

# TWO WARRIORS

Gabriel Valjan



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45 Lafayette Road #114  
North Hampton, NH 03862

[www.wintergoosepublishing.com](http://www.wintergoosepublishing.com)  
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Two Warriors

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First Edition, April 2016

Published in the United States of America

**ROMA SERIES**

By Gabriel Valjan

Book 1 – *Roma, Underground*

Book 2 – *Wasp's Nest*

Book 3 – *Threading the Needle*

Book 4 – *Turning to Stone*

And look for Book 5, *Corporate Citizen*, coming soon.

## I

“Isidò, it’s time.”

Pippo, one of his partners, wanted him to put in the earpiece. Farrugia twisted the bud into his left ear. Their equipment was basement-budget surplus, department-issued, and antiquated listening devices. Voices crackled in his ear.

Pippo had bugged the *trattoria* across the street. Their good fortune was that the *'ndranghetisti* and *mafiosi* appreciated the September breeze so they kept the curtains drawn and sat at a table near the window.

Pasquale had sidled up next to Farrugia and raised a cannon of a camera with its long telephoto lens. Pasquale, the failed art student, redeemed himself as a talented Special Cases photographer.

“*I viddani sono a casa*,” Pippo said. Not peasants, but known *Corleonesi*, mafiosi from Corleone, Sicily. He identified familiar faces. He recited names. There were some newcomers. Pippo had a sharpened pencil in one hand and a notebook captive under its point. He had binoculars in his other hand trained on the open window at an angle below them. Farrugia could hear the clinical sound of the shutter of Pasquale’s camera taking scores of pictures next to his ear.

“Pasqua’, please find another spot.”

“What?” The detective stepped back, offended. “My camera bothers you? Let me do my job. You do yours when the time comes. For now, shut up. Just listen and learn.”

Pasquale stepped forward again like a sniper and resumed snapping pictures. He was a tall, thin man with spidery arms and a long neck. The camera seemed outlandish and large in his hands, around his neck, but his work as a documentarian had made him a legend from Italy’s toe to the brain of the peninsula, which was either Rome or Milan, depending on the Italian asked. His nickname was *Il cicogna*. Stork.

Fast as the needle of a seismograph, Pippo scribbled down names into his small notebook with such speed that Farrugia worried the man wouldn't be able to read his own handwriting later. Pippo had his own reputation. He was called *Il cimice*, or "The Bedbug," because he could plant and conceal surveillance devices so well.

Farrugia had no nickname yet. He pretended it didn't bother him. He dismissed the practice as a puerile tradition that cops should have nicknames like the very thugs they watched and hoped to arrest. His extended time in the military had exposed him to unofficial discipline and fraternal rituals. *Nonnismo*. He could handle these two.

"Get a load of this, boys," Pippo said. "We've got ourselves an initiation."

Recording a gangland initiation was tantamount to seeing a lynx in the Alps. It was talked about, mentioned second-hand, but no one had ever filmed or recorded one yet.

"Sociologists would kill for this," Pippo said as he adjusted his volume dial. A Calabrian was being inducted into the *'Ndrangheta* with Sicilians as witnesses. The U.N. couldn't boast of this level of cultural dialogue.

The Sicilians had their own ritual, which involved some minor bloodletting, an oath of silence, *omertà*, and the prospective candidate's holding a saint's card in his cupped hands. The religious card was then set on fire as a symbol that the apprentice would rather burn in hell like the holy saint in his hands than betray *Cosa Nostra*. Like the Roman Catholic sacrament of Confirmation, the new mafioso, already a murderer, required a sponsor. He was "made." The *'Ndrangheta* was less flashy with the props but more esoteric with their oath.

The figure of a large man near the window would appear and then disappear from view because he would lean back while sitting in his chair. Once the ceremony started, he was invisible to them, hidden inside a carapace of white shirts and dark suit jackets. Pippo, Pasquale, and Farrugia listened to the man across the street declare his fealty to his criminal fraternity, heard him swear that

he'd either take a cyanide pill or eat the last bullet in his gun before he betrayed the brotherhood, or disobeyed an order. He renounced everything he knew before this rebirth. Poetic words came next for the newborn's genealogy.

“My father is the sun and my mother is the moon.”

Pippo was disgusted. “I bet he reeks of cologne from the local chemist.”

“Will you focus?” Pasquale said, and then smiled at his choice of words. “No pun intended, but we have to hear whether the *pentito's* testimony bears out.”

Farrugia had heard about this repentant mafioso. The man had discovered God in a magazine ad and then he had confessed all his sins to the police. He talked and Rome listened. Palermo and San Luca had shrugged in resignation. He had said that this time there was a larger than usual iceberg of cocaine to move, but the Sicilians needed help with their heroin. The power station under construction near Porto di Gioia Tauro was their cover. His affidavit stupefied and stunned police and magistrates. In it he had named big names in the government and Holy Mother Church. The tree he drew had everyone from cardinals to Swiss bankers and incumbent politicians on its branches. His claims were questioned and even mocked, but feared to be true behind closed doors. Farrugia and his two colleagues were just cops there to vindicate the bit about the cocaine. Leave it to the higher-ups to prove or disprove the rest of the ink.

They listened.

Pippo filled up three small notebooks, wore down four pencils. He'd leave it to the station secretary, who would be locked up and under guard in a basement, to decipher his scrawl and type up his notes. A fresh set of proofers would listen to the tapes and read the text for accuracy. Pippo also took notes as a form of insurance since tapes had been known to disappear in transit, spontaneously combust, and drown within sight of water.

Noises contaminated their reception. The simple ballet of knives and forks, the occasional cough and burp thundered in their ears. There was one alpha voice.

“We move C with A and B,” said the *capiere*, or head boss, across the street.

Pasquale turned away from his viewfinder and said, “What the hell was that? Code?”

Only the speaker’s hands were visible in the window. His Italian, however, with its distinctive aspirated consonants, marked him as a Calabrian. The other voices around the table were a minestrone of Southern dialects.

“C goes with A and B. Understood?” the chief repeated to his colleagues.

Was C cocaine? The ’Ndrangheta was becoming Europe’s primary coke dealer. The Sicilians had the heroin market wrapped up like the neighborhood butcher. The pentito hadn’t used any slang in his testimony. The ’ndranghetisti used code all the time. Until the next genius came into the world to solve these hieroglyphics, investigators were out of luck.

Pippo raised a finger. Had someone just used slang for heroin? They had heard *formaggio*. Were they about to discuss the drug, or did someone ask to pass him the cheese? There was an order of pasta on the table. They all leaned forward and waited. Pippo had identified the speaker as the mouth breather in the group. He also chewed with his mouth open.

“How’s the cheese?” the man asked the leader.

“Not so good. Let’s wait until the birds fly south for the winter.”

“The cheese is bad then? Okay, I’ll throw the crumbs to the Zips.”

“Smart. They’re animals anyway.”

That remark sparked a round of agreement. “Zips” was slang for low-level Sicilians. Everybody hated them. They were also ultra-violent and uncouth. When the laughter subsided, they heard it again . . .

“For now, it’s only A, B, and C.”

For the next five minutes, the conversation was an agreement and sounds reminiscent of schoolchildren reciting a theorem in geometry class. A. B. C. Farrugia could hear it in his own head.

If  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , then  $a = c$ .

Only problem is they didn't know that A, B, and C were not equal to each other. The two sides of the table weren't even alike. Other than their lust for money and power, these two criminal enterprises were different. The mafia was hierarchical, a vertical structure with distinct roles and responsibilities. A man was an associate until he proved himself, which meant he made money for the faction. If he was Sicilian, then he might be invited in. *Might*. The 'Ndrangheta was horizontal and familial, where everybody is the cousin, the brother-in-law, or the childhood friend of everybody else and virtually every family in Calabria is part of a clan. That is why he, Isidore Farrugia, couldn't return to San Luca and play policeman. Everybody knew he had become a cop.

"Hey, rookie," Pippo said after he snapped his fingers. "Pay attention. You're up. You're the new guy so follow the made guy."

Stork had found that amusing. "New guy tails made guy. They could start a club."

"Can it." Pippo had that serious look. He was the senior detective. His instructions were clear as Sunday's silver on the table to Farrugia. He said, "When I hear from my guy, you'll work whatever assignment they give him. Perhaps it'll help us crack this alphabet."

"I have a different idea," Farrugia answered. Their faces registered confusion.

"Look, kid," Pippo said, his breath fragrant from the sausage with fennel seed and hot pepper he had wolfed down earlier, "this isn't the academy. This is real life. This is no time to be creative, or the hot shot. Get me?"

"Got it, but tell you what: if I come up short by noon tomorrow, I'll drink your piss with a cappuccino, and his too." He pointed at Pasquale. "What do you say? How about it?"



He was on and alone the next morning in the car. Pippo and Pasquale had their eyes on him from another safe house. He was going in without a wire. The Stork had probably clicked enough photos already to show him where he had missed with the razor that morning.

Anything was better than sitting on his ass. That was for old men in the park who liked to play chess or bocce. God had created the body for movement. A stakeout was like the obligatory military service he had completed years ago. It was always sit and wait and then sit and wait some more. Cooped up in a room the size of a pigpen with two guys, each man with his own ties, his own understanding of the clock, made him antsy. At least he didn't have to wear a uniform. Farrugia preferred the street. Hitting the pavement was just like being an actor. Play the part, stay calm, and ooze confidence.

Today, he was dressed casual in American blue jeans, to show status. The old blue t-shirt, Italia vs. Spagna for the World Cup, which he maintained with assiduous care, was both a touch of national pride and symbolic of his roots since he had a Spanish mother and a Calabrian father. His mother would've disapproved of his long hair and the garish Ray Bans, but he didn't dare imitate those two fools on *Miami Vice*, or their pastel wardrobe.

Headquarters had allotted him one gaudy BMW. Farrugia breathed relief about the choice of car. Anything but an AR! Government agencies used nothing but Alfa Romeos. Tricked out with the latest accessories, including expensive rims and gold spokes. Farrugia parked the BMW in front of the house of an old acquaintance. It wasn't quite undercover, but he wanted intelligence he could trust. He wasn't about to go in blind against the Sicilians or Calabrians. He stayed behind the wheel, just long enough for Pippo to wonder behind his binoculars what he was doing. He also wanted to enjoy the AC.

The weather was hotter than usual. Catanzaro, located in the arch of the Italian foot, was the recipient of some occasional breezes blowing in from the two seas, the Ionian and the Tyrrhenian,

but the stale brine on them did no favors. The still air smelled of ash and dried the mouth and throat. His glimpse of the Ionian Sea while driving had him thinking about the ancient Greeks: 'ndrangheta was a Greek word, and legend has it that Italy got its name from Greeks who named the calf-worshipping tribe in the area *Italo*. He got out of the car. A black cat spurted across the cracked walkway. That had to be an omen. Farrugia touched his medallion of Luke the Evangelist around his neck to ward off bad luck.

