



# Made Man

Nothing is more important than family

WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'  
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MADE MAN  
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## Introduction

*“Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”*

(**EL Doctorow**, respected author and car owner)

On Saturday 19th October, 2013, twenty-five writers pooled their collective talent and wrote every single word of the book you are about to read.

The basic plot structure was worked out in advance and then broken down into bite-sized chunks for each writer to work on over the course of the day... and to test Doctorow’s theory properly we made sure it was *really* dark outside the car: With the exception of the guy who came up with the initial outline, none of the participants had any idea about the wider story, or where their section fitted in it.

No map, no GPS. No idea of the destination. Just a steering wheel and a pair of headlights.

The result, I hope you will agree, is a fun ride.

Tim R.  
October 19, 2013



# Made Man



## CHAPTER ONE

*by R. Dale Guthrie*

“C’mon Luca, let me take care of this empty suit for you,” said Bobby Marazzi, “just say the word, and he’ll never be a problem again.” He moved closer to the pinball scoreboard as Gianluca Padrone played, hopping to catch his boss’s eye. But it was no good, the man was absorbed with the chrome ball rebounding through the Popeye-themed machine. If he squinted at it just right, the bumpers and ramps looked kind of like a theme park, and the ball standing in for some sugar-crazed kid, running from attraction to attraction. Bobby didn’t quite understand the appeal of the pinball arcade to a grown man like Luca, except that it was noisy enough to keep a conversation private.

Luca tapped the flipper buttons, knocking the ball back into play with increasing violence as it kept rebounding from a bumper shaped and painted like a life preserver. Bobby suppresses a sigh and waited.

“Vegas is always growing. Territory expands with every new dry cleaner, burger joint, movie house,” he said, pausing at odd intervals to deal with the ball as it ricocheted under the glass. “You gotta keep an eye to the future G’Dammit!” he said when the ball slipped past his

flipper. He caught the eye of a startled boy hardly tall enough to play. “Pardon my French, kid. Here,” he said, tossing him a nickel. “Try your luck at one of them machines over there,” he nodded across the room to another machine plastered with images of showgirls in skimpy outfits. The boy dashed off to spend his coin.

“Where was I?” he said, but waved away the younger man’s answer before Bobby could respond. “Growth, yeah. So there’s ways of taking care of jokers like Salvatore, and then there’s ways of taking care of yourself. One way subtracts a problem, the other adds up to opportunity. Understand?” he leaned on the glass of the pinball machine where another ball rested at the end of the plunger, ready for him to continue his game.

Bobby could almost feel the gears in his brain grinding on that last bit of obscure wisdom. Luca was always passing on vague hints to him about the business, and Bobby took it all in, even if he didn’t always understand. He knew Luca expected him to have some kind of lightbulb moment, but he was stumped. Was Luca saying he should take care of the man impersonating a made man? Bobby knew that he wouldn’t be told to kill the impostor outright. By taking care of Salvatore, he’d be taking the biggest step you could take toward being made. This was the big opportunity to prove himself. “Yeah, I know what you mean boss.”

Luca flashed one of his rare smiles, “Good.” He smacked him on the arm, and then settled back into his game-playing stance. “The ball’s in your court, Marazzi, “let’s see what you do with it,” he pulled back the plunger and released it. The game resumed.

The ice cream dribbled over Bobby’s hand, melting under the blazing sun faster than he could eat it. Not for the last time, he wondered why anyone would choose to build a city in a desert. He actually missed the



humidity of Kansas City, with its rivers and trees... real trees, not these palms that did bupkis for shade. What he wouldn't give for a shade tree to relax under for a bit.

He had been visiting, restaurants, drugstores, dry cleaners, hat shops, TV repair shops, any place that might have fallen for Salvatore's racket, but no dice. After five hours in the hot sun, he was ready to call it a day.

The amorphous blob of ice cream slithered off its perch atop its sugary waffle cone and onto the sidewalk and ice cream dribbled from its pointed tip. Bobby threw it down on the oven-hot pavement, the now liquid cream splattering a nearby car. The owner shouted an irate, "Hey!" but shrank from Bobby's murderous glare. He demanded water from the man in the ice cream truck, and poured the piddly paper cup of liquid over his sticky hand. It washed most of the mess off with the help of a paper towel.

He contemplated Vegas Vic, his slow wave towering 40 feet above and sighed. He'd never heard of a cowboy named Vic. There were plenty of gaudy signs in Vegas, but this one had a loudspeaker that belted out "Howdy podner!" every fifteen minutes. As if taking a cue from his thoughts, the recording gave it's cheery western greeting and then fell silent. Any place out of the sun was a good place to be at the moment. The cool interior of the Pioneer Club beckoned.

Inside, a handful of people were chatting while a couple of men hunched over their drinks, alone with their thoughts. Bobby leaned on the bar and ordered a martini. The chilled glass felt cool on his fingertips even as the drink burned going down. He loved everything about martinis, the gin, the olives or little pickled onions; this was how gentlemen drank, and Bobby Marazzi was nothing if not a gentleman. Carla was always saying so anyway, and he was gaga for that woman.

Gentlemen wore fancy suits too, like the guy two stools down. Bobby

raised his glass when the man noticed him looking, “Nice suit.” The man’s jaw opened in confusion, but he just shook his head and went back to contemplating his drink. One day Bobby would be important enough to get a high-dollar tailor to make him a nice suit like that, instead of just having to buy off the rack.

With this job, it wouldn’t be long before he was made, and then he’d marry Carla and put her up in a big house like she was always dreaming about. She’d mix up cocktails in sparkling crystal glasses. She’d greet him at the door and hang his classy suit and hat up for him. It was all within reach now.

Over the well-dressed man’s shoulder, Bobby spotted Bruno Salvatore going into the men’s room. “What’re the odds?” he said, downing his drink in one gulp. He dragged the toothpick between his teeth, dropping the olives onto his salivating tongue and then followed Salvatore.

Bruno “Sal” Salvatore wobbled and splattered the toilet seat he had failed to lift. He must have been celebrating a big windfall, which should have been a windfall for the Grimaldo family. His tall frame was filled out with the muscles of a boxer, but if he did know how to fight, he had already put himself on the ropes with one too many. Still, Bobby wouldn’t want to tussle with him.

Bobby glanced at the other stalls, all of them empty, and then pressed his gun to the back of Bruno’s head and cocked the hammer. The man raised his hands like a shot, “Wait! Whatever this is about, we can deal.”

All it would take was a little squeeze, and a fast getaway, and Bobby would be on his way to being a made man. Just a little squeeze.

