



A Smokey Annicelli Mystery

New York Times
Bestselling Author

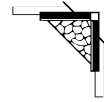
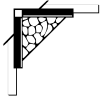
BLOOD OF MY BLOOD

Ralph
Pezzullo



"An instant classic."

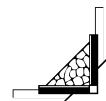
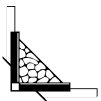
— Ken Bruen, Shamus-award
winning author of *The Guards*



Blood *of My* **Blood**

BY

Ralph Pezzullo



ZUMAYA ENIGMA

2012

AUSTIN TX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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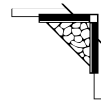
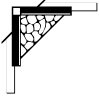
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To my uncle Sonny

Who died too young and stays with me

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Chapter 1

I've got a funny feeling. It's one of those mornings when even the air doesn't feel right. At eight a.m. the sun hangs over Long Island City like a ripe plum. The sky is ash-gray with a glimmer of pink. And my teeth are about to break because they're chattering so hard.

"Come on, Snowball, do your business," I plead with Maya's shih tzu as I stand on the rim of Manhattan, a knot of blue-jeaned kids behind me smoking a jay and giggling like they just invented getting high. My eyes are following a 737 up the river to LaGuardia Airport when my cellphone starts vibrating.

"What is it, Lukey?" I ask; his name is on the screen.

"Smokey," he says like something's up.

Luke is my oldest, bluest buddy in the NYPD. Twenty years ago, when it was dangerous, we patrolled the alphabets together. That's before I was booted off the force.

"How's the family? How's Luke Junior? He get those Fantastic Four comic books I sent him?"

Last I heard, the kid had been checked into Bethpage Hospital with double pneumonia. This unexpected call is making me think something's wrong.

Luke says, "You better get over to Two-forty-seven West Twenty-ninth Street fast. Fourth floor."

"Why?"

"Go! Now!"

"Sure, Luke. But how come?"

“They’ll explain when you get there. Just go.”

I ditch the dog at Maya’s on East 13th Street just as she’s getting out of the shower. Little bulbs of water cling to the slope of her back.

“How’d you sleep last night?” I ask, because lately she’s been having terrible nightmares about strange men chasing her through unfamiliar streets. She thinks they might be echoes from another life.

“Better,” she says, her dark skin warming the cool light. When it glows at night it turns more honey. Her eyes change, too, from amber to deep gold. Watching her and the way she moves, I’m reminded of a cheetah, which was my favorite animal as a kid growing up in the Bronx.

I’m damn fortunate she’s in my life.

“Where you going, Smokey?” Maya asks. “We’ve got to talk.”

I know what she wants to talk about—the job that’s been offered to me by an international security firm in Miami. She wants to move out of the city for a bunch of reasons—her dance career is over, she’s tired of teaching, the city is wearing her down. But I don’t have time for that now.

“Sorry, baby, I gotta run.”

“You gonna walk out on this?” she asks, pulling back the terry towel to reveal a slice of her right breast and nipple, the taut contours of her stomach and thighs. We met three months ago squeezing tomatoes at the Chelsea Market, and we’ve been together ever since.

Life has been good.

I give her a kiss, a quick pat on the butt and a “later” before scooting out the door. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror—dark penetrating eyes, strong nose, unruly black-and-silver hair, taut lines around my mouth that remind me I’m nearing fifty.

West 29th Street is a jag uptown and west.

“Can’t you move this thing any faster?” I ask the driver. He’s spouting a stream of Arabic or something into a mouthpiece then hits the gas. A couple near misses later, we skid to a stop in front of a nondescript six-story dirty gray building, the kind you hardly notice in the architectural jumble of midtown.

“Thanks.” I hand him a ten for his trouble then flash my PI badge at the red-haired cop guarding the entrance. He walkie-talkies upstairs.

“Detective Donnelly wants to see you,” he snarls.

I slap him on the shoulder. Ask: “Why? What’d I do wrong?”

He’s got no sense of humor. Points to the elevator.

“Four.”

Police tape and a crowd of officers tangle up the narrow hall. A paramedic with a mean goatee zips up the stiff. Behind him is the deepest, widest pool of blood I've ever seen.

"What happened?" I ask a detective in one of those lived-in blazers. "Looks like someone squeezed him dry."

He's a squat guy unknown to me, with a big nose that juts in three directions and heavy hangdog eyes.

"That's what happens when you get shot nine times in the back," he says, squinting up. "What are you doing here?"

"I was called."

"You a priest?"

"Do I look like a priest?"

"You look like you don't belong here."

"The name's Smokey," I say. "Tony Annicelli."

He sniffs at me like he smells something bad.

"I'm Donnelly," is all he says. Then his eyes light up like sparks. "Shit."

A tall Irish-looking guy wrapped in a white apron screams a line of curses a mile long, and the cops clear fast.

"You dumb cocksuckers! You stupid, clumsy bastards! You mess up my crime scene, and I'll fry your asses."

"It's the crime scene investigator," Donnelly says. "You'd better cool your heels downstairs."

Twenty minutes of trying to get Luke on the phone, scanning the sports page and two cups of bitter coffee later, Donnelly pulls me inside.

"Follow me," he says, fishing something out of his nose.

We push past some uniforms chewing gum and sipping coffee. Take the elevator up to four then start down. The stairway is narrow and dark. Smearred across the worn metal steps lies a thick ribbon of blood.

"Watch your step," he says.

We follow it down to between two and three. That's when Detective Donnelly turns to me.

"This is where he got clipped."

"Who?"

Instead of an answer, he stares at me hard.

"Who?" I ask again.

He just keeps staring like he's miles away. So, I ask, "Any suspects?"

"A Korean lady in the dry cleaner's downstairs put an ID on a kid with a cap who nearly knocked her over when she was opening her shop. I got a dozen officers out there looking for him. Roughly five-seven, wearing jeans and a hoodie. Disappeared into Penn Station at rush hour. Gonna be a bitch to find him."

