

CONFLICTING LOYALTIES

My Life as a
Mob Enforcer
Turned DOJ
Informant



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Skyhorse Publishing

Editor's Note:

Names, dates, and places have been changed to protect the guilty.

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CHAPTER 1

The diagnosis was a death sentence.

A night nurse pushed my wheelchair down a crowded white hallway. Parked me in a cold exam room. She turned on the light and prepped the MRI. My stomach turned at the stink of hospital gauze. I wanted to go home. I wanted to start over. She took my temperature and blood pressure and jotted some notes. Then she helped me stand. Eased me onto the scanner bed.

We were on the third floor of a hospital tower just outside Newark. I had just turned fifty-six. She told me to be still. I asked her if it would hurt at all. She said no. She said I wouldn't feel a thing.

I lay there in a paper gown, counting backward from ten. I kept my eyes shut tight, but my mind was in a panic. It all started coming back up. The past. Weighing on my conscience like a violent debt. One I was about to repay. The nurse pushed a red button, and I disappeared into the tube.

I spent two days waiting on the results. The doctor called the house while my wife was at the store. We drove together to the clinic at noon the next day. I sat across from the doctor in a windowless room. His desk was a mess of paperwork and medical books. He placed a black-and-white MRI in front of me and said three little letters that slugged me in the sternum: A—L—S.

“Lou Gehrig's . . .” I said. He nodded to confirm my worst fears.

Time seemed to slow down as he explained my doomed future. His words came out warped, like a record spun in reverse. Like a distant radio signal. I didn't have the money to get sick. I imagined myself, helpless in a wheelchair. Unable to move. I was afraid I'd get dementia and forget my wife's name. I was afraid I'd forget the names of my children.

“How long do I have? To live?”

“It's hard to say,” he said. “The disease affects everyone differently. I've had clients live ten, fifteen years. Others . . . months.”

I left the hospital with my wife. Stared out the window. It was mid-December. I didn't feel like talking. Minutes passed slow. I could feel my body collapsing. This was

it. I had escaped death before. Too many times to count. But it found me in the suburbs as a married man. And not in the way I thought it would. Not a bullet to the head, or a knife in the back. ALS was an invisible killer. Patient and methodical. That scared me more than twenty guys with machetes.

Finally, I spoke.

“How am I gonna tell the boys?”

“We’ll do it together,” she said. “I’ll be right there the whole time. Beside you.”

“I thought I paid my debt,” I said.

“What debt?”

“To God. I thought we were square. That it was over. But here He is. Back again. To collect.”

“It isn’t your fault that you’re sick, Aiden.”

“You know the worst part? I know I deserve this. For what I did.”

She pulled the car over to the shoulder and clicked on her hazards. She grabbed my cold hand and held it in hers. Cars sped by us as we idled on the side of the freeway.

“You were a kid, Aiden. Why are you so quick to blame yourself?”

White stadium floodlights blinded the field. We were down by three. Huddled mid-field with our helmets knocked together. I bit down on my mouthguard. Lungs were gassed. I could barely see through the sweat in my eyes.

It was 1982. I was sixteen years old. A junior in high school in a Jersey town we affectionately called the Bluffs.

The Bluffs was a small section of Jersey that seemed to exist in its own orbit. It had the buzz of city street life, but felt, at the same time, like a small town where everybody knew everybody. Nosy neighbors knew your business. People gossiped. Drive through on a weekday, and it might seem like a quiet slice of Americana. But beneath that facade pulsed a vicious, corrupted heart. The Bluffs was run by mobsters and street gangs. Heroin flowed in and out of the ports. There were more illegal guns on the street than cars. It was a breeding ground for criminals.

We’d done the play a thousand times. Fake left. Cut hard right. A short pass over the middle. First down.

“Aiden, you got this?”

I nodded. I was a wide receiver. The fate of the game rested on my shoulders. We took our positions. From the corner of my eye, I saw the high school cheerleaders. Their red-and-white pom-poms. Coach pacing at the ten. Next to him, my mother. I never saw my father at a game. He was too busy working at the transnational train company. But far off to the left, standing by himself, I saw another man: Eddy Tocino, dressed in black. Arms folded. His salt-and-pepper hair slicked back and to the side. Everybody knew who he was. Nobody dared to say it out loud.

Twelve seconds left in the half. The center snapped the ball.

I faked left. Broke right. The quarterback dropped back and threw a ten-yard bullet. I turned just in time to see the blur of brown leather spiraling toward me. The ball thudded into my sternum and stuck. I cradled it in my arms, turned, and collided with a linebacker who tackled me down into the turf at the seven-yard line.

