

Brooklyn private detective Eddie Lombardi has a weird new case, and it'll wear him out, if it doesn't kill him first. Because when a Mafia don hires you for a very special job, you'd better be on your toes.

Under the Gun in Brooklyn

An Eddie Lombardi Mystery

by Douglas DiNunzio

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DOUGLAS DINUNZIO



**UNDER THE GUN
IN BROOKLYN**

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I should never have gone out that morning. First, the weather was vile. It was April, mid-April if you want to know, but outside my new house on 16th Avenue in Bensonhurst, Borough of Brooklyn, it was sleeting. There were patches of black ice on the streets and sidewalks wherever the sleet had changed to freezing rain, and the temperature was hovering in the mid-thirties. A malevolent wind was blowing, too, one of those wild, apocalyptic winds that you hear about from time to time in church on Sunday mornings, especially if you've got an excitable parish priest telling you about it, and if you can hear the damn thing blowing like a hurricane against the stained glass. If you listen to our parish priest, Father Giacomo, long enough, he'll convince you that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are double-parked in a hearse on New Utrecht Avenue, just waiting to crash the service.

In this kind of weather, or any kind, I would've chanced taking the car, due to the fact that my *goombah* Gino's supermarket was several long blocks away and my delicate Eye-talian feet were missing four toes thanks to frostbite in the Battle of the Bulge. But the car was in the shop -- again -- and so I was on foot in this freezing downpour, without an umbrella or a prayer. Not that either would have helped much.

Except for the weather, all this unpleasantness was my wife Laura's doing. She'd made me trade away my reliable Chevy for a Chrysler station wagon that wouldn't start. The car didn't need repair, just a priest to say the Last Rites over it after the exorcisms had failed. Laura's argument had been that we were a growing family and therefore needed what was politely known as a "family" car. Not to mention that her younger brother Johnny Temafonte assembled Chryslers in Detroit. And so I was walking to the supermarket in the freezing rain and cyclonic wind for nothing more than a loaf of bread, a bottle of whole milk, and a tube of toothpaste. Wife's orders.

I passed a newsstand on the way and glanced at the headlines. Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut, had just orbited the earth. Adolf Eichmann was in the dock in Israel, on trial for war crimes. The usual local news was on the inside pages if I'd cared to look -- society scandals, crime, births and deaths -- but I wasn't much interested in the news these days, not even the sports news. The Brooklyn Dodgers were in Los Angeles now, and Ebbets Field had fallen under the wrecking ball only last year. With the Flock gone, there wasn't much to cheer about in the Borough of Brooklyn, even in the best weather.

I was still blocks away from Gino's market, fighting the stiff wind and trying to keep from slipping and breaking my Eye-talian neck on the black ice, when the big black Pontiac pulled up and two goons stepped out just ahead of me. Given my dark mood, and the weather, I wouldn't have stopped if the Virgin Mary in pink toreador pants and a wig hat had called out to me; but in Brooklyn, when guys like that block the sidewalk, you stop walking and give them some attention.

"Well, good morning," I said amiably. "Are you fellows on your way to church? You could pass for altar boys."

"Get in the car, Lombardi," one of them said. They were lean and tall, and they wore slick black raincoats that went all the way down to their black shoe tops. Rainwater dripped off their black fedoras, which were pulled low over their eyes. If they had faces, I couldn't see them through the rain.

"And why should I do that?" I asked, which must have made them smile.

"Just get in the car," said the second goon. I eyeballed them for a moment, strictly out of habit, but they were not to be turned away. The one who'd spoken first slipped his hand into the deep pocket of his raincoat. Shamelessly, and somewhat carelessly, I grinned at him.

"Is that a .38 in there, or are you just happy to see me?" I said, ramping up the grin.

He pointed to the open back door of the Pontiac. I smiled again, less boldly, and took my place between him and his lethal twin on the back seat. The driver, a stocky, taciturn fellow, didn't turn around. It was a tight fit on that back seat, even for a full-sized Pontiac, and I could feel cold steel through wet fabric pushing hard against my kidneys. The hood on my left tapped the driver on his shoulder, and the big black Pontiac pulled away from the curb.

"Are we going somewhere?" I asked in my best deadpan.