He opened and closed the gate. Houses in Calabria were textbook examples of misdirection. From the shabby exterior, with its chipped paint, to the porch threatening collapse and ruin from termites, the interior would reek of opulence. He expected to be able to count the veins in the Carrara marble floors trucked in from Tuscany. He'd likely sit in an Albini chair that had fallen off the delivery truck, but had landed intact. The light from the Murano chandeliers overhead would make the Doge of Venice more jealous than Othello. He gave the front door two hard raps.

Corrado answered the door. He had lost all the baby fat since Farrugia had last seen him. Corrado was the clone of a peasant from the last century, thin and with spindle legs, minus his cap and donkey behind him. A woman was bouncing a squalling infant, the attempt to calm it gone to hell now that he had banged on the door. Corrado motioned for him to come inside

"I can't believe it's you," Corrado said. He hugged him and did the customary cheek to cheek. Those puny arms of his had farmer's strength in them. Farrugia patted him on the back and whispered into his ear that they needed to talk. Corrado asked the woman to make them some coffee. Her dark eyes gave Farrugia the once over before she left the room, banshee child attached to her like a barnacle.

"Your wife?" Farrugia asked. Corrado nodded. "She looks familiar," Farrugia said and then, "No, don't tell me . . ."

Corrado put his hands up in protest. “Yes, I married a local girl from San Luca and brought her here with me.”

“And her family?”

“The lot of them are in San Luca, except her brother. He’s here.”

“Is he?”

Corrado lifted his shoulders up and let them collapse. “What do you think? What can you do? The heart wants what it wants. You can’t help who you fall in love with.” Corrado put an arm around his childhood friend. “So what is it that you want to discuss with me? I hear you’re a cop these days. Where’s your partner? Outside in the Beamer?” Corrado rubbed his fingers together.

“*Tangenti?*”

“No, I don’t take kickbacks.”

“*Pizzini* then?”

Farrugia pushed the man’s hand down. “No, I don’t collect protection money and stop playing that violin. Can we talk or not?”

Corrado indicated the sofa. Good timing since the madonna and now quiet child came in with the stovetop espresso and two demitasse cups on a tray. He introduced her as Giulia, the child as Francesco, and asked her for a moment alone with his friend. She didn’t seem offended by the request, but she gave Farrugia the head to toe again, as if he had stepped into a pile of dog crap on the way in. Corrado waited until Giulia was out of sight. He turned his attention to Farrugia and the tray on the table in front of the sofa. Not Albini, but close enough; it was an authentic Gio Ponti.

“We’re old friends, right?” Farrugia said. “We can speak freely with each other.”

“Yeah, we are, not that it would stop you from speaking your mind. Sit and have some coffee. You’re making me nervous.”

Corrado poured the strong coffee. Farrugia took the small cup, but didn't bolt it back. He let Corrado tip his first. That was proof that the wife was no Lucrezia Borgia and the black ink in his cup didn't contain cantarella, her preferred poison. The coffee was dark and had a touch of crema blistering on the surface.

Farrugia said in a low voice. "You're telling me that you moved here from San Luca, to get away from them, and you marry a girl, have a child with her, and your brother-in-law is a gangster. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Please, Isidò, not in my house. Now, what is it that you want to discuss? Look, I have clean hands." Corrado showed his palms. "*Mani pulite*. My in-law does his business but I don't allow it in my house."

"But you hear things, don't you?"

"Now and then. So what?"

Farrugia drank his coffee in one gulp. The caffè would be hijacking his nerves within a few minutes. Whether Corrado had done it for love or out of lust, he had made his bed. His mother, may she rest in peace, had named him after the writer from San Luca, Corrado Alvaro, the first writer with the courage to write the word 'Ndrangheta in a major newspaper. Farrugia remembered Alvaro from the anthologies that the Marxist editors had put together for students back in the day. He was one of those mandatory authors teachers made you hate.

"I heard something recently," Farrugia said.

Corrado had the next cup of espresso in his hand. "I'm listening," he said.

"A certain party is onto something new, and I can't quite figure out what it is, but this something new is big and I heard it has three parts to it. You following me?"

"I follow. Three parts. On with it, please."

“This group has an alliance with another set of businessmen. The thing is that the two things they normally do, they aren’t doing, and that third thing is a fat question mark over my head, like in one of those cartoons we used to watch as a kids. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Where I expect white, I see black.” Farrugia knew that he wasn’t good at speaking code, but it was a valiant attempt. He’d consider playing with matryoshka dolls just to better learn how to talk in circles and riddles, if it would help. “That thing that one of them does went rancid, like spoiled cheese. Have you heard anything lately?”

Corrado finished his coffee. His shoulders said one thing, his mouth another. “I hear a lot of things. It’s not so much that the cheese went bad. The problem is there are no buyers.” He moved in closer. Corrado bared his arm and tapped a vein. “The Americans aren’t buying cheese because of this new disease they’ve started calling AIDS. As for those three parts of yours, I need to tell you a story. You are good with allegories, aren’t you?”

“I’ve read my Dante, like everyone else. Go on, and feel free to start it off with *C’era una volta*.” His words provoked a smile from Corrado.

“Once upon a time, there was this boy who had a very special talent. He could hold his breath for a very long time. He’d dive deep down and return to the surface with all kinds of treasure.”

Corrado’s hands came together in prayer and plunged into invisible water.

“Word got around about his gift. He spent time away from his house, away from his mother. Like most mothers, she worried about her boy. Never underestimate a mother. Anyway, she pulled her son aside one day for a talk. ‘Nicolò,’ she said, ‘if you spend too much time in the water you’ll turn into a fish one day.’ He didn’t listen to her. Most boys don’t because their blood is hot and the day is always long and sunny for them. They don’t know sadness. Nicolò didn’t because he spent all

his time underwater. He was making good money, too. One day he dove down deep, way underneath Sicily and there he saw two marble columns holding the island up, but the third one was failing. The island might sink into the sea, he thought. He surfaced but before he could tell anyone about those columns, a king from Rome was standing there. He listened to the boy's worries. The island was endangered. The powerful king promised to help Nicolò help the people of Sicily, but only if he did a big favor for him. Well, actually it was two favors that counted as one. You know how businessmen are."

Corrado had that vulpine expression; the kind the fox has after it's eaten the hen and all the eggs.

Farrugia squinted. "Two things, eh? Thought you said a king, but you changed it to businessman. I guess the important thing is that he's Roman."

"You know your history enough to know that Rome had many kings. Seven to be exact, one for each hill, but that isn't the point. Nicolò could do something that the king couldn't do himself." That grin flashed again.

"Dive deep," Farrugia said. "He had to dive for something twice."

"Yes, twice." Corrado held up two fingers.

Farrugia wanted another cup of coffee. He grabbed the handle and tilted the steel Moka. The iconic man above the name Bialetti had his hand raised like an exclamation point, as if to scream at him, "A and B, moron."

Farrugia poured the remainder of the coffee for his friend without asking him. "In this story of yours, what happens to Nicolò after he dives twice for the king?"

Corrado drank his espresso and looked straight ahead. "That's the odd part, because nobody knows what happened to Nicolò. Some say he became a fish, like his mother had predicted would happen; others say he stayed too long under the sea and never surfaced, possibly drowned, while

another version of the story says that he was turned into marble and is the third column.” Corrado held his demitasse close to his lips, his eyes never drifting from Farrugia’s own.

“And the island, what happened to it?” Farrugia asked.

“It’s still afloat, isn’t it?”

## II

No Italian in his right mind would drink cappuccino midday, but Farrugia upheld his end of the bargain. He set the ceramic cup sealed with tinfoil next to his poor man's lunch of sardine fillets tossed with capers, garlic, parsley—and chili peppers in it for a kick of heat. The whole thing had been tossed with yesterday's breadcrumbs and baked under a thin layer of bread. He hadn't offered up Corrado's fanciful allegory, though he did hold the line hard that Corrado kept his in-law's business outside his house.

"The man is connected; he's involved," Pippo said.

Farrugia could see the senior detective's reasoning. How long could Corrado keep the barbarians at the gate? It was long, slow, and inevitable, but even Rome fell to the fur-wearing and smelly primitives.

"What about your friend's wife?" Pippo asked between bites of his own sandwich and long sips from his cold bottle of Peroni. Both the bottle and the man were sweating. Pasquale ate and listened.

"She was out of the room," Farrugia answered.

"Not to insult you, kid, but my wife can hear my thoughts before I think them. How else do you think she keeps the kids and me in line? This woman is no different. Name?"

"Giulia." He dodged giving the last name, or mentioning the kid.

Pippo took another slurp of beer. "I tease her that if she hadn't married me, she would've been a great Mother Superior, terrorizing a generation of kids. How's the *pittea*?"

"Good, thanks."

Pasquale had a large green bottle next to him. San Pellegrino. He had his share to contribute to the conversation.



“I say we get back to our original plan, so we don’t lose time. Pippo will keep his ears on the congregation. This herd sits on its stomach. Pippo’s CI gave him the next spot for the guy we want you to follow. You can go solo, but we need to agree on a schedule.”

“Schedule for what?” Farrugia asked.

The Stork had reach; he extended a long arm and grasped Farrugia’s shoulder. “For you to check in, stupid. We’ve got to know that our new guy is alive and well.” Pasquale ran his hand fast over Farrugia’s head. Big brother move.

Farrugia had finished. He crumpled up the wrapper for the sandwich. He pulled the cappuccino close to him and stared at the sunken foam. He expected silence. He got silence.

Pippo had some of his sandwich in his right hand, hanging there while he watched Farrugia. This was the big moment. The test. Pasquale had the mouth of the bottle of sparkling water to his lips, waiting.

“Which one of you pissed into this?” Farrugia asked, and nosed it. He smelled nothing but the blizzard of cinnamon that Pippo had blanketed the froth with.

The two burst out laughing. Pippo was the first to speak.

“It’s okay, rookie. We wouldn’t do that to you.”

Farrugia drank some of the cappuccino. Lather tickled his upper lip. “Tastes okay.”

Pippo rose from the table to fetch his notebook. He flipped a couple of pages to find the one he wanted. “While you and your friend were talking, I put in a call with Central to get some juice on that new guy I want you to follow. Pasquale had faxed a photo to the secretary and I got the call.”

Farrugia was impressed, but not with his dead drink.

“Faxed from where, and how did you develop the film so fast?”