It was a jarring hit. Like a car crash, it rag-dolled my head and neck. I was dazed under the lights. The whiplash dizzied me, and the taste of warm blood flooded my mouth from my bitten tongue.

This is what I lived for.

Violence is a drug. A rush of pure dope to the brain. A hit of serotonin like nothing I'd ever experienced. I got high off hitting someone as hard as I could. I got even higher when they'd hit me back.

I could feel my heartbeat pulsing in my temple. I saw spots and white stars under the cold black sky. Night games were rare in the Bluffs. The street gang turf wars made it too dangerous for us to play ball after dark. The Latin Kings and the Vice Lords had been lighting each other up. Some decades-old beef about drug corners and bragging rights. We'd see their cars rolling by with the headlights off, stalking their rivals, gunning each other down like we were at war. But here we were. Playing ball in the dark.

A voice slowly broke through the daze.

"Aiden, you okay? Get up!"

I felt like a soldier on a battlefield. And our team was like an infantry, gaining ground on the enemy, fighting together, pushing back, so close to occupying their turf. It was a war.

Two plays later, we scored the game's winning touchdown. I'd had one of the best games of my life. Received for 194 yards and three touchdowns. If my father had been there, he would've been proud of me that night.

I'm almost certain of that.

After I'd showered and changed, I walked the cinder-block tunnel from the locker room to the field. I saw Eddy, by himself, waiting by the concession stand. Eddy was a lieutenant in the DeCavalcante crime family. He was one of the most dangerous men in New Jersey. He was a friend of mine.

At sixteen, I wore two faces. One of a high school kid with all the promise of going all-state. The other of a young Mafia recruit. I'd put on one face each morning and ride my bike to school. Then after practice, I'd swap it for the other.

"You played a helluva game tonight," he said. His approval meant more to me than my own coach. More than my father. More than God. We walked together to his silver Mercedes parked in the back lot. "Heard there was a scout in the stands tonight."

"No shit?"

"Some recruiters from Michigan State."

"You talk to them?"

The dream was always to go to Nebraska or Ohio or Michigan to play college ball.

"You think I'm gonna lean on some college scout for you? Besides, you don't need anybody's help."

I threw my backpack on the floor and rode shotgun to the suburbs. We took the back roads slow. Drove across the city to a wealthy suburb just outside the city.

"You just missed the turn."

"I need you to do something for me first," he said.

"Tonight?"

"That a problem?"

I shook my head. No sir.

The job was simple. Jack a BMW from outside a house party two towns over. Bring it to the shop so Eddy and his crew could strip it for parts. I'd been running this game with Eddy since my sophomore year. He dropped me out near a small affluent suburb where the rich kids lived.

"In and out," he said. "Fast."

Then he sped off, leaving me alone on a dark street, holding my bag. I was a junior in high school. I could steal a car in less than sixty seconds, quicker than most guys twice my age.

You'd find some of the most idyllic suburbs in the state thirty minutes outside the Bluffs. Our racket was to sneak into wealthy suburbs and jack expensive cars. I quickly found a quiet street lined with luxury cars. I kept a low profile as I loitered for a while outside a stone Tudor mansion. The residential block was quiet. Some of the families had already begun decorating for Christmas. At the end of the street, I saw a new red BMW convertible. I unzipped my backpack and dug past my Algebra II book, my Spanish folder, my copy of *David Copperfield* and the Cliffs Notes I bought with it. I pulled out a screwdriver and a long metal slim jim. I was a sly little thief. I had done this six times before. I remembered every car I stole. Each time I did, I was faster than the time before.

I took one more glance around to make sure nobody was coming. Then I began: shimmied the metal rod down into the car door until I felt the lock. I shifted just slightly and heard a pop. Just like that, the door opened.

I tossed my backpack on the console and ducked inside. Adjusted the seat to fit my six-two frame and jammed the screwdriver into the ignition to start it. But something was off. The car wouldn't start.

"Fuck."

I searched through my backpack for a flashlight. If I was going to wire it to start, I'd need to be able to get under the steering wheel. And then I heard a voice from across the street.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?"

I stepped out of the car. "Go back inside before you get hurt," I said.

"Fuck you, buddy," he said, walking closer. "I'm callin' the cops."

But before that last word could even leave his mouth, I swung. My cold fist smacked with a hollow thud against his jaw. I slugged him twice in the stomach. He went down hard. I got on top of him and bashed his head against the street. Stood over him and struck hard with a swift knee to the ribs that left him gasping in the middle of the road.

"You call the cops, and I swear to God, I'll kill you."

I stood over him, looking down, this stranger, writhing and whimpering in pain and fear. And I noticed, even then, in the moment, how odd it was that I didn't feel anything. Not empathy, not sadness. Not even fear. I was eerily calm. Or maybe I was numb. I felt that something was missing inside of me. I had a junkie's appetite for violence.