"You'll find out," said the one on my right. He had a deeper voice, so I assumed he was in charge.

"Oh, it'll be a surprise then. I like surprises, don't you? Like those decoder rings in cereal boxes."

"A comedian," he said brusquely to the other. But they must have liked the joke, because the pressure of the two gun barrels against my kidneys eased a bit. I used that small but hopeful development to push the joke a bit further.

"Wherever we're going, would you fellows mind stopping at the market first? Got to pick up a few things for the wife."

Nobody answered.

"She'll be properly pissed if I don't pick them up. Seriously. Are you guys married? Not to *each other*, I mean. It's just that, if you were, you'd understand my situation a little better. Hell hath no fury like the little woman who..."

"You talk too much," said the goon on my left. "Why don't you just shut up?"

"No, seriously," I said. "I've got some important shopping to do, and you fellows are keeping me from it."

"Are we gonna have to keep listenin' to this guy?" said the goon on my left. The driver kept silent.

"Just shut up till we get there, Lombardi," said the other goon.

"Get where?"

"You'll see."

"I'll see, right. You said that already, didn't you? So, who do you fine fellows work for?"

"The boss."

“Right. Of course. Dumb question.”

“Can you maybe shut up now?”

I pointed out the window. “There’s the market,” I said. “Pull over. Only take a minute. Three little items, that’s all.”

Again, nobody answered, the barrels of the .38s dug into my kidneys again, and we drove on.

I took a moment to try to remember the last time I’d been taken for a ride by hoods like these. It was back in ’49. My not-so-gentle kidnappers were a pair of no-necks I called Superman and Calamari Breath for reasons that aren’t worth the time or effort it would take to explain. They belonged to a *capo* named Alberto Scarpetti. Alberto was having some trouble with the District Attorney’s Office and was hoping I’d find a way to get him out of it. He eventually got to ride the Sparky up in Sing Sing, which should give you some idea of how much help I was to him. No, it wouldn’t be Alberto Scarpetti who’d be hosting whatever little soiree these two hoods were planning for me, but he was of the same ilk.

I paid some attention now to which direction we were driving. We were headed south along New Utrecht Avenue, which could mean any number of familiar places: Gravesend, Coney Island, Sheepshead Bay, Gerritsen Beach, Floyd Bennett Field. And if you traveled further east from there, along Shore Parkway, there was Canarsie, East New York, Ozone Park, and Howard Beach. I was hoping our destination wasn’t going to be Floyd Bennett Field, because that’s where the Mob was rumored to dispose of its most undesirable undesirables. There were enough wetlands, bogs, and tidal swamps around Floyd Bennett Field to hide a regiment of decomposing stiffs. If you believed the rumors, there were almost as many graves there, albeit unmarked, as in Green-Wood Cemetery, where many of Brooklyn’s most famous swells and not-so-swells were planted.

So I asked, “Okay. Where *are* we going, and who *is* your boss?” When I received the same cold silence, I added, “My wife is really going to be pissed when I don’t come home with the groceries, but then I already told you that.”

"That's all taken care of," said the hood on my left.

"*Taken care of?*"

"That's right."

"So, does that mean *you're* going to buy the groceries?" I asked, almost seriously.

"You know what we mean," said the goon on my right.

"No, I *don't*," I said. "That's why I'm asking the question. And what's my wife got to do with this, whatever *this* is? What the hell has *she* done?"

Neither goon answered. That made me nervous.

"Does this have anything to do with my business? Because if it does, my wife is my office secretary, and that's all. I don't tell her anything that she doesn't need to know about anything or anybody, okay?" It was a lie, but a believable one, or so I hoped.

"Lighten up, Lombardi," said the hood on my left, just as the hood on my right shifted his weight ever so slightly and the heft of his handgun pressed that much harder into my side.

"Well, you can just leave my wife out of this," I continued, feeling a little of the *agita* now. "It's bad enough I'm going to catch hell from her about the groceries. You leave her out of it, *capisce?*" It was weak, ill-timed bravado at best, and I caught laughter from both goons, so I decided to shut up again.