“I got money, lots of it. Not here, but I got a lot, and you can have it...” he trailed off.

Problem was, the setup here was all wrong for a hit. If Bobby pulled

the trigger, where would he go? He hadn't thought this one through. The bathroom didn't have a window, so the only way out was through the lounge, and he didn't have enough bullets to take care of everyone out there. He also wasn't stupid enough to really be thinking about that. *Think Marazzi, think!*

"You don't need to do this, mister..."

"Zip it," Bobby said.

"Okay, yeah, sure," Salvatore said, taking the instruction literally. He close his fly and said "We can just walk right out of here, and I'll take you to straight to my stash, I swear."

"How much are we talkin' about?" *Adds up to opportunity, eh?*

"I uh... Five hundred, cash."

Bobby kicked the back of Salvatore's knee, sending him down to the tiled floor, then grabbed his short blonde hair put the barrel of his gun behind Salvatore's ear. "Don't be such a pansy," he said, when the other man cried out in pain.

"Okay, okay! A grand."

"A grand? Not a bad start, Sal." Bobby figured he must have double that, or he wouldn't throw out a figure that big so quickly.

"Wait, do I know you?"

"You know what we do when we kill a rat, Sal?" he said, ignoring the question. "We put a bullet through his mouth, lets everyone know we knew he was a rat."

"I ain't no rat, and I don't know nothing..."

Bobby thumped his head with the gun barrel and said, "I don't know how to send a message about stealing. I guess maybe I shoot off a finger?"

"Oh God, please no," Salvatore blubbered.

He gave Salvatore another tap on the head, "Don't worry, I'd kill you

first.” He waited for the man to start begging again, but was a little surprised when he remained silent. Bobby continued, “No, you don’t know me. If you did, you wouldn’t be throwing the Grimaldo name around.”

“That’s what this is about?” he said, panic cracking his voice, “I’m sorry. I was being stupid, but I won’t be no more. Just give me a chance, I’ll give you a cut of everything! Let me make it up to you mister Grimaldo!”

Bobby snorted in disgust, but let go of the man’s head and stepped back. “I ain’t a Grimaldo, knuckle head. I just work for them.” *A cut, huh?*

“Oh, right,” he turned his head a little, shuffling on his knees to look Bobby in the eye. “Right. Anyway I’m real sorry, but a man’s gotta eat, y’know?” He smiled wanly, the perfect balance between groveling and cleverness.

Was this the opportunity Luca was talking about? It made a kind of sense. The family was about profit, and someone who could earn was a valuable asset to them alive, and worthless to them dead. Worse than worthless, a body was as much a problem for the Family as it was a message to others. If Bobby turned this guy into an earner for the family, then that would go a long way to proving Bobby’s worth to them. It would show them that Bobby Marazzi was go-getter.

“A man does need to eat,” he said, recalling the few measly licks of ice cream he’d snacked on a while ago, “but he has to pay his share of the check, or he’s not really a man, is he?” He relaxed against a sink and let the gun droop in his hand.

“Right, right, that’s fair. What about I give you ten percent?” Salvatore said, getting a foot under himself.

“Nuh-uh,” Bobby said, motioning him back down with his pistol.

Salvatore settled back onto his knees, “Okay. Fifteen.”

“You’re a really funny guy. You should put on a show with this act.”

“Twenty?” he cringed as if the number caused him physical pain.

Bobby shook his head. “Fifty percent...”

“Half?” Salvatore leapt to his feet, but Bobby closed fast and gave him a swift kick to the shin and a fist to his gut. Salvatore fell to the tile floor, gasping for breath.

“So much for all them boxing lessons, Bobby said, “Half. Plus the two bills you promised me.”

“Boxing? Two?” he croaked.

“You gonna play dumb with me? We both know you were low-balling before.” Bobby waved the gun, “I could put a bullet in your brain instead. Would you like that instead?”

Salvatore raised a trembling hand in surrender.

“Count your blessings, Sal. Fifty percent is a small price to pay for stealing from the Family.” He tucked the gun back under his belt, and then added, “You’ve got two weeks. Don’t make me come looking for you again.”

He walked through the lounge, and out into the desert heat, ignoring the furtive glances cast his way.

The ridiculous sign waved above him, the motors almost audible above the light traffic noise. *Bobby Marazzi: made man. It’s got a nice ring to it*, he thought and grinned up at the Vegas Vic.

“Howdy podner!” said Vic.

“Right back atcha, pal.”

## CHAPTER TWO

*by Tim Edwards-Hart*

Bobby pulled up outside Luca Padrone's house and turned off the headlights to keep from waking the neighbours. He felt good about Bruno: the kid came to Vegas looking for excitement, and he'd found it. He smiled at the memory as he killed the motor. Glancing at the house, he noticed for the first time that another car was in the drive. A black Buick. He only knew one person that drove a car like that, "Frankie Dice. Shit!" He wondered, again, just how Luca was going to respond when he told him he let the kid go. Surely even a dumbfuck like Luca could see the sense in getting the kid to work for the family? Glancing again at the Buick, he wasn't so sure. He didn't feel so good now. The only lights he could see in the house were in the vestibule by the front door and in the lounge to the right. As his eyes moved back towards the drive, a movement at the dining room window caught his eye and he saw Jenny's face in the moonlight before she twitched back the curtain.

"Shit!"

This wasn't going to go as well as he'd hoped.

Gianluca Padrone poured another drink for Frankie. Although two years his junior, Frank Corozzo was his capo. Luca still had times when he envied his boss. He'd been with the family just as long as Frankie, they'd both served Quiet Tony and Luca was one of the few people to know the true story behind Frank's nickname 'Frankie Dice'. Hell, he'd even helped spread the story about Frankie rolling a dice to determine the fate of anyone who'd crossed the family. He remembered Frankie making it up — rolling a one to five indicated number of fingers to lose, a 6 was your life — over a drink and laughing about it. He knew Frankie was generally much more straightforward: a baseball bat or a penknife were usually enough, sometimes both. When the baseball bat was needed, the dice were never involved. He knew because he'd clean up. Shit most of the time he made the mess. But he also knew that Frankie was smart. Frankie knew who to lean on, how hard to push, and when. He'd sit them in a chair, all friendly like, pull out some dice and... that was all that was needed. Sometimes he'd simply ask for an associate to play craps, or even just toss some dice in the air, on the street outside a recalcitrant dealer, and the next day there'd be a delivery plus interest. Frankie didn't need the baseball bat often but when he did, Luca was always there. Frankie always trusted Luca to take care of the difficult cases.

