

Lonely At The Top
By
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Blood wasn't exactly flowing in the streets, but a violent war was evident. The Grimaldi and Sabatino crime families had been in a constant struggle against each other for over forty years with no signs of stopping. Vincent Scarsonsone, a key player in this struggle, had a special dinner engagement to keep on this particular evening, but he figured he still had time to kill someone before dining. It wouldn't be done randomly, instead it was on orders from his boss; crime lord Pasquale Sabatino.

The name of the bar was the *No Name*, not officially, but at least that was what it was called. It was a run down, shabby establishment, frequented only by those who weren't scared enough to enter it. No one would be bothered there, however, for if you were brave enough to go no one would dare question your toughness. This was especially true in the case of the two top hitmen in the rival Sabatino and Grimaldi crime families. Outside those four rickety walls, they were deadly enemies; but inside, where they met once a week, they were the best of friends.

William Borghese and Vincent Scarsonsone couldn't have led more different lives – to a point. Still, their paths led them to the same occupation; albeit on opposite sides of their ongoing conflict. Despite their positions on opposite sides of the battle, they had a mutual respect for each other – at least when they met at their regularly scheduled dinner meetings.

William Borghese, also known as "*Willie the Wisp*", one of the most famous living hitmen in the criminal underworld. Known for his small, thin frame and ability to somehow "disappear" after finishing a job, Borghese was a former Marine sniper and rumored to once be a special-forces agent. He was trained to kill by the best, and his

skills had only grown better with time. In spite of his occupation, he hadn't ever spent one night in jail for all of his misdeeds.

In comparison, Vincent Scarsonsone, also known as "*Vinnie the Keys*", had been in and out of jail ever since he was an adolescent. He was a musician first and foremost. His skills at the piano were unmatched; he could have easily been one of the world's most famous keyboardists, but fate had a different plan for him. Working for the Sabatino family for many years, he was now grooming his son, accordion player "*Vinnie the Squeeze*" to succeed him. It was a tall task, however, for just as junior was no match in the field of music he couldn't hold a candle, or more fittingly a gun, when it came to killing the enemy.

"Welcome, old friend," William "*Willie the Wisp*" Borghese said to his rival, Vincent "*Vinnie the Keys*" Scarsonsone, as he walked in through the creaky screen door that rattled with even the slightest breeze.

"Hello Willie. I think eventually we may need to find a new place to meet, this place is falling to pieces."

"Maybe, but its quiet...and safe. And the only person here besides us is the bartender, and he won't tell anyone cause he needs our business. No one comes here anymore, except us. It may be the bottom of the barrel, but, it's lonely at the top..."

"But it's lonelier at the bottom – and it doesn't get any more 'bottom' than this." Vinnie laughed. "It's not lonely for you and I though, my friend. We have each other's company."

"Yes, and the best of all – no one knows we are here."

Bobby "*BabyFace*" Brucato was called that because his face looked like a baby's – not cute and snuggly but wrinkled and ugly with beady little eyes and a small tuft of thin hair. One of the most ruthless killers around, he specialized in "clean" murders...heart attacks, suicides, accidents, all for the special purpose of making sure that no traces were left. If all else failed, or of need be, however, he wouldn't hesitate to leave a bloody trail in his wake, however.

He hadn't been with the Sabatino family for long, instead he cut his teeth as a free-lance hitman.

He was recently brought in by Pasquale to do a special job, because the old man feared Vincent's son Vinnie wouldn't be able to perform a difficult task that lay ahead – the task of carrying out a necessary hit on his own father.

"They're both there, Don Sabatino, and they both need to die," Bobby "Babyface" Brucato suggested to his boss. "I can think of a number of ways to do it; quickly, slowly...very slowly..."

Pasquale interrupted his subordinate, finding his propensity to violence unbecoming. Pasquale's son Dominic stood in the background as usual, taking it all in; and learning.

"I haven't decided yet what to do, we don't know for sure exactly what he is up to..."

“He’s meeting with the enemy, that is what he is up to,” Bobby interrupted as his boss finally relented and nodded in agreement.

“They may be meeting, but it doesn’t mean he is giving up family secrets.”