Pippo glanced at Pasquale and smiled. “He might turn out okay. Rookie here doesn’t miss a thing, does he? For your information, I sent the fax from the pharmacy and, don’t you worry, I cleared the machine’s memory so there’s no trace of the number, just in case the guy behind the counter is doing more than selling candy and condoms. Satisfied?”

“And the film?”

“You’d be surprised what you can set up in a bathroom,” Pasquale answered, head tilted to indicate the door to the toilet behind him. Farrugia spotted tubs, which he assumed were for the chemicals. He looked up and saw the special light bulb.

“Happy now?” Pasquale asked.

Farrugia listened to the older man’s report. Pippo had received that call from headquarters on a brick; that was the name for the phone because it, well, looked like a brick. Farrugia had never used one. Motorola made the analog phone, but the tech magazines were reporting that the Scandinavians were busy with fabricating a lighter model. Good, Farrugia thought, because the cumbersome thing looked like something his grandfather might’ve seen in World War II, when it took two men to carry the damn thing.

Notebook in hand, onionskin paper for a page curled up and over the small spring coil, Pippo went down his list of particulars on his mark. It was the standard litany of criminal acts and misdeeds for a hood. He hadn’t been pinched for anything serious, but what was more important to Farrugia, to the police, was the Supplemental Notes, such as to whom he was related to and where they lived. Dogs and horses had pedigrees and so did Calabrian mafia.

There were two major families in San Luca and new guy was related to both, though he worked for only one side of the marriage aisle. Farrugia heard about the assault charges. Dropped. He heard about the blackmail and intimidation charges. Dropped. The guy had been made because he was slippery as an eel in a tank at a high-end restaurant.

“What’s his cover? His front?” Farrugia asked.

“Says he’s a flunky for a construction company. Isn’t that a dead giveaway?”

“What’s this guy’s nickname?” Farrugia asked Pippo.

“*Il tonno*,” Pippo answered. Totò could have said it and nobody would’ve laughed.

“Tuna? Seriously?” Farrugia had raised eyebrows in surprise. He had seen the man’s size, the cauldron for a belly that strained against his white shirt. Pippo had something else to add.

“His father was a fisherman, near Pizzo.”

Farrugia got it. He felt ill. He had witnessed an illegal *tonnara* as a child. His father thought it would put hair on his son’s chest so they went to see the spectacle of harvesting tuna. He could never look at fish the same way again after.

Calabrians had learned how to fish tuna from the Arabs a thousand years ago. Arab poets talked about the nets of love for good reason; they used them on the tuna. Somehow, Farrugia couldn’t imagine this hoodlum’s father singing “*U Leva Leva*,” the fisherman’s song asking the big fish for forgiveness.

Farrugia recalled that day with his old man. He had meant well. He had explained each nauseating detail. The fishermen would drop their nets into the sea. Papà pointed to where the water had turned a deep blue from all the bluefin tuna under the surface. There was a shimmer of silver in the water when the sunlight touched the waves. He remembered that. Papà the narrator explained that each boat had a task. That was when it happened: the chanting and the ferocity of stabbing and reeling in the fish until all that beautiful blue water turned red. He covered his ears, afraid that fish screamed. All he could think of was catechism class and the story of the plague visited on Egypt.

Church bells rang out all through the slaughter. Almost hand in hand, the priest and the town's Communist mayor had come down to the dock to greet the men like Don Camillo and Peppone and claim the first and second largest fish from the holocaust.

"So what is the plan again?" Farrugia asked.

"We stay here in Catanzaro, but you're going to Reggio. My CI gave me a contact for you to meet there."

"Reggio? That's a hundred and sixty kilometers, and you know how bad the roads are."

"How bad can they be? It's what, an hour and half drive if you make good time?" Pippo pushed his notebook forward as if it were the car. "You'll have a view of the sea and it's a straight shot once you get on State Road 18."

"I'll look across the strait and send you a picture of Messina," Farrugia said as he crossed his arms in front of his chest. He was the low man here. He rationalized that he would have AC, while they roasted in this room, got on each other's nerves until the stench of BO suffocated one of them. The crack about Messina made him think of Corrado and his tale of the deep-sea diver. "Why Reggio?"

Pippo guzzled the last of his beer. He had tilted it back to get every last drop down his gullet. He exhaled satisfaction. "Our CI said whatever it is they want Tuna to do, he'll do it in Reggio. He knows someone there."

"And you trust this informant?"

"Always with a grain of salt, but he hasn't misled us yet. Drive down to Reggio and make sure you're armed this time and check in with us three times a week. Meal times work best. Everyone has to eat, right?"

"One last question," Farrugia said. "This contact of his—is he another informant?"

“No, and he’s hardcore.”

Farrugia glanced at Pasquale. He had the long sleepy face from too much food in his stomach. Farrugia knew where to get his weapon, a Beretta 93R. One more question for the duo had come to mind before he’d speed away in his loud car.

“When I get there . . . other than dropping in on Gianni and Donatella Versace, where does this informant of yours say I should go, or has he forgotten that Reggio is the largest city in the region? Any hints how I recognize this tough guy?”

Pippo didn’t consult his notebook this time. His fingers toyed with the foil to gain access to one of his filter cigarettes. The pack was so cheap it came without cellophane. Farrugia recognized the red, white, and blue of the packet and the golden ship on it. *Nazionali*. State-issued. Pippo stalled, dropping this last detail after he did his imitation of a film noir detective. He’d light his match, toast the end of his vice, and wave the match dead. Farrugia accepted his fate.

“Where? Yeah, I’ve got the name of the place for you. Be there tomorrow at four in the afternoon.”

Pippo blew out a long curtain of smoke. Farrugia was grateful that his coffee hadn’t been tainted, but Pippo had taken hazing the new guy too far. The man had seen too many movies. Farrugia would spite him and not beg for this last critical piece of information. He suspected that he’d know when he saw the racketeer. Still, he needed the name of a place. He’d let the gray smoke linger some. The mouth moved and the hosanna came down from on high.

“*Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia* in Reggio. Four o’clock. Sharp.”

He had his own brick on the seat next to him, the AC blasting, fake ID in his pocket, license and registration on board. He had the stash in the trunk. Driving sometimes made him nervous and paranoid. Pass on the left and drive on the right. There were speed limits for each type of road, and

they changed to yet another set of numbers for rain and snow. Road signs changed all the time. And the cameras. The bureaucrats were watching him. They were everywhere. He conceded that driving was like reading a bad translation of a picaresque novel. He released the gear.

Farrugia thought he had it made when, twenty minutes out of Catanzaro, his jaw dropped with one terrible realization. He didn't utter a single profanity. He had resigned himself to his act of colossal stupidity. He left the lane and eased into a petrol station and got out of the car. He slammed the door shut and slammed his fist down on the roof. The attendant smirked and dismissed him as a lost fool on God's racetrack.

Neither of those two jerks had given him a name!

He flung the door open and ignored the car's stupid chimes. He pawed his jacket out of the way and grabbed a hold of the monstrosity anchored on the leather. He stared at the keypad before he punched in Pippo's number.

"*Pronto?*" Pippo answered in a voice trembling with laughter. Farrugia could hear Pasquale snickering. These two were loving every second of it. "The next *pronto* he heard was done in the concerned *nonna* voice. "*Pronto?*"

"Listen to me, you . . . never mind," Farrugia said, hand to forehead. Sweat from anger. "Having fun with the new guy, are we? The two of you think you're the next Benigni and Troisi, don't you? Enough is enough, I want—"

Unadulterated howling assaulted his ears. Farrugia wanted to smash the phone, run over the remains, and then again in reverse. The station attendant was staring. Farrugia understood why: the gun, the shoulder holster, in public view.

"A name. The name, please."

Pippo's cackling started to subside. The last laughs came out in short gasps. Their amusement at Farrugia's expense had run its course. A gasp and then a cough, the serious, professional voice about to purr in his ear. "Ugo Abbadelli."

The surname sounded ecclesiastical. Farrugia ran the last name through the mental sieve and washed it with his knowledge of cognates.

"The little abbot? I'm meeting a monk," he said.

"The only religious thing about him is he's good at Last Rites. Watch yourself with this guy. Hear me?"

"I heard you, but while I've got you on the line I've got a question." Farrugia scratched his head. He turned his back to the attendant and faced the highway. Cars whooshed by, anonymous and fast. "This informant of yours . . . do you . . ."

The answer didn't require higher math.

"Lesson one: never trust an informant. No exceptions. Ever. The only difference between an informant and a sewer rat is that the informant walks upright." The words sunk in. "It's simple logic. If a guy is willing to snitch and betray people he has known for years, then what integrity does he have? A CI always has an angle, whether it's a reduced sentence, or revenge."

"Revenge?" Farrugia didn't like that. "And the fish—what's his Christian name?"

"Nicchi. Fiorenzo Nicchi."

"But of course," Farrugia said with a smile. "Daddy was a fisherman. Any words of advice from Il cimice?" Flattery might help, Farrugia thought.

"Be careful. Abbadelli will meet you in front of the museum. I told you that."

"I know. Four on the dot. What does he look like?"

"He's a short guy. You'll know him when you see him. I got word through the vine to him that you're driving a Beamer. Check in with us later and good luck. You're doing okay for a new guy."

Don't take it personal. You develop a weird sense of humor on the job; it's what keeps you sane. You'll see."

Farrugia ended the call. It was back to the car and his road trip.

He had the AC on. He waited for his chance to claim his spot on the highway. He had the radio on. Retro song. He heard the Spanish word *colitas* in the lyrics. He thought of the language he hadn't spoken in years. The lilt of her Spanish lived inside his head. Music opened a door that he didn't want to enter right now. Papà was gone. She was gone. His eyes burned. He had to change the station.

The drive, this embryonic sac of life inside a mechanical beast, would last only so long. He'd have to open the door and take on reality soon. For now, though, for now he'd enjoy the reverie, something on the radio.

The news reported an earthquake in México City. Thousands were missing, feared dead. He heard it in the reporter's voice. Farrugia deplored this morbid fascination with natural disasters. He heard 8.1 on the Richter scale and the geologist's analysis. He was thinking concrete and dust. He was thinking Guadalajara cartel, pesos and dollars, cocaine and guns. Those things never slept or died. He turned to another station.

A Ramazzotti tune hurled him back in time. The singer, popular with southern boys such as himself, came from a working-class neighborhood. Ramazzotti had Rome and he, Isidore Farrugia, had San Luca of the Sticks. Different places, but they both shared the same nihilism. He turned the dial again.

He settled into some American music. The synth sounds of Duran Duran recalled parties off the base. Girls with glossed lips and guys with outrageous hair. The synthesizer made its appearance again, rolling in this time with Sting's breathy ditty about a possessive lover, or was it his homage to Orwell? Never mind. He listened to it anyway.