Luca grinned. Frankie had looked after him since he'd moved down from Portland to help run the business. Frankie recently arranged the house for them: introduced them to the agent and "negotiated" the kind of deal that only Frankie could. Frankie's alright, Luca reminded himself, we got this house and we're in Vegas. I'm earning more now than I ever did in Portland. Frankie's alright.

"Does Jenny like the house?"

Luca looked up at Frankie's question. "Yeah. The new kitchen was

finished last week. Electric everything, even the can opener! She still burns the fucking roast, but it don't take so long now."

"Yeah, well she did a good job with the dinner tonight. In fact, you tell her from me that my mother Patty, best cook in the whole of Oregon, couldn't cook a roast like hers." Luca burst out laughing at Frankie's joke. Jenny was an excellent cook but she had used their new oven for the first time and *had* burnt the roast. So she was mortified when Luca told her was Frankie was coming for dinner, he hadn't heard her swear at him like that in years. Luckily Frankie's arrival curtailed her abuse. She served pasta instead, red-faced and apologetic. "No, you tell Jenny her pasta was good, better even than my Mary makes. Reminded me of home."

"I'll tell her Frankie. Maybe she'll forgive me for inviting you 'round to meet Bobby."

"When will he get here?"

Luca looked at his watch. "He should be here soon. He had that business to attend to, but a little shit like that Salvatore shouldn't take him long. He's smart Frankie, like you. That's why I want you to meet him, he's *too* smart. You know people, Frank, just say the word."

Frankie took his drink and nodded. Once.

The doorbell rang.

Bobby took a deep breath, then smiled warmly as Jenny opened the door. "Hello Mrs Padrone, sorry for bothering you so late, but Luca wanted me to come round tonight."

"Come in Bobby. Come in. Luca said you'd visit."

Was there something in her voice? He watched her face as he walked in, noting her eyes flick to the lounge then look out to the street when she closed the door. He hadn't see anyone else he when walked up the



drive, so he hoped no-one was there. “Carla says to say hello Mrs Padrone; said she loved your beef stroganoff and told me to ask if you might share your recipe? She’s trying some of these new recipes and you’re the best cook we know Mrs Padrone.”

“That’s nice of you to say Bobby. You tell her I’ll send her my stroganoff recipe if she gives me the recipe for her chicken curry with raisins. It was so exotic, I’ve never tasted anything like it!” She gestured to the lounge door beside them, “He’s in there Bobby, with a guest. Watch your manners now.”

There! That was the warning. Squaring his shoulders, he knocked on the door and entered.

Luca and Frankie were sitting in lounge chairs each side of the fire. Bobby closed the door and, as custom dictated, silently waited for Luca to speak first. Bobby had made an effort to learn everything he could about the rules and traditions of the family, he hoped it helped him now. Luca smiled and said, “Evening Bobby, you’re late.”

Shit.

Luca continued, “I’d like you to meet your capo, Frankie Dice. Frankie, this is my associate Bobby that I was telling you about.”

“Good to meet you Bobby, Luca has told me all about you. How do you like Las Vegas?”

“More than Kansas City sir” he hoped the honorific would gain him some time. “It’s better run and the air don’t smell of cow shit. More opportunities here.”

“More opportunities, eh? What sort of opportunities?”

Shit!

“Well sir, this is a growth town. There’s still the bookies, and they’re doin’ well, but the casinos are raking it in. And of course, more casinos

mean more construction. And construction workers need unions and the unions need someone to arrange the featherbedding. And the workers need entertainment, as it were, so someone needs to supply the girls. And when the casinos are built, well someone needs to staff them. And all them people need to be fed. And all that feed needs to travel here from the farms in California and Idaho. I hear that Judy Garland is coming to town this October, so someone has to make sure the high rollers get in to see the show and then stay on in the casino. And I've heard there's some unsavoury types here in Nevada, sir, so whoever's doing all the building and the staffing and the feeding and so on, well, they're gonna need protection. The city needs you to keep the hoodlums under control."

"Needs me, huh? You don't reckon you could do some of that on your own?"

"No sir! There's no honour in that. I saw what common thugs do when I was in Missouri. Then I saw what Lucky Luciano and Don Carlo and Big Tony could do. I saw what organisation could do, saw the power of the family. That's why I'm here sir." Bobby stopped. He'd said too much.

"You're sharp boy, better watch you don't get cut."

Bobby swallowed.

"You want to be a made man? A button?"

Bobby nodded.

"You were right Luca, he's a bright one. Finish your business, then we'll talk." Frankie sat back in his chair and lit a cigar, ignoring them both.

Bobby stood silently, wondering if he'd passed some test or if Frankie's 'talk' was going to involve dice.

Luca laughed, “Relax Bobby. Did the job go well? Did you deal with our young problem?”

Fuck!

Bobby turned to face Luca directly. “Yes, but there was a change in plan.”

“Change? I don’t like changes Bobby, what was this ‘change?’” Luca placed his drink on the side table and stood up.

“I let him go. He...” Bobby stumbled as Luca slapped him across the cheek with his right hand.

“I said deal with him, so I expect you to fucking DEAL with him! What the fuck is wrong with you?” He slapped Bobby again. Twice on the left cheek. Luca was about the same height as Bobby, but was heavier and had more practice with measured violence. And he had his capo, the full weight of the family, right behind him. Literally sitting by the fire. The younger man barely kept his feet.

Bobby’s face stung. He scrambled to find the words as Luca lifted his hand again, “He... boss, he was scared. He was shit scared, I made sure of that.” Luca’s hand stilled. “But he had something. He was onto something and was turning a nickel into a dollar. I thought, ‘This is Grimaldo coin’ but Salvadore had the contacts. If I burned him, we lost them, see. And if we lost them, we, I mean you, lost the profit. So I convinced him to pay tribute, plus a little extra for back pay.”

Luca punched Bobby with a short, powerful jab to the belly and another to the back of the head. “You stupid fucking shit! I said deal with the fucker!” Another blow. “When I want something done, my crew does it. When I ask you to ice someone, you ice ‘em!”

The next blow knocked Bobby to the floor. He felt his head hit side-table on his way down and saw Luca’s glass of whiskey tumble down with him. Before he could move, he felt Luca’s his shoe on his

face, aggravating his cheek from the slaps and grinding his ear into his skull. All he could see was a table leg and an ice cube and the whiskey soaking into the rug. He wanted to fight back, to defend himself, but knew that was certain death. Not just for him, but for Carla and his parents and probably Carla's parents too. He had to hope Luca would see reason before things got worse.

