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Opening extract from

Mean Streets: The Chicago Caper

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1 7.15 A.M., AUGUST 15TH 1928, TOPEKA, KS

T. Drummond MacIntyre III, son of T. Drummond MacIntyre II (Senior Vice President of MacIntyre, MacIntyre & Moscowitz Engineering, of Chicago, Atlanta and New York City), sat on his horse, Biscuit, and watched the dogs bring the last of the cows across the dirt road from one field into another.

Trey (as he was generally known by one and all) got down, draped the reins over the fence and set about closing both gates. He could almost *smell* the bacon he knew Gramma Cecilia would be cooking, along with

eggs over easy and hash browns, and his stomach growled and rumbled in anticipation. He'd been up since before 6.30 so he was somewhat ravenous.

Job done, Trey got back on Biscuit, whistled for the dogs and set off back towards the ranch house, just a short ride away. He'd been down at the Circle M – Gramps's spread just outside Topeka, Kansas – for almost a month now and there was no doubt that life on the ranch was about as far from the day-to-day to and fro of Chicago as it was possible to get.

And none the worse for that, he reckoned as he rounded a bend in the road and saw a very unusual sight – for the time of day and this neck of the woods as his gramps would say; some hundred yards or so up ahead a *very* classy white automobile had stopped. It looked like it'd been jacked up, and someone, who'd taken their jacket off and rolled up their sleeves, was kneeling down by one of the rear wheels. The other side of the dirt road, three men in sharp pin-striped suits and slicked-back hair were smoking cigarettes and seemingly in deep discussion.

As he got nearer, Trey could see that the man kneeling down was doing something to the wheel, and getting pretty mussed up in the process. Easiest thing in the world to get a flat tyre on these roads, he thought to himself as he got nearer.

“Mister!” Trey called out. “You need a hand?”

The men smoking glanced up, then went back to whatever it was they were talking about, but Mr. Shirtsleeves stood, wiping his hands on a grubby cloth, and shook his head. “No thanks, bud,” he called back. “Almost done here.”

Trey could see the dogs were getting interested in what was going on up ahead and he whistled them back to him as the tallest of the three suits ground his cigarette out with the toe of his highly polished black-and-white shoe, and crossed over to the car with one of his colleagues – a pale man who was wearing a pair of heavy-framed tortoiseshell spectacles.

As he approached, Trey saw that what he had here was a very fancy Buick Monarch, its black Landau top and streamlined coachwork covered in a layer of grey Kansas dust; definitely not the type of vehicle you saw very often in these parts. Being, it would not be exaggerating to say, *very* keen on automobiles, Trey knew this particular model had a six-cylinder 4.5-litre engine that developed 2,800 rpm; not quite as big as his Pop’s 4.7-litre Chrysler Imperial, but no slouch. And he could see that the owner had opted for the wooden 12-spoke wheels, and the whitewall tyres that, if he remembered correctly, came with aluminium hubs.

He was about to stop for a look and a friendly chat,

the way everyone did in these parts, when he noticed the Buick had Illinois plates…but his attention was snatched away by the sight of the third suit, a shorter guy, walking across the road and flicking his lit cigarette behind him.

"Hey!" Trey yelled, without thinking, pulling Biscuit up.

"You mean *me*?" The man stopped and looked up at Trey, frowning. "Who you think you are, punk? Talking to me like that…"

The man's aggressive tone of voice and heavy scowl wasn't missed by the dogs, particularly Blaze, who started growling, his hackles right up.

"One of them mutts touches me, kid," the man started to reach into his jacket, "I'll make it sorry, so help me…"

Trey froze, his eyes wide and seemingly glued to the man's hand, knowing it must be a gun he was going for. All he could think of was how he would tell Gramma Cecilia if anything happened to one of her dogs. Then he somehow managed to break the spell of fear. "Blaze!"

"Stub the butt out, Frank. This ain't Chicago."

Trey glanced to his left and saw the taller of the two suits by the car coming towards him. He could tell that Biscuit had picked up on the rising tension, and was aware of the dogs nervously pacing near him. Feeling

that his control over the animals was in danger of slipping away from him, all he wanted to do was get on his way before he lost it completely.

"You hear me, Frank?" said Tall Suit. "You could start a fire out here, right, kid?"

Trey looked at the man who'd just spoken, aware that his face seemed oddly familiar. "Yeah," he nodded, trying to figure out why he recognized him, "you bet."

The short guy didn't move.

"What I tell you, Frank?" Tall Suit raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Stub it out, *capiche*?"

"Sure. Anything you say…" Frank's lip curled, revealing a snaggle of yellowed teeth, and he shot Trey a filthy look as he crossed back over the road.

"I apologize for my associate, he doesn't spend too much time in locales such as these that don't have pavements. And thanks for the offer of help. Much appreciated." Tall Suit grinned, his smile wide and apparently friendly. He began to walk away, then stopped and turned back. "One thing, how far are we from this place – the T-Bone ranch?"

"Not so far, mister." Trey nodded down the road. "A couple of miles is all, you can't miss the signs they have up."

"Good to know." The man gave Trey a mock salute. "Thanks."

Trey glanced the other side of the dirt road and saw the one called Frank stamping around in the dry grass. Frank looked up and caught Trey watching him. His eyes narrowed as he stared back at Trey and spat like he really meant it into the dust.

"I see you again…" he whispered as he passed by, close enough for Trey to smell his oddly flowery cologne; his face was split by a humourless smile as he drew a finger slowly across his throat, leaving the sentence unfinished.

Gathering his reins up, Trey kicked Biscuit into a gallop and made tracks, his heart beating like a jackrabbit's back leg, his mouth drier than a sand pie…