

# THE PIKE BOYS

*Book 1*

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The Pike Boys

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# A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

I want to thank my mother and father for allowing me to explore my creativity in my youth, and for always listening to my rambling stories. I also want to thank my uncle Lawrence for telling me at a young age to always be curious, and for reminding me how, when I was a kid, I constantly talked about wanting to be a writer when I grew up. Thanks to my beta readers, Kassandra Majesky, Matt Donnellon, and Sebastian Richards for reading my book when it was a work-in-progress.

Lastly, I want to thank my wife. She is the person who got me back into writing after I had abandoned it in my teens, and she dragged me to the finish line in the moments where I *really* didn't want to finish this book. I couldn't have accomplished all that I have in my writing career without her.

You all have helped me in more ways than I could ever express, and even when I don't say it, I am forever grateful.

Thank you









## P r e f a c e

I came up with this book when I was about 20 years old, and finished it about 4 years ago. I was in college when I started, and the nation at the time seemed to be preparing to boil over in ways a 20-year-old had never fathomed. Racial tension seemed (at that point) to be the highest I'd seen in my young life. It was hard to sit down at a keyboard when mounting anxiety from tests and figuring out who I was, along with feelings of existential dread, got in the way. It got hard trying to reconcile that I lived in a nation that sometimes felt hostile to my existence. It was all made harder by the fact I had no words in my lexicon to describe what I felt. (Writers like James Baldwin would later clear this up for me).

So I instead generated an idea so far removed from myself—something I wanted to use to hide away from any existential dread—and invented a comic book character called Jesse “Quick Draw” Pike, a gun-slinging cowboy, and

## THE PIKE BOYS

Claude (he would later become Clyde), a random 1920s gangster.

That's where this book started: an attempt by a 20-year-old who wanted to escape and get transported into a world different from his. And how different can I be from two white men from the 1920s? Then over time, the two characters became brothers, and then I added a brother, a sister, and a childhood best friend. Then I realized I invented a gang.

I had always loved crime fiction, whether it be prose or television. Everything from *Sons of Anarchy* and *Breaking Bad* to Don Winslow's *Cartel Series* lived rent-free in my mind. Also, when visiting my parents, my dad would sometimes have on a true crime show of some form, which deepened my interest in wanting to explore the criminal element. So, I took this family that I was so different from and created the Pike Boys.

Writing this book was beyond daunting. So daunting to the point that I asked a friend to help me write it because I didn't think I could do it alone. Once he said no, I figured I'd use the novel as a chance to improve my writing skills, and not a venture to take seriously. I had read that all first books are bad, so when you're done your first one, you should throw it in a trunk and work on the next. But along the way... I fell in love with the characters. I couldn't abandon it.

Hours upon hours were spent at my dorm room's uncomfortable ass desk and in the school library, where I'd sit by the window and watch my peers congregate while I

wrote and rewrote this damn book. Then later, once I got to grad school, I'd sit in my apartment, attempting to build the world within this book, all while stressing over classes like finance or statistics. Once I was done with the book, I was about 24 or 25 or so, and I told myself I'd submit it to agents to see what happened.

But life happened.

Some bouts with depression, namely because I struggled to find work after graduate school despite promises from teachers that the more education I got, the easier finding a job would be. I worked some temp jobs and even drove Uber and Lyft. All throughout these incidents in my life, I tried to keep my mind on this book, but I got distracted. It's hard to focus on writing about fake people when you got real shit going on.

I took a break from this book for a time to see if I was skilled enough to write for large publications. I honed my skills through blogging, but I would eventually end up in national outlets like BuzzFeed News (RIP), The Daily Beast, and Politico, where I wrote stories with racial and socio-political commentary. I've also written for award-winning fiction magazines, like Fiyah Literary Magazine and Apex Magazine. (I've also had a few stories go viral and semi-viral, as well as one story end up on multiple "end of year" best stories lists, but who's keeping track?)

No matter what happened in my life, the Pike family was always there, over my shoulder, reminding me where this dream of mine all got started: with them, right in that small ass dorm room at Southeastern Louisiana University.

## THE PIKE BOYS

Why do I tell you this?

I tell you this because I want you to know that this book means so much to me in ways that I'll never be able to explore within this preface. I tell you this because I want you to know that for me, this ain't just a book, but a testament to the fact that I was able to make it through all of my worst days, and stayed focused on a promise I made to myself nearly a decade ago.

When I recently read through this book, I remember writing some of these chapters at both my lowest and highest moments, including writing and revising some chapters in spare moments before I went pregame with my college friends for a night out in Downtown Hammond, or while sitting in my car while waiting for my next Uber ride.

This book was written by a younger me that was raw and finding his voice and exploring big themes I didn't have words for yet, and it's the messiness of it and its imperfections that make me love it all the more. Whether this book sells 5 or 500 copies, or gets 0 or 5 stars, I am profoundly proud of it, and I want you to know I appreciate you reading it, even if you don't finish. (But please do finish it.)

Now without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to the Pike Boys.





# P A R T I

*"No man for any considerable period can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which may be the true."- Scarlet Letter*





# P r o l o g u e

## The Heist

*Mid-summer, 1920*

Jesse leaned against the base of a mossy oak tree and rapped his fingers against his sawed-off shotgun. Dirt was caked under his nails and flies buzzed around his ears; the humidity and sweat made his long sleeve cotton button-up feel like a straitjacket. But he closed his eyes and relaxed nonetheless, allowing the sound of his timepiece and nature to drift his imagination to someplace distant. He mumbled under his breath: *Cooks, food, food suppliers, storage.*

The sound of chirping crickets and low-flying mosquitoes turned into clattering plates and happy conversation. The grass and marsh his boots sunk into became solid ballroom floors. People scooted their tables back and danced. The strong scent of the swamp shifted into Creole aromas wafting in from a kitchen, and in his

mind, he was actually in a restaurant. His restaurant, if this job goes well.

Annoyed grumbles and snapped branches broke his focus. His eyes shot open, and the restaurant décor descended into darkness, while the sight of shit, flies, and animal carcass-infested marshlands returned to him.

His younger brother, Rory, paced back-and-forth and crunched every twig and stick along the way. He continued to fuss to himself. Jesse rubbed his temples and stood. “Do you wanna calm down?”

Rory looked at his watch. “How much longer do we have to be out here?” Rory’s eyes were tiny black beads.

Jesse glared at him. Rory was coked-up out of his mind. But Jesse didn’t have the energy to argue, so he said, “The job takes as long as it takes.”

Rory snorted and wiped his nose and continued to pace back-and-forth at a near-manic rate. Jesse tried to go back to daydreaming before the trucks came, but at this point, he couldn’t even envision a single table, let alone a whole restaurant. Rory sat next to Twitch, the brothers’ long-time close friend. Twitch sat against a tree and looked expressionless at the dirt road through the bushes and marsh. He clutched a pistol in one hand and pocket watch in the other.

Rory asked him, “So if there were any girl you could take to town at the brothel, who would it be?”

Twitch had a stutter, so he fumbled the first letter for a bit but said, “I’m married.”

“Yeah, yeah I know that. I’m just sayin’ if you could get

with any dame at the brothel—” Rory rapid-fired off a round of girls’ names. He stopped at one and took his fingers and traced a figure 8 in the air and shot his arms out to mimic big breasts. Jesse choked down a laugh. “Rory, please, leave Twitch alone and shut up for Pete’s sake.”

Rory waved it away. “Good thing Pete ain’t here.”

Before Jesse could even respond the sound of tires crunching over dirt and gravel approached them, getting louder and closer as the seconds ticked on. He stood and pulled the sack-mask over his head. He looked at Rory and Twitch. They did the same. Jesse heard the clicking sounds of gun chambers being checked and decided to check his sawed-off. He ducked down so he could be flush with the bushes. The crunching grew closer and closer, prompting Jesse to put three fingers in the air.

Then two.

Then one.

His fingers dropped to a fist and the trio sprinted out from the bushes into the middle of the road. Jesse shot a round into the air and watched as the convoy in front of him shook, rattled, and slammed to a stop and caused a mushroom cloud of dirt to cover the trucks.