"Boss! He pays, you get the tribute. If he's an empty suit, I burn him just like you said."

"You're a fucking cafone! I'm gonna break..."

Frankie spoke, "Stop."

There was silence. Bobby felt the pressure from Luca's shoe on his face increase just a fraction. He held his breath.

"Frankie, he went off the record."

"I know. Let him up Gianluca, let him up."

Luca momentarily increased the pressure with his foot still more, then stepped away. "Sit up boy!"

Bobby sat cautiously, and leaned back on a chair leg for support. He touched his face to check for blood, then the same with his ear. There was none. Damn Luca was good. He looked to Luca and was frightened by the dark anger still smouldering. Then he looked to Frankie. Frankie's face gave away nothing. He just stared at Bobby and pulled on his cigar. The silence ticked. Bobby didn't dare speak now, but the silence was worse than the beating. He'd experienced plenty of those, from both ends of the fist, but the silence was new. It was terrifying.

After an age, Frankie asked, "You think this Salvatore will be an earner?"

Bobby nodded. "The kid almost shat himself when I turned up. He's not stupid, he knows he won't get a second chance after this so he won't dare miss a payment. And the babbos and crumbs that pay him already

think he works for you, so they'll continue to pay. At worst, we take a few weeks to learn his books then ice him. But if things turn out, you've got a new income stream with no additional work. There was nothing to lose." Bobby turned to Luca, "Boss, I didn't go off the record, there was nothing in this for me except bringing you new marks. I'm not stupid enough to cross you."

Luca glared back, then looked to Frankie who asked, "Bobby, do you have a favourite number between one and six?"

Bobby's mouth went dry as he shook his head.

"Good, you're a smart boy. I'm going to give you a pass because I like your thinking and want you to keep thinking like that. But next time you have a bright idea, you tell Luca first. I don't want you to become a *problem* I need to solve. Some dice only have sixes. Understand?"

Bobby nodded, still unable to speak.

"Go see Jenny," Luca said, "she'll clean you up before you go. Make sure you're on time tomorrow."

"Yes sir."

"Why'd you let him go Frankie? He disobeyed orders. He disobeyed *me*."

"You were right Luca, he's a smart kid. He showed some quick thinking tonight, both with Salvatore and here. What's more, he just created new income for the family. Tony Junior is gonna like that and he's gonna know it came through me and *I'll* know it came through you. Walk with me to my car."

They said nothing as they left the lounge. They could see the light out of the bathroom door down the hallway and heard Jenny murmuring to Bobby.

As Frankie got into his car he turned to Luca, "Watch yourself the

next few days, friend. I know you're still mad, but this kid's got something and he's learned his lesson. Watch him, and let him know you're watching, but no action without my approval OK?"

"Alright."

"I have a little reminder for him. See?"

Luca grinned when he saw what Frankie had in mind "I'll make sure it's passed on. Thanks Frankie."

"You busy?"

"Yeah, job tomorrow with the union."

"Spare me the detail. Watch the kid, and keep him close. You done well Luca. You done well."

"See you boss."

Bobby got into his car. Jenny had cleaned him up without question, simply gestured to the bathroom and followed a few minutes later with some wet towels and ice. Then she gave him her recipe for beef stroganoff to give to Carla and showed him the door. It was all he could do to remember to say thanks and that he'd get Carla to send the curry recipe.

As he sat in the car, he could feel where Luca struck him. He had a bruise just below his ribs, an egg on the back of his head and his face still burned. But it was minor and he felt lucky to be alive. He grinned and started the car. Then, as he looked in his centre mirror for traffic, he almost wet his suit.

Hanging over the mirror, attached to each other with string, were two large plastic dice.

## CHAPTER THREE

*by Keith Blount*

Night squatted over Las Vegas with all the trepidation of a fat tourist with piles - the Vegas lights ensured night never sat comfortably here. From where Bobby Marazzi sat in his appropriated beat-up hearse on an overhang a few miles out, the city looked as though a particularly tasteless god of gaud had vomited up a patty of neon in the desert. That was okay with Bobby Marazzi; that was fine by him. There Carla waited with her warm thighs and cold eyes, and there his future stretched before him like a landing strip. And this job, menial though it may be, was another rung on the ladder he was building for them both.

He had a few minutes yet before he had to make his way back to the main road, a while before the truck was due. He passed the time re-combing and fingering his JFK quiff, checking it in the rear-view mirror, and reading *The Brothers Karamazov* by the light of the full moon.

Dostoyevsky was not your typical light-reading-for-henchmen, but that was the point: if he was going to soar through the ranks, he had to stand out - he had to have *character*, as Carla put it. All that stood out about him currently was his Kansas accent: and if one more schmuck

said “You’re not in Kansas any more” to him, he swore he would rip open the wiseass’s jugular. His plan - Carla’s plan - was this: improve his banter. Banter was important - banter with your co-workers, banter with your victims. Banter showed the world your wits were quick, like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin in *Oceans Eleven*. But Bobby’s banter so far consisted mainly of telling people to shut up and hand over whatever it was he’d been sent to steal on that particular day. He was lacking *panache* - as Carla put it.

So Bobby Marazzi imagined his future self not only respected for his cold brutality but also for his intellectual *bon mots*, the apt quotes plucked out of the ether while on the job. “That Marazzi,” they’d say, “is one smart guy.” Another idea of Carla’s was that he should always ask himself in any given situation, “What would Kennedy do?” To which the answer was probably, “Not hang around in the desert waiting to hijack a truck carrying booze.” So he persevered with old Fyodor, even though he would rather have been reading *Thunderball*, and even though all he’d gleaned so far was that in Russia, at least according to the translation, the rain was always falling in oblique sheets (whatever that meant).

Finally it was time. Bobby took his pistol from the glove compartment and got out of the car. The overhang on which he had chosen to park his morbid motor vehicle was about a hundred metres down a rock-strewn track, sufficiently winding to render the car invisible from the road. Now he picked his way up the embankment to the road. The job was typical foot-soldier fare: stop the truck, wave a piece around. Bobby Marazzi stationed himself at the top of the embankment, crouching just out of sight, and settled in to wait, sweating into his cheap suit in the arid desert night. He kept his eyes on the bend in the road that circumnavigated an outcrop of rock, the direction from which the truck would be coming. For a while, all was silence.



