

MAN OF HONOR

Gabriel Valjan



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By Gabriel Valjan

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I

He saw the man and the man saw him. There were no bodyguards, no car nearby. Only a man standing there in olive slacks and a blue shirt, while a waiter dragged a metal table into place. As the church bell tolled noon, white linen flashed in the air before it draped the fresh surface. Alessandro was walking on his way home from the last day of school across the town square. He used his hand to shade his eyes against the glare, only to see dark eyes across the way waiting for him. Watching.

The man, now seated, whispered something into the waiter's ear. Another servant, silent and without being asked, had placed a glass of white wine on the table. Alessandro, about to turn the corner, heard a sharp whistle. He had no choice. The man was inviting him to lunch.

Alessandro approached the table. Another chair had appeared, another setting. Before the waiter disappeared into the bar, he was instructed to bring two orders of *struzzichini*, along with a non-alcoholic drink "for the kid." Face to face now, Alessandro saw an aquiline nose, sensual lips, a bearing that said *Noli me tangere*. I am not to be touched.

"Are you hungry?"

"My mother is expecting me."

"Join me. Have a seat. I won't keep you long."

Alessandro would not allow his chair to make a rude noise as he pulled it out. The waiter appeared with a Crodino. Hungry since school had let out without lunch, Alessandro tried to be discreet as he worked his hand inside his pants pocket. He had only so much money.

"Take your hand out of your pocket. You're my guest. I ordered tapas for us."

Alessandro's hand retreated. He focused his eyes on details such as how blinding the white tablecloth was under the midday sun, how the silverware shone and how he resented himself for his silence and blatant submission. Alessandro lowered his head. He took a furtive sip of his orange drink, tolerating the carbonated blend of herbs and sugar.

"It's Alessandro, right?"

Alessandro nodded without saying a word.

“You’re new in town. I want you and your mother to feel at home.”

“My mother has family in town. She knows the town well.”

He smiled. “Your mother’s family has been here for generations. She may know how things are in this town, but do you? Tell me, do the other kids make fun of your heavy accent, the way you look?”

Alessandro blushed. He didn’t like it when attention was called to his way of speaking Italian, or to his precocious height. The waiter appeared with their tapas.

“You know people are misinformed,” the man said.

“Misinformed about what, sir?”

“About poison. Did you know that royalty had used cats, not servants, to test their food for poison? Cats have an acute sense of smell. If the animal backed off from the plate, they knew the food was tainted.”

The man encouraged Alessandro to eat the tapas. Alessandro sampled the first bite and swallowed hard. The waiter swung from behind him and poured a glass of water. The host busied himself with his own plate of tapas without looking up from it.

“So, where are you from?”

“From Florence, but I moved around a lot because—”

“Your father is military, I know.”

“Former military.”

There was another smile, the scrape of tines, and a pause.

“I also know that your father left you and your mother.”

Though he squirmed in his chair, Alessandro tried to not feel humiliated by that truth. He had learned from his father that men were either wolves or sheep, and this man was a predator sizing him up. Was he, Alessandro Monotti, a threat to this man? The man’s knife and fork remained intent on his meal. Alessandro shivered at an unexpected breeze. Wolves hunt in packs, but few know that

wolves are cannibals, that they find other dogs delicious, and that they eat their prey alive. The alpha male always ate first.

“Relax, I know many things about you; it is my business to know things. I know, for example, that you like to test boundaries. I also know that you have a vicious temper.”

“Vicious?” The inflection in his voice betrayed him. How did he know?

“School records—I had a look at your file. You like getting into fights.” He wiped the edge of his knife against the tines. “I admire that.”

“You admire that I get into fights?”

“It shows that you have a mind of your own, though one should learn to balance thought and feeling. This moving around, the life of a military brat—how do you feel about that?”

The man was on the hunt. He had a scent in the air. Alessandro said nothing. He waited. The man cut and ate, cut and ate another piece of stuzzichini.

“What does she have to say about that, about her husband leaving her alone to support a son?”

“That’s between them, sir.”

“Is it? You don’t think that you deserve even a modicum of respect?”

The man’s eyes examined him the way a teacher did with a slow student. More than just the correct answer was in the balance.

“I’m just a kid, sir. I haven’t had a chance to earn respect.”

“Decency then, and honor,” the man said. “Men are supposed to have honor. You’re a young man.” He paused to drink some wine. “Your father left you to take care of your mother. Where is the honor in that? Furthermore, he disrupts his son’s education and has him enroll in another school far away from his friends. That’s no life.”

Their eyes met. The man reached for his glass of white wine again. The glass sweated in his hand. Alessandro had intended a smart reply, but the words came out wrong.

“I’ll make friends.”

“Which is why I thought we should get to know each other. You need at least one friend. I’d like to be that friend. You’re a long way from the Arno, Alessandro Monotti. In case you haven’t noticed, this isn’t Florence, this isn’t your Santa Maria Novella.”

“I’m impressed that you knew my neighborhood. What is it that you want in your friendship with me?”

“You’re straight to the point—another trait I admire about you.” The fork and knife came to rest on the rim of the plate. “It’s not so much what I want, but what I can offer you. I’d like for you to know that you have a home here and that I’m your friend.”

“You’re recruiting me then?”

“And I thought I was being subtle,” the man said. “It’s not like you haven’t been approached before.”

The man knew his history, had God’s ear and heard everything. He had the family pedigree and the school transcripts. He was right. Alessandro had been approached before, to participate in the *calcio storico* for the neighborhood team, the Rossi, after a coach had seen him in a nasty fight in the schoolyard. Some kid had defamed his mother and Alessandro tackled him and meted out a storm of blows with his fists. The coach, who was walking past the yard and witnessed it all, had thought that the tall Alessandro would be perfect for the annual games in the Piazza Santa Croce. Alessandro remembered those matches, his red jersey. He remembered the sweat, the blood from a broken nose, the crunch of cartilage within the scrum, and how sand covered him from head to toe and chafed his crotch. The frenzy intoxicated him. This man at his table saw him, Alessandro Monotti, as some prized gladiator for his stable of thugs.

“And how is your mother adjusting to yet another move?”

“She has family in this town. They’ll help her.”

“Will they?”

The tapas were now gone; the plates glistened under the lazy afternoon sun. A heat wave threatened the remainder of the day. Clouds on the horizon suggested a possible thunderstorm. Colors

brooded there, the way the light and the dark met and blended. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick wad of cash. He anchored a large bill with his wine glass. He set aside a fifty-thousand-lire note and pocketed the rest of his money.

“There’s an old proverb, Alessandro. Perhaps you’ve heard it?” The man put on sunglasses and considered the blue sky, in a shade not unlike that seen in Picasso’s *Periodo Azul*. “Looks like rain in a few hours. Oh, I almost forgot: that proverb. When it rains, snails put out their horns. Don’t forget that. Horns out.”

He pushed the lira note, Bernini side up, towards him.

“What’s this?”

“There’s a pharmacy behind you. Please pick up a bottle of aspirin for me.”

Alessandro pushed back his chair. He glanced down at the note.

“That’s too big of a note to break, sir.”

“The chemist will make change, or he could give you the aspirin for free.”

Alessandro saw eyes hidden behind the sunglasses and teeth exposed in a sinister smile beneath the frames. He understood the game between the mafioso and the store’s owner. Never mind the price of aspirin, the man behind the counter would know who was behind the purchase. He was just the messenger. If the chemist made change for the ridiculous note, that was one answer. If he ate the cost of the medicine, that was, well, another.

The jingle of a bell had alerted the pharmacist of a customer’s entry. Alessandro saw the ancient waiting for him at the counter. He had propped himself up at the counter, planted two fists down like a union organizer expecting a confrontation, hands covered with liver spots. He had a sunburnt face and a bald spot that shone from the glare of the fluorescent lighting. Alessandro picked a bottle of aspirin from the shelf on his way to the register. The man at the counter named the price.

Alessandro placed the money on the counter. He wouldn’t wait for the reaction. He glanced over his shoulder, as if to emphasize that he was an errand boy. It was gauche, a not so tacit statement,

but he had never played the part. The pharmacist hadn't bothered to look outside. He dispensed the coins first and then counted off the bills.

The one advantage, the one luxury that the pharmacist had over Alessandro and his lunchtime host was air conditioning. His store hummed with a constant stream of arctic breezes from a unit mounted into the back wall to keep the medicines in storage from spoiling. Air conditioners were an American indulgence. Italian homes and the cheaper hotels didn't have them, but this pharmacy did.

Parting from the store saddened Alessandro. He had the heat and a prince ahead of him, Satan's own breath and appointed emissary. He set the bottle of aspirin down, white pills on white tablecloth.

"Your aspirin and your change."

"Keep the change."

"I'd rather not, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

Alessandro understood the symbolism. He wished that he had eyes behind his head like Janus to see whether the pharmacist was watching him now. He was the stranger in town, the new kid, and he had every reason to accept the money. His mother had no job; she was dependent on the largesse of her family and nobody knew how long that would last. His father was gone, reasons unknown. Alessandro Monotti from Tuscany could use a friend in this forsaken village that tilled the soil with horse and plow, measured the year in seasons, and named children after grandfathers. He had turned his back on the opportunity.

A drop of rain fell, then another and another. On the walk home, he was thinking of snails with their horns out, and what that meant. The road home itself was no different from any of the roads in southern Italy. This road had seen its share of traffic. Unpaved, not maintained, yet trampled upon by farm animals, cars, trucks, and itinerants such as himself. An Ape truck sped past Alessandro, bouncing and kicking up a veil of yellowish dust in its wake. He thought of miners from the sulfur

mines nearby. Their faces leathery, their shirts and bodies yellow as bees covered with pollen. He coughed from the dust.

The dirt. Sometimes it was yellowish and other times whitish; it contaminated everything. It was only the start of summer, the end of the school year, and this corruptive element was already a film on windows, an annoyance in shoes, and a nuisance to the eyes and throat.

Alessandro had appreciated the spit of rain later in the afternoon, but he knew hotter days awaited him. August would be something here. He expected the furnace's blast of heat in early morning hours. Noon would be a wilted bookmark between night and day, two halves of Hell. Then there was the house, his mother, and the Sicilian relatives he hardly knew.

Home was a renovated stable on a cousin's property. Alessandro smiled to himself, thinking of snippets of British literature he had translated months ago before his migration. The English, ever so upbeat and genial with their synonyms, would have called his manger a carriage house, not converted but renovated. He reached for the front door.

His coughing signaled his presence. The door flung open. His mother waited in ambush.

"I just got off the phone with a neighbor. You refused a job offer?"

"Oh, is that what that was?"

Alessandro dusted himself off. He tried not to look at her. He wanted a glass of water. She followed him the way chickens followed the morning feedbag. Not in the door five minutes and gossip convicted him as both lazy and ungrateful.

"Is it true? Did you turn him down?"

"News travels fast here, doesn't it?"

"Then it's true. You refused him."

"Not exactly."

"How exactly then?"

“You tell me since the journalists in skirts reported the news. Did you hear that Signora Calabrese’s cow is due any hour now, or that her daughter is rumored to be a *strega*? That she has cast the evil eye on her boyfriend’s new love interest?”

“Don’t be fresh with me. Answer the question.”

He drank the glass of water. He watched her. His mother, Olivia, was from these parts. His parents had met while his father was on leave once; the rest was like a montage from the American film, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, except he wasn’t an officer at the time, yet she was the girl rescued from a life in the provinces.

“We need the money, Sandro.”

“You can’t be serious. You would have me work for him? Him? I’m not from here, and even I know better than to associate with that man.”

He picked an orange from the basket. Her eyes were tracking him. He did like one thing here: the scent of oranges and lemons. He pushed his thumbnail into the rind to start unpeeling the orange.

“What’s next? You want me to say that he’s a man of honor? Or better, you’ll be proud the day one of your girlfriends tells you she heard on the wind that the illustrious don said, ‘È la stessa cosa.’” He looked away from her as said, “I’m not one of them.”

