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# SLEEPERS

**lorenzo carcaterra**



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# **SLEEPERS**

**Lorenzo Carcaterra**

**BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK**

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## **“A POWERFUL BOOK, HARD TO FORGET...”**

Carcattera is an excellent writer, changing pace here and there but never letting the reader go. So many fail with autobiographies, but this one is sensitive, humorous, and harrowing, featuring dialogue with perfect pitch.”

—*The Denver Post*

“SLEEPERS is so many things: a Dickensian portrait of coming of age in Hell’s Kitchen, a terrifying and heartbreaking account of the brutalization of youth, a shocking—and disturbingly satisfying—climax worthy of the finest suspense novel. A brilliant, troubling, important book.”

—JONATHAN KELLERMAN

“A hell of a read...Taut, compelling.”

—*The Baltimore Sun*

“Lorenzo Carcattera’s labor, his pain, and above all, his compassion as a man have given us the great gift of SLEEPERS. I ended reading this incomparable work with my heart crushed and my eyes blinded by tears.”

—HARRY CREWS



**“READS LIKE  
JOHN GRISHAM—MEETS—  
GOODFELLAS.”  
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“Lorenzo Carcaterra gives us a story of the fierce and undying loyalty and stoic courage that children seem to possess when adults do not. No one who reads this book will ever forget it.”

—JAMES LEE BURKE

“A once-in-a-lifetime tale . . . If the old Sicilian saying is true and revenge is a dish best eaten cold, then this is the story of the coldest dish of all.”

—*The Kansas City Star*

“Irresistibly readable . . . An extraordinary true tale . . . Carcaterra has run a moral and emotional gauntlet, and the resulting book . . . is disturbing and hard to forget.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“The story is at once riveting and shocking, the writing is top-notch, and the characters—major and minor—are unforgettable. The themes are timeless. Lorenzo Carcaterra’s treatment of them is original and stunning.”

—MICHAEL S. PALMER, M.D.

## **“UNPUTDOWNABLE.”**

**—*Glamour***

“A ferocious story of loyalty, betrayal, murder, and revenge, told with such passion and honesty I felt I was looking into Carcaterra’s soul. He writes with the passion of Styron, the guts of Mailer, and the sting of James M. Cain. This book is not to be missed.”

—WILLIAM DIEHL

“Carcaterra tells with gripping force of his days growing up in the tough New York City neighborhood of Hell’s Kitchen in the 1960s.”

—*Booklist*

“SLEEPERS is a book written with immense passion and devotion. It is compelling from start to finish, and its images—of friendship, brutality, and revenge—will remain with the reader long after it has been closed.”

—JOHN KATZENBACH

“Searing . . . Violent, gritty, yet always braced with humor and massive compassion . . . One of the most shocking and the most affirming books we’ve ever read. . . . Carcaterra has written a book that will be compared to *In Cold Blood* and the works of Norman Mailer.”

—*The Voice Ledger* (Millbrook, NY)

By Lorenzo Carcaterra  
*Published by Ballantine Books:*

A SAFE PLACE: The True Story of a Father, a Son, a  
Murder  
SLEEPERS

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**For sleepers everywhere**



# Acknowledgments

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THIS BOOK WOULD not have been possible without the support of the silent citizens of Hell's Kitchen. I will honor their requests to remain anonymous voices and never forget their contributions.

Through the years, I've been fortunate to have worked with many editors who have helped me in various stages of my career. None has had more confidence in my abilities than Peter Gethers. With this book, he made a leap of faith few editors are willing to risk. Then, he guided the work and shaped it and edited it as few can. He also supplied an endless stream of jokes that helped ease me through the rough spots. No writer could have a better partner.

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And thanks to my crew of suspects—the Fat Man, Bobby C., Bam-Bam, Carmine, Doc, Big D., Mike Seven, and Sammy Weights. You were always where you were supposed to be. I never expected any less.

