



# stone-cold in brooklyn

**Douglas DiNunzio**



*When private eye Eddie Lombardi discovers the body of a young pianist in an abandoned Brooklyn slum, he vows to find the person who murdered her. But the more he investigates, the more discrepancies he finds between her family's image of her and who she really was. To complicate matters, a vicious drug dealer that Eddie and Watusi are after for other reasons keeps getting right in the middle of things.*

# Stone-Cold in Brooklyn

by Douglas DiNunzio

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# **Stone-Cold in Brooklyn**

**An Eddie Lombardi Mystery**

**Douglas DiNunzio**

*Stone-Cold in Brooklyn*

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First Edition

*Douglas DiNunzio*

For Stewart Stern,  
with gratitude and affection

*Stone-Cold in Brooklyn*

There is no good on earth, and sin is but a name. Come, Devil, for  
to thee is this world given.

-- Nathaniel Hawthorne  
"Young Goodman Brown"

# 1

No Christmas lights.

Christmas Eve, but no Christmas lights anywhere along this sorry excuse for a street. Everywhere else in the Borough of Brooklyn, houses were duly decorated for the season, including my own brown stucco two-story on 16th Avenue in Bensonhurst: colored lights blinking along the eaves, Nativity scene in the yard, plastic Santa on the door, plastic reindeer on the roof.

But not here.

*Here* was a deserted side street in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Brooklyn, U.S.A., to be sure, but the decrepit block of buildings that Watusi and I had staked out for the evening looked more like the bombed-out ruins I'd seen in Belgium and France during the war. A dead place, a place where Christmas couldn't possibly happen. The buildings were old brownstone row houses with nearly identical facades. Sixty or seventy years ago, when they were built, when there was purpose and pride in this neighborhood, Christmas used to come here. Before ten years of slumlording and rent control had accelerated the process of decay, there was still hope here.

Not now. Not anymore.

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There were nine houses in the row. The two houses at the far end of the block were burned hollow. A few of the others still had actual doors and an unbroken window or two, but for the most part, only thin sheets of unpainted plywood kept out the elements. The slumlords responsible for these ruins were off making a sullied buck somewhere else now, their pockets bulging with insurance money from fires they'd started themselves. The regular tenants had fled as well, to some other slum. There was no reason to stay. The city had shut off the power, and the ruined interiors had been picked clean of water pipes, kitchen and bathroom fixtures, copper wire, and whatever else the junk man was buying by the pound. Broken water lines cascaded small but steady streams off the stone stoops and onto the cracked sidewalk, where they froze into treacherous, iron-hued skating rinks.

The third house from this end of the block was the one Watusi and I were watching. Only one window still had glass in it. The front door was a thin sheet of plywood bearing a faded, handwritten "Condemned" sign. The door was wedged almost shut and frozen to the stoop. A rusting fire escape marred the brownstone facade, and there were large gaps in the roof that allowed shafts of moonlight to illuminate the top floor.

Watusi had taken up his post behind a wooden fence on the far side of the building while I hunkered down in the front seat of my Chevy Bel Air. I was wearing a heavy winter coat, but it was still numbingly cold inside that car, colder still where Watusi was hiding. We'd been



here less than an hour, and I was already thinking about calling off the stakeout and going home.

Home for the holidays.

Our quarry was a young, colored drug dealer known as the Reaper. He'd made his reputation and most of his illicit profits right here in Bed-Stuy; but hubris, ambition, and bad judgment had tempted him to expand into an area of Harlem controlled by a crime lord known as the King of Africa. The King, whose enterprises included extortion, gambling, and prostitution, nonetheless despised drug dealers with all the self-righteousness of a man of the cloth. It was in the King's questionable service that Watusi and I labored on this frigid, depressing Christmas Eve, waiting grimly for the Reaper to appear.