Jesse pointed his gun directly at the first truck and inched forward heel to toe. He held the warm steel tight, but not too tight. His palms were sweaty and the humidity could cause the gun to slip. He made a swirl in the air with his pointer finger. Twitch and Rory made wide turns on both sides of him.

One by one, Twitch, Rory, and Jesse snatched the

drivers out of their seats and dragged them into the middle of the road. Jesse stood in the middle, Twitch and Rory flanked him. He looked at the three drivers kneeling in front of him and singled out the lead driver, an older man with three threads of hair matted to the back.

“Get up,” Jesse said. The convoy leader stammered. Twitch stepped in and cracked the driver’s skull with the bottom of his pistol. Rory stepped in closer with his rifle and placed it right under the man’s nose.

“I think you want to get up now,” said Jesse. The man wiped the blood from his face and Jesse yanked him by his collar to the back end of the first truck. “Come on, you old fuck.”

The man moaned and grumbled, but once around the back, Jesse loosened up his grip.

“What the hell was that for?” asked the driver.

“Got to make it look convincing,” said Jesse.

The man peeled up an edge of the tarps and flashed the Thompson Distilling Co. emblem on one of the boxes. “I better get the rest of my money I’m owed. It wasn’t easy to convince the other guys to not bring guns.”

“Yeah, you’ll get the remainder of your money. Then you’ll go on an extended vacation.”

The driver smiled then winced from the bruise on his head. The driver stepped up on the tailgate to produce a bottle for Jesse to examine. Jesse opened the top and the whiff ruptured through his nostrils and strangled his sense of smell. It was the real deal. His retirement plan. His start-up capital for his new legitimate business: 100% pure

federally bonded medical alcohol. Before Prohibition, it was worth a lot. It helped cure coughing fits, insomnia, and Moon Madness. Since the start of Prohibition, the shit was worth more than gold. Jesse's smile turned devilish.

Jesse went through the rest of the trucks and made sure the cargo was all there. He then pushed the lead driver back into his spot on the ground and held the gun right where they could all see it.

"Everyone on their bellies with their hands behind their back," Rory said. The men did as told and laid flat and pressed their faces into the ground. Jesse and the gang backedpeddled toward the trucks, keeping their eyes on the drivers, then they each got into a truck and kicked up dust down the empty dirt road. After 15 minutes Jesse took his mask off, squeezed the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white, and laughed. He stuck a thumbs-up out the window and Twitch responded in turn by firing two rounds into the air outside his truck.

Jesse looked straight down the road, and the marshes and trees zoomed by outside his window in one thin green blur. The bottles rattling in the back would become real cash, enough cash to change the state of the Pike name. Enough cash to move Jesse into the upper crust of society, where there were cocktail parties and galas and shit his family could never afford to do growing up. It would take some time—he knew that—but he'd have enough cash to finally buy that old, abandoned restaurant outright in the French Quarter with no loans or credit needed.

In the sky, the copper that peeked behind the clouds

## THE PIKE BOYS

made its evolution into a deep yellow with undertones of rustic orange. Jesse took out a cigarette and blew thick smoke out the window and kept the cigarette clasped tightly between the fingers of his driving hand. A new day was upon him. He was heading back to New Orleans a much richer man, and in turn, he would become a much better man.

# Chapter 1

## The Prince and His Kingdom

*Late September, 1920*

Jesse's dreams were interrupted every night by the memory of his father's dead body at the family dinner table. It was propped up in a chair, blood and brain matter sprayed against the wall, a slow stream of crimson flowing from its head like molten lava from a volcano. Jesse was a boy then. He still had kernels stuck in his teeth from the popcorn at the silent picture show he, his mother, and his brothers saw. His mother cried on her knees while trying to uncurl the corpse's rigor-mortised finger from around the trigger. His baby sister's cries echoed up the hall.

The night terror made Jesse tremble in his sleep. He twisted into Cindy and woke her up. She tapped him. His body was damp and sticky and he muttered in his sleep

over the sight of his father's milky eyes giving him an accusatory glare.

*No. No. No*, Jesse pled in his sleep.

Cindy tapped his shoulder. It merited nothing. He was captive in a nightmare no person should have to endure as much as he did. She shoved him this time. He shot up like a piston.

Cindy held him. "You okay?"

Jesse took rapid, shallow breaths and hooked his fingers into the blankets like he could be dragged back to the night terror any moment. He stared into the dark abyss of his room and could almost see the silhouette of his father's body in the corner, sitting there, mocking him from the shadows, saying in a near whisper, "Why'd you do this, Jesse?" Jesse, still in a hazy state, heard the voice ask again, "Why?"

Jesse yanked his lamp on. The shadow was gone.

"The same dream again?" asked Cindy. She draped him with her bare body. He lay down, grabbed her hand, and kissed it. "Yes. What time is it?"

She pointed at the slit of yellow through his drapes. Jesse rubbed the rest of the sleep from his eyes and untangled himself from Cindy. She sighed. Jesse was only twenty-six but set in his ways. He thrived on being up before the sun—before the streets of New Orleans whirred with streetcars and tourists and two-bit hustlers trying to make a quick dime.

"Guess I'll get up too," said Cindy. Her milky southern drawl displaced what was once a northern accent. She



pulled the covers off of her body slowly, teasing him with every stray second, making him hang in there for the moment he could see her naked body again. He was attentive. He watched her full hips, her long legs, and her ample behind until she made it to his bathroom. She cracked the door and his mind played back a hazy compilation of last night, when a few drinks at his brothel turned to tangled bodies in his bed and bunched-up clothes on the floor. He reminisced on how her body felt soft and warm in his hands—how her thighs, ass, and breasts almost melted between his fingers as he caressed her. Jesse whistled, then got out of bed.

Jesse slipped on clothes and shuffled around his room looking for his cigarettes. He checked the nightstand drawer. Old wrinkled academic honor roll certificates rested uncomfortably under a pistol and green bills dotted with blood. The money wasn't a lot, but he squirreled cash away in case one day he wanted to move far, far away. Arms wrapped him from behind. Cindy pointed at the certificates. "You should hang those up." Jesse was a tall man, so her head rested perfectly in the middle of his back.

He shrugged. "I'd rather have a bonfire with them." Jesse slammed the drawer shut.

Cindy let out an animated sigh and let her arms fall to her side. She ambled over to a box on his floor filled with office supplies. "You might as well throw them in the box with the rest of this junk."

Jesse continued to rummage around the room for his smokes. "I'll think about it."

Cindy put her hands up in resignation. She finished dressing and headed for the door. It took every bit of self-control to keep Jesse from running behind her like a dog when its owner was leaving the house. Big Sal, Jesse's mentor, once told him, "Every man needs a woman. You just can't let them know that." So Jesse locked his knees and winked instead.

She turned before closing the door and reminded him to not get so caught up in work that he'd miss his own brother's surprise party. He told her not to worry; he'd leave the restaurant in time. She blew a kiss his way and left. After finding his smokes, he opened his blinds and flooded his room with the New Orleans sunlight.

New Orleans: the jewel of the South; a city with as much personality as its people and just as colorful. Jesse could see from his condo window, over the buildings of Canal St., a tight cluster of buildings; a compilation of blues, greens, reds, with brick, wooden, and stucco facades nestled together shoulder-to-shoulder. The architecture was all sharp edges and bright colors, with wrought iron railings or thick wooden columns running around the balconies. And right below was Canal St., the Broadway of the South. The street was the main artery of the city, and the thoroughfare separated the old side of the city from the new; the rich from the poor; the immigrant from the American. Canal was dense with buildings half a block high and numerous shops, cafes, theaters, and art galleries, and despite it being morning, the sidewalks were already lively. Jesse had a bird's eye view of small dots moving in between each other

to start their day. Bright baubles walked into boutiques and coffee shops, and bland business suits walked to the street cars with suitcases gripped tight. Cars zipped by and yellow taxis let out eager tourists who he figured got out with wide-eyed wonder, knowing that they were in one of the best cities in the country. The best, if you asked Jesse.