I felt some relief when we passed Floyd Bennett Field, still moving due east, but then a new thought struck me. Maybe the cemetery at Floyd Bennett was already filled, and they were going to dump my bullet-riddled Eye-talian body somewhere else. I remembered a case back in '55 when a duck pond out on Long Island had served that grim purpose. But that Potter's Field of nameless dead had been shut down for good, thanks to me, my hotheaded partner Arnie Pulaski, and several squads of New York's Finest. The thought was comforting, but only for a moment. Maybe there was another duck pond out there somewhere, just waiting for me. Maybe I was going to be its very first tenant. But for doing exactly what?

We skirted north of Jamaica Bay and continued east into Long Island. When we kept going in that direction on the Southern State Parkway, far from the comforting confines of Kings County, I felt real panic for the first time. The goon on my left took notice of my concern and smiled, almost benevolently.

"Still haven't figured it out, have you, Lombardi? Where you're goin', who you're gonna see."

"You might say that," I answered. I glanced past him out the window. It was sleeting again, harder. The big Pontiac moved almost snake-like along the flooded parkway, floating on the slick surface, just short of hydroplaning.

"I told you not to sweat it," said the goon again. "Told you to lighten up, didn't I?"

"You did, yes," I said. "You might also tell your driver to slow down, if you don't mind. I've got a wife and kids, as you know. She won't be a merry widow if your *cafone* of a driver skids this loose cannon of a car into a tree."

"Relax," said the other hood. "You're too tense. It ain't healthy to be so tense."

"Maybe I've got a good reason," I said. I didn't want to give them ideas, but I wanted answers instead of evasion.

"Well, if you really gotta know, I suppose we can tell you. We're goin' to the Jones Beach Hotel out in Wantaugh. The boss, he's booked a room there. He wants to talk to you, that's all."

"In Wantaugh? In this weather?"

"His idea, Lombardi. Like I said. He just wants to talk to you about somethin', that's all. Don't sweat it."

"Oh, I see. That's just swell. And for the last time, who exactly *is* your boss?"

"Mr. Santini."

I turned to look at the goon on my right. His large, toothy smile had grown larger. "Surprised, Lombardi?" he said.

For a while, I sat silently between the two hoods, pondering the imponderable and deciding what to say in my final prayers. Jimmy Santini was the biggest mob boss in Brooklyn, and had been for

fifteen years or more. He was a bona fide stone killer. I hadn't had any serious contact with him since the Scarpetti business back in '49 and an earlier encounter in '47, and I didn't want to have any serious contact with him now. He lived in Gravesend, on a large, gated estate protected by a small army of goons like these two, plus guard dogs and an electrified fence. What the hell was he doing meeting a shamus in a tourist hotel way out on Long Island?

"I still don't get it," I said.

"Too bad," said the goon on my right. "But that's where we're goin'."

"What does Santini want with me?" I asked. "I barely know the guy."

"Mr. Santini," said the goon on my right.

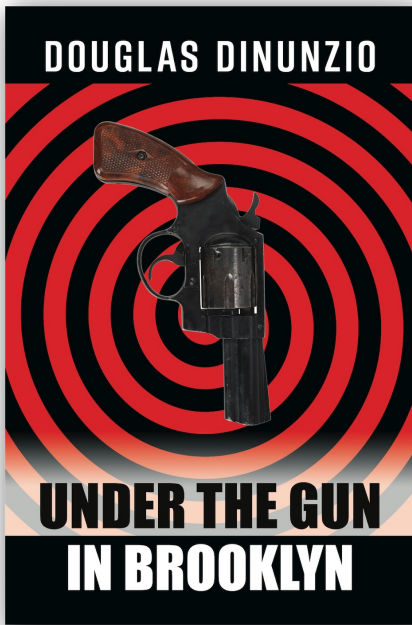
"Just take it easy," said the goon on my left. "Honest to God, nothin's gonna happen."

"Nothin' at all."

"Oh yeah? Well..."

"Jesus Christ! Cut the shit, Lombardi! Nothin' bad's gonna happen to ya, unless ya keep flappin' your goddamn gums!" It was the driver's voice that I heard this time. I would've had a snappy comeback, but I kept silent because it was a voice that I recognized, even after fourteen years.

The voice of Mr. James Santini, mobster.



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