and stay there”.

Ancel knew as he approached the booth with another bourbon for Jackie by the expression on his face that he knew whatever was going on was major and he dared not ask.

Jackie's eyes were shrouded in a mist of sorrow; they had a distant gaze, carved by unspoken grief. His mouth was turned down at the corners, a subtle curve that spoke of unspoken loss.

It was a quiet sadness, a sorrow that settled not in tears or cries, but in the hollow spaces between his breaths, the slumped shoulders, and the barely perceptible tremor in his hands. His expression, a canvas painted with the muted tones of grief, spoke volumes without a word being spoken.

It was a testament to the profound depth of human emotion, a silent echo of a pain that resonated deep within.

Jackie looks up as his burner starts to vibrate; the only words spoken were "Eight o'clock Clymer Street apartment 205", working on the other.

Jesus Christ that's the place I took out Angelo!
Jackie says to himself.

Exactly at Eight Jackie climbs the three steps to the door he hears “don’t knock just go in”; Jackie turns around and sees Bobby “The Pick” Demarco right behind him.

Jackie without saying a word turns around and both he and Bobby go inside and shut the door behind them.

Ok, sit! Have a glass it’s your meet so we’ll have a talk, a talk about anything you want to talk about. The voice of course was Joey Stalino sitting at the end of the kitchen table.

Jackie picks up the already poured glass of “Dago-Red- Wine” and drinks about a third. Jackie knows better than to waste any time and needs to get right to the point; he begins by saying Thank you for the excellent glass and I need to ask for your permission to take care of an issue that took place three days ago.

One of my guys was severely beaten and as a result he died this morning. I know my guy had nothing to do with or had any knowledge of what they were after and I seek revenge for my friend.

There was silence as the two men looked at each other across the table.

Joey taking a sip of his wine puts his glass on the table and says, I'm very much aware of the incident you speak of and I'm very much aware of what they were after.

I am sorry for the loss of your guy; I'm told he was a big guy and withstood a lot of the pain they inflicted upon him. I also know it was only because he and another delivered a package that they thought he knew more.

Let me ask you, did he know more?

Jackie looks directly at Joey and says, "No" and the only reason they made that delivery was because I told them too. I told them to because I made a new friend and he asked me to do him a favor, a favor with no questions being asked.

My guy's death is on me and I need to make it right!

Silence again until Joey picks up his glass and says to Jackie "you have to do what you have to do" I won't stand in your way.

Jackie nods, picks up his glass finishes his wine then gets up and leaves.

It's almost midnight when Jackie arrives at Tommy's and there he sits with April at his side. Jackie turns to April and simply says "go to my place now" I want to talk with Tommy for a little while.

Chapter – 25

You Want One You Got One

Tommy and two very big and very ugly guys who were wearing the leathers of the Pagans stood on the sidewalk outside of Isabella Barry's at 2116 E Tioga Street.

The Pagans are a known and feared motorcycle gang who have been associated with criminal activities and connected to Philadelphia crime families.

The Pub door swings open and out steps Calan Bryan dressed in full beat cop uniform and says to Tommy “You were to come alone” now, weren’t ya? Yea well this joint doesn’t look to natural does it now? Go find out if that Irish asshole is going to have a meet or what?

Bryan points to the door and signals them to go in.

As Tommy approached the lone figure sitting at a table in the middle of the room, he only sees one individual behind the bar and the rest of the place was empty.

The guy behind the bar had to be pretending to be the barkeep and Tommy was sure he probably couldn't find the tap to pour a pint.

What's with the leathers demands Haggerty?

Look you've got "poriky" over there behind the bar with more than his dick in his panties and a member of the Shillelagh Squad standing over there in the corner so as I see it were even.

Tommy knew it would piss off Patrick "Patty" Quinn by referring to him as "Poriky" and it was meant to. Quinn was Haggerty's right-hand man and was known to be a merciless shooter in the Irish mob.

Sit down, you wanted a meet so you got your meet; I don't have all day so let's get to it demands Haggerty.

Tommy looks at Haggerty and says, "All I want to know is why"?

You want to why I'll tell you why shouts Haggerty! My kid was blown to pieces and I will find out who, I will find out why, and I will get my revenge!

I know damn well that fat slob and the broad that was with him had to be connected to it; yea I might have went a little too far but who knew that big fat fuck couldn't take it. I'll go a little easier on that broad when I find her and believe me, I will find her!

Mother of Christ!" you really are beginning to annoy me now get the hell out of my bar!