“You recover the murder weapon?” I ask as I follow him up to three. He doesn’t bother to turn, just shakes his head.

Back up on four, he steps carefully over the pool of blood and pushes a door. It opens to a big loft space with bare walls, scraggly plants, cats looking for cover and a big desk piled high with papers and books. I follow him into a square bedroom. An older, baldheaded guy sits collapsed on the bed, his eyes flashing all over the place. As soon as he sees Detective Donnelly, he starts talking.

“I feel terrible,” the little man says. “My doctor told me no stress. Watch the blood pressure. And first thing in the morning, I’m drinking my coffee, smearing my bagel with cream cheese. Then, this,” he moans into his hands.

“What?” Donnelly asks.

“Someone banging on the door next door,” the baldheaded guy continues. “Then a slamming sound, like he’s breaking in. I get out my thirty-eight—I keep it loaded. It’s licensed. I’ve got rare coins here, officer. My friends tell me I’m crazy, but I’m a businessman and I got a right to protect myself.”

Donnelly looks uninterested. I’m still wondering what this has to do with me.

“Let me see it,” Donnelly says.

The bald man reaches under the bed and hands over what looks like an old service revolver. Donnelly sniffs it and hands it back.

“What happened next?” he asks.

The baldheaded man on the bed faces me for the first time. He’s got a mug that’s hard to look at—sallow skin, a mouth that twists to the left, a weak chin and jaw. He ain’t a looker.

I notice a plaque on the wall that reads: *Seth Breely, Rare Coins and Stamps*.

He looks at me like he’s scared.

“What do you mean, what happened next?”

“I mean, what happened next?” Donnelly repeats, shifting his weight to his right leg.

“I opened the door to see what was going on,” Breely says, recovering. “And what do I see? I see...this...this bloody mess. This terrible, terrible thing. This nightmare, detective. I don’t know how I’ll ever sleep.”

“You know him?” Donnelly asks.

“Of course not,” Seth shoots back. “Why would a decent man like me associate with something like that?”

Seems like a cruel thing to say given the fact the victim was brutally murdered less than an hour ago.

Breely tries to amend that with a quick “May he rest in peace.” Then, he starts trembling. First his legs, then his pale hands, then big convulsions that run from his toes all the way to his head.

Donnelly puts a hard squeeze on his shoulder.

"You ever seen the guy before?" he asks.

Breely shakes his chin as a skinny shorthaired cat crawls into his lap. Detective Donnelly slaps my arm.

"Come with me, Annicelli" is all he says.

Out of curiosity, I follow him downstairs to the street, where onlookers have gathered and are asking each other questions. A slick-looking Hispanic reporter from *Eyewitness News* pushes his way forward, blocking our path.

"Detective," he demands. "Detective, just a minute."

"Later," Donnelly answers, shoving him aside.

In the back of the medical van, Donnelly tells the female medical examiner to show me the body. With the rip of the zipper comes the question *Why?* It hangs there like a plastic bag caught in the wind. I suck in hard.

"Fuck."

The body's a bloody mess of turned-out skin and entrails, but what strikes me is the face—young and old at the same time, handsome once, almost angelic; triangular-shaped, framed with shoulder-length bleached-blond hair. But now the nose and mouth are badly smashed. The part that grabs me is the expression—half-sowl, half-laugh. Caught between sarcasm and disgust.

"So?" Donnelly asks.

"It's Ricky Bravere," I say, smoothing over the damaged face, adding the familiar smile, the intelligent glint in his big brown eyes.

"So you know him," he says, almost matter-of-fact.

"Yes."

Or did.

I feel sick as guilt floods over me and invades my head. I was supposed to look after him. Ricky was my godson, and my best friend Evan's son.

Donnelly nods at the paramedic, who lifts Ricky's pale left wrist out of the bag and turns it over.

"Why do you think he has this on his wrist?" Donnelly asks.

I read my name and number written in blue ink.

"I have no idea."

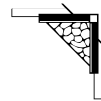
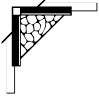
Then he removes a plastic evidence bag from a case and thrusts it in my face. It holds a silver automatic that feels like it's empty.

"Any clue why he was carrying this?" Donnelly asks. "It's empty. Hasn't been fired."

"I guess he was expecting trouble."

"He found it."

"Yes, he did."



Chapter 2

“Life ain’t nothin’ but a big ball of mozzarella,” my best friend Evan used to say. Delicious and complex, I think he meant.

We went way back, me and him. Back to the point where our histories were practically inseparable. Like his story was so much a part of mine I couldn’t imagine mine without him.

To keep it brief, we grew up just north of East Tremont Avenue in the Bronx. Our mothers prayed together at Our Lady of St. Carmel every morning, his mom made chocolate biscotti with hazelnuts instead of almonds and handmade manicotti that tasted like you died and went to heaven, our fathers played pinochle and poker at Esposito’s Social Club, we both went to DeWitt Clinton High School. He played third base, I backed him up in left field. I batted third; he batted cleanup. We were something like third or fourth cousins.

Evan was more of a brother to me than my own big brother. He was an all-around good guy. A prince. The kind of guy people gravitated to. The kind of guy who tried to get me out of trouble when I was selling fireworks illegally or setting off fire extinguishers in the bathroom of DeWitt Clinton High School. He’d sit me down and repeat the Bronx motto, which he knew by heart—*Ne cede malis*—“Don’t give in to evil.”

And I’d ask, “What is it with you, Evan? You bucking to be a saint?”

You couldn't help but love the guy even though he was so good-looking.

The stories about his kindnesses were legend. Like everyone in the neighborhood said, He did for people. And he was fun, always joking and laughing, telling stories.

The way I look at it, he did everything right. He just made one mistake. He married the wrong woman.

If you watched TV in the late 80s and 90s, you've probably seen him. *Matlock*, *Kojak*, *Columbo*, *Crime Story*, *Police Woman*, *Miami Vice*. The handsome guy with the thick brown hair, strong jaw and loose-limbed body. He either played a New York City bad guy or a wise-guy cop.

