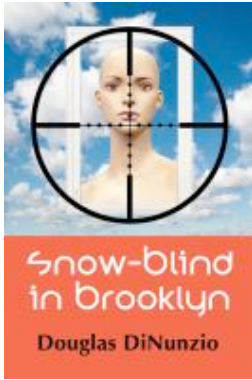




Snow-blind in Brooklyn

Douglas DiNunzio



When Eddie Lombardi saves hit man Carlo Cattalanotte from an assassin's bullet, he finds big trouble. Apparently, Carlo has stolen a Mafia kingpin's entire inventory of cocaine. Eddie couldn't care less what happens to Carlo but, when the hit man's sainted mother implores Eddie to find and protect her little bambino, Eddie is hooked. Worse still, somebody is murdering Carlo's ex-girlfriends, and leaving his grisly calling card: bullets, point-blank, through the eyes.

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An Eddie Lombardi Mystery

Douglas DiNunzio

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First Edition

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I was trying to watch the newsreel at the Avalon Theater on East 18th Street when Carlo Cattalanotte swaggered in, a peroxide blonde on his arm, a simian snarl on his lips. He bullied his way through the lobby, cussed out a pair of ushers, then stomped his way down my aisle. I didn't object while the spring fashion reel was running, but he was still acting like a jerk when the sports news came on, and that peeved me.

Still, I held my temper and even took a moment to size up the blonde. She was half a head shorter than he was, with the obligatory jumbo-size balloons and a behind that swayed like a destroyer escort on maneuvers. If she were anything like his other bimbos, she'd crack her Spearmint with the regularity of a metronome and have a voice like Betty Boop.

They took front row seats, but even that wasn't far enough, and when Carlo ran his mouth again during the boxing news, I finally cupped my hands around my own mouth and hollered, "Shut up in front!"

That brought the hulking bear to his feet, murder flashing in his dim mobster eyes. But the menace drained from his face when I stood up, as if he'd remembered all the times I'd kicked his ugly ass when

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we were kids. He offered a face-saving sneer that was wasted on me and sat back down.

I didn't hear another sound from him until the baseball news. Jackie Robinson, the Dodger rookie, was trying to break out of a batting slump. "Who the *fuck* is that?" Carlo blustered at the bimbo. She didn't know, either, and then, mercifully, the cartoons came on.

He laughed all the way through Yosemite Sam, then sat quietly through the coming attractions and the serial. But restlessness overtook him again during the main feature, and while Fred MacMurray was planting a final sweetheart's kiss on Paulette Goddard, Carlo and the blonde were already trekking back up the aisle. He stopped at my row and glared as if he wanted to make trouble, but the blonde squealed, "Let's go, Carlo, honey," and they moved on.

There was still daylight outside. A warm, orange glow bathed the awning-covered storefronts across the street. The movie crowd had been light, but the sidewalk traffic was heavy: weary working stiffs spilling out of the BMT station around the corner; late afternoon lady shoppers returning from successful expeditions to Abraham & Strauss; stickballers reluctantly going home for dinner. Carlo was outside, too, lurking in the shadow of the box office. The bimbo was standing just behind him, looking like she wanted to run.

"Lombardi!" he shouted as he lumbered toward me. I was already on the move, partly because I've always been quicker, partly because

I'd seen sunlight glinting off a rifle barrel in an open third floor window across the street.

I launched myself at Carlo with a shoulder block that drove him back beyond the box office. As we tumbled onto the pavement, I heard the sharp crack of the rifle and the ricochet of a .30-caliber shell as it struck concrete and then glass. It was Carlo's blonde bimbo screaming, not the gunshot, that started the panic.

Or maybe it was the sight of two .45-toting hoods emerging from a black Ford sedan at the curb. In any case, Carlo had the jump this time. As the hoods pushed forward through the frightened crowd, he pulled out his own .45, and, lying on his side, threaded two shots through the bystanders to make a double bull's eye in the leading hood's chest. With a slight recalculation, he put his next shot into the second hood's forehead. Brains splattered into the face of a teenage boy who had the bad luck to be nearby.