Madonna made him think of music videos. Video Music, the music channel, was the trend for kids now. He'd see them huddled around a television set, eating up Berlusconi's programming. *Dallas* and *Dynasty*—shows RAI stopped televising after three episodes because of their alleged corruptive power. And he hadn't forgotten how odd, how cool it was, to have commercials interrupt movies. So fashionable, so chic and cool, so very American. So not RAI.

The sea came into view on his right. Blue raced parallel to the car. The Strait of Messina threatened ahead. He thought of the earthquake he had heard about earlier on the radio. Messina was known for seismic activity. "It could have happened here," he said to himself.

Soon, he'd see the two rock formations. Homer had sung of Scylla, who ate men and dolphins alike. Scylla had been born a nymph. Glaucus, a fisherman, had fallen in love with her, but had made a terrible mistake; he complained about his unrequited love to Circe. The witch's brew transformed the attractive girl into a hideous monster with six heads. She raged against the sea from her home in the cliff.

Across from her, there was Charybdis. She was the dutiful and loving daughter of Poseidon. She rode the tides like a California surfer for her father in his war against Zeus. Women always paid the price for men. Zeus exiled her to a cave, to live under a fig tree. Three times a day she'd drink in the sea, ships and sailors with it. Farrugia could hear his old chum Corrado now.

There's an abundant poetic metaphor for you, Isidò. The Strait of Messina is nothing more than a blue vein between Italy and Sicily. Things are not what they seem, though, because neither blood nor veins are blue. No, they are not. Any kid in elementary biology could tell you that, but we forget what we've learned in school. It's all an illusion. Blood is blood and blood is always red, even when it is starving for breath. Farrugia admitted it; he preferred poetry to science. He'd allow Corrado his lecture.

The entire Mezzogiorno, southern Italy, could be said to be starving for oxygen for centuries. If it wasn't the Arabs, it was the Normans, or one army or another, one after the other, century after century, millennia. Corrado would wave his pointer finger in the air, like the little man on his coffeemaker. Between the rock and the hard place, Scylla and Charybdis. Oh yes, you knew that idiom was coming. Admit it.

"I admit it," Farrugia said to the windshield. Drivers always talked to themselves. He could complete the comparison himself.

In one direction, it was Cosa Nostra, the Sicilians. Behind him, it was a matter of how far back he wanted to look in his rearview mirror. The Spanish had brought in a criminal fraternity—what became the Camorra—into Naples with them. Landowners, whether in Sicily or in Calabria, midwived the birth of twin beasts, Cosa Nostra and 'Ndrangheta. Pay hooligans to maintain your hold on the land; keep the peasants in line and afraid. Corrado was inside his head again.

Blame the Greeks, he said. The Romans emulated them. The Greeks gave us their word for courage, bravery, *andragatía*, and that evolved into 'ndrangheta. Don't trust Greeks bearing gifts, Corrado warned him. Everyday Sicilian uses the word *mafiusu* to mean flashy and flamboyant, or well turned out.

Farrugia tapped the steering wheel.

"This is mafiusu. That's enough, Corrado. *Basta!*"

The voice in his head wouldn't quit: "But, one more thing, Isidò. Just one."

"Fine, old friend. What is it?"

"Water surrounds Reggio di Calabria on three sides, like a triangle. A, B, and C."

He almost lost control of the wheel when he looked out the window at the sea.

He drove a bit more before he cut the wheel and made the turn into the town center. He caught the time on his wristwatch. The city, the region's most populated, was an anthology of

architectural styles. The city had been rebuilt after the 1908 earthquake. He saw old-timers and kids walking the boardwalk, taking in the seafront under the canopy of palm trees. He noticed one of the elders. The man was some matador, tilting and turning veronicas against Death because he had to be ninety or older. He was walking with his hands behind his back, head and chin up, proud, his shoulders pinned back. His age and bearing implicated him; he had to be a member of that minority in the area, who spoke *grecanico*, a dialect that both teachers and the local government had banned for almost a century. Thinking Greek, Farrugia's stomach ached for two slices of *lestopitta*, the local pizza. He had time for that.

He threaded his arms through his jacket while seated inside the car. He didn't want anyone to see the holster or the gun this time. He popped the trunk and walked down the side of the car and pulled the lid up and leaned down into the trunk. He moved the tarp and verified that the product hadn't moved in transit. He closed the hatch and buttoned his top button.

Two slices later, he washed his hands in the bathroom and checked his reflection in the mirror. It was time to play the *duro*, the hard guy. The model of sunglasses fit the role: Shooter.

He considered the solid block of building, *Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia* there at Palazzo Piacentini, home of the museum dedicated to the art of Ancient Greece, a massive edifice, intimidating, and a far cry from the Greek idealism of agora and democracy. The architect, Marcello Piacentini, had been a Fascist. As Mussolini's Commissar, he left his signature in Bergamo and several places in Rome, and here in Reggio he built Italy's first museum from scratch, from the ground on up.

Farrugia choose a lamppost across the street from the museum. There was a small block of stone there for him to sit on if he got tired of standing there like a prostitute. He was two minutes early, but his meet was already on the scene. Farrugia had spotted him. The man's stature reminded

him of the honorary mafioso Meyer Lansky, a Jew by birth but an organizational and financial genius. Pippo had warned him about false appearances. This guppy was a shark.

The charisma projected two meters ahead of the man. He had elegance and a splash of swagger. He extended his hand and Farrugia offered his for the greeting.

“Gaetano Moscano?” the contact asked.

Farrugia thought fast. He had forgotten all about his alias.

“Yes. I’m Gaetano. Pleased to meet you.”

“Ugo Abbadelli.”

The next two minutes would be crucial.

“Let’s take a walk,” said this Abbadelli character. “I know this bar nearby where we can have *aperitivi* and have a talk.” Farrugia agreed. He’d let the man play guide.

“My friend Eliseo tells me that you have product and that you have a clean nose.”

“Nice play on words, Ugo. Do you mean clean as in I don’t use, or that I have no record?”

Ugo smiled. “Eliseo told me that you were a smart one.”

They were quite the couple walking the boardwalk. It was Tall and Short and the study in sartorial discrepancy. Farrugia was wearing his blue jeans, a dress shirt, no tie, and a sport jacket. He was tall enough that he could peer down his companion’s shirt. He wasn’t carrying.

Farrugia stopped the next time. He had to get into the role.

“Let’s get to the point, shall we? We both know that you and your associates ran my name through whatever network you have to tell you that I have no criminal record. You did that within an hour after Eliseo gave you my name. You probably have my height, weight, and I’ll bet you also know my blood type. We wouldn’t be having this meeting if I hadn’t cleared the first round. How do we help each other? I didn’t come all this way to waste my time, waste your valuable time so we could do this dumb dance.”

They were smiles on both sides of the equal sign. They arrived at the bar and stood close to the counter. Ugo asked Farrugia his preference. He ordered two of the same and made the first overture.

“I appreciate your respect for my time, and for that of my boss. I know your record is spotless, but that doesn’t mean all our questions were answered.”

The drinks arrived. The little man waited until the barkeep left.

“I need to know before any commitment is made whether you use.” Ugo touched his nose.

“No, I don’t. Thank you for the drink.” Farrugia raised his glass for the toast. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask Eliseo.”

“I did, but he said the two of you hadn’t seen each other in a long time. He said you didn’t. I believed him and still do.”

Farrugia waited. He took a small sip. Let the contact do all the talking.

“I had to check out what Eliseo had to say. We’re Calabrians. He isn’t. Don’t get me wrong: I like Eliseo. I’m helping him move something that he can’t unload.” Ugo hadn’t touched much of his drink. He had a point to make. “With a Sicilian last name, you know that I can’t be careless.”

Ugo took a slow, measured sip. Farrugia could feel the man’s eyes studying his reactions. He tried not to sound cynical. “Tell me what you think I need to know and whether I meet the grade to meet your boss.”

“Familiar with the museum?”

“Not particularly. Sorry if that makes me ignorant.”

Ugo patted him on the back and emitted a patter of laughter. Here was a killer with canned giggles, straight from one of the tins in Cinecittà.

He took one last interest in his drink before he continued. “There’re two statues in that museum. A recreational diver discovered them a couple years ago. Scholars around the world say those statues are the oldest known, the most significant artifacts our world has from antiquity.”

Farrugia leaned back, arched an eyebrow. The shark had bared some teeth when he smiled. Both the look and what he said had puzzled Farrugia. He leaned in and whispered. “Are you telling me that you want to steal two museum pieces?”

A hand curled around the top of his shoulder. Farrugia worried whether the man might’ve felt the holster’s strap. Two dark eyes stared into him.

“Nobody said a word about stealing.”

“Then: borrowing, or misplacing them?”

Ugo finished his drink and turned on the stool to face Farrugia. The man could pass for a garden gnome.

“My boss will explain the rest to you. Let’s take another walk.”

He had passed the second test.

### III

His mother was whispering to him in his blood. Ugo, the Italian version of the Swedish writer Pär Lagerqvist's evil Piccoline, led the way. Funny thing, having another man hold the door open for you. Farrugia stepped into the frigid restaurant. Heads looked up and dismissed him. The headwaiter and bartender also glanced up. Where one stared like a mortician, the other one stopped in the arc of cleaning his counter. That look, the nod to Ugo, brought Farrugia's vitals to a heated pitch. Not quite the ambush, but too many things didn't add up here.

The new guy, this Fiorenzo Nicchi alias *Tonno*, was tasked with an important operation. Farrugia got that. He could see it, but all this secrecy, the rites of passage, didn't make sense. Appearances are deceiving, yes, but fat Tonno didn't seem like the species of gangster to have those kinds of smarts inside the block on his shoulders. He may have beaten the rap several times, but he had gotten caught. He had a history, a trail that made him the ideal person the cops wanted to annoy in the middle of the night with questions about his whereabouts. Ugo excused himself. He needed a moment. He and the maître d' huddled for a moment.

"Follow me," Ugo said.

Farrugia walked past the host of reservations. Farrugia felt the man's downward glare and the fake smile of hospitality. The man knew that he had had an effect. Farrugia stole a look towards the bar. The trendy magazines were calling bartenders mixologists these days. This one was likely old school, using an icepick to stab stubborn ice into obedient ice cubes. He didn't smile.

Mamá disliked this; he could hear her and he agreed with her. A few short steps forward he passed other diners. No tourists here. This was the pagan south, where the fashion was flamboyant and vivid; their religion, baroque, so unlike the pious northerners with their monotone weather and neutral palette for everything.

