

A Promise to Lena

Chapter One

The room glowed green in rhythm with the flashing neon of Gerry's Irish bar across the road and two stories down. Frank Daley, fully dressed and lying on his back on the cheap bed, put a period on the light show with the red tip of his Chesterfield.

The sounds and smells of the Brooklyn neighborhood floated through the open window; Antonio's Pizza Pies blending with the odors of cigarettes, sweat, and sex that filled the fleabag he had rented for the month. It'd have to do. He'd lose his security deposit anyway, once he robbed the joint downstairs.

The hooker beside him stunk of cheap whiskey, her snores a discord of nasal wheezes that drowned out conversations of the restaurant patrons below as they came and went to an irritating bell jangling above the door. He leaned over and pinched her nose until she opened her mouth to breathe. What came out overwhelmed all other aromas, pleasant or otherwise.

She was naked except for a pair of black lace panties and a gold strapless sandal on her left foot, the heel worn on one side. He had noticed it earlier on their walk up the staircase. There was no significance to the worn heel, but it represented something he knew that no one else did. It was one of his better qualities, a keen sense of observation. It had kept him alive and out of jail since the war.

Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing, the air once again escaping through clogged nostrils. Between the bell over Antonio's door and her nose music, it sounded like a bad Salvation Army band.

He'd counted the number of times the bell rang one Friday night beginning at five-thirty and stopping at eleven when Antonio's closed. The joint could be making about two grand a night. That and the numbers take would be worth the C-note he paid for the month's rent to case the restaurant.

What had Sal said? Fifteen, twenty grand? That was two weeks ago, at the Palladium Pool Hall on Garden and Center. Sal and he had bumped into each other by accident, or maybe it wasn't by accident. Sal wasn't his real name, it was Giuseppe Anodino Torrioni and Frank knew him from the war when they swept up Italy after Hitler retreated and Mussolini hung. Sal had surrendered, like the whole Italian army, hoping to avoid the sure death of the Soviets.

They let him join their platoon where Sal fought against the same Krauts he used to march alongside. Since Giuseppe was too long of a name, they called him Sal since he said he was from Salerno.

Sal had been in the States for two years now and seemed happy to see his old sergeant in the pool hall. They played eight ball for a buck a game. Sal was no pool shark, down two bucks after two games and three beers.

"I have some information I think you would be interested in, Sarge. Some-a very good information I think could help you and help me."

"What makes you think I want any of your information?" Frank dropped the three, five, and seven balls before Sal answered.

"I talk to a few of the regulars around the neighborhood. They say my old sergeant is the man to go to if I want to get a job done with no trouble. They say your sarge, he goes in, goes out; no cops, no trouble. I say, 'Okay, where is my old friend?' and they say, 'Maybe the Palladium,' and here you are, my friend."

Frank pocketed the eight ball from across the table with a bank shot. “I don’t like people talking about me.”

“Yes, I know. No one knows your name, except me...and no one ever will. That’s because I tell no one.” He tapped his chest.

“That’s a good thing, Sal. I’d hate for you to end up like McKinney.”

Sal said nothing for a few heartbeats, his eyes darting back and forth from the table to his sergeant. Thinking. Thinking real hard. “That was you?” Sal asked .

“I didn’t say that. I just wouldn’t want you ending up like McKinney. He might have mentioned my name to someone he shouldn’t have.”

“Okay. That’s no problem. Let’s talk about fifteen thousand dollars. How does that sound to you, Sarge?”

“I’m listening.”

“I used to work at Antonio’s Pizza Pies; for two years now, since the war. Nice man. He hires Sal because he’s from the old country. A real worker, not like these Brooklyn boys—spoiled and no work hard. You know the place?”

Frank shook his head and concentrated on the break. He scratched. Sal lined up the cue ball and kept talking. “They fire me two months ago. I ring up some lasagna to a friend for maybe too little. So, Antonio—Tony—he fire me. Okay, maybe he should fire me, but I know something about the place that maybe not everybody knows. Busy place, lots of customers, pizza here, there. All the old G.I.s, they come back from the war after eating pizza pie over there, now they want it here in Brooklyn. Then Tony, he says, ‘Okay, I make a pizza pie for G.I.s and make a living.’ That’s good, yes. But I see Tony, he’s living *too* good for only cooking in a *ristorante*. And Sal, here, he sees Tony making the money on the side.”

“How’s that?”

“Numbers. His *paisanos* from Sicily, they run the numbers and drop the cash off with Tony on Friday, so Tony can—what is it when you put money in bank?”

“Deposit.”

“Yes, deposit his money, his *paisano*’s money in bank so no one knows it’s not Tony’s money only.”

“How much?” Frank asked.

“Fifteen—twenty, like I said.”

“Thousand?”

“*Si*.”

“So why me? You could knock ’em over.”

“No, Sarge, not Sal. They know me. And the *policia*, they have my record, my prints. Not like you, Sarge, they say no one knows you. No *policia* have fingerprints of *my* sarge. You are a man of reputation, for getting the job done and so—” Sal held up his arms.

“What do you want?” Frank asked.

“Two thousand, for my information.”

Frank shook his head. “Fifteen hundred, *if* there’s twenty grand.”

Again, the arms came up. “It is worth more than two, Sarge. But I am a reasonable man, I will settle for *two*.”

Sal missed the three ball and then Frank took over. “You’ll take fifteen hundred or you’ll be crawling for the rest of your life.”

Sal rubbed his chin about that one. “Okay, you win, Sarge. Fifteen hundred. So, here is the dope. That’s what you call it, eh? Dope?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, so the *paisanos* drop off the money maybe at seven or eight. They eat a little *antipasto* or some bread and then go. The old man, Tony, he never leaves the back office, always there, all day, and one time, Sal, he sees Tony put all that numbers money in a file cabinet.”

