

The Grandfather Clause

A Novel by Philip A. Genovese, Jr.

S&G

Smoke&Gunn Publishing LLC

AWARDS for THE GRANDFATHER CLAUSE

FIRST PRIZE WINNER FOR FICTION

Santa Fe Trail Creative Arts Council Fiction Book Award

SEMI-FINALIST FOR FICTION, SUSPENSE/THRILLER CATEGORY

The Eric Hoffer Award

HONORABLE MENTION FOR GENERAL FICTION

The Los Angeles Book Festival

PRAISE FROM READERS

“A fantastic book! I do not read mob related stories, they are just not my "thing"...but this was SO much more! The writing was crisp, the characters were real, the tension was electric, the laughs well timed and the twists kept me on the edge of my seat. Think Nelson DeMille meets Brad Thor meets Mario Puzo.”

“An amazing page turner with crisp detail and dialogue... It’s like the Sopranos on steroids. I hope this book gets snagged by HBO or Showtime and turned into a mini-series.”

“I am an attorney who reads a book a week. I love the likes of Nelson DeMille, Vince Flynn, etc. The Grandfather Clause truly DELIVERS at that level. A page turner, a great story. Clearly this author not only crafts an edge of the seat story buy he enriches it with a depth of language often overlooked in such novels. I am officially on the Phil Genovese bandwagon and look forward to his next novel as much or more as I would DeMille.”

"Richly developed characters unleashed on a totally believable yet incredibly twisted and suspenseful story, make for a hard to put down read!"

“The Grandfather Clause is an amazing book. It's riveting from the first page to the last. Mr. Genovese does a remarkable job with character and story development and this is an exceptional first novel.”

“Fantastic Book! My prediction is that Philip Genovese, Jr. will be the next James Paterson. (This book) holds your interest to the point you're going to have a meltdown, if you stop reading.”

“I enjoy all the current novelists. Turow, Baldacci, Patterson, DeMille, Grisham and now Genovese. (He) writes as well as any of these others... I liken his style mostly to that of DeMille...The story is full of twists and turns and is as difficult a book to put down as any I have read in twenty years.”

“The Grandfather Clause does a wonderful job of sweeping you into the underworld of crime and terrorism. ... you find yourself unable to put it down. Who are the real heroes? Who are the real enemies? Genovese takes great care to craft a story that naturally builds upon itself as life truly does. I loved this book and look forward to living in that world once again.”

More reviews on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Visit www.philgenovese.com

Smoke&Gunn Publishing LLC

Email: smokegunn@comcast.net

Author's web site: www.philgenovese.com

This is a work of fiction. All the names, characters, locations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons - living or dead, places, or events is either purely coincidental, unintentional, or a fictionalized version created solely for entertainment value.

© 2007-2015 Philip A. Genovese, Jr. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any fashion without the written permission of the author.

ASIN: B001F0QM5G (e)

ISBN: 978-1-4343-3426-8 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4343-3427-5 (hc)

For my wife, MaryAnn, and our children - Taylor, Melissa, and Tommy

And in remembrance of my grandfathers, Tom and Vito.

Acknowledgments

It has been said that writing is a lonely pursuit. But thanks to the early readers of my manuscript and their kind words, I was rarely alone and always encouraged. You are too many to mention but too few to forget. I never will. Thank you.

When I announced to my parents my sophomore year in college that I no longer thought I would be a doctor and had switched my major to English Literature, they bought me an electric typewriter. I'm still not sure that was a good idea, but I love them for their support of my dreams and their wonderful grand-parenting.

If you have a demanding day job and decide to write a book, you better plan to have five years worth of missed weekends and vacations with your laptop. It is also best to have great friends and good neighbors who excuse your absences and tolerate your book funk way longer than reasonably necessary.

Mostly, though, you need a wonderful family that forgives each others' weakest moments and celebrates the best. There would be no book without their peace, love, and understanding.

GRANDFATHER CLAUSE - A provision exempting persons or other entities already engaged in an activity from rules or legislation affecting that activity. Grandfather clauses sometimes are added to legislation in order to avoid antagonizing groups with established interests in the activities affected.

lectlaw.com

People may be "grandfathered" to receive new benefits they are not otherwise entitled to.

wikipedia.org

Prologue

Sunday, March 1963

Red Bank, New Jersey

What I remember about Sundays back then was that they were always the same. Even knowing that our memories play conveniently with the truth and most often live longest the closer they reside to the boundaries of comfort and sorrow, I think this is generally correct. Certainly, it was God's day and, I guessed, it was by His design that Sundays were meant to be a mix of pain and pleasure, punishment and reward. Week after week, I'd find my hidden treasures amid a strange brew of uneasiness, resignations, and small wonders, one of which being that Sundays were always the same. That is, of course, until this Sunday.

The day began at seven-thirty with a glass of orange juice. In those days, the Catholic Church decreed a three-hour fast prior to receiving the Holy Sacrament. However, to ease the suffering of the faithful, liquids were allowed up to one hour before. My brother and sister were younger and having not yet made their First Holy Communion, they were exempt from fasting. As I sipped my orange juice, they would taunt me with delicious, closed-eyed moans and groans as they ate their cereal. I remember this as one of the early signals that being the oldest was not merely a chronological fact but also carried with it some weight.

My parents woke up cranky on Sundays. We were not morning people and I suspect that their mood was in anticipation of the mad dash to get everyone ready for the glorious peace and light awaiting us at the nine-fifteen at St. James. Tension draped the house from the moment my mother came into our rooms and snapped up the shades. I went about my morning routine carefully, the way you walk through a minefield. God forbid you were caught lingering or engaged in anything not directly related to the grand preparation. This is not to say that my parents were mean or ugly people, quite the opposite. They were simply victims of the angst born of the prescribed routines and responsibilities of young family life, which occasionally can suck the breath out of living.