During Jesse's childhood, any bit of savings their family accrued was siphoned off by his father's drinking habit. They never had the money to come out to the heart of the city, so he and his brothers would sneak out to see the bright lights, beautiful people, and fancy outfits, and prayed to hear just one loose note from the many music halls. Now Jesse could see the city from one of the top floors in one of the tallest buildings on the street, and catch a stray note floating over to his window from a club below. The fact that he now lived in the heart of all that he ever loved is something he hoped he would never get used to. He loved every moment of it.

Jesse's cigarette's cherry burned bright and fizzled out into a smoky nub, signaling that it was time to head to work.

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Jesse walked up to his restaurant, The Magnolia, and felt instant pride. It had a "**Coming Soon!**" sign plastered on its doors, and after the renovations, after cleaning more money and hiring more contractors, it would be the hottest place in town. His business partner, Mel, stood under a street light right in front of the restaurant-to-be talking to three gentlemen, who were all either in their late twenties or early thirties.

Mel said, “Hiya there, Jesse.”

Jesse shifted his box in his hands. “What’s news, Mel?”

Mel was a short man with bug-eyes magnified by the thickest glasses Jesse had ever seen in his life. His demeanor was of a man constantly on the precipice of severe anxiety and he was old-money with a family net worth higher than the wealth of some small countries. He was the complete opposite in every way from Jesse, but Jesse liked the guy. He was an ex-Tulane classmate, and one of the few people there that didn’t look at Jesse as less-than.

Mel introduced Jesse to his friends. “Jesse, this is Albert, William, nicknamed Bill, and Kenneth.” The men were courteous and welcoming, but in a pretentious way that only meant one thing to Jesse: they’re rich too. Not regular rich but fuck-you rich. The type of guys who were born on third base but think they hit a triple. But Jesse smiled, placed his box of office supplies at his feet, and tried his best to be cordial. He learned what the group dynamics were after minutes: Bill was the quiet one. He did whatever the other two wanted because he was too soft to speak up. Kenneth was on the shorter side and felt the need to overcompensate with constant jokes. And Albert, well, he was an ass and by default the alpha of the group.

“So, Jesse, we’ve heard so much about you from our old friend here,” said Albert. “Mel says you went to Tulane with him. So you finished in ‘16?”

Jesse had a tight smile. “No. A semester earlier actually.”

Albert looked impressed. “Advanced classes?”

“Nope, never finished.” Jesse’s attempt at a punch-line

landed like a brick. Mel's friends looked at Jesse like he'd said something crude. Jesse cleared his throat. "Yea, uh, I had to leave early to start my own business. There was a tragedy in my family."

"Well," Albert said. "I'm sorry to hear that. I was a Yale man myself."

Jesse said, "Impressive." What he thought was, *don't break ya fucking arm patting yourself on the back*. Eventually Mel told his buddies to scram so he and Jesse could go inside and get some work done.

Jesse grabbed his box and walked into the restaurant. He darted past contractors zigzagging back-and-forth with ladders in their hands and tool boxes and tarps to cover the tables so stucco and dust didn't dirty them. Butterflies filled Jesse's stomach with the mere thought of what this place could be. Mel scampered behind him. "I'm sorry about that, Jess. My friends, well, they can be a bit much sometimes. Spoiled brats, you know?"

Jesse shrugged. "It's fine. I'm used to the stuffy types. No offense."

"None taken. You know, you should come with us to the Chateau one day." Mel smiled like he did Jesse a big favor and wanted a thank you.

But it piqued Jesse's interest. The Chateau Social Club was where the elites of New Orleans spent their time, namely, the ruling political machine, the ORD. Those old fucks wouldn't have let him sniff the outside air of that place years back. He always told himself he would never go there. But... that was then. If he wanted to be accepted by

high society, he needed to start playing the part. Starting with schmoozing up to Mel and his friends.

Jesse said, "Sure, pal. That'd be nice."

In his office, Jesse put away his favorite books on his shelf, hung a few pictures on the wall, and sat behind his brand-new desk to sort through the business ledgers. Going through the accounting book for the restaurant made him smile. He loved the thought of how the numbers on the page could one day become dollars in his wallet, or paintings on his wall, or cars parked on the sidewalk in front of his condo. All he needed to do was infuse some more of the liquor heist money into the next round of contracting hires and the restaurant would be open in no time. He put that ledger away and pulled a book from behind his shelf. It was a ledger for his brothel, the Rising Sun.

He locked his door and carefully scanned the ledger's columns. Dates, names, room numbers, all inflated or fabricated to hide the source of the building's income. He made up patrons in his ledger one scribble at a time like it was muscle memory. It was a headache, but necessary. On paper, the Rising Sun was an inn. In reality, it was the most popular brothel in the French Quarter, owned and operated by the Pike Boys, under the authority of their acting leader, Jesse Pike.

Being the leader of a gang that owned a brothel wasn't all shattered kneecaps, bruised knuckles, and street fights. It was greasing palms and shaking hands and kissing the asses of his powerful clientele. Knowing which beat cop got how much, which bellhops and taxi drivers got referral fees. It

wasn't easy being the Prince of the French Quarter, as some people jokingly, and others seriously, called him. But Jesse was the Prince. His land was the corner of Royal St and Toulouse, and his castle was the Rising Sun. Only reason he wasn't the king was because Big Sal wasn't dead yet. But after Clyde's surprise homecoming party tonight, Jesse wouldn't have to hold the crown anymore. He grew weary of carrying it.

Jesse's head jerked up at the sound of his phone. He'd left Rory in charge of the Rising Sun last night, so his imagination ran through options: Rory sliced a guy's face with a broken beer bottle; he tried to hit on someone's wife; or some combination of the two. He snatched up the phone and out came a harsh Italian accent. It was Big Sal. "You got the papers?"

"Yea."

"Turn to page ten."

Jesse flipped through the pages and saw the bold lettered headline: **"CAMERON MULLIGAN, YOUNG DA AND GOLDEN BOY OF NEW ORLEANS, VOWS TO TAKE ON CRIME; EYES ENDING CORRUPTION AS MAYORAL PLATFORM."**

Jesse raised an eyebrow. "Is this an issue?"

Sal rattled off curse words in Italian loud enough to make Jesse's head jerk away from the phone. Jesse read further. "He's looking into the liquor heist. Thompson Distilling CO., a branch of Thompson Limited, had three truckloads of federally bonded, pharmaceutical liquor stolen three months ago. Baby faced Mulligan, DA and the

son of a powerful philanthropist and political advocate, says the heist was a slap in the face to the justice system of New Orleans, and he promises to do all he can to make sure due process is completed on this investigation." Jesse paused. "So, he's reopening the case on the municipal level."

Sal let out an annoyed groan like his back was sore. Jesse said, "They're calling it the biggest hijacking, money-wise, since Prohibition started."

"Don't sound too fucking impressed."

Jesse's next words were cut off by deep, wheezing coughs from Sal. "You ok, old man?"

"My heart still beats and my dick still works. I think I'm fine. But look, you, your crew, and Pencil-Dick-Thompson told me this would go away after two months. Mr. Councilman Thompson was supposed to collect the insurance, and it would be done. It's been fucking more than two months, Jesse. Why ain't it done?"

Jesse raised his shoulders in confusion. "There's no mention of you here."

"A man could slip, fall, and crack his own skull and I'd get blamed by these Bible-thumping pricks. If a man gets caught with his dick in another woman it was my hands that put it there. I can't catch a break."

Sal was old and frail. Jesse could hear the years of cigar smoke and heavy drinking taking its toll. The paranoia wasn't helping with Sal's condition, either. But Jesse understood it. Salvatore "Big Sal" Bianchi, a feared gangster and respected businessman, ran the Italian underbelly of New Orleans with impunity. His money created a shield of



lawyers and politicians and cops, and when there were raids on his gambling dens and cocaine safe-houses, he was tipped off and never spent a single night in jail. He never even sniffed the air outside of a prison. In return for protection, he made sure Italians voted the right way and stayed away from places they weren't wanted. Now he's worried about a city investigation when he's this close to retirement, if not death. Jesse told Sal to relax; it's a publicity stunt for the upcoming election.

Sal sighed. "Ok, Jesse-boy, I'll trust you. I always do."