He walked around his mother. He bit into a wedge of the orange. The fruit exploded with juice. He had forgotten that it wasn’t seedless and revisited the sink.

“You’re a child and you wouldn’t understand,” he heard behind him.

“Fine, I’m a child then.”

He spat out the white seeds and ran some water to clean his sticky hand. He worked another wedge loose. His mother approached him.

“You don’t understand how life works; it’s different here. One way or the other you’ll deal with the don, whether you work as a truck driver, or in the mines. He’s unavoidable. He called you and—”

“Yeah, he did, and Christ called the apostles and tell me, how did that turn out for them? All of them, except for one, were killed. And the one who did survive lived alone and blind. Just so you know: I’m no poet and I have no interest in the Apocalypse.”

His mother had raised her hand. He had slighted God and knew it, but he didn’t care. Let him be the impetuous teenager. He was allowed that in small measures. She lowered her hand and turned away from him. Alessandro resisted the swell of guilt. He turned his back this time and did what Pilate had done: washed his hands. She was his mother, but he was no fool, no innocent. He pulled at the dishcloth to dry his hands when a white feather had lifted up, floated before his eyes, a reminder that he had forgotten the obvious, been oblivious to the odor of dinner cooking.

“Dinner will be ready in a few minutes,” she said.

The scent of cacciatore lingered in the air, along with the rustic smell of herbs, tomatoes, peppers and onions, or whatever else she had scrounged up from the garden to accompany the braised chicken. The white feather landed.

She had killed a chicken. Abstract was how he’d describe his relationship to the land, distant from the big cities, so used to grandiose supermarkets, numbered aisles, to violence edited with a sticker, a price, white boards and plastic sheets. His mother was different. She had a different history. She could recall a time when she had to kill to eat. She had wrung the bird’s neck that morning, plucked its carcass clean of feathers throughout the day, and then disassembled it with whacks of a cleaver for the evening meal. He could say that it was mere reflex with her. Survival. Violence here was as unavoidable as hunger, work, or the don.

“I wish you’d understand there’s no avoiding him,” his mother said.

“You worry too much.”

“You worry too little,” she said, this time with her hands around his waist. Her chin dug into his shoulder. In a year or less, he might exceed his father’s height. He had from his father the green eyes and the dancer’s lean physique, from his mother, the blond hair. North and south, Etruscans and Normans.

“We don’t know what he wanted, Mom.” Her fingernails tickled his stomach, an old childhood trick to get him to laugh. “Stop, I’m serious.”

“So am I. I think I know what he picked you for.”

“Did you hear something from Nonna’s switchboard operators?”

“He wants you for the postal service.” She had released him. “His private messenger.”

He turned around and leaned his back against the sink. “Delivering his mail, his messages?”

“*Pizzini*.”

“Small pieces of paper?”

“Think of it as postcards. Each scrap has a word or phrase and none of it makes sense to you, only to the recipient and they, in turn, craft a reply known only to them and the next person. Nobody knows a thing and you’re just a messenger. You’re just a kid. You like history, so think of it as being a herald.”

“A herald?”

“And nobody harms the royal messenger.”

“Messenger? You got all that from the old ladies around here?”

“Don’t be a snob, Sandro. Women know more than you think. Besides, like I said, we could use the money. I don’t know how long I can rely on my family. We have to make ends meet somehow until your father comes back.”

“Comes back from what?” he said, and regretted it when he saw her eyes. This unspoken conversation between them had been carried around for months like a difficult pregnancy. He had questions; she had answers. He had speculation; she had some facts, or did she? He had heard her crying at night and suspected that his father had had an affair. Alessandro dared the question and she issued the denial. Her cryptic response was that some things were best left unsaid, for their own safety.

He could hear his Latin maestro at his former *liceo* intone the Latin for “in the fullness of time.” Only thing missing was the swinging of the incense censers, the tears of myrrh turned into smoke. Alessandro resigned himself to pulling dishes from the cupboard and setting the table.

The poor man's dish was delicious. His mother knew how to cook. She could do what the shepherds and fishmongers had done for centuries: make do with what was on hand from the land and sea. They ate what they had and, on some nights, he didn't ask what was in his dish. A different hunger bothered him. His father's chair was empty and his voice, absent.

A knock at the door was dessert.

A different messenger: a policeman stood there. A detective, specifically, Alessandro learned after the formal introduction. The man invited himself inside.

The pharmacist was dead.

Murdered.

II

Inspector Zincari proceeded to the table and stood behind the empty chair. Alessandro's mother had pulled it out to indicate that he could take a seat. The man chose to stand for the moment. The lighting revealed saturnine features. The eyes, blue and icy, were tired. He stood there like Atlas holding up the weight of the world.

Alessandro's mother offered Zincari some coffee, a glass of water, but he declined both. She moved about him with small talk. She chattered the usual apologies for the state of the house, while she fussed about the room. While she talked, the inspector and Alessandro had their eyes locked in tense confrontation. Their gaze broke when Alessandro's mother insisted with, "For the life of me, Inspector, but I can't recall a family named Zincari in town."

"That's because there is no one else with that name here. I'm not from the area. You see, Mrs. Monotti, I'm on what is called punishment detail, a form of exile."

"Exile? That sounds odd. Do they still do that?"

"Bureaucrats do many things. My boss learned, much to his chagrin, that I am descended from boot makers and not boot lickers. And so here I am."

"Here you are, indeed. Are you sure I can't get you anything?"

"I'd like to speak with your son, but I'll take an ashtray, if you have one."

"Of course. Anything else?"

"Your son may need an after-dinner drink to correct his digestion. Cacciatore, was it? I bet it tasted as good as it smells."

"It was," she said. "Is the gargoyle dead? Forgive me—such a disrespectful thing to say." Alessandro watched his mother rush her hands to her lips. "Grimaldi, is he really dead?"

"Unless you know of another pharmacist?"

Zincari pulled out a small notebook and recited the shop's address to start the preliminaries with Alessandro, but his mother lingered.

“We used to call him that when we were children.”

“Grimaldi is dead, Mrs. Monotti. How about that ashtray and a moment alone with your son? Alone, please.”

Zincari placed his small notebook onto the table. He sat down. He reached into his jacket for a pen. He flipped open his notebook to a blank page and clicked his pen open. He reached down into the pocket of his lightweight jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. The ashtray had not yet appeared and he already had a cigarette between his lips. Zincari flicked the top of the lighter open to breathe in the flame. He snapped the lid closed. He took in a deep drag from the cigarette and sat there. Alessandro’s mother slid the ashtray in front of her guest. The inspector turned the opened mouth of the pack towards Alessandro.

“Want one?”

“No thanks. Those are the cheap kind and only old men smoke them.”

Zincari reeled in his Emme Esse with a wry smile. He held his lit cigarette next to his temple. A long exhalation followed that announcement and Alessandro’s mother swooped in with, “I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t, Mom.”

Alessandro stared at the inspector. Green eyes versus Mediterranean blue—Verdi against Azzuri, just like a football match in Florence. The inspector sat unmoved, cigarette near his hairline. The man had no intention of taking notes. Inspector Zincari cleared his throat.

“It’s a pleasant evening, Mrs. Monotti. You should step outside and enjoy it. I had heard an owl on my way in.” The eyes shifted and looked upward at Alessandro’s mother. Without a word, she headed for the door and Zincari waited a moment after it had closed.

“Shall we talk?”

Alessandro shrugged. “Sure. What about?”

“Old man Grimaldi had a video camera in his store.” Zincari cited the time that Alessandro entered the store without consulting his notes. “You purchased a bottle of aspirin. Did you have a headache?”

“Sometimes. When I’m stressed.”

“Are you stressed now? School is out. Is it the stress of finding a summer job? Stress at your age? You’re vital, a healthy young man, so perhaps it’s a matter of hormones?”

Alessandro stared. He said nothing.

“You paid using a large bill. I’m not interested, for the moment, how a man such as yourself had acquired a large denomination.” Zincari toked on his cigarette. “Who am I kidding? How did you come by such a large bill?”

“How do you know I had a large bill?”

“The camera, remember? Also, Grimaldi made a show of counting the change.”

“You say that there was a camera, but how do I know you aren’t lying?” Alessandro crossed his arms.

“You haven’t denied you were there for aspirin. If there was no camera, then why not just say you weren’t there?” Zincari took another drag from his cheap cigarette. “Do you have the change?”

“No.”

Alessandro put both hands on the table. He knew some reverse psychology. He attempted his hand. “So you say I entered the premises to purchase aspirin, using a big bill at such-and-such time. Right?”

“Yep.” Zincari imitated a fish and blew circles of smoke.

“Then you know I didn’t kill Grimaldi.”

“I know you didn’t kill Grimaldi.”

“Well, then?” Alessandro resisted the temptation to pound the table. “There you have it: I didn’t kill Grimaldi. Your beloved camera, the same eye of God that told you I bought aspirin, that I paid and received change, ought to have told you who killed Grimaldi.”

“It doesn’t, because whoever killed Grimaldi switched the camera off. About that change . . .”

Alessandro could hear his heart beating. He wanted that drink his mother never poured for him. Zincari extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray, flipped his notebook closed, and clicked his pen closed. He pocketed his items and placed one hand on top of the other on the table.

“Grimaldi’s cash register drawer was open. No money was taken; it was all there, small and large bills. Me? What do I think? I’m thinking the old man was forced to open the cash register and look at the money before he was shot in the back of the head. Execution style.”

The man’s fingers took the spent cigarette and mashed it until it was nothing. Those blue eyes had something of the ocean’s rage in them, unrelenting in how they bore into Alessandro.

“Know why I think that? I’ll tell you, my young friend. Blood splatter.” His left hand opened and imitated a firework display. “Rather sad, isn’t it? A man that old, still able to work, is murdered in the very business he built with his own sweat. Why? You tell me?”

“I can’t, because I don’t know.”

Zincari lit another cigarette. Addiction or a mere prop, Alessandro was unsure. He listened.

“We have that in common, Alessandro. We’re both not from these parts and learning our way around. See, I figure that Grimaldi didn’t pay protection money, so somebody decided to make an example of him. What are your thoughts about the mafia?”

“Wolves.” Alessandro’s eyes and nose resented the cheap tobacco. He couldn’t avoid the veil of smoke around him. The white smoke incriminated him. The police were speaking to him.

“Thing you need to understand, kid, it isn’t a matter of the wolf keeping the flock terrorized when it attacks one sheep.” Zincari waved his lit cigarette. “The wolf is sending a message. You’re a smart kid. Know what that message is?”

Alessandro shrunk down in his seat, as if he was in liceo again. He had been called upon and he had an answer, but he wasn’t confident about it. He could stand up, state it, and risk the teacher’s censure, or his classmates’ ridicule.

“I don’t know. I’d say that the wolf wishes to let others know that he’s boss.”

“Wrong.” Zincari said it casually.

Alessandro hadn't expected this.

“The other wolves know he's the leader. Think of it another way, Alessandro. You give someone a message over and over again, but they don't listen. They defy it. Grimaldi was probably told time and time again, ‘Pay the pittance. Pay the money and avoid the headache; it's the cost of doing business.’ The man didn't listen, however, and he ended up with a lethal headache. Ever think that bottle of aspirin was a symbol?”

Alessandro watched Zincari extinguish his half-smoked cigarette. They stared at each other. A moment was an eternity. Alessandro conceded.

“I don't know what happened before you walked into the man's store, or why you chose to buy some aspirin, or where you got the money. I asked around and nobody had seen you, heard of you; it seems no one knows a thing. There's a bar across the way from the drugstore. I asked there. Know what I learned? *Niente*. But I figured as much, Alessandro. Why? I'll tell you: because I'm an old guy, who smokes grandfather cigarettes, yet knows a thing or two, because I'm forty-something years old, which is prehistoric to you, but I'll wager somebody had a message that said do what I say, because you have only so many times you can say no.”

Zincari stood up.