A benefit of being the oldest was that I had learned the program. I knew when the tempest was nearing its end. I would close my eyes and breathe in the sweet powdery smell of my father's aftershave as he bent to tie the Windsor knot under my chin. And when he would overdose me with enough Odell's Hair Trainer to stiffen the wind, and comb my hair so roughly that the tines felt they would leave bloody tracks across my scalp, I would smile to myself and wait for the command we heard every Sunday. "You

three just sit on the couch. Don't talk. Don't touch. Don't even look at each other. Just sit there until your mother and I are ready." For me, this was the true beginning of Mass and the only part in English.

I had reckoned early on that religion was another one of those things that only adults could understand, even if they couldn't speak Latin. The nuns taught us The Immaculate Conception. I went home and looked up the two words in our dictionary. It still made no sense to me. In my young mind, The Holy Spirit, a.k.a. The Holy Ghost, was a scary image, but burning in Hell or detention in a medieval waiting room called Purgatory was unimaginable. So, to cover all the bases, I made up a wagon-load of sins for my First Confession. Worse than all the ethereal demons and dungeons, was the fear of the earthly reprisals should you struggle with your weekly lesson from the Baltimore Catechism. Failure to regurgitate verbatim your holy assignment would unleash the unholy wrath simmering under the sister's black robes. Thereunder was the stuff of Hell, rumbling like pressurized volcanic matter restrained only by a delicate layer of planetary crust. I have never been a good Catholic but I'll bet I could still recite the catechism lessons with very little prompting.

During Mass, I would study the backs of people's heads and try imagining their faces. Were they happy, solemn, pretty, or bored like me? The game would end when we all walked to and from the communion rail and the faces were revealed. This, and the fact that I was very hungry by then, made receiving Holy Communion my favorite part of Mass. I savored the thin wafer, letting it dissolve slowly in my mouth, imagining it was a warm cinnamon bun, the ones from Freidman's Bakery that my father would buy on the way home. It also signaled that Mass was almost over. A few more mumbles in Latin and my family would earn another week of Sanctifying Grace. Thank God.

After Mass, my family partook in another Sunday ritual; a big breakfast at our dining room table. My mother liked it that way and that's how most things were decided around our house. She would say, as long as it was her house to keep, it would be kept her way. After breakfast, I would secretly watch her clear the dishes and simultaneously reset the table for dinner. She did this with such grace and economy that I wondered if she practiced it during the week. This Sunday, she didn't speak until she was done.

"Mike, are your father's *friends* coming again today?" she called to my father in the living room.

"Of course, nothing's changed. Things are still unsettled. You know that," he answered from behind the newspaper. Lowering the paper. "Let's not start this. Just set them a place in the kitchen like he wants and pretend they're not here."

"Pretend they're not here? You've got to be kidding. We need to talk."

My father crumbled the newspaper and walked deliberately into the kitchen. I strained to listen, but they argued quietly. Even so, I knew what the problem was. My mother didn't like my grandfather or his friends, Mario and Nico. I couldn't understand then why she felt that way. Sure, he seemed to be a very important and serious man, but there was something else. Something special. If not, how could he have been friends with my favorite Yankees, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford? One Sunday, he brought me a baseball they both had signed and it wasn't even my birthday or Christmas. Later, I was stunned by the tone my mother used when said to my father, "I wonder how he got that?"

My grandfather's friends, Mario and Nico, were always very polite. They dressed in suits and helped my grandfather. They were a younger than my grandfather, around my father's age. But Pop Pop Carmine had a lot of friends of all ages, which made it more difficult for me to understand why my mother couldn't love him, too. But being just eight years old, even my most serious ruminations were ephemeral and victim to easy distraction. So, unencumbered by the unresolved, I would look forward to the best part of every Sunday.

Just before one o'clock, I began to watch for him through the living room draperies. Soon I'd see my Pop Pop Carmine's sky blue Chrysler Imperial roll to a stop in front of our house. I remember thinking how nice it was of my grandfather to let Mario drive his new car and Nico sit up front while he rode in back. I watched Nico and Mario get out and look up the road and behind the towering elms and sycamores that lined our street before they opened my grandfather's door. They even carried all the boxes of pastries and fruit and the warm loaves of bread for him. Nico and Mario couldn't speak English very well but they sure knew their manners.

Shortly after he arrived, Pop Pop Carmine would roll up his shirtsleeves and take me by the hand into the kitchen. All the ingredients - the garlic and olive oil, canned tomatoes and paste, the sausage, beef, and pork, cheeses, seasonings, pasta and wine were carefully arranged beside the stove. Like the priest's Sunday altar, everything had been set out in advance by my mother. Soon, the incense of sizzled garlic and the sweet smell of the thick red sauce would waft to every corner of our house, rendering it redolent and warmed.

I remember one Sunday the garlic wasn't fresh.

My grandfather had cursed, "Mannaggia, Michael, this garlic is stale. I don't ask for much. My grandchildren and fresh garlic once a week."

"Dad, calm down. I'll get you some fresh garlic," my father called from the other room.

"Your wife can't do that?"

My mother hurried to the kitchen and handed my grandfather another clove. He took the clove and without a word drove her from the kitchen, her eyes red and pooled.

But this Sunday everything seemed to be just fine. Pop Pop Carmine carefully prepared the sauce while I sat close on a stool. Like the altar boys at Mass, I had learned to hand over each of the ingredients without being asked. I would sit patiently waiting for my grandfather's outstretched hand, the right moment to tender the next offering. Then I'd wait for the faint nod, the signal I had done well. This was my church.

We sat and stirred the sauce for hours. Mario and Nico played pinochle at the kitchen table and talked Italian to each other and to my grandfather. I couldn't understand the Italian any better than the Latin at Mass but I could somehow feel the words. Their cadence created a rhythm that beat deeply and naturally in my core. Normal conversation lulled me like soft music. I had even come to sense buoyancy in the meter before they would laugh and I'd smile along with them. But, if the words came quickly,

clipped and sharp, I'd pretend I wasn't listening and concentrate on stirring the sauce slowly and evenly as I had been taught.

