

## *Dust and Laughter*

Working for the Mob is pretty much the same as any other job you might have. You get up. You eat some breakfast. You go to work. On very rare occasions, you hit someone in the mouth. Most days, you're doing tasks someone who gets paid more than you tell you to do. You do a good job; you move up. You do a bad one; you don't. You do a really bad one; you move down. Me? I'm proud to say, I do good work.

I was the right hand for a guy nicknamed No-Red Wayne. He got the name because he didn't like red. Didn't like it on his people. Didn't like it on his turf. Didn't like it in his books. He was good at keeping the red out, so he was highly trusted and widely respected. A couple months ago, No-Red was asked to take over a club on the up north that was under performing. We yanked the leashes a few times and got the place on track pretty quick. You gotta keep an eye on things, though. Keeps them from back sliding when they know they're being watched.

So this one night, we've just closed up and No-Red is with the Bartenders doing the count-outs. I'm shooting the shit with the door guy when this rough-looking guy walks up. And when I say rough, I mean it. He's skinny and dirty. He's wearing a dingy hoodie with a low-slung cap, and his head is hanging to where I can't see his face well. He's almost walked through his shoes and the bottoms of his pants. I could smell him before I saw him. It was like a washed corpse.

"We're closed, guy," My Door guy, Bobby calls out to him. "You can't be on the property."

"Sorry," The guy says back. He sounds way more clear-headed than his appearance would suggest. "I'm looking for someone. You call him No-Red. Can you send him out?"

Now, I've been working with No-Red for a while now. I've never seen him keeping company with anyone that could make a coroner put down his fork, so I'm really curious. "How do you know No-Red?"

"We go way back. Tell him it's Sherman Sandoval."

I figure it can't hurt. This guy doesn't seem that dangerous, so I tell Bobby to keep an eye on him and go to head inside. When I unlocked the door, the guy took a half step forward, but so did Bobby and he backed up again.

"Hey, No-Red," I call out, "There's a guy outside asking for you."

“What does he want?” No-Red called back.

I come into the main area and No-Red is sitting at the bar with the Bartenders, the waitresses, and the three Door guys we had for the night. Staff usually has to wait around for tip outs to make sure no one is up to anything. No-Red is good at sniffing out when folks are trying to skim, so you can't leave until he clears you. “He didn't say, but he asked for you by name. Said his name was Sherman Sandoval.”

Soon as I said that No-Red gives me this look. It's the same one people wear when you tell them a loved one passed away after fighting with an illness for a while. It was unnerving. He suddenly starts counting the money faster than I've ever seen. Seriously, he was counting it like a machine in a casino. “Tell him I need a few. Gotta count out the staff.”

“You ok?” I ask him.

“Just go, Lenny. Tell him. Now.” He's got a voice on, so I go.

Outside, the guy is still right where he was when I went in. “He said he needs a few. He's gotta count out the staff.” I tell him.

He nods a little and says nothing. That's when I notice he's starting to look tense. It's not obvious, but you notice little things. He's leaned forward a little, like he wants to move.

After a minute, the waitresses and the Bartenders are leaving, so I head back inside. The door guys are standing around like a pack of smacked asses. No-Red is at the bar pacing. He's finishing up a call when he sees me. He waves me over, then turns to the guys. “Alright, fellas. We got some shit about to go down and I gotta explain it first, so clean the shit out of your ears because we don't have time for me to say any of this twice. That man outside isn't a man. Not anymore. That thing outside is a Ghoul.”

Now I'm a bit of a horror movie buff, so I laugh. He said it so seriously that I couldn't help myself. “C'mon, Boss, pull the other one. Next you'll be telling me vampires are real too.”

“Lenny, You've known me long enough. Do I seem like the joking kind?”

Now the guys are looking at me, and I'm feeling dumb suddenly. It was hard to swallow, sure, but something about the way he said it made me second guess myself.

“And since you mention it, yeah, Vampires are real,” No-Red said, reaching into his pocket. “Because I'm one, which is why the Ghoul is here in the first place. I killed him a few years ago and now he's here to return the favor.”

“Don't vampires make ghouls as slaves? Like in the movies?” One of the guys chimes in.

“If it worked like that, you think I'd be paying you chuckleheads? No. Those things happen if a vampire gets greedy.” No-Red said as he pulled a fat roll of bills out of his pocket and slammed it on the bar. “Now, I got a few grand here. You guys can't kill that thing, but if you can get it into the walk-in, you can split this. It's six grand.”