Alessandro had wanted the last word. Immature. Vain. He wanted it.

“Yeah, but I still think the wolf just wanted to show his teeth.”

“He did that, didn't he?” Zincari put his two fists down, like Grimaldi had done at the counter. Zincari smiled. “Grimaldi sealed his fate, yes, but there's another hidden message here, my young friend.”

“A message to me?”

“For you, indeed.”

“Yeah, and what might that message be?”

“The sheep were already scared.”

III

The day almost dead by noon, Alessandro had resigned himself to his fate as unemployed. Early to rise, enthusiastic to snatch a job, he had walked into town wearing his best slacks, shoes polished, his shirt ironed, and his tie knotted and pulled the right length. Somebody would want an able-bodied sixteen-year-old kid. He went from one business to the other like the Prodigal Son, who had come home unrecognized and unwanted.

He had started with the grocer. He could make deliveries, stock shelves, keep inventory, and save the old man his back and unload the truck. He piped up that he was reliable. He was trustworthy. He was conscientious, a hard worker. Alessandro exhausted all the clichés. The old man walked around, stopped now and then, but the answer was no.

Alessandro visited the butcher. No.

The fishmonger. No.

Fruit vendor. No.

He recited his speech again; this time, for some bizarre reason, he mentioned that he was an excellent baker's apprentice. No. As he left the shop, Alessandro admonished himself. He should have connected his grades in mathematics to a baker's need for precise measurements.

He stopped. A sign said "Chiuso." He saw the flowers on the sidewalk. The pharmacy.

The restaurant was not on his list, nor was the social club, for obvious reasons.

Alessandro walked over to the other business district. He tried his hand with the owner of a music shop. It was a hard sell. His voice lacked confidence. What did he know about restringing violins, tuning guitars? He didn't know the difference between a clarinet and an oboe. He thought a piano was a string instrument.

No.

He read the sign in the window. His curiosity piqued, he entered the barbershop. What could possibly disqualify him from sweeping a broom, or swapping out bottles of disinfectant for the combs?

Again it was No, though the barber took pity on him and gave him a free trim. His neck dusted with Pinaud, his cheeks slapped with decent cologne, he left somewhat invigorated. He passed two men sitting at a table, arguing about the demise of the lira. Their conversation halted, as if the Angel of Death itself had cast its shadow over them. Out of spite, Alessandro walked slowly and smiled at them. He added a small wave of the hand. Gave them the slow death.

He tried the bookseller. No.

Hands in his pockets, he considered his last hope, the sulfur mine, but that was a longer walk. He could do that tomorrow. Alessandro dreaded the walk home. He thought of his father. His *babbo* had served in the air force as a pilot. Alessandro considered the blue sky. Every time he saw a plane overhead he thought of him.

The visit to the bookstore reminded him of a book on Italian aviators that his father owned. If his father had been behind him, he would've pointed and commented on the pictures of Italian fighter pilots from both world wars. Ferrari's Cavallino Rampante, the famous prancing horse, dad would tell him, was the emblem of World War I ace Francesco Baracca, except Enzo added the yellow background for the city color of Modena, and changed the horse from red to black because the pilot had been shot down and died in a fiery crash.

On his second walk through the town square, a bulletin board caught his attention. He had not seen it before. Flyers flickered in the summer breeze—Want Ads, For Sale announcements, and then the one that inspired him: Tutor Wanted. He could advertise himself as a tutor. He had a command of history, language, and math. His English was so-so. He saw an ad that interested him. It was worth a shot. He could do this. If he didn't land the gig, he could place his own ad. If the powers that be tore it down, he would replace it. Rip it off and he'd staple it to the board again. He would need supplies, permission to use his cousin's phone number. He had a plan. That cologne was good luck.

As he was about to walk away he saw the don in the distance. Alessandro witnessed the same scene repeated. A waiter snapped into action. The table was put out, along with the tablecloth. The don had a standing reservation, a special spot, as if the sun shone down on him, rose and set, and

revolved around him. The don hadn't seen him this time. Alessandro's plan suddenly felt insignificant as an ant.

Head down, hands in his pockets again, he kicked a stone on the walk home. He persisted in that nonsense until the rock ceased to amuse him. He'd be up for a football match, if he weren't such a pariah and had friends. He had memorized the phone number from the Tutor Wanted ad. He had a prospect. The kid might not like him, but his parents were willing to pay him for the brain transfusion. The idea of starting his own business buoyed him. He set aside thoughts of the don.

Well on his way down the path towards the house, he heard the ding-ding of a bell behind him. He turned around and he saw the incredible sight of Zincari on a—this couldn't be real—a bicycle.

The inspector braked and dust kicked up. "Good day, isn't it?"

Alessandro eyed the bicycle and then the man. "Is this some kind of joke? Are you moonlighting as a bit player in cinema neorealista?"

Zincari swung a leg over his bike and held the handlebars now. "Laugh all you want, kid, but the credit belongs to the police chief. He has a sense of humor."

"Apparently. I see this injustice doesn't include a helmet."

"Let's walk together. I have a proposition for you."

"What is it? Let me guess: you want to steal my lunch money."

"Aren't you the comedian? How old are you again?"

"Sixteen. Why?"

"Walk and listen, and whatever you do, show no reaction to what I have to say."

"I forgot, you're paranoid and think everyone is watching."

"Everyone *is* watching, Alessandro. Didn't you just spend your entire morning looking for a job?" Zincari held up his hand to stop the answer. "And tell me how many times did you hear *no*? How many times did the person look around you or through you before they said no? Why do you think that is? Did I mention the barbershop has a Help Wanted sign in the window? Did you know that?"

"I did. I suppose you know the answer I got there. You mentioned a proposition."

Alessandro noticed shadows in the windows. Curtains moved as they walked past houses. The last pair of eyes appeared and disappeared like the owl in his mother's yard. He kept walking next to the detective.

"I did mention a proposition, didn't I?"

"You did, and I suggest you make your point, Inspector. The next turn in the road is mine."

"I know that, so here's my offer. Take the job at the pharmacy."

"What job? The man is dead. You said so yourself. The sign on the door doesn't say *Aperto* and, if I'm not mistaken, there are flowers in front of the shop. What job are you talking about? There is no new pharmacist."

"There will be in three days, and the new owner needs a clerk. He's a quiet guy."

"New owner, huh? Don't you mean the don?"

Ding-ding. Zincari rang the bell on his bike's handle.

"The job is yours if you want it."

Alessandro shot the inspector a suspicious look. "A job just like that? What's in it for you?"

"We both know the don will send his collection goons to let the new owner know the amount of the *pizzzo* and when they expect to see it paid. You let me know when that happens, how much, and anything else that happens in the store."

"Who's the new owner?"

"Relative of Grimaldi."

"And he'll hire the last person who saw his relative alive? He must not believe in superstitions."

"He believes in stopping corruption. I know that because he slipped me a note in confidence. Funny thing is that nobody talks, but they write letters."

"I have two questions for you, Inspector."

"Why was I transferred?"

"No, I know why. You're a pain in the ass. My question is this: on your long drive into exile, did you notice the guardrails on the highway, the ones painted red?"

“I did. Memorials for those who took a stand against the mafia.”

“Right you are, Inspector.”

They took the turn in the road. The house was meters away. Inspector Zincari took hold of Alessandro’s arm. “What’s your second question?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Besides a job and some money in your pocket?”

Alessandro shook his arm loose of the man’s grip. “Forget it.”

Alessandro continued walking.

“What’s your problem?” Zincari shouted to him. “It’s the bike, isn’t it? You don’t think I’m serious.”

Alessandro walked back fast and got in Zincari’s face, eye to eye, his green eyes against the policeman’s blue ones. He’d have his say and be done with it.

“You want me to work as a mole for you. Grimaldi’s relative approaches you, but you don’t trust the guy. Is that it? You’re worried he’ll double-cross you, so I’m your backup plan. You also know that the don will approve of my working there. The man owns every piece of paper and every pen in this town. Hell, he’ll clap his hands with joy when he finds out I’m working there. Isn’t that a fine coincidence?” Alessandro reached down and pressed the thumb clip to ring the shiny bell on the handlebar. “Right answer this time?”

“You’re a smart kid. What is it you want?”

“Walk slowly with me and you listen to me this time. You’re a cop, right?”

“That’s what the badge says.”

“You have access to records, all kinds of files, right?”

“I do,” Zincari said, eyes squinting this time, and not from the glare. “What do you want?”

“Anything you can find out about my father. Deal?”

“Deal.”

IV

As the exiled detective had prophesized Nicolò Battaglia appeared on the third day behind the counter, wearing the white lab coat. The sign in the shop's door was flipped over to say Aperto. Open for business. The green cross, sign of Saint Lazarus and pharmacies everywhere, was lit once more.

Nicolò kept everything as his cousin had left it. He had not renamed the aisles. He had not rearranged the shelves. He had even kept the shop's proprietary elixir, a cure-all for numerous ailments. Every pharmacy had one and everyone knew that it contained alcohol and quinine, but guessed at the recipe, the combination of herbs and in what amounts.

Despite the last name, the new pharmacist could pass as a stunt double for the actor Alberto Sordi, with his forlorn eyes and Clark Gable moustache. He hired Alessandro on the spot. Zincari had been right again. Nicolò was quiet and never spoke until he was spoken to. This tic of his made customers think him aloof, cold, and indifferent.

He listened to their litany of aches and pains, large and small, which they told to him in quiet whispers or dramatic gestures. He'd stand there, his weight shifted to one hip. He'd purse his lips in empathy and rub his chin in contemplation, as he listened to his customers. When the man spoke, the listener felt as if he or she was the center of the universe. Alessandro listened as he unpacked boxes and filled shelves, or busied himself with other tasks. He had to adjust his ears to the man's rustic dialect.

It was two weeks before Nicolò Battaglia told his only employee that he was from Monreale, the small village on the side of Monte Caputo, overlooking Palermo. He never explained his exact relationship to the deceased. Zincari had said cousin, or relative. Alessandro forgot which.

It was two weeks before the don's men paid a visit.

Two of his men entered the pharmacy one late afternoon. The bell tingled and, like a scene in American westerns, the few good people in the pharmacy vacated the premises in a hurry. One man

closed the door, locked it and flipped the sign over. Closed. The other man did the slow walk up the aisle to the cash register, where Nicolò waited to receive him.

“Alessandro, why don’t you go in back and check inventory?”

“I did it earlier. I’ll stay here with you.”

The heavy-hitter smiled and opened his arms wide. “Welcome. I wish you much success and good health.” His partner refrained from moving much. He stood there not far from the door, like a movie usher watching the show.

“You wish me well, or is it your boss?” Nicolò said.

The man wagged his finger. “For someone new to town, you catch on quick. My compliments.”

The man defied Alessandro’s preconceived notions of a gangster. He expected muscles and an intimidating stare. Instead, Alessandro saw a chisel, a wiry physique, an intense face, hooded eyes, and a slow pulse in the man’s neck. The man behind him, the hammer, blocked the door.

“How much?” Nicolò said.

“Must we be so crude, so direct?”

“Unlike parasites, I work for a living. Time is precious.”

Chisel clicked his tongue. “No need to be disrespectful, especially when you’re so new to the neighborhood.” The man stepped closer to the counter. “Especially when you don’t know all your neighbors.”

“Is that so? I’ve seen your type before.”

“And what type might that be?”

“Wannabees who think they’re men of honor.”

The collector made a nasty face and stormed the counter, only to find a gun leveled at his face. Nicolò Battaglia held the revolver with a steady hand. The man on the business end of it held his hands up. The man behind him took a few stupid steps forward.

“Tell that moron behind you to stop, unless he would like your brains all over him.”

Chisel turned his head and warned his friend. When he faced the pharmacist again, he swung his arm around to take the gun, but Nicolò was faster than the hoodlum had expected. The tough soon had the side of his face slammed into the counter and a handful of his hair in Nicolò's iron grip. Nicolò seeded the muzzle of his semi-automatic pistol into the man's ear.