I'd been trying to avoid this kind of work, but the bounty the King had offered was beyond generous, and I needed the money. My wife Laura was expecting our second child any day now, and the bill from the delivery room was certain to bankrupt me, assuming that Laura's damn-the-torpedoes style of Christmas shopping hadn't already accomplished that. Nor had this Christmas season been all that sympathetic to Lombardi Investigations. For reasons unfathomable, teenage runaways were staying home, husbands, wives, and business partners had all given up cheating, and absolutely nobody was skipping bail. Nobody *I* knew about, anyway.

It was the bounty money that was keeping me here, all right, freezing my sweet Italian ass in this Arctic cold. Catching the Reaper

and delivering him to the King of Africa wasn't going to be easy under the best of circumstances, and sixteen years of shamus work had taught me always to expect the worst. From all reports, our quarry was as vicious as a cornered wolverine and as sly as a mongoose. Add "depraved" to the list: the kind of subhuman trash who'd sell cocaine to a ten-year-old and lace it with strychnine for laughs. No, it wouldn't be easy jousting with the Reaper tonight, but I really did need that money.

I passed the time trying to think of a name for the baby. Masculine names were the only ones I was considering, because I was practically desperate to have a son. I wanted one so badly that I'd already bought him an American Flyer train set at Macy's. I loved my little Amanda dearly, but girls didn't play with trains, and I didn't care much for dolls or their tea parties. Eddie, Jr., had a nice ring, or I could name him after one of my long-time *goombahs* from the neighborhood: Gino, Frankie, Angelo, Tony, Sal. Or maybe John, after my father, who died delivering coal on a night very much like this when I was only fourteen.

I was still thinking up baby names when I saw someone approach from the far end of the block. He was of average height, Caucasian, wearing a fedora, a gray overcoat, and a long gray scarf that covered most of his face. There was a youthful buoyancy in his step, and some urgency. Not the Reaper, but I hunkered behind the steering wheel anyway, watching his pace slow as he approached the stakeout house. I hunkered lower when he stopped and made a quick, nervous recon of

the area, with special attention paid to my parked Chevy, the only car on the street. As he reached the steps, he slipped on the ice, fell hard, and picked himself up. I tried to see his face as he readjusted his scarf, but he'd already turned his back. Cautiously, he climbed the frozen steps, pulled on the stuck door until it was partly open, and disappeared inside.

Surprises can be anticipated on stakeout, even planned for, but I hadn't planned on this kind. Watusi and I were expecting only the Reaper on a visit to one of his caches. That's what Watusi's usually reliable informant had told us. The plan was to let the Reaper enter the building, wait sixty seconds, then signal Watusi with the car horn that I was closing the trap. Watusi, unarmed as usual, was to wait in ambush if the Reaper tried to exit by the rear fire escape, and I was there to get him if he backtracked. But now somebody else was inside the building, so I couldn't give the signal.

I tried to figure out who he might be. He was too clean to be a transient, and too mundanely dressed to be one of the Reaper's flashy underlings. He wasn't colored, either, and the Reaper was known to keep to his own kind, except for women. So who was this interfering s.o.b., and what was he doing out here in Bed-Stuy compromising our stakeout?

Another five minutes passed before the Reaper finally appeared. He was tall and lean, and he moved with a long, smooth, confident stride. He was light-skinned, what Watusi would call high yellow, and

he wore a pork pie hat and a full-length leather coat that bulged slightly on the left side from the hip to the knee. The left sleeve of the coat was empty. I didn't like the look of that. The Reaper was known to carry a knife, but not ordnance. Unless he'd been tipped. Unless something or somebody had put him on his guard.

If he'd gotten wise to us, he wasn't showing it. Paying no attention to my Chevy, he walked up the steps to the icy stoop like a nine-to-five Joe coming home for dinner, eased past the half-opened door, and stepped inside.

I counted to sixty, beeped the horn twice, pulled my loaded .38 revolver from the holster under my right arm, and followed.

There was more light inside than I'd expected, but I stopped in the first floor hall anyway to acclimate my eyes and to listen for him. I had a flashlight in my pocket, but I probably wouldn't need it. There was a full moon out, and between those big gaps in the roof and all those broken windows, I could easily navigate the ruined interior without fear of breaking my neck. Lines of sight were good, too, as most of the interior walls were gone. Scavengers had hacked them into jagged hip-walls, making this rabbit warren of cramped cubicles look almost like loft space.