Eventually there came a vehicular whine and the bright arc of headlights slid across the asphalt from around the bend. Time for the performance to begin. He stepped into the road and assumed a crooked, broken stance, as though he'd been in an accident. The trick on jobs like this was to get the driver to stop without causing any damage to the truck - something that wasn't generally a good idea when you were trying to steal the booze on board. But as the vehicle came closer, he saw it wasn't his mark after all, but a red pickup truck. He straightened up and tried to get back off the road, but too late - the truck swerved towards him menacingly. In the back was a bunch of men wearing stetsons and moustaches. They whooped insults at him and slowed down so they could make sport pelting him with scraps of food, all the time laughing and shouting at him to stay out of the road. They were smoking and swigging beer from bottles, but despite their inebriation, one of them, at least, still had remarkably good aim: he threw a bottle at Bobby which bounced off his forehead and sent him staggering backwards until he lost his footing and tumbled back down the rocky verge. He heard their laughter echo as they drove away and he clambered back to the road.

Now he lay in wait nursing a bloody forehead and an apoplectic - apocalyptic - rage. His previously exquisite bouffant now looked less like a JFK quiff and more like a particularly bedraggled bird had crashed into his forehead at high speed.

The thought of Carla, the derision in her eyes if she could see him now, an enforcer of the Grimaldo family knocked down by common, mindless thugs, gave him heartburn. They'd get theirs. Nobody fucked with Robert Marazzi and lived. Nobody.

Bobby was a pro, though: he had a job to do, and already he could hear the growl of another vehicle approaching the city, already the headlights were illuminating the road ahead. Back into character - and

for now the blood on his forehead and the dirt on his suit only played to his advantage. He stumbled into the road in his best accident victim shuffle and crouched like a wounded animal.

As planned, the delivery truck squealed to a halt in front of him, bathing the coiled snake of Bobby Marazzi in the yellow light of its headlamps. The driver jumped down to help. He was so wiry, it looked as though there was nothing in his crumpled blue overalls but a coat-hanger. His face, as he peered down at the crouching Bobby, was as cratered as the moon.

Bobby whipped up to his full height and pointed his gun straight at the driver's heart. "This is a robbery. You're gonna give me what's in your truck or I'm gonna give you what's in this barrel. Got it?"

To Bobby's bewilderment, the truck driver winked. "Got it. Stand and deliver. I will not resist, if you get my drift." Then the driver eyed the state of Bobby's attire and added, "Nice suit."

"I'm serious. This is a real gun and it will tear a great big fucking hole in your chest if you don't get moving."

"Ohh," said the driver, as though grasping the situation at last, much to Bobby's relief. "I get it. No problem. Gotta make it look real, eh?" He looked around as though he suspected they were being watched. Then, perplexingly, he winked again, and gestured towards the truck. "Shall we?"

The situation was this: just as nobody had told Bobby that the driver had been paid off, nobody had told the driver that Bobby wouldn't know that he'd been paid off. As a result, what should have been a simple process of man-points-gun-and-steals-booze was complicated by the driver's bewildering complacency at being hijacked, and Bobby's slowness in grasping the situation, and this just made Bobby more sore than he already was and his trigger finger twitchy. By the time they were

sitting in the truck together and Bobby was demanding that the driver take the truck off-road down the side track, the driver's indifference to having a gun pointed at him was becoming murderously infuriating.

"So, you and your boys planning a bit of a party eh?"

"I don't drink," lied Bobby, wondering if he had enough time to dig an impromptu grave. "Now drive."

"Ironic."

"What's ironic?"

"That you're hijacking a truck full of booze when you don't drink."

"No, what's 'ironic'? What's it mean?" Part of Bobby's self-betterment plan was that he had a notebook at home in which he scribbled down words he had learned, words that he planned to use in front of Carla.

"Are *you* being ironic?"

Bobby pressed the barrel of his gun into the man's temple. "Just shut the fuck up and drive."

"All right, take it easy Yojimbo."

When they pulled up alongside Bobby's car, the driver frowned. "*That's* your getaway vehicle?"

"Just shut up and open the back doors." Now Bobby was inwardly cursing himself for not practising better banter. That pickup truck had put him off his game.

The driver was quiet for a few minutes as Bobby directed him, at gun point, to start transferring the crates of beer from the truck to the back of the hearse. But loneliness from days on the road and overconfidence in his own safety meant that he couldn't keep his mouth closed for long. As he went from truck to hearse, he said, "I ain't never heard of a hijacking hearse, is all. I suppose it's the ominousness you're going for, is it?"

There was a reason that Bobby had chosen a hearse - a very *good* reason in Bobby's eyes. He figured that no one in their right mind would choose a beat-up old hearse as the vehicle for a major felony, and therefore no cop in his right mind would choose to stop and search a beat-up old hearse and so it would therefore evade suspicion. He chose not to convey his ingenious deception to the driver, however. Instead, he reiterated his desire for quietude by saying: "If you don't stop your yacking, I am going to blow your brains so far apart that they'll be finding pieces of them in the oblique sheets of rain in Russia."

There was indeed silence for a minute, but it was an embarrassed one in which both men realised that Bobby's threat hadn't really worked as a witticism.

"Oblique sheets, eh?" muttered the driver. But even he by now could see that it was not the moon but murder glinting in Bobby Marazzi's eyes.

Bobby waved his gun around some more but the driver continued his work without another word.

The back of the hearse was soon full and the driver had to start loading crates onto the front passenger seat. Then there was no more room at all, only just space enough for the driver. About a third of the truck's contents had been delivered into the hearse. Bobby told the driver to put his hands on his head and stay where he was until he had left. As the driver put his hands on his head, though, he nodded in the direction of the hearse's front-right wheel. "You want to get that seen to. Those nuts are loose. That wheel could come off at any minute." He was trying to be helpful: he'd pocketed a sizeable sum for letting the robbery go smoothly, and was hoping there might be extra cash coming his way in the future. But Bobby pistol-whipped the driver in the chest, kicked him to the dirt and told him he that he'd better stay down and not make

another sound if he wanted to live. Bobby thought it was all a cunning plan to get him to look at the wheel so that the driver could hit him from behind with a monkey wrench. The delivery driver whimpered and finally got the message. "The Brotherhood of Hauliers are clearly not a very selective brotherhood," said Bobby. His mood lightened at this, and he made a mental note to beat up a haulier in front of somebody next time, so that his quip could be properly witnessed.

Bobby climbed into the hearse. He took one of the beers from the passenger seat, downed it in one to neutralise the adrenaline that was starting to give him the shakes now that the job was nearly over. Then he started the engine.