"Stupid move there. Get up slowly now." Nicolò eased the pressure and released the man's hair. "If you do something stupid like that again, it's your life."

The man lifted his head and held his hands up. Nicolò raised his weapon. The mafia thug took two steps back. Alessandro swallowed hard, heart pounding. Images of Florence and *Ma, che sei grullo?* flashed through his head. Are you nuts? He glanced sideways and noticed the peculiar stance. Nicolò Battaglia, the pharmacist from Sicily, stood there like a soldier leaning into his shot, at one with his front sight. Alessandro understood the pose because he had seen his father use it more than once on the shooting range. Officers had a Father-and-Son Day.

"Let's be civil about this," Nicolò said. "Name the price, date and time for payment, and be on your way. Understood?"

After all the details had been given, the two men left. Alessandro waited until the last silver note from the bell had stopped ringing in his ears. He placed his hands on the counter, leaned forward, and took several deep breaths.

"You all right, Alessandro?"

"Give me a moment." Alessandro took several sharp breaths. His hands shook.

"Best if you breathe through your nose, nice and deep into your belly. You'll calm yourself down faster that way."

"Are you an expert on meditation now?" Alessandro turned his head. "My dad used to give the same advice. He told me that he had learned it in the military. Box breathing, he called it. Did you serve?"

"Of course I served. Compulsory." Nicolò walked around him. Alessandro hadn't noticed that the man had already holstered his weapon. Nicolò was walking towards the front door. The goons

hadn't turned the sign over on their way out. Alessandro squinted. No rear holster, no telltale lump under the lab coat. On his way back, Nicolò flashed the front of his lab coat open.

"In case you were wondering."

"I was also wondering if you think you're Charles Bronson. In town less than a week and you've made the mafia your enemy. I suppose you'll have to sleep with that thing under your pillow."

"What makes you think I don't?"

"The pistol . . . never seen that make and model. It's not Italian, is it?"

"Nope." Nicolò was fixing a few items on a shelf in front of the register.

"I'd seen my share of weapons with my dad. He was in the Air Force."

"Air Force guys have it easy."

"Real funny. I've heard that joke before. About that gun, the coloring seems unique."

"It is. Polymer. Anything else you want to know?" The tone came with an intent stare that said he would tolerate only a finite number of questions.

"Law enforcement?"

"Not here."

"Military?"

"Sort of," Nicolò said, with a slight grin. "If you consider NATO military. Let me save myself from the death of a thousand and one questions." He removed the gun from the holster and turned it sideways to give Alessandro its profile. "It's an FN Five-seven, made in Belgium; Greek Special Forces were the first to use it, and one U.S. agency seems to like it."

"Let me guess? CIA."

"You've got quite the imagination. Secret Service, if you must know."

Nicolò was behind the counter now, as if nothing had happened. Alessandro reevaluated this man whom he had mistaken for an eccentric professor. What he had taken for a slight build, a mild mannered disposition, was a tautly coiled spring.

Another two weeks passed. In the interim, Alessandro had abandoned the idea of tutoring students as a side business. Nicolò paid him well enough that he had some cash left over after he forked over a generous sum to his mother. He wasn't one to tell her what to do with money, but he hinted that some of it should go into a slush fund for an apartment. He asked that she start researching flats, with September as a possible moving date. He might be building the henhouse before he had any chickens or eggs, but he was confident he could work out some kind of schedule with Nicolò during the school year. Only pharmacy in town, open six days a week, spelled monopoly and job security.

The don—the wolf—had his two heavies visit and collect the first payment of protection money without incident. There was no retaliation, no graffiti, and no “accidents” of any kind. No reprisals.

Nicolò carried his weapon for insurance.

Alessandro arrived one day to find a Vespa behind the counter. The scooter made him think bicycle and that made him think of Zincari, whom he hadn't seen again, except once while he was walking home. A mere nod of heads passed for a hi-and-bye.

“What's with the Vespa?”

“You'll need it.”

“Need it for what?”

Nicolò was at his station with boxes of medications. The Italian Space Agency may have sent the first satellite into space in 1964, but Nicolò had a process even they would envy. He was talking, but he was not distracted. The same laser focus he had demonstrated in his confrontation with the don's henchmen, he used with his inventory.

“For deliveries. I've made a private arrangement.”

“You mean something illegal.”

An amused but hard stare answered Alessandro's provocation.

“It's all a matter of perspective. I'd like to think I'm helping the less fortunate.”

“And how does this work?” Alessandro asked.

“I’ve talked to housebound patients, who, for a small fee would like their medication delivered to their homes.”

“And what else?”

“I knew you were a smart one. The clinic in the next town over asked if our shop could act as a backup when their dispensary runs low.”

“Aren’t you the entrepreneur?”

Alessandro didn’t hear an answer. He was admiring the Vespa, the playful creation of Corradino D’Ascanio, the engineer who invented the first helicopter. The scooter’s color was the same shade of green as the Green Cross, and sleek. He ran his hand over the leather seating. He loved that smell of fresh leather. Chrome accents and front disc brakes. He itched to ride it. He put his fingers around the handlebar. No school kid’s bell there. Inspector Zincari would be envious of this ride.

Nicolò rattled off the specifications. Alessandro caught “ET-2, 50cc engine and up to 65 kilometers per hour” and then, “There’s also plenty of storage under the seat and considerable room in the glove box. Perfect for deliveries. There’s a helmet under the counter.”

“Who wears a helmet? When do I start making deliveries?”

“Today, if you’d like.”

“I’d like that a lot, but I don’t have a license.”

“Let’s go outside for a tutorial.”

Nicolò kept his lab coat on. He insisted on the helmet. Alessandro accepted it with a teen’s typical attitude. While walking the Vespa toward the front door, Nicolò put his hand on Alessandro’s shoulder. It was a nice gesture, a paternal one, unexpected and pleasant until Alessandro felt the holster against his own hip.

For almost an hour under the day’s heat, Alessandro started the Vespa and the scooter stuttered until he could finesse a confident straight line and a precision stop. Nicolò taught him hand signs for the road—the polite ones. The cobblestones taught Alessandro the bumpy ride so he’d appreciate the smooth one on the smooth road. Round and round he went, thinking of the Rolling

Stones and their song, “Miss Amanda Jones.” If only he had a girl who could ride with him. He didn’t have that. Nicolò clapped and encouraged him, giving him the thumbs-up of approval. He completed tour after tour of the piazza. Nicolò chose to rest. Alessandro decided on one final, victory lap.

Alessandro saw Nicolò seated in a chair near the door of his pharmacy, the Green Cross over his head like some character in a cartoon.

He also saw that the don had arrived, took his usual place at his usual table, enjoying an aperitivo. Something in the way he sipped his Negroni, his eyes said the wolf was hungry.

Nicolò and the don were staring at each other over the hot stones.

Two more lines and he could write CVD and conclude the mathematical proof. *Come volevasi dimostrare* or Quite Easily Done. Some people did crossword puzzles, some had hobbies with serious sounding names such as numismatics and philately, but he played with numbers and shapes. His father had introduced him to the British game, one that he had come home with one day, called Spirograph. Right then and there his love for mathematics started. The two of them would sit for hours creating circles upon circles, shifted and rotated in ways that would have tickled Dante.

He did proofs in geometry and soon enough, calculus. His mother watched television.

She had it on now. The television was always on. Alessandro learned to ignore the small box, the talking idiot. He willed himself not to look at it. If he wanted news, he consulted a newspaper. If he wanted an opinion, he asked someone. If he wanted entertainment, he read a book. If he wanted the visual arts, he went either to a museum or the cinema. He had to admit there was little if any of that here.

He tried. He really tried. His mother said she enjoyed *CentoVetrine*, a popular soap she started watching in Turin. Innocent enough, just like cocaine and heroin were once over-the-counter drugs. She was hooked. She had started her habit with *Incantesimo*, another melodrama, while the rest of the country held its breath during the World Cup. She, like millions of viewers of Rai 2, hung on every word from the mouth of the vicious Christina Ansaldo character.

Alessandro kept his mouth shut. He said nothing about the chattering babble on her other channels. He disliked *nazionale popolare*, or popular entertainment. What little he did glimpse, he saw nothing but the mirage, the mythical and ambitious but loving family, the contradiction between having it all and spirituality. Television offered the life, the dream, and the antidote. Alessandro knew his history well enough to trace the faint ghost of Fascism behind “family values,” which helped the corporate sponsors behind television programs line their pockets. *Familista*—it rang as false as the

canned laughter on poorly dubbed American sitcoms and as fake as the awful enthusiasm of game-show contestants.

He understood. He empathized. His mother had no husband, to speak of. There were no divorce papers. Women could divorce; they could have abortions. All legal, too, but there was stigma, or more precisely, stigmata in southern Italy. She had no marriage.

Television filled the void.

His mother had gone away and now she had returned to her roots. Olivia Monotti was forgiven in silence. Family had taken her in, but reminded her every step of the way that she had left them. *Il sangue non è acqua*. Blood is thicker than water.

These cousins he didn't know, other than to sign his name and send them holiday cards. He was courteous, but there was no bond, no connection. How could there be when he had met or spoken with them less than a handful times in his sixteen years? Alessandro could count on one hand the number of times he had interacted with the clan.

His mother had never worked. She saw herself as the central train station for their small family. Father worked. Mother did the cooking, the cleaning, and the cheerleading. All well and good, Alessandro realized, until there was no money. The want of money is the first step of many on the road to sin. He had never questioned anything until he had turned his assumptions upside down; or, rather, not until his father's departure had.

He and his mother lived okay. The bathroom was functional. Ditto for the two small bedrooms. They had a modest living room and even more modest kitchen. There was no room for a table, but it had a stove, cabinets, small refrigerator, a closet pantry, a dishwasher, a washer, and a clothesline. They had a television and VCR, like everyone else. Their place was small, tight, and cozy.

"CVD. I'm done," he said.

His mother, with the laundry fresh from the dryer, set the basket down on the table in front of her television. Alessandro had closed his book and stood up, checking his pockets for his keys.

“Whew! Thought I lost them.” Nicolò had allowed him to take the Vespa home in order to make some deliveries in the morning. The Vespa. That was the other roommate. He parked it near the front door.

“Where are you going?”

“Work,” he said, the keychain in his hand now.

“You work too much. You never talk to me.”

He knew this script. Passive-aggressive. She was the suffering Madonna of the Rocks.

“I would talk to you if you didn’t watch so much television.”

He had let loose that arrow before he could shut his mouth.

“Maybe I wouldn’t watch it so much if you talked to me.” She folded a shirt without looking up. The laundry was her Zen meditation, her repetition and ritual. He said something and turned to leave. “I’m lonely, Sandro.”

Alessandro had no words. He tried to ignore hers. “I’ve got to go, Mom.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? I’m lonely.”

“What do you want me to say?”

On her third shirt now, one of his, she folded and smoothed it out with her hand. She picked up the next item. Underwear. His. He felt embarrassed. She had given birth to him, changed him, and now she was folding his clothes and expecting an argument with him. “I’m sorry, Mom, but I really have to go.”

“Say that you understand. Say that you feel bad. Say something? I’m your mother.”

“And I’m your son. I’m not your husband!”

That notorious Monotti temper had escaped the furnace. Heat had turned his neck and face red. He felt it. He had been impulsive. Alessandro had even used his father’s same intonation. He saw her eyes film.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that,” he said as he dropped the keys on the table. He pulled out the chair and sat down. She had stopped folding the laundry.

“No, I’m the one who is sorry. You should be out there doing whatever young men do. You should be out with your friends, flirting with girls, making trouble, and enjoying your summer vacation. I had never intended this to happen. I didn’t want this for you.” She rubbed her eyes.

“Well it did happen.” He tried to be comforting without getting uncomfortable. “Look, it’s not your fault. If anyone is to blame, it’s Dad.”