Farrugia followed Ugo. He saw men in Versace suits, others in tailor-made suits from the city's best tailor. They were here to be seen and talked about. A few of the kept women dared to look at him. He spotted one in Missoni. His bet was that grand bourgeois signora across from him was wearing either Poison or Dior. Azzaro and Calvin Klein were the top two colognes. Farrugia could never get the mélange of scents out of his head after reading and sniffing the samplers in the magazines.

Ugo moved aside once he had entered the private dining room. "Take a seat."

Farrugia took the chair. He didn't like having his back to the entrance. Ugo settled into the chair next to him. Two men sat opposite them.

"This is Gaetano Moscano. He's in from Catanzaro, like you said," Ugo stated.

Farrugia had stopped midway with his napkin on his leg under the table. He had never mentioned Catanzaro.

"Nice to meet you, Gaetano. May I call you Gaetano?" asked the man in the dark suit.

"You may, and what do I call you?"

"Forgive my lack of manners. This gentleman on my left is my associate, Alan Ancona."

The man, also in a bespoke suit, said hello. These two were American; their vowels betrayed them, but their Italian was good. Very good. The man who hadn't given his name looked fortyish, lean in his Brioni suit and custom-made shirt. He had opted for no tie, but his shirt cuffs were monogrammed. LB.

The lighting hadn't appeased his mother. When the nameless devil had spoken, he had moved his head forward into the light. Shadows fell into crags of his clean-shaven face; the eyes, playful, told the story of the cobra and mongoose and left the reader with the riddle: Which one am I?

"I'm having Aperol. Join me, please," Mr. Monogram said.



Farrugia didn't have time to answer. Drinks appeared at his side, for him and Ugo. A turn of the head found Ugo holding the same drink, hand trembling.

"I'm told you have merchandise."

"I do, but not on me. It's in my car, safe and sound," Farrugia answered. Before the taste of orange and bubbly hit the back of his mouth, Ancona called someone over with his hand.

"Your keys, please," he said to Farrugia.

Farrugia set the glass down. "In my pocket. I'll reach for it nice and slow."

"I appreciate that, but no need for it. We're all friends here," Ancona said. A large hand had reached down his side into his coat pocket and fished for the keys. The headwaiter twirled the key ring and used two fingers to flick the lapel aside. "He's armed. Should I?" he asked Ancona, who waved him off.

Farrugia knew that they would find the cocaine in the trunk. That was fine, since meetings of this kind required a gift in good faith. The real purpose for the errand wasn't the cocaine, but to check out the car, the license and registration, and for any other oddities that might provoke mistrust.

A waiter came in with the starter. Farrugia had wanted to gag: tuna tartare. Mr. Monogram broke a smile.

"It's unconventional for a starter," he said, "but I had wanted to sample it before I met with your partner."

Farrugia hoped to Saint Luke for no tuna. He was right that his two hosts had decided on the courses. Another dish appeared under his chin. Fried anchovies. He could live with that. He said no to wine. Water would do.

"My partner?"

“Fiorenzo Nicchi will be working with you,” the man said, enjoying his pile of raw fish. Farrugia spied an artistic spray of green liquid and thin florets of ginger. “Fio isn’t the brightest flower in the garden. I need someone to keep an eye on him.”

“Why me?”

“Because he uses.” This bald fact came with the sounds of knife and fork. Ancona had pasta with squid.

“I don’t understand. You can get one of these waiters to do that,” Farrugia said.

“Modesty and wit, I like that. You’re smart, though I think you should do without the flashy car.” He closed his eyes to savor the tuna before he continued. “A car like that and who needs unwanted attention? The point is that I need clean hands and noses around my operation.”

*His* operation. The man had done his homework. He either had him tailed, or he had someone check the surveillance footage from the highway cameras. The maître d’ returned. He placed the package on the table and something else: the hulking phone.

“In the trunk, like he said. He also had this phone on the front seat. He checks out.”

The man seemed disappointed that he couldn’t find something wrong with the car or the cocaine. There was a small slit in the package. He had used a penknife to test the coke. He put his hands on his waist and asked his burning question: “Why are you carrying?”

“I had a bad experience in the school yard once. I never got over it.”

A smirk contorted his face. He then said he had work to do. “Will that be all?” he asked Ancona, who tapped the brick with manicured fingers. He wanted to know.

Farrugia tilted his head and grinned at the waiter. “The nose knows and how good is yours. Better than the dog’s?”

Ancona caught the man’s wrist, as he was about to lunge forward.

“Sorry, Boss. Something about this guy, I don’t like. Yeah, the coke is good. Peruvian; it’s better than the Colombian stuff. Takes special connections to get it.”

After the man had left, Ancona examined the mobile phone. He was fascinated with the device. He laid it down on the table. He said, “I’ve heard people say they can cause cancer. What do you think?”

Farrugia pushed his dish forward. “I’m not a doctor; heard the same about microwave ovens and cigarettes.”

Ancona looked to his boss and got the slight nod of approval.

“You’ve got superior merchandise,” Ancona said. “It’ll fetch a handsome price, provided you have an ample supply. We can promise distribution and negotiate percentages.”

“I’ve got the connection. What do you want from me?”

“Be Nicchi’s babysitter.”

Farrugia narrowed his eyes to convey confusion and suspicion. “Please tell me about yourself, and I don’t mean you, Mr. Ancona. I’d like to hear it from your companion.”

The man next to Alan Ancona rested his knife and fork to say his words. “Alan and I run what you might call a cultural investment firm. It’s called *Amici di Roma*. I’m the CEO and he’s the legal expert. There are two bronze statues in the museum. Familiar with them?”

A business card slid into view in front of Farrugia from Ancona. *Amici di Roma* was in Aldine font, black except for the R in Roma. Ancona’s name and number appeared in the lower corner.

“I heard about the statues from Ugo,” Farrugia said. “I thought at first that it’s ballsy to steal them, but he says you have something else in mind. He didn’t elaborate.”

“Not interested in the statues. We’re interested in what’s shipping with them to Rome. All eyes are on those statues, but we want to move merchandise offstage.”

Farrugia switched gears. “May I call you Alan?” he asked.

Farrugia pushed his chair back. He crossed a leg over to imply relaxation and interest. That got the eyes to look up from the tuna. Here was a man who appreciated nuance.

“I know I’ve asked this before, but why me?”

“Because you’re clean,” Ancona said.

The boss put his fork down and wiped his mouth on his linen napkin. He cleared his throat and quaffed his Aperol. It was his turn to speak again.

“What Alan is trying to say without belaboring the obvious is that you’re clean as they come. Ugo vouched for you. He says a friend of his who’s worked with him recommended you. You’re also Calabrian and I haven’t dealt much with the Calabrian group, if you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Farrugia said, and rubbed his knee. “But why me, the babysitter? Is it only because you have an unreliable Calabrian, a drug user?”

“That and there’s the matter of diplomacy. I need an in with them, so I’m letting Nicchi think he’s running this venture.” The man sighed. He actually sighed. “You’re my eyes and ears on this, Gaetano. Nicchi is a risk, like you said. I don’t like liabilities. I don’t want Nicchi running this show.”

“You just want him to think he is.”

“Exactly, and I’ll tell you why. Anybody who comes within centimeters of those two statues had better be sanctified. I’ve asked around and you do good, clean business.” The man raised his glass, as if toasting Farrugia. “You went beyond the mandatory military service and you have the one quality I admire in business . . . you haven’t drawn any attention to yourself. Can’t say that for Nicchi and his friends. You may just be the man who helps me expand my business north of Rome. Help me, and I’ll get your Peruvian candy into every nightclub in Milan.”

Farrugia had taken all of this in. The guy had vision. Organized crime in thriving Milan, the least Italian of cities, would be a major accomplishment. This unnamed American had a keen understanding of the peninsula. He'd let Nicchi sit in as stooge in order to get cocaine from the 'Ndrangheta. His next play, if he saw the Peruvian cocaine as lucrative, would be to either take Gaetano Moscano out, or side with him against the Calabrians. Farrugia knew which option was easier. This suit was smart, cagey, an astute student of Machiavelli.

Gaetano Moscano: his alias, his false self, was beyond reproach. Pippo had succeeded in building up his false dossier. His counterfeit persona was a cocktail mix of truths and falsehoods. The military service was there. Truth. On paper and in real life, he had done more than the obligatory service. The northern boys used to tease him and his friends behind his back, calling them *firmaioli*. Southern boys with crap prospects signed on for a two-year extension. He had. That military service slid the impenetrable door open into law enforcement; cleared a path through the byzantine Italian bureaucracy.

He put his napkin on the table. He ran his hands over his eyes.

"I'll do it, but you'll have to excuse me, I'm tired. I apologize if I don't stay for the rest of the meal." He went to stand up when Ancona spoke.

"We understand, which is why we arranged for your hotel."

Farrugia was stunned. He heard the name of the hotel. He understood immediately. The demon was speaking for both himself and Lucifer next to him. This was unexpected: accommodation. This was the iron fist inside the velvet gauntlet. He was now the watched servant. He could picture it: he was the canary inside the hotel, with the 'Ndrangheta tending to the cage from ceiling to floor, from manager to janitor.

"Your thoughtfulness flatters me," Farrugia lied. "At least tell me the name of my host."

He had thought to say benefactor, but that sounded too sarcastic. The Dark One with monogrammed cuffs rose. Tall man, but aren't all Americans? He extended his hand. Farrugia expected the crushing grip, the Texas handshake, but it was soft as silk.

“Name is Lorenzo. Lorenzo Bevilacqua.”

He arrived back at the hotel drenched with sweat, tired; his white short-sleeved shirt stuck to him. He unbuttoned it. He had others, pressed and hung up in the armoire.

In his second week into the gig, he was impersonating a *carabiniere* for Ancona and Bevilacqua. Farrugia didn't know how they did it; they had several authentic uniforms for him, down to the red stripe on black slacks and the cap with its official symbol, *la fiamma*, or exploding grenade. He worked long hours.

He retired for the day, done with his shift of standing like a statue guarding statues. Farrugia understood why Lorenzo had picked him: the ingrained military gravitas was impossible to imitate, unless you drilled and drilled until your back became as stiff as an ironing board; he had the San Marco Battalion to thank for that. The role of police guard was the perfect cover for access to the museum. One of his daily duties was the entry and logging out of deliveries and received items. He had the clipboard, the hard stare, and the illegible scrawl and ticked box perfected.

Nicchi showed up; more like, he rolled into the first meeting with the expectation that he was boss. In the presence of Ancona and Bevilacqua, he took the news Gaetano Moscano would be working with him in stride, but saved his ire for the few moments he had alone with Farrugia.