Evan exuded sex appeal, star power, charisma, good times. But the woman he married seemed to drain it out of him.

I was living in Queens, working for the NYPD. Evan moved to the West Coast right after his marriage to Debbie, as we called her then. She was a little blond girl from Syracuse. When they met, she was an architect's assistant in the Village. Pretty. A good figure.

But she had this stuck-up, pseudo-sophisticated air about her that I didn't get.

Then, maybe two years later, my wife Amy and I visited them in California. Evan was a hotshot actor living the life. A big spread in the Hollywood Hills with a swimming pool. A personal assistant. A trainer. Two vintage Porsches in the garage. A large Mercedes.

We had just finished eighteen holes of miserable golf and were telling jokes, knocking back a few cold Heinies by the pool. Amy was pregnant with our first. I asked Evan if kids were in the cards for him and Deborah.

He looked at me like I had just pissed on his flip-flops, and said, "I'd like to, but Deborah feels unsettled."

"Unsettled?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

He twisted in his chair this way and that like an eel out of water

"It's hard to explain," he said. "She hasn't found anything she likes to do."

What?

"Then maybe starting a family is just what the doctor ordered," I blurted out.

"I don't know..." is all he said, his voice trailing off. Maybe he was dreaming about all the waitresses, starlets and hatcheck girls I had seen him eyeing all week like they were a vacation. All I knew was that something wasn't right.

That's why I was so surprised six months later when we got the news. Evan and Debbie were expecting a baby girl, just like Amy and I had just had. Then we had another girl, and we heard they were having a boy.

When Evan called me with the news of his soon-to-arrive son, he was ecstatic, practically bursting through the phone.

"A son, Smokey! Can you imagine? A kid to play ball with! I'm having a son!"

I was thrilled for him. I knew he'd be an amazing father.

When the baby came, I sent the kid a little baseball mitt with his name engraved in it—Ricky Bravere. Amy and I even flew out for the christening. I was named the godfather of little Richard Evan Bravere. Everything was smiles, sunshine, roses.

It wasn't two years later when Deborah called. Her voice came across the line like a paper cutter.

"Your fucked-up friend Evan has disappeared," she said. "He had a nervous breakdown. Now he's abandoned his family."

The way she told it, he'd been whoring around, drinking, snorting cocaine, acting like an asshole. She talked about him like he was trash.

That didn't sound anything like the Evan I knew.

I got on the horn and tracked him down in Encino, CA. He explained the situation differently and slowly, like each word was important.

"I love my kids, Tony. It's Deborah I had to get away from. It was a matter of life and death."

Then, because our lives were lived on the same trajectory, I got hit with my own shit, which came totally unexpected. A call while I was on duty with my partner Wolfie to break up a domestic dispute on the Upper Westside. The four bullets I caught in the process.

When I woke up in the hospital I discovered that not only had the whole incident been wrongly blamed on me, but my wife was leaving me, too. She took our two girls. Escaped to Florida. I left the NYPD.

When I caught up with Evan again, we were both going through rough water supplied by our ex-wives. In his case, there were accusations of sexual abuse and lawsuits that sidetracked his career, and painful years when he wasn't allowed to see his son and daughter. Then, once, a day before Thanksgiving, I got a call from the Tombs downtown.

"Smokey, you gotta get me the hell out of here." I didn't even recognize his voice.

"Evan? Is that you?"

“Help me, Smokey. I’m gonna get killed in here.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Even though his cousin was a big shot lawyer and the two of us raised bail, it was the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, and the judge wouldn’t hear the case till Monday. I raised hell.

The upshot was that Evan spent the long weekend in the Tombs with rapists, contract killers and common criminals while I pulled my hair out worrying about him, thinking, *What’s going on with my friend?*

I remember him sitting on my sofa the Monday after I bailed him out, his eyes big and heavy.

“I was set up,” he told me. “Deborah set me up. Everything had been arranged for me to take the kids for the weekend.”

I said, “You’ve got to get away from her, and put this behind you.”

“How the hell do I do that? We’ve got kids together. I adore them. They’re the blood of my blood.”

By the time Evan moved back to New York permanently, he was a broken man. He wasn’t even forty, but you could tell he was running out of gas. Then he started getting terrible pains in his stomach. The doctor he was seeing suspected cancer.

I remember the night like it was yesterday. I was in my apartment on West 19th Street watching the Knicks getting the shit kicked out of them when the phone rang. A very tired-sounding Evan was on the other end. Sounded completely different from earlier in the day when I saw him in the hospital surrounded by well-wishers, laughing and smiling.

“Smokey,” he said in a faraway voice, “I can’t take this anymore.”

“What?”

“I’m calling to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye? Where are you going?” I asked.

“I can’t take the pain. Everything,” he answered. “I’ve had it with this whole fucked-up...life.”

I spent the next five minutes or so trying to cheer him up. Telling him he was just worn down, that he had to hang in there for his children. That he’d get his health back, jump-start his career.

“Smokey,” he said, sounding like he was losing consciousness. “You got to promise to do me one big favor.”

“Anything, Evan,” I said, wrestling back big emotions.

“Look after my kids when I’m gone.”

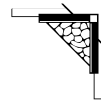
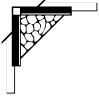
“Of course.”

“I mean, really look after them. They’re going to need a friend like you.”

“I promise, Evan,” I said.

“Renata and Ricky...” His voice trailed off. A couple hours later, I was awakened by a call from the hospital.

Evan was dead.



Chapter 3

I'm trying not to look at what's left of Ricky's body, splayed out on the table. Luke Thorn wangled me an invite to the autopsy, which is a sad, antiseptic affair.

I just keep thinking, *No one should end like this, especially not a nineteen-year-old kid.*

The coroner with the droopy gray mustache is groaning into a microphone around his neck. "One nine-millimeter entry at the anterior end of the trapezius muscle, traverses south at forty-nine degrees where it comes in contact with the third rib, thereby changing course and severing the subclavian artery."