And, while the meat sauce simmered, my Pop Pop would tell me stories about great Italians. These might be gospels about the adventures of Marco Polo, Cristoforo Colombo, and Amerigo Vespucci; or testaments to the genius of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Brunelleschi, Virgil and Dante, or Galileo, Fermi, and Marconi. By my grandfather's telling, it was the Italians who had single-handedly discovered America, created all the world's masterpieces, and laid the foundation for modern science. In fact, he would conclude that without the Italians the world would not be what it is today - certainly, it would be devoid of the arts, design, and true culture. I sat enthralled by these homilies and begged for another when each would end. This Sunday, the sermon was in praise of Puccini, which my grandfather punctuated by closing his eyes and humming the defining arias.

Finally, when my grandfather tore the heel off the loaf of bread, like a good altar boy, I tilted my head back and opened my mouth to receive the holiest of communions. The bread dunked in the hot sauce burned my mouth and watered my eyes. My grandfather dipped a piece for himself, swallowed slowly, and wiped his chin with the dishcloth. I waited while he neatly refolded the towel and sipped his wine.

After a moment, he patted my head and smiled, "It's ready, Joseph. Tell your father."

After dinner my mother and sister washed the dishes in the kitchen. My brother and I ate pastries and fresh figs at the dining room table with my father and grandfather. The two men smoked cigars, drank espresso and poured Strega into tiny glasses. We picked from a bowl of nuts, finding fun in cracking walnuts and pecans for the older men. Mario and Nico smoked cigarettes on the back porch. My mother insisted on that. She always made a lot of noise banging the pots and pans on Sundays. I had come to know that this was no accident. No matter the weather, Mario and Nico knew to stay on the back porch until the racket stopped.

When the last shiny pot was put away and the kitchen was quiet, my father called, "Are you girls all done in there? Come and join us for dessert."

Little Annie came but never my mother. Not until the doorbell rang. As usual, some of Pop Pop Carmine's other friends had come to visit. Only then did my mother come into the dining room and only to take Tommy and Annie upstairs for their baths. My father and I moved into the den to watch television. Mario and Nico joined Pop Pop in the living room.

The Wonderful World of Disney was on by that time and I pretended to watch. I had learned to position myself just right. Davy Crocket was one of my favorite movies but through the half-opened doorway was the real show.

The first to arrive were two men dressed in suits. Mario opened the door for them and Nico took their coats and hats. My grandfather motioned them to the sofa across from his chair. They spoke quietly and sometimes leaned forward to whisper in Pop Pop's ear. When my grandfather raised his voice for a moment his friends became very still. But soon they were all talking again. When they were ready to leave, Nico helped them on with their coats and Mario held the door for them.

More men came and went. This Sunday three groups of friends came over to talk with him. Every visit was more or less the same. The visitors were polite and respectful. They seemed very thankful to have Pop Pop Carmine as their friend. One man even kissed his hand, which made me laugh into my hands. And, they all called him by his nickname, Don Carmine.

Just as Davy Crocket was ending, Mario and Nico leaned into the doorway to say good-bye. My grandfather came in wearing his coat and hat.

He winked at me and said, "Hey, Joseph, I need some help finding something in my car. How about getting your jacket and helping your old Pop Pop?"

This was the way every Sunday ended. Mario and Nico would go out and start the car. Rain or shine they'd stand on either side of the Chrysler and wait for my grandfather and me to come out. When we reached the car, my grandfather would say, "Some change fell out of my pocket today. You can keep whatever you find if you share it with your brother and sister."

But this Sunday was unlike all the Sundays before. Mario and Nico were not standing by the car and the trunk was open. It was dark, but as we got closer I saw Mario bent over into the trunk. I didn't see Nico.

My grandfather called out, "Mario, abbiamo una ruota sgonfiata?" *We have a flat tire?*

Mario didn't answer. He didn't even move.

"Mario!" Louder this time. "Nico!"

In the silence I felt my grandfather stiffen. He put his hand across my chest and motioned for me to stay behind. As he walked around to the rear of the car, I followed instinctively.

My grandfather stopped suddenly. "Figlio di puttana!" *Son of a bitch!*

I saw what caused my grandfather to swear. Mario's right cheek was pressed against the floor of the trunk in a pool of blood. His eyes were wide open and brain tissue blossomed from his forehead. My grandfather reached down to touch Mario's shoulder as if he could somehow still feel.

I was mesmerized by the horror of the moment. My grandfather's voice hissing through clenched teeth startled me.

"Nico. Tu!"

I looked up to see Nico pointing a large pistol at my grandfather. It was the type soldiers used in World War II movies but it had a black pipe extending from the barrel. Nico looked past my grandfather at me.

"I sorry for you, Joey," he said.

"Nooo!" my grandfather screamed and swung up wildly from the trunk.

Nico never saw the cross-shaped tire iron fisted in my grandfather hands. It struck diagonally across his face, knocking him hard to pavement. I heard Nico's gun clatter on the street.

With the quickness of a much younger man, my grandfather stepped across and stood astride Nico's chest. He leaned forward and, holding the arms of the iron cross, shoved one end into Nico's mouth until he started to gag and grab at my grandfather's arms.

My grandfather looked over his shoulder at me. "Go, behind that tree."

I heard his voice but the face was one I had never seen before. The mouth seemed smaller and thinned under flared nostrils. The tendons in his neck were raised and corded to jaw muscles that rippled over clenched teeth. But it was his eyes that I would never forget. Flaming holes cut into a furnace of rage and cast-iron will. Maybe this was the face that made my mother cry. I froze.

"Joseph, go! Now!" My grandfather's voice again. "Stay there 'till I call you."

I stumbled backward, then turned and ran toward an old sycamore. I could hear Nico gagging.

"Chi, Nico?" *Who?* My grandfather demanded. "Baressi?"

Nico choked loudly. I peeked from behind the tree trunk. My grandfather hunched lower, putting more of his weight on the cross.

