

## TONY SCRAM: MAFIA WHEELMAN

### 1.

The getaway driver had fifteen minutes to live. Even a desperate night couldn't rook an extra five. Tony Scram, smashed to Hades, vertigo buzzing. Buckshot sloshing his stomach. Blood oozing his lap.

Manhattan loomed. Parkway feeding into the Lincoln Tunnel. Speed limit, fifty. Watch the pin. Tony hit sixty, sixty three, thumbing cruise. Ten to thirteen stays under the radar. Fifteen, you might piss them off. Punch it higher, you're in a chase. They box the tube, he dies. Two minutes burned. Thirteen bubbled.

Tony zipped the dog leg in the helix. The Empire State Building huddled in a dark skyline to his left. A dive-bombing straight away, elbow right, the tunnel tolls.

An out of focus road. Warped, waving. The head gremlin busted in, tossing Scram's attic. Ripping wires, mashing brain

meat. Dancing in his belfry, now a mosh pit. One day I'll bag your ass, you high octane ball breaker. Don't piss the bugger off, he'll light a fuse, and really kick things off. Back to biz. One skull fucker at a time.

If he could only dime that angel. The one with the heister hots. Time, stitches, break out. All points bulletin for Saint Sonny Corleone.

Tony sailed the toll booth. Cops inspecting a box truck. Scram swerved, blitzing the tunnel. Twelve minutes. Worked this patch his entire career, now pushing seventy. A detour to the big bunk if he didn't snap it up.

The tube posted thirty-five, and a double stripe. No passing, watch your speed. They meant it. Scram jetted up to forty five. Play it safe. An open alley. *What do I got to lose?* Tony gunned the gas. The CTS catapulted. Strobe lights popped. High-def scoped.

If they had a hall of fame for heisters, they'd put Tony in the getaway wing. His own spread and mantle. Work rods boxed in velvet rope. Monitors squeezing off highlights. *Tony's Greatest Scrams*. Gift shop Blue-Rays. X-box editions for Christmas.

That Rockland County raid. The target, a gun shop. The cutter clipped a foul wire, ripping the alarm. They bolted ass, empty handed. A wolf pack of prowlers, high speed chase. Tony

shot over a pool of black ice. In the rear view, a NASCAR brew-ha. Black and white's spinning into a bumper car rally.

Tony buzzed the Tappan-Zee, hooked the Deegan, and reached the Bronx. The leader bitched, but forked Tony's fee in full. After all, he got them out, earning his pay. The rep expanded, beamed out wide: Tony Scram's the real deal.

Tony smoked the tunnel in a minute flat. No cops waiting for a stop. They recorded his tags. They mail the fines nowadays. A packet with pics. Another bullet dodged. Twelve minutes in the hopper. Tony banged the right onto Ninth Avenue. A flush of green lights. Ten minutes. Thirteen blocks. Eyeball any floating badge. Punch the reds, keep it wheeling.

Doctor C's the man. Bad, and city-wide. Big time cred in the gangster's handbook. The spread, the tools, the tables. An underground funhouse where bad guys bang out slugs, and bandage up. No records, phone calls, or fuzz. An all night stitch and swab, on the hush. Scram dialed a heads up.

"What's your blood type?" The doc asked.

"Low," Scram said.

"I'll figure it out. Get here as fast as you can."

His stomach, skinned, and torn. Every time Tony jimmied, he felt sharp pains. The exposed pulp, stinging as it rubbed his shirt. Never felt like this before. Never been hit with buckshot either.

Once, a stray bullet. One lousy slug. And wrecks, yeah. C stitched Tony up from those, and splinted a few bones along the way.

If Tony reeled, he'd loop his kid brother Nicky. They stole their first cars together. Jersey City juvies. Hot-wiring wheels, sailing joy rides. "If you guys were smart, you'd sell 'em," said Bobby, one of Mama Scram's derelict boy toys.

