

## Chapter 3

One night when he was seventeen, Mad Dog, Frankie Messina, and Kenny “Snake Eyes” McGuirk were at the Acropolis Diner—“the Greek’s” as they called it—on Nostrand Avenue. They sat at a Formica-topped table, amidst the fake chrome, plaster columns, and bogus leather booths.

“I’m not interested in this job,” Kenny said, tamping his Lucky Strike in an ashtray.

“Whaddaya mean?” Frankie said. “It’s a sure thing.”

“Sounds risky.”

“Hey, Snake Eyes, you’re a gambler. You take risks every day.”

“Frankie, gambling’s the art of *controlling* risk.”

“Whaddaya talkin’ about?”

“I always know the hand I’m dealt. That way I figure the other guy’s hand. This job? I don’t know the guy’s hand.”

Frankie’s low-lying hairline sank as he scowled. “Look, Kenny, this guy’s been workin’ there four years. The place closes at eight and he’s gonna leave the alarm off. Nine-thirty, he comes back and turns it on. We’ll have an hour and a half.”

“I wanna meet this guy.”

“Why?”

“To dope him out. I got one rap already,” Kenny said. “One more and I go away.”

The waitress approached, Silex coffeepot in hand. “Will there be

anything else?”

“No, sweetheart. Just you,” Frankie said, ogling her breasts.

She sighed, looking bored and tired.

Mad Dog always felt embarrassed when Frankie—who fancied himself a Romeo—oozed his bewitching bullshit. Kenny looked uncomfortable. With a purple scar on his forehead, a broken nose, and weak chin, Kenny McGuirk never found a comfort zone with the girls. His true love was gambling, especially poker, and his main squeeze was the smiling queen of a royal flush.

Plopping the coffeepot on the table, the waitress ripped the tab from her pad and set it down. “Have a good night,” she said, and then sauntered off.

“You too, sweetheart,” Frankie called. “I’m telling you, it’s guaranteed,” he whispered to Kenny.

“Nothin’s guaranteed,” Kenny said. “And what about the kid here?” He tilted his head at Mad Dog. “One more rap, he does time.”

“What’re you, Kenny? His fuckin’ father? Besides, for him it’s juvie.”

“Frankie, I gotta talk to your guy.”

“You sound like that red-headed chicken shit, Danny Burns,” Frankie said.

“Watch it, Frankie,” Mad Dog warned.

“Yeah, yeah,” Frankie said. “Don’t get your Mickey Finn Irish up. Your best friend’s gonna be a fuckin’ accountant with his numbers.”

Frankie’s eyes followed the waitress down the aisle.

“Look at *me*, schmuck, not her,” Kenny said. “You get me face time with your friend. Otherwise, forget it. *Capice?*”

“Yeah, yeah. I *capice*. I’m tellin’ ya, my guy says the fence value in that storeroom is fifty, sixty Gs. Whaddaya gonna do with that kinda cash, huh?”

“*If* I go for the job . . . and that’s a big *if*,” Kenny said, “then I won’t work the Parisi card game anymore. I’ll start my own.”

“Yeah,” Frankie said with a snicker. “Kenny never saw a bet he

didn't like."

"Only when I know the odds," Kenny said.

"And you, Dog?" Frankie asked. "What'll you do with that kinda money?"

"Get outta my house. Get away from that low-life bastard."

"That kraut, Horst?" Frankie asked.

Mad Dog nodded.

"You could box. Herbie Jew-Boy says you're the best light-heavy-weight he's ever trained."

"Yeah, and have scrambled eggs for brains."

"With those hands you're the toughest white guy I know," Frankie said.

"There's always someone tougher," Mad Dog said. "And I don't want another rap."

Frankie kissed his Saint Anthony medallion. I'll see if my guy'll meet Kenny. Then maybe we're in business."

■

Kenny jimmied the store's back door with a crowbar. No alarm.

He and Mad Dog clambered down the steps. Another door—fastened by a hasp and padlock. Wood splintered and metal creaked, as Kenny pried it open. Their flashlight beams fell on stacked cartons: Sony, Sharp, televisions, stereos—months of inventory.

"We're gonna need a bigger van," Kenny whispered.

They began hauling. Up the stairs out the back door. Box after box. Frankie waited at the van's rear and loaded it up. Kenny scrambled back down to lug another load. Mad Dog and Frankie packed the van.

A whoop shrieked through the alley. Mad Dog's insides turned to ice. Then a cherry light whirled on the brick walls.

A silent alarm. Frankie's guy fucked up.

The walls were a mad rush of gyrating lights. "Stay where you are!" came a command down the alley. "Hands in the air where we

can see 'em!”

“Don't move,” yelled one officer. “Not a muscle.”

They were patted down, head to toe. Mad Dog's hands were thrust behind his back, cuffs snapped on.

He felt his flesh chill as radio static and whirling lights filled the air.

■

The Honorable Alfred Waterman—bushy-haired, bespectacled—looked austere in his black robe. The legal aid lawyer told Mad Dog and Frankie, “Don't bullshit this guy. You already copped a plea and he'll hear you out for a presentencing statement.”

They stood with their court-appointed lawyers.

“Young man,” Wasserman said, addressing Mad Dog first, “you're only seventeen and this is your second offense. Grand larceny carries a severe penalty.”

Mad Dog nodded respectfully.

“And there were only two of you?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“You took a lot of merchandise in a very short time.”

“I'm sorry, Your Honor,” he said, wondering what happened to Snake Eyes.

“You're on a bad road, son; it leads to prison.” The judge peered at him. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Thoughts streaked through his head. *No bullshit.*

“I'm sorry, Your Honor. I didn't think of the consequences . . .”

“We live in a world of consequences,” the judge said. “Yours is a unique situation, young man. This is the first time I've ever been contacted by a youthful defendant's teachers. They said you're a brilliant kid . . . you have enormous potential.”

Wasserman seemed to be taking some kind of mental inventory. “I'll tell you what I'm going to do,” he said. “I'll give you a choice . . .”

Mad Dog's heart jumped in his chest.

“The first is two years in prison. It means one year at a state reformatory. And when you turn eighteen, you’ll be transferred to a penal institution.

“Your second is this: you join the army, for a three-year enlistment. You’ll get a chance to fulfill your potential. Now . . . which will it be?”

*A year’s vacation in juvie followed by lockdown with the crazies? Or the army? Who knows? Could be a chance for something . . . who knows?*

“The army, Your Honor . . .”

“And, young man, if you’re thrown out or discharged other than honorably, you’ll do those two years in a state penitentiary. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“Maybe you’ll become something other than a street thug.”