Nico moaned low in his throat and his hands flailed at my Pop Pop's forearms. But these were the forearms of an old longshoreman, thick and hard.

"Baressi, si?" My grandfather asked again.

Then in a soft and calm voice, my grandfather said, "Nico, metti le mani giu." *Put your hands down.*

Nico let his arms slide to the road beside him. My grandfather whispered something in Italian, or maybe Latin, and in one powerful motion rose up on his toes and leaned forward onto the arms of the cross. Nico's legs and arms shot up wildly and shook like a puppet. I could see my grandfather pushing down hard, rocking the tire iron back and forth until Nico stopped moving.

My grandfather stood up and threw the tire iron into the trunk of his car. He lifted Mario's legs and swung him in, too. Then he grabbed Nico under the arms and grunted as he wrestled the dead weight up and over the edge of the trunk. He glanced around before lifting a can of gasoline from the trunk, which he used to splash away Nico's blood.

My grandfather looked down at his soiled and bloodied camel cashmere overcoat.

"Bastardi," he cursed between thin, tight lips.

He took off the coat, wiped his hands on it, and tossed it into the trunk before closing the lid. I continued to peek as he went to the driver's seat and used the rear-view mirror to adjust his shirt collar and comb his hair. When he had resettled his fedora, he called for me.

He swung his legs out the door to face me. "Joseph, do you understand that I had to protect myself... that sometimes men must die for others to live? Nico would have killed your Pop Pop tonight. He shot Mario, his old friend from Napoli. He may have hurt you, too."

"But Nico was your friend," I said.

”Nico was my second cousin’s son. But no, Nico was not my friend. You remember this, Joseph. People aren’t always what they seem to be. Sometimes it’s hard to know who is your friend.”

His eyes slipped from mine for a moment and drifted back with a weak, sad smile.

“It seems the longer you live the fewer friends you have,” he said.

”You have me, Pop Pop.”

“Yes, I know. And now we have this secret.”

My grandfather touched the first two fingers of his right hand to his lips and then moved them slowly to mine and rested them there.

“We must never tell another man what happened here tonight. No one, not even your father must know. Never.”

I nodded unconditionally. He studied my face for a long moment and then slowly withdrew his fingers. I followed his mutilated forefinger as it fell away, remembering a year earlier when it had been mangled in the metal blades of a table fan.

“Pop Pop?”

“Yes.”

“Will Mario and Nico go to Heaven?”

“Mario will. Nico called you Joey, though. That is not a name men say with respect. Joseph was my father’s name. Never let anyone call you Joey. For that, and other things, Nico will go to Hell.”

“Will you go to Heaven, Pop Pop?”

“If you pray for me, Joseph.”

I watched him drive away and round the bend in the road, the red lights on the tail fins of the Chrysler flickering between the trunks of the elms and sycamores before they disappeared. I smelled the gasoline and looked down at the spot where Nico had died. I kicked leaves from the gutter and spread them over the wet area with my sneakers. Something hard and heavy banged against my toes. It was Nico’s gun. I picked it up and was surprised by its weight. I tucked it in my belt under my jacket.

Before I went to sleep that Sunday, I wrapped the gun in my Davy Crocket frontier shirt and hid it with my ‘coonskin cap at the bottom of a box filled with toy soldiers and matchbox cars. Before I slid the box to the back of my closet, I put the baseball he had given me inside, too. In my bed, I closed my eyes, smelled the meat sauce and prayed for my grandfather.

Today

I've never told anyone that story, not even my wife. There are a lot of reasons. I'd like to think that at least one of them has to do with me keeping my promise to my grandfather. Maybe, though, it's about living my father's life and not my grandfather's, and wanting to be defined by *my* deeds and not by the salacious nature of my grandfather's chosen work. But most likely, I never told anyone because I was afraid they might believe me.

So, why do I tell it now? Well it's not because I struggle with any deep psychological requirements to ventilate and heal from what I witnessed that night at such a tender age. I seem to have skirted any major consequences, moral or otherwise, from having kept this secret. Frankly, some recent events have more soundly trampled my psyche. It is true, though, that unlike the rest of my childhood, time and distance have failed miserably to dim even the most insignificant detail of that Sunday. Looking back, even as I stood at the curb making my promise, I knew that the weight of that moment would never leave me and, now later, nor will its occasional night rides through my darkest dreams.

And no, breaking my promise to my grandfather has nothing to do with me suddenly finding myself much closer to his age or him being long gone, that Sunday in 1963 being the last time I ever saw him. I've learned a lot about Don Carmine Napolo over the years, the side of him I never knew, him being someone I might be afraid to know today. Say what you will about him, it's all probably true and not much of it good. But he was a wonderful grandfather to me and because of that there was never a question about me keeping our secret. Not until recently.

I told that old story because you need to hear it now, in view of this new story. They go together, hand in hand, like my grandfather and I walked to his car that chilly March night. And, I believe, knowing what I know now and what I had to do not too long ago, releases me from my promise. I think he'd understand because this involved my family and people I care about, and each of them was made fearful and diminished by it.

So now that you know the back-story and what it costs me to tell you, we can move forward to a week in May some years ago to the events that brought us here. But know first, that while great literature has been built around defining events in men's lives, don't be mistaken, this is not one of those stories and it's certainly not great literature. The defining moments in my life have been those that most men pass through without much notice or even that expectation. No, this story has nothing to do with greatness; weakness perhaps, and from some perspective, comeuppance. I am no longer afraid who might believe it, or not. I do wonder, though, if enough time has passed to make the telling safe.

One thing is certain, none of this would have happened if my grandfather had been a cobbler. And for that, he and I are now inexorably coupled and likely to meet again someday in Hell.

So, we can continue now. I'll tell you exactly how it happened, all that I know and what I have come to learn in the years since, clearly understanding that this telling will not serve to further me from the sins - his or mine.

