

*Though all roads lead to the same destination, the route chosen determines the quality of the journey.*

Karma Tea

## Prologue

May 1955

Dead Weight

The sign etched on the front window read *Saldano's Cleaners Since 1912*. Joseph Saldano, Jr. flipped the "Open" sign to "Closed," then quickly returned to the back room.

Aghast, he looked around at the tables and chairs overturned, a mist of scarlet on one wall, Carlo sprawled facedown in a puddle of it.

"Jesus Christ, Martin. What am I supposed to do here?"

"Get rid of it, Joe," the man said, lighting a cigarette.

"But Martin ..."

"Get rid of it, Joe. You own the cleaners, so clean." Martin took a deep drag off his cigarette, squinting his porcine eyes against the smoke as he exhaled. "You know, I'm no cheapskate," he went on. "Tell me, Joe, aren't I treating you right?"

Joe nodded. The man wasn't, but under the circumstances this was not the time to bring up the question of a ... raise, for lack of a better word.

"Damn straight." Martin offered Joe a cigarette, lit it with the snap of his lighter. "I was treating Carlo right too. If the man needed an advance, say, for some good reason, I'd a given it to him. He didn't have to go and skim the cream; you know what I'm saying? That was just wrong, Joe, and an insult. Carlo insulted me, badly."

Joe inhaled deeply, blew the smoke out towards the ceiling, then took another drag.

"So, how's that kid of yours, Joe. What's her name again?"

"Liliana."

"Yeah, Liliana. Pretty name. And your wife? I always wondered how a guy like you got a good-looking babe like that." Chuckling, he poked him in the

ribs. "You must be doing something right." He flicked his half-smoked cigarette to the floor. "So, everybody's good?"

"Fine, Martin. Everybody's fine."

"Glad to hear it." Smiling, Martin looked down at Joe's shoes, black and white wingtips with classic tooling on the toes. "Nice shoes, by the way. Where'd you get 'em?"

Confused, Joe looked down at his feet. "My shoes? Florsheim's."

"Florsheim's, eh? Figures. Well, you're a good man, Joe," he said clapping him on the cheek. He pointed to Carlo, then adjusted his balls. "Now, get rid of it."

Joe heard the bell over the door ding as Martin exited. Hands shaking, he looked around the room again. What the hell was he supposed to do now? A guy like that should have some kind of stooge to clean up his messes, he thought, then realized with a shock that Martin had him.

He stepped on the smoldering cigarette, righted one of the chairs, collected a flung ashtray, and sat, head in hands. Was it too much to ask, he wanted to know. A nice house in a nice neighborhood, a little extra for a trip to San Diego in July when the kid can't even play outside because it's 110? Was it wrong to want your wife and kid to dress nice? So he bought a new Chevy truck for the business, and yes, Florsheim shoes. Did that make him a bad human being? He took a last drag on his cigarette, then crushed it in the ashtray.

He had been operating Saldano's Cleaners on Drachman since his father's death twelve years ago, but for the past two years or so, the shop had not been his only source of income. Gambling tables and the numbers racket run from the back room of the shop, packages he accepted and passed along — no questions asked — small shit like that, provided the nice bump in income needed for all the little extras he, and especially his wife, Glory, enjoyed.

Looking down at Carlo, he regretted it now, regretted being caught under the heel of Martin the Bat Battaglia, a thug and some kind of shirttail relative of Capo Joe Bonanno himself.

Jesus. "Get rid of it," Martin told him, as if Carlo were no more than a dog. It was true, Carlo was a chiseler, but he was a human being, for God's sake. The guy had been to the house many times on Martin's bidding, and every time Carlo had given a Tootsie Pop to Joe's little girl. "Uncle Carlo," she'd called him.

He looked around the room, three tables, twelve chairs, and a dead body.

He banged his forehead lightly on the table. What was he supposed to do with the body? The cleanup alone. And it wasn't just blood. Shot in the face at close range.

In the corner of the room was a secondhand Persian rug. See, secondhand, he was not a spendthrift. He'd bought it at the Saint Vincent de Paul's over on Sixth Ave. It was in pretty good shape, that rug. He had planned to clean it, then put it down in his own living room, it was that good.

Slowly he rose from the chair. Such a beautiful rug, but at the moment he could think of no other solution. He unrolled it now and laid it out alongside Carlo. Grunting, he pulled the body onto the rug. The man was scrawny; couldn't weigh more than 120, 130 max, but he was dead weight. Dead weight, he smiled at his joke. Joke, that's what his life had become, one big joke.

Moments later, he pushed the dolly he used to transport cleaning supplies from his shop and positioned it behind the bed of the Chevy parked in the alley in back of the cleaners. Even if somebody saw him, it was only a rug. Cleaners cleaned rugs, right? Sometimes they might even deliver the rug to the customer. The trick was to make it look like it was only a rug.

January 2012

Drive-by

Mama T, wrapped in a blanket and sporting laceless tennis shoes, a pair of dusty black trousers and a bright pink knitted cap, trundled down 14<sup>th</sup> Street. The radio wired to her grocery cart was tuned, as always, to Radio Caliente and a *cumbia* bled into the dusk.

