

Nemesis: The Final Case of Eliot Ness

Prologue

February 16, 1957

The days were all the same now.

The best part of Eliot Ness's day was breakfast with Bobby. His marriage with Betty had its ups and downs, as had his previous two marriages. She was an artist, a sculptor. He had no idea whether she was talented but she certainly had an artist's temperament. Her suggestion that they adopt a child, however, had been a brilliant stroke that had transformed their lives, only for the better. All his life he had been a little awkward around children. Now he was a doting father who never missed an opportunity to spend time with his only son.

Most people expected a corporate president to be a busy man. Instead, Ness found himself getting idler by the day. The North Ridge Alliance Corporation had been in trouble for a long time now, almost from the start. It had seemed like such a brilliant idea. They would produce checks that could not be forged using a special watermarking technique. He would be providing a useful service—and still stopping crime, in a new way.

But the truth was, he had no head for business. One of his partners had run off with the corporate secrets and started his own corporation. Then they were denied a patent because there were other pre-existing watermarking firms. They had moved their offices from Cleveland to Coudersport, Pennsylvania, a small town near the New York border, to reduce expenses. But it wasn't enough. They were holding on by their fingertips now and the money coming in wasn't nearly enough to pay the bills.

And that was how the great hero of the Prohibition era ended up in a backwater burg in Pennsylvania without a penny in savings and exceedingly poor prospects. Who would blame him if he took lunch at the same bar and grill every day, a pastrami sandwich with a whiskey chaser? Maybe two. A quick stop at the store and he was home with far too little to do until Betty and Bobby got home. He

would pour a drink, sit in his favorite easy chair, and remember the days when every day had been packed with more excitement and activity than most people could handle...

The doorbell rang.

“Hey, Oscar. You’re early.”

“That okay?”

“Sure. I’m not doing anything.”

“I just wanted to get some work done before you were...you know. Before you got too tired. It’s hard, trying to remember stuff that happened so long ago.”

“Yeah.”

Ness let Oscar Fraley into his home. He liked Fraley. He was a good listener. He was a friend of his partner, Joe Phelps. A sportswriter, by trade. They’d met in a bar where Ness was telling his stories, as usual. But unlike most, Fraley seemed genuinely interested. He believed what Ness told him, or at least acted as if he did. And unlike most of the young punks at the Bar and Grill these days, Fraley remembered who Al Capone was.

“Like a drink?” Ness asked, hiccupping.

“No thanks,” Fraley said. “Not while I’m working. But you go on ahead.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ness replied, refilling his glass. “Helps me remember.”

“Can we pick up where we left off last time? You and your people had finally put away Al Capone. For tax evasion.”

“Yeah. People made fun of us for putting away a killer on such lame grounds. But it worked. Me and my boys kept him busy, pre-occupied, a constant thorn in his side, while Frank Wilson slowly put together a case proving Capone wasn’t paying his taxes. We got him off the street, out of Chicago. He wasted away in prison—he had syphilis, you know. He got out, but my people tell me he was a broken man, barely able to dress himself or go to the toilet without help. Finally died about ten years ago. The tax charge did what we wanted. It put an end to the bloody reign of Al Capone.”

“I gather you feel no shame about the way you did it.”

“None at all. To the contrary, we were proud of ourselves for using our brains for once. Being creative. That’s what the times were like back then. Learning something different every day. New scientific discoveries. Forensic labs solving crimes detectives couldn’t. How long could criminals survive in this brave new scientific world? We thought we’d found the cure for crime. We thought we could end it for all time.”

His eyes darkened. “But it turns out, crime is more resilient than we realized. It’s—what’s that term scientists are using now? It’s a mutating organism. It adapts to new environments. Builds up resistance to the vaccine. We may have figured out how to deal with people like Capone—but something new, something different came along to take their place. Something we had no idea how to handle.”

“Are you talking about Cleveland? The Torso Murderer?”

Ness took a long draw from his drink. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Why not? It’s a great story. Scary, suspenseful, and filled with--”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want anything about it in this book you’re writing. You understand me? Nothing!”