Jesse eyed the clock. "We'll talk about this more at the party tonight. Ok?" There was silence. The old man had probably fallen asleep on the phone again. Jesse hung up, hid away the brothel's ledger, and went back to unpacking. Once he got down to the last remaining objects (some pencils, a book, and an old photo), he noticed his Tulane honor roll certificate folded into his favorite book. Cindy must've stuffed it in there when he wasn't paying attention. He fought a losing battle against a wide grin. He smoothed out the wrinkles on his desk and contemplated what to do with it.

He pulled out the old photo next. It was a half-faded picture, grainy like torn film footage, of five kids; four boys dressed as outlaws holding wooden guns, and one girl, head full of dark curls, kissing a young Jesse on his dimpled cheek. The picture was dated on the back as 1906. It stated the names of the children as well: Twitch, Clyde, Jesse, Rory, and Rose.

That star-filled night was clear in Jesse's mind.

Whistling cold air stripped the trees' branches bare, and winter's frigid fingers slipped between Jesse and his brothers' poorly patched clothes.

That night, he, Twitch, Rory, and Clyde had seen a cowboy show under the big tent at the Parish Carnival. That night, they jokingly formed their "outlaw gang." Jesse made the boys scrape their change together for the photo. Rory, who was eight, screamed it was supposed to be boys only, but Rose hopped in anyway and planted a kiss on Jesse's cheek.

The photo filled him with pride and sadness. Pride because he wasn't that kid anymore, sadness because Rose wasn't here to see it. He held the picture up next to the Tulane certificate and weighed which one meant more to him now. He tossed the photo back in the box and kicked the box under his desk, so he could remember to toss it in the trash later. He wouldn't need it anymore. He was moving forward with his life. He grabbed his Tulane certificate and nailed it up on the wall, so whenever people needed to come speak to the manager and co-owner, they'd see his accomplishment. He didn't finish, sure. But a kid like him wasn't supposed to get in in the first place.

Later that work day, before turning off the lights, he stopped by the threshold of his office door with the box of trash in his hands and looked around at all of his possessions, wishing he could tell the 12-year-old Jesse from the picture that one day, he wouldn't have to pickpocket anymore. One day, he and his brothers would make enough money to survive after Papa killed himself.

One day, he'd be able to look at the world of crime with disdain, because he'd no longer need the quick and easy money. One day, he would be able to say the words that few gangsters ever say: "I quit."

## Chapter 2

### Homecoming

Jesse stood outside of Clyde's motel room and listened to his brother's snores roll out through the cracked door. Jesse pushed the door open and was bombarded by a rolling cloud of sweat, piss, and bathtub hooch. Clyde had stuff everywhere: his clothes thrown into piles, the remnants of food unfinished from the diner across the street on the floor, half empty mason jars scattered around the room. And there was Clyde—draped over his bed in a drunken coma, his snoring sounding like a saw grinding through wood, heaving out toxic fumes from his two-day bender with each exhalation.

“Clyde,” Jesse said through pinched nostrils.

Jesse stepped forward and clattered two bottles together. “Fucking animal.” He side-stepped the remaining trash and stood over Clyde. Clyde had a whiskey bottle

gripped tight in his hands, and Jesse tried to pry it from him, but even in his sleep, Clyde's fingers held on like metal coils.

He got the bottle un-suctioned from Clyde's paw and used it to poke him in his side—right where a puckered knife scar ran down his ribs—and jabbed him again, and again, and once more for good measure. Clyde's eyes burst open, and in one smooth motion he swung his legs to the floor, exploded up, and grabbed Jesse by the collar. His eyes were vacant and inhuman enough for the typically calm and cool Jesse to have a slight waver in his voice when he said, "It's me, it's me. It's fucking Jesse."

The veins in Clyde's neck swelled. Jesse looked into his brother's eyes. He looked through the mask of rage to see what four years of living in fear could do to someone. Four years of rattling chains and shank stabbings in the showers and guard towers where an unseen officer massaged his rifle trigger and waited for someone to attempt to run—just to have a reason to punch a bullet in someone's cranium and see the shrapnel of his skull explode in a bloody flurry.

Jesse slapped Clyde across the face and his head snapped back and the vacancy in his eyes dissipated. He released the collar and sat on the bed. Jesse stared at him confused as shit. Clyde said nothing; instead, he stroked his reddish-brown beard and looked at the ground. Jesse snapped his fingers at him. Clyde's head perked up. Jesse gestured in confusion. "What the fuck?"

Clyde stood. "Sorry."

Jesse scratched his head. He knew going to the toughest

jail in the South could fuck up anyone, but dear God, Clyde was a shell of himself. Clyde scavenged through the piles of shit on the floor, picking up pants, dropping them down, sniffing them. It was like he and Clyde occupied the same physical space, but Clyde was a million miles away. Jesse turned his back. “Guess I’ll give you a moment.”

Jesse looked around and was dumbstruck over the juxtaposition of the mounds of trash on the floor and the tidiness of the countertop. Clyde had taken all of the silverware from the drawer and laid them out in neat rows. Jesse pushed the silverware crooked. Clyde charged over behind him, still in only his underwear and exhaling last night’s booze, and pushed the forks and knives back in place. He glared at Jesse. Jesse perked his eyebrows up and tried to hide a smile. “Good to have you back, big brother.”

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Jesse and Clyde made their way to the heart of the city. The skyline was beautiful; lines of molten copper snuck through the swath of purple, gold, and orange skylight. Pretty soon those colors would melt together into a black backdrop with scattered stars and moonlight piercing the New Orleans sky, bathing the French Quarter, summoning the harlots and sinners toward its glow. It would be a signal to the city that it was her time to awaken; a beacon to flappers, drinkers, and gamblers; whoremongers, scammers, and lowlifes, that it was their time. The neon lights outside of the row of shops, theaters, and opera houses started to flicker on. Canal St. was coming alive.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Jesse asked Clyde. Clyde stared

out the window. He looked at who filed on and off the streetcars. Groups of women in short-cut, shimmering dresses walked arm and arm with men in suits into the music halls with their heads cocked back in laughter. The stuffy “respectable” folks strolled to the streetcars with their dresses past their knees, along with their husbands who looked like they’d climax at the look of a woman’s shoulder. The streetcar hummed down the street. Jesse stopped to let pedestrians cross the thoroughfare. A street vendor was selling lotto tickets while illuminated under the corner streetlight, and did his best impression of a circus ring leader and bellowed to everyone passing him. “Five cents gets ya \$500.” Jesse waved him off.

“It’s like the first time again,” Clyde said.

Jesse split his attention between the road and Clyde. “What you mean?”

“The first time we laid eyes on this place.” Clyde put his hand out the window and allowed his fingers to cut through the brisk September air.

That was Clyde’s first full sentence the whole day, and the second time he’d talked in hours, the last time being when he asked about their little sister, Catherine.

“I remember,” Jesse said. He pulled the Packard to a halt on the sidewalk next to a row of tiny shack homes. He twiddled his fingers on the steering wheel and turned in his seat.

“What’s this?” Clyde asked.

They were parked outside a row of cribs; a row of tiny homes with dark shutters where you could contract

gonorrhea for fifty cents. Homely prostitutes would stick their hands or knickers out of the window to let men know they were open for shop. The only things inside were a tiny cot and lanterns dim enough to make the women look twenty years younger, but just bright enough to reveal track marks and inflamed red genital warts. Outside the car window, a crib prostitute stood in the doorway with her nightgown half off her shoulder. She tried to summon Jesse and Clyde to her with a finger motion. She had droopy eyes and held onto the doorway for balance.

Clyde tensed up. "Please don't tell me this is the place I've heard so much about."

Jesse shook his head, feigned laughter, then prepared himself for his speech. "You holed yourself up for two days in a roach motel outside the city, you don't talk to anyone, see anyone, not even Cath. Are you doing ok?"

"I'm fine."

Jesse nodded. "How did you even stay sane in there?"

Clyde stroked his beard and stared into the distance. "Church."

Jesse snickered. Clyde wouldn't know a chapter in the Bible from a page torn out of a stag book. "Church?"

"Yea, fucking church."

Jesse stared in disbelief. Clyde returned the stare. "What else was there for me to do?"

Jesse let the question roll off of him.

Clyde wrung his hands. "And I thought about Catherine. And Mama. And our family. I want us all to be close again. I wasn't around much before... before I went away. I want



to change that.”