The truth is, Ricky and I weren't that close. As much as I wanted to and as hard as I tried, he never let me in. Not really. Saw him a handful of times when he was a kid. Sent him a card every birthday with two twenties inside. He was around twelve or thirteen at his dad's funeral. Clung to his mother's side—two big brown eyes under a mop of chocolate hair. Didn't want to talk.

I remember congratulating him when he got accepted to Princeton at the age of seventeen. People had been telling me he was off-the-charts smart, but the guarded look in his eyes concerned me.

Must have been three or four months later, I got a call from a West Coast friend of Evan's who said that Ricky had been kicked out for drinking and not going to classes. I tracked him down. Found him living with some artist friends on Avenue B in the

East Village. Dragged him out of the dump he was crashing in and treated him to a cappuccino. Ricky was wearing a “Fuck you” T-shirt and ripped camouflage pants. Once again, I remembered his eyes—big and wary, trying to avoid mine.

“I’m here for you, if you need me,” I must have repeated a dozen times.

He kept looking down at the walnut tabletop, drumming his fingers in a hip-hop rhythm, biting his paint-spattered nails.

“What’s going on with you, Ricky? What are you doing to yourself?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I don’t know.” Looked outside at a homeless woman pushing a stroller with a plastic baby. Devoured two espresso brownies then finally said, “I’ve learned that I’m a lot like my dad.”

“What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” he asked back, looking up at me accusingly, anger and pain twisting in his eyes.

I threw a twenty on the table, picked him up by the collar and dragged him outside. I said, “I don’t know what you heard from your mother, but your dad was one of the best people I’ve ever known.”

Ricky looked vulnerable. He said, “I know. I loved him, too. But maybe he was too sensitive and intelligent to cope with this fucked-up world.”

His words were deeply felt and drenched with sadness.

I said, “Maybe that’s true.”

It was a moment of honesty. We looked at each other like the city had emptied, and it was just him and me.

I said, “The world is what it is, Ricky. That’s why you’ve got to be strong.”

He looked away, over the rooftops, and said, “I’m trying. I don’t know...”

“Then what are we doing here, Ricky? Let’s get you cleaned up.”

He let me escort him to a rehab center on West 73rd Street, where they went to work on him. He didn’t argue or resist. Six weeks later he was ready to return to Princeton. I was pleased. So pleased I took him to Saks Fifth Avenue and told him to pick out some new clothes. Two grand lighter, I put him on the Amtrak south.

We spoke on the phone once a week about girls and Roman history. Then we both got busy and traded messages through the summer, into the fall. Around Thanksgiving, I got a card. An artsy picture of a woman’s naked back with a musical symbol on

it. Inside was a check for two thousand dollars and a hastily scribbled note: "Thanks for the help. Love, your godson Ricky."

No return address. I called Princeton. I called his Mom. No one knew where he was.

Three weeks later, I received an identical card. Only this one had no inscription, just a folded-up article ripped from the *Village Voice*. It was about a new band called Seed Demon that was playing at Club Siberia and had released a "killer" debut album.

I took a taxi to a club on 38th Street, off Eighth. Entered a dive. A couple of girls dressed in leather sat at the bar. Leather masks and halters hung from the walls. The bartender was bare-chested and covered to his neck with tattoos.

"I'm looking for Seed Demon," I told him.

He pointed to a door in the back. There, surrounded by a gaggle of kids trying to get in, sat a guy at a table taking cash.

"I'm looking for Seed Demon," I said to him.

"You on the list?"

"My name's Smokey."

"Smokey what?"

"Smokey Annicelli. I'm looking for Ricky Bravere."

"So is everyone else."

"I'm his godfather."

The guy at the door stared at me for a second then barked, "The godfather's here. Everybody stand back for the godfather."

He was trying to be funny, but nobody laughed.

I went in. Next thing I knew I was in the middle of a mass of bodies, pressed against some brunette's chest so hard I could feel her nipples pushing back. Someone's knee stuck in my back. We were being pushed towards the bar, where some smiley-faced guy was handing out cold Coronas.

I grabbed one and shoved my way towards a side exit.

One sip of beer later, the exit door popped open and some kid with stringy blond hair to his waist started yelling at me from the other side.

"Watch out, dude. We're coming through!"

He and another guy were setting up equipment for the band. I moved towards the opposite wall. Saw kids doing coke off the lip of the stage. Then some skinny blond in a bright-green dress got in my face.

"Hi!" she said brightly, even though I was old enough to be her father. Her eyes spun like swirly lollipops. I could see down the front of her dress. Little boobs and lots of ribs.

And just as if someone had flipped an "on" switch, she started talking a mile a minute.

"I'm sooo excited. I live for this. Women's mags are so much powder and piss. I never imagined I would be so bored. Got to fill this hole in my life. Either that or I'll, like, die. My friend Sarah died. Cut her wrists in her bathtub. Yuck! So damn smart. So brilliant. You would have liked her. She had the cutest little ass, with dimples and everything. She liked to get spanked."

I was thinking that this place was an S&M club when the chick in the green dress yanked my arm.

"Let's go downstairs," she said.

I figured maybe there would be room down there to breathe. In the stairway, she whispered, "I'm not wearing any underwear."

"That's nice, honey, but I'm looking for someone. Ricky Bravere."

"He and Seed Demon are going to be kicking ass upstairs," she said. "We have time."

The basement glowed red. Blood red. The lights, the floor, the walls—everything. Two girls in G-strings gyrated in a cage. The girl in green whispered, "Just a sec," and vanished into a bathroom, leaving me next to two Black guys who were putting the moves on a girl in leather pants. As I watched, the taller one reached around and squeezed the girl's ass. She slapped him hard. Pop!

Then he started laughing. A high-pitched squeal like a siren.

"You had that coming," I told him.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a tourist from out of town."

He smiled widely.

"Not the way you talk." Then, his teeth gleaming like the rhinestones in the frames of his shades, he gestured to his shorter friend and said, "Slick, I want you to meet my man Porter."

