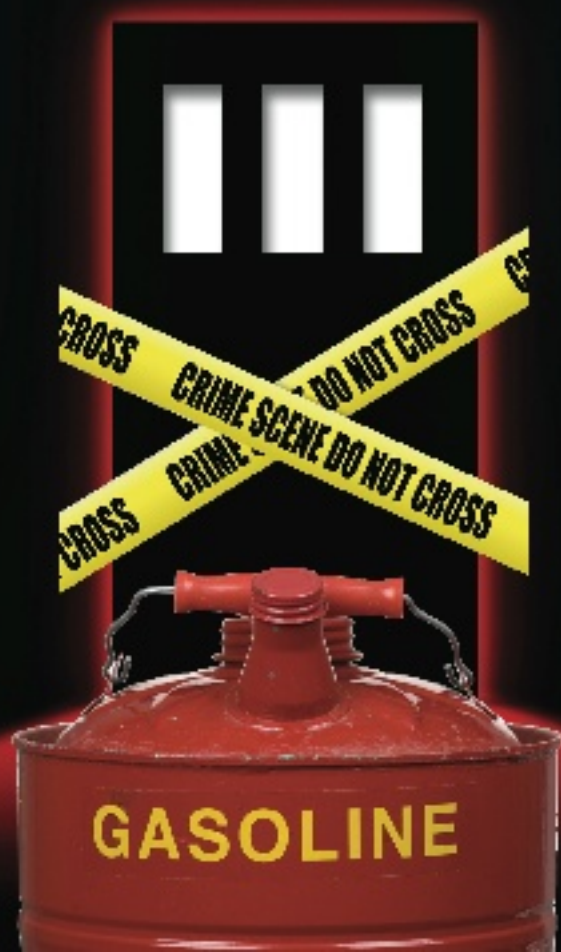
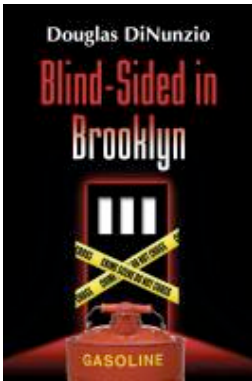


Douglas DiNunzio

Blind-Sided in Brooklyn





When Eddie Lombardi's friend Watusi is gunned down in an alley on Manhattan's West Side, Eddie vows revenge. His efforts are hampered, however, when the local police precinct shows no interest in finding the man. In addition, a sinister figure from Eddie's past has begun stalking him. Captain DeMassio of the NYPD isn't taking that case seriously either. Somehow, Eddie must solve both cases, either of which could make his wife a widow.

Blind-Sided in Brooklyn: An Eddie Lombardi Mystery

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Watusi was down. I heard him grunt as the two slugs hit him high in the chest. He lunged forward, fighting the impact of the bullets, fighting to stay upright. He staggered a few steps further, and then he toppled to the ground.

We were in a trash-filled empty lot behind a row of brick tenements on West 84th Street in Manhattan. We'd been pursuing three members of a Puerto Rican gang who'd been harassing our fellow bill collectors in the neighborhood. After a healthy foot race covering three blocks or more, partly on sidewalks, partly in alleys, partly in lots like this one, we figured that we'd trapped them in a dead end behind one of the buildings. We'd been closing in, almost casually, expecting them to have switchblade knives, an attitude, and maybe a zip gun or two. We hadn't expected a revolver. Or the fact that they'd lured us there so they could use it. A convenient door had opened at the end of that "dead end", and they were gone.

I reached Watusi in an instant, almost catching him as he fell. His eyes were glassy; he made no sound. There were people collected on the fire escapes on both sides of the empty lot. They looked scornfully down upon us, as if we were part of the uncollected trash.

"Call the police!" I shouted. I heard laughter and catcalls in return. "Call for an ambulance!" I shouted again. I heard someone shout back, not to us, but to the others looking down. "Bernardo shot a Nigger!" was what he said, what a boy of ten or eleven had said, and a raucous cheer rose up from the fire escapes. Debris

began raining down: empty bottles and cans, all manner of garbage and household trash. I covered Watusi's huge frame as best I could, trying to protect my head with my right arm while the other reached for the .38 in the holster under it. I fired six rounds into the air. I wanted to fire at the sons of bitches on the fire escapes, wanted to pick them off like those little metal ducks at the penny arcade; but I fired into the air. Then I reloaded and fired again. After I'd done that two more times, a police black-and-white finally arrived, and a few minutes later, an ambulance.