Respectfully,

Joseph Carmine Napoli

Chapter 1

Monday, April 30, 2001

Edison, New Jersey

Domanski Trucking Company sits on fourteen blacktopped acres just off Exit 10 of the New Jersey Turnpike. We're in an industrial park near the crossroads of every major highway that transects the state. I stood in the yard just inside the main gate. The sun was just below the horizon, chasing the false dawn westward. Early birds were chirping in a narrow stand of pines and maples at the edge of our property. The night rain had left the yard smelling of damp loam and petroleum.

Michael Cogan was behind me, bent over, head down with his hands on his knees, panting.

I looked over my shoulder and said, "A little too much drinking this weekend or just getting old?"

"For chrissake, I'm forty-six, not sixteen."

"And I'm not... Nancy?"

"Fuck you."

We're best friends and partners. We hold each other to the promise of an early morning run, a couple miles several days a week. It wasn't a race but we secretly compete. Still, I take no real pleasure in beating him, or him me, especially since there is never a wager on the outcome. I would never bet with Michael, just as I would refuse a drink with a recovering alcoholic.

Michael joined me and we stood there in silence, both of us still too winded. We met as freshman roommates at Penn in Philadelphia. Sophomore year, Michael took a course in Greek Mythology. He'd get sloppy drunk and hug me and announce to anyone who would listen that we were like Damon and Pythias, making sure everyone knew he was Damon because Pythias sounded like someone with a lisp. He'd jump up on the pool table at Kelly's and tell the story of these two friends who lived in Syracuse in the 4th century BC, always having to explain that he was not talking about Syracuse, New York. He'd invariably begin at the end of the story, when Pythias was sentenced to death. Damon took his best friend's place in prison so Pythias could be free to put his affairs in order. Pythias returned just before Damon was to be executed, and the king was so impressed with their loyalty to one another that he pardoned Pythias.

“I’d die for that guy,” he’d slur pointing at me.

Then he’d jump down and try to kiss me on the lips.

We lived together until we graduated and remained faithful to the legacy of Damon and Pythias ever since. We shared apartments, cars, women, and eventually both went to work for different Fortune 100 companies; huge multinational, brand-rich consumer products and healthcare manufacturers. But Corporate America in the seventies and early eighties was a dinosaur world, lumbering along through swamps of waste and mediocrity, where factories were called plants as if it softened the truth of the bricks and mortar and steel. A place you had to work hard at to get fired from. Overstaffed and stifling, thick and bloated with self-important middle managers insulated from all realities of business except those exposed in corporate mission statements, company policies and standard operating procedures, each guarded and preserved as if they balanced the order of the universe.

Over the years, in spite of our corporate successes and earning our ways into the bigger boxes higher on the page of our divisions’ organizational charts, we grew to hate it there. Along with the boredom and complacency, we struggled with an absence of meaningfulness and found ourselves once too often drinking a Friday night away, paraphrasing Jackson Browne in one last toast: ‘when the morning light comes shinin’ in, we just get up and do it all over again’. Ultimately though, it was what we had been forced to witness; the horror of too many capable men with good intentions and hardy ambitions slowly suffocating inside these massive cocoons, losing themselves in the company goo.

This was no place for the dynamic duo. After all, we had helped change the world. We stood shoulder to shoulder with other longhaired students in protest of the Vietnam War. More than once, the National Guard and State Police had hosed us off the steps of the ROTC building and chased us through the teargas across the campus, batons and bayonets at our backs. We had survived sex, drugs and rock’n’roll together and, when the opportunity presented itself, we knew we could make Domanski Trucking into a company we’d be proud to own. No excuses. No compromises. Just good men in good machines providing good service for loyal customers. Silly as that all sounds, it’s the good ground we walk that’s become the path to our success.

Now, in the first light of day, we stood shoulder to shoulder again. Our fleet of eighty-four Freightliners was backed up against both sides of the yard. Forty-two shining blood-red behemoths frowning at their mirror images across the pavement. The two of us stood there struggling to regain our breath, but even at rest, the power and stamina of these machines could still leave us speechless.

Finally Michael spoke.

“When we were playing hippies, whadja think you’d do when you grew up?”

I shrugged. “I never thought I’d grow up.”

“Have we?”

I looked at him. He was a thicker around the middle and a bit worn around the eyes, but they were still strong eyes, still sparkling with Irish mischief.

“Hell no,” I said. “Older, yeah, but I still don't know what I want to do when I grow up.”

“I think we're doin' it.”

“Maybe.”

* * *

By the time we had showered it was close to six o'clock. As I dressed, I could feel the terminal building begin to stir as drivers and dispatchers, dockmen and mechanics, clerks and supervisors began to circulate through the facility. I heard the time clock thump and thump. Doors breathed open and closed. Rooms pulsed with footsteps and voices, soft and loud. Computer screens blinked awake and the smell of fresh-brewed coffee, the real fuel of trucking companies, filled the halls. The good people of Domanski Trucking Company had come to bestow it life for another day.

At exactly six, Michael and I stepped up on a four-foot high riser fashioned from wood pallets stacked at one end of the loading docks; a long and narrow structure that juts out from the center of the office area. The docks were nearly empty of cargo. Friday night the second shift crew had loaded today's deliveries onto trailers. Nonetheless, there was little room on the platform. Standing before us were all but five of Domanski Trucking Company's one hundred and forty-two employees.

Michael cleared his throat and began. “Good morning and thank you all for getting up so early to come to this important meeting. It's a very special day for all of us and we felt it was important that we should all start it together, just as we will move forward together.”

Michael stepped aside for me.

I said, “Good morning, everyone. Today, you are all valued employees of Domanski Trucking Company. Michael and I are the proud owners of this great little company. But tomorrow, May first, we are all owners. As of twelve-oh-one tomorrow morning, each of you will own a piece of our new company, DTC Transportation LLC. Collectively you will own thirty-three and a third percent of the company and the value of your shares will grow with time and good service. Congratulations!”