Porter nodded and grunted, "Yo."

"What'd you say your name was?" the tall guy asked.

"Smokey."

"Smokey. That's perfect." He started talking fast, telling me how he and his man Porter were in the film business. How they were raising money for his latest feature. He described it as "*Pulp Fiction* with vampires and babes instead of caps."

It was hard to hear above the roar of the music. The girl in the green dress returned and asked me for money.

"How much you need?" I asked.

Instead of answering, she reached into my pocket, came out with a wad of money and peeled off a twenty.

"Hey."

She was gone. My Black friend with the rhinestones in his glasses started free-associating, rhapsodizing. He stopped at one point and asked, “You hear what I’m saying?”

“Not really.”

“You’re old school, baby! You’re authentic. That’s why I want you in my movie. You’re gonna play the hood who sells the blood. Ain’t that right?”

He turned to his friend Porter, who said something, then the two of them started arguing.

I took this as my cue to slip away.

Upstairs was packed even tighter than before. I pushed my way towards the same side door so I could make a hasty exit if I had to. Anticipation was building around the stage like steam.

Roughly five minutes later, the lights went out, and kids started screaming. Shadowy bodies filled the stage. A pulse of thick base notes pounded our chests.

Tom-toms laid down the rhythm for a terrible racket that came together slowly like a loosely bolted jet. The loud music snaked like a roller coaster, climbing impossibly high and crashing. The singer growled about breaking rules, shattering boundaries. The crowd leapt up and down, crashing their bodies into one another.

They weren’t only grunge kids but also lots of well-dressed twenty-somethings who probably worked on Madison Avenue and Wall Street. Tonight, they wanted to lose themselves. And the singer was egging them on. I couldn’t see his face through the hair, the flying bodies, but I recognized the voice.

“Skies are darkening, priests are falling,” Ricky moaned into the mike, bare-chested, his hands thrust into the pockets of his skin-tight pants. He seemed both vulnerable and dangerous, which seemed to encourage the young men and women to press closer to the stage and shed their clothes. I saw boobs and guys in underpants. One tattooed boy completely naked. A girl danced up to him, grabbed his cock then spun away.

One song bled into the other. Ricky stood on a milk crate now, his bleached-blond wet hair against his face. Girls in front pawed him and tried licking him through the leather pants.

A guy with a ripped shirt stuck some pink pills in my face.

“Ecstasy,” he screamed. “Score some peace and love!”

I pushed him away.

Girls grabbed at Ricky’s pants, trying to pull them off. He screamed into the mike, “Don’t make me do it! Don’t make me bow and shrivel! Don’t make me act like your hero!”

He fell backwards off the crate, and the girls surged onto him. They were on their hands and knees trying to rip his clothes off.

That's when two thugs with pool cues appeared and started beating them away.

I saw blood and pushed my way towards the stage; I heard a pop. Someone shouted, "They've got guns! Watch out!"

Who? I wondered.

The lights went out; the band stopped playing. People started pushing this way and that.

A herd of buffaloes would have made more sense. A girl hit the floor behind me. I tried to pick her up but was pushed hard against the wall by a torrent of bodies that was surging towards the side door. I caught only a glimpse of the band. And let myself be pulled out.

"Ricky!" I shouted. "Ricky, it's me, Smokey. Where are you?"

Outside, people scrambled in all directions. I saw the tall blond girl I'd tried to help, blood streaming down the front of her dress. Panicked kids ran in all directions, some towards an SUV, pulling me with them.

"Quick!" someone shouted. "Here come the cops!" It was my tall Black friend from the basement. Next thing I knew, the two of us were in the back of the SUV gunning fast, swerving onto Ninth Avenue and heading south.

In the dark crowded space, somebody flicked on a lighter. A girl snarled, "Asshole. You're on my fucking foot!" A big guy next to me, who smelled like old tuna, pushed me for no reason. I pushed back. Then someone else stuck the lighter in my face and asked, "What are you doing here?"

Before I had a chance to answer, someone else shouted, "He looks like a cop!" Hands emerged from the dark to grab me. The back door kicked open. I was thinking about how I was going to negotiate the hard, rough pavement when a familiar voice said, "Leave him alone. He's with me."

They stopped. The back door shut. I saw Ricky up front, the side of his face reflecting blue-and-red neon light.

I said, "Ricky, we've got to talk."

"Later, yeah," he said in a pained voice. I watched his head slump down between two girls.

I was wondering what I was doing there and where we were going when the SUV turned sharply and screeched to a stop. Because of my position near the back door, I was one of the first people out. Clouds of sweet-smelling steam poured up from the cobblestone street.

“Smells like ether,” someone commented as the group lurched towards the nondescript entrance to an old brick building somewhere below 14th Street near the Hudson River.

I passed the scrawny-looking kid I had seen hauling the equipment uptown. He stood in the back of a van wiping blood off guitars and amps.

“Got real primordial back there,” he groaned. “I’ve seen worse.”
“You see where Ricky went?”

He pointed to the redbrick building as my Black friend’s laugh came up from behind me and ricocheted off the street. He put his big praying mantis arm around my shoulder and started talking what sounded like nonstop gibberish into my face.

We went down some steep concrete steps as if we were descending into hell. The room we entered was black and silver with flashing red and orange lights. The music sounded like it was being played at the wrong speed. The air was filled with a sweet, burning smell. Opium? Crystal Meth? Crack?

I was surrounded by freaks—transvestites, head-bangers, perverts, pyromaniacs. Someone yelled out, “We’re all going to fucking die tonight! You ready?”

I wasn’t. My tall Black friend laughed wildly at something this extremely fat woman said, his head all the way back like he was blowing a trumpet.

“Where is Ricky?” I asked again.

He shrugged. She answered in a Southern accent, “He’s upstairs, honey.”

“Where?”

“He usually hides in the booth above the show.”

“How do I get there?”

She raised her eyebrows and pointed into the gloom. I pushed through the milling bodies, unable to tell if they were dancing, fucking or slitting each other’s throats.