The cart held all the things she needed. There wasn't that much. A grimy sleeping bag, a yoga mat, and a three-foot tall plaster statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe with her star-spangled blue cape and roses. The old woman had wrapped *La Virgen* in a beach towel to keep her warm.

Earlier she'd been given a brown bag with a sandwich (probably bologna), an orange, a granola bar, and a bottle of Gatorade. Under the sleeping bag was a half-pint of whisky. The bottle said Jim Beam, but she knew that it was not. You don't get a half-pint of Jim Beam for two dollars. She only hoped that it wasn't watered down. Most folks knew better. She'd put a hex on any man who cheated her too bad, make his pee-pee go limp for weeks at a time. Yes, she'd done that and more many times before, and folks knew not to cheat her.

She passed a small boy on a bike that was too big and a big boy on a bike that was too small. Both were laughing, either at her or themselves, she couldn't tell. In response, she did a little dance for them, shuffling her feet and waggling her hips in time to the music. The boys waved, thinking she was hilarious. Smiling, she continued down the street.

As she turned west onto Maple, she paused. Despite the evening chill, light and banda music spilled from the open windows of a house in the middle of the block. A few people were gathered on the porch. Two men lounged against a late-model sedan, she didn't know what kind, but it was a nice car, one she would have been happy to sleep in. She thought about joining them. They might fill a plate for her, hand her a beer maybe, and they could all dance — but it was cold, her feet ached, and she was tired. She still had a ways to go, so she set her jaw and pushed forward.

From behind her, she felt, as much as heard, the throbbing bass of gangster rap. It drowned out even the brass of the banda and made her cart and her few remaining teeth rattle. She hunched her shoulders against the noise. "*Aye, chingado,*" how she hated that bass.

She turned to see the source of the noise, a big black truck of some sort, she could see that, with giant tires and lots of chrome. As the truck passed, the driver, a *chamaco* from the barrio she'd known since he could not wipe his own ass, turned toward her. Jesus was his first name. She couldn't remember his last. He didn't greet her as he should, but merely shook his head the tiniest bit.

As the truck passed the party house, it slowed, bass pounding, pounding, then *pop, pop, pop*. Firecrackers, she thought, tossed from the passenger window, but then the loungers slipped to the ground like two fried eggs from frying pan to plate.

The truck peeled out, leaving Mama T in a cloud of exhaust, she was that close. As fast as her feet would carry her, she retraced her steps back toward 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

When the cops arrived, she wanted to be far, far away.

May 2020

She Slips Away

DeShanna stuffed a couple of extra panties in her purse. Antwan had told her that she didn't need to bring a thing, but these were her favorites. The clock on her bedside read 2:40. He would be here any minute. Carefully, she

shoved the window open. She would need Antwan to remove the screen so she could crawl out.

Her chest felt like a mouse was skittering around in there. She almost closed the window, then thought of her parents. She loved them, but they were so strict and churchy. She couldn't do a single thing. No make-up, no parties, no boys, no nothing. And the clothes they made her wear! She had to roll the waistbands of her skirts just to hike them above her knee. It was embarrassing. When she tried to talk to her parents, she cried and sometimes yelled. They always started with *as long as you're living under our roof*, and, if she didn't shut up, it ended with *Go to your room*. Well, she wouldn't be living under their roof anymore, and they'd be sorry.

She'd met Antwan in Algebra. He made her laugh, passing notes — she wasn't allowed to have a cell phone. She loved him, not boyfriend kind of love, at least not yet. Antwan said he was bi, but they'd deep-kissed once in the hall, and she figured that maybe when they lived in the same house ... Whatever, he was her very best friend. He had her back. He'd told her that, and she knew it was true.

Antwan was super good-looking with a peroxide blond fade, a beautiful smile, and fine clothes. It was his smile that first got her, that, and his eyes. They were warm, golden-brown. She trusted those eyes. He was already making good money as a model, which was why he missed so much school. He told her how pretty she was, how Lila, the white woman he lived with, would get her modeling gigs too, how she'd make enough money to do whatever she wanted to do, how she deserved a little fun. They'd all live together and share everything.

Once she turned eighteen and was a successful model, or maybe even an actress by then, she'd drive up to her parents' house in a Corvette, or at least a Mustang. At first they'd be all mad, but when they saw that she'd done so good, they'd be proud.

She closed her eyes. Pictured how it would be. When she and Antwan hit the street, they'd be all hugs and giggles and high-fives. Lila would be waiting in her car around the corner, and DeShanna would begin her new life.

It had rained earlier, unusual for May. The air coming in through the open window was cool and damp. She pressed her forehead against the screen. It smelled of dust. She unlocked it, then reached for her navy-blue fleece jacket, a present from her sister, Rochelle, who was a freshman at Tougaloo College back in Mississippi. Rochelle hated Mississippi, hated the weather and the way folks talked, all southern, but it was a Christian college,

and her father said it was there or nowhere. Well, DeShanna was choosing nowhere.

She pulled on the fleece jacket so she'd be ready.