With the guy still on the ground, I ducked back into the BMW. Now I was facing a possible assault charge on top of a grand theft charge. I needed to get out of there. I twisted on the flashlight. Reached under the wheel. Tugged on the tangle of wires. Touched the frayed ends together until I heard a spark. The dash lit up and the engine revved. Here we go. I adjusted the seat and closed the door. I heard police sirens in the distance. Some friendly neighbor must've called the police. I put the gear in drive and sped off.

I floored it through the quiet residential streets and onto the main street. Tires spun and squealed as I hooked right and saw cop lights in the rearview. I sped up. I felt like I was back on the football field. Hauling ass, gaining yards, with someone behind me, close enough to feel their breath on my neck. And me, running for my life.

But the cops didn't know the neighborhood like I did.

I jumped on the freeway and floored it west. Pulled off on the next exit. Hooked a U. Down a side street. Pulled into a high school. Sped through the parking lot and down an alley. I shut off the lights and waited. I jumped out of the car, adjusted the seat so it would look like a much smaller man was driving, and walked to the back of the alley.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins while I waited. I heard the sirens fade away. When it felt safe to leave, I jumped back into the car and drove the speed limit across town to the auto body shop.

I pulled the BMW into an open lane, where I saw Eddy waiting with a smile.

That night, I got home around eleven. Our two-story redbrick rowhouse sat on the corner of Leland and Sutherland Street. The windows were dark. The house was asleep. As usual, my mother left a key under the doormat. I let myself in. I tiptoed through the house. The floorboards creaked with every step. My father wasn't home. He never was. But my mother was a light sleeper. I tried never to disturb her.

I flipped the kitchen light. Scoured the fridge. Near the back, I saw some leftovers wrapped in tinfoil. I took the food out of the fridge and jumped back, startled. My mother was standing in the living room, holding a shoebox.

"Jesus Christ, you scared me."

"You wanna tell me where the hell this came from?"

My mother's native language was Hungarian. She met my father in Budapest and came with him to America in 1956, left during the Hungarian revolution. English was her second language and she spoke it in a broken, stilted cadence. She looked and sounded like Zsa Zsa Gabor, always impeccably dressed and made up. I inherited so much of my personality from my mother. She was quick tempered. She never held back. She carried herself with a fearlessness I would later carry myself. SHE opened the shoebox and took out a rubber-banded wad of hundreds.

"I counted eleven thousand dollars," she said. "That sound right to you?"

"Mom . . ."

"Don't lie to me, Aiden. I wanna know what you're up to. Where the hell does a sixteen-year-old get eleven thousand dollars? In cash?"

"Do you really wanna know?"

"Aiden, you know what your father will say if he finds out you're hanging out with those guys. You got your whole life ahead of you."

"What are you worried about?"

"Just promise me you're being careful. I worry about you."

"I promise, Mom."

I searched my mother's face to see a glimmer of her true feelings, but I only found her shyness. She hated confrontation. She didn't want the truth. She thought she was protecting me by loving me unconditionally. I let her believe that.

I took the shoebox full of money from her and kissed her on the cheek.

"It's late," I said. "I got school in the morning."

For my mother, it was all about appearances.

She was born Eva Varga. Grew up in a sleepy, tree-lined district of Buda, Hungary, just north of the Danube River. She lived in Hungary during World War II, falling asleep every night as Allied bombers decimated her city. My father was from south of the river, the slums of Pest. They met as teenagers and married shortly after. They never spoke about their lives in Budapest. Their eyes harbored secrets. I didn't know at the time that understanding their secrets from Hungary would end up being the key to unlocking my own.

I adored my mother. I was an unashamed, self-proclaimed mama's boy. She learned I was dyslexic when I was six years old. She never told me. Having a dyslexic kid

brought too much shame to the family. What would people think if they knew I couldn't read?

Outside of football, I hated school. I didn't belong in a classroom. I wasn't like the other kids. The inner workings of my mind were pure chaos. I could barely read. Words danced on the page. Numbers appeared in reverse order. Nothing stood still. Nothing made sense. I was always falling behind and didn't know why. Football was my only shot at getting into college.

The Saturday after I jacked the BMW, I was making collections from the corners Eddy owned, my backpack stacked with envelopes full of money from gambling debts.

I wasn't book smart, but I had a criminal's mind. I was moving up the ranks in Eddy's crew, fast. But too many guys still saw me as a kid. I was Eddy's boy. I'd been running errands for the crew since I was twelve. I knew I'd never be anything more than a small-time car thief unless I did something to change their perceptions of me.