I listened, but I couldn't hear anything. I had two quarries now, so I expected at least to hear their voices; conversation level if they'd been expecting each other, cursing, shouting, or worse if they hadn't. But I

didn't hear a thing. That bothered me almost as much as the bulge under the Reaper's coat.

As I reached the third floor, I heard a voice from halfway down the hall. It made a low, muffled, growling sound, and the words that followed sounded like "Stupid bitch." The Reaper was standing there, his back to me, something shiny in his gloved right hand. On the floor in front of him, propped against a hip wall, was a shadowy form that I figured was a body.

That was all the figuring I had time for. As he spun around, a short-barreled shotgun emerged from under his leather coat, and two loads of lethal buckshot sent me scrambling for cover.

I heard him reload at the end of the hall, gave some thought to moving forward, then checked myself and waited for him to exit by the window. I figured it was safe to follow when he climbed out onto the fire escape, but that was a mistake. The Molotov cocktail he'd just lit sailed past me as I left my cover, smashing on the wall about ten feet behind me, shooting flame and shards of hot glass in all directions. I stumbled toward a cubicle just ahead, past the body propped against the wall, and into the killing zone of the Reaper's shotgun; but he didn't pull the triggers. I reached the fire escape a cautious few moments later, my .38 at the ready, but he was gone.

As I ran back to put out the fire the first Molotov had started, I heard the report of a .45 and then a loud *whoosh* from behind the building. I ran to the window, past the body again, and peered out to

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see a wooden fence in flames. It was the same fence that Watusi had been hiding behind.

No heavy weapons on the Reaper, just a knife, Watusi's informant had said. The lying son of a bitch.

Watusi was beating out a patch of burning weeds with his coat when I reached him. The fence behind him was smoldering. His hair was singed. All six feet and seven inches of him glowered at me.

"Got away, huh?" I said.

"As you can see."

"You all right?"

"I'm no longer cold, if that matters."

"Your informant's fulla shit, Tooss."

"Misinformed, perhaps."

"Fatally, perhaps. Anyone else come out this way?"

"Else?"

I explained about the interloper, but Watusi hadn't seen anyone except the Reaper, and then only long enough to avoid being shot and set on fire.

"The King will not be pleased, Eddie."

"Think he'll give us a cash advance for a near miss?"

He glared at me.

"It's times like this when I think maybe you should carry a weapon," I said.

"It's times like this when I think I should be otherwise employed," he answered.

He started walking. I said, "Wait a minute," and he stopped and glared again.

"Our business here is surely concluded."

I looked back at the building. "Not quite."

There was still enough smoke rising out of the third floor windows to rate an alarm or two, but no one at the fire station several blocks away was showing any hurry to get here. "Let the damn things burn" was probably policy now for this entire block, and who could blame them? After the few minutes that it took to climb the fire escape, we reached the scorched third floor hallway coughing and wheezing. A body was still propped up in the middle of the hall. It had to be the young white man in the gray overcoat and scarf. Tough luck for him. Another drug deal gone wrong, another life taken by the grim Reaper. But what had the Reaper said?

Stupid bitch.

There wasn't enough light to make out the features of a face, so I took the flashlight from my coat pocket and shined it at the lifeless lump in front of me.

What I saw in that awful glow I never want to see again.

## 4

The address Laura had written down was on Montgomery Place in Park Slope. If you had the big bucks in Brooklyn, there were plenty of places you could call home: Bay Ridge, Flatbush, especially Albemarle Road and environs, most of Midwood, and Sea Gate at the western end of Coney Island. But if you had the big bucks *and* a pedigree, there were really only two suitable places: Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope. Brooklyn Heights had the picturesque views of the Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge, but Park Slope was just spitting distance from the Borough of Brooklyn's greatest natural treasure, Prospect Park.