By the time he was back in the city and only half a mile from the Strip, Bobby Marazzi was back in good spirits; jubilant, even. Every blinking, dazzling hotel and casino reflected in the hood of his hearse reaffirmed who he was - a man on the make, invincible in his adopted city. His future was writ as large as everything else here: Lucky Strike. Bingo. Casino. The signs went on and on. He was thinking about how happy Padrone would be, and therefore how happy Carla would be. He anticipated their immediate future - her caresses tonight. Next, he was imagining himself sitting at the head table of a banquet with all the family members present. It was a more distant, vague point in the future, and through some fortuitous but nebulous twist of fate, he was head of the family now. Carla was seated at his side, and her eyes were shining with admiration as he stood up to make his speech. It started like this: "Ask not what the family can do for you; ask what you can do for the family." And so on.

His reverie was interrupted by something that caught his attention at the side of the road ahead - a red pickup truck. A red pickup truck and a

nearby group of men wearing stetsons and moustaches standing on the sidewalk, smoking and contemplating entering a casino that stood at the end of a row of plane trees. Above their heads, suspended between the casino and the tree nearest to it, was a gigantic, neon horseshoe.

Nobody fucks with Robert Marazzi and gets away with it.

He tightened his grip on the wheel. He was in a queue of traffic that was moving off now that the lights had changed, but he hung back. The car behind him honked its horn. He couldn't kill anyone, not here, not on his way back to the Jewel with the goods in the car, but he could sure as hell careen up the sidewalk and scare the fuckers into *thinking* they were going to die before screeching away. See how *they* like it. The car behind him honked its horn again. Bobby put one foot on the accelerator and took the other off the brake, swerved across the oncoming lane of traffic and took aim at the man who had thrown the bottle, preparing to pull out of the way at the last minute. Bobby wanted to see the terror in his eyes.

What happened next happened too fast for Bobby to grasp entirely, and yet he seemed to view it entirely in slow motion. As he mounted the sidewalk, he briefly had time to observe a wheel rolling and flipping off between the trees, and to understand that this particular wheel had divorced itself from his own vehicle. Next, a large, cylindrical, wooden object met his car which his brain had just enough time to recognise as belonging to the category "tree" before said brain's boney casing was smashed against the steering wheel.

And then Bobby Marazzi's brain stopped generating Bobby Marazzi for a while.

Just before he swam back up to the stinging air of consciousness, Bobby's addled brain concocted a comforting explanation of his current

predicament for him. This is what it told him: that he was waking from a drunken stupor following a huge celebration at the Jewel. The party was still in full swing, which was why there were red flashing lights everywhere, and why there was so much chatter. He groped to remember the details of his night, and pieced them together as follows: he had returned to the Jewel following his spectacularly successful robbery of the delivery truck. Padrone had been so impressed that he had insisted on throwing the party despite Bobby's protests that it had been nothing, and they'd all got so splendidly drunk that Bobby had fallen asleep with his face on a roulette wheel. For some reason, there was broken glass all over the wheel, too.

Savouring what he presently believed was a delicious hangover, Bobby tried to think of words that rhymed with Carla. He landed on "impala", which he thought was marvellous.

Now someone was turning on the lights, but Bobby didn't want to get up just yet because his pants were wet and he was worried that he'd wet himself.

Only then did pernicious doubts start pulling at this thread of events. He was sure something else had happened, something bad that he was forgetting. So he opened his eyes.

He immediately wished he hadn't. The light that he had thought was from the chandelier in the Jewel's ballroom was in fact from a torch. The torch was in a hand that was attached to the arm of a policeman, who was shining it in Bobby's face and saying, "That's it, buddy, come towards the light." Then the policeman stood up and wandered over to his car, spoke on his radio for a while. The red lights weren't from a disco, but from the police car. Bobby's head wasn't resting against a roulette wheel but a steering wheel, and it was covered in glass from his windscreen. The chatter wasn't from a party crowd, but from a crowd of

onlookers - among which were the men with stetsons and moustaches, who were grinning from ear to ear and enjoying themselves tremendously. The one who had thrown the bottle had his arm around a busty redhead. He was comforting her because she was shook up after witnessing the crash. Bobby hadn't wet himself, either, so there was *that* at least - his pants were wet from hundreds of bottles of beer having been smashed to pieces all around him.

Groggily, Bobby Marazzi sat up. He tested each limb with tentative movements. Everything seemed intact - he just had one mother of a headache. He performed a brief, but in his present state, taxing mental calculation and decided that he probably wasn't going to be able to make a run for it.

An ambulance arrived. Someone helped Bobby out of the hearse, leaned him against the ambulance and checked him over. Bobby surveyed the damage: the front end of the car was making love to a plane tree. Its back end had been crushed by the neon horseshoe, which had been toppled by the impact.

The medic followed Bobby's gaze to the lucky horseshoe protruding from his hearse. "Ironical," he said.

Then the cop approached and conferred with the medic briefly. Another cop came over and handed the first cop Bobby's tattered copy of *Brothers Karamazov*. "Look sir. Evidence! Do you think he's a... *commie*?"

The first cop rolled his eyes at Bobby as if to say, "Don't mind him, he's new." Behind him, beer dripped from the crumpled hearse, forming great frothy pools. Then the first cop addressed the other cop, saying, "You're stepping in the evidence, Bentley." The second cop lifted one of his feet from the beer and examined the sole of his shoe, as though expecting to find something other than fermented alcohol there. The



first cop ignored him, and, turning the soggy Dostoyevsky over in his hands, continued, “It seems our friend here enjoys dabbling in the Russian classics while he’s out hijacking beer trucks.”

“Sir?”

“Just spoke to despatch. A delivery truck full of booze was hijacked outside of the city an hour ago. Guess which brand?” They both looked down at a fragment of broken bottle among all the shrapnel and beer. The label was about all that was left.

The first cop thumbed the Dostoyevsky and said, “I think *Crime and Punishment* or *The Idiot* would have been more apt, eh?”

But no one answered him. Bobby was trying to think of a plausible explanation for why he had just wrapped a hearse full of beer crates around a plane tree. But his bruised brain was working at approximately the speed of a slug taking a Sunday stroll through treacle. What would Kennedy do? Fucked if he knew. He heard himself say, “I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding, oshiffer - officer. I’m just delivering these to a, to a party. All above board.” Maybe there was still time to make a run for it after all?