“No, don’t say that.” She rose from her seat. Alessandro watched her take a glass from the cupboard and run the cold water. After the first gulp, she said. “Don’t blame your father. You don’t understand.”

Alessandro bolted up. “Then enlighten me. Why not blame him?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“You said that. Try me. I might, if you said anything at all about him. Ever.”

“I can’t and I won’t.”

“I have to go to work.”

“Stay, please.”

Alessandro sank deeper into the chair. A bit of an attitude, he’d admit it. He brooded the way teens were known to—insolent and impatient, when they were about to receive a lecture, the Aesopian moral of the story. He waited for the life lesson. He expected it to be shorter than a commercial.

“You know how couples get a divorce and—”

“Are you two getting a divorce?”

“No, we are not, but that’s not . . . What I’m trying to say is that, like a couple who get divorced, I won’t say anything bad about your father.”

“You don’t have to say a thing. His absence does it all. Now, may I go?”

“Alessandro,” she said, and the emotion in her voice hit him. “Sandro, I’ve made you grow up too soon.” She nested her head between her hands. “Your father had to go away. He didn’t want to, but he had to. That’s all I can say. You don’t belong here. You don’t deserve this. I love my family

here, but I had to get away from them when I was younger.” He heard her talking. She sighed. “I can’t explain it to you.”

“You don’t have to. I get it.” He shrugged his shoulders. “It’s Armani versus Versace.”

That made her laugh. She wiped her cheek with her hand. “You should get going. You have a good job. I meant to ask: Do you like your boss? What is he like?”

“Nicolò? Other than the fact that clams talk more than he does, he’s a good guy.”

“Quiet, huh?”

“Took two weeks before he told me he was from Monreale. Know the place?”

“Other than a cathedral, not really. I want you to know that, though your father isn’t here, he’s looking after us.”

“That sounds morbid, Mom. He isn’t dead, is he?”

She almost smiled. “No, but do remember that he keeps his promises.”

“I’ve got to go.”

He kissed her goodbye, but she pulled him closer for an extended hug.

Green helmet this time screwed down on his head, strap under the chin and buckled, and wearing tortoiseshell sunglasses he had picked from the turnstile rack in the pharmacy, he motored along. Alessandro loved his Vespa. He knew the layout of the town, its traffic lights, and the roads least or most frequented. He knew when he had to take it slow and when he could goose the throttle. The main road in and out of the town was no Via Aurelia, but it had its own version of the national pastime, *il sorpasso*, the honking of horns and tailgating. It was all in good fun and a chance to get his blood up.

With time he had come to recognize some people on sight. He’d wave; they’d wave back. He was learning more about the village. He’d learned that the small building near a café was where couples engaged to be married took the mandatory classes, the *corso prematrimoniale*, with the priest for the church wedding. Yes, classes. Southern Italy was more Catholic than the Holy Father in Rome.

He didn't fit in. Alessandro wouldn't call it discrimination or prejudice, but he knew that he was different. After a while, he didn't care. He had a job. He had money. He had a life that wasn't all about his mother. He loved her, but he would not allow her to smother him. No *mammone* here. No mama's boy, if he had his way. He was no sociologist, but in his downtime when he observed people, he'd notice how the woman did everything and how the man expected it, as if he couldn't get his own glass of water.

He ripped around town. Some days he'd let his mind type out the logic to solve his latest proof. Other days he'd hear Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" in his head. Nicolò didn't hassle him, or watch the clock the way a lawyer would track billable hours. He had a routine down, knew his customers: they thanked him and they paid the special fee for home-delivery.

One afternoon, he ran into unexpected traffic. A funeral.

He saw the pallbearers, the priest, and the widow in black dress and matching veil. Other members in the mourning party walked down the church steps, heads bowed and in tears. There were no wailers or dramatic displays of grief, but Alessandro thought how this scene would have played out in Florence. More stoical, he thought.

The cars moved and directing traffic was none other than Zincari. He was a *vigile*, an ordinary policeman. How you have fallen, Inspector Zincari! Alessandro thought while watching the man. With the last car waved on, they saw each other. Zincari did a short bleat on his whistle and pointed at him and then with a karate chop in the air directed him to a bench outside a gelateria up the street.

Alessandro gunned it and made the turn. He'd arrive and park his Vespa, while the inspector had to hop on his bike and pedal his way over. It was absurd, but no more comical or no sadder than Zincari pulling traffic detail.

The gelato bar specialized in Sicilian-style gelato, which meant that milk is the major ingredient, followed by sugar and cornstarch. *Crema rinforzata*. No cream. No eggs. The result was a shiny dessert, lighter and intensely flavored.

The two of them did their version of Good and Evil, Light and Dark. Zincari had himself vanilla gelato. Alessandro chose chocolate. They exchanged small talk; how some time had passed since they had last talked. The inspector cracked a joke about the Vespa and the bicycle next to each other.

“Looks like you’ve done well for yourself.”

“I’m sure the good inspector will see good fortune his way soon.”

“Yeah, paper cuts one day and traffic cop the next. I suppose I shouldn’t rule out dogcatcher. How’s your chocolate?”

“Rich.”

“Speaking of wealth, how’s it going with the pharmacist?”

“Good, I guess.” Alessandro stuck his small spoon into his ice cream. “Inspector? I’ve been meaning to ask you something. Don’t you find it weird that within three days somebody is running the pharmacy?”

“It’s the only drug store in town. Isn’t it a good thing that it’s up and running? I told you Nicolò Battaglia was Grimaldi’s relative.”

“You did. News does travel fast.”

Zincari busied himself with the last of his gelato. The treat was the perfect answer for the hot weather. “What’s bothering you, kid? You’ve got a job and a set of wheels. Anything new you need to tell me? Anything about why you have wheels and buzz around town? We had a deal, remember?”

Finished with his chocolate, Alessandro wiped his hands on a napkin.

“That’s the thing, Inspector. I haven’t anything useful to tell you. I feel as if I’m not holding up my end of the bargain. It wouldn’t be fair to ask you about my father when I have nothing to give you.”

Zincari took his cup and then Alessandro’s and walked them over to the trash. He returned and sat down, taking off his hat and using a handkerchief from his back pocket to wipe the sweat off his forehead. He looked at Alessandro once before he ran the handkerchief around the back of his neck.

“About your father—”

“You found something?”

“I did, but you might not like it, Alessandro.” Zincari turned, elbow on the back of the bench and body twisted for an intimate conversation. “Your father is in the Air Force.”

“Was,” Alessandro said, confused by the serious expression on Zincari’s face. Something wasn’t right. “What are you saying, Inspector?”

“What I’m saying is military is military and, in my experience, some jobs you never leave, or at least it seems that way, especially with your father’s. He was . . . how should I say this delicately? Involved.”

“Involved in what?”

Zincari touched Alessandro’s shoulder. It was the gesture he had seen in so many movies; it always was the touch, the sad eyes, and the lowered voice, just like Zincari’s now. Bad news.

“How do I say this?” Zincari asked.

“Easily. Just say it.”

“Ùstica. What do you know about Ùstica?”

“Small island in the Tyrrhenian Sea. What of it?”

Zincari swung his arm around and leaned over and put his head between his hands. He stayed there a moment, lifted his head and let out a long exhalation. He touched Alessandro again. This time he patted the younger man’s thigh.

“I forgot. You hadn’t been born yet. Eighty-five, right?”

“Correct.” Alessandro squinted and then his eyes widened. “You aren’t talking about the plane crash, are you? There’s that Ùstica and that was—”

“Nineteen eighty. July. Know of it?”

“Only the little I’ve read, but it’s all spaghetti to me.”

“The short version is a commercial plane, Itavia Flight 870, was caught between NATO jets and a Libyan MIG, and shot down. There’s no smoking gun, but one theory says the MIG had hidden

underneath the airliner, assuming the NATO jets wouldn't dare take the shot." Zincari paused, and his eyes became sad again. "They had thought wrong. All eighty-one passengers and crew died en route to Palermo. That Ùstica."

Alessandro went to say something, but Zincari held his hand up—the ugly traffic of history needed no hand signal.

"That was in July. Something happened the next month. Connected or not, you decide, but a bomb went off in a train station in Bologna. Another eighty-odd people died, hundreds hurt."

Alessandro thought of his mother and the laundry, of his father and the last time he had seen him. He replayed Zincari's words in his head. He knew that his strength was in numbers and not in deciphering subtext and symbols.

"What are you telling me, Inspector? My father served in the Air Force. He was with NATO."

"NATO is a fig leaf." The eyes were sharp and focused now.

"What are you saying about my father?"

"Involved."

"Involved in what and where?" Alessandro found himself gesturing with his hands. "You mentioned Ùstica. You tell me about Bologna in August. All of this was before I was born. What are you saying?"

Zincari put on his hat, squared it in back and then ran his finger over the brim. Before he stood up, he turned once more to Alessandro and said, "Involved. I won't say more than that."

Alessandro throttled it on his way back to the pharmacy. Angry and feeling stupid at the same time, also helpless, he drove like a madman. He parked the Vespa and yanked off his helmet as he entered the store. Nicolò looked up from behind the counter. He said nothing. Alessandro put his clipboard and the receipts on the counter.

"Bad day?" Nicolò asked.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Alessandro realized he had raised his voice. He had mouthed off to his boss, an armed man. Nicolò looked at him, unaffected. The man betrayed no emotions. None.

“I’m sorry. I have a lot on my mind.”

“Well then, use the night to think about it; sleep on it. Tomorrow is an easy day: only one delivery.”

Nicolò pushed a piece of paper in front of him. Alessandro saw the address. He saw the name. He held the piece of paper up and stared at Nicolò. The man didn’t blink.

“Are you insane? You can’t be serious. A delivery to the mafioso?”

Nicolò reached over and took the piece of paper out of Alessandro’s hand. He looked at the address and the name. His lips tightened.

“We’ll talk in the morning, Alessandro. And do find a way to make peace with what’s troubling you. The world is already a crazy and dangerous place.”

“Yeah, sure. I need to have my head on right for the don.”

Sandro picked up his sunglasses and turned to leave.

“Alessandro?” he heard from behind him.

“Yes?”

“The don? All God’s children to me.”

There was an unnerving smile with his words.

VI

Up before sunrise, before the sirocco blew over the Tyrrhenian Sea, he paced the apartment. He couldn't sleep. So this is what a condemned man must feel like in his last hours, he thought. And he hadn't even taken his *la maturità* yet. He hoped that he'd be alive long enough to take his State Exam up North. Students in southern schools hid *bigliettini* on their person, crib notes everywhere, and the proctors would look the other way. But this—this was a different matter. The don would be the death of him. Alessandro was certain of it. Convinced.

“What’s wrong, Sandro?” his mother asked.

“Nothing.”

“I’m a mother,” she said. “I could be an ocean away from you and I’d know something was wrong. What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? You’re pacing like your father did when I was in labor.”

“Can you sense him from afar, too?”

It was a cheap shot and he knew it, but he didn't apologize this time. He had his pride. Stupid thing—and useless—that pride. Alessandro watched her as she advanced into the room, to him. She was one of those women who looked composed and beautiful at any hour. She tied her robe tighter and sat down.

“You want to talk about your father, don’t you?”

“Yes. No. Now is not a good time.”

“Then what is it?”

“Work has been stressful. Did Dad talk about work much?”

His mother didn't have to think long for her answer. “No. Your father never brought work home with him. If something was bothering him, he kept it to himself, just like you’re doing now.”

“Maybe some things are best not discussed, I guess. I’ll figure this out myself.”

“If you say so, but I’m here if you need to talk. I’ll make breakfast since we’re both up.”

Alessandro faked a smile; he faked an appetite. They ate. He couldn’t care less about the food.

Nicolò was quiet. He was doing his usual thing behind the counter. No matter how many times Alessandro watched the man, it still seemed like Prospero at work. Alessandro could describe the stages, the process, but still couldn’t explain how the man could tell one pill from another, one medicine and all their different dosages. Nicolò had inherited his predecessor’s customers and the infirmary the next town over had thrown him some business. This magician worked potions all day.