“Pardon my frankness, Don Sabatino, but I doubt they are attending *Hitmen Anonymous*”.

“And how do you know that, Bobby?”

“If they were...I’d be the star attraction,” Bobby replied smugly with his tiny, snarled baby teeth and bad breath. The Sabatinos kept their comments to themselves, knowing that if they didn’t they’d say something offensive. Usually they wouldn’t hesitate to speak their minds, but Brucato came highly recommended and his services were needed.

“Don Sabatino, I know that Vincent is one of your oldest colleagues, and possibly even a friend, and his son Vinnie will never kill his own father. So the question is, will we need to take him out as well?”

“If you can make it look like an accident, then he needn’t ever find out. I need Vinnie in the fold, especially if his father will no longer be with us. The *No Name* is a dump, after all. If you can kill them both, Vinnie may just figure it was a hit by the Grimaldis – *if* you can kill them both. And that is a big *IF*.”

“That won’t be a problem. Because that is exactly why you brought me in, Don Grimaldi,” Bobby stated confidently as the hitman grinned from ear to ear.

“The Sabatinos are nearly finished. I think the time is right for you to retire, Vinnie. Why don’t you head off into retirement and play the piano to your heart’s content.”

Vinnie smiled as he and William continued their drinks. The thought of doing such a thing filled him with great contentment. He knew it was never to be, though.

“No, I cannot go anywhere. Not until my son is ready to take over for me.”

“Vinnie *the Squeeze*?”

“Yes.”

“If he’s not ready now, Vinnie, when will he be? The boy is in his thirties...”

Vinnie nodded in agreement.

“Yes, he certainly is. He’s good, but...”

“Not as good as you, huh?”

“No, he isn’t. Not yet. He’s always been a bit of an underachiever. He couldn’t match my skills at the piano, so instead he took up the accordion.”

“Instead of pushing himself to get better, right?”

“Yes, I am afraid so. On the contrary, I understand that your young son Billy is quite ready. “Billy the Kid” is what they’re calling him.

William smiled; a father beaming with obvious pride.

“Yes. He is young, but he is a natural.”

“A chip off the old block?”

“Yes...in a manner of speaking,” William agreed, not wanting to sound too boastful. “Just as Vinnie is, some are just late bloomers you know.”

“Yes, I have not given up on him yet. He has yet to make that big-kill. I am confident he will, however. But now the family has brought in a freelance hitman to pick up some of his slack, and he’s very good.”

William suddenly looked very interested, wondering who Vinnie was referring to. Usually, neither of them would discuss “family” busy between the Grimaldis and Sabatinos. But his was different, it was their personal families they were talking about.

“Who is it, Vinnie?”

“It’s Brucato, William...Bobby Brucato.”

“*The Babyface.*” William stated as Vinnie nodded in agreement.

“He is supposed to be here just to do some extra work, but I fear he is going to be taking over. Which means...”

“The old man is planning on retiring your permanently?” William said as Vinnie nodded in agreement.

Just as they realized what *could* happen, it did. Gunfire erupted as the windows and front door’s glass shattered, raining debris down among them. William and Vinnie briefly turned each other’s guns on the other, until they realized the only way they could survive was by working together. Even then, the odds were against them. Vinnie and

William knew they were surrounded – likely found out by one of their perspective families.

“We are both dead men!” Vinnie stated as William nodded in agreement, both of them still returning fire to the front and back.

“Any idea who...”

“It’s Brucato’s men.” Vinnie stated matter-of-factly. “I know it. And that means the Sabatinos know that I’m – and you, are here.”

William knew if this were true, and if the Grimaldi family didn’t know he was here, then he might still somehow survive – if he could make it out alive.

“William, you need to cover me from the front while I make a run for the back door...William...”

Vincent knew the *Wisp* had struck again, as his “friend” already had made good his escape – or at least an attempt at one. It was almost as if he had vanished in thin air. There was obviously no honor among thieves, or at least assassins, as William had passed up the chance for a long goodbye and left Vincent to fend for himself. As the beleaguered hit man continued to return gunfire, he felt the bullets pierce through his chest and hands in sudden hail. Dropping his gun, he looked down to see he no longer had any fingers to pick the up

“No!” Vincent screamed in agony – but more so in frustration. Never mind the blood gushing out of his chest and his heartbeat becoming more faint by the second. His fingers were his asset, not just with the gun but with his beloved keyboards. The thought of never playing the piano again was overwhelming, much more so than his impending

demise, that he didn't use his other hand to retrieve his gun; fearing his other hand would be destroyed as well. His pain and disillusionment caused him to underestimate his current predicament, and another round of gunfire suddenly ripped through his body.