The new owners of DTC Transportation broke into unrestrained cheering and applauding. Michael and I joined the noisemaking. Soon the clapping was accompanied by stomping feet, in unison quicker and quicker, until we could no longer hold the rhythm together. I raised my hands and the thunder rolled and faded like a down-shifted diesel breaking into a steep curve.

“But, like all good things, this has come with a price,” I continued. “The days ahead will be challenging for us all. Michael and I will continue to finalize this situation as it is not only what you wanted us to do, but also what is best for our company.

“Now, you all know Bobby Moretti, your shop steward. He’s worked hard over the last few years to represent those of you who belonged to Local 714. He’s always been fair and honest, and a strong advocate for all you Teamsters, or should I say, former Teamsters. Michael and I are particularly grateful to Bobby for his representation and hard work on this decertification effort. Come on up here Bobby and give us an update.”

Bobby Moretti was a truck driver in his early fifties. His thick hair was dark brown and his large frame moved with the strength and agility of a man half his age. Like a lot of Viet Nam vets, he still sported a bushy, late-sixties style handlebar mustache which accented his ready smile. As he approached the makeshift stage, his associates chanted, “Bob-by, Bob-by, Bob-by.”

He leaped up between Michael and I, grinning and embarrassed but proud.

“Awright! Enough. I ain’t the freakin’ Pope.” Everyone laughed and someone in the back yelled, “Bob-by” one more time.

“Hey, this is a great day but we got some problems. And it’s these guys’ fault.” He pointed at Michael and me. “If they hadn’t wanted to give us all a bonus last Christmas and give us part of their company, there’d be no problems.” The crowd laughed.

“Seriously, now, that’s when it all started. That’s when Local 714 told us that our contract would not allow us to take the bonus or any ownership in the company. Hey, call me stupid, but I always thought a union’s s’posed to improve conditions, and pay, and bennies for its members. So when they drive up in their new Town Cars and try to tell us not to trust the company because they want to put some cash in our pockets and share the profits we all help earn, hey, guess what, I can’t understand that. Then when we hear about how the Federal Government’s investigating the looting of our union’s pension fund, the misuse of our funds for Teamster elections, and how the Feds had to take over Locals all over the state because they say these guys are all mobbed up, well somethin’s wrong. And then, after we all voted to decertify and to work for Joseph and Michael without the union, the National Labor Relations Board tells us we can’t do that. They tell us that we’re working illegally. Well this is still America and last I heard it was outlaws who founded it. So if that’s the way they see it, screw the freakin’ NLRB and screw the union!”

The outlaw employees broke into another round of cheering and stomping. Bobby let them go for a while and then held up his hands until the crowd was quiet.

Turning his head toward us he began again. “Joseph. Michael. Today we are teamsters with a small ‘t’ but we got big heart. You’ve helped many of us individually through hard times over the years. We know your kids’ names and you know ours. Hell, some of our kids work here now. You guys have

turned this company around, and it's this company that puts food on our tables, not the union. Without the company, the union wouldn't even know our names. What's done is done. Now it's time to stand together and get through this. We got freight to deliver and bills to pay, so let's get it on!" More cheering.

I squeezed Bobby's shoulder as I stepped forward on the platform. "Thank you, Bobby. Ladies and gentleman, we asked you to get here very early today because Local 714 has promised us a picket line."

"Who's gonna be on that picket line? We're all here," someone yelled from the back.

Bobby Moretti shouted, "Donchya worry 'bout that. Laskowski and Catella can produce a picket line from thin air. There'll be pickets, and plenty of 'em. Look out the window, there's a few dozen of 'em out there already."

The gathering shifted to one side of the building to get a look through the windows on the loading dock doors. Michael broke through the murmur.

"Okay. Okay. Let's get back to the meeting."

When we had their attention, I began again, "Truth is, we're not all here. Five of our drivers have chosen not to join us. They will most likely be joining the pickets today. That's their right. We will *not* hold it against them. Please, under no circumstances, engage them or any other pickets in any conversation. At this juncture, nothing good will come of it. We are all owners and, therefore, principal representatives of this company. We must demand of each other that we act professionally and within the law, no matter how we are treated.

"Our attorneys have briefed us on the rules of picketing. Picketing is legal under these circumstances. But, pickets must keep moving, walking, and be spaced three feet apart. They can not picket on company property. They can not prevent or intimidate persons or vehicles from entering or exiting company property, although they will try. They can carry signs but the language must be specific and accurate. We have alerted the Edison Police and the State Police, and we will enforce the rules of picketing. We will protect company and personal property. And, of course, we will protect all of our people.

"Now, this morning and every morning until this is over, all trucks will leave the grounds together. Drivers will hook up to their trailers and line up, circling the building. Michael and I will be at the front gates. We'll roll on my signal. Office personnel will meet after this in the customer service area. Janie Steple will instruct you all on how we will cross the picket line and how to handle inquiries from customers and the media. Any questions?" I paused and scanned the crowd. "Good. Let's be smart and safe today."

Michael and I returned to the office we shared. Through the windows we could see that there were now at least a hundred men gathered outside the gates. Ron Laskowski and Albert Catella, the President and Vice President of Teamster Local 714, were holding their own meeting. These were men of

the streets and the blacktop was their stage. Their twin Lincoln Town Cars served as the backdrop. Albert “Alley Cat” Catella was the most animated. Black pants and shoes, and a black leather jacket over a crisp white shirt accentuated his middleweight’s build. He always dressed in black and white, but today he looked pumped and ready for a prizefight.

“Jesus Christ. Who *are* all those fucking guys?” Michael thought aloud.

“Unemployed and retired Teamsters, no doubt,” I guessed.

“Whadaya thinking?” Michael said without taking his eyes from the window.

“I think we better get our trucks movin’.”

Michael headed to the dispatch area and I went out into the yard. I watched our drivers pull themselves up into the cabs of their trucks. One by one, the eighty-four starters whined loudly and the huge Cummins engines exploded to life. The air shook and filled with a sweet mix of diesel and morning dew. The pickets turned toward the noise and began to hoot and boo and shout obscenities.