He blinked, and then handcuffs were being clicked into place around his wrists. “Is that the best you can do?” asked the first cop, shaking his head in disappointment. “Do I look like a hick sheriff chewing hay in a one-horse town? You ain’t in Kansas any more, kid.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

*by Adela Torres*

Las Vegas was already lit for the night like a demented forest from a madman's dream, each casino or hotel fighting for the attention of the people walking under neon signs, bathed in the coloured light from a million bulbs and wrapped in the scents and noises of the balmy evening. High against the indigo sky, the *Golden Nugget* sign attracted pointed fingers and stares from tourists arrived from Florida, Illinois, Ohio, Montana. Gold lights suggested riches and luxury for everyone, a dream as insubstantial and ephemeral as the lights themselves. Like in a fairy tale, it will all be gone in the morning.

*Come to us*, the signs said. *Look at me*, said the smiling cowboy of *The Pioneer*, beckoning incessantly. One of the neons in the left eye was on the fritz and the cowboy seemed to wink madly at the pedestrians. The more stylized lights of the *Sahara* pointed downwards in a stream of gold and the *Stardust's* cold blues successfully eclipsed the *Silver Slipper's* eponymous sign. A bit further down the glittering lights of The Strip, *The Jewel's* understated white-and-emerald lights, accented in gold and sapphire, set an elegant contrast against the *Flamingo's* imposing silver

tower.

*The Jewel* was not the largest hotel-cum-casino in Vegas, nor the oldest. But it *was* in The Strip, and that night more people seemed to come in than get out. Two porters in bottle-green livery stood like a matched gargoyle set at the doors. If you passed their discreet but thorough scrutiny, you'd enter a large, airy hall in faux-Roman style, all green and ivory, with a tasteful art deco look that managed to be at the same time friendly and palatial. A faint tinkle of piano notes wafted from the casino's area, and casino personnel in the dark-tall-and-handsome variety smiled scimitar smiles at the women, who tittered and giggled, and exchanged masculine, complicit nods with the men amidst the scents of tobacco, perfume and money. The Mediterranean feel of the place was emphasised by the light fixtures in the shape of smiling suns and the delicate insinuation of vine leaves in the ceiling's plaster.

The lush carpet in earthy tones, decidedly non-Roman, muffled the steps of the many customers and the clanking noise of the slot machines. The bar, to the left, was kept in a tasteful penumbra, and the despondent losers and the expansive winners alike were plied with beer, hard liquors and cocktails. From time to time one waiter in a blindingly white jacket would go into a dark corridor to get another case of smuggled whisky from the cellar.

In doing so he would pass by a solid door of polished mahogany that had a peeping hole and a small plastic placard that stated "Management" in an almost apologetic tone. The waiter had never seen the room behind that door, and hoped to keep things that way.

Behind the door, Luca Padrone sat at his desk in the circle of light provided by a brass desk lamp with a green shade. He was consulting some ledgers and writing figures in a sheet of paper with a neat, precise hand. Then he would add some of them, grunt in satisfaction, write

something else, and flip a page or two in one of the ledgers.

Padrone had learned to like this task, as he had learned to like Las Vegas when he and his wife Jenny had moved there from Oregon five years ago. Sometimes he missed the forests and the cool, rainy springs of Portland, but these occasions were getting rarer every day. He liked *The Jewel*, he liked his staff, and he was happy when things went smoothly, the money flew in, and he could send a nice, round figure up to his Capo, Frankie.

Like today. He paused and looked at the neatly kept books, satisfied. It was good when things were nice and quiet; he remembered the time after the Old Boss's assassination and he didn't miss it one bit. Ticking the last figure, he rubbed his eyes and smoothed his black hair, which he tended to muss when he was preoccupied with something. Then he lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair to enjoy it.

The phone rang. Luca started, annoyed, left the cigarette in the half-full brass ashtray, and picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Mister Padrone, a gentleman wants to speak with you," said Maria, who was the casino's phone operator for the night. She was new; Luca swallowed his angry response.

"Remember to ask him who he is and what he wants first, Maria," he said, not unkindly. He almost smiled as the girl fumbled with the connection, flustered. A few seconds went by.

"His name is Mr. Nesbitt, sir. He's a public defender at the Police Station. He says he needs to speak with you about a, a confidential matter."

*Damn*, thought Lucas. Good thing Maria was about as astute as a cigarette butt and had the brains to match.

"Very well, put him through."

The line popped and crackled again, and a second later a voice that seemed to be coated in stale smoke said:

“Good evening. Mister Gianluca Padrone?”

“This is he.”

“My name is” a coughing fit made Luca pull the receiver away from his ear, “Abel Nesbitt. I’m a public defender here at the Police Station. I was given your number by a mister Robert Marazzi, currently in the police’s custody.”

Damn, again. What had Bobby done? He kept his voice cool and calm.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“He’s accused of —,” the voice faded abruptly and Luca heard a faint rustle of papers and some more coughing, “stealing a large amount of alcohol from a delivery truck.” The voice got close again. “I understand you will provide legal counsel for him?”

“Not directly, no. I’m his employer. But I will arrange matters in that regard, certainly.”

“Well, if you could do that, then my services are not required,” Nesbitt’s tone suggested that this was a small but significant relief in his harried life. “The judge will probably set bail. Can your lawyer make it here tonight?”

“I’ll see to it,” Luca said, and jotted down the phone number and address Nesbitt gave him. The defender coughed by way of goodbye and hung up.

Damn.

He took his cigarette and pulled the smoke into his lungs with gusto, thinking. Carla, Bobby’s girlfriend, was working tonight at the casino. He’d have to tell her before she found out some other way. And he’d have to call Ray Thompson, the Grimaldi’s family lawyer, and get Bobby

some help. The delivery truck? He shook his head.

He put all ledgers back in their drawers, extinguished his cigarette in the brass ashtray and opened the padded mahogany door. After the silence of his office, the sudden wave of noise — conversations, the clinking of glasses, music, the faraway susurrus of the casino — made him frown.

He went to the main floor, adjusting his suit and nodding absently to the employees he crossed in his path. The room was bustling, people coming and going every which way. He stood on tiptoe at the threshold, craning his neck. He was looking for — ah.

Tonight she wore an elegant coral skirt suit with a silk ivory blouse that set off her dark good looks. Carla Morelli glided among the guests, completely in her element, greeting and listening and helping and smiling. If her matching coral pumps hurt her feet, she didn't show it. If she was tired, nothing in her smile let it show. Her straight, shoulder-length brown hair was cut in the style of Jackie Kennedy, and Luca thought even her makeup was modeled after Carla's idol. Not that he usually noticed those things.

But it was hard not to notice Carla. She was smart and she had plans for her and for Bobby. She'd become a trusted employee and many clients that returned to *The Jewel* asked specifically for her if they wanted anything, from restaurant recommendations to pink champagne or a discreet meeting away from prying ears. He knew she wanted to go far, and she had the brains and the ambition to do so, but Luca didn't know how she would react to the news.