No Italians lived on Montgomery Place, of course. Not unless they were direct descendents of King Victor Emmanuel or one of the Borgia popes. But it didn't bother me that I couldn't live here and walk my poodle, assuming I'd had a poodle, along this exclusive street. It was enough just to breathe in the thin, aristocratic air and admire the architecture. On Montgomery Place that was mostly in the Queen Anne style: pitched gable roofs, large chimneys, asymmetrical textured-brick facades, bay windows. The original thinking behind Queen Anne style, back in the 1880's, was to break up the visual monotony of row houses, or so Laura's architecture books had explained to her when she took a course at City College. The architects had stopped thinking that way by



the time that row of brownstones in Bed-Stuy was built. What a difference almost eighty years could make, or not make, in these two very different neighborhoods that had once been very much the same.

Mr. James Hollister lived in the third Queen Anne from the corner. It was four stories high. A short flight of stone steps led to a broad stoop and eight-foot-high double doors. There was a brass lion's head doorknocker on each, and a large, black wreath hung above each of the knockers. I knocked, then waited for someone to appear.

"My name is Edward Lombardi," I said when someone did. "I'm here to see Mr. James Hollister." The man who greeted me looked like the butler and acted accordingly. He half-smiled, making only the briefest eye contact before turning his glance away and stepping obsequiously aside. He was middle-aged, colored. He had Watusi's general build, on a smaller scale, and Watusi's jet-black skin. "Would you come this way, please?" he said with an accent that might have been Jamaican. He closed the door behind me and led the way inside.

The entrance hall was arched, with decorative plaster friezes and marble columns on either side. The tops of the columns were draped with black crepe bunting. I expected an ancestral painting or two on the walls, but there were only landscapes hung in heavy, ornate gilded frames. Laura could have told me what period they were from, but I didn't care. I already felt intensely uncomfortable in this place.

The butler made a right turn past the second set of columns, stopping just inside a large double parlor, where he directed me to wait.

It was quite a room: carved white marble fireplace across from the entrance, black horsehair sofa and wing chairs flanking it, area rugs with Oriental designs over a polished parquet floor. No paintings here, but a sizable collection of African art adorned the walls: carved wooden masks, leather shields, ornamental knives, and long, tapered spears. Most of the collection was in the back parlor. I counted fifty or so items on display, the sale of which could probably buy half a block of good-sized houses in my neighborhood. The front parlor, just as intimidating, looked like a small concert hall with a semi-circle of straight-backed chairs arranged around a Steinway grand piano. Beyond the piano was a red velvet window seat built into the recess formed by the large bay window that overlooked Montgomery Place.

I could've taken more time to examine the room, but when my eyes drifted to the mantle a few feet from where I was standing, they stopped. A framed 8x10 photograph of a young woman had been placed there, draped with more black crepe. Such a different face from the one I'd seen just a week ago in Bed-Stuy, but I knew it.

"Her name was Mary," said a deep male voice behind me. I turned and saw three people standing in the doorway. The man who'd spoken was middle-aged, tall, lean, full-bearded, with a hawk nose and fierce, menacing eyes. He wore a smoking jacket and corduroy slacks. The small, pale, brown-haired woman standing just behind him wore a plain black dress that was maybe a half-size too small. She looked nervous,

distracted. The teenage boy standing beside her just looked angry. He had his father's build, but all his other features seemed to be hers.

"She would have been nineteen next week," the man continued as he approached. The other two followed a few respectful steps behind, which was probably the protocol here. "I am James Hollister, Mary's father," he said, offering his hand. I took it, but there was something in the over-firmness of the grip and the steely arrogance of his manner that made me want to be somewhere else. "My wife Lydia," he said, half-turning, "and my son James, Junior." I nodded a hello, but neither of them noticed it. The boy was whispering to the butler, who'd just re-entered, and the wife was staring at a small liquor cart parked beside the entrance.

"Lydia," Hollister said, frowning. "Can't that wait? We have a visitor, as you can see."