For an odd moment, the panic ceased. People stood as still and silent as mannequins. Then the teenager, realizing what was on his face, began throwing up into the street. Blood oozed from the dead hoods, somebody else screamed, and the panic started again.

Carlo, meanwhile, had raised himself to a kneeling position. He fired three rapid shots at the only open window he saw across the street, then bolted for the big white Cadillac convertible he'd parked in a no-parking zone out front. The Caddy left trails of hot rubber all the

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way to the corner. The blonde had already bolted in the direction of the BMT station.

While Carlo and the blonde were going their separate ways, I darted through the crowd, grabbed the .45 that lay next to a hood's outstretched hand, and raced toward the building with the open window. Brooklyn traffic at rush hour won't stop for a runaway baby carriage, but believe me, it screeches to a halt for a man with a leveled .45.

I fixed my eyes, and the .45, on the open third floor window, but the rifle barrel no longer protruded into the sunlight. I took cover under the awning of the grocery store below, took two quick breaths, pushed the stairwell door open, and slipped quietly inside.

Like sniper hunting house-to-house back in Europe.

I remembered my combat lessons. First, *listen*. Before you do anything, goddammit, *listen*. Hug the wall, listen, then move in perfect silence. Separate yourself from the noises outside, become a part of the silence inside. Be alert for special silences, for patterns of light and shadow, for subtle, deadly disturbances of the air. Anticipate the sudden opening of a door, the click-click of a rifle bolt. Listen and move with stealth, like an Indian scout.

I reached the second floor landing, then listened for activity on the third, but there was only more silence. Four doors on the second landing. Storage rooms. I tried them all. Light from a hall window. Closed. No breeze. I hugged the wall, the .45 out ahead of me, as if I

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were back with my old combat unit: Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division.

First Sergeant Lombardi.

Smaller steps now, slowly, in a crouch. Almost to the next landing. Almost. Doors come into view, light from the hall window, and then...

Meow!

The cat's nose was about an inch from the .45 when I pulled my hand back. He rubbed his head against the barrel and purred patiently for some attention; but mine was already on the only door that mattered. Again I waited. Before a Screaming Eagle of the 101st kicks in a door, he holds back a prudent moment or two. And then, man does he kick!

The door hit the stopper, caromed back, and caught my shoulder hard. I was ready, but there was nobody to shoot at. A light breeze was blowing through the open window into the empty room. I walked to the window, not so much to look outside as to examine the contents of a crumpled paper bag on the floor. There was nothing else in the room. Not even a shell casing.

I pushed the barrel of the .45 cautiously into the bag and looked inside. An empty Coca-Cola bottle and some greasy chicken bones.

Cool customer. Very cool. How long had he waited here, eating his fried chicken and sipping Coke, before his target came out for the

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big surprise? He's good, this sniper. He's very good. And he's smart enough to run away, smart enough not to be trapped.

The urgent sounds of police sirens shifted my attention outside. Two black-and-whites arrived simultaneously from opposite ends of 18th Street, and pairs of officers fanned out to hold back the pressing crowd. I made my way back down to the street, witnessed the arrival of the meat wagon, two more black-and-whites, and, finally, a detective-lieutenant's black, unmarked Buick. A big Sicilian named Nick DeMassio stepped out. He surveyed the carnage on the sidewalk, spoke briefly with two uniformed cops, then suddenly split the air with expletives.

Showtime.

5

I started my search for Carlo Cattalanotte with a visit to Louie Attanasio, the neighborhood bookie. During the week he operated out of a corner candy store at 71st Street and 17th Avenue, but he spent most of his Saturday afternoons a block over on 18th at the Sons of Palermo social club. Louie wasn't a made member, wasn't even Sicilian; but then you didn't need a pedigree to join the Sons of Palermo. Just a picturesque rap sheet and some colorful *goombahs*. I didn't like Louie much, but tips were his business, and I needed a red-hot tip on Carlo.