Now the guys are eyeing that roll like it's a key of coke at a porn stars wedding. “How much more will you pay us to kill him?” Another guy asks.

“You can't. Don't bother. Just get him into the walk in and for fuck's sake, be-” He

stops when we hear a boom from the front door and when I say from the front door, I mean, it's the actual fucking door. That door is heavy. It's an inch thick and made of steel. Right after we took over, we got ram raided, so No-Red had these heavy security doors installed to make sure it never happened again. There's a second boom and a squeak. I jog back over to look and watch them buckle a little. Then another boom and the door almost gives. I can't believe that skinny, sickly looking guy is the one doing that. He had to have gotten a car or something.

The door buckles again and explodes inward. Before I can react, Bobby comes flying at me. He hits me like a sack of potatoes and lays me out. Now Sherman in the doorway. His hood is off and he's lost his hat and it's now clear why he was wearing them both. Half his face is missing. I can see his teeth through his cheeks and his nose and eyes are gone. He looks at me for a second, at least, that's what it felt like, then he breaks into a run.

When you come into the club, you have to go down a hallway then turn left into the main section where you have some seating and the dance floor. The bar is at the far side and the walk-in is right next to that. When this guy rounds the corner, one of the guys is waiting with a bar stool and catches Sherman full force in the face. He stumbles a few steps and then drops to his knees. The guy with the stool hits him again and knocks him flat.

Now things are looking good. A couple of the guys grab the Ghoul by the legs and start to drag him to the walk in. I'm rolling Bobby over so I can help when I notice something that stops me dead. Bobby's neck was crushed. It looked like the elbow of a bendy straw. I could still see the grooves where Sherman's fingers had crushed Bobby's neck like a cheap soda can. It was dawning on me how deeply screwed we were.

I turn to look as Sherman sits up and grabs the guys dragging him by the arms and snaps them. The guy with the stool tries to hit him again, but Sherman is ready this time and snatches it out of his hands. He swings back at the guy without getting up and hits the side of his knees. They just give way. It sounds like fresh celery. Then he flings the stool full force at No-Red, who is trying to run past him. The stool catches him in the legs and he tumbles to a stop in the middle of the dance floor.

It was a blur. By the time I got to my feet, Sherman was already on top of No-Red. It was horrific. He was hitting him over and over without stopping. The floor is polished concrete and I can hear it cracking at this guy just goes to town. I look at the guys this ghoul has taken apart with one hit and No-Red getting beaten into a smear and I freeze. No amount of money is going to convince me to even try to touch that thing.

I'm pulled out of it by a wet, crunchy splash. No-Red's head is a pile of mush. I've seen dead guys before, but I've never seen someone die like this. Sherman kinda slumps over and starts laughing. It's the happiest laugh I've heard in a long time. It's like a little kid. While he's doing it, him and No-Red start to crumble and turn to dust. No flash of fire. No dramatic light. Just dust and laughter.

Maybe five minutes later, Jimmy James shows up. He's No-Red's boss. He walks in, takes one look at the mess and looks like someone took the air out of him.

“Were you here for this?” He asks me.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“He tell you what it was?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, at least it only killed one of you,” Jimmy says, nudging Bobby with his foot.

“You knew about that thing?” I ask him.

“Yeah. I helped him catch it last time. Sealed it up in concrete and dropped it off the coast. I guess we should have dropped it further out.” He laughed. He actually laughed.

“This shit ain’t funny.”

“Nah, It’s a little funny. I told that dumbass he needed to eat more and in smaller amounts. Then he wouldn’t have fucked around and made that thing.” Jimmy turned a whistled and a couple guys jogged in. He pointed to the injured Doormen and Bobby’s body, and the guys grabbed them without a word. Jimmy walked over to the bar and grabbed the roll of cash No-Red had left there. He walked back and put it in my pocket. “Now, keep your mouth shut and enjoy your promotion. My Brother would have wanted you to have it. Now go home and get some rest.”

I stared at him. “I didn’t know you and No-Red were brothers.”

“Tonights just full of revelations, ain’t it? Now go home. I got sweeping to do, and you got a club to run.”

So I went home. I ate my dinner. I went to bed. I decided not to ask anymore questions. I already didn’t like what I knew. Why pile on?