I rode my bike ten miles until I reached the shop two towns over. Inside it was dark, but I could hear a man screaming. I saw a yellow sliver of light from under a door that led to the toolshed. I opened the door and saw Eddy and six guys from our crew standing in a semicircle around a man beaten bloody in a heap.

"Oh, hey Aiden," Eddy said. He was nonchalant. Unaffected by the man bleeding on his shoes.

"Who's he?"

"Oh, him? He's just a guy who thought he could fuck me," Eddy said, and he kicked him in the ribs. The guy let out a pathetic yelp. "He's a cocksucker who owes me money but thinks he can make a fool outta me."

"No, Eddy . . ." the guy begged. "Please . . . I have two little girls. Please don't kill me."

"Kill you?" Eddy said. Then he turned to me. "What do you think, Aiden? Should we kill him?"

I shook my head no. "He's no good to you dead," I said. Inside, I knew this was a test. It was my chance to erase the perception of the crew that I was a kid. I needed to do something they would never forget. Something that made it clear that I was every bit as ruthless as Eddy.

"Don't kill him," I said. "Death is too easy. Pick him up."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a rusted metal bench vise. I didn't even know his name. I didn't care. I slugged him twice in the stomach and he keeled over. I opened the vise, grabbed the guy by the ears, and dragged him to the table and jammed his head in the vise.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Eddy said. "You don't gotta do this, Aiden."

But I'd become unhinged. The crew took a step back. Not even Eddy could stop me. I wasn't just trying to kill this man—I was killing whatever was left of the little kid inside of me.

His head was shoved sideways in the vise. I began to twist the crank. As the metal enclosed on his face, I heard his muffled yelps for help. I heard his nose bone crack and I kept cranking until I couldn't turn it any further. His arms went limp at his sides. Eddy rushed over and pulled me off. Uncranked the vise and pulled his head from the metal. The guy collapsed in a heap onto the oil-slicked floor. Eddy checked his pulse.

"He's breathing," he said. "Let's get him the fuck out of here."

As I stood there, watching them drag this man away, I didn't feel anything. Looking back now, I wonder: When did I become that person? Was it a form of self-preservation? Did I have to be numb to survive in this world? Or was it something else?

After that night, the crew never saw me as a kid again. I became Eddy's personal enforcer.

The new role kept me busy. Being an enforcer was a job that required me to do a bit of everything for Eddy. Sometimes I acted as his driver. Other times, we ran errands together. I made collections for him on gambling debts. But my main focus was to protect him at any cost. I was something like a bodyguard and his own personal pit bull. Violence was always a last resort, but there was always somebody, somewhere who thought they could stiff Eddy and not pay up. That's when I'd pay them a visit with a baseball bat or an ice pick.

Eddy and I grew closer. He took me under his wing and schooled me on the business. I drove him to meetings and waited in the car. After a few months—by then I was seventeen—he started inviting me in. I'd sit quietly beside him and soak up whatever I could. I struggled in the classroom but had a savant's mind for organized crime. I was good at it.

Couple months later. Summer in the Bluffs. Humid, sticky heat. Neighborhood kids skipped rope and splashed in the puddles of busted street hydrants. School was out for the summer and I was spending less time with my friends and more time with Eddy and the crew. It never felt unusual for me to be surrounded by older men. I never got along with kids my own age and, unconsciously, was likely seeking a father figure with my father being gone so often.

Lunch that day was at the Three Brothers Diner—a small, mom-and-pop haunt on a derelict corner in the Bluffs. It wasn't much to look at—half a dozen worn leather booths and a counter where you could grab a quick coffee or a plate of eggs. It reeked of ham grease and burnt hash browns. But they made the best corned beef sandwich on the East Coast. Homemade pickles. Just the right amount of mustard.

We were regulars. The place was something like a second office to Eddy and his crew. It's where we'd all gather to hang, talk shop, shoot the shit. The waitresses loved us. The owners treated us like family. There was always a table waiting when he came in, which was almost every day. Eddy always tipped big—he believed in taking care of locals that made the Bluffs feel like a neighborhood. Whatever else he was—a criminal, a con man—he cared about the Bluffs.

As usual, we took the back booth—just the three of us, Eddy, Dominik, and me. Dominik was Eddy's right-hand man. His number two in command. His lieutenant. Dominik advised on major projects and took a lead role on a lot of the operations. He was morbidly obese—closing in on three hundred pounds—with a belly that hung over his belt. He was known as a hothead, and even at seventeen, I saw that blank, sociopath stare. From the first time I met Dominik, he never seemed to like me. Maybe it was because I was “Eddy's boy.” Maybe he felt threatened, that Eddy was grooming somebody else to be his second-in-command. Of course, my lack of Italian heritage would've prevented me from climbing to the heights I wanted within the crew, but still, something about my mere existence seemed to rub Dominik the wrong way.