Fiorenzo would eyeball Farrugia with rodent eyes, pudgy face, bulldog jowls and rubbery lips. What Isidore Farrugia could not stand, what he abhorred most and used all the discipline he could muster in order not to punch the fat slug in the face, was when the beast insisted on intruding into his personal space. He'd breathe on him; he'd move in close, then closer still; he'd press him

against the wall. Farrugia hated that. Most mornings, Fiorenzo Nicchi had halitosis, morning breath, so sulfurous that the Vatican's Swiss Guards would throw down their halberds and abandon the Holy See to the Protestants.

The hotel room was getting to him, too. The former soldier had gotten soft. Acceptable hotel, but he had forgotten that he had lived in barracks where amenities he had now were luxuries. He had a small portable fan for the sweltering heat. A geriatric would wheel his squeaky cart down the hall at all hours, cigarette clamped tight between his lips, and the stupid hat screwed down onto his head. Farrugia was a prisoner. He had to accept that, just like he had food and water delivered to him at regular intervals.

Sofia, an attractive local girl, delivered his meals at night. She was a ghost of a woman in the hallways. She was younger than he was, always polite and, with time, something of a flirt. Taller than most girls he saw in the area, he appreciated the sadness surrounding her. Her soft black curls, perfect nose, and dark eyes could inspire sonnets. Farrugia anticipated her knock on his door. On a few occasions he'd mention a certain dish, when she asked what he liked, and it would appear the next night. He hunted for an answer as to whether she had cooked the meal, but she evaded his questions like a deer in the forest. His training had taught him to suspect everyone. He tried not to look; he tried not to think about her, but he failed every time. He did not want her in his world, this corrupt one of false pretenses and certain danger, but Sofia had become his postcard between realities, his wise jailer, and his imaginary mistress in his dreams. When she left the room, closed the door behind her, he was left with nothing but the mundane.

There was neither minibar nor fridge, and the television had a tiny screen. He watched what he could for company. He disliked game shows but he watched *Superflash* and its quizmaster host and chameleon, Mike Bongiorno. Umberto Eco had satirized the man as the ultimate non-threat, the

milquetoast man. Farrugia agreed with the intellectual. He surfed channels. He missed the heated exchanges between the other Corrado and Raffaella Carrà.

Farrugia was thinking back to his army days. Days of *buonismo*, when the world associated Italian soldiers with repairing roads and hospitals, and never with combat. Farrugia knew better. He and his fellow soldiers had done plenty to dispel the myth of The Good Italian. Still, it was all bittersweet nostalgia.

He and his buddies would gather around the rare television for snatches of Italian. In time they stopped listening and watching it, the dials turned low and then off. They started to hear the stories of the refugees around them, taking in their faces and their testimonies. Atrocities. Genocide. Not easy words for him to stomach but Farrugia would have his proof. He had walked through Sabra and Shatila. Everything that moved, human or otherwise, had been attacked. He had seen the mutilated, the dead and dying. A little girl, on the precipice of death, grasped his hand. She had asked for her mother. She died. He had never forgotten the slashed throat or all that blood. September would always remain for him a month of appearances and disappearances; the reports, the refugees kept appearing. Nobody seemed to care until one day the barracks in Beirut had disappeared.

He verified the time on the watch that stuck to his wrist. It was almost time for his important show, his call to Pippo and Pasquale. Their conversations had become like the doctor's prescription: done three times a week at first, then twice, and now negotiated to one.

Not one for paranoia, it wouldn't have surprised him if Bevilacqua had had the room bugged.

Farrugia checked the entire bathroom, from the toilet's lid and tank to the shower curtain. He opened and closed the cabinets where he kept towels and personal items. He stood on the toilet first and then the sink to take apart the lamp overhead. While unscrewing or redoing a fixture with



his Swiss Army Knife, he had debated more than once which outfit Ancona might've hired. Were they ex-CIA, KGB, or the Stasi? The labors of Hercules done, Farrugia did what he had been doing since Day 1 of his incarceration: he ran the shower to blanket his conversation.

In a pair of shorts, he closed the door and entered the faux steam room with the gargantuan phone. He punched in the number and waited. Dialing. The hard part was thinking in code.

"Hey, it's you," the voice, Pippo's, greeted him.

"It's me."

"Good to hear," Pippo repeated twice.

This was unsustainable. One of them would have to use verbs or, God forbid, a pronoun.

"Any news?"

"Not really; sunrise and sunset without any clouds here. There?"

"An unexpected cloud over a friend's house."

This was tedious. Farrugia wished that Pippo would say something of substance, but he played along. "You don't say. The mail is on time here. Same mailman, same route every day."

"Every day? Wow. Any signs of a dog?"

Farrugia had had it. "Cut the shit, will you? Say something that isn't baby food."

"Calm down, will you. Your friend was attacked."

"Corrado?"

"He would be the one."

Farrugia was thinking fast; he slapped his forehead. The car. *Shit.*

"Are you there?"

Pippo asked more than once. His voice had that cool tone to it, the kind dispatchers heard on emergency calls; calm at first, then one detail, only one, and the ice would crack. Something was wrong.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Farrugia asked.

“We’re thinking that the date will get bumped up.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Farrugia said. He didn’t believe the date anyway. The statues were scheduled for transport in the last week of September, but it wasn’t an uncommon practice to edit the details: tell the public one date and have the artifacts already in transit. Museums were vague as fog to throw off terrorists and hijackers. He shifted the phone to his other ear. He had flexed his bicep for too long holding the phone. “What happened to Corrado?”

“Roughed up, shaken and stirred, but nothing major.”

“My ass, nothing major. He isn’t James Bond or a martini. Did he say even a single word about my visit?”

“What was there to say? The wife must’ve given away bits and pieces, so they tried to beat it out of him. Nothing, but his brother-in-law is the one stirring the pot.”

Farrugia wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He should have excellent skin by now from all the spa treatment. Pippo was telling him to listen closely.

“I’m listening.”

“You either get out now, or you really are solo. The two factions are nervous; each thinks the other is trying to put the screws to them when it comes to cocaine. There could be a war.”

“And the Sicilians?”

“What the hell do they care? They aren’t making money, so they’ll side with whoever ends up on top, but I’m telling you that there will be a lot of dead bodies before there is peace. It’s bad up here.”

Moisture collected in his eyebrows. The sweat hung from his eyelashes, about to drop and sting his eyes. Bad news was bad news, but he doubted that a feud between the two major clans in Calabria would derail Lorenzo Bevilacqua, Ancona, and their Amici di Roma.

“How bad is bad?” Farrugia asked Pippo.

“Remember the scene in *Godfather II* when mafiosi were walking around in the middle of the night, yelling about either a reward or bad luck would come to those who were hiding the child Vito Andolini? It’s that bad here. People are talking, day and night.”

Not good. The Sicilians would be burning money they didn’t have, while the two clans sorted out their grievances. Heroin was a poor cash crop this year. The Sicilians couldn’t afford to sit still. Pot stirred, indeed. Violence was a desperate option, but if some bloodshed now meant peace in the long run, then so be it. Governments did it. Farrugia could hear the priest saying it in mass: *Fiat*. Let it be done.

“Get out while you can,” Pippo reminded him.

“Take care of each other. I’ve got to go.”

He ended the call. Farrugia reasoned that Bevilacqua, like Mussolini, would keep his train on time. Where there is money to be made, earth will move with either heaven or hell, God or Devil, man or miracle.

There was pounding on the door.

Water turned off, towel casual around his neck, and phone tossed onto the bed, Farrugia approached the door. The closer he got to the door, the louder the sound, thundering. The light around the edges of the door pulsed with each fist on the other side. Farrugia thought to take his weapon with him. Instead, he grabbed the doorknob.

“What!” he said to the fat man. First, Nicchi pushed past him. The headwaiter from the restaurant slid in behind the wall of flesh and closed the door behind him. Gently. Farrugia heard the soft click. The maître d’ swept the door’s chain lock.

“You forgot to hang the Do Not Disturb sign on the doorknob,” Farrugia said.

Fiorenzo Nicchi grabbed an arm and spun Farrugia around. Farrugia yanked his arm away. He glared at Nicchi. Two wet loops under the armpits, shirt buttons ready to pop off and blind someone, the man stood there with an open mouth like the fish he was named after. He said he wanted to ask him something.

“Then ask your question. Did you need this one over here to carry the question mark?”

“He’s here because he’d like to hear the answer, too.”

“Then ask me instead of hammering my door like you’re crucifying Christ a second time. There are other guests, you know.”

The waiter approached. He took soft steps. Experience told Farrugia that kind of silence suggested the man was a hitter, a contract-killer. Farrugia never got his name, but that didn’t matter. Tall and lean, he was a human Doberman on a leash.

“Get some clothes on, first,” the killer said.

Farrugia motioned to his chest with his hands. He had the physique. “Why? Is this distracting the two of you? This is my room and I can do what I want.”

The tall man smirked, reached for the pair of jeans that Farrugia had hung over the chair near the desk. “Put these on.”

The denims hit Farrugia in the chest. He put one leg in and then the other and, just as he had pulled his favorite pair of jeans up, the fat beast slammed his fist into the side of his head. Farrugia toppled over and hit the floor thinking he should’ve greeted them at the door with his Beretta. Eyes glazed, he saw feet. Restaurant guy was behind him, both hands on the towel. He planted a foot on Farrugia’s lower back and pulled on the two ends of the towel hard. Strangulation was dessert. Il tonno crouched down to whisper into Farrugia’s ear.

“We want to know where you scored that cocaine.”

Farrugia couldn't answer if he tried. Little air left in him, the towel tight around his throat, pulled high and tight, it also sealed his jaws shut. He could feel his blood trapped inside his head, with nowhere to go, pulsing and pounding against his ears and eyes. He managed to get a hand loose to grab some of the noose. Before the blackness, before he lost consciousness, the killer released the reins and Farrugia's head hit the floor a second time. He coughed and gasped for air. There was no white light, no tunnel, only the atrocious breath and the baritone voice above his face.

"Tell us where you got the cocaine."

"*Un amico*," he sputtered, the words hot and dry.

"A friend—that's a start. Does this friend have a name?"

The tip of a dress shoe flicked his ear. "Answer the man."

Farrugia improvised. "He's a very private man. He'll only talk to me. You can only get to him through me."

A pair of hands pulled him up. Stink-breath's next words proved that he had paid attention in catechism class.

"The priest says the same thing about Christ." Thumb up like a hitchhiker to indicate the phone on the bed behind him he said, "Call God for us."

The waiter's voice, this time in his ear, said, "Do as the man says."

Farrugia zipped up his jeans and buttoned them. He touched his throat, swallowed hard. The medal of Saint Luke had done nothing for him.

"The phone, now," Nicchi said.