She paused as if trying to process a difficult thought, and then her face flushed. Hollister nodded to the butler, who quickly wheeled the offending cart into the hall.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Lombardi?" Hollister said, offering the horsehair sofa. He gestured to his wife and son to sit also, but neither of them moved. The son added some defiance to his scowl and moved a step closer to his mother. Mr. James Hollister, Sr., was clearly in charge here, but he was not a popular monarch. I kept that in mind as he sat in the wing chair across from me and sized me up. When he seemed assured that I wouldn't leave grease stains or an offending odor on his

expensive furniture, he relaxed back into the depths of his chair. But only for a moment. "*Will you please sit down, Lydia,*" he said as if addressing a child. "You're embarrassing us in front of our guest."

"Father..."

"Your intervention has not been requested, James. Armand, see Mrs. Hollister to her chair and make sure she doesn't fall out of it."

The butler stepped forward, offered his arm, and the woman reluctantly took it. When she finally sat down, she glanced in my direction, smiled timidly, then stared with blank, unwavering eyes at the opposite wall. Hollister, satisfied that everything was to his liking, turned his attention back to me.

"As I was saying, Mr. Lombardi, our daughter Mary would have been nineteen next week. That photograph was taken when she was almost eighteen. She disappeared about nine months ago."

"Nine months exactly," blurted Mrs. Hollister, looking straight at me. "Nine months to the day from the time we lost her to the time her body was found. Her death was a judgment on us. *A judgment.*"

Hollister, only mildly distracted by the interruption, continued. "And *you* found her, Mr. Lombardi, for which we are most grateful. You found her after the police had failed miserably for nine long months. I would have called you sooner to thank you for finding our Mary, but it was barely two days ago that I identified her body at the morgue."

"The detectives in Missing Persons have a pretty hefty case load, Mr. Hollister. I'm sure they tried their best to find her. I only did by accident."

"Would you tell us how, please?"

I couldn't tell him the truth, so I rehashed the story I'd given Tom Hanratty and Lieutenant Cochrane. Hollister pondered it in silence while I considered what his wife had said: nine months to the day from Mary's disappearance to her death. Nine months: the time it takes for a new human being to enter this world.

"Perhaps if I'd hired *you* to find my daughter, she would still be alive, Mr. Lombardi. But that's just so much wishful thinking at this stage, is it not?"

I knew what he was leading up to, but my feelings were mixed, my emotions in turmoil. I needed to lift the burden I was carrying, but I didn't like Mr. James Hollister, and I would probably like him less as an employer. I thought he might try to beat around the bush a little more, but that wasn't his style.

"What is your standard fee, Mr. Lombardi?"

Mrs. Hollister jumped up from her chair, arms flailing, like a broken-winged bird or a marionette. "*James! For God's sake!*"

He dismissed her with a quick, hard glance, then asked me again.

"Thirty-five dollars per day," I answered, "plus the usual expenses."

"Which are?"

"Generally, when the work is local, just gas and the mileage on my car."

"Like a cab driver."

"I suppose. If the work takes me far enough outside the Five Boroughs, I add on any hotels I stay at, places where I eat. When the work is done, I present the receipts to my client."

"I'll pay you double..."

*"James!"*

"Seventy dollars a day, plus your expenses, to find the person who murdered my daughter."

*"Damn you! Do you have to throw money at everything?"* she shouted with a shrill suddenness that stood up the hairs on my neck. She stormed out of the room without waiting for a reaction, and the boy, scowling harder, turned and followed her.

Hollister stood up, motioned to Armand that he should wait in the hall, then leaned heavily against the marble fireplace. He picked up the photograph of his daughter and stared at it for such a long time that I stood up as well. It would've been the perfect time to make my apologies and leave, but that wasn't something I could do.