Eddy and Dominik had been running together since they were my age—seventeen years old. They were close as brothers, or at least there was a time when they were. At that time, it seemed something was coming between them. Some unspoken animosity. Call it jealousy or resentment. Maybe Dominik didn't want to be number two his whole life. I was too young to know. Whatever it was I could sense it, boiling under the surface.

There was no air-conditioning inside the Three Brothers deli. Just a small box fan that blew hot, recycled air through the claustrophobic space. It was sweltering as we ordered our food. Eddy and Dominik both ordered pasta fagioli. I ordered a sandwich—corned beef on rye with mustard and pickles. Halfway through the lunch, Eddy spots a guy out the diner window walking westward down the block.

“See that wop fuck right there,” Eddy says. “Cocksucker owes me twelve grand.”

“Who?” I said. “That piece of shit right there?”

“Yeah.”

“Who is he?”

“Louis Gatz.”

“Gatz? Doesn’t he own that billiards parlor across from the firehouse?”

“That’s him.”

“Well, how come he’s still walking?”

“What am I gonna do? He keeps telling me he’s gonna get the scratch, and then I never hear from him.”

It wasn’t like Eddy to be passive. He’d usually take a hard-line, aggressive approach to a guy who owed him that kind of money. I’d seen him break people’s kneecaps for a lot less. So why was he being so calm about it all? At seventeen—hungry for attention and validation—I interpreted his defeatist response as a challenge. Eddy knew I had a killer instinct. In a way, I thought he was testing me.

So with my sandwich still in my hand, I pushed my chair out and went hauling ass out of the diner and across the street. I could hear them calling after me to stop, but I was like a rabid pit bull. I couldn’t be reasoned with. I ran up beside Gatz, sandwich in hand. He must’ve heard my heavy footsteps stomping behind him, because he turned in a scared panic.

“You Louis?” I asked.

“Who wants to know?”

I never answered. Instead, I swung so hard, my fist like a sledgehammer, and almost punched through his jaw. He collapsed in a heap. I slit him up with kicks to the ribs. Right hooks to the kidneys. He was begging me to stop. I stomped on his wrist and heard him scream out in pain. As I laid a biblical beating down on this degenerate gambler, I could feel Eddy and Dominik run up behind me. Eddy stood to the side of me, watching, while Dominik got a few shots in of his own.

I reared back and swiftly kicked the guy in the ribs and heard the air get knocked out of him. All the while, I was still holding onto my sandwich. I took a bite.

“This fuckin’ kid’s eating a sandwich,” Dominik said. He had a bemused grin on his face. “He just fucked this guy up with one hand, while eating a corned beef sandwich. Hey ‘Sandwich,’ let’s get outta here before the cops come.”

After that day, Louis Gatz paid Eddy the twelve g’s he owed him. And the nickname “Sandwich” stuck for life. To the guys in the crew, I was no longer Aiden—I was Sandwich.

Later, back at the garage, something had come over Dominik. I could tell something was nagging at him, and it simmered inside, slowly rising to a boil; he started up with me about not following orders. At that point, despite being Eddy’s enforcer, Dominik saw me as an understudy. An intern. A kid who should only act when given an order. To him, I was some measly frontline soldier. An infantryman. When he saw me take matters into my own hands—jumping up from the table like I did—it spooked him. He didn’t like that I went rogue, defying him like that, especially in front of Eddy. I could tell he felt emasculated. Truth was, he was threatened by a seventeen-year-old taking his spot and he thought he could bully me into obedience.

“Didn’t you hear me calling after you? Telling you to slow down?”

“No.”

“No? You fuckin’ deaf or what? You don’t go tuning some guy up in broad daylight. You’re begging the cops to seize this place. That ain’t how we do shit.”

“It needed to be done.”

“That’s not your call to make. Or I need to remind you who you work for?”

“I work for Eddy, not you.”

“You work for the crew. And I’m a lieutenant of this crew and you’re gonna give me some respect.”

“Fuck off.”

“What’d you say?”

But before I could answer, he slugged me twice in the stomach, sending me down to a knee. It felt like I’d been sacked on the twenty-yard line. His second punch knocked the wind out of me. Rage boiled inside of me. Rushed through my body to my face where I could feel a vein pulsing in my forehead.

“What the fuck you doin’?” Eddy said. “Leave the kid alone. He’s one of us.”