Alessandro had no use for medication. He was healthy; the mere idea of popping a pill was like the sacrament of Extreme Unction: the last resort. Alessandro recalled an exchange student, an American, who had, it seemed, pills for every possible ailment and in bulk quantities. Pills, wherever Alessandro had lived in Italy, came in blister packs. His American friend’s bottles could double as maracas.

“Come over here, please.”

Alessandro stepped behind the counter. This area was off-limits to him, like entering the sacristy. Authorized personnel only without the sign. Licensed professional only.

“I want to apologize,” Alessandro said.

“Apologize? For what?”

“For yesterday. I had a lot on my mind, and I sort of freaked when you told me about the delivery to the don.”

Nicolò had placed a small box onto the counter; it reminded Alessandro of the small tinderboxes that the old-timers used to light a stove or their cigarettes.

“It’s okay. Since you mentioned it, I want to talk to you about the don. Are you scared?”

“You think?”

Nicolò found this funny. Alessandro was tempted to say, *Hey, if you’re so damn cavalier about this: go do it yourself. That’s right: hop on the Vespa and make the delivery yourself.* But he didn’t.

Nicolò motioned for Alessandro to come look at the computer screen.

“I want to show you something.” He pointed to a number on the screen. “See that?”

“Eight.” Alessandro squinted and craned his head forward. “That has to be a mistake; it should be seven for a one-week script.”

“No mistake. Grimaldi filled that standing order every time with eight pills.”

“Eight, huh. What is this medication for?”

“Heart condition. The don has an irregular heartbeat.”

Alessandro laughed. “So he has a heart after all. He looked pretty healthy to me. Why have the doctor do a one-week script when a thirty-day supply is more convenient?”

“Recent diagnosis. Takes a good doctor to detect cardiac arrhythmias in its early stages.”

“Aren’t we so lucky?” Alessandro said. He pointed at the number eight on the screen. “So why the extra pill?”

The iceberg that was Alessandro’s brain melted. He stepped back from the computer screen. “No. No. No way,” Alessandro said. “Don’t tell me the don has someone take it to see if he’s being poisoned. Say I’m wrong. Why couldn’t the man have a cat?”

“You’re not wrong. A cat? What are you babbling about?”

“The don told me that in the old days the royals used cats to smell or taste their food for poison.” Alessandro felt hot, cold, and then clammy. He started to breathe short staccato breaths. Panic. Anxiety. Fear.

“I hadn’t known that about cats,” Nicolò said. “They do have an acute sense of smell, but I would’ve picked a dog.” The man was fascinated by the idea. “Did you know that the military uses dogs in combat and the police have them sniff out drugs?”

Alessandro placed both hands on the counter, head down, and spoke to the floor.

“Can we focus on me, please? In case you haven’t noticed, I walk upright.”

Nicolò took Alessandro’s wrist, turned it over, and started to take his pulse. “Remember box breathing?”

In and out with cleansing breaths deep into his belly, Alessandro breathed, adding a count at the end of each inhale and exhale. His dad had instructed him to build up to a count of five for each breath and to use a mantra. Alessandro had never created that personal chant. He calmed down, his nerves quieted. Nicolò still had his wrist.

“Good. Your pulse is in the mid-seventies. Average is good.”

“Glad to hear it, but why is that important?”

“Because you said it yourself.”

“I did?”

“The don has one of his pets take a pill, but since you’re delivering it, the taste test falls on you and not on one of his bodyguards. My advice is you practice box breathing before and after he makes you swallow the pill. Just try to look normal while you’re doing it.”

“Thanks,” he said, and pointed at the package. “Will it hurt me?”

“The pill? No, it’ll lower your heart rate, but nothing too dangerous. Had you had an athlete’s resting heart rate, below sixty beats per minute, then that’s another story altogether. Don’t worry. You’re normal.”

“Gee, thanks. You know, I’d feel better if you gave me your FN Five-seven.”

As if God Himself had a sense of humor, clouds cloaked the sun and spared the town from unrelenting heat. Alessandro knew all twelve types of clouds and their Latin names from his father. Pilots had to read the sky. Their lives depended on it. Cirrocumuli overhead, he recalled, were the harbingers of rain or thunderstorms—just the perfect omen he wanted for his ride out to the don’s villa.

The don, like his historical antecedent, had the eyes of a cruel vassal, sworn to execute his lord’s will and exercise his own power. He had his fortified villa built on the outskirts of town, on a narrow road. He had walls. He had guards on the ramparts. He had a gate. The only thing missing was the drawbridge and a moat with alligators.

Alessandro had no need to sound his horn. Two guards saw him; they had seen him long before he had reached the front gate. The dirt road, the dust that his Vespa had kicked up, had announced his approach. The gate opened with a creak. No words were spoken. A thumbs-up from one of the sentries instructed him to get off his ride. Alessandro pulled his helmet off. Behind him, the other sentry kicked his legs wide and started to frisk him: around one ankle, up the inside leg, then down the outside of the same leg before he repeated the procedure on the other ankle and leg. The man pawed his waist and patted up and down his ribs. Alessandro almost smiled. He did put on antiperspirant that morning.

“È pulito,” the guard announced to his partner.

Of course I'm clean, you moron, Alessandro wanted to say, but held his tongue. These guys might want to do a cavity search with surgical gloves.

The front sight of a handgun nudged him forward. There were steps to be scaled and possibly another checkpoint before he would meet the don. Tomasi di Lampedusa didn't have this in mind when he was writing *Il Gattopardo*.

Inside the foyer hung a gaudy chandelier too hideous to put into words. There was pink marble for the floor, a small table with claw feet, and an oversized portrait of the don. He loomed large on the wall. Done as Christ Pantocrator, the don's eyes followed Alessandro wherever he stood. The immortalized don even had an aura, or was it a halo behind his head? Alessandro shook his head in disbelief. The don, ruler of all, stared out from the wall and did the sign of blessing with his right hand.

A door opened and he welcomed the distraction.

The two collectors, who had visited him and Nicolò for protection money, appeared. The same dark suits and the same white shirts and the same dark ties and their hair slicked back, these two were the poster children of mafioso fashion.

“If it isn't The Brothers Karamazov,” Alessandro said.

“You've got some cheek,” the one gaunt man said.

“I think he's disrespectful,” the heavy-set man said to his comrade.

Alessandro turned his head and looked at the painting now behind him. “Me disrespectful? I don’t think that’s possible after looking at that thing on the wall.”

“It’s the don,” Chisel said.

“You don’t say?” Alessandro answered. He knew that he had to can the sarcasm. Jokes and barbs were his way to defuse tension. Self-defense. He took in an audible deep breath. He didn’t count to five. Yet. “I’m here with the don’s medication, so let’s get on with this.” He lied next. “I have other deliveries to make.”

“Sure you do,” the thin man said. He swept his hand in a grand gesture to indicate the door. “Through that door, if you will.”

“Thanks.” Alessandro noticed a wide smile on the fat man’s face. “What’s with you?”

“You’ve saved me the weekly trip to the pharmacy.”

“About that,” Alessandro said. “Why doesn’t the don talk to his doctor and increase the quantity? It’ll be a pain doing this every week.”

“Why don’t you shut up and start walking?”

The don was inside the room. Alessandro wanted to laugh, but knew he shouldn’t. He had heard all the stories, apocryphal and authentic, about the don’s sadism. Vlad the Impaler was both cruel and consistent, especially with how he treated Turks; the don was just callous and unpredictable. For all the illegal wealth that the don had, the man hosted Alessandro in a darkened room. Alessandro heard a click and prayed it wasn’t the hammer of a gun pulled back. Now, he counted to five.

“Welcome to my home,” the don said.

A hand shoved Alessandro’s shoulder. A cue. “Thank you for your hospitality. I have your medication.”

The don snapped a finger and the ursine bodyguard took the small box of medication. He peeked inside after he opened it. “It’s all here, Boss. Eight pills.”

“Good. Take the one labeled Day 1 and give it to our young friend here.”

Alessandro held out his hand for the pill. The sliver of man had disappeared into the darkness and returned with a glass of water. “Thanks.” Alessandro considered the white pill in the palm of his hand. He practiced his breathing.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

He flung the pill to the back of his mouth and drank the water in one long gulp. Without being asked, he faced the tall man and opened his mouth and moved his tongue left and right. Lifted the tongue, too. He handed the man the empty glass.

The don churched his hands and evaluated Alessandro. “You understand what I’m doing, don’t you? Of course you do. This will be our little ritual every time you make a delivery here. You are to deliver my medicine every week. If I’m feeling generous, I’ll invite you to lunch. Now, I have a proposition for you. I would like for you to be my mailman. How does that sound?”

“Do I have a choice?” Alessandro said.

“Technically, you do; it’s called Free Will and a decision always has consequences. Say no, and who knows what’ll happen.” A sick smile accompanied that sentence. “I could make you swallow the remaining pills. Know what’ll happen if you do that?”

“I won’t feel so good?”

“You do have a sense of humor. I like that, but only in small amounts. Yes, you won’t feel good, my young friend. Healthy heart or not, swallow those pills all at once and the clock in your chest stops, so say yes to my proposal, and you’ll remain happy and healthy.”

Alessandro felt relaxed, in the moment. Was it the special breathing exercise? Was it an effect of the pill he had swallowed? It didn’t matter because the don wasn’t done.

“Do what I ask, and I’ll reduce your boss’s pizzo. Don’t do it and, well, I don’t know what could happen to him or his business. Are we clear?”

Alessandro nodded. “Explain to me how the mail works?”

Light from the sole lamp created shadows when the man’s head moved. Sinister. Demented. The whole montage was so film noir.

“Like the small box you delivered from the pharmacist, I also have a small box. I’d like for you to deliver it to a colleague of mine. One of my men will give you the address. You don’t ask questions. You don’t breathe a word to a soul. Your task is to deliver it. Understood?”

“What if your friend doesn’t accept the delivery and he decides to take it out on me?”

The man’s fingers opened wide, the way a cat stretched its paws. “No worries there, my friend. You’re under my flag, so to speak.”

He saw the window and, like an actor, Alessandro wanted to crash through it and run away. Something told him that those windows had bars on them and, if he succeeded, any of the don’s men outside would cut him in two with their guns.

One of the men, Thick or Thin, he hadn’t noticed which, had pried open his hand and placed a box in it. A folded piece of paper was tapped into his shirt pocket with the words, “That’s the address.”

Alessandro shook the box. No sound.

“Just deliver it,” the don said. “You can go now. Oh, and I expect to see you tomorrow. More mail.”

VII

Alessandro plunked down on the hot leather seat. His ears rang with the word “tomorrow” as he strapped on his helmet. He rolled forward taking the Vespa off its kickstand. Leather roasted the back of his thighs, the sun overhead blazed, and the thick hot air thrummed. He wanted to crank the throttle and roar through the gate, burning rubber like some motorcycle stud from the movies, but the guards and their weaponry squelched that hormonal surge. The gate whined opened and his bike did the *putt-putt* out to the solitary road.

Halfway or more towards his destination, he pulled over to the side of the road. He opened his storage compartment. He retrieved clipboard and pen. Inside the don’s tinderbox he read the squib, a cryptic word on a shard of paper. “Might as well be papyrus,” he said. Alessandro had seen sample texts in Adriano Cappelli’s lexicon on paleography. The don was one for the ages. No Mona Lisa smile in a million years, but his word was enigmatic. Let Turing and Navajo code breakers have at it. He penned the word on the last page, a blank one in the back of his clipboard. He also wrote the date and address. He mounted the bike to deliver the chit.

The recipient of the small parcel, a small bald man, answered the door to a nondescript house in the rundown section of town. If the don was baroque rococo, this gangster was minimalism incarnate. Simple clothes on him, and from the looks of his apartment behind him, a man who could teach St. Francis a thing or two about privation. He asked Alessandro to come in and wait a moment. The nerve of this Picasso lookalike! He had a tinderbox of his own. He had his own piece of paper and another address.