"Get moving." The other guy poked Farrugia's shoulder. He had to stall and buy time for himself. He saw the phone on the bed, the book he had started reading on the nightstand. He would try small talk.

"Got the craving, Fiorenzo? Is that it?" Farrugia added the cokehead's sniff.

The fat face showed interest, but his friend was the designated killjoy. “Make the call.”

“What’s your interest in the coke?” Farrugia asked the waiter. Farrugia had decided to pit one against the other. “You’re the one who sampled it. Said it was good quality. Are you his dealer? No, you can’t be because you’re from Reggio.” Farrugia pointed to Nicchi. “He’s from Catanzaro. Mixed couple, the two of you.”

A confused Nicchi asked, “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you want to snort some blow, but this one here wants my source so he can take over my supply, or . . .” Farrugia had them hooked. He could tell.

“Or what?” the killer asked.

“You see whether your rival in San Luca is behind it.”

Farrugia was standing near the nightstand now. While he talked drugs, he had picked up the hardback book. He had it in his right hand.

“Are they?” Nicchi asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know—steal from them, or steal from your own, I don’t know which is worse for your health.”

Farrugia had planted the seed of discord. *Seminare zizania*. He had forgotten which Greek goddess to thank for that. He turned his attention to the expert who had classified his cocaine as Peruvian. That man was short on patience. “Pick up that phone and make the call,” he said.

Farrugia reached for the phone with his left hand, kept the book in his right. He smiled at the maître d’ and said, “Look at that: my hands are full. Hold my book, please.”

Instinctively the man held his hand out. Farrugia dropped the phone on the edge of the bed. The waiter looked down long enough to be a distracted.

Farrugia hit him hard in the throat with the spine of the hardback, driving him into the curtains. He spun him like a spider did with its prey. Farrugia dove for the phone next.

Nicchi rushed him.

Farrugia got to the phone first. He hammered the fat face until he broke the nose. Fiorenzo Nicchi's ugly face was now tuna tartare.

Farrugia used the hotel phone to make a local call. The restaurant. He asked the front of the house on the phone whether two gentlemen were dining in the private room in the back of the house. They were. He asked whether she would be so kind as to convey a message.

"Tell the gentlemen that I have two problems at my hotel that warrant their immediate attention. No name is necessary. They'll know the hotel room number, too."

He heard a loud crash behind him. A tray had dropped. Her.

"Sofia? I can explain," he said as he dropped the receiver into the cradle without looking.

On her knees, she fumbled with the mess on the floor, offering apologies without looking up at him. He surmised that she didn't want it known that she had witnessed an altercation. He saw that she had seen the gun in the holster. Her hands shook as she scooped up food from the rug onto the dish.

"I won't say anything." She had tears in her eyes. "Please. I won't."

He nodded. Stupid him almost said, *What about dinner? Let's go out, you and I.*

She was gone. He knew tomorrow night some granny would be delivering his meal. He could hear the arthritic cart now.

Two days later, Farrugia saw Ugo standing outside the museum, smoking on the steps. Farrugia understood this as an invitation for a quick conversation in which he, as carabinieri, would instruct a man where to take the cigarette elsewhere and he might receive a message.

"I heard about the misunderstanding at the hotel," Ugo said first.

"You did, did you?"

“Our mutual friend regrets any inconvenience it might have caused you. He hopes that business is on schedule.”

“It is,” Farrugia said. A tourist walked by so he said something else and indicated where a man could smoke his cigarette. He had to do his part for public theater. Farrugia had a message for the diminutive herald to take back to his prince.

“Please tell our friend that if he wanted to ask me a question he should’ve done so to my face. He didn’t have to send one of his men.”

Ugo took another deep hit off his cigarette to feed his lungs. An oxygen tank was in Ugo’s future. He blew the smoke the other way. Ugo was still short. The fedora made him look shorter, archaic looking. The cloud of smoke dissipated. Farrugia could see it in the man’s face. He, too, had something to say.

“What is it that you needed to tell me?” Farrugia asked.

“You don’t have to worry about making reservations anymore.”

Their eyes met. The little man dropped the cigarette and ground it nice and slow. Another metaphor. The shoes were northern items, from *Via Montenapoleone* in Milan.

“You don’t say, and fat boy?” Farrugia asked.

“He stays, unfortunately. The maître d’ made a reservation that he shouldn’t have. Our friend doesn’t tolerate disloyalty or seeing a friend get hurt. He hopes that you and he are still friends.”

“Tell him we are.”

Ugo tipped his hat and walked away. Farrugia watched him walk away.

Shipment day was the Feast Day of the Archangels. Gnocchi weren’t the only things white available on the holy day. Farrugia looked down at the crushed cigarette. He looked around him.



The Devil was in the world; his instrument for malice had spoken to him. He wore a fedora. He smoked. Isidore Farrugia thought of a regional proverb before he went inside the museum.

The saying runs something like: Through the Angel Michael, heat goes into heaven.

He had Devil's work to do.

#### IV

His mother had always said that he was a special child, a poetic boy with a hard head and a soft heart.

Bird and vampire came to Farrugia's mind. He and the art experts were the living, the birds. The two bronze warriors asleep in uncovered wooden crates, the vampires. Stefano Mariottini had discovered them on the bottom of the Ionian Sea near Riace. The amateur diver from Rome had thought at first that the arm he was seeing belonged to a corpse. A short distance away, the other bronze statue also awaited resurrection. Twenty-six meters down, over a thousand years of slumber buried in mud, lost when a ship to Rome had sunk in a storm, the two warriors, A and B, had waited under sea and salt to reclaim their immortality.

A was the taller one, the Dark Youth; B, the Old Man. Farrugia read the pamphlets, the swirls of arguments about the statues, their identities and their sculptors. He'd decided for himself by having a look at the physical evidence. Statue A had once held a shield in one hand, a spear or sword in the other. The bronze spoke of an eager youth, every muscle taut and ready for battle. Statue B instead conveyed experience, a familiarity with war, his muscles more relaxed. His helmet and weapon were likewise gone. B lacked an eye, whereas A had both. Both warriors had silver eyelashes and teeth, detailed beards, and copper lips. Farrugia admired the attention to detail; for instance, the brachial artery, the telltale pulse of blood and courage there.

Then there was C.

There was the echo of that obscure author of the voice. "We move C with A and B."

Pippo, Pasquale, and he were partially right. C was cocaine. C was also heroin. The mode of transportation was easy: trucks with a protective detail when the two warriors traveled north to Rome for another round of restoration. The politicians could squabble all they wanted, just as they had the last time the statues had gone to Florence for a ten-year hiatus. The northern aristocrats

might say that the southern peasants could not comprehend the magnitude of the archaeological discovery or that they lacked the resources to tend care to their ancients. Farrugia could hear the choice words and the razor insults. He imagined the debates on the television, but none of it mattered. Millions in lira of cocaine and heroin would follow the two warriors.

Lorenzo Bevilacqua and Alan Ancona, these were men of genius. Their plan was ingenious. The two (or was it now three?) weeks that Farrugia had been working undercover, he had watched fake marble brought in and placed into crates. These treasures were cocaine, molded into the shapes of artifacts, though the same method was used to disguise heroin from the Sicilians so that nobody would suspect narcotics smuggling. Amici di Roma would fund the transport and sell it to collectors in their private auctions. Collectors—now that amused Farrugia. More like drug dealers in respectable suits.

One of the masters, a real Michelangelo with the cocaine artwork, held up his hand and tapped his wrist. He wanted to take a cigarette break. Farrugia gave him the thumbs-up. Take your break. Farrugia thought to himself that Phidias had preceded the renaissance master. Best not to have an anachronism in that poetic brain of his. He decided that he'd talk to the man. Shoot the breeze. Hold the fire together.

He opened the door to the alleyway. The man glanced over his shoulder, a lit cigarette stuck to his lip. He smiled. Lorenzo ran a clean crew. Literally. Phidias was in a jump suit, his respirator hanging from its strap around his neck, goggles pulled up to look like an insect with an extra pair of eyes, and his gloves tucked into his belt. Amici di Roma paid for hi-tech, the best to avoid contamination. They exchanged greetings, the usual crap about the weather. Phidias offered Farrugia a cigarette. He declined. The script and scene flowed nothing like a neorealist film, more like tea with Luchino Visconti.

“This is the last block, Boss. I didn’t think we’d make the schedule,” the man said, shaking his head, amazed at the amount of work he had done. He was correct, for the amount of cocaine he had molded could kill a small nation and land him in the concrete hotel for a few decades, unless he rolled. Phidias wouldn’t and Farrugia knew it. The man might be a southerner, but he’d do it the Roman way and open a vein in a hot bathtub before he turned himself into a rat.

“The only difference between an informant and a sewer rat is that the informant walks upright.” Pippo’s words flashed through his head. Farrugia wondered how his two partners were doing. They, too, were alone.

“Why did you have any doubts?” Farrugia asked Phidias. He watched the red glow at the end of the cigarette. He threw in “You’re a hard worker” to grease the ego.

“Kind of you to say so, but I was thinking it was going to be close after Porco bumped up the timeline.”

“Porco?” Farrugia said, forgetting that the workers had assigned a nickname to Nicchi behind his back. Not poetic at all, but accurate. “Oh, that,” Farrugia said for a fast recovery.

“Yeah, that. Between us, I don’t like the guy. I do my work, but there’s nothing good about that man. I keep my mouth shut, but I’d give anything to know who broke his beak.” His laughter turned into a cough. He touched his nose. “He’s got those bandages like Jack Nicholson did in *Chinatown*. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy. Calling him Porco is an insult to pigs.”

He stubbed the cigarette out with his shrouded foot. He had work to finish. Farrugia watched the man take the door and disappear. The Italian language did indeed have an odd relationship with the pig.

He checked his watch. Nicchi should be arriving soon, he thought. They needed to talk.

He stopped at the other guard’s station. His hand on the dial to increase the volume, he saw the bulletin on the man’s small television set. Giancarlo Siani, a crime journalist and enemy of the

Camorra, had been shot down in Naples. Farrugia saw hands shoved in front of the camera. A glimpse of the green jeep in the background, a solemn voice announced that two unidentified men had shot the twenty-six-year-old ten times in the back of the head.

Phidias had been right. Two white bandages, not unlike the two white straps officers of the Carabinieri wore during the winter months, crisscrossed the man's face. He looked out at the world through two blackened eyes like a fat raccoon. Farrugia thought Porco was more fitting.

“What's this I hear about a schedule change?” Farrugia asked.

He received a profanity for an answer. Farrugia blocked the man's path. “I asked you a question.”

“Mind your own business, or would you prefer sign language?”

“I would prefer an answer,” Farrugia said. The man moved, he moved. Stalemate.