At the back wall, I knocked on a phosphorescent green door. A curly-headed woman emerged wearing nothing but black boots up to her thighs.

“You can’t come in here unless you’re performing,” she said in the scolding tone of a third-grade teacher.

“Performing what?” I asked.

The slamming door almost hit my face. I turned directly into the teeth and rhinestone glasses of my tall Black friend, who wanted to tell me something but couldn’t stop giggling. The fat lady stood at his side.

“You’re at the wrong door,” she said, pointing to the opposite wall.

As I reached the door and tried to open it, a little gray man came up behind me and poked me in the ribs.

“It’s fifty to get in,” he said.

“But I’m not watching the show.”

“I don’t care what you’re doing.”

I handed him three twenties. He said he didn’t have change and left.

“I’ll find you on my way out.”

The door was locked. I tried knocking. No answer. Then, suddenly, a buzzer sound, and the door popped open.

I climbed the spiral metal stairs two at a time. Ahead, I heard people speaking dialogue with a British accent. Music started playing. It sounded like a Viennese waltz.

Strange.

Everything was black up top, and I couldn’t see a way out. That’s when I stumbled over legs. They belonged to some bearded guy who was sleeping. Beyond him, I found a curtain, which hid another door.

This one opened to a narrow black balcony with three rows of benches crowded with people dressed for a night out. Grey-haired ad exec types, middle-aged lawyers with their twenty-something girlfriends, desiccated rockers, anorectic models. They all leaned forward, some with binoculars and opera glasses focused on the stage below.

I turned to see six couples dancing, twirling and going ’round and ’round in circles. Girls with curls and elegant gowns that brushed the floor; men in tuxes with lots of whiskers and shiny black shoes. All elegantly dressed. Waltzing ’round and ’round and ’round like in a dream.

The stairs leading to the booth were on the other side of the audience. As I pushed my way along the balcony, the music grew faster, and louder. Below, the dancers spun like dervishes, skirts out, hair flying.

I thought, *Maybe they’re going to take off.*

Then a drumbeat started to intrude counter to the rhythm of the waltz. It grew louder and louder, and concluded with a terrific bang that rattled my eardrums. The dancers stopped. The people on the balcony leaned as far forward as they could, straining their chests against the metal rail.

I pushed past the last group of people, and a woman below screamed. I turned to look as savages swarmed the stage. Some were naked, others covered with feathers and paint, two rode a spotted horse. I saw three dwarfs. They descended on the dancers like crazed locusts and started attacking them, wrestling them to the ground, ripping at their clothes.

People on the balcony literally drooled as they watched. Soon, elegant gowns lay in shreds, together with stockings, tuxedos, wigs, cummerbunds. In less than a minute, the dancers who had been carefully dressed were now completely naked. The savages went at them with penises, fingers and dildos. Men and women alike.

I don't know which was more disturbing—the depravity onstage or the heavy lust in the spectators' eyes.

I climbed the steps to the booth. I knocked first, and when no one answered, I walked in.

The room was small, with a large sofa against the far wall. Ricky sat on it with his eyes closed and his shirt and pants open. A rail-thin Asian woman with incredible cheekbones and swollen lips gently massaged his stomach and chest.

“Ricky?” I asked.

“He's not feeling well,” the Asian girl whispered.

“What's wrong?”

That's when I noticed a wounded-looking blond with startling blue eyes highlighted with gobs of mascara standing in the corner. She was filling a syringe with white liquid, which she was drawing from a spoon.

“What do you think you're doing?” I asked her.

“It's heroin,” the girl with the needle slurred back, scratching her neck. “He needs it. You want some, too?”

“Ricky, what the fuck is going on?”

He slowly opened his eyes.

“I'm not a drug addict, Smokey. It's not what you think,” he said.

“Then what is it?”

“It's a long story...” he started. Then he grimaced and doubled over.

“Ricky, what the hell's wrong?”

He lay on the sofa, curled in a ball, moaning. The Asian girl was using a handkerchief to dab sweat from his forehead.

She said, “He's been in terrible pain. It's his stomach.”

Just like his father.

“When did it start?”

“A couple months ago.”

“Has he seen a doctor?”

Ricky grabbed his stomach in response to another stab of pain.

“He has been to all kinds of doctors,” the Asian girl explained frantically. “Specialists. Many, many. They find nothing.”

Ricky was writhing now, screaming, “Pang...Smokey—do something. For chrissake...please!”

“Here, baby.” The blond girl started to roll up his sleeve to search for a vein. I pushed her away.

“Ricky,” I said, grabbing his jaw. “Ricky, I’m getting you out of here.”

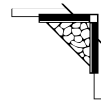
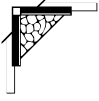
I lifted him as the blond girl tried to latch on to my leg.

“Wait. Wait!” exclaimed the Asian girl, finding her purse and following.

It was a bitch to maneuver because Ricky was heavy and the space tight, but I made it out the door and was looking for the exit. That’s when he moaned and said, “I guess you gotta descend into hell before you can find heaven.”

“Easy, Ricky.”

I was feeling for the first step when I felt a needle jab my ass. The last thing I remember was tripping and losing Ricky. I must have hit the floor hard.



Chapter 4

That was two months ago. Today, I'm standing at Ricky's gravesite, wondering what happened, asking myself why I didn't follow up. One minute the sun is teasing us from between dark clouds; the next, a cold wind blows in unexpectedly, and we shiver. All forty or so of us gathered in St. Raymond's Cemetery in the Bronx.

It's the same place I stood ten years ago when we buried my cousin Dominic, who died when Tower #2 of the World Trade Center fell on top of him. Except, that time, cops with gold braid on their uniforms were playing bagpipes, and the mayor read a eulogy.

Now, it's just bees buzzing above the drone of a Haitian priest. Because the weather this March has been haywire, the sun is suddenly heavy again. I feel sweat gathering in my shoes.