I turned my back to the pickets and raised a fist in salute to the drivers. Then, in keeping with a tradition that had never been taught nor practiced, the last truck on the right lurched forward and rolled down the middle of the yard toward me, passing between the rows of rumbling red monsters huffing at each other across the asphalt. The last truck on the left quickly followed the first and, as if perfected for a truckers’ rodeo, each of the remaining drivers pulled his vehicle out, alternating left and right with nearly precise pacing. It was a beautiful thing. The first time, about a year ago, it just seemed to happen, and I had to wait in the yard for my eyes to dry. Ever since I made it known that sometimes in the morning the exhaust irritated my eyes. Michael nor any of our employees ever let me know that they knew better. But this was the only lie I ever told them. Not all of them could say the same.

Michael joined me in the yard and we turned toward the gates and the pickets.

“All set inside,” Michael said.

“Well then, let’s go say good morning to our friends.”

Laskowski and Catella had adjourned their street meeting, having successfully orientated their men on the picket line, ensuring the synchrony of their hearts and minds. As Michael and I approached the gate the pickets bunched together in anticipation.

Michael felt something come through his shoe into his foot. “What the ... Joseph there’s nails all over the place.”

As Michael bent to remove the black-painted roofing nail from his shoe, the pickets burst into laughter and jeers. *Hey, get the point you fucks? What’s the matter? Maybe you should sweep up once in awhile.* The pavement was littered with hundreds of the black-painted, two-inch roofing nails, the most economical, portable, and stealthy tire puncturing instrument made by man.

I looked over the pickets. I had never seen any of these men before. They were young and old. Big and small. White, brown, and black. I took in the group and walked slowly at them. As I got closer, I let my eyes move over them one by one. Still no one I knew, but I recognized them; near strangers joined and emboldened by a common belief, empowered by a simple notion that they are here to right a wrong, fortified by their numbers and sanctioned to act out their anger. They were where I once had been. A different time – a different reason, but I knew the power that one man could draw from the crowd. Even a coward, anonymous in the womb of a mob, could have his day in the sun. I knew this was a potentially very dangerous situation, one that had to be confronted directly and without hesitation.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” I said loudly as I rolled aside the twelve-foot high chain link gate at the entrance of DTC Transportation.

The Teamsters had their own greetings.

Fuck you, asshole.

Why ya openin’ the gate? Nothin’s comin’ through it today.

Hey, scumbag, go tell your drivers they better not try to come through us.

Michael joined me at the gate.

How’s your foot feel, asshole?

“We need to speak to Laskowski and Catella,” I announced.

Who gives a fuck what you want?

I started to walk through the pickets. No one would move. Michael pushed in close beside me and we used our shoulders and elbows to separate the crowd and wind a path through the thicket of angry bodies. Occasionally, a Teamster would shove one of their brothers from behind and he would slam into one of us, but we kept pushing through until we reached the back side where the leadership of Local 714 was watching with amusement.

“Beautiful day for this sort of thing, donchya think?” Alley Cat Catella said when he saw us.

Ignoring him, I turned to Ron Laskowski, a slim, former truck driver in his late fifties. He had climbed to the top of his Local with a reputation as a tough but tempered professional. “Ron, let’s talk about some ground rules to keep this thing sane.”

“Whadaya mean, Joseph?” Laskowski shrugged. “Because of your *insane* and *illegal* attempt to break with this Local, we’re well within our rights to be here.”

“We understand that, Ron. But this will be settled in arbitration or in the courts, not here. And you’re not within your rights to block our gate or to throw nails around our property.”

Catella threw up his hands. “Whoa, wait a minute. You accusin’ us of throwin’ nails? I didn’t see any of our guys throw any nails.”

“Oh, cut the shit, Albert,” Michael said.

The Alley Cat Catella stepped forward with his right foot, rose up on his toes and pointed a finger in Michael’s face. “Hey pal, maybe you two should get back onto your property. Ya never know what could happen out here. These guys are really pissed. So why don’t you and your friend Joey here just go on back inside before you get hurt.”

The tightening started in my chest and spread like a wild fire to every cell in my body. My face burned hot as I glared at Catella and said, “Get your finger out of my partner’s face.”

Catella smiled and settled back on his heels. “Heeeey, just a friendly warning. I wouldn’t wanna see anyone gettin’ hurt here.”

“That’s enough, Al,” Laskowski interrupted. “What do you want, Joseph? We shouldn’t be talking now.”

I took a breath and turned to Laskowski. “Ron, we’ve worked together for over ten years. You know us and you know what we want. Our employees have made their own decision to break with the union. They’re better off for it. I want you to do the right thing and walk away from this.”

Laskowski shook his head. “Can’t do that, Joseph.”

“All right, then let’s get clear on a few things. We’ll be going about our business as usual. We’ll respect your right to picket but we won’t tolerate any abuses. Our trucks are going to roll through this gate in a few minutes. Please instruct your men accordingly. I don’t want anyone doing anything stupid. Okay?”

“Whatever,” Laskowski shrugged and started to walk toward his car.

Catella cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted mockingly to the pickets, “Hey, listen up. These guys want to get their trucks out and they won’t *tolerate* any abuses.” Then he walked toward his car.

Michael and I turned to the crowd to head back inside the gates and found ourselves surrounded by Teamsters.

Michael pointed toward the gate. “We’re going back in now. Please step aside.”

The men in our path just smirked or shook their heads. No one moved.

I looked at Michael. He shrugged and nodded in a way that I had come to know over the years. He was with me. I walked up to the biggest picket, paused briefly and stepped around and past him with Michael close behind. Shoulders and elbows were jostling us when suddenly an older man pushed through and spit in my face. The pickets laughed, of course. Then, as we pushed further into the horde, every man within range was spitting on us.

I looked over my shoulder at Michael. It only took a second for our eyes to speak a conversation, silent words that only many years of friendship could understand.