Jesse tried to read Clyde. He looked nervous, jumpy, but somehow still had undertones of his menacing calmness. He was much more docile than before he was arrested, but at the same time, twice as explosive. The episode in the motel was evidence to the latter.

“Ok. We can find time for that,” Jesse said. “But I’m just saying, if you need some more time off, or, I don’t know, to see a head-shrinker or get back on the lithium...”

Clyde straightened in his seat. Jesse flashed his palms. “Alright, no head-shrinker or head dope. I hear ya.”

Clyde was born with a fire only a high dose of lithium could douse. If the lithium didn’t work, their father would beat the demon out of him, spouting scriptures while doing so. It wasn’t uncommon for a young Clyde to stare at the wall in their childhood room, murmuring to himself with a string of drool running down his face. But he got older. Bigger. He had stopped eating his grits after realizing what that bitter taste was. The space underneath his mattress became a black hole for his pharmaceuticals, and their mother could no longer force him to take them after their father died.

Clyde eventually relaxed in his seat. “I just need to get back to work. Nothing else.”

“I understand. And trust me, I’m eager for you to take my place. I just want to stay on long enough to show you the ropes. I still want my monthly points on the booze, of course, until we’re out of stock. But other than that, the brothel will be yours to lead at your discretion; like we

talked about.”

Clyde smirked. “Yea, like we talked about. You did good. Better than I expected. But it can’t be that hard to sell pussy and booze, is it?”

Jesse blanketed his offense with a laugh.

The car’s engine roared to life. Clyde rubbed his knuckles for a while, a nervous gesture he’d had since childhood. “I—I know I asked of you something that was hard, Jesse. All those years ago. But you stepped up. You really did. I hope to one day repay you for your sacrifices in perpetuity.”

“In perpetuity?” Jesse laughed as they drove off. “Learned that in church too?”

“From a book.”

“Shit, when’d you learn to read?”

Clyde tried and failed to hide a soft smile, and eventually, he gave in. The two brothers laughed the whole way up the street.

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The Packard jerked to a stop right outside of a two-floor red brick building that took up the majority of the corner of Royal Street. Clyde hopped out before the car was fully parked, and ran his hand up and down the thick iron beams connected from the ground to the second-floor balconies. He tried to take it all in, but couldn’t turn his head far enough to see the cast iron rail that wrapped around the exterior of the Creole Townhouse.

“Shit,” Clyde said.

Jesse shivered from the nighttime breeze that tumbled

from over by the river some blocks away. “Shit’ is right.” They walked around to the front. Jesse stood side by side with Clyde. He put his hand up and swiped in the air from left to right. “This is the palace built by Pike, big brother.”

“The Rising Sun,” Clyde said. The front looked like the face of a monster, the two corner room windows on the balcony making up the illuminated eyes and the double green doors the mouth.

Jesse lit up. “Rolls off the tongue don’t it? I did all this myself.” He wanted those words back before he said them. Clyde walked toward the door. Jesse sprinted ahead of him. “Alright, wait right here.”

He trotted up the three steps and gave two light raps on the front door. A doorman stuck his head out. Jesse whispered, then looked over his shoulder to make sure Clyde wasn't close enough to hear. The doorman nodded and shut the door.

“The fuck is going on here? We going in or not?” Clyde asked.

“We're going, we're going.”

Jesse checked the time and knocked at the door again. Clyde, now visibly agitated, said, “What in the hell are you—”

The doors swung open and a sea of smiling faces in masquerade masks and glimmering dresses and finely stitched suits all screamed “Surprise!”

Jesse waited for Clyde’s smile. And waited. Waited some more. Clyde stood frozen in place, with the only movement being the slight tremble of his hand and quiver of his lip.

The people's smiles turned to confusion. Rory parted the crowd with two women on each arm. He had a kazoo pursed in his lips and a cone party hat resting on his head. Jesse tried to shake his head subtly to warn him away, but Rory let out a hard squawk and shouted, "Surprise, you bastard."

Rory's eyes darted between Jesse awkwardly scratching an invisible itch on his temple and Clyde standing like a statue. Rory released the women. He turned his finger in a circle and everyone went back to the parlor and the piano music started back up like nothing happened.

Jesse looked at Clyde. "You alright?"

"Fine. I—I just wasn't expecting..." Clyde stared at the ground to search for his words. Jesse immediately regretted not telling Clyde ahead of time.

"I'm sorry," Jesse said.

Clyde said nothing. Rory removed the hat. Rory grabbed both sides of Clyde's face. "Welcome home." He hugged Clyde, wrapping his arms around his wide frame. Clyde was still statuesque. But Rory didn't relent. He squeezed tighter. Clyde moved Rory back and placed his hands on his shoulder. "I can't believe it. My baby brother; a man now." Clyde slapped him on the arm and rubbed the spot where he hit him. Clyde looked back-and-forth at his brothers and the uncertainty slowly melted away. He unbuttoned his coat. "Well, I guess I have a party to attend."

Jesse and Rory smiled. The brothers walked side-by-side up the steps and followed the noise of booming music and happy chatter right into the Rising Sun.

# Chapter 3

## Wolves At the Door

The Rising Sun was a fortress of fantasies, a palace of pleasure; a place where any man, whether poor, rich, gangster, or blue-collar, could come to be treated like a king. Chandeliers and old paintings classed up the place and allowed Jesse to up-charge on every single thing. The spiral staircase that split the large building in half was like a conveyor belt. Jesse would see a woman go up empty-handed with a john in tow and come down minutes later fifty dollars heavier. And at Clyde's homecoming party, that belt was moving in swift rotation.

Jesse walked through the party and cut through the sea of dark suits and colorful party dresses and was greeted with a myriad of handshakes and conversations. He got some pats on the back and had to feign interest in conversations he wished he was never in, but it came with the territory.

He made it to a cluster of chairs and tables where the working girls sat talking to johns. Those women were more effective than sirens. He'd see the smartest, wealthiest men throw away their lives over a wet slit between two legs.

"Quite the establishment," one man said to Jesse. He sat in a chair with two brunettes flanking him. They were young, early-to-mid-twenties, with smooth skin and dresses hugging their bodies. The man between them was the antithesis, wrinkled and liver-spotted, with a beaked nose. But the money folds hanging from his pockets and gold trim around his glasses distracted from the gut spilling over his waistband and the toupee perched on his scalp. Jesse saluted the man with a raise of the glass and shot a wink at the girls.

Jesse walked up to a group of men; some big whales with big wallets. "What's going on, fellas?" he said. They greeted him like a celebrity, which he was, if only in the vice circles of the city.

"Isn't it crazy what's going on around this country? Some places up north have no booze," one of the men said.

Jesse smirked. "Yea, good thing you aren't up there. Because then you'd actually have to survive on food and water." The men tossed their heads back and laughed.

"How about this one," said Jesse. "A man says to a preacher, 'That was an excellent sermon, but it was not original.' The preacher was taken aback. The man said he had a book at home containing every word the preacher used. The next day, the man brought the preacher a dictionary." The men almost keeled over laughing at Jesse.

He told the gentlemen to go get some drinks on the house and left them to bask in his greatness.

Jesse strode toward the bar, but was stopped by a logjam of people. Without a word, people parted and made an alley to his stool—the spot where he always sat. He rested his elbow on the smooth wooden bartop, and like clockwork, a towel came down to wipe away spillage near him, a fresh drink appeared without his need to ask, but he waved it away. He held up his watered-down whiskey. “I’m good, thank you.” The barkeep nodded and roamed toward the end of the bar. Jesse turned in his chair and looked to the dance floor.

People talked and danced. The jazz band’s trumpets’ wild squawks went on and on, becoming wilder and wilder without a loss in rhythm, but seeming to go nowhere in particular. The music made the crowd cheer louder and dance harder. Cigar smoke hung above everyone’s heads and almost dimmed the brothel’s crystal lights with a thick fog. The party was packed. And between the full eighteen rooms upstairs and the girls working the floor and the people buying marked-up drinks at the bar, the brothel was going to make more money tonight than Jesse could ever launder in a month. Why was this not enough for him, though? He couldn’t explain this odd need he had for validation from the people who made him feel less than. It wasn’t these exact people, but kids he’d run into in his childhood who had affluent parents; those who didn’t live in a shotgun home or have to share clothes with their siblings.