"Where do we do that?" Nicky asked. The boys quizzed. Bobby spammed the chop shop lingo. The boys dug in. Mother chopped Bobby.

Nicky would be sixty five himself if not for the VC's and Nam. Whacked in the siege at Khe-Sanh. Four minutes in pocket. He still had it.

No time to scope legit parking. Tony found a hydrant, and ditched the wheels. He popped the trunk, pulling a suitcase from the well. Scram stumbled into an alley, crashing a side door. One hand on the wall, the other, a railing. He let the suitcase tumble the steps, banging a tiled floor.

He was met by Doctor C, and two nurses. Not bad for a graveyard call. "Get him clean," C ordered the women. The nurses poured him onto an aluminum gurney, stripping his duds. The suds and bubbles job. Tony's plexus, a pelican's jaw. Floppy, folded, dimpled brown. The rest, burger meat. Black and blue pocks smeared his chest. The pellets. Shallow, scattered. A saline

rinse. The nurses shuffled Scram to a slab beneath a large octopus lamp. "I don't know if I could help. You lost a lot of blood," C laid law through a surgical mask. Rubber gloves snapped. A tray of sharp tools rolled up slab side.

"Do what you can," Tony said. Doctor C got down with it. A ball of road kill. The pellets burrowed in like termites. C wanted a skin graph. Tony, knock-off gas.

The nurses linked up the works. Bags, tubes, intravenous needles. C cut, pulled, and twisted. Another yank. Intestines snapping like elastic bands. Funny thing, Tony didn't think it a mistake by going into that hornet's nest. The bungle was getting struck.

Tony would have to cook up the get out of town scheme. A number of people wanted him, big time. Snatch and bag missions dispatched. Badge punching tickets to the pen. The wise guy's, their funky grinders.

The bloody suitcase, stuffed with mean green. Enough wool to cash out the rest of his days, no doubt. *C'mon C, you could do it.* A nurse prepped the mask. The battery pumped gas. Scram shut his eyes. C dug in. Flaying flesh, pruning pellets.

Saint Santino shook the dice. Maybe the gremlin had enough and bolted. He's got hot hands, that Sonny. Especially in a pinch. Maybe he'd break out the loaded cubes. Maybe.

Scram went under. Diving deep and dark. Into the fathoms of beginning and past...

2.

The crime father worked it atop the Jersey Palisades. Nested over the Hudson like a predator's crib. Leo ran a farm system for criminals. He torqued info, packaged scores, and cherry-picked teams to rip hide.

Tony popped in, playing the straggler angle. That extra gun to fill out a tight foursome. Reliable, cool headed, a team player. Leo ran a members only, not a union hall. Backers financing a heist, jewelers louping hot stones. Big shot mobsters dropping in to shoot the breeze. The old man, plugged in, big time. Tony was among the few drones welcome in the kahuna's hive.

The spread, Euro villa. Cream stucco walls, arches, wrap

around terrace. A Spanish tiled roof, candy apple under moon light. Cobble stoned paths, gardens, and statues. Those old school wops. Gardens and granite. No pit bulls or gunslingers. Nothing to guard the joint, except Caesar, his cronies, garlic bulbs and basil.

Tony was greeted by a curvy Asian woman in a tangy robe and flip flops. Shiny black hair, the wing of a rain forest bird. "Mister Leo, this way," she said, and wiggled off. Tony zoomed silk, tailing with a cane. The last job detoured, putting two in the death house, pinching the third.

Still in pain, he hobbled through Leo's sports lounge. A room big enough to box a small basketball court. A pool table sat in the middle. Off to the side, pinball machines. Another pouched ping-pong, air hockey tables, and dart boards. Leather chairs and couches, large and foamy, fanned a corner of TV tubes. Bootleg broadcasts. Closed-circuit fights, NFL games off the radar, patched in.