Tommy as he is getting up smiles gives Haggerty the finger and as all three walk out says

“You want a war you got a war”.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew who lived at 7200 Claridge Street, the house & surrounding property always immaculate. There is often commercial vans parked in the driveway with labors doing some type of work on the property. Over many years there had been no loud music, no wild parties, and very few visitors.

If a neighbor was asked about the owner their reply would certainly be, “he's ok”, keeps to himself, and respectful to his neighbors.

It was late evening when the dark maroon sedan pulls to a stop on the corner of St Vincent and Claridge Street and as Haggerty gets out “Porky” the name he was referred to earlier by Tommy says, boss you want me to go in and check it out?

7200 Claridge St, Philadelphia had been Haggerty’s place for some forty-five years, it’s near Arch Street in an area between Eighteenth and Nineteenth Street known as “McAran's Garden” Northeast Philadelphia. The “Garden” has always been heavily populated by the Irish and has a reputation having very little crime.

“Nah” go home; you know I would have got a call from the neighbor I pay to watch. If anything didn’t look right, I would know.

As he closes the front door and as he reaches to the small of his back to pull out his Smith and Wesson he hears “Don’t do it”.

Haggerty utters “I could smell ya” as he turns his head slowly and sees a figure sitting in the North corner of the living room holding what looked like a cannon with a big black barrel pointing directly at him.

He knew before he finished turning the latch on the dead bolt attached to the front door that something was odd; there was a pungent odor of fired cheese steak in the room. Ancel could never get that smell out of his clothes no matter how hard he tried, it was probably infused in his skin not his clothes from the thousands of orders he prepared at his bar.

Now very slowly put your hands on top of your head and sit in the chair to my right, we're gona have a talk; that command was coming from the voice in the South corner.

Haggerty knew there were two and that was one too many to make a move against.

“Chair over there, sit”, was the next command he heard and complied with. Now seated in a tall backed wooden kitchen chair Haggerty immediately feels the tight binding of the duct tape that is securing his waist, legs, and arms and even around his neck to the chair back preventing his head to move. His mouth is stuffed with a wet rag and that too is duct tape shut.

It was of course Jackie who points to the cheese steaking smelling Ancel and signals him to leave which he does with caution and silently.

Jackie begins by saying “you know I’ve never liked baseball but I’ve always liked their bats” and then the sound of a “THUD” and by another “THUD”.

Stars flickered behind Haggerty’s closed eyelids, a moan tore from his throat, and his ragged breath sent fresh waves of agony crashing through him. His vision flickered back into existence, blurry and fragmented.

That my friend is your left shoulder being torn loose from its socket, I really like these bats, then “THUD” and that is your right shoulder says Jackie.

Now let me explain what’s going to happen to you and believe me it’s going to be a very long night; I’ll take my time so you don’t miss out on any of the searing pain and both your elbows, and both your knees will feel the strength of my swing.

Jackie then says “before I begin and I suppose since you really can’t ask, you might want to know who I am and why am I doing this”.

Well, first of all my friend and acquaintance that visited you a yesterday told you:

“If you wanted a war, you got a war”

Second, the guy you murdered and the woman you referred to as “Broad” had nothing to do with the killing of your son and they were only delivering a package at my request. Oh, and before I forget “Isabella Barry's” in about 4 hours will explode and be no more.

Over the next hour and a half Jackie inflicts the most brutal pain he can deliver to Haggerty and with each swing of the bat he says “For Henry”.

As the Blood, warm and sticky, trickled down Haggerty’s forehead, Jackie smiles and utters “now for what you really want to know”

Yes, I’m the one who made your son go Boom!

Then Jackie steps back and “clack, clack, clack” two in the chest and one in the forehead.

Jackie sits awhile then leaves with caution and silently.

Chapter – 26

Rules Are Rules

Rules are rules and they must be followed else why would a rule be made in the first place. While it's true that April, Denise, Ancel, and Jackie saw each other at the wake that Tommy had arranged for their close friend Henry; there was absolutely no conversation between them.

The rule was in play and to be followed.

Jackie's crew understood there was to be no contact, no phone calls, and no one was to be seen together following a horrific action such as what had just taken place with Jimmy Haggerty.

April living at Denise's house made her daily rounds at the restaurant to ensure the business was thriving. Denise had flown to Las Vegas and wouldn't be returning until she was called. While Ancel continued to open his bar every day Tommy had made several trips by bus to Atlantic City to keep himself occupied.

