

PEON
by Gerald Martin

Raphael Hernandez sat in the back corner of his tobacco shop hiding in the shadows and remaining as quiet as he could. He was watching Dino "The Hammer" Morelli smoke a cigar. Dino was the mob boss that controlled the south side. Every Monday morning he came in to claim his box of Cuban cigars and smoke one to the very end.. A Cohiba Robusto that cost Raphael \$850 a box. \$43,200 a year. That was fifty percent of Raphael's total gross, and that didn't even account for the loss of business every Monday because Morelli insisted he have the shop all to himself.

The other businesses on 64th Street only had to cough up ten percent. Life wasn't fair. Rapheal was a peon back in San Salvador, and he would remain a peon here. He never knew what Morelli was thinking. The man never talked. Insisted on complete silence. Just stared out the front window which on this day meant listening to the drumbeat of pouring rain on the top of his limousine parked at the curb, and on the front awning under which Morelli's two bodyguards huddled and stomped their feet to stay warm.

A woman passed in front of the shop in a hurry, but stumbled and stopped just in front of the door. She didn't have a rain coat or umbrella, and was soaking wet. She balanced precariously on one leg as she removed one shoe and reached down to pick up the heel that had broken off it. She hobbled toward the smoke shop entrance, but the biggest of the two bodyguards blocked her path. She looked confused by that and stressed out; shaking uncontrollably because of the chill the rain had put on the air.

Morelli went to the door and opened it. Raphael couldn't hear what he said to the guards, but the woman was allowed in while they remained outside. It was the first kindness Raphael could ever remember from Morelli. The woman seemed very appreciative, and struck up a conversation with Morelli as she shook out her hair. She was dressed very fashionable - upscale New York, and her nipples showed prominently through her wet blouse. Perhaps that was why Morelli had taken such an interest in the woman's plight.

Then Raphael realized he had seen her before. She had been in his store three or four times in the past couple of weeks. Her dress was plain enough then, and the carefully applied makeup absent. Each time she would wander around looking at things randomly, and finally settle on buying a small pack of cigarillos. Raphael doubted if she even smoked. There was never an odor, or any staining on her delicate fingers.

The last time she had been in his store, she had asked to use a bathroom. Raphael had none for customers, but he let her use the one in his back office. Then he started to get worried and opened the door to his back room just a crack to peek in. The woman was at the back door in his office - the one that led to the alley. Although it was locked from the outside, it had a push bar so it could act as an emergency exit from the inside. The woman opened the door and looked outside. Then she let the door close and returned to the front of the shop. Raphael had ducked back, so she never knew he had seen her. He didn't say anything as he sold her the box of cigarillos. After she left the store Raphael went into his back room and used the allen key to adjust the push bar so it wouldn't open the door from the inside. That was strictly against the fire code, but he was more concerned that he was being set up for a robbery.

Now here the woman was, looking like a million dollars and laughing at something with Morelli. He was holding both her shoes. He placed the shoe that still had a heel on it on the counter top, the woman both cringing and laughing and hiding behind him, as he slammed his ham handed fist down and the heel broke cleanly off. At the same time Raphael heard a pop sound, and Morelli's head flew sideways. He fell against the counter, and slide down to a half seated position on the floor.

The woman reached down, a gun in her hand, and fired a second shot into Morelli's head. Then she headed straight back to Raphael's office, closing the door after herself.

Raphael sat in his chair, stunned. At least she hadn't shot him too. Blood ran down onto Morelli's suit coat. The bodyguards were still standing outside, facing 64th Street.. They hadn't heard anything because of the driving rain. Then Raphael did a most uncharacteristic thing.

He got up and went back to his office. The woman was there, panicking, pointing her gun at him. Raphael put his finger to his lips. He got the allen key out of his desk, and released the push bar. Then he opened the door for the woman, who quickly slipped out into the alley.

Raphael went back into his shop and sat back down in the corner chair. He watched the blood pool around Morelli for one or two minutes. Maybe three. Then he shouted out as loud as he could, "Morelli's been shot!"

The bodyguards turned, saw Morelli, and dashed into the store.

"She went out the back way!" Raphael cried.

The big guard drew his gun and ran into the back room. The other bent over Morelli, feeling for a pulse, then hesitated before wiping his blood soaked hand on Morelli's suit. The other guard came back, and the two got into an argument about whether to stay or go.

Raphael watched all this from his chair. They looked over once, and Raphael tried to look wide eyed and scared. What he was really thinking, was that one box of Robustos still remained in his back room from the last order. Maybe he would smoke that one himself. Maybe he was through being a peon.