“He ain’t one of us,” Dominik said. But before he could say another word, I reached behind me and picked up a lead pipe slick with oil and swung it wildly, blasting Dominik in the sternum. I hauled back and swung again, this time crushing his shoulder, and again, connecting with the point of his elbow. He crumpled onto the floor. But he was quickly back up.

“Knock it the fuck off, the both of you,” Eddy yelled. “I’m the captain of this crew. You do what I say. Now knock it off.”

Dominik’s nostrils were flaring. He had murder swelling in his eyes.

“You little prick. I oughta kill you for that.”

“I said shut up!” Eddy yelled. “We’re a family. Now shake hands and grow the fuck up. It’s over. There ain’t gonna be a civil war here.”

After a moment of cooldown, both Dominik and I relented and agreed to follow orders like the soldiers we were. My job was to protect Eddy. Period. I dropped the pipe. It made a loud, metallic echo on the concrete floor. And I reached out to shake Dominik’s hand.

As the summer waned on, the jobs got more and more dangerous. One weekend, Eddy asked me to make a collection for him. Some degenerate gambler—Wyatt Something—was refusing to pay up, and he needed me to pay him a visit. Give him a warning. Wyatt Something worked at a massage parlor. One of those off-the-books, strip mall joints. I went around back where I knew he took his smoke breaks and waited for him. In those days, I never carried a gun, but I had my ice pick hidden up the sleeve of my windbreaker. After about twenty minutes, Wyatt Something came out. His face dropped when he saw me.

“Eddy’s been looking for you,” I said.

He looked around, wild-eyed, like a scared and cornered animal.

“The fuck are you?”

“Never mind all that. You been bullshittin’ him long enough. I’m gonna need to see some money today, or you start paying points.”

He squinted at me. I could tell from the way his skin looked, from the pale color of his eyes, that he was a druggie. The money he owed us was long gone. Probably snorted up his nose or shot into his arm. Eddy shouldn’t have ever allowed this guy to

gamble with us when he knew he wasn't good for it. It was a greedy, shortsighted mistake and now things were about to turn violent.

"Man, why don't you go fuck yourself," he shouted, hocking a snotty wad of spit in my direction. Before his spit hit the asphalt, my ice pick was sliding down my jacket sleeve and into my palm. But he beat me to the punch. He had a small blade of his own drawn and jabbed me in the side with it, ripping a gash in my abdomen.

I screamed out in pain and went down. He bolted inside and locked the door. The gash was bad, bleeding out into my palm and soaking through my T-shirt. I pressed my hand into the wound, but it only caused the gushing to worsen. I needed to get to a hospital, but a hospital stay would invite the cops, and I couldn't have that. So I limped back to my car, hopped inside, and floored it back to the garage, where Eddy was waiting for me. He was on the phone when I went hobbling into the office.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Dom, lemme call you back." He slammed the phone down. "The fuck happened to you."

"Cocksucker knifed me," I said.

"He got you pretty good," Eddy said.

"I'm gonna bleed to death," I said. I was starting to feel light-headed. I could feel my heart thudding in my chest, and blood pumped out of the wound at pace with my heart rate.

"Call Doctor Yelavarthi," Eddy called out to one of the other guys in the room. "Tell him it's an emergency."

Less than twenty minutes later, a small Indian man of about fifty showed up. He was mild-mannered. He had almost no reaction when he saw me drenched in blood. Yelavarthi stayed calm and he inspected the gushing wound. He was a surgeon in Vietnam, and I knew he'd seen much worse in the Hanoi field hospitals. He sopped up the blood with a white towel. Applied a stinging disinfectant that burned so badly I nearly lost consciousness. Pain went quivering through my body. Eddy handed me a shot of Crown Royal. Anything to take the edge off the pain. And then, I felt a cold needle puncture my skin, and the strange, dragging sensation of sutures being threaded through my skin. He patched me up that night and saved my life. I never went to the hospital. The cops never heard a peep about the incident.

It always amazed me how far the Mafia's reach could go. It didn't stop at cops and politicians. It reached doctors, too. Back then, we had our own underground community.

I couldn't tell anybody what I was involved with. Not my parents, not even my closest friends. Over the years, there were three people who saved my life, all at different times, and in very different ways. Dr. Yelavarthi was one of them. The other two were neighborhood kids I'd known since junior high: Sam Schwartz and Donnie Cooper.

I first met Sam in the seventh grade. I could never forget the first time I saw him, standing there on the side of the basketball court, waiting quietly to be chosen for a team. He was five-four with braces, and he weighed less than a hundred pounds, with feet so big that they looked like clown shoes. The poor kid had no coordination. I watched him that day, struggling not to trip over his laces. But what he lacked in coordination, he made up for in smarts. He was painfully shy but remarkably intelligent. A math whiz like nothing I had ever seen before. I could never overemphasize just how geeky this kid was. He knew math the way I knew crime. Our minds were wired differently, but there was something—some unknowable thing—that drew us toward each other. Maybe it was feeling like an outcast. Sam was a gawky, Jewish kid in a part of town that didn't always respect his culture. I knew what that was like—feeling left out, unwanted. Neither of us felt like we belonged. No group wanted us, so we started our own.