The ambulance took us to Harlem Center Hospital on Lenox Avenue. There were other hospitals closer, but they were "white" hospitals, places that might not welcome a colored man in any condition and under any circumstances. Had he been conscious, Watusi might have made his own objections to such a choice. Caucasians were not among his favorite people.

There was a pay telephone in the waiting area outside the emergency room at Harlem Center, so I tried calling Watusi's daughter, Desiree, who was also my godchild. She lived in the East Village, one of the few places in New York City outside of the traditional enclaves that would tolerate her color. Much to her father's vexation, she was living in sin with a musician of mixed parentage, neither of which was remotely African. When I got no answer at their apartment just off St. Mark's Place, I tried Martha Graham's dance school on East 63rd Street, where Desiree was a promising student.

"Your father's been shot," I said, and I told her where he was.

She arrived about twenty-five minutes later. She was agitated, and she'd been crying, but at twenty she

was as strikingly beautiful as her late mother Alma had been. And even in her fear and panic, her dancer's strides were long and elegant.

"How is he?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

Her boyfriend Jerry arrived another twenty-five minutes after that. He was rail-thin, hawk-nosed, balding early in his mid-twenties, but with a vigorous light-brown goatee. Wire-rim glasses completed the bohemian image. We waited in silence in the bright green corridor. A steady stream of nurses, interns, and orderlies went in and out of the emergency room, but no one stopped en route, and no one spoke a word to us. I tried to explain to Desiree about the shooting, but it didn't help.

"I've been telling him he's too old for this. He's forty-four years old, Eddie."

"I know."

"He just won't give it up."

Neither, of course, would I. I was forty myself, and in the shamus business, unofficially at least, since I was nineteen. I wasn't "Fast Eddie" anymore, hadn't been in years. I had arthritis in my right leg, from shrapnel wounds received behind enemy lines on D-Day. I was missing four frostbitten toes, lost at the aide station at Bastogne in '44. I had the long scar of a knife wound below my right shoulder from my rookie year of '39 that still bothered me whenever I lifted my arm high enough, and I still limped from a bullet fragment that had caught me in my left heel on a case back in the winter of '48-'49. In the course of twenty years plus, I'd had multiple concussions, abrasions, contusions, and several broken ribs. I'd barely survived death by fire, drowning, explosions, and my car hitting a tree on Long

Island at sixty miles an hour. I couldn't count the number of times that a bullet had almost put an end to my life. And, for reasons that continued to escape me, I was still in the business. Still a shamus, and lately, a shamus on the edge.

With a wife and two young children.

A doctor finally emerged from the emergency room. He was white, sandy-haired, early-thirties, and tall, like a basketball player. He looked past me and past Desiree's boyfriend, scanning the corridor earnestly until he saw Desiree coming out of the ladies' room. He introduced himself to her, spoke with a grim expression, and she listened. Jerry and I walked over to where they were standing.

"I don't know," was his answer to a question she'd just asked but we'd missed. But then he added, "We won't know for a while. Would you be able to give blood? He's lost a lot."

A nurse arrived to ask Desiree for her type, and a moment later they were off to a room where she could give blood. The doctor returned to duty in the emergency room. I was sitting on a long wooden bench with Jerry, staring at the green wall across from us. White as we both were, I felt somewhat uncomfortable being next to him. Probably because I knew that Watusi was similarly uncomfortable with his romantic attachment to Desiree, not to mention their living arrangements. He was also something of a beatnik, and I couldn't much relate to that. Neither of us spoke a word until Desiree came back and sat next to us.

"Did you learn anything more?" I asked.

She shook her head. The tears started again, and she walked the corridor for a while, Jerry a few steps in her wake. There was a *Saturday Evening Post* on the

bench next to me. Norman Rockwell cover. I took it, opened it, read the advertisements, and put it down again. The long hours passed.

It was after midnight when the doctor showed his haggard face again outside the emergency room. As before, he ignored Jerry and me and spoke only to Desiree. Then he left. There in the corridor, she looked lost. Little-girl lost. I wandered over.

"Any change in his condition?" I asked.

"No change," she answered, her dark eyes filling with tears. "He's just barely hanging on, or so the doctor says."

"I'm sorry. It's partly my fault. We could have done things differently. We could have played it safer."

"You're not to blame, Eddie. My father was just doing his job. He's always known the risks. I've known them, too. Year after year, ever since I was little. And now it's really, finally happened."

I tried to say something comforting, but she cut me off. "I can't lose him now, Eddie. I *can't*. I know I can make him warm up to Jerry, but I'll need time. I can't lose him. I can't. Not now, not like this."