I expected to find Louie out back by the *bocce* court. What I didn't expect was Carlo Cattalanotte's big white Cadillac convertible parked at the curb out front. I checked the registration card clipped to the driver's sun visor just to be sure, pondered the absurdity of my discovery for a moment, then ambled through the dingy storefront and out to the *bocce* court.

Louie was rolling the *pallino* to the far end of the court. His playing partner was a great bear of a man, late-thirties and balding. From behind, I might have mistaken him for Carlo except for the cheap cut of his suit and the fact that Carlo would be a million miles away from this place under the circumstances. Why Carlo's Cadillac

was at the curb was one of several million-dollar questions that maybe Louie could answer.

I studied the other two hoods. The first was younger, scarecrow-thin, his eyes dark and sunken, his skin pale and yellow. A scar ran across the right side of his head, as if a bullet had once parted his hair. His *bocce* partner was sleek, dark-haired, mobster-handsome, early thirties. The handsome one stared back, our hard looks colliding for just an instant before I caught Louie's attention.

"*Come va*, Louie? See you a minute?" I said as I hooked him by the arm. I smiled coolly at Handsome, said, "*Scusi*," and led Louie back inside.

"So, Louie." I offered a half-smile.

"Can't tell you nothin', Eddie," he said immediately. He studied me as if I were modern art until I stared him down.

"Haven't asked yet, Louie."

Handsome had followed us. He waited a few steps beyond the open door, arms folded.

"Don't be askin' 'bout Carlo," said Louie, keeping Handsome within his field of vision. "You didn't win no friends savin' that sonofabitch at the movie house." As I arched my eyebrows, Louie's weasely eyes narrowed into protective slits. "You're an okay guy, Eddie," he continued. "You don't want Mr. Santini thinkin' you're playin' for the wrong team."

I leaned toward him and lowered my voice. “It’s that serious, huh?”

“Plenty,” said Louie, his voice dropping to match mine. “I got it for a fact that Mr. Santini would be personally cashin’ in that prick Carlo’s ticket if it wasn’t for his daughter and her graduation.”

“*Whose* daughter?”

“Mr. Santini’s.”

“Santini has a daughter?”

“She’s seventeen, a wallflower with a face like a boxer dog, but she’s his pride and joy. She graduates from high school this year, and then she’s goin’ to a convent. She’s gonna be a nun. Can you fuckin’ believe it?”

Not easily. Santini’s two sons, Carmine and Rico, were already hard at work in his lethal employ. They were known as the Barracuda Brothers, and not just because of their pointy teeth.

“What’s Santini’s daughter got to do with Carlo?”

“Nothin’. But Mr. Santini’s plannin’ a big send-off party for her, and it’s takin’ up most of his time. Frank Sinatra’s gonna sing. *In person*. A big band’s gonna play, too.”

“I guess he figures Carlo’ll be out of the way by then.”

“Listen, Eddie,” he said, his voice rising suddenly. “I’m takin’ bets the filthy fuckin’ scum won’t last the week.”

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Handsome moved another step closer to the open door. “Sounds like Santini wants him pretty bad,” I said, my attention drifting toward Handsome.

“Real bad. But, hey, that’s what happens when you steal from your *don* and then try t’ go into business for yourself. You wanna stay healthy, you don’t mess with Mr. Santini. You hear what I’m sayin’, Eddie?”

“Absolutely. And thanks for the advice.”

“Just tryin’ to help.”

“Just one more thing, Louie. Saw Carlo’s Caddy out at the curb. What’s it doing there?”

Handsome stepped inside and offered a cool, white, Pepsodent smile. “The car’s not doin’ anything. It’s just sittin’ there.”

I glared at him before I turned back to Louie. “What’s Carlo’s Cadillac doing at the curb?”

“It’s not his car anymore,” Handsome volunteered again, swaggering his way forward and planting himself in front of me. Louie backed off.

“That so?” I said, eyeballing him. I felt my muscles tighten.

“It belongs to Louie here. A gift from Mr. Santini.”

“A *gift*?”

“That’s right. Found it in an alley. Gave it to Louie here.”

I looked past him at Louie. “You actually *driving* that car, Louie? On the *streets*?”