Jesse pushed the thought from his mind and took a sip of whiskey. He chalked it up to it being some form of vindication for all those years he didn't have money. Now he had a lot of it. When he was little, that's all he'd wanted. Now he needed power. That's all this brothel was for him: a stepping stone to power. Part of the reason he quit crime the first time was because of the risk street-level jobs carried. That's why when he was forced to take over the crew, he pooled all the money they ever made and bought into a brothel.

When he found this place, there was no live music, only the same strained tune emanating from a funky phonograph, and working girls who were drugged up and beat down by patrons and dope peddlers who got too rough. Four years and several minor turf wars later, and here it was, his baby, his once pride and joy, and his stepping stone to the upper-class and legit business. His run with this place was done. He'd made the connections he needed. Now he could comfortably live the life of a common man, and he'd finally prove to all those people years ago that he was more than a street rat.

Jesse caught glimpses of Rory and Clyde through the barrage of moving bodies. They sat at a table in the far corner, where Clyde made liberal whiskey pours into a row of shot glasses. The amber liquid spilled over the glasses, pooled on the table, and spread until it dripped onto the floor. Clyde took all of the shots for himself, and Rory and the three women with them laughed like it was the funniest shit they'd ever seen. The drips on the ground turned into



a small puddle at Clyde's feet. Jesse pressed his palm to his forehead.

Jesse turned and whistled to the bar-back, Mickey, who dropped empty glasses into a bin and hustled over like an attention-deprived animal. He slung the towel over his shoulder and stood at attention. "Need something, boss?"

"Go over there and clean that up, will ya?"

Mickey's shoulders dropped.

Jesse extended his pointer finger toward the table. "Now, please." Mickey rushed over with his arms pumping at his side. Mickey was as loyal as a dog. He was the bag boy for the crew and made sure every parcel of money got where it needed to be. His big eyes and baby face were a paradox next to his crooked nose and clipped ear from his days on the street.

Jesse watched Rory jostle Mickey's hair while he attempted to wipe the floor. Clyde was dramatic and made a show of lifting his feet so Mickey could clean under the table. Jesse turned back around and waved the barkeep over. "I'll take that drink, actually."

Jesse left the bar and walked along the outside of the dance floor where people were doing The Charleston. He saw Twitch straight ahead in the corner on a stool. Amidst the chaos and debauchery around him, Twitch was by himself reading a book. Twitch's head jerked up when Jesse approached.

Jesse turned his head sideways to better read the title: *How to Speak Publicly*. Twitch hopped to his feet and stuffed the book in his coat.

“It’s fine,” Jesse said. Twitch eased up. He had a face branded with the same expression at all times. Not happy, not sad, just pure apathy and indifference.

Jesse’s index knuckle rapped against the book in Twitch’s coat pocket. “It’s good you’re learning, though.” Twitch curled his lips, which for him, was like someone grinning from ear to ear. Twitch stuttered and stumbled over his words, pausing to pick the right ones, but Jesse was patient. Twitch suffered from fits of stutters since they were children and always got shit for it, and at one point, he used to shake and sputter like a car breaking down. But as he got older, the shakes went away. But the nickname never did.

“The kids,” Twitch said. “I want to be able to read to them at night. Sometimes.”

Jesse gave a nod of approval. “You’re getting better every day.” He pulled his pack of smokes from his jacket and offered it up.

Twitch shook his head. “My wife can smell that on me.”

Jesse put them back.

Twitch’s calm demeanor hid his capacity for violence. He never sought it out, but when it came, he was ready and willing to lay a motherfucker on their ass or take things to a level that gave most people nightmares. He didn’t have a broad, bulky chest like Clyde but instead an athletic frame of an ex-MLB prodigy. His arms and legs looked like engorged pythons crawled under his skin whenever he flexed. His frame came from years of being called retarded by the neighborhood kids. Every time a kid called him retarded, he went home teary-eyed and did push-ups. Then

dumbbell curls. Eventually, no kid called him retarded again.

Twitch jutted his head toward Clyde and Rory. They were still at their table throwing back drinks. Twitch shook his head and spoke slowly. “Things can’t go back to the way they used to be.”

Clyde had slammed his hand down on the table, knocking over the glasses, which prompted liquor-induced laughter from Rory and their girls. Twitch held up his wedding band. The light glinted from the silver ring, the smooth circle snug near callused knuckles.

“They won’t,” Jesse said.

“G-g-good.”

Jesse leaned against the wall. “I’ll keep him on a leash for a while. It may take Clyde some time, but he will see the brothel business is more fruitful than any heist or odd job he could come up with. I’ll be around until he gets acclimated.”

Twitch fastened his black tie and stared at Clyde. Jesse put a hand on Twitch’s shoulder. “I promise. I won’t let anything get out of hand. After we get rid of all of that booze, only thing you’ll have to worry about is what you’re going to spend all of your of money on.” Jesse rubbed his thumb against his pointer and middle fingers. Twitch jutted his eyebrows up and down and gave another corner-of-the-mouth smirk.

Jesse checked his watch. Big Sal and his other special guests would be there soon. Around the room, the brothel’s security stuck close to the walls on the perimeter of the

party. They all had a uniform look—big heads and wide jaws and thick shoulders, with gun bulges hidden under their jackets. Jesse's eyes scanned the crowd but got snagged by the way Cindy's dress hugged her just right. Her graceful walk and her long dress made it look like she levitated around the room. He smiled at her. She returned it. He stepped toward her, but a man stepped into frame and made him rock back on his heels. The man embraced Cindy and she placed a kiss on his cheek.

The music became slow and somber—a tune that was meant to lull people into intimacy. Everyone stopped moving around and drifted to the dance floor with their partners. Cindy nestled her head into the John's neck. They swayed side to side, her hand on his back and his hands slowly making their way down hers. She playfully raised them back up. He leaned down to whisper something in her ear. She blushed. She returned the favor by leaning in close to whisper something back. Jesse imagined she told the man something sweet and sensual, arousing yet calming, like she did for him last night, and every other night.

Jesse hoped Twitch didn't see his near embarrassment. He did. Twitch looked at Jesse with a knowing look. The look asked, *that's still going on?*

Jesse read his friend's mind and said out loud, "Oh shut the fuck up." Twitch chuckled, then went back to reading his book.

Over the horizon of the dance floor, Jesse saw the first of his guests arrive: Davy Perrilloux. Davy walked around the edges of the party and straight to Jesse. Jesse embraced

Davy with a handshake.

“What’s going on, Pike?” Davy asked.

Jesse replied cordially.

Davy was a sharp-dressed colored man with a southern drawl smooth like honey and a joyful demeanor to match. Many of the guests turned to stare. Black men weren’t allowed most places in New Orleans, especially not in brothels. But Davy was a friend, business associate, and probably the most important part of Jesse’s liquor operation. The guests would have to get over it.

Jesse pointed and gave directions to where their meeting would take place. After Davy walked off, Twitch jumped to his feet. Jesse ordered Twitch to make sure the security was locked and loaded. He waved over Mickey and ordered him to run and get the bag of money from the safe. Mickey nodded and cut straight down the dance floor, bumping into couples who swayed left to right in one another’s arms.

Jesse pushed through people and waved his hands to shoo away the girls next to his brothers. Clyde’s face glistened from a thin layer of sweat and burned red with drink.

“It’s time,” Jesse said.

Rory and Clyde both shot up from their seats and swayed back-and-forth and bobbed up and down like buoys in the river. Jesse said a quick prayer under his breath. The Pike brothers cut through the party and Mickey met them at the threshold of the foyer with a duffel bag. Twitch caught up to them. He took the bag and its weight pulled his

arm to the earth.

Jesse turned to Mickey. "Tell the band to switch to up-tempo music for a while."

Jesse wanted to make sure if things got loud, they'd at least have some noise blanketing their conversation. The music and chatter lowered from a ruckus to faint noises as they approached the east parlor threshold. A bouncer guarded the doorway with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

The Pike Boys walked into the east parlor where several men waited for their arrival. Jesse greeted everyone with "Fellas" and made the rounds to shake hands, starting first with the man leaning against the wall by the fireplace, Hymie.