Falling to the ground in a limp, dying thud, he looked up to see Bobby Brucato's ugly, snarling babyface staring back at him. Both men stared at each other, briefly, before Brucato delivered a final bullet to the skull.

Savoring the kill for a moment with an evil grin, Brucato next moved on to hunt down his other target – William “*Willie the Wisp*” Borghese. Brucato followed the gunshots still ringing out in the direction of the back of the bar. With his own gun drawn for safety, he stepped over the bartender's dead body; a body that lie dead with a single gunshot wound to the heart. This body only led to a trail of many more; Sabatino Family assassins laying bloodied and butchered back through the kitchen and out the back door. *Willie the Wisp* had escaped again.

“Billy!” William shouted repeatedly as he entered his home, and the longer his calls went unanswered the more worried he became. His son was supposed to be there waiting for him, and when he wasn't he knew something was wrong. Could the Grimaldi Family have found out where he had been? His instincts, unfortunately for him, proved to be correct.

“Hello, William,” Joseph Grimaldi said as he stepped out from the shadows, accompanied by his son Anthony and a number of other burley bodyguard types.

William's first instincts were to go for his gun, but he knew he was clearly outnumbered; and he wasn't yet sure that he had been found out.

"Billy is fine..."

"I know he is, Joseph. Both you and I know that you would never hurt him. I would like to know where he is, however."

"He is with my wife, at the family compound. I didn't want him here for this...my son and I need to have a few words with you...alone."

As the bodyguards were told to leave the room,

"We know what happened at the *No Name* tonight." Joseph stated with authority, which took William by much surprise. "Vincent Scarsone is dead, along with a number of Sabatino Family associates. Not to mention the poor, unfortunate bartender."

"Is that right?"

"Yes. Of course you already know this, being that you were there."

William knew it would do no good to lie, as he had already been found out. Lying about what had happened would only anger the old man. And he figured he had already angered them enough.

"Yes, I was."

"The bartender of the *No Name* that ratted out Scarsone to the Sabatinos did the same to you with us. Seems he wanted a double-payday, too bad he didn't live long enough to spend his bounty."

"That's too bad for him," William said as he laughed to himself. "I don't feel so bad about killing him now."

“So tell me, William, why have you been meeting with Scarstone?”

“Because, many years ago he was one of my pupils, when we both worked for the Romero Family out of Chicago. Remember?”

“Yes, of course.”

“We maintained our friendship, even though we were adversaries working for different families.”

“And the two of you met just to...talk shop?”

William laughed, the thought of two hitmen discussing their job duties quite entertaining.

“No, not necessarily. Not until tonight to be exact. Kind of fitting, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

And with Vinnie Scarstone dead, they'll be no more meeting with *anyone* associated with the Sabatinos, agreed?

William nodded in agreement, shocked that he had somehow made it our alive.

“The Sabatino Family is the enemy, associating with them can only lead to bad things – and the possible dark cloud of betrayal.

“We would meet, only because we could relate to one another as no one else could. Killing men...is not an easy job.”

“No, it most certainly is not. But sometimes, allowing them to *live* is even more difficult.”

William nodded in agreement, knowing exactly what his boss was referring to.

“You are giving me another chance? Why?”

“Because...” Joseph began before stopping short of his explanation. “Because I can, that’s why.”

William nodded, thankfully and respectfully.

“That’s good enough reason...especially when you’re the boss.”

Riding off in their bullet-proof limousine, the Grimaldi father and son reflected on what had happened – both in quiet thought and engaging conversation.

“I honestly didn’t think William would make it out of there alive. And his replacement...is not quite yet ready.”

“You don’t think that his son is ready to step in?”

