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TITLE INFORMATION

EMPTY LUCK

Paul Backalenick and Paul Backalenick

Self

ISBN: 9798850642525

August 18, 2023

BOOK REVIEW

Four friends go on a gambling trip to Las Vegas and bring back more than they bargained for.

You're minding your own business, and some rich guy's wallet literally lands at your feet—what do you do? In 1984, Tommy Sullivan is sitting on a toilet in the men's room of a casino when the man in the stall next to him drops his trousers, and his wallet spills out onto the floor. Tommy's choice to snag the wallet and quickly leave the restroom nets him a significant amount of cash and some serious peril as the wallet's owner, Fausto D'Angelo, a man operating on the edges of organized crime ("A damp, unlit cigar protruded from the left corner of his lips. He wore a tailored, blue three piece suit that probably fit him a year ago. Now the buttons of his vest strained against his ample belly") seeks to identify the thief and get his money back—and then some. Tommy's in Vegas with his little brother, Ricky, and two of their regular poker pals, Jared and Eric. They're there ostensibly to celebrate Ricky graduating from the Boston Police Academy and beginning his new career as a police officer, and maybe to get him some real-life experience with women. Ricky's naivete results in him falling for Jenny May, a similarly gullible stripper recently arrived from Tennessee. Tommy's decision to take what's not his puts all of their lives in danger, and the trouble follows them all the way back home to Boston (Fausto's doesn't adhere to the credo 'what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas'). The author's ear for accents, whether South Boston or East Tennessee, doesn't translate well to the page, but his sense of the psychological stressors that influence each character's moral decision-making, from mobster to record store clerk to bullying older brother to young Catholic cop, is pitch-perfect. The pacing is taut but not hurried; each character's inner sense of right and wrong, balanced against their actions in the moment, keeps the novel barreling toward its inexorable showdown.

Deliverance in Vegas, with cinematic flourishes of violence and rough justice.

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