It was early Wednesday morning and Tommy had just put an "x" on his wall calendar. There were 21 consecutive "x's" signifying the last time he spoke or heard from Jackie.

Tommy knew that since Henry was gone it would be Ancel who would carry the “all clear” signal to everyone.

As Tommy poured his 4th cup of coffee and took another deep drag on his Chesterfield the loud clang of the doorbell rang causing Tommy to jump spilling his coffee all over his kitchen floor.

As Tommy approached his front door, he could see two men standing on his front porch, one with smoke rising from a cigarette in the hand. A brown-haired man dressed in a dark black suit and the other taller, younger, wearing a cheap gray suit with a green tie that didn't match.

As Tommy opens the door he thought to himself, “I don't care what these clowns are selling I'm not buying”, “What can I do for you with a smile, Tommy barks?”

The somber faced dark suited figure stares directly at Tommy silently for a moment then utters, “I'm Detective Palo with the Philadelphia police departments homicide bureau; may I come in I have a few questions I'd like to ask you?”

Tommy stunned stands ridged for a moment as hundreds of thoughts race through his mind.

“Taylor” did you hear what I asked Palo says in a loud voice”?

Tommy coming to his sense’s steps out onto the porch and pulls the front door behind him. Tommy having been through this saga before new his 4th amendment rights and wasn’t about to let them snoop about in his home without a warrant.

Tommy says facetiously “sorry did you say police department”? Tell me again “who are you and what’s this about?”

Palo now visibly irritated sternly answers “I’m Detective Palo and this is Detective Wahl and we would like to come in and ask you a few questions about an incident that took place a few weeks ago near in "McAran's Garden" Northeast Philadelphia.

Tommy laughingly says “Wahl” I had a Wahl beard trimmer and it was a great little shaver then continues to say “listen fellows “I don’t want to speak with you, and I’d like for you to get off of my property” and if I’m free to go I’m heading back in to have my morning coffee.

Palo turned to Wahl and said “let’s go” and walked off the porch headed for the vehicle. Palo knew from the way Tommy spoke that if they tried to haul him to the station Tommy would have his lawyer there waiting for them when they arrived.

Palo was now thinking how he was going to get beat cop Calan Bryan to tell the judge he was at Isabella Barry's on E Tioga Street when Tommy and the two Pagans threatened Haggerty. Palo didn't trust Officer Bryan's story about who threatened who at Haggerty's and still hadn't found anyone who had seen Tommy anywhere near Northeast Philadelphia.

Detective Palo had that gut feeling that somehow Tommy was involved and it was just going to take a little longer to find out what it was. Palo told his junior partner Wahl “get the 24 by 7 surveillance thing going”.

Monday eight am sharp three two person teams were assembled and meeting in Detective Palo's office. Palo began by saying “this guy is dirty” and before it's over you're going to write a book that I can throw at him”.

You'll not be seen, you'll not be heard, you will know everywhere he goes, everyone he talks to, when he eats, what he eats, where he eats, and if he farts, you'll know what it smells like!

Do you understand Palo demands?

All six law officers had worked with Palo before and they knew he was a no non-sense guy and once he got a hold of something he wasn't about to let go and his expectations were high and his demands were even higher.

The team consisted Jimmy Collins, Anthony Taurasi, Christina Carbone, Freddie Frade, Johnny Malita, and Bill Heiser. For the most part they were all serious law enforcement officers with years of experience.

It was known that if you threw a dime six foot in the air Freddie would nail it with his 9-millimeter Slovakian semi-automatic and you could find most evenings Taurasi and Malita hanging out at Total Wine at a Bourbon Tasting event.

Their response was unanimous "yes sir".

At six pm on Saturday evening Taurasi and Collins had been teamed up and reported that all was quiet, Taylor had been home all day and a pizza girl had just left after delivering a large pizza. Taurasi remarked that it made him hungry.

Of course, the pizza girl's name was Terry and she was sent by Ancel. On the inside the lid of the pizza box was written "Sunday Ancel's 8pm". Finally exclaimed Tommy to himself I'll see Jackie tomorrow.

When April received her pizza, she immediately used her burner to text Denise simply saying "Come home".

Three glasses of Ancel's finest bourbon were raised and "clinked" as Jackie said "For Henry"! April and Tommy repeated "For Henry"!

Jackie asked "When will she get back" and April replied "Tomorrow morning, catching the red eye".