Alessandro had expletives racing from one side of his brain to the other, sprinting up his throat, and dancing on his tongue—hot, piquant curse words that would make fishermen and truck drivers blush, but he kept his mouth shut.

He had another delivery in the heat, another journey, a circle in a hell to cross, while the shades of both Virgil and Dante howled in laughter at his expense. He had another piece of paper. Numbers this time.

A brief drive later, he arrived at an apartment. A cliché answered the door: standard-issue ogre in a tight shirt, his crucifix on a gold chain and Christ trapped in a forest of chest hair. He had his own box. Alessandro was ready to burst out laughing this time. The small box in such huge hands inspired the image of a giant seated inside a dollhouse at a tea party.

Another address, box, and contents to inventory.

And the don's words echoed inside his head, "Oh, and I expect to see you tomorrow."

He completed the last delivery of the day.

On the ride back into the main part of town, the sky opened up and rain came down. Those cirrocumuli clouds—his father had been right about them. A white flash blinded him for a thousandth of a second, and the loud crack of thunder came next. The air had changed. He tasted copper in his mouth. Sheets of rain were falling now and he was drenched. As if God weren't done with him yet, as if he were the last creature outside Noah's ark—he had a red light. He wanted to scream, or cry.

Stuck in the middle of the road, stuck in the rain, stuck at a red light, stuck in a small town, stuck in the south, stuck with . . . The Devil, tired of the self-pity, spared Alessandro and changed the light to green.

He took it slow on the slick surface. He got philosophical. The magistrates resorted to mythology when they discussed the mafia. The head of the Hydra has been lopped off, yet it springs up hissing somewhere else. The metaphorically inclined have called it the octopus because of its extensive tentacles, because of its reach and its tenacious grip. The don may have been more on the nose when he said, "When it rains, snails put out their horns. Don't forget that."

Alessandro hadn't forgotten. The mafia was as slow as a snail, insidious in its patience; it had horns, alert and awake, and it left slime in its wake—a trail of corruption.

He pulled the door to the pharmacy open. He struggled a bit with the Vespa, but in it went with him. He heard laughter and then silence.

“See that,” Zincari said. “Ulysses has arrived.”

Nicolò came from around the corner. “Where the hell have you been?”

Alessandro dropped the mask of surprise and went straight to deadpan.

“Out making deliveries,” Alessandro answered, using the plural. Nicolò was an intelligent man, a pharmacist. He shouldn’t need a baseball bat to get the point. “And it’s raining out there.” Alessandro stated the obvious.

Zincari leaned against the counter. “Mr. Battaglia here was bragging to me about how fast you do your route. Did you take the scenic route this time?”

“Yes, this town has breathtaking views.”

Nicolò raised an eyebrow. “You two know each other?”

“Small town and word gets around,” Alessandro said.

Nicolò joked that Alessandro looked like a wet dog. He excused himself to look for a towel and a fresh change of clothes for Alessandro. Alessandro waited until his boss was out of earshot. He heard the door close.

“What are you doing here?”

“He has a pistol. I had to make sure he has the proper paperwork for it. Headquarters frowns upon the idea of armed citizens. However, in light of what happened here—well, it’s understandable that he’d want to protect himself. The man has a legal license and a carry permit.” Zincari leaned in and asked, “Have you got anything for me?”

“I might, but I’d ask—and I mean this with all due respect—that you stay away from me. Do not, I repeat, do not approach me in public. We can’t be seen together.”

Zincari’s head pulled back. “You’re asking me to trust you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not holding out on me, are you?”

“Trust me.”

The door flung open. Nicolò appeared triumphant.

“You’re in luck, Sandro. I have a towel for you and a shirt for you. No such luck on pants or shorts. Sorry about that.”

“Thanks,” Alessandro said, and tousled his wet hair with the towel. Zincari had called him Ulysses. The detective wasn’t far off. In the course of one day Alessandro had experienced his own odyssey: hundred-degree weather, a medieval trial with the don, rain, and now he was cold and tired, his nerves shot through.

“The inspector here gave me some interesting news,” Nicolò said with a nod to Zincari.

“What’s that?” Alessandro said, pulling the bottom of his soaked t-shirt out of his jeans.

“Mafia war,” Zincari said. His finger tapped on the counter. “Right here in this town.”

Alessandro tried not to register panic. He sought out Nicolò’s reaction. He found the face placid, unmoved by the news. The detective’s visit had included more than *License and registration, please*.

“I had stopped because, in addition to asking Mr. Battaglia about his gun, I felt it incumbent upon myself as an officer of the law to warn him that the don might ask for more protection money.”

Alessandro bit his tongue. The snail himself had told him that he’d reduce Nicolò’s protection fee in exchange for postal duties. Perhaps, octopus was the correct mascot. The don had wrapped his tentacles around him, around the town. Now, it’s time for the suckers, for the lethal squeeze.

“I’ll pay whatever the man asks,” Nicolò said.

“You do know that you’re admitting to paying shakedown money in front of a cop,” Alessandro said, as he pulled off the wet shirt. “And the cop admits to corruption, like it’s in the air we breathe.”

“Sandro, are you that naïve? Inspector Zincari simply came to tell me that the don has to finance his war.”

Alessandro shook his head. “And here I was thinking that the inspector came here because you have a gun, afraid that you may use it. So, who is the don at war with?”

Nicolò and Zincari hesitated, as if they couldn't decide who would answer the question.

"With his own clan," Zincari said at last.

"And the police know this how?" Alessandro asked.

Zincari stiffened and pulled away from the counter. "I can't discuss that."

"Fine," Alessandro said, pushing the towel into Nicolò's chest. "I can only hope that the roads are safe while I make my deliveries. Excuse me, gentlemen."

The rain had stopped.

Alessandro drove home dazed. He didn't put much store in the laws of chivalry concerning heralds. Whether it was on a green Vespa, the pharmacist's Green Cross for his banner, there were no white horses or knights on the field. Seeing Zincari and Nicolò had unnerved him. Nicolò had dispatched him to the don, a renewable subscription for heart medication in hand. The don forwarded him to his colleague and that one to yet another mafioso.

Alessandro had to work the don's errands into his regular routine now. The "I expect to see you tomorrow" haunted Alessandro. On the sixth day, if he survived the sallies across the fields of Mars, he'd have to swallow another pill. He might pray for mercy, for a poison pill as an end to his misery.

VIII

The unforgiving heat started early. It was day two of deliveries for the don and the first day that Nicolò had been late opening up the pharmacy. Alessandro waited outside with his Vespa. No respite, no awning; nothing shielded him from the boiling heat. The Green Cross overhead offered little shade. Alessandro checked his watch.

“You’d think he’d give me a set of keys,” Alessandro complained. A woman—a very attractive woman—walked by just then, giving him not one, but two interested looks. Was he mistaken? Was she flirting with him? An elderly couple came next, and the man lifted his hat when his eyes met Alessandro’s. Was this a sign of respect, or was he raising the roof to cool off his head? Just when he thought he’d need a tinfoil hat, Alessandro saw Nicolò.

“You’re late.”

“Did you hear me complaining yesterday about your joyriding?”

“I had to blow off some steam. Think it was any fun playing the taster for the don?”

Nicolò unlocked the door. “I meant to ask you, how did that go?”

“I’m still here, aren’t I?” Alessandro walked in behind Nicolò. A flip of the switch and lights flickered on and lit up the pharmacy one aisle at a time. “You know; it wouldn’t have hurt you to ask. I might’ve though you cared.”

“I do care. I wouldn’t put you in harm’s way,” Nicolò said, as he got behind the counter. He put on his white lab coat, adjusted his sleeves. “I was worried when you hadn’t returned. You only had one delivery yesterday. I almost asked Inspector Zincari to go look for you.”

“Best to leave him out of it.”

“Yeah, I took that hint when you said ‘deliveries.’ Subtle of you, but you know what?” Nicolò didn’t wait for an answer. “Stop and find a phone and call me next time to let me know you’ll be late.”

“You sound like my mother.”

Nicolò patted Alessandro on the shoulder. “Your mother sounds like a wise woman. You should listen to her. Now, get to work.”

Alessandro stood there. He had an overwhelming urge to confess, an impulse to tell Nicolò all about the don’s postal scheme, and how he was using him to spread mafia pestilence from house to house. He wanted to show Nicolò the notes he had been taking between deliveries. Perhaps Zincari could get an anonymous tip and make damaging arrests, enough to catapult him out of the boonies. No, he couldn’t do that, because the don would find out and that would be the end of him, the end of the pharmacy, of Nicolò; his wise mother would then wear black and lead his funeral procession. The don, like all those other big shots in the mafia, would pour salt on the wound by ordering the most expensive, the largest wreath for his casket.

He did the usual chores first and then rode out to the don’s villa. The gate didn’t open this time. He asked to speak with the don. Request denied. The sentry gave him another box. One delivery led to another one. Alessandro enjoyed another afternoon of round robins of note taking and deliveries. No names were ever exchanged, but he didn’t jot down names; addresses and riddles on scraps of paper sufficed. Like the day before, it was another colorful cast of criminals.

He returned to the pharmacy. Nicolò didn’t say a word. He looked up from his counter for a second and put his head back down to his paperwork, to counting his pills, or whatever else it is that pharmacists do.

Alessandro arrived home exhausted. He hadn’t had time for any math proofs. He collapsed on the couch and let out an exaggerated sigh. His mother walked in, like one of those caffeinated housewives on American sitcoms, abuzz with news about her day. She talked so fast that he couldn’t answer or keep up. His eyes tracked her as she walked and talked.

“The oddest thing happened today. I went into the butcher shop to place my order since they have a sale on—I forgot on what, but you know I like to save money, so I went straight to the mark-downs when the butcher came from behind the counter with a parcel. He handed it to me, practically shoved it in my hands is what he did, and when I went to pay at the counter he said, ‘Domani. Domani.’

Tomorrow. Tomorrow. I visited the grocer and she had a gift basket all prepared for me. I mean, the lady knows what I like, but she put all of it together in a nice basket. I made an effort to pay and the bill was ridiculously low. I told the clerk that there had to be some mistake. ‘No mistake,’ she said. ‘I insist. Customer Appreciation Day,’ I was told. And that’s not the end of it, I went to the appliance store to make a payment on the credit card, and wouldn’t you know it, the manager told me there was an accounting mistake and my balance is zero. ‘An oversight on their part,’ he told me. You look pale. Are you feeling okay? I’ll get you some water.”

A chill had made the hairs on his arms stand up.

“Here you go, Sandro,” she said. She offered him a glass of cold water. “I’ve never seen you so pale; it must be this awful heat.”

He’d let her think that. Alessandro knew better. The tentacles had reached out; the octopus had squirted ink and marked his territory. The don may have not paid Alessandro in lucre, but he extended social benefits to him and, by extension, to his mother because they were family.

On the third day, Alessandro skipped one delivery. The fourth beneficiary for whom the next tinderbox had been intended in the game of Post Office had died. Not from natural causes, Alessandro guessed. He drove past the house. He drove past the swarm of police cars on the street. He had seen the body, or rather the tarp thrown over it.

And whom did he see directing traffic with a palette in his hand? Inspector Zincari. Alessandro enjoyed the contrast of the cool mirrored sunglasses and the bright red circle and star at the end of his paddle.

On the fourth day, he picked up the next package at the gate. He read the address. This box seemed different. He rattled it next to his ear. He shut off the engine, dismounted the Vespa and called the sentry over. He wanted to speak with the don and he wouldn’t leave until he did.

Thick and Thin came out, acted indignant and outraged. Alessandro ignored them; he walked through the don's marble Versailles and headed for the sanctum sanctorum. The two thugs behind him protested.

“Who the hell do you think you are walking in here like that?”

“You don't have an appointment.”