“No safe?”

“Yes, he has a safe and that’s where he keeps the money later if no deposit in the bank. Tony, he lives there, next to the restaurant, and so he locks up the cash, but Friday, he sends his boys to the bank.”

“The bank’s open at night?”

“No, they are closed, but a man, a banker, he waits for Tony’s special deposit. So, you need to get that money before Tony gives it to his boys. No safe, you just take it from the file cabinet.”

“You said he never leaves his office.”

“That’s right. Except once, when a car, it catches on fire outside the restaurant, and Tony, he gets up to see what’s going on. Now there’s no one in the back office. What you need is a fire or something—what we used to call it in war when you throw a grenade and the enemy, they look over there instead of over here?”

“Diversion.”

“*Si*, diversion.” Sal laid the cue stick across the table. Frank would still make him pay for the game since he’d all but won it. “You need a diversion and for two thousand, Sal will make that come true.”

“No, I’ll take care of it,” Frank said.

“Okay. You take care of it. Let’s go to a table now and get a pitcher, maybe two, and we work out the plan, and maybe you’ll see why two thousand is better for Sal, eh?”

They pulled a couple of chairs up to a table and split a pitcher while Sal gave him directions and described the three-story building where Antonio had his pizza pie restaurant on the bottom floor. Half way into the second pitcher, Sal was almost too drunk to talk. Frank roused him when the Italian nodded off.

“What about the rooms above the restaurant? They for rent?”

Sal nodded. “That’s-a right. Too much for Sal, one hundred dollars a month and as many bedbugs you can want and so Sarge, all you do is get Tony outside and go to the alley and walk in.”

“No lock on the alley door?”

“Sure, but a cheap one. Ten seconds, it’s open. There is a deadbolt, too, but he don’t lock it when the place is a-open for deliveries. Okay, Sarge, how you gonna get Tony up and outside?”

“Grenade, like you said.”

“You got a grenade from the war? You got it two years later after we come here?”

“Yeah, a couple of them,” Frank said.

“That’s-a great,” Sal slurred. “You took them from the 5th Armored? That time in Berlin when we watch that pretty girl for you, right?”

“When I went to HQ,” Frank said.

Berlin had been nothing but rubble then. The war had ended, but they hadn’t received their discharge papers. In the interim, HQ ordered his squad to evacuate as many Berliners as they could from the edges of the Soviet sector and into the American side. The Soviets put an

end to it quickly. Frank had been ordered to pull out, but at the last minute they found a girl hiding in a basement. She might have been the only female over ten that hadn't been raped or murdered by the conquering Russians.

"Those were good times, Sarge," Sal said as he emptied the last of the second pitcher into his glass, spilling some of it on his shirt. "That Lena, she was nice."

"We talking about the one I had you and Wilkins watch?"

He bobbed his head. "That's her. We watch her, but that jeep driver, he didn't show. When we saw the Russians outside, we go, because Sarge," he poked his finger against Frank's chest, "Sal, he's no favorite of the Russians. I fight on the other side before I join you. *Si*, Sal no favorite of the Russians. Still, we had time for Lena before we go. Nice girl. The first *verGINE* Sal ever had. How about you, Sarge, eh?"

Frank rubbed his eyes. "I said to take her and her mother to the American sector before the commies showed up. You left her?"

Sal shrugged. "I left her with something... a little bit of Sal. Why you so upset? It was just one more Nazi. Why you so upset?"

"Yeah. Okay. Like you said, one more Nazi. She knew what could happen when she cheered on those goose-stepping bastards."

"Yes, goose-stepping bastards. You're right, Sarge. So... we talk about old times. Good friends talk about old times. Now, maybe Sal should get the two thousand. What do you think?"

Frank mulled over it with the last of his beer. "How about half?"

"Half?" Sal asked.

"Half the dough. You and me, we split it. You got me out of a few scrapes there when we crossed the Meuse. I owe you that."

“That’s-a right. I save the sarge at the Meuse. Okay, half. That’s more like it.”

“Okay,” Frank said. “Two weeks.”

The hooker left the apartment at seven-thirty, stumbling down the staircase with twenty of Frank’s money. It was eight-fifteen before Sal knocked lightly on the door.

“Sarge, it’s me,” he whispered. Frank let him in and grabbed Sal’s wrist when the Italian went for a light switch.

“Leave it dark. I don’t want anyone to see us up here.”

“Sure, Sarge, sure.” He pointed to the open window. “The men. They drove up just now, Sarge. I see them get out with the bag and go inside.”

Frank and Sal walked over and leaned out the window to look. A ’47 Packard idled outside Antonio’s. A man in a long coat sat on a front fender smoking a cigarette. Frank lit his own and blew smoke out the window. A gust took it two apartments over.

“Okay,” Sal said, “they get their free food now and come back out. You see.”

Right on cue, a couple of thugs came out chewing bread. The apartment window vibrated as they drove off in the souped-up sedan. Frank sucked hard on his cigarette, Sal’s big eyes illuminated by the glow.

“All you need now is that diversion,” Sal said.

Frank grabbed Sal by the collar with one hand and the belt with the other. He flung the Italian through the window and out into the cool Brooklyn night. Sal almost made it down two floors without trouble, until he caught a foot on the bottom of a fire escape, somersaulting the final floor to the ground where his head cracked against a fire hydrant.

Blood pooled from the body to a serenade of screams. Frank flicked what was left of his Chesterfield out the window. It blew apart in a gust, little tobacco commuters flying along on the wind. He stared at Sal's mangled body.

"That'll work," he said.

He grabbed his coat and fedora and headed toward the alley to relieve Tony of his Friday night loot. Later, maybe in a few days, he'd pay a priest to say a Mass for that girl, Lena.