Not too long after, I met Donnie Cooper. Another kid from the Bluffs, Donnie and I played football together. He wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but the kid had heart. He lived just a couple houses down and we'd hang together every day—riding bikes, wandering the streets, complaining about teachers, girls, and our coaches' latest antics. Donnie was loyal as a dog, and I knew he had my back. Back then, I could never have imagined Sam, Donnie, and I would be building a friendship that would last over four decades. We were just lost boys who found each other.

But no matter how much of our lives we shared, I could never tell them about my secret life with Eddy and the mob. Even to my two closest friends in the world, I lied. I would tell them I was caddying at the local golf club, then I'd slip off and meet Eddy at the garage. Why did I lie? Because I didn't think they'd understand. I wasn't sure I understood myself. Sam had smarts, and Donnie had sports. They both had a future. I wasn't sure I had anything outside of being a gangster. It was my ticket out—a ticket I wasn't sure they'd approve of. So I kept it to myself.

As the months went by, Eddy started trusting me with bigger and bigger jobs. I began collecting the gambling debts guys owed. Began sitting in on important meetings. I was moving up the ladder. I knew if I didn't make it playing football, I could make a decent life for myself with Eddy.

On a Tuesday in September of my senior year, I rode my bike two miles across town to meet up with Eddy and the crew at the auto body shop. The guys were playing cards. Watching golf on an old Magnavox. The plan that day was to go down to a quiet, suburban block and jack a BMW. But then Eddy walked into the room with a concerned look on his face. He turned the TV off. Told us to put the cards down. We had to talk.

He pulled a chair out and sat at the head of the table.

"Listen," he said, and he took a big deep breath. "I just got word from my guy over in county. The feds are looking to hit us. I don't know when. But he says it could be soon as this weekend."

"For fuck's sake," Paulie said. "Somebody talking?"

Paulie shot me a look. "Don't look at me, motherfucker. I've been here since I was twelve years old and I've never said a goddamn word to anybody."

"You ain't one of us," he said. "That's all I'm gonna say."

He was right.

As much as I hated to admit it, there was a truth I'd been running from: I wasn't Italian. I was Hungarian. And no matter many times Eddy told me I was part of the family, my heritage said otherwise. Only Italians got made. And being a made guy meant you were untouchable. It meant more money. It meant you called your own shots and had a crew of your own. It was what every wiseguy dreamed of. But for me, it wasn't possible. No matter what I did, I'd always be an outsider looking in.

"Sit down," Eddy said. "I'm not gonna let this bullshit cause a rift. Leave Aiden the fuck outta this. We ain't done shit wrong."

"You're always protecting him? The fuck's he got on you?"

"I said shut your mouth!" Eddy yelled. "We're a family, capiche? This shit goes down and the subpoenas start flying, it hurts all of us. So, for the time being, we all need to split up."

A voice came from the back. "Split up?" Little Johnny.

"Just until things cool down," Eddy said.

"And what if they don't?" I asked.

Eddy drags his hands over his face. “Look. You watch the news? You saw what happened in Providence. In New York.”

What had happened was, the Department of Justice had been nabbing DeCavalcante crew members left and right. Crews were going down, getting locked up. Major RICO trails were pending. The heat was cranked as high as it could go for guys like us. “We got fuckin’ rats on our ship and we have to get to shore before the goddamn boat sinks. Okay?”

“Where the fuck you want us to go?” Paulie asked.

“Anywhere. Just get out of here. For a while. It isn’t safe for us anymore.”

The truth was, I always knew it would end this way. Ninety percent of these guys end up dead or in jail. That was a reality I couldn’t get away from. And I felt a twinge of sadness and guilt for some of the guys who’d given their lives to the crew. Because I had football. I had a way out.

The garage was slowly emptying out, one guy at a time, when I heard Eddy call my name.

“Aiden,” he said. “Hang back for a sec. I need to talk to you. How you doin’ with all this shit? You okay?”

“I dunno. It’s gonna be hard not seeing you around.”

“It’s not goodbye forever,” he said, and my eyes redirected to the concrete floor.

“Hey, what did I say about looking down like that. Look me in the eye. It’s not goodbye forever, okay?”

I nodded.

“Listen. You know I’ve always considered you like a son. I wanna be straight up with you. There’s a good chance I’m not gonna make it outta this.”