Large portraits tiled the walls. Warhol-like stuff. Pop icons smeared in neon. Prints of jazz musicians on one wall, athletes on the other. Tony eyeballed the jocks. Marciano, Namath, and DiMaggio. Jim Brown, Johnny U, Lombardi. The jazz wall riffed Coltrane, Parker, Miles, and Monk. The musicians anchored by Satchmo's cheeks, blowing brass.

Tony passed the pool table, whiffing chlorine as they reached

Ali taunting Liston. The city skyline loomed. Hemmed in by large, wide-screen windows. The Asian chick slipped out of sight, as Tony caned it up to Leo, floating in a Jacuzzi. Jet lagged from Mars, taking his first steps back to the carnie tent.

"What the hell do you want?" Leo said. Leo had a pug nose, pocked cheeks, and thick glasses. Old tattoos, now green blotches, smeared his forearms. Anchors and distorted gun ships from the Pacific theater. Guadalcanal, Midway, Leyte Gulf.

"What else? A job," Tony answered.

"You're in no shape to work," Leo said.

"You have a benefits program?" Leo laughed.

"You think about that thing?" Leo asked.

"What thing?"

"That thing we talked about last time. Or did you forget, on account the wreck messed your head up?"

"Oh yeah, that thing." Leo got Tony in the tub. They talked, laughed, and sipped tumblers. The heat stung Tony at first. The bubbles and jets groped. Tony feeling better. Leo shifted gears, getting back to that *thing*.

"Anybody could aim a shotgun and put on a rubber mask. I'm lookin' for drivers. The money's no good if you can't get it to the bank."

"I hear ya."

"No you don't. Crews are dryin' up. Sure there's work. There's always work. But I got guys goin' down. Pinched, you know what I'm sayin' here?"

Sandlot baseball. The scrubby kid that couldn't field, run, or hit for shit. Can't deep-six him, you're short of bodies. You stuck his ass in right field. The getaway gig. Flat rates, chump change, while the cowboys yahoo it towards sundown.

"You have to make it sexy." Three hot chicks in bikinis skipped into the jack. Somebody dug the old man's pitch.

"Let me ask you a question. Whenever you have to lay low, and play it straight, what kind of job do you get?"

"What else, I drive."

"That's my point, kid. They make good money. Besides, being a cab driver, you already have more to offer than most guys," Leo poked cubes, and fingered his Wild Turkey. Below the foamed surface, he poked something else. One of the bunnies giggled.

"I never did it before."

"There's too much risk in the other stuff." Leo cut the comic relief, refocusing on the thing. Learn something. The old man hawked. A down to business switch. The bikinis, spliced from the scene.

"They don't make as much money as a stick-up guy," Tony

said. Leo lit up.

"Listen to me, you rock head. Drivers get a fee. It's understood by everybody. The crews, the cops, and even the D. A's. You're an accomplice, unless you fuck somebody up like that stunad, they ain't throwin' the book at ya."

Of all the cats in this game, the drivers talk the most shit. They all brew the meanest moonshine. Of course. Until they saddle up, and the action starts.

The last guy, Mario Andretti on harmones. Hot dog Harry tore a light, turning Queens Boulevard into the 500. The party ended when he ripped the ride into a concrete pillar. Battered to hell, Tony hocked a novena from god knows where. An angel with heister hots picked a hood where they cheer bad guys.

Tony staggered hell's highway. Dodging three lanes before slipping onto the subway. No eyeballs to point the route. Memories unable to flesh out a police sketch. One guy kicked on impact. Another died in the shell of an ambo. Speedy survived, mailed off to crank license plates.

Tony's bone chips floating in fluid. Scars, tendons, stretched and torn. Joints grinding to hitch sockets from the smooth, good old days. *Man, this hot tub's crankin'.*

The guy before speedy, super jack ass. Putz boy grabbed the Major Deegan. Swollen traffic choking the bolt. Strangled in

bumper to bumper, convoys cock-blocking exit ramps. When retardo finally squirmed in, a road crew had the alley coned off. Tony jumped. With a gym bag full of loot, he scaled a highway fence, and flagged a cab.