I had a few lame, encouraging words that needed to come out, but wouldn't. How many times had I promised the people I loved that everything would turn out all right, but hadn't? How many times had I promised myself that the dangers Watusi and I faced every day could be kept safely in check? Now I saw the tears welling deep in my godchild's eyes, just as I was holding back my own. But I couldn't reassure her of anything, couldn't promise her anything. So I kept silent.

I kept a vigil in the corridor outside the emergency room while Desiree and Jerry took a fresh air break

outside. In any tragedy, you reach a point where a benevolent, numbing calm sets in; but I wasn't lucky that way, and so I was still trying to untangle the Gordian knots in my stomach when the very strangest part about this very strange and sad business began to penetrate my dense Italian skull: there had been no police asking questions at the hospital. No police from the 20th Precinct. No police at all.

5

I called Desiree first thing Saturday, explained that I wouldn't be available until that evening, and asked her to call if there was any change in her father's condition. Then I went to my sister Letty's house, only a couple of blocks from my own. As usual, Letty gave me a peevish look as I walked in.

"There's somethin' funny goin' on, Eddie," said her fat husband Dino when he joined her in the hall. There had been times -- very few times -- when I'd tried to find something likable about Dino, something that would override the monumental contempt I had for him. But it was a futile pursuit, and I was long past trying to find any redeemable features in his oafish disposition.

"There's always something funny going on with this family," I answered, scowling for effect. "Especially with you in it."

"No. You don't understand."

"Explain it to me, then, *paisano*." I was tempted to give him the evil eye, but I just walked through the entry hall, found his favorite stuffed armchair in the living room, and commandeered it.

"Somebody got into our trashcans and dumped garbage all over Letty's vegetable garden," he explained.

"Vandals," I answered. "Teenage punks. Incurrigibles." I was about to mention Gino's, Arnie's, and Liam's recent encounters with same, but fat Dino cut me off.

"Over at Maggie's, somebody splashed red paint all over the front of the house."

"And?" I said, as Letty entered the room and hovered like a scavenger bird. "And?"

"And that's not all," she said, grim-faced. "Somebody killed Fran's old cat and nailed it to a tree. Sick son of a bitch, excuse my French."

"Did you call the cops?"

"And what would *they* do?" The harsh voice was Fran's. She was standing just behind Letty, and Maggie was just behind her. They were giving me near-Sicilian looks, for which they had a patent.

"What cops *usually* do," I answered, a bit peeved now myself. "If there's a new bunch of hoods or bad-asses in the neighborhood, the cops ought to know about it."

"But it's not *in* the neighborhood, Eddie," argued Fran, even more peeved. "It's not *about* the neighborhood. It's about us. *Us*."

That stood me up. For a moment, I just stared at them. Finally, Dino said, "She's right. Just us. Three different streets, three different houses. *Our* houses. Nobody else we know around here got so much as a busted window."

"Nobody?"

"Somebody's singled us out, Eddie. Just our three families."

"Uh oh," I said, as a new and not very pleasant thought crossed my mind.

"You know something about this?" asked Joe. He was frowning in the hallway behind Dino.

"I might," I said. I explained about Gino, Arnie, and Liam. Those three circles -- my *goombahs*, my family, and my operatives -- did not intersect. Still, the room was dead silent when I finished.

"Is this some kind of sick joke, Eddie?" asked Joe, his look darkening. "You know maybe who's doing this? And why?"

I didn't have an answer, but the nature of my work included certain close associations, both friendly and unfriendly, with people as alien to my relations and their sheltered world as beings from another planet. Some of those close associations held grudges. Some of those acted on said grudges. Taken individually, acts of vandalism and urban sabotage could be dismissed as the work of street gangs and punks. But specialized and directed, as these acts seemed to be, that was something else.

"Well, Eddie?" said Dino.

"Where are your kids?" I asked, and Letty gasped. Before anyone could answer, I said, "Maybe you should call them in. Just to be on the safe side."

"*Call them in?* They're friggin' teenagers, Eddie," Dino complained. "They're all over the place."

Ignoring Dino, I walked past them all toward the front door, turned, and said. "Let's not worry just yet. I'll make some phone calls. In the meantime, Maggie and Fran, maybe you should go to your own houses and stay there. At least until you hear from me."

More silence. It was clear that I'd spooked them, but I wasn't sure how to quell the rising panic that I felt all around me. A panic that I'd fueled with my own sense of disquiet.

Joe and Dino moved protectively beside Letty and Fran. I looked at Maggie, who was standing like an orphan by the front door. "Where's Romeo?" I asked. Romeo was Maggie's husband.

"Out back, at the barbecue grille."