In a moment, Michael was at my side I leaned forward, raised my arms and began shoving men aside. Michael used his hands to push and pull at men in his way. The crowd finally gave us room but the rain of spit continued. When we broke free on the other side of the mob, spittle was dripping from our faces and hair.

Looks like you guys need a shower. Laughter.

Hey, just come a little closer and we'll give you a shower. More laughter.

Pussies.

Chickenshits.

By now, our eighty-four trucks were hooked up to trailers and lined up nose-to-tail at the gate, winding back around the terminal building. When the drivers of the first few trucks saw us emerge from the crowd they climbed down from their cabs and hurried to us. Bobby Moretti was in the lead truck and reached us first.

“Fuckin’ animals,” he cursed and gave us each a handful of paper towels. “Whadaya wan’ us ta do, boss?” He asked me.

“First, we’ll get these nails swept up. Then Bobby, get back in your truck. Get on the radio and tell the other guys to follow you as closely as they can. Take a lap around the building to get your speed up. I want you to go through the gate at twenty-five or thirty miles an hour with your air horns wide open. I don’t want any of those assholes jumping up on our trucks.”

“What if they don’t move?” Moretti asked.

I wiped spittle from my ear. “They’ll move.”

Chapter 2

The Lower East Side

New York City

Vincent “Vinny Diamonds” Venezio liked to meet with his crew, his whole crew, first thing every Monday. So between noon and one, but never later than one, Vinny Diamonds’ boys would straggle into Taverna Reggia, an almost unnoticeable establishment just off East Houston Street. From the sidewalk, steep concrete steps descended to a wrought iron gate that guarded a black metal door. The windows had been bricked up years ago. The inside was dark and stained with the redolence of garlic and tobacco. Only a faded sign trimmed with grapevines, barely visible above the door, identified this as a public place. Although, the general public hadn’t been inside for many years.

“Where’s Dominick Patacca?” Vinny Diamonds was irritated. He had finished his pasta fagioli and not everyone was there.

“He’s got sumthin’ goin’ in Jersey, boss,” said one of the eight men at the table between spoonfuls.

“What the fuck’s he doin’ in Jersey? No one talked to me about anything in Jersey.”

Turning to his right, Vinny bent toward Jimmy Merchant and said, “You know about this?”

Merchant nodded. He had mouthful of bread. “Yeah, this is the Tommy Ton thing.”

“What Tommy Ton thing?” Vinny Diamonds frowned and leaned over the table to put his bulbous face squarely in front of Merchant’s. “Someone better fuckin’ enlighten me.”

The younger Merchant flashed the palms of his hands. “Boss, calm down. Some mick in Jersey was a hundred large into Tommy Ton, some hockey and final four action. And ya see Tommy laid some big numbers off onto Rocco DaMeo and then the fuckin’ mick stiffs him. So Rocco’s lookin’ for his money and Tommy Ton don’t have it or he wouldn’t have laid it off in the first place. And the mick, well he ain’t even makin’ the weekly vig. So ...”

Merchant swallowed the rest of the bread in his mouth.

Vinny screwed up his face. He looked like a gargoyle. “So whatthefuck’s this gotta do with Dominick Patacca bein’ in fuckin’ Jersey when he’s s’posed ta be here?”

“Well, Johnny Anelli ...” Merchant began hesitantly.

Vinny Diamonds slapped his fat hands on the table rattling the dishes and silverware. “Don’t you fuckin’ tell me Johnny Onions is in this thing! You’re not gonna fuckin’ tell me that, are ya?” Vinny eyes were bulging out of his reddening face.

The other men at the table put their forks and glasses down, and they all looked at Merchant. Everyone knew that Vinny hated Johnny Anelli. Given the opportunity and, of course, the proper blessings, Vinny would gladly shoot Johnny Onions several times in the head and then spread his body parts all over the tri-state area. Only Jimmy Boy Merchant could get away discussing Johnny Onions Anelli with Vinny Diamonds Venezio. And even Jimmy Boy had to be careful.

“Look boss, a lot of the guys still like Johnny,” Merchant continued cautiously. “All he wants is ta make things right wit’ you. So, uh, Johnny, he, ah, knows this union guy, a Teamster in Jersey. The union guy tells Johnny about this mick’s operation. He owns a trucking company. So Johnny sits down with the mick and tells him Tommy Ton wants his money or else. Now Johnny, he knows there’s no fuckin’ way this mick can put his hands on a hundred grand, so he tells the guy he has to give up a truckload of somethin’ to make things right.”

Vinny shook his head quickly, like he was having a fit. The meaty wattle under his double chin flapped and shook even after his head stopped moving. “Whatefuck’s wrong wit’ you? You still haven’t tol’ me why Dominick Patacca’s in Jersey. What is it you don’t understand? I don’t even wanna hear that cocksucker Anelli’s name and you’re sittin’ there tellin’ me his fuckin’ life story. Get to the *fuckin’* point! *Why is Dominick Patacca in Jersey?*”

Merchant drew a breath. “Boss, Dominick used to drive a big rig, so Johnny brought him in on the job. He thinks the load’s gonna pay big. Big enough to pay off Tommy Ton and Rocco and then some, and by bringing in Dominick he’s hopin’ he can get straight with you, Vinny.”

“Yeah, sure. Fuckin’ typical. That scumbag figures he’ll be kissin’ three asses for the price of one. So, what’s on the truck?”

“Shoes. Over twelve thousand pairs of Bennini shoes.” Merchant emphasized *Bennini*.

Vinny Diamonds sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. Taverna Reggia was quiet as a graveyard and nobody at the table was breathing much either.

Finally, Vinny spoke. “Those shoes are two, two an’ a half a pair retail. Shit, that’s ah, an easy quarter million on the street, minimum.”

Vinny Diamonds banged the table again, lighter this time. “Okay, so now I know what Dominick Patacca’s doin’ in Jersey. Tell me, Jimmy Boy, was that so fuckin’ hard?”