After Tony applied, he started behind the dash. Leo took a liking to *the kid*. Tony started as a hired gun, riding shotgun. Wheeling Leo around. Dinners, sit-downs, and dates. Soon after, Tony started to drive.

When a wannabe ambushed, Tony took the bullet. Wise guys smoked the trigger before scooping up Scram. They shuttled him to Doctor C's. C pulled the bullet, and Leo air-mailed Tony to heal in Palm Beach. What a spread that was. The Kennedy's zigged north, Eric Clapton zagged south.

Tony healed, and returned to New Jersey. He developed the scratch for more loot. Another detour.

"Listen to me. The best drivers are the ones who are loyal. Outrunning the cops, that's only part of it. I'm more impressed with a guy that sticks."

"I never looked at it that way," Tony said.

"Your job's not the job, so to speak. It's everything else. The car, the route, the back and forth. Of course the freight, and the men. My men." Leo laced into Tony. The old man meant business. An old school hard ass.

"Pick one of the girls. I got rooms all over the house. Have yourself a time."

"Not tonight."

"Whatever. You're free to stay, hang out, you know?"

"Thanks. I want the job, Leo."

"It's the best move you could make, kid. You'll see."

Tony, on the way home, drove himself. His pal Whitey, offered to take him. Tony declined. A stubborn independence. Maybe he was made to drive. Besides, he never felt comfortable about bringing anybody along, even if chilling outside the grounds.

He got to thinking. The new gig. New direction. The old man too. What he had, was anybody's guess, but he *had it*. Tony pictured that young guy in the Pacific atolls. Blitzing beaches, charging hills. Crashing dark, dense jungles. No clue what's waiting for you. Man, that takes some pair of stones. Mobsters lined up to follow this man. No wonder.

The old man made it clear. The wheelman anchors the job. Even when the *fit hits the shan*, he's the point man. You hang tight. The job, the car, the merch, and the men. The wheeler's iron cross. Jobs get baked. It's part of the game. Leo knows this. Big-time lawyers on deck.

Tony heard the stories of skittish drivers. Guys who bolted during trouble, leaving crews stranded on location. If a driver

runs, he better not stop. Leo caught this guy. A cousin of a connected goodfella. He went easy. The guy had problems walking for awhile. He recovered and retired, with a permanent limp. The dudes before him walked fine. Their issues had more to do with breathing.

### 3.

The old man knew his shit. The kid turned out alright. The gigs nifty. Tony was reliable, and professional. He'd match the car to the job, and pick discreet locales to hash details. Tony never cooked up a demo when meeting a crew. Like that scene in *Driver*, where Ryan O'Neal goes bat shit in a parking garage. Guys spitting up, dizzy, and juiced. *Man, we better hire this guy if we want that loot.*

Tony learned to drive through time and miles. Years behind the meter, peeling city streets. The million miles of pavement, it seemed. Every town, inch of road. Every stop sign, and yield post. One ways, highways, and ramps. Scram wasn't a stuntman, or stock car racer. Hell, he wasn't even the fastest.

He worked his ass off. Learning the cars. Learning the road. The hours of shift-work, all behind a wheel. Time and prep. AM radio only. Constant traffic reports. Three every ten minutes. *1010 WINS* on the ones. Twist the dial for the fives, pop the trifecta with the eights. Updates around the clock. Accidents, construction, closures. Heads up on any over night projects, rerouted traffic, run offs, trouble spots. You want the *British Invasion*, pull the job, and hire a tribute band.

In Westchester, Tony wheeled a home invasion. The joint resembled a country club. He made the hit in a four door Chevy Chevelle. Tony had the pep boys unload the granny engine, and replace it with a big block. Eight bad-ass cylinders, bored out. The pit team welded in metal slabs, extra pipes to cradle the big boss. They also installed heavy duty air shocks, and a dual exhaust system. On the outside, a family sedan. In the bolts, a freakazoid.