“You think you're in charge, don't you? Well, you're not.”

“Since when?”

“Tonight. Now get out of my way.”

Nicchi brushed by and Farrugia checked his watch. He considered the time. He could call the restaurant, hope to get Bevilacqua, but that reeked of pettiness. Lorenzo had admitted that Nicchi was a low-life user, a lummoX.

He'd wait it out. Farrugia walked the rampart overlooking the *official* work, a view to the archaeological experts who crated and prepared the two bronze statues. Like the front of the house in a restaurant, they had no idea what happened in the back of the house, in the kitchen, or, in this case, the back room of the museum. Antiquities in plain sight; drugs fashioned into counterfeit art, out back. Ancient and modern would ship out in a caravan of trucks together.

He had one last look at the statues. No disrespect to B the Elder, but Farrugia favored A the Younger. It didn't matter that A represented Tydeus, he preferred the young man for the simple reason that they were both dark. The warrior could blame it on the bronze that the sculptor had used. Farrugia would not blame his mother, her Spanish gypsy heritage, for his darker skin. He liked A for another reason altogether. The warrior had his mouth open. Possibly a loud mouth, like himself, or it could be an allusion to the Greek warrior's ferocity. Legend has it that Tydeus ate the brains of the man who had wounded him before he died. Statue B, the older man, was a seer. Isidore had no time for predictions, Tarot cards or the reading of entrails. He had to confront Nicchi.

Easy to find, harder to hide, Nicchi was playing overseer to Phidias and his colleagues. Phidias saw Farrugia behind Nicchi. He shook his head, annoyed or disgusted in the change of management.

"We need to talk," Farrugia said.

Nicchi looked over his shoulder and uttered a profanity.

"Talk like that and you'll find yourself breathing through your ears."

Nicchi inched closer. Farrugia caught a rancid whiff. Pigs had a better diet than this guy. Nicchi talked. "If you have any problems, then take it up with you know who."

"I might just do that."

"You're entitled, but before you do, you should know something." Nicchi did the actor's dramatic pause. "I heard a rumor. I heard that car of yours bothered someone, so I did some research. Nothing much came of it, except one curious little thing. My associates and I know that you visited a civilian named Corrado, last name of something or other, who has a brother-in-law in the outfit. Mind you, he's on the other side of the tennis court, being that he belongs to the other family." The fat man thought he was Cicero, a master of rhetoric and delivery. "We have our

differences, but my friends had another meeting to put those differences aside so we could make money together.”

“Funny you say that,” Farrugia said, “because nobody said a word to me.” Farrugia wanted to twist the man’s nose off his face, but he had no choice. This rumor Nicchi had heard had to be from a waiter in the room because his maître d’ friend wasn’t there. He was too busy stripping his car. This waiter must have relayed gossip. Farrugia listened to the rest of the sermon.

“As I was saying, that car is the problem. A liability. We—and I don’t mean your friends at the restaurant—asked around Catanzaro and discovered that the car used to park near a small B&B. Believe in coincidences?”

Farrugia knew that this was a rhetorical question asked and answered. Nicchi would list them.

“I was at a meeting across the street from that small hotel. Coincidence? A druggist said a guy used to come in and use the fax machine. Coincidence?”

Nicchi went on to give a description of Pippo. Farrugia could hear his mother making and unmaking Penelope’s rug in order to buy him time until he came up with a plan.

“My friends visited the aforementioned establishment. We didn’t find anyone there, but one of the rooms had a unique light bulb, the kind photographers use to develop their film. Peculiar. An amateur photographer left his bulb behind. He must’ve been in a hurry. What do you think of that?”

“You surprise me with your active imagination about a tourist. If you were so worried about my integrity, then why didn’t you discuss it with our friends in the restaurant?”

“I wouldn’t worry our friends with coincidences, but you and I can sort it all out after the shipment goes out. I owe that much to my family. You’ll answer to me, but right now I’m boss and I say the shipment goes out tonight. My call, understand?”

Farrugia realized that someone was standing behind him. He turned and looked.

Ugo Abbadelli. Farrugia said to him, "You believe a word of this?"

"I'd be careful, and I don't mean you, Gaetano."

That answer moved Nicchi's jowls. "What the hell are you talking about?"

The small man walked up to Nicchi. He had his hands behind him. Farrugia could see a .22 in his hand. The smaller man stared up at the bigger man.

"I vouched for Gaetano. That counts for something."

"But he could be a cop," Nicchi said.

"He isn't," Ugo said. His thumb counted the rosary against the gun's taped stock. "There's a cop but it isn't him."

"Then who?" Nicchi said. Farrugia repeated the question, cold, without hesitation, and for dramatic effect, though he was sweating in an air-conditioned facility.

"Andrea Putorti," Ugo said. "That's the real name of the guy with you at the hotel."

"The maître d'?"

"One and the same," Ugo said. He never took his eyes off Il tonno. "I was very impressed that he was able to give the pedigree of Gaetano's gift. You weren't there, but I know you heard all about it. That is one talented nose and that got me thinking about something else Gaetano said that night. He mentioned a dog's keen sense of smell. The image of a police dog came to my mind."

Ugo took one step closer to Nicchi.

"Then, I found myself feeling uneasy, like I had a bad case of indigestion or something, when I learned that you and the waiter had become good friends." Ugo touched Nicchi's chest.

"Burned like hell. You know why?"

Ugo stuck the gun under Nicchi's chin. The movies always show the bad guy cocking the hammer back. Farrugia knew from personal experience that was nonsense. All it took was a slight



squeeze and the small caliber bullet would be singing its song all around the inside of the fat man's skull. A .22 bullet was spaghetti ammo.

“What the hell are you doing? I'm not a cop.”

Ugo wasn't done.

“Didn't say you were a cop. Here's what I'm thinking. You came down here from Catanzaro thinking you were going to run some business for your family. New guy that you were thinks he's a hot shot until he finds out he isn't boss. You get stupid and side with a cop instead of following orders like a man. You were thinking you could take it over.”

“Bullshit,” Nicchi said.

Ugo was not distracted and drove his reasoning straight ahead. “Putortì played you like a violin, didn't he? He got you all worked up, wondering about that cocaine, didn't he? He talked about that coke until you were salivating, itching for a sniff.”

Nicchi had his hands up. “I swear I didn't. Yeah, I use, but that's not—”

Ugo pulled the trigger. He eased the body back down to the ground. Nicchi was garbling nonsense. Ugo stuck the gun in the man's mouth and pulled the trigger again. He tucked the gun inside his jacket. “Two things I hate most are traitors and thieves,” he said.

The marble workers didn't look up. They worked. They saw no evil. They heard none.

Farrugia stood there, shocked. “You kill him inside the museum?” He looked. They didn't need the doctor. Nicchi was dead. “What am I going to do with that?”

“Same as at the hotel. I'll send over a cleaner. Do your job and get this shipment out tonight.”

“Tonight?”

Statues crated, the faux marble boxed up and onto trucks headed for Rome. Farrugia saw it all done. The marble makers went home. Phidias waved goodnight, an unlit cigarette between his lips. The shipments left.

Later that night as the trucks rolled with the hills, northward-bound for Lazio, their escort, the carabinieri, turned on them. They opened up the back of the trucks. They found the statues, safe and secure. They had canines. The dogs barked.

The police pried open the other crates. They found straw. Nothing else.

No cocaine.

No heroin.

As for Lorenzo Bevilacqua and Alan Ancona, the police raided the restaurant and the hotel; the end result was the belief that ghosts did exist and some magician had waved his cape and wand to make the drugs evaporate. Nobody in Reggio Calabria knew a thing.

Ugo Abbadelli also disappeared without a trace.

Neither Fiorenzo Nicchi nor Andrea Putorti's bodies were ever found.

Farrugia was sitting there at his desk reading one report after the other. Quality cocaine was flooding Milan. A large quantity of heroin had shown up in Germany. The Peruvian coke had vanished from storage.

His commander walked by. Farrugia flagged the man down. He replayed his pitch of *Let's go after this Amici di Roma*. He showed this superior the business card from Ancona.

The answer was the same, the reason different.

“I wish we could, but we can’t. There’s been some bad blood between the two clans.

Antonio Imerti retaliated for the attempt on his life. Paolo De Stefano was killed this morning. This means a second war between the clans in Reggio. Amici di Roma isn’t a priority. Sorry.”

Farrugia stood there defeated. The phone rang.

“Pronto.”

“We need to talk,” the voice said. It was a pleasant voice, a scent of Palermo on certain words. “I’ve been watching you and I think we should work together. I need someone like you. We admire you.”

“Who is this?”

“Paolo Borsellino. I’m the—”

“I know who you are—you’re the magistrate. Antimafia Pool,” Farrugia said. He needed a drink of cold water. Unbelievable.

“Giovanni and I would like—”

“Falcone? He’s there?”

“Sitting next to me. As I was saying, we’d like for you to work with us. Magistrate Falcone is staying here in Palermo, but I’m headed to Marsala. Please keep that between us, because that isn’t public knowledge yet. Giovanni and I have uncovered a scheme that we think has the Camorra behind it. You’re the perfect candidate for this assignment.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it is in Spain, you speak Spanish, and the Camorra doesn’t know about you. Do you have pen and paper? I’d like to give you the name of a colleague.”

Farrugia grabbed a pad of paper and pen. He saw the other line blinking. Pippo and Pasquale were busy. He had hoped they’d answer it for him.

“I have pen and paper.”

“The name is Gennaro DiBello, in the Naples office.”

Farrugia scribbled down the number. The white light pulsed like a regular heartbeat. His mother’s voice told him not to be rude. Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone were investigative magistrates. They were breaking the back of organized crime one vertebra at a time. That insistent light irritated him.

“Can you hold one moment?” Farrugia said, and pressed the white cube of light. “Pronto.”

The voice, straight from the depths of hell, was from Lucifer’s lake, the rattle of chains in his ear.

“Remember me? I thought we were friends. I’m disappointed in you. But don’t worry because we’ll meet again soon.”

Click. The line had gone dead.

Farrugia pushed the other button. He resumed his conversation with the magistrate while his hand fiddled with the medallion of the Evangelist around his neck.

## About the Author



Gabriel Valjan is the author of the *Roma Series* from Winter Goose Publishing as well as numerous short stories, including *Back in the Day*, short-listed for the 2010 Fish Short Story Prize. Born and raised in New Jersey, his education took him from California to northern England, with time spent in several European countries. Gabriel has worked in diverse fields such as consulting, engineering, information technology, and healthcare. He lives in Boston, Massachusetts, where he enjoys the local restaurants, and his two cats, Squeak and Squawk, keep him honest to the story on the screen.