"My family is somewhat distressed, as you can see, Mr. Lombardi. My wife especially thinks that we should grieve, accept the loss of our daughter, and get on with our lives. But the loss is not merely our own. The world has lost her as well; specifically, the world of music. Mary studied for years to be a concert pianist. She was truly a prodigy; her

talent was enormous. Now that talent is gone. Do you see the piano by the window? She gave her first recital there, when she was six years old. Chopin, I believe she played. At the age of fifteen, she was performing at a professional level. Mary's life and her career in music were cut short by murder. I demand justice for my daughter, Mr. Lombardi, and swift punishment for her killer. Are you of the same mind?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Fine," he said with a smile of satisfaction. "Then it's settled."

I nodded, tried to smile back, but my insides were churning, and a chill passed through me as though I'd been bartering with Satan. Still, I said, "I can have a contract ready for you to sign in the morning."

He offered a crimped, disapproving look. "Come now, Mr. Lombardi. For arrangements as personal as these, is a simple gentleman's handshake not adequate?"

I looked around for Armand, for anybody who could see me to the door. "A gentleman's handshake would be just fine, Mr. Hollister, but I have to account for myself with the Internal Revenue Service once a year."

He stiffened; his look grew still colder. "Very well, then, a formal contract, if you insist. But I wish you to begin immediately, tonight."

Once again, I knew where he was headed, and I didn't want to go there: the petty tyrant establishing dominion over his latest underling. I

gave the look right back to him. "No offense, Mr. Hollister, but I think we both need to be with our families tonight."

"Very well. First thing in the morning, then."

"First thing."

He gave me a final, kiss-off glance, then motioned to the butler. "Armand," he said, "Please show Mr. Lombardi to the door."

I didn't like being shunted out like a delivery boy, either, so I dug my heels in and delivered a closing salvo. "Before we can do business, Mr. Hollister, there's still a couple of other things that need to be said. First, your seventy dollars a day buys my best efforts to find your daughter's killer, and that's all that it buys. My fee is the same if I succeed or if I fail. Also, I'll conduct my investigation according to my own methods. I'll follow up on any leads that you or your family might provide, but I'm not in the habit of taking unsolicited advice from my clients. You're free at any time to fire me if you don't approve of the way I operate. And one more thing: if I *do* find the person who murdered your daughter, I'll be turning him over to the police, not to your personal justice. I'm not a vigilante, and I'm not an executioner. Just so you understand."

The smile almost returned, as if I'd impressed him. "Very well. May *I* make an observation now?"

"Go right ahead."

"You have your own purely personal reasons for pursuing this matter."



"That's right, I do."

"May I inquire what they are?"

"I'll be happy to tell you, Mr. Hollister, after I find Mary's killer, or after you fire me for failing."

When I left Montgomery Place, I wasn't ready to go to my sister Letty's New Year's Eve party. Too many demons were hounding me, making me feel sick and angry inside. Rather than try to shake the demons this time, I indulged them. I drove east, past Grand Army Plaza, around the northern tip of Prospect Park, and down Flatbush Avenue until I reached the corner of Bedford Avenue and Sullivan Place. On that corner stood Ebbets Field, the one-time home of the one-time Brooklyn Dodgers, looking dark and forsaken in the pale glow of the streetlights. Hallowed ground, Ebbets, and now a graveyard. The Dodgers had played their last game of the 1957 season here only three short months ago. They would never play another. Like poor Mary Hollister in that Bed-Stuy tenement; like the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which had closed its doors only a year before the Flock had won their only World's Championship in '55; like the last trolley cars to run along Church and McDonald avenues; like so much of the borough I'd grown up with and loved, the Brooklyn Dodgers were dead and gone.

After a few moments of mourning, sitting in the chill silence of my Chevy, I was as ready as I was going to be for Letty's dull party, my

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unwanted in-laws, and the rest of a thoroughly depressing New Year's Eve.

Funerals. I was sure in the mood for them.



*When private eye Eddie Lombardi discovers the body of a young pianist in an abandoned Brooklyn slum, he vows to find the person who murdered her. But the more he investigates, the more discrepancies he finds between her family's image of her and who she really was. To complicate matters, a vicious drug dealer that Eddie and Watusi are after for other reasons keeps getting right in the middle of things.*

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