Trunk full of goodies, Tony scrambled towards the Hutchinson River Parkway, a few miles out. A dog leg ahead, zip the slight bend, up and down a hill. Cool the engines, coast the banks. Home free.

Back at the ranch, a maid holed up in the attic. She ducked the raid, horning the fuzz. A squad car popped into Tony's rearview. Pacing Tony for a quarter mile. No biggie, just an escort. That's when a buddy creped from a cross street. One's a

shadow. Two's a stop.

Tony punched the gas. Rack lights flashed, patrol cars zoomed. The Chevelle launched. The cop cars in Tony's rearview, shrunk to Matchbox scale. Tony burned the crest of the hill, and started to dive. The gray hide of the Hutch, a dry river bottom, snaking wide right. Once he grabbed it, these punks were smoke.

Midway down, two more squad cars. Rack lights whirled. Snout to snout, blocking the road. Dark duds bunkered behind the prowlers. Each hanging twelve gauge. Super-fuzz hair cuts and aviators. Scram zoomed in.

Tony pressed the pedal. An incoming comet. Like a zillion Hollywood shots, he aimed to pierce the grills. Great. A debris field of glass, plastic, and twisted metal. Gun shots to go. Flat tires, and a busted radiator wouldn't get them out of town either. The better odds of an impact.

A track of cream gravel hugged the shoulder. A shallow ravine carved a three foot ditch, just past the gravel. That thing ran both sides of the street, up to the rails guarding woods. Fifty feet from impact, the studs meant biz.

The barrels locked in. Tony jerked the wheel left. Clouds of gun smoke. The windshield spider webbed. The officers pumped again. Tony slashed, cutting right.

He did it perfect. So did the cops.

The front wheels hit grass, the rear jimmied. *Shit.* Quarter panel buck shot slammed the ride. Tony sailed the blockade. He steered back to the road, rear wheels skidding. More pellets. A rear window exploded, blasting glass like popcorn. The guy behind Tony cupped his neck. His blood smeared the rear window. The second badge aimed at the front wheel, hard on for a flat tire. He nailed the top of the wheel well, sending sparks and pellets in a swirl. A hubcap sailed. Loose buckshot hit the metal of the wheel, sparing rubber.

Tony, unnerved, cut the wheel. The ass fishtailed. His rear wheels bit the gravel, launching a giant cloud of kitty litter. Tony straightened out. He floored the gas, unleashing the six pack of carburetors. The horsepower erupted, rocketing the Chevelle through a sandy dust cone.

The two tails hit the bottom of the hill. One cop cut left, skidding the gravel. His rear wheels lost traction, digging the lip of the ravine. He cut the wheel, ramming his snout into the ditch. He spun the wheels some more, slamming the shifter. *Reverse, Drive, Reverse.* A tyke in a *Big Wheel*, navigating a bath tub.

The second tail followed Tony. He cut the corner too wide. The front end grazed the lip of the ravine, springing the front end. The physics released, and spun the car like a mower blade. He managed a few twirls, before ass landing softly in the ditch, front

wheels, airborne.

Tony kept the pedal pressed, ripping the Hutch at ninety-five. Two more cop cars got in on it, chasing Tony onto the highway. In seconds, he slalomed the Chevelle through light traffic topping a hundred. The speed gave one of the blues the shakes. He bailed. His partner in heat floored it. He clipped a Ford Pinto in the tail, lost control, sailing the squad car into a metal guard rail.

Through the splotted glass, the crew howled over the debris field. They ditched the wheels, and hot-wired a relay. The legend grew. The team cashed out, and the guy in the back lived. He'd push through with nerve damage, but reaching the bank, as the old man says, is what it's all about.

The the good old days. Big brother is now badge's bitch. Cameras, copters, computers. They cart in the snitch theater, and set it up like a hot dog stand. They're on your ass before you could fill out a crew. You proceed nice and slow, or you hole up and wait for a cool breeze.

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