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“Shank”

CHAPTER 1

“You picked one helluva guy to smack with a golf ball. Nice shank,” said Brennan Flynn as he drove me to the ornate clubhouse, where I rushed nauseous and dizzy to the men’s locker room. I thought about hiding out in the stall. But if Rico Barone really wanted to kill me, this was not where I wanted to spend my last moments on God’s green earth.

August 17, 2002, was supposed to be a great day—my 50th. Flynn, my old friend from Barrington, N.Y., was treating me to a round of golf at the prestigious Oakwood Country Club, where we used to caddy decades earlier. Flynn wasn’t a member, but as a longtime detective with the Barrington P.D., he knew some impressive people and was owed plenty of favors for a notable 30-year career. I had returned to my hometown this weekend at his invitation. It felt good to be back in metro New York after years in the cornfields of central Indiana, where I taught journalism on the contract faculty of a mid-sized, “third-tier” (according to U.S. News & World Report) university.

But I am burying the lead as my old boss Bill Silverman would say when I was a cub reporter at the Cleveland Press, back in the 1970s. “Cut to the chase,” he would remind me, tapping my forehead with one of his many sharpened red pencils.

Just before noon, Flynn and I were teeing off at the ninth hole on a glorious blue- sky Saturday. I had a decent round going and wanted to reach the green of this uphill 190-yard par 3.

“Get your ass into it, Goose,” Flynn said. “A long way to Tipperary.”

I should have choked down on a 5 wood and swung easy. Instead I pulled my 2 iron, which I rarely used. I adjusted my grip for slight draw, but I swung too fast, my right elbow flapping in the breeze like a giant chicken wing. I clenched my right hand at the top of my back swing, preparing to launch a monster shot. *First mistake: Over-swinging.* My club came through at an ugly angle and the hosel struck the ball instead of hitting square on the clubface of my godforsaken 2 iron.

“Look out,” Flynn cried. “It’s the Shawshank Redemption.”

I had hit the dreaded shank. The tee shot sounded like it belonged on a Bugs Bunny cartoon not on the pristine fairways of Oakwood Country Club. I was so disgusted I closed my eyes and shook my head. I didn’t check the first fairway to see if anyone was in the line of fire. *Second mistake: No golf etiquette.* My Titleist Pro V-1 golf ball was screaming at a cruel angle toward a hulking guy in a garish purple and yellow checked shirt and white pants, who was hitting his approach shot, unaware he was about to get creamed. Flynn grabbed my shoulder and spun me around to face the pending catastrophe.

“Fore,” I yelled impotently, more of a chirp than a bona fide warning. I then heard an awful thud as my golf ball made human contact. *Third mistake: Striking a Mafia hit man in the head with your Titleist Pro V-1.*

“Marone! You fucking asshole! You fucking clown! I’ll fucking kill you!”

It was bad enough hitting anyone in the head with my errant golf shot, my bloody shank. But why in the hell did the ill-fated target have to be Rico Barone, longtime soldier in the Bonnano crime family?

Under most circumstances, I would have already been a dead man. No questions asked. But I was fortunate that: a) I knew Barone from high school and b) I had 6-foot, 4-inch former bodybuilder and retired detective Brennan Flynn riding shotgun in my golf cart. Flynn was an especially vital talisman when Barone pulled a 9-mm pistol from his bulging red and black Ogio golf bag and pointed it at my nose, shining with perspiration.

“Easy, Rico,” Flynn said in a calm yet forceful voice after my miserable attempt to apologize turned into terrible stammering and pleading for my life.

I hadn’t seen Rico Barone for some 32 years since our 1970 Barrington High graduation. He was scary then—dark hair, dark complexion, and dark dead eyes. He was lanky with massive blue veins running down each arm, which I equated with incredible strength. He grunted when he spoke, having emigrated from Sicily when he was 10 years old. His words were seasoned with a harsh Italian accent, and, man, could he curse. And fight. I watched him beat the crap out of several guys, most bigger than he was. Barone was the prototypical junkyard dog. Mean as hell. Rumor also had it that he was screwing two or three of the prettiest Jewish girls in our class. That approached godlike stature for me, considering I didn’t even kiss a girl until my senior prom.

But none of that mattered now as my life was on the line on the verdant Westchester fairway. If I had to die, at least it would be on a golf course, one of my favorite places. Fortunately, God and Brennan Flynn had other ideas that summer afternoon.

“Come on, Rico. It’s Goose Gosse. You remember him, right? We all had our lockers together senior year. He used to give you the answers on your Business Law tests.”

Blood was dripping down the right side of Barone’s massive head, but he didn’t seem to notice. He was more concerned with his busted sunglasses, which he held rather daintily in his left (non-gun) hand. I swear his full head of hair was darker than it was back in our schooldays. But the rest of him hadn’t aged well. He must have gained about 100-some pounds, and his face looked like a gargoyle. He had been scary as a teenager. Now he was absolutely, chillingly terrifying, especially when armed with a 9-mm automatic.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Tony Gosse. Goose Gosse. We went to Barrington High together.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he barked. “This ain’t no fuckin’ reunion.”

With that the three other bloated goons in Barone’s foursome cracked up. I may have well have been wearing a pink tutu as far as these testosterone cases were concerned.

“Let’s go. Just crack him a good one, Rico. I’m putting for a par,” one of the goons said.