Jackie began to say let's set a date to meet at the "table" meaning Tommy's house but Tommy said "that might not be a good idea". "Explain Jackie said"

Tommy told them about the two detectives and what transpired on his front porch but said since he sent them packing, he's not be bothered but still thinks they should be careful.

Jackie responds saying "your right", as he signals to Ancel to bring three more rounds of bourbon, but as hard as it will be we need to find someone to replace Henry. I need to be "Twice Removed" before we move forward.

As Ancel places the glasses on the table Jackie quietly asks "the couple three table to my left" are they regulars?

Ancel replies "No" first time in.

Jackie looks at April and Tommy and whispers "We may have a problem"; find out who they are and get in touch with Jimmy Ten and see what he knows!

Three days later everyone's burners light up, the message says "Sunday 8pm suite 509 Hotel Penn's landing" pick up all at designated assignment" "D"

Jackie's team all new they had to be on guard and suspect they were being watched and followed. The plan had always been to take a cab but this time they were to take the subway north then another subway east and yet another south to their designated exit and wait to be picked up by Denise.

Promptly at 8pm Jackie's crew were all seated at a table in the Penn's Hotel Suite and the discussion began.

Chapter – 27

The Linden Room

Denise is busy pouring double doubles of Woodford Reserve and passing them around the table, there was no doubt in anyone's mind the first thing on the agenda would be to pay tribute to Henry.

As Tommy sat his empty glass on the table he said "I've got two concerns" first I've heard nothing from Jimmy Ten about Detective Palo and second "Patty Quinn" wants a meet.

Before Tommy could utter another word, he was silenced by Jackie holding his arm up and saying "I've got a bigger concern and that's the fact we've got no one to negotiate with new clients "We have to replace Henry and as you all know I need to be "Twice Removed".

April looks at Jackie and as soon as the words "What about Ancel" came out of her mouth and seeing the frown on Jackie's face she said "well on second thought maybe not such a good idea."

Denise pipes in saying “Jackie, I know you might think I’m nuts but until we find someone that has the abilities that Henry had we need to utilize someone we trust.” What to you think about giving “Terry” a shot?

Jackie sits quietly and stares at Denise for a few minutes and then says, “I do trust her, she’s tough, and she’s savvy”. I’m not hearing anyone else speaking up so let’s bring Terry in and see if she wants to make an attempt.

Ok, Tommy let Ancel know what we’re doing and let’s set up a little test for Terry and see how she does at negotiations.

April, you and Denise find a fake client, maybe use Freddie the big guy we used to set up the Professor, have him tell Terry he needs to get his money back from a long shark.

Tommy, you set up the meet with “Quinn”; send the message “Tuesday Schmitz’s on South Street, 9 pm” , say you will be there alone and he would be wise to do the same!

Brauhaus Schmitz's is an ideal place to have a private meeting since it has a number of rooms catering from as few as two to more than 30 patrons. It's one of the most authentic German Beerhalls and Restaurants in the United States. With 34 German beers on draft and over 50 in bottle, they pride themselves to offer more German beer than anyone else outside of Deutschland!

Jackie has had a close personal relationship with the owner Frederick Hoffmann and any time he enters everyone on staff greets him as if he was a family member. It was some ten years ago when she was close to opening the restaurant that Jackie made some permit issues with the City disappear. Ever since some would think they were brothers.

Each of the rooms had its own unique name and Tommy was patiently sitting in the "Linden Room"; he was there early and only had one draft beer. Tommy was also very much aware that Jackie was sitting in the very next room.

It was Officer Calan Bryan who bellied up to the bar promptly at 8:30 pm and twenty minutes later Patty Quinn was telling the hostess he was expected.

She promptly led him to the “Linden Room”. As Quinn enters the room he followed by a waiter who places two very tall glasses of beer on the table; the waiter leaves closing the door behind him.

The glass nearest Tommy was a tall Munich Dunkel Lager and the one in front of Quinn was a Guinness Stout that had been brewed at St. James’s Gate in Dublin, Ireland

Tommy sits silently as Quinn picks up his glass and takes a long drink of the Stout; sitting it down he says with a smile on his face, “Now don’t you be calling me “Porky” and I thank ye for the drink!

Now I’m here to tell ya that since Jimmy and his son are no longer, I’ll be taken over Isabella Barry's and all that comes with it. It will look a little different once I get it rebuild from the accidently explosion that occurred.

With a sly grin on his face Quinn remarks, “It’s seems nobody knows what cause it to explode.”

What's done is done and I want to leave it like that; what's say you?