Maybe I'm supposed to weep for Evan and Ricky and all the things that could have been, but I can't. I'm just mad.

Pissed that Evan and Ricky are dead. Mad that I feel guilty and responsible for things I don't completely understand.

I've got my own family to think about. My daughters, thank God, are doing fine. I tell myself I have no appetite for dredging up the past and getting depressed as the priest asks us to pray together.

"Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name..."

Bells toll in the distance. They help me calculate all the obligations I'd have to push aside. The millionaire in Florida who hired me to recover several million in diamonds taken by his business

partner. The Panamanian jockey who wants me to spring his lover from a Guatemalan jail. The Hall of Fame pitcher who has paid me a five-figure advance to find his girlfriend's two prize Pomeranians that have been kidnapped, he believes, by his ex-wife.

Business. Business that's been flowing, thanks to my friend and mentor Sabino Goldstick.

I look at Ricky's bereaved mother Deborah; she's staring at the ground. I see a little woman swallowed up in black being held up by her brother, a big man twice her height and three times her weight with a square red face topped with white hair. I step forward, place a white rose on the cherry coffin and take her hand. It's as cold and clammy as a dead fish. I'm not even sure it's alive.

"I'm sorry, Deborah. I'm very sorry about Ricky."

"Thanks for coming," she says automatically, through a thousand mental screens. Her eyes behind the black veil are fixed and blue, like marbles suspended in air. I'm thinking she must have taken a couple of Valium.

"Deborah," I say. "It's me, Smokey."

Her body seems to quiver back to life.

"Smokey?" she asks, breaking through the spell. Her voice swooping up. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, Deborah, I'm here."

"I didn't recognize you, Smokey," she says, composing her voice, moderating it for the desired effect.

People are waiting to pay their respects.

I say, "Deborah, I'll be in touch," and kiss her cold cheek.

"I need to speak to you, Smokey," she says. "It concerns Ricky. Call me, please."

"I will."

I move down the line to her brother, who looks at me disapprovingly, not even offering his hand. I recall that he's a judge from some place in Ohio. His wife, clutching her big black hat, her dress billowing like it's about to take flight, turns and heads for the road. There, a line of cars waits like a sinister black snake.

"My name's Smokey," I say to Deborah's brother, Ricky's uncle. "I was Ricky's godfather. His father was my best friend growing up."

The judge scowls at me the way he must look down at murderers and child molesters from the bench.

"It's a damn shame," he pronounces. "Such a bright kid. Such a good mother. All he leaves behind is pain."

Not true, I want to say, remembering the beautiful song that Ricky sent me a couple weeks before he died. Poignant lyrics and a haunting melody. Just Ricky's voice accompanied by a piano.

How many times have I
Plowed these oceans?
How many times have I
Lived this life?
Despite my scattered prayers
and notions
I'm still looking for you.

Above the heartless souls
Of tyrants
Beyond the grind of industry's
roar
Outside the greedy fists
Of bankers
I'm still looking for you.

You to know
Your face to hold
Your voice to soothe
To feel your heart.

I'll sail through time
Pass through fire
To learn your song
God is love.
God is love.
God is love.
God is love.

You, you, you...
It's you, I want to know

I know it so well I could sing it for him. But what's the point? The judge, Judge Anthony Palmer, (now I remember his name) has reached his verdict. I can almost hear the sound of the gavel falling.

Case closed!

Screw you, too.

I'm shaking the hands of grieving friends and cousins when I notice a pair of eyes like talons sinking into me from other side of the coffin. They're big and brown and pulled tight with grief. As soon as I meet them, they dart away. I weave my way through the mass of black bodies to find her trudging to the road by herself. She's taller and curvier than the last time I saw her.

“Renata,” I call softly to Ricky’s older sister.

She spins, sees me and stops.

“What do you want?”

“It’s me, Smokey,” I say. “Smokey Annicelli. Remember me?”

Something about my name seems to touch her.

“Smokey!” she exclaims, throwing her arms around my neck. “Oh, Smokey,” she says as though I represent something important. She holds on tight and shudders, soft and damp beneath the coat.

“It’s so awful, Smokey. So horribly wrong!”

Her desperation is so strong I feel myself being drawn inside it.

“A real promising kid,” I say, tearing myself away. “I’m gonna miss him.”

She has her father’s big, dark eyes, his olive skin. The only feature I can identify from her mother is the thin, long nose.

“Me, too, Smokey,” she says in a weary voice. “Me, too. We tried to help him. We did what we could.”

Did we? I ask myself. What did we do?

Seeing a very tall man limp closer, she says, “I’ve got to go. I’ll call.”

Before I leave, I stop to pay my respects to my Evan, who is buried nearby. I remember that his favorite song was by The Animals. In my head, I hear him singing the chorus over and over, a big smile on his face: “I’m just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh, Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood. Ta-ta-da. Ta-ta-da. Ta-ta-da-da-da. Ta-ta-da. Ta-ta-da. Ta-ta-da-da-da. “I’m just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood.”

I loved the guy.

But it’s a downer—the cemetery, the gravestones, the tears, the dead. My own gray face reflected in the glass of the taxi.



Two hours later, trying to shake off the funereal spell, I turn west onto 19th Street, my eyes tracing shadows on the cracked sidewalk.

From my stoop, I hear the sounds of a guitar then a sharp voice like a slap.

“What you hangin’ your head for, motherfucker?”

I look up into two brilliant eyes swimming with indignation, a gaunt black face covered with a wild rustle of salt-and-pepper beard.

“Hey, Saleem,” I say. “How’s it hanging?”

I see him practically every Monday, Wednesday and Friday night, digging cans out of the trash, talking or singing to an invisible someone.

“You tell me, Smokey. You tell me, boss.” He told me once that he was fifty-five, but he looks ten years older. A little guitar in one hand, a black plastic bag in the other. Crazy motherfucker. Smokes too much crack, but he’s smart.

I say, “A kid I know passed away.”

He drops the garbage bag and says, “I know. I can see him right there standing behind you.”

I stop in my tracks.