Barone brought his huge melon of a head close to mine. I heard him wheeze and smelled cigarettes and stale coffee on his breath. He still held the gun, but he had lowered it. He was examining me as if I were a bug on his windshield. Then he stepped back and grinned. The smile widened, and he giggled. I recalled that giggle. As mean a guy as he was, he had a girlish giggle. Of course, no one ever dared tell him that.

“Goose Gosse. Yeah, I remember you. You were a dipshit then and you still are.”

I managed my own weak smile and glanced at Flynn for backup as I had lost all powers of speech along with any control of my bowels.

“Come on, Rico. Give him a break for old time sake.”

“You’re getting on my nerves, Flynn. Since you’re a civilian now, you ain’t got no sway over me. So just shut the fuck up.”

My large pale-skinned pal Flynn was now red in the face, and it wasn’t from the 90-degree temperature.

“What do you want, Rico? Tony’s apologized. He’ll pay for any doctor bills. Buy you a new pair of sunglasses. What do you want to make this go away?”

Barone stroked his bloody face with his paw of a left hand covered by a white deerskin leather golf glove, now smeared in crimson.

“This is a big deal,” he said. “Your dipshit friend here made me bleed. Coulda freakin’ killed me. I’ll probably need stitches.”

“I told you he’ll take care of it.”

“And I told you to stop talking so fucking much.”

One of Barone’s goom-bahs handed him a white and blue-striped hand towel from the cart to stem the bleeding.

My counterfeit voice returned.

“Rico, I’m really sorry. I screwed up. What can I do to make it right?”

Again Barone giggled. He waved his right hand, the one with the 9-mm as if he were brushing aside a fart.

“What can you do? What can you do?” he asked again and not in a rhetorical way.

He rushed at me and swung a clumsy left hook which caught me high on the shoulder but had enough force to knock me to the plush fairway. The grass was soft and warm and had the intoxicating scent from being recently mowed. When I tried to get to my feet, Barone kicked me in the chops, and I fell back, striking my head on ground and blacking out.

Next thing I knew, Flynn was driving me to Oakwood Country Club's ornate clubhouse. Our golf day was done as was my life as I had known it. After Flynn convinced me it was safe to shower, change clothes and grab lunch in the men's grille, I learned of my fate and the Faustian deal my old friend had reached with Rico Barone as I lay unconscious in the middle of the first fairway.

"Great burger, huh?" Flynn asked impervious to my emotional trauma. "They use ground filet mignon. Amazing, right?"

"I almost get killed, and all you can talk about is a goddamn hamburger."

"Not just hamburger," he said, interrupting himself. "Ground filet mignon. So what's the matter? I saved your ass out there. Trust me, you don't know how crazy Rico is these days. You been gone a long time in those cornfields."

As much as I complained about my pedestrian Midwestern life, boring Indiana sure looked good now, compared with the insane New York world to which I had returned.

"I think I figured out how crazy Rico is," I said rubbing my swollen left jaw and probing my gashed lower lip. "What I don't understand is how could you make a deal like that without asking me."

Flynn raised his index finger like a polite freshman student in a lecture hall.

"Ah, excuse me, professor. But you didn't have no choice. Rico could have dragged you into the weeds and shot your lame ass dead. So just let me explain."

"Explain? Explain? I now belong to the godfather, Vincent Marchetti, for the rest of my freakin' life. What's to explain?" My shrill voice turned well-coiffed heads in the grand air-conditioned clubhouse restaurant.

Flynn shrugged his thick shoulders up to his trunk of a neck and quietly returned to his filet mignon burger.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “It’s just I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

Flynn sipped from his iced tea and bit off a huge chunk of his sandwich. Blood-red juice squirted from his mouth and dribbled down his prominent Celtic chin. I pointed this out, and he grabbed a white linen napkin to dab at his faux pas. He again raised his finger.

“Look, you’ve said for a long time you hate your job, and you want to write books. So here’s your chance.”

“My chance?”

“Yeah,” Flynn said confidently. “Rico said Marchetti wants someone to help him write his biography. He’s seventy-something. And now that Gotti’s dead and guys like Sammy “the Bull” are ratting out everybody, he’s concerned about his legacy for his kids and grandkids, who are all legit, by the way. I told Rico that you’re a professor and a writer. He actually seemed impressed.”

“Great. Rico Barone was impressed. Should I send him my resume and some clips? I don’t believe this is happening.”

Flynn pointed to my plate, which still contained an uneaten burger and side of once steamed broccoli.

“You’re all worked up. You gotta eat something.”

“This is like a crazy dream,” I said, trying to organize my helter-skelter thoughts. “Let me get this straight. Tomorrow, I’m meeting with Vincent Marchetti, the head of the Bonanno crime family to talk about ghost writing his biography. And if I refuse?”

“Come on, Goose,” Flynn said. “You ain’t refusing nothin’. You’re doing this, or your ass is grass. I got you out of a helluva jam today. Good thing I was your golf partner and not just another douchebag college professor.”

With that, Flynn cracked up, laughing so hard, I thought he was going to choke.

When I saw him smile and regain his breath, I relaxed and took a bite out of my now-cold filet mignon burger. Unbelievably tasty. Never had anything like it. And that would be a suitable metaphor for the next 18 months as I became a confidante and scribe to my Mafia life coach, Vincent J. Marchetti.