Tommy picks up his glass as he sternly stares at Quinn then says, "I need to say this first" my two followed my orders, made a delivery, had no idea of what was in the packages, and now one is gone".

Tommy then says Mr. Patrick Quinn "If your words "it's done" are true then "It's done"

The two stand and Tommy says, "As you leave this establishment let Calan Bryan know that we had a meet in the "Linden Room" which in English it stands for the "Be Careful Room".

Chapter – 28

The Interrogation

Jackie's eyelids cracked open, dragged from sleep by a relentless pounding that seemed to vibrate the fillings in his teeth. He squinted at the clock: 5:01 AM. What kind of deranged woodpecker attacked doors at this hour?

Groaning, he fumbled for his baseball bat and stumbled to the front door, flinging it open with a none-too-sunny disposition.

There, bathed in the sickly pre-dawn light, stood Denise, she looked frantic the sweat had turned her bouncy hair into a dark, matted mask. There was no spark in her eyes now—only a wide, glassy terror.

"Jackie!" The name was a ragged gasp. She fought for air, her lungs hitching. "It's Tommy! They've got him!"

Jackie blinked, trying to process this bizarre morning drama. Someone's got Tommy? Seeing the genuine terror in her eyes Jackie pulled her into his living room, sat Denise on the couch and as he was pouring her a glass of bourbon he asked "OK, who's got Tommy and where did they take him?"

I was staying at Tommy's place when I hear this crash like a bowling alley exploded. Tommy told me to hide in the closet while he ran down stairs with a switchblade in his hand to find out who broke into his house.

Before I could blink, I see four big guys in black dumpy suits forcing poor Tommy into a black sedan and speeding off.

At that moment Jackie's phone lights, up and its Ancel saying "Tommy just called and said "Palo" has him!"

Jackie turns to Denise hands her a piece of paper, tells her to call the number that's on it and say "Palo's got Tommy, go help him" then hang up.

Detective Palo, a man forged in the crucible of countless investigations, leaned across the metal table, his gaze pinning Tommy like a hawk. The interrogation room thrummed with a low static, the air thick with unspoken accusations. The brutal murder of Jimmy Haggerty hung heavy in the air, and whispers swirled that linked Tommy to the crime.

"Tommy," Palo said his voice a rasp that scraped across the silence, "we both know what happened that night.

Haggerty didn't stand a chance against someone your size, someone with your... history."

Tommy flinched, the bravado slipping like a cracked mask. "I didn't do it," he spat, his voice thin and reedy. "Haggerty was a corrupt drug supplier and you know it!"

Along with Palo in the room were Detectives Collins, Frade, and Heiser who were part of the team that grabbed Tommy from his home. Palo scoffed a humorless sound that echoed in the sterile room.

"Don't play innocent, Tommy. We know you threatened Haggerty, do you deny saying "you want a war you got a war?"

Tommy's eyes darted around the room, searching for escape in the flickering fluorescent lights. I don't know what you're talking about barked Tommy!

Palo leaned in, his face a mask of granite resolve, "witnesses Tommy" we've got "witnesses!" Palo pressed on, his voice low and relentless. "Tell me the truth, Tommy. Tell me what happened to Haggerty, and maybe, just maybe, you can find some semblance of redemption in this mess."

Suddenly the door to the interrogation room swiftly opens and in walks a very tall, well-dressed red head. Detective Palo she says, I'm Beverly Gallo and my client Tommy and I will be leaving and any further questions you have be sure to have me present.

Palo stands and says "Now wait a minute" Immediately Beverly interjects "no, you wait unless I need to call Judge Mace again" we'll be leaving then points to Tommy and says "get up we're going".

Palo stood silent with a scowl on his face and knew he could not hold Tommy any longer but would soon see him at arraignment.

As he walked with Gallo down the hall heading for the front door of the Police Station Tommy gasped upon seeing Officer Ten in front of Detectives Taurasi and Malta another interrogation room.

"Ten wouldn't..." Tommy started, and then fell silent, chewing on his lip. The silence stretched, thick with unsaid words and the weight of potential betrayal. Seeing Ten caused a flicker of something close to fear in Tommy's eyes.

"Ten", the cop who'd tried his best to separate himself from Jackie's crew, was now a potential witness against them.

Chapter - 29
It Really Isn't Over Yet

Jimmy, we've had Haggerty's place under surveillance for months building a drug case against him. You're here because we have you on tape talking to Haggerty about a meeting for Tommy Taylor.