“What?”

“Fuck, yeah. Long bleach-blond hair, a handsome, kinda almost pretty face.”

I’m trying to remember if I ever told him about Ricky. I don’t think I did.

Saleem’s waiting for me to say something, hands on his hips, legs spread apart, reminding me of my junior high school principal, despite the fact he’s wearing boots secured with silver gaffer’s tape and a plastic Mexican sombrero with “Cozumel ’95” embossed on the side. I try to change the subject.

“You need money for the shelter tonight?”

“Don’t be a dumbass, Smokey. You can’t be thinking ’bout money at a time like this.”

“Here,” I say, reaching into my pocket and offering him a five, which he ignores. I stuff the bill into his torn shirt pocket and start climbing the steps.

Saleem gets in my way and holds out his arms.

“Whatever this might be about, it won’t go away. He won’t let it.”

I push past him.

“You’re probably right.”

“It’s our destiny, motherfucker, to untie the knots so the cosmic knowledge can flow the way it’s supposed to.”

“Whatever.”

I’m asking myself whether or not I believe in ghosts as I enter the little kitchen where Maya is steaming vegetables. She wipes her hands on a towel, kisses me on the lips.

“You okay, honey?”

“You believe in spirits? Ghosts?”

“Of course I do. Why do you ask?”

I haven’t told her about Ricky and don’t feel like burdening her with the story now. So, I pour myself a glass of wine.

“What’s going on with you, Smokey?”

“Nothing. How are you?”

“Is this about the job offer?” she asks, following me to the bedroom. She’s referring to the position at Max-Martin Security in Miami—Vice President of Executive Services. A cushy job with benefits and a desk. Six figures to guard rich CEOs and other executives, especially when they travel overseas.

I remove my jacket, shoes and tie as Sarah Vaughan sings about lady luck from the living room.

“Not really.”

“Then, what?”

She waits on the edge of the bed, clutching a chocolate-trimmed pillow that matches the freckles on her face. She’s tall and thin with red-brown hair that twists to her shoulders. She’s also ten years younger than me. There’s a clarity in her amber eyes that’s always startling.

I know she’s tired of the city. She’s already told me she’d like to give up her job teaching dance and study to become an energy healer. Reiki, I think it’s called.

Part of me wants to take the job in Miami, too. I say, “Maya, I rather not talk about this now, if you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” she says, following me to the bureau, where I fish out a shirt. “I thought you had to give them an answer this week.”

“Let’s discuss this later,” I say gently as I think about what Saleem said about untying cosmic knots. I’ve already decided to go to Lou’s Three Square on the corner, down a couple of beers, and try to lose myself in a hockey game.

But Maya doesn’t like it when I hide from her, when I choose not to argue, when I smile coolly and walk away. Ignites the quarter-Irish in her from her mother’s side, which can blossom into anger if you trip the right buttons. Her father is African-American, her mother Irish-Indian.

I listen to her reasons again: There’s a negative vibe in the city, the weather sucks most of the year, it’s time for us to start making plans.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Where you going, Smokey?”

“Lou’s.”

“What for?”

“I need to clear my head. You wanna come?”

Her brain has latched on to something. I watch the emotion build in her eyes. She says, “What are we doing together if we can’t be honest with one another?”

Of course, she’s right.

So, I tell her about Ricky's death, and the fact that I feel responsible. Then I say, "I need to go, sweetheart, and try to clear my head."

Ricky's murder is starting to dredge up stuff I thought I'd put behind me.



Thirteen years ago, when I was still on the police force, I ran up some stairs on the Upper Westside with my partner Wolfie to break up a domestic dispute. Screamed at him "Enough!" when I saw him beating the boyfriend with his nightstick.

Then the half-nude girlfriend appeared out of nowhere with a gun. I saw the smooth barrel pointing at me, her unblinking eyes. Heard four shots and felt four searing stabs in my side.

Fuck!

I'm standing in my bedroom, remembering my knees buckling. The rubbery days I spent recovering in the hospital shot up with drugs. My ex-wife looking at me the way Maya is now.

"What's going on with you, Smokey?" she asks.

The mayor, the police chief, the NYPD brass all decided to blame the incident on me. I was too sick and weak to fight. The shame of it, and all the years of struggle, turned out to be too much for my wife. She left, taking our two daughters with her. Moved to Florida.

I eventually fought back.

I say, "I'm just feeling some things, Maya."

"What does that mean?" The way she looks now, her expressive mouth, her wavy hair loose to her shoulders, reminds me of a Botticelli Madonna.

But Botticelli painted his Madonnas calm and ethereal, and this one is in my face, waiting for an answer I don't want to give her.

"It's about the kid who got murdered."

"Are you sure about that?" Blood rising in her face disguises the freckles.

"Him and my friend Evan."

"Really? Tell me."

Her delicate chest against mine. Uprturned lips the color and texture of rose petals. She takes my hands and squeezes.

"His son is dead. I was supposed to look after him."

I'm not a guy to wallow in guilt, to take it and not fight back. That was more Evan's style than mine. Like the time in fourth grade when we got ambushed by the Scapetti brothers on the way to school.

Evan, dressed like he was going to a wedding, saying, "Don't, Tony. They're bigger than us, and we're outnumbered."

But when the oldest brother Bruno pushed Evan so hard he fell backwards into an icy puddle, and the other three brothers laughed, I snapped. Grabbed a rock from the ground, swung and hit big Bruno across the side of his head. Smashed another in the chest, a third in the face. They never came near Evan or me again.

Maya's cheeks are soft; her lips are wet. She says, "It's really about you. Isn't it, Smokey?"

"I don't know."

"I can see that it is, which means you've got to solve it."

"The murder?"

"Yes, the kid's murder. The whole story behind it."

"You're probably right."

Being with her is soothing. I kiss her cheeks, her neck. She kisses back with a passion that ignites mine. Before I know it, something deep inside me starts to take over.

Maya moans, "Do what you've got to do, Smokey, but don't forget about us."

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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