"Took you long enough," Hymie said. Jesse forced a smile.

Hymie had yellowish teeth and big, clammy hands Jesse couldn't wait to let go of. It wasn't a secret Jesse hated Hymie. He was Big Sal's longtime partner, preferred hitman, and personal attack dog. Hymie had gray, thin hair spread on his head, along with a pot belly developed after years as a baker stretching his cheap suit to its limits. He also always had a toothpick dangling from his mouth. He used the picks to tell if the centers of cupcakes and other delicacies were done baking. The joke around the city was that his fat ass kept the picks there so he could constantly have the flavors on his tongue. No one ever said it to his face though. Hymie picked at his nails and cursed under his breath in Yiddish as Jesse and the rest walked past. Jesse

ignored him and walked over to Davy, who sat at a table by himself.

Jesse patted Davy on the shoulder and introduced him to Clyde, who hesitated to take Davy's hand, looking him up and down. "He's an associate I met after you went in," Jesse said, sensing Clyde's hesitance. "He's a good man."

Clyde loosened up some and took Davy's hand. Davy took the suspicion in stride and introduced himself.

Next was Sal Jr. AKA Junior. Junior sat at a table with two of the Bianchi gunmen next to him. Their names were Donny or Luca or some other Sicilian shit Jesse could never remember. He acknowledged them, then went to Junior. Jesse reached out his hand. Junior did everything in his power to make Jesse's hand hang for a while before he ever acknowledged it. He sat back against the table, his elbows resting firmly against it, with his wrist up in the air like he was interested in the time on his watch. Junior had the attitude of a scorned cat; a level of passive aggression toward Jesse that no woman could ever parallel. His face was almost in a permanent pout like a little boy who'd been told no one too many times. Which—Jesse knew—Junior was lucky if he was told no, and not beat over the head by his father altogether.

Jesse gritted his teeth and kept his hand in Junior's face. Junior eventually huffed and gave Jesse a dead fish handshake, something you'd do to a child so that you wouldn't crush their hand. Last but not least, sitting opposite Junior on the other side of the table, was Salvatore "Big Sal" Bianchi.

Jesse smiled wide. He walked toward him while Clyde, Rory, and Twitch completed small talk behind him. His surrogate father had a jovial smile. Sal placed his frail, veiny hands on the top of his cane and tried to stand up, but Jesse put his hands out to tell him to stay sitting.

“No, no, no,” Sal said. “I’m old, not an imbecile. I can stand up on my own.”

Jesse stood back and watched the man who used to scare him shitless struggle to stand up unaided. His knees buckled and he let out strained groans like needles were stabbing him in his joints. He hobbled over, his cane clicking the ground in stride with his steps.

“Come here, come here,” Sal said.

Jesse embraced him with a hug and felt the bones under the thick layers of coats. Jesse couldn’t believe how bad he was getting. He’d dropped at least eight pounds in the month since they’d seen each other.

“Good to see you too,” Jesse said.

Jesse made small talk with Sal for a little, asking how Mrs. Bianchi was, how the doctors’ visits had been, all while the sound of the music from the party drifted into the middle of their conversation. The small talk dissipated. The men moved to tables in the middle of the room.

“Welcome home, boy,” Sal said to Clyde.

Clyde responded with a whiskey hiccup and a nod. Clyde, Twitch, and Rory sat at a circular table by themselves while the other men split up amongst the other two nearest tables.

“So, other than this party,” Davy said. “Any other reason



we here?"

Jesse grinned. He motioned toward Twitch to open the duffle bag. The handle strained at its ends as Twitch flipped the bag over and caused an avalanche of money, 5 figures total, to slide out and shake the unlevelled table. College funds, retirement funds, investment capital, all right there on that table. Davy's jaw dropped. Hymie sat at the edge of his seat. Big Sal stood and walked over to the table. He gave Jesse a kiss on both cheeks. Junior rolled his eyes.

"This is from the second shipment," Jesse said.

Sal went back to his seat. "The out of state contacts really bought that much?"

"Yes. And we have more. Way more."

The Volstead Act was meant to stop the "evils" of drinking—or so the bigwigs in D.C. thought. All it did was make a fifty-cent bottle of wine worth \$2 and a nickel drink worth a quarter. And with the large shipment of stolen liquor Jesse had in storage, he'd make 7 times the money as someone who made booze themselves or got it imported. Rory divided the money into portions equivalent to everyone's stake in the job and handed it out.

Davy got a portion for providing the out of state contacts and logistics. Big Sal got a portion for providing the capital for both Rudy Thompson's payoff and for access to transportation of the booze out of the state. Big Sal then divvied the money up amongst Hymie and Junior, then Junior to his gunmen. Sal asked Jesse, "Where's the honorable Councilman Thompson?"

"He didn't think it would be best to be seen with us."

“It’s probably smart—what about what we talked about earlier?”

“The ‘Golden Boy’? He’s a non-issue.”

“How you know that?”

Jesse rubbed his nose. “He’s a reformer. They never win.”

“Until they do,” snapped Junior.

Hymie chuckled to himself. “I can always just...” Hymie turned his fingers into gun barrels and laughed hard enough to make everyone in the room feel uncomfortable.

Jesse knew it was no joke though. Everyone knew one thing about Hymie: he’d go to the hospice and put a fucking pillow over his own mother’s face if he thought she’d snitch.

Sal slapped Hymie on the shoulder. “Now, now. Enough of that.”

Jesse sighed. “Fine. I’ll go check in with Rudy tomorrow and see what he has on the guy.”

Jesse felt like it was a moot point. But if looking into the guy would make Sal get off his back and free him up to work on his restaurant, he’d do it. Jesse composed himself and looked to Clyde for this next part. “There is another announcement.” Everyone’s eyes came from their money stacks and straight to him. “As of tonight, I’m out. I’ll stay on in an advisory capacity for the time being, and continue to take my cuts of these shipments, but Clyde will be taking over from here on out.”

Time froze. No breathing, movement, or signs of life could be seen or heard.

Sal fidgeted. “Why?”

“Clyde’s capable,” Jesse said. He pointed his hand toward Clyde, regretting the decision after seeing Clyde was still drunk. “And I just think it’s time.”

Junior responded with a dismissive snicker. His father barked, “You shut the hell up.” Junior shrunk back in his seat. “What is it time for?”

Jesse shrugged. “Something else.”

Clyde stood and cleared his throat. “I didn’t know I needed permission from any of you.”

Clyde eyed daggers at every person in the room. Sal’s brows furrowed. Jesse saw Hymie’s hand move near the bulge in his coat. The gunmen alongside Junior took his cue to do the same. Twitch eyed Jesse, looking for any indication the situation would grow dire.

Sal let out a hefty laugh. A laugh strong enough to force the men around him to move their hands from their coats and join in.

Sal pointed at Clyde. “You’re grown. You don’t need my permission for anything.”

Jesse could see through Sal’s laugh and saw he was pissed. Under Jesse’s control, the Pike Boys went from stickup men and hijackers to business owners. The liquor scheme wasn’t the first time Jesse’s connections netted those men money and serious work. Jesse created an environment where businessmen and gangsters could cohabitate, which meant big things for everyone in that room, which meant if Jesse left then their connections did too. Jesse also knew Sal wanted him to be a consultant to the Bianchi family one day. He never said it outright, but he

alluded to it every chance he got at their once frequent cafe meetings. Sal wasn't getting any younger, and he needed to make sure the New Orleans faction of the Bianchi family thrived after him. Jesse looked at Junior. Junior smirked—because when Big Sal died now, he would be the sole leader of the Bianchi family, and his father's little pet would have no involvement.

Jesse played it cool. "Like I said, I'll see this venture through to the end the best I can. After that, Clyde's your man."

The men gave reluctant nods of approval. Everyone stood. Davy was the first to leave. Sal walked over and stopped to place a hand on Clyde's shoulder. "Why don't y'all come by the shop sometime, eh? We'll have dinner like old days."

Clyde nodded noncommittally.