The air in the interrogation room was thick with tension, clinging to Jimmy's skin like a damp shroud. Across the table, Detective Malita's gaze was a laser, dissecting every twitch of Jimmy's nervous jaw. You know we had Tommy here being questioned by Palo. Now, Jimmy sat under the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights, his stomach churning with a concoction of fear and loyalty.

For "Christ Sake", you're an officer of the Philadelphia Police department, "Do You understand the gravity of your statement, Mr. Ten?" Detective Malita voice was a low rumble, vibrating the worn table between them.

Jimmy swallowed, the lump in his throat refusing to budge. "Yes sir," he rasped his voice barely a whisper.

"You're saying Tommy Taylor may have been involved with the murder of Jimmy Haggerty! A brutal, cold- blooded murder."

Detective Malita leaned forward, his eyes boring into Jimmy. "Tell me what you saw; tell me what you know, Mr. Ten. Every detail."

He spoke, his voice trembling, I didn't see him do it but I know he met Haggerty because he made me set up the meeting! That was the day Haggerty was murdered and that's all I know.

"Mr. Ten," the detective finally spoke, his voice softer now, look I get it you did it because you owed him money, now "is there anything you haven't told me? Anything that might shed a different light on this?"

Jimmy hesitated. There was a piece missing, a puzzle piece that could change everything, but revealing it meant betraying not just Tommy, but a part of himself. He looked into Detective Malita eyes, searching for a flicker of understanding, a hint of belief.

Jimmy's thoughts turned to the guy with the patch and shuddered when he thought would happen if he said anything about it.

"There's nothing else," he said finally, his voice barely audible. When Jimmy finished, a long silence stretched between them. Then, the detective sighed, a weary sound that echoed Jimmy's own.

"Mr. Ten," he said, "what you've told me is crucial. It doesn't change the facts of the case, but it does add context. We'll investigate this further, and your testimony will be invaluable."

He stood up, the tension in the room easing slightly. "You've done the right thing, Mr. Ten. Now, we have to let the justice system take its course."

As Jimmy left the station, the weight of his words pressed down on him. He had betrayed Tommy but he knew a good lawyer and a good alibi would get him out of it.

Tommy's knuckles went white against the oak desk, his jaw clenching like a rusty vice. Across from him, his lawyer, Beverly Gallo, sat unruffled, sipping tea from a China cup. The amber liquid reflected in her steely gaze, which held a grim certainty that gnawed at Tommy's already frayed nerves.

"Judge James Faughnan?" Tommy croaked, the name leaving a bitter taste on his tongue. "That fire-breathing Irish son of a bitch who threw the book at Joey 'Fingers' last year?"

Gallo set down the mug, the clink echoing the finality of her words. "The same. Unfortunately, Faughnan drew your case. And let's just say, he holds a particular...disdain for your...previous 'engagements' with the law."

Tommy flinched, the specter of his past rising like a vengeful ghost. Petty thefts, bar brawls, a brush with the loan sharks – he was hardly a choirboy, that much was true. But murder? Murder was a chasm he'd never even peered into, let alone crossed. Yet, here he was, accused of snuffing out Haggerty, the rotten drug dealer, and Judge Faughnan, notorious for his zero-tolerance policy and iron fist, loomed large as his executioner.

"So, what are you saying?" Tommy's voice was strained, the weight of his predicament threatening to buckle him. "He's already convicted me before the gavel even hits?"

Gallo's expression softened a fraction, a flicker of steel replaced by the faintest ember of hope. "No, Tommy. But Faughnan will come in with a bias, no doubt. We need to be watertight. Every alibi, every witness, and every scrap of evidence – we need it all, squeaky clean and presented with surgical precision."

The next few days were a whirlwind. Days morphed into nights, fueled by stale coffee and Gallo's relentless drilling. Witnesses were prepped, alibis were scrubbed, and Tommy's own story was polished until it shone with a desperate truthfulness. Sleep became a fleeting luxury, haunted by the image of Haggerty's ugly face twisted as he shouted telling Tommy to get the hell out of his bar.

The courtroom was a suffocating box, the air thick with tension and the cloying scent of disinfectant.

Judge Faughnan, perched on his throne like a gargoyle, surveyed the scene with cold, reptilian eyes. The proceedings were a blur of accusations, objections, and Gallo's sharp retorts, each parry and thrust chipping away at the prosecution's case.