Alessandro stopped and spun around. “I'll make my own appointment. Shoot me if you have to and play messenger boy yourselves, for all I care.”

The tall man grabbed Alessandro by the throat and pushed him up against the wall. A second later, Alessandro was gasping for air as the man lifted him off of his feet. “Listen to me, you go to the don when he asks for you and—”

“Let him go.” The don waved him in. “You want to talk then we talk. Come inside. You two stay here.”

Alessandro entered the darkened room. He could hear the don's labored breathing. The heat was bad, but not that bad, he thought. The man was indoors, like a hermit; he had air conditioning, all the amenities, yet he shuffled along, geriatric, and Alessandro could see that he was not that old. Fiftyish, the don huffed and puffed.

“What did you want to see me about?”

“Yesterday, I couldn't make a delivery. Want to know why?”

“I know why. What can I say? Death visits us all.”

Alessandro didn't sit in the chair near him. He liked the illusion of having the upper hand with the don. He stood; the don sat.

“Thing is, a few minutes earlier, death might've invited me to join that man on the sidewalk.”

The don was shaking his head. “No. No. How many times do I have to tell you? You're a messenger, a civilian. Nobody will harm you.”

The don coughed once, and then again and again. Alessandro almost pitied the man. Out of politeness he asked, “Feeling okay?”

“A little lightheaded. Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Alessandro said. He pulled out that afternoon’s tinderbox. “They usually don’t rattle; this one does. Care to tell me why?”

The don stood up. He placed his two hands on the desk in front of him. It seemed as if he wanted to bellow or yell, but he didn’t have the strength to play lion. He hacked again. The cough this time sounded like a pail of water thrown against the wall. The don held his hand to tell Alessandro to wait.

“Should I get you some water, a doctor?”

The don glared at him; the jugular vein distended.

“A messenger does his duty. He does not concern himself with the message. Now go and do your duty. Have I made myself understood?”

Alessandro nodded. When he was a step away from the door, the don called him. Alessandro turned around, waited for what the man had to say.

“How is your mother Olivia?”

The don’s crooked smile told Alessandro that he didn’t expect an answer.

Alessandro dropped off the box. He waited, but the mafioso had no box of his own to give Alessandro. Relieved that he didn’t have to forward any mail, Alessandro turned to leave when he heard a noise.

“Excuse me, did you say something?”

“I did. Come in for a minute, but close the door behind you, please.”

Alessandro stepped in and closed the door. The décor, simple and contemporary, impressed Alessandro. He surveyed the walls: nice artwork, and pictures here and there of family vacations. The framed degree surprised Alessandro. From a northern university.

“University of Bologna,” the man said.

“May I?” Alessandro asked.

The man raised his hand. “Help yourself?”

Laurea triennale. Alessandro read the citation. Finance. This man had to be a genius, a brilliant student to have obtained this degree at such a young age.

“My business is Import and Export. I should’ve taken my *laurea specialistica* in international finance.”

“Why don’t you? You look like a young guy, if you don’t mind me saying so.” Alessandro stood there, hands behind his back. Uncomfortable in taking an interest, yet intrigued. This mafioso was different: young, educated, and intelligent. He wasn’t gaudy. He spoke sophisticated Italian, no dialect, and his mannerisms were polished.

“Want a drink?” the man asked.

“Uh, no thanks. I really should go.”

“Have a drink. I insist.” The man looked behind him. “There’s a chair. Use it.”

He was mafia after all. Alessandro sighed. He saw the chair and sat in it. The man found two short glasses and poured shots of whiskey. “I got into the business because my father had before me,” he said.

“Import and Export?”

The man smiled. “Yeah, let’s call it Import and Export.”

He handed Alessandro a glass. The man sat down in the chair opposite Alessandro at the small table in the kitchen. The man said, “The way you speak, your Italian, is not from around here. Where are you from?”

“Originally? I was born in Florence, but I moved around a lot because of my father. He was in the military.”

“I see. What does he do now?”

Embarrassed, Alessandro answered, “I don’t know. He and my mother had a falling out, I guess. I haven’t seen him for a while.”

“Sorry to hear that. I mean that, but let me tell you something: family isn’t everything.”

The answer shocked Alessandro. The man might've been more northern than the northerners. The man gestured to the drinks. "Before you have your drink, I want you to promise me something. Promise me you'll get a laurea specialistica."

Alessandro seized the opportunity for reciprocity. "Same to you, sir. May you take a laurea specialistica in international finance."

They downed their drinks together. The man smiled. "I wish I could."

"Why can't you?" Alessandro asked. The whiskey warmed up his chest and scalp. He enjoyed the sensation. It was his first drink. The whiskey hit him again seconds later. He had to focus his eyes and conversation.

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"Nope. I'm just a messenger boy."

The man opposite him leaned back in his chair, as if he were a scientist studying a new life form. He shook his head in disbelief. "Well, that makes sense, doesn't it? The don picked you to be his messenger because you're an outsider. Am I wrong?"

"Just a messenger boy."

"You're free then."

"I wouldn't go that far," Alessandro said. The sarcasm bubbled to the surface.

"Me? I followed in my father's footsteps."

The man rose. He poured another drink. Alessandro was nervous now.

"Relax, kid. I'm not going to hurt you." The man sat down, with the bottle on the table. "It all makes sense to me now."

"I'm not sure I follow, sir."

"You don't know who my father was, do you?"

"No, I don't."

He flicked the box with his finger; it stopped in front of Alessandro.

"You wouldn't have delivered that, if you'd known who he was. Drink up."

Alessandro tilted the shot back. The whiskey was smoother this time, but it still burned; his eyes watered, and his brain lifted inside his skull.

“Good stuff, isn’t it?” the man said. He drank his in one gulp. He closed his eyes and then opened them. “My father was killed yesterday, outside his apartment, shot in the back of the head.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Alessandro said. The alcohol hit him again. This time, his ears opened up. “I guess you don’t have to continue in his footsteps.” Alessandro shook his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay, kid. Unfortunately, it’s too late. It’s too late to stop following him, too late to get that degree in international finance, and you know why? The answer is in that little box from the dear don. Open it.”

His hands shook as he separated the lid from body. He saw a pill. Now, he panicked. Was this mafioso going to force him to take it?

“Know what that is?”

“A pill.”

“It’s a message to me from the don; it’s cyanide.”

“You don’t have to take it. Who says you have to take it?”

“Aren’t you innocent!” the man said. His expression changed. “My father was the don’s rival within the family; they were at war with each other. Now you understand? The don is quoting from ancient history. Kill the tree and then the fruit from the tree. Destroy Carthage and salt the earth.”

He splashed himself another drink.

“I don’t take this pill, then the feud drags on and there’s a good chance my own people will turn on me. I’ll put it another way—if I don’t swallow this pill then the don will draw two conclusions. Conclusion number one: I’m not a man of honor.” The man was staring hard at Alessandro. “Conclusion two: he might think you didn’t deliver the message. What do you think would happen, if he were to think that?”

Alessandro’s mouth went dry at the thought.

The man beamed with a big, great smile now. “Promise me that you’ll get that degree and that you don’t follow in your father’s footsteps, if he’s the kind of man whose work is less than honorable.”

“I promise.”

Alessandro left. He had legitimate deliveries and the day after he would have to deliver another box of pills to the don. He’d have to repeat the ritual of swallowing a pill and resume the role of mailman.

Alessandro didn’t know what to believe. The well was deeper than he had thought. He could see the sun, but it mocked him because it would rise and set, indifferent to him, his problems, and this hell, where priests and police were both impotent and complicit with the mafia. The hell with honor, he thought as he left, as he sped his way back into town on his Vespa as a messenger of a mafia don, as a knight of the Green Cross.

The next day was to be any other day. He would work. Alessandro’s mother dithered on about the odd deference she would experience at the shops. He would venture out to the don’s villa. He would accept another tinderbox at the villa’s gate. That night, he couldn’t sleep, nor could the rest of the town. The sounds of random gunshots echoed throughout the night.

The newspapers relayed the gore: bodies found in the countryside, or in the streets at odd hours. There was an article about the murder of a rival mafioso outside his home, and another column about the suicide of his son.

Alessandro accepted the next morning that he would have to play guinea pig to placate the don’s paranoia. He had his breakfast. He kissed his mother goodbye.

He pulled up to the pharmacy to find Zincari waiting for him.

“Thought I told you I didn’t want to be seen with you.”

Zincari clutched his chest. “You really know how to hurt a guy’s feelings.”

“You’re hilarious. Get on with it. Nicolò will be here any second.”

“That’s just it: Nicolò isn’t coming.”

“Please don’t tell me something happened to him. Don’t tell me the don got to him.”

“The don’s dead, Alessandro.”

“When?”

“This morning.” Zincari pressed an envelope to Alessandro’s chest. He reached into his pocket. “These belong to you.” Zincari handed him keys. Alessandro recognized the key fob.

“What’s going on?”

“Nicolò has left you and your mother the pharmacy; he’s deeded the property over to your mother. The legal papers are all there inside that envelope.” Zincari looked up at the Green Cross. “Not sure if this can stay a pharmacy, but maybe your mom can find a pharmacist. I’d suggest that she steal one from the infirmary. Know where that is?”

“Next town over.”

“The staff there is overworked. Look, Nicolò told me to tell you that he left you cash in the register and more in the safe.”

“Safe? I didn’t know there was a safe.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know, kid.” Zincari leaned in and whispered into Alessandro’s ear. “Grimaldi had no living relatives. The answer is in the envelope.” Zincari stepped back and held out his arm out for a handshake. “Time for me to say goodbye.”

Alessandro, without thinking, extended his hand.

“Where are you going?”

“Home—no longer exiled. Seems my old boss has found forgiveness in his heart.”

“Wait,” Alessandro said. He went to the Vespa and pulled out the clipboard. “Take this,” Alessandro said, and handed him his notes. “It’s all code, but the addresses and dates could help.”

Zincari read the notes. “You know the fat guy, the don’s man? He turned *pentito*.”

“What about the other guy?”

“The tall thin one? He’s dead. Killed in a firefight last night.”

“The don?”

“Bad heart.”

“Lucky him. He got off easy,” Alessandro said, still shocked by the turn of events.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Nicolò told me something very interesting that day I stopped in. He said the pills that the don was taking are very easy to confuse with pills of a higher dose. He had shown me the pills. All looked the same to me, but what do I know? Anybody who worked behind the counter had better have eyes like an eagle. Know what I’m saying?”

“I do. Nicolò had a chess master’s concentration.”

“Out of curiosity, I had asked Nicolò—hypothetically speaking—what would happen if someone were to take higher doses of those pills without knowing it. He told me they would experience difficulty breathing and their heartbeat and blood pressure would continue to drop until they became comatose and died because their heart stopped.”

Alessandro stood there dazed. Zincari was still talking.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Uh, no. Sorry.”

“I said if that is indeed what happened to the don, there will be no way to prove it.”

“Why not?”

“He ate the evidence.”

They shook hands. Zincari put on his mirrored glasses. He mounted his bicycle. Alessandro didn’t find it amusing this time. He watched the man pedal away. Alessandro looked down at the key in his hand. He opened the large brown envelope. Inside it he found the deed to the pharmacy and a picture.

He caught his breath. Alessandro put his back to the wall behind him and slid down it.

It was a photograph of two men, two airmen in uniform: his father and his handsome friend, a man with a thin moustache. Alessandro turned the photograph over. There was handwriting. He recognized it as his father’s. He read the two names. He also read those words of love from his father.

Ti voglio bene.

His mother was right: his father had found a way to look after them. He was keeping his promise to her. Was this honor?

Alessandro saw the date; it was after his father had left the family. His thumb passed over the images of the two men. He thought again of his father and this man who had called himself Nicolò.

Either wolf or sheep; eat or be eaten.

He had to decide for himself, at this young age, already learning the ways of the world. Blood is blood. A white Fiat careened down the road, and the driver honked the horn for no reason at all and the dust that kicked up descended and touched his clothes, his skin.

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.