



# Loopholes

Phil Brucato

TAP. TAP. TAP.

Jack's there at the bedside. I can't see him, but I hear him. Feel him, too, a dense presence with barrel-thick arms. The club in his hand falls without striking a blow. He doesn't need to. The sound is enough. Jack Dunning's clever enough to hurt you inside.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

Oak shouldn't fall so lightly. Calloused palms shouldn't sound so thick. There shouldn't be an ogre in a three-piece suit standing at the foot of my bed. And I shouldn't owe him something I just can't pay.

"You 'wake?" Jack says. His voice rumbles through the framework of my bed.

"Keep it down," I hiss. "You'll wake my roommate."

The dark-on-dark shape shrugs. I shouldn't be able to see that, but I can. My eyes must be accustomed now to the light-less room we share. The club keeps falling steadily, soft as rain, hard as thunder.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

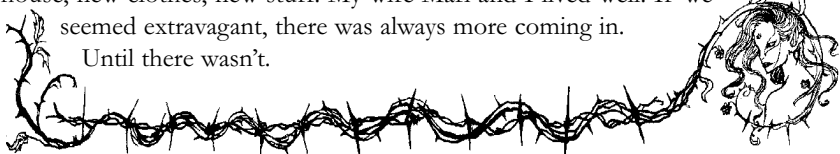
Sigh, deep, finally.

"Okay, Jack," I say. "Let's talk..."



It's the American way. Make money, spend money, borrow more money for both. I'd spent the better part of a decade as a hotshot law-shark, acquiring all the toys such status brings. New cars, new house, new clothes, new stuff. My wife Mari and I lived well. If we seemed extravagant, there was always more coming in.

Until there wasn't.



Boom. Bust. Pretty words. Harsh feelings. Economic onomatopoeia doesn't capture the crushed-chest pain of bills you could have paid a year earlier. My cred-it was still high, though, so the plastic got a workout. It was only a matter of time, we figured, until the good times rolled back up again.

Something stalled, though. So did my career. Soon, my marriage did the same. The bills, though, kept arriving. The good times, then, seemed over and done with.

But you don't get where I had been without accumulating a few favors along the way. So about three years after the boom had busted, I walked down a flight of stairs I promised myself I'd never descend again.

He was still there, waiting.

The door to his office swung open, silent as a Mob witness on testimony day. Inside, the office was much as I recalled. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Clutter everywhere. Burnt tobacco and paper rot. Endless ticking from countless clocks. Gargoyles perched on precarious shelves. Occasionally, they moved. It'd been that way since I was a kid, when Dad first brought me down to visit....

"Gino," he said in a cigarette voice. His parchment features crinkled with something like joy.

"Hello, Sal," I replied, raising my hand to wave. My fingers, I noted, were trembling.

Salantazi DiVoraccio was from what you might call the Old Country. The *very* old country. Not my ancestral lands of Sicily, but someplace far more ancient than human civilization. His name was a convenience, not even truly Italian. Like most names, though, it conveyed certain hints about his identity.

"It's been too long," he scolded, unfolding from his overstuffed chair. On the table he'd been sitting at, a watch spilled its guts across black velvet. A jeweler's glass overlooked a glittering dissection of bright lights and miniature tools. Sal liked things that ticked. The walls of his shop clustered with cuckoos and other novelty clocks. He couldn't care less about passing hours, but precision fascinated him. If something stopped ticking, Sal would want to know why.

I arced a shoulder to shrug. "Time gets away from me."

Sal chuckled like wax paper. The watchmaker's spotlight cast his dry features into sharp relief. He stilted toward me, trailing smoke like a grasshopper with a nicotine fixation. "Such a busy boy," he said. "So many things to do." He reached out to hug me. I hugged him back, of course. He felt like old twigs wrapped in steel. "It is good to see you, *bambino*."

"Good to see you, too."

His wagged a thin finger at me, smiling. "Ah, ah, ah...lying again. Haven't you learned better than that?"

I half-smiled. "Sal, I'm a professional liar."

"Small wonder, then, that you are doing so poorly with it."

"You know?"

"I always could read you, *ragazzo*," he said, motioning to another chair. "Sit."

"Then you know why I'm here," I replied, sitting. The trembling in my hands went bone-deep.