*Sleeper* (colloq.): 1. Out-of-town hit man who spends the night after a local contract is completed. 2. A juvenile sentenced to serve any period longer than nine months in a state-managed facility.

“Let’s go say a prayer for a boy who couldn’t run as fast as I could.”

—Pat O’Brien to the Dead End Kids  
in *Angels with Dirty Faces*

# Prologue

## Winter 1993

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I SAT ACROSS the table from the man who had battered and tortured and brutalized me nearly thirty years ago. I had imagined him to be in his sixties—he had seemed so old to me back then—but, in fact, he was in his late forties, less than a decade older than me. His thinning hair was combed straight back, and his right hand, trembling and ash white, held a filter tip cigarette. His left clutched a glass of ice water. He looked at me from behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses, his brown eyes moist, his nose running, the skin at its base red and flaky.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” he said in a voice devoid of the power it once held. “I don’t know where to start.”

In my memory he was tall and muscular, arrogant and quick-tempered, eager to lash out at those under his command at the juvenile home where I spent nine months when I was thirteen years old. In reality, sitting now before me, he was frail and timid, thin beads of cold sweat forming at the top of his forehead.

“I need to keep my job,” he said, his voice a whining plea. “I can’t lose this one. If any of my bosses find out, if *anybody* finds out, I’m finished.”

I wanted to stand up and grab him, reach past the coffee and the smoke and beat him until he bled. Instead, I sat there and remembered all that I had tried so hard, over so many years, to forget. Painful screams piercing silent nights. A leather belt against soft skin.

Foul breath on the back of a neck. Loud laughter mixed with muffled tears.

I had waited so long for this meeting, spent so much time and money searching for the man who held the answers to so many of my questions. But now that he was here, I had nothing to say, nothing to ask. I half listened as he talked about two failed marriages and a bankrupt business, about how the evil he committed haunts him to this very day. The words seemed cowardly and empty and I felt no urge to address them.

He and the group he was a part of had stained the future of four boys, damaged them beyond repair. Once, the sound of this man's very walk caused all our movement to stop. His laugh, low and eerie, had signaled an onslaught of torment. Now, sitting across from him, watching his mouth move and his hands flutter, I wished I had not been as afraid of him back then, that I'd somehow had the nerve and the courage to fight back. So many lives might have turned out differently if I had.

"I didn't mean all those things," he whispered, leaning closer toward me. "None of us did."

"I don't need you to be sorry," I said. "It doesn't do me any good."

"I'm beggin' you," he said, his voice breaking. "Try to forgive me. Please. Try."

"Learn to live with it," I told him, getting up from the table.

"I can't," he said. "Not anymore."

"Then die with it," I said, looking at him hard. "Just like the rest of us."

The pained look of surrender in his eyes made my throat tighter, easing the darkness of decades.

If only my friends had been there to see it.

. . .

THIS IS A true story about friendships that run deeper than blood. In its telling, I have changed many of the



names and altered most of the dates, locations, and identifying characteristics of people and institutions to protect the identities of those involved. For example, I have changed the location of the murder trial, which did not take place in Manhattan. I've also changed where people live and work—and made many of them a lot better looking than they really are. It is a story that has taken two years to write and parts of two decades to research, forcing awake in all the principals memories we would have preferred to forget. I have been helped in the re-creation of the events of this story by many friends and a few enemies, all of whom requested nothing more in return than anonymity. So while their deeds have been accurately documented, their names—heroes and villains—will remain unknown.

However hidden their identities, this is still my story and that of the only three friends in my life who have truly mattered.

Two of them were killers who never made it past the age of thirty-five. The other is a nonpracticing attorney living within the pain of his past, too afraid to let it go, finding reassurance instead in confronting its horror.

I am the only one who can speak for them, and for the children we were.



# BOOK ONE

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“This much I do know—  
there’s no such thing as a bad  
boy.”

—Spencer Tracy as  
Father Eddie Flanagan  
in *Boys’ Town*