“He absolutely is *ready*, he’s a natural after all,” Joseph answered. “If there were an emergency, but there’s not. Seasoning would come with time; mentally he has a bit of a way to go. He is immature.”

“He’s still a child, after all.”

“Yes, and a special one at that,” Joseph agreed. “But that isn’t the reason I am letting William survive this lapse in judgment. The family *needs* him, as we have difficult days ahead. Now that Vincent Scarsone is dead, we have the upper hand.”

“Father, you honestly believe that the death of the Sabatino Family’s top hit man is that big of a deal.”

Joseph laughed, surprised at his son’s ignorance.

“Absolutely, Anthony. Because we all know that Brucato can’t be trusted, and today we have cemented Borghese’s loyalty with *our* family. It may seem like a small event, but even a minor tremor can lead to an earthquake.”

“I understand, father. This alliance between Scarsons and Borghese, no matter how innocent, may be the factor that turns the tide of this war to our favor.”

“Yes, perhaps.” Joseph agreed as his thoughts grew more contemplative.

“Alliances...sometimes are a necessary evil.”

Pasquale Sabatino had been something of a mentor to Joseph Grimaldi, long before they became deadly enemies. This friendship had fallen by the wayside, however, in a myriad of tales too lengthy to mention in a short space. Their friendship may have been beyond strained, but they had never lost respect for one another. Besides their differences in business, they still had many things in common. One of these things was fine dining.

In sharp contrast to the *No Name*, the *Top Of The World* penthouse was the most expensive restaurant in town, with a dazzling view of New York City at its feet. The two former friends and current sworn enemies met at this fancy locale from time to time, and the hypocrisy of this fact was not lost on them tonight.

“I just thought of something ironic. If my son Anthony were to know that you and I meet like this, just as Borghese and Scarsone did, he may order me killed as well.”

“Yes, I agree – it is the same way with my son as well.”

“So the events of what recently occurred, that the bartender had alerted to us both beforehand, Brucato took care of Scarsone, but William Borghese survived much to my dismay. *Willie the Wisp* escapes again.”

“Yes, that’s right...”

“Unless...you made him pay for what he has done. His *betrayal*.”

Joseph shook his head in disagreement. He could clearly see that Pasquale was disappointed his own hit man *deluxe* had died while Joseph’s had lived.

“Borghese is still alive, and still under my employ.”

“I am surprised at you, Joseph; you are giving your hitman a second chance after he consorted with the enemy.”

“William Borghese is...important to me, much more than an employee. You wouldn’t have done the same for Scarsone, if he had survived?”

“No, I suppose I wouldn’t have. I valued Vincent Scarsone as an ally; not quite a friend, but someone I trusted. He betrayed that trust.”

“Did he, really? Did either of them? As far as we know, from what William explained to me, they met on occasion, just as we do. They have done so for years, with no betrayals evident.”

“Maybe he is telling you the truth, or maybe he isn’t.” Pasquale stated. “Or, maybe you are just a better man than me I guess.”

“Perhaps.”

“Are you sure he is still alive because his successor is not yet ready? Brucato is ready to take the top spot in my organization, at least until Vincent’s son, *Vinnie the Squeeze*, takes over and kills Brucato for murdering his father.”

Joseph laughed evilly. He respected Joseph’s plan, but he wasn’t about to admit that his own family’s stance was weakened.

“I have to say your plan is a good one, Pasquale.”

“I think so. Soon Vinnie will know the truth, and he will take his revenge. Vinnie will be ready soon, hopefully. He is a grown man, after all. But William Borghese’ son Billy, after all, is still a child.”

Joseph paused before answering, knowing that Pasquale could very well be correct in his reasoning.

“I guess we’ll never know, will we my friend. Or at least not today.”

“No, I suppose not. But at least today is almost over. As it was...a very difficult day overall.”

“Our lives are not easy for sure; these are difficult, *important* decisions we have to make...not many people can relate to one another as we can.” Joseph said as he took a gulp of his expensive drink, repeating the same words of William Borghese just hours before.

“Yes, that is why we meet. Because only you and I relate, and *understand*, each other.”

“Yes, it’s lonely at the top, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is, old friend,” Joseph agreed. “It most certainly is. But it’s much lonelier at the bottom.”