“What do you mean?”

“My lawyer says there’s a ninety percent chance I get indicted in all this. I gotta disappear, kiddo.”

“Disappear? Where?”

“I’m leaving for Spain,” he said. “End of the week.”

“Spain?”

“My old lady’s got a cousin there. Gonna drink some wine and flamenco until things cool down around here. Sounds pretty good, yeah?”

“You got room for me?” I said and smiled sadly. I was an only child, and this crew was the closest thing I ever had to a brotherhood.

“Nah,” he says. “You need to go to school, Aiden. You need to play football. These other guys . . . this life is all they know. But you got a gift. You need to promise me you won’t squander it.”

The football season came to end. We didn’t take state, but we finished with a winning record. At the same time, the crew had all but disbanded. The auto body shop closed. And my heart and mind were torn. I felt a sort of freedom—a relief—at being released from the crew. I wanted to play football and I saw only trouble ahead if I kept running jobs for Eddy. How long before I ended up in jail, or worse? The Mafia had a way of devouring your time. Your life. They wanted ownership over your body and your soul. I wasn’t ready to give it to them. I had a separate dream that was supposed to rescue me from the streets. In March, I accepted a full-ride offer to Michigan State.

But my decision was complicated, and the feelings that came with it weren’t always so clear-cut. I was an only child. I was a lonely kid. I wasn’t a good student, and I didn’t fit in anywhere. Even my football teammates felt distant to me. I couldn’t make a connection. But with Eddy and the guys, it was different. They were criminals, yes. But they got me in a way nobody else ever had. They watched out for me. Mentored me. They made me feel like I mattered.

I was going to miss that.

I graduated from high school in May of 1984. Summer passed in a blur. By late August, it was time to say goodbye to my little section of Jersey. I packed up my room, loaded up the car, and drove with my parents for two days across country to East Lansing, Michigan. Apparently shipping me off for a discount was something my father could show up for.

When we finally arrived on campus, my father parked his black Caddy outside of Kentwood Hall—a two-story redbrick residence that reminded me of home. We lugged the boxes up the stairs to the second floor while Mom took my duffel bag up in the elevator. My room was the last door on the right. I claimed the top bunk. Dad helped me tack my torn Tampa Bay Buccaneers poster to the wall. Even though I grew up in Jersey, I loved the Buccaneers and dreamed of signing a big contract with Tampa and buying a big house on the Florida coast.

My father patted me on the back. I wanted to grab him and hug him before he walked out, but we didn’t have the kind of relationship. Instead, I just nodded and

waved goodbye. Kissed my mother on the cheek and wished them a safe ride home. And when they left, the quiet in the dorm room was too much to bear. Who was I without Eddy? Who was I without the crew backing me up? I chose the straight life, but now I wasn't so sure.

College was a bust from the get-go. No matter how hard I fought it, I felt homesick. I felt like a stranger on campus. Displaced and invisible, small and unseen. I missed having the respect that came from running with Eddy and the guys. In the Bluffs, people knew me. People feared me. But here? I was just another student on campus, and I hated standing in line and waiting my turn.

Saturday mornings were for running drills. Practice started at seven, when it was still dark. We ran the bleachers. Then it was short, explosive sprints around the track. I tried to make friends with the other guys on the team, but it didn't take. I thought about joining a frat to have some sort of brotherhood, but I couldn't fit in. I kept to myself. I took some business courses and sat in the back. I ate by myself in the cafeteria. I missed the guys. I missed my city. I missed my mother's cooking.

After the blues of the first month wore off, I rededicated myself to football. I slept with a football by my bed as if it were an affirmation. I touched the Buccaneers poster like it were a prayer card. I had to make the most of my time here. I swore an oath to myself that I would make it to the big leagues.

Then, on a warm day in late August, I was walking back to my dorm after practice. There was a calm in the air I never experienced back in Jersey. Inside the residence hall, freshmen played Ping-Pong and bullshitted in the lounge. Down the hall, the doors were chaotic messes of sticky notes and Pink Floyd posters and "Vote for Mondale" stickers. I had my backpack slung on my shoulder and burst into my dorm room. And I froze.

I saw a man in a gray suit sitting at my desk. I'd never seen him before. Standing beside him was another man in a blue suit. I could tell they weren't here to kill me or collect a debt. I glanced for just a second at the Buccaneers poster on the wall. My heart plummeted into my guts and my mouth went dry. I stood there still and scared in the doorway until one of them spoke.

"Aiden Gabor?"

“Who the fuck are you two?”

“I’m Agent Johnson,” he said and flashed me his badge. “Department of Justice. Let’s go for a ride.”