Tommy sat through it all, a stoic statue sculpted from fear and adrenaline. Every glance Faughnan's way sent a tremor through him, but Gallo's unwavering gaze was a lifeline, reminding him to breathe, to focus, to trust her.

The days bled into weeks, the courtroom becoming a battlefield where arguments were weapons and verdicts the spoils of war. And then, finally, came the closing arguments.

Gallo, a tigress in a tailored suit, tore into the prosecution's case, exposing inconsistencies, raising doubts, weaving a tapestry of reasonable explanations from the threads of evidence. She appealed to the jury, not to their emotions, but to their sense of logic, of justice.

As the last words hung in the air, a heavy silence descended. Tommy's heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic drumbeat in the quiet.

As Tommy sat waiting for the Jury to return with their verdict, he knew that Beverly had without a doubt proved that by saying “you want a war you got a war” was not in itself a death threat.

It was the lie that had Tommy bewildered; why did Davy “The Knife” Botta, from the Pagans’ lie and say that Tommy swore he was going to kill Haggerty. Tommy was sure it wasn’t the first lie he told to save his own skin.

Tommy of course was sitting in his car two blocks away from Haggerty’s house waiting for Jackie and only had a very thin alibi. Tommy’s story had said he " was actually helping an elderly man change his tire on a deserted backroad. I didn't get his name, but he looked exactly like Bill Murray. He thanked me and drove off into the fog."

Tommy knew no one would believe his alibi but he had to protect Jackie.

The jury returned and the foreman spoke, his voice a beacon cutting through the fog of uncertainty.

“Guilty.”

The words washed over Tommy, a tidal wave of disbelief that threatened to drown him. He slumped back in his chair, it wasn't victory, and it was defeat.

As the courtroom emptied, Gallo placed a hand on his shoulder; listen will get this thrown out on appeal.

Both Jackie and Tommy had long since followed Gallo's advice and had the houses taken out of their names; April was on the title of Jackie's place and Denise on Tommy's. Likewise, Jackie's two cars were titled in each of their names as well.

Tommy was on his way to serve fifteen to life at the Cambridge Springs, PA prison. Jackie could only talk to him through his attorney Gallo and even some of that was in code that only Tommy and Jackie knew.

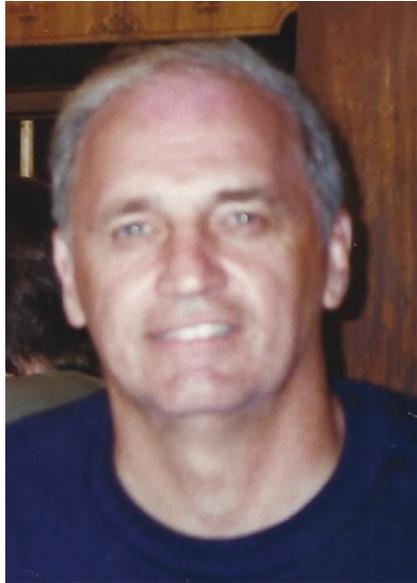
Tommy knew that Davy the Pegan boy wouldn't be long on this earth and Jackie will push Gallo to get him out of prison.

Jackie's last message to Tommy was "April and I are headed overseas for a while; I/m sending Denise to Cleveland to work with Malo, and Ancel will watch over all of our investments in "Philly."

"I plan to return when you return!"