“Sure,” he answered, but his voice was suddenly small and tinny.

Handsome moved to intimidation distance. Our noses almost touched. “Time to move on, friend,” he growled.

My gaze hardened. “This is *my* neighborhood, friend. Maybe you’re the one oughta move on.”

“Rocco!” The booming voice belonged to the Carlo look-alike. Handsome paused only a moment before turning to go, making sure he bumped me hard with his shoulder as he turned. While he concentrated on that, I slid my foot quietly ahead of him. He stumbled into a table, bounced back up, red-faced, and threw a poorly aimed punch. I blocked it and returned an uppercut that caught him flush on the jaw. He hit the table again, then rolled off onto the bare wooden floor. He didn’t get up.

I heard heavy footsteps behind me. As I spun around, I drew my .38 from its holster under my right arm. The Carlo look-alike’s face stopped about six inches from the barrel. “That wall behind you could use a little color,” I said.

He stepped back slowly, his vengeful, see-you-later smile a match for my own. I took a step back, too, just for insurance, keeping weasel-faced Louie at the edge of my vision. “C’mere, Louie,” I said without looking at him.

“Christ, Eddie.”

My .38 was still pointed at the big guy as I took another step toward the door. “Outside, Louie. *Now.*” I propped the door with my

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shoulder and let him pass, then pulled it closed behind us. We were on the sidewalk, where the passers-by were trying unsuccessfully to pretend there was no artillery in my left hand. “The big guy,” I said to Louie. “What’s his name?”

“Tomaso.”

“And the sleeper on the floor, he’s Rocco?”

“Yeah. *Christ*, Eddie.”

“And the pale, thin one with the scar?”

“Don’t know him.”

“I got a gun here, Louie. Remember?”

“Name’s Jack. Or Mack. I don’t *know* him, Eddie. *Christ!*”

I slid the .38 back into its holster. Inside, Tomaso didn’t move. He seemed content to wait for another time and place. The tall, thin hood from the *bocce* court hadn’t moved, either, but he was watching me with an eerie detachment. Sick, cold, vacant eyes. To break away from his gaze, I fixed on Louie again. “You want a real good tip, Louie? Don’t go driving that big white Caddy while Carlo’s still breathing.”

“But Mr. Santini, he gave it to me.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ll live to keep it. Think a minute. Santini wants to find Carlo, right? So, he gets Carlo’s car.”

Louie offered a blank look.

“And then he gives it to you.”

“So?”

“So, you remember that young punk who took Carlo’s Caddy for a joyride coupla years back? Remember where the cops found him?”

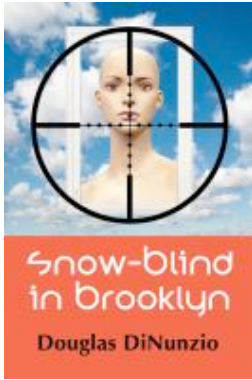
“Three different places.”

“Right. Now *you’re* joyriding the Caddy. You’re the tethered goat, Louie. When Carlo comes outa hiding to get you, Santini figures to get *him*. And your new pals won’t shed a tear when you catch the big bullet.”

Louie cast a troubled look at Tomaso. A shudder of fear passed through him, as if my warning had just gained some weight. “Listen to what I’m saying, Louie. Leave it at the curb.”

“But it’s *mine* now,” sputtered Louie, eyes suddenly fierce. “Ain’t nobody gonna take it away from me!” For a moment, he looked like he might cry. He even offered a little-boy-hurt look for effect. His posture was as rigid as steel, his small mind shut tight.

I could’ve warned him again, but he’d already wasted enough of my time.



When Eddie Lombardi saves hit man Carlo Cattalanotte from an assassin's bullet, he finds big trouble. Apparently, Carlo has stolen a Mafia kingpin's entire inventory of cocaine. Eddie couldn't care less what happens to Carlo but, when the hit man's sainted mother implores Eddie to find and protect her little bambino, Eddie is hooked. Worse still, somebody is murdering Carlo's ex-girlfriends, and leaving his grisly calling card: bullets, point-blank, through the eyes.

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