Oscar held up his hands. “All right, Eliot, stay calm. Don’t work yourself up. We’ll stick with the Capone saga.”

“Good.” There was no reason to get into the rest of it. No reason at all. So few knew anything about it these days, outside of Cleveland, anyway. Better to keep it that way.

If only there was some way he could make himself forget...

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Chapter One

From the front page of the December 12, 1935, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*:

“...when this reporter learned that Eliot Ness, formerly an agent for the Treasury Department, has been appointed by Mayor Burton to be the new Safety Director, filling the position vacated by the

unpopular Martin J. Lavelle. Apparently Ness had a brief meeting with the mayor yesterday morning, then less than an hour later was sworn into office. Ness will receive an annual salary of seven thousand five hundred dollars and will have authority over the entire police, fire and traffic control departments...”

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“So you’ll come back to my place?”

“Sure, mister. I don’t mind.”

“That’s very obliging of you.”

“The customer is always right.”

“A noble attitude.”

“It works.”

“And you don’t mind if things get...a trifle unusual?”

“Believe me, mister. I’ve seen it all before.”

He smiled. “You never know.”

Perfection itself. Why kidnap someone when you could persuade them to come with you voluntarily? That made it ever so much simpler to travel through Kingsbury Run unnoticed, to bring her back to the brewery. To do what he wanted to do to her.

“No one works here?” she asked, as she walked around the empty abandoned building.

“Not any more. Prohibition put it out of business.”

“Shame. I like a beer every so often. How ‚bout you?”

“I prefer something stronger.”

“I pegged you for a drinker.”

“Now and again.”

“Pardon me for sayin’ so, but you seem a little too classy to be hangin’ out in Kingsbury Run.”

“Appearances can be deceiving. Have you seen the Sailors’ Home?”

“Sure. Oh—I get it. You really do like a drink now and again.”

“Just as I said.”

He removed the ropes and tied her to the chair.

“Hey, what’s that about?”

“Just a harmless ritual. I’m…complicated.”

“I get it. You like a girl to seem helpless. Like you’re in control.”

“Something like that.”

“Hey, can you loosen them knots a little? I’m not sure I can move.”

“I’m not sure I want you to move.”

He shoved her and her chair forward across the table. Her hands were tied behind her back; her legs were tied together. Her torso was flattened across the length of the table while her head dangled off the edge.

“Hey, what’s this all about?” For the first time, her voice indicated a trace of apprehension.

“You said you were ready for anything.”

“Look, you want to take me that way, just do it.”

“That isn’t what I had in mind.”

“You’re not trying to get some action?”

“Not in the way that you mean.”

“You’re some kinda customer.”

“I’m a man of science.”

“Zat so? What’s this, an experiment?”

“You could say that.”

“Hey—what’s with the axe?” Her voice had passed well beyond the point of apprehension. She was scared.

Her head dangled over the edge of the table. He took careful aim. If he judged it correctly, one slice would be sufficient to sever the head at the level of the third intervertebral disk…

He swung. It worked. Severed in a single slice. Superb.

But what is the point if no one knows? How could there be any pleasure in that?

He liked swinging the axe. It was a good feeling. He liked using his physical strength. They let him use knives at the hospital, scalpels, but never anything like this. This was better. From now on, he would devote his energies to the endeavors that truly mattered. Not the coddling of the sick and infirm. Something on a grander scale.

The blood rolled down the slanted floor and into the drainage tunnel. So much could be discarded that way. She had told him she loved the waters. Perhaps she would have chosen it for her final resting place. Perhaps he would choose it for her.

She had not screamed when the axe touched her neck. That was a disappointment. It happened all too swiftly. There was no time to react, no chance to savor the moment.

He would learn from his mistakes.

He pushed open the sliding door and stepped outside, brushing the blood from his apron as he walked. Across the river, the smoke and dirt hovering over the city made a visible cloud that never cleared. He preferred it here, away from the mad traffic, the insane hustling back and forth, the people who thought they were so modern but in fact had no idea what modern was.

He would show them.

Something new had come to town.

He just hoped Cleveland was ready for him. If there was any disappointment involved, it was that it had all been too easy.

He needed a challenge. He craved it.