I eyeballed the two men. "I've never asked you this before, but do you both own a gun?"

They nodded.

"Do you know how to use one?"

"We know how," said Joe.

"And Romeo?"

Maggie said, "He knows."

"Good. Now, let me work on this. Call in your kids. I don't care where they are or how long it takes you to find them. Just do it. In the meantime, watch the street, and be ready to call me, or the cops, if anything or anybody looks remotely threatening. There's no need to get trigger-happy, but stay alert and keep the guns handy. After I've made some calls, I'll tell you what we do next. This might be a whole lot of nothing, but it doesn't hurt to make sure. Understood?"

They understood.

I started with the rest of the *goombahs*. Tony was on his shift with the Yellow Cab Company, but his wife Millie answered. Yes, someone had set a fire behind their garage that Tony had managed to put out without help from the fire department. Sal reported a pair of broken windows. Frankie didn't answer his phone, but when I called Angelo, he had a similar tale to tell. So it wasn't punks or vandals. It was somebody from my peculiar universe with a serious score to settle, somebody who was after me and nobody else. And all this adolescent foreplay was meant to enhance the threat, teasingly at first, but with a message that was clear and serious enough: *I'm coming to get you, Lombardi*.

Through everybody that you care about.

My next call was to Nick DeMassio at the Bath Avenue precinct station. Nick was the precinct captain there, and a sometime old friend of sorts. Or as close to being a sometime old friend as any cop and a private dick can be. I explained, calmly, and he listened.

"All right, Eddie," he asked when I was through. "Got any idea who might want to put a scare into you?"

"I have some enemies," I said.

"No foolin'."

"If you mean, do I suspect somebody in particular, the answer's no."

"Could be anybody with a hard-on for you, then."

"Plenty of those," I said.

"Includin' half the police force, if my memory serves me right."

"If I thought it was a cop, would I be calling you, Nick?"

He paused for a moment. "You remember that case back in '52, the one with that machine gun nut? What was his name? Green? Mr. G? Remember those two cops on the case? What were their names?"

"Bellows and Stranger."

"Talk about a hard-on. Didn't they both threaten to kill you? In front of witnesses?"

"Yeah. So?"

"So, could be one o' them. I could check up on 'em, see if they're still with the NYPD."

"I need protection for my family *now*, Nick."

"Sure, sure. I'll see that you get some help. Maybe an off-duty cop to come check on everybody."

"I need an *on*-duty cop, Nick," I growled. "And I need three of them. Full time."

I could picture DeMassio's body snapping forward in his chair, matching the tone of his reply. "Whoa! Hold

on, now. You expect me to hand over three men to you just like that?"

"That's right, Nick."

"*Three men?*"

"Three exactly."

"Jesus Christ, Eddie! I've got a *stack* of open cases. I can't spare anybody to babysit your kid sisters and their families when the only provocation you're givin' me is a garage fire, red paint, a dead cat, and some flamin' dog shit on the porch."

I was ready to respond to that. With hostility. But then I remembered something I'd said once myself about being a babysitter. When I'd first met Laura, she'd asked me to look out for her brother Johnny when he was in trouble with gamblers. I'd told her that it wasn't one of my better skills. It wasn't one of Nick DeMassio's skills, either. And, in his way, DeMassio was right. There was nothing official he could do in the present circumstance. Not until something a lot more serious happened, at which point it would be too late to think about anything but regret.

I couldn't let this little spook show get that far.

DeMassio waited through the silence that followed. Then he said, almost imploringly, "Give me somethin' more, Eddie, and maybe I can act on it."

I'd already lost the argument, but I felt the need to push. "You're telling me this isn't enough? Is that what you're telling me?"

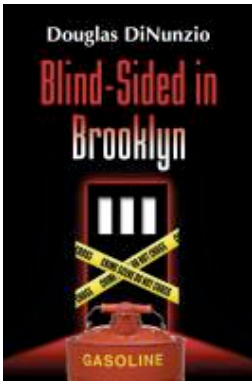
"That's what I'm tellin' you, Eddie."

"Sure, Nick. You need something more. Right. Okay. How *much* more before you move your fat official ass?"

"Listen, Eddie..."

"Later, Nick," I said, and I hung up.

I called Arnie and Liam right away. They were both targets themselves, based on what they'd told me; but at least they knew how to handle themselves in tight spots. Gino and the *goombahs* might also be in harm's way, but there were already too many bases to cover. Until I could get a better handle on things, the *goombahs* were on their own. Liam and Arnie agreed to keep themselves available, while I waited for that next big shoe to fall.



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