Sal walked out and his men followed behind. Junior glared at Jesse the whole time he walked past. Hymie followed last and stopped at the threshold, turning with a confused look on his face, like he was trying to remember something on the tip of his tongue. He snapped his fingers and turned to the Pikes. "Remember when you guys used to shine our shoes?"

He looked around and nodded with a grin at the paintings on the wall, the piano in the corner, and the foreign décor. Hymie chuckled, then said, "I remember."

Jesse bit his tongue. "We've come a long way since then."

"That's all I was saying, kid," Hymie said. "But my shoes sure miss ya." He cackled all the way out the parlor and

down the outside steps. The Pikes were alone in the room now.

“Fuck him,” said Rory with his fist at his side. “We’re not children anymore.”

Twitch nodded in agreement. Clyde stood at the table with a dejected, annoyed look on his face.

“It doesn’t help that y’all couldn’t even wait until after the meeting to get sauced,” said Jesse.

Rory grew defensive. “You were fucking drinking too.” Jesse put up two fingers to indicate the number of drinks he had. Clyde looked at the ground.

“What’s eating you?” Jesse asked.

Clyde left the room without a word.

Jesse followed him back into the party and tried to chase him down, but before he could reach him, Cindy stepped in his way, and she had tears in her eyes.

“We need you,” she said. “And now.”

Jesse decided to leave the Clyde situation for later.

Jesse walked over to an area sequestered from the rest of the party with a cigarette pursed in his lips, where Mickey, Madam Eve, and Cindy huddled around a girl sitting on a plush bench with her hands clasped to her face. Jesse asked her to move her hands, and his stomach turned in knots. She was bruised, black and blue spots stretched across her face, her eye completely shut and swollen, with webs of pulsating veins spreading across the eyelid.

Madam Eve stepped up to Jesse and shoved his shoulder. “You and your boys are supposed to stop this type of stuff from happening.”

The words cut through Jesse like a blade. He rubbed the wounded girl's cheek and told Mickey to get her to a doctor, then to home.

Jesse stood, rubbed the back of his head, and blew thick plumes of smoke in the air. "I'll fix it."

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The room was dim and bare, nothing more than a loose hanging light bulb swinging free from a fixture and years of caked burgundy stains soaked into the wood floor. A man sat in an old chair in the middle of the room, his head low and tears rolling out his eyes and his face a mask of fear and anxiety. Rory and Twitch flanked him. The man's forehead had a wide gaping scar that yawned open each time he moved. Blood poured from his busted lip and left a bib of red around his shirt's collar. Jesse stood cool and casual in front of the man with a cigarette pinched in between his fingers. Jesse took a stiff toke, mushroomed out a cloud, then laid a light smack on the man's face. "Get yourself together."

"I've learned my lesson," the man said. His words came out like he was speaking with a mouth full of peanut butter; like he accidentally bit his tongue while getting worked over by the bouncers in the alley.

"Did you really?" Jesse asked.

The man nodded. He sniffed up some loose snot then ran his sleeve against his nose. A streak of blood soaked into his shirt. "My uncle, he's—he's O'Grady; might know him as 'The Greek.' Ever heard of him?"

Jesse had. The Greek was a dope-dealing scumbag with

no huge connections. He ran a crew known as “The Riverfront Clubbers.” But Jesse shrugged and told the man, “No.” The Greek had nothing Jesse wanted.

Jesse looked at Twitch, then back at the man. Twitch's body moved in Jesse's peripheral, a big blob shifting further from Jesse's view into the corner of the room.

“Ok,” Jesse shrugged. “Well if you say you learned your lesson, I guess I believe you.”

Jesse reached out his hand, letting the man know everything was fine. The man hesitated, but he finally took Jesse's hand and stood. Jesse smiled. The man strained through the pain to grin. Jesse's smile shifted to a frown.

A rope looped over the man's head and wrapped around his neck. Jesse clamped down on his wrist with both hands. The man flailed around, unsure whether he should relieve the pressure being applied to his throat or the pressure being applied to his wrist. They dragged the man, gurgling, kicking, unable to scream, to a table, and forced his right hand flat.

“Come on,” Jesse said. “Just put your fucking hand on the table. Come on.”

Jesse put all his weight into holding the man down. Rory pulled on the rope tighter, twisting his wrist and turning his body to keep a scream from escaping the man's throat.

Twitch came over with a mallet and handed it to Jesse. Twitch took a towel from his pocket and stuffed it in the man's mouth with three fingers, making sure it got right in the back of his throat. Jesse raised the mallet, took a deep breath, and swung it down.

He hammered until the man's fingers plunged backward at the joints, bending them in the opposite direction and forcing them to make a wet, snapping noise. Jesse swung until the legs of the table wobbled; until veins in the man's neck swelled; until animalistic groans from his throat were hardly drowned out by the loud music from the party outside. The man twisted and writhed, groaned and trembled, but Jesse wouldn't stop. He kept swinging until he hyperventilated and until his adrenaline hit a point where he no longer felt in control. When Jesse was done, the man's hand was a bag of shrapnel. Jesse loosened his grasp and the mallet slid from his hand and clattered to the floor. The man fainted. Rory and Twitch held the man up and took him toward a back door to an alley behind the brothel.

Jesse went to a mirror to fasten his suit. His face was hard and angry. He fastened his tie, but never removed his gaze from his reflection. His mother always said he had his father's eyes. They were capable of holding such gentleness, until they turned hard. Those eyes stared back at him right now. But no, he wasn't his father, he told himself. He wasn't a thug, not anymore. He pulled the knot closed and meditated on what Big Sal once taught him: "As soon as the wolves come to your door, they bring the whole pack with them." He wasn't a monster. He was keeping the other beasts away.

Jesse opened the door. A hallway separated the makeshift torture room from the rest of the establishment. It made it easier to put distance between who he was to his guests, and who he was when in that room. He made sure



to take short, measured steps to compose himself, catch his breath, and slip on his prize-winning charm. He stopped at the door, placed his hand on the knob, took several deep breaths, and walked back into the party with a smile on his face. He walked past a man going to town with his saxophone and shot him a thumbs-up. He winked at a customer or two along his route to reach Clyde.

Jesse spread his hands. "You A-OK?"

Clyde stared down at his glass like he'd find an answer in it. Jesse opened his mouth to apologize, but Cindy called for him. She was a few tables over, with well-dressed men who Jesse could only assume were of the white-collar variety. Cindy waved repeatedly for him to come over, and he put up one finger to let her know he'd be a moment.

Clyde took big gulps of his drink and stared into nothingness. "Just go ahead."

"You can come, you know," Jesse said.

Clyde shook his head. Jesse, who felt at a loss, turned away from his brother, and decided he'd try again later.

Clyde's vice-like grip clamped Jesse's wrist. "Your friends over there know the real you, Mr. Businessman?"

Jesse's eyes followed Clyde's gaze to his cuffs. There were specks of blood around them. Tiny dots that were supposed to remain in the backroom, and not follow him into this part of his life. Jesse snatched his hand away from Clyde and walked away.

Jesse took a seat at the round table right next to Cindy and joined in a conversation he inferred was comical in nature. Cindy made the effort of introducing Jesse to her

## THE PIKE BOYS

new friends, some out-of-towners in New Orleans on business. One of the men leaned over to shake Jesse's hand. Jesse slowly lifted his arm, but the specks of blood caught his eye. He tucked his shirt cuff deep into his jacket sleeve. After all introductions were done, Jesse slipped on a wide, good-humored, politician-like smile, and began his routine. "So, a man says to a pastor..."



# A b o u t t h e A u t h o r

By day Danny Cherry Jr. is a Customer Service Representative and caffeine-addled office-drone with an MBA. But by night, he writes political and personal essays; op-eds; novels; narrative nonfiction; and short stories. He has written for BuzzFeed News, Politico, The Daily Beast, Truly\*Adventurous, Transformation Magazine, X- ray Lit Mag, Fiyah Lit Mag, Ploughshares, Antigravity Magazine, Apex Magazine, and Hexagon Magazine, as well as a few dozen blog posts on Medium.com. His short story, “Brief Life Story of Lila,” was shortlisted for Best American Sci-fi and Fantasy 2023, and Locus Magazine’s “must read” for 2023.

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The last people I want to acknowledge are my readers.  
Without you, my words would just fade into a void.

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