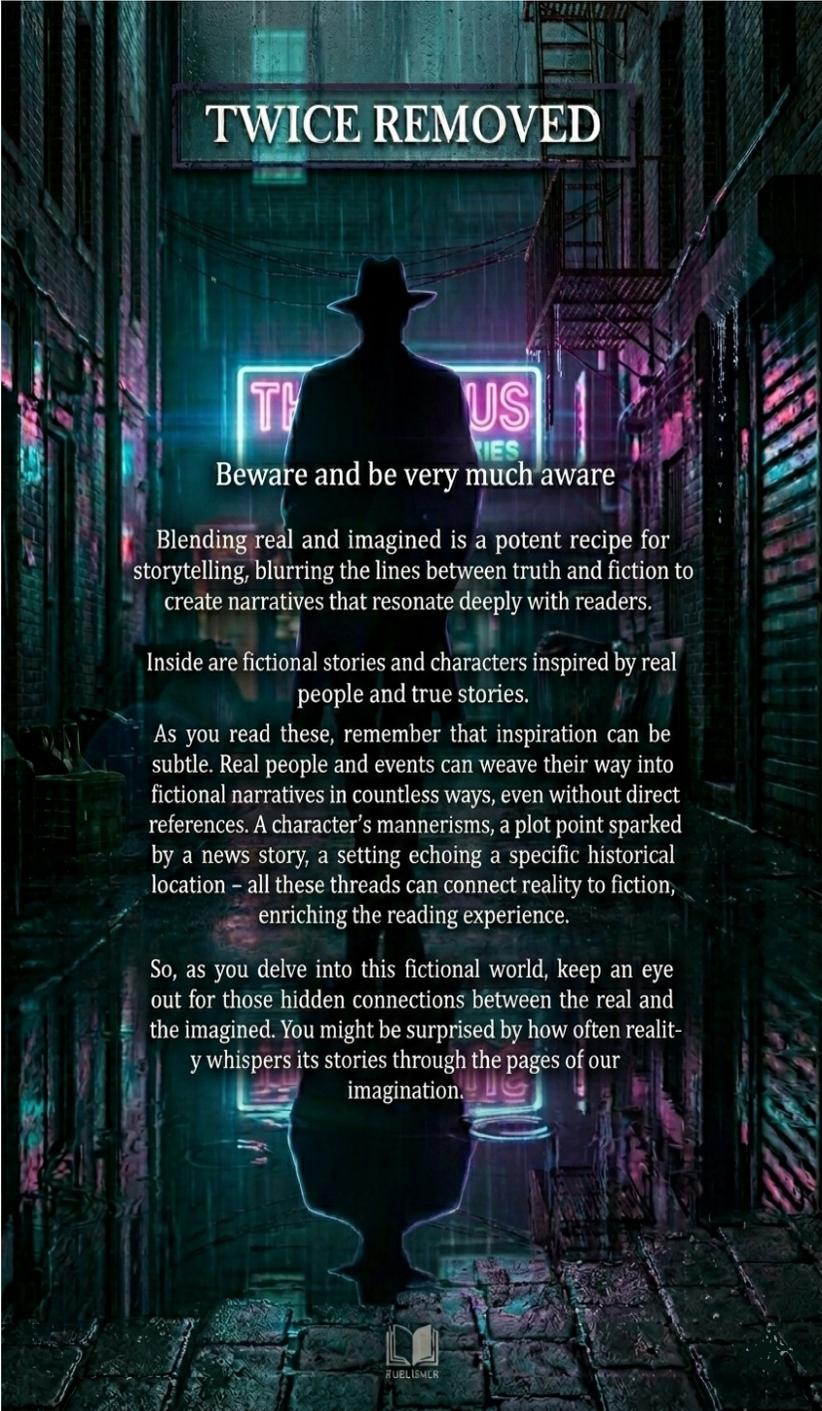
About the Author

Rick, a self-proclaimed "wordsmith in the rough," wasn't formally trained in the art of storytelling. His classroom was the world, with dog-eared experiences his curriculum. From the grit of his blue-collar upbringing to the unexpected kindness of strangers, he meticulously recorded life's lessons in worn notebooks. Now, fueled by a desire to share, he pours these experiences onto the page, weaving them into tales that resonate with raw honesty. His sentences may lack polish, but they thrum with an authenticity that critics can't ignore. Rick's fiction isn't a meticulously sculpted garden, but a vibrant jungle, untamed and teeming with the untamed beauty of lived experience.



Rick Ramm

Born & raised in a small town in Ohio
Whose parents were hard working, kindhearted and a sister who died
at a very young age.
One who took responsibility serious along with many failures & short
comings.

The background of the page is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a narrow alleyway at night. The walls are made of brick and are illuminated with various colors of neon light, including teal, purple, and pink. In the center of the alley, there is a silhouette of a person wearing a fedora hat, standing with their back to the camera. In the background, a neon sign is visible, partially obscured by the silhouette, with the words "THE US" and "IES" visible. The overall mood is mysterious and noir.

TWICE REMOVED

Beware and be very much aware

Blending real and imagined is a potent recipe for storytelling, blurring the lines between truth and fiction to create narratives that resonate deeply with readers.

Inside are fictional stories and characters inspired by real people and true stories.

As you read these, remember that inspiration can be subtle. Real people and events can weave their way into fictional narratives in countless ways, even without direct references. A character's mannerisms, a plot point sparked by a news story, a setting echoing a specific historical location – all these threads can connect reality to fiction, enriching the reading experience.

So, as you delve into this fictional world, keep an eye out for those hidden connections between the real and the imagined. You might be surprised by how often reality whispers its stories through the pages of our imagination.