He caught her eye and made the tiniest gesture with his head. Carla didn't seem to notice and kept talking with an old couple dressed in what appeared to be matching bath curtains. But after an instant she cut off the conversation smoothly and went to him with a smile that had a trace

of bemusement.

“Good evening, mister Padrone,” she said. “It’s so good to see you outside the office for a change. You work too hard.”

He waved away the compliment and took her by the elbow, steering her to a quiet table in the bar. She let herself be walked there docilely, but a crease had appeared between her brows.

“Is something wrong?” she asked as they sat and the waiter brought them small glasses of *grappa*. Luca eyed her for a minute and nodded to himself.

“It’s Bobby,” he said, and saw her eyes widen. “He’s been arrested.”

“What? How? Why? Is he —?”

He raised a hand.

“He’s fine. I’m sending a lawyer immediately. I don’t want you to worry, everything will be taken care of.”

“But what happened?” she was maybe a little pale, her voice a trifle high-pitched, but she kept her composure admirably. Luca liked that in a woman.

“They told me he stole some alcohol,” he said vaguely, and when Carla opened her mouth he raised his hand, silencing her. “Now, I told you you don’t need to worry and I meant it. The family will take care of this: bail, lawyers, anything that’s necessary. We take care of our own, you know that.”

Carla nodded and took a tiny sip of *grappa*. Her hand trembled a little; she put the glass back on the table and folded her hands in her lap.

“Thank you very much, mister Luca,” she said in a small voice. “My Bobby and I will be in your debt.”

“You’re a good girl,” he said, magnanimously, “and Bobby is — well, he’s Bobby. Now,” he put a finger under her chin and lifted her face, “finish your *grappa*, smile, and keep your pretty head high. Can you do

that for me?”

She still looked a little shaken, but nodded again and smiled. It was a brittle smile at first, but soon it steadied and she took a deep breath.

“Of course, mister Padrone. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Good girl,” he said again. He gulped his *grappa* down, wishing he’d had something to eat first, and walked her back to the floor. He watched as her coral suit mingled with the casino’s customers, and kept watching her for a couple of minutes.

When he was sure she wasn’t going to burst into tears or any such other feminine nonsense, he went to the casino’s storage room, where the chips and card decks and other accoutrements of the trade were kept. Another of his men, Thomas Ricambi, was sitting there watching morosely a half-finished game of solitaire in front of him.

“Tommy.”

“Mister Padrone, sir!” Tommy started to get up, but Luca motioned him back down and perched a hip on the small table.

“I need you to find the number of Ray Thomson for me. Bring it to my office.”

Tommy looked blank. Luca looked down and put the seven of spades under the eight of diamonds.

“The family’s lawyer in Vegas,” he explained, and Tommy’s expression got animated. Or as animated as Tommy’s expression ever did.

“Something’s happened, boss?”

“Bobby’s been arrested,” Luca said, without rising his eyes from the game. He put the two of hearts under the three of spades. Tommy made as if to get up again but seemed to think better about it.

“Oh,” he said, and then: “By the police?”

Luca gave Tommy a quick look from under the eyebrows. Tommy



wasn't exactly stupid, but ideas tended to have a hard time getting into his head. Once there, however, it was hard to take them out.

"Not many other possibilities," he said placidly, and turned a card from the deck. It was the ace of diamonds. He put it to one side.

"Well, sir, I can do something about that, if you like." That was another thing about Tommy: he thought in straight lines, and he was expeditive. Sometimes that was a real asset. Sometimes, not so much.

"This is the *police*, Tommy. You know we don't target the police." He drew the jack of hearts from the deck. Nowhere to put it; he discarded it.

"Yeah, but I could —"

"Just the phone number, Tommy," he said, softly. Repetition usually worked with Tommy. Either that, or blunt instruments.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be in my office. Bring it there. And, Tommy —"

"Boss?"

Luca raised his eyes and fixed him with a hard stare.

"Not a word about this to anyone. Not a word. Understand?"

"Yes, boss."

"Good man," Luca said, smiling. Tommy didn't smile back but then, Tommy rarely ever did.

He went back to his office, glad to be away from the constant noise of the casino, and tidied his desk as he waited. About five minutes later there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Tommy entered and handed him a piece of paper.

"Here, boss."

"Thank you, Tommy. That will be all."

Tommy didn't move.

"You can go," Luca said.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take care of it, boss?”

“I’m completely sure.”

“It’s only that being Bobby...”

“I *said* that will be all, Tommy,” Luca said, his tone dry. Tommy took the rather non-subtle hint and left. Luca got up and, sighing, closed the door Tommy had left ajar.

He dialed the number in the paper. It was late, but the family didn’t keep office hours.

After the third ring, a male voice answered.

“Hello?”

“Good evening, mister Thompson,” Luca said. “I’m Gianluca Padrone, from *The Jewel*.”

“Ah, mister Padrone, of course. What can I do for you?” The voice was kind, cultivated. Professional.

“I’m afraid I have a job for you.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

*by Montrée Whiles*

All along the drive over to the Capo's house – translated *mansion* - I found myself thinking about the situation at hand, my part in it, how I got there and what my options were. The thoughts continued to dance about in my head in some crazy mambo as though induced by an unknown hallucinogen. But, I wasn't a dope-head. I was a man whose conscience had chosen to become acquainted with his soul at a very late date in his existence. I pulled around into the drive and appreciated on many levels the opulence which Corozzo's lifestyle had afforded him. I parked, walked up to the expansive doorway and rung the bell. Muffled chimes reverberated inside as I stepped back from the door.

I stood patiently, as I always did, waiting for an answer to my ring. I hoped it's that sweet little Lucia answering the door. She was forbidden fruit especially to me an outsider. I love my Jane, but it never hurt to wonder 'what if.' I wasn't kept waiting long. Mrs. Corozzo answered the door and smiled. She was always smiling and the twinkle in her dark eyes put any star to shame for its dullness.

I followed her through lush trappings, a sculpture here and a classic

work of art there. Throughout we passed furnishings and adornments as exquisite as they were of good taste. We moved silently across the thick carpeting, our steps accented only by the muffled sounds heard occasionally on our journey into the center of the Caporegime's seat of power. Before we turned down the last corridor, Mrs Corozzo paused to pull a long cord hanging on one side of the entrance to that final walk of shame. My shame.

Yes, but it goes deeper than shame. Jane would take away my man-card if she knew where I really was on those frequent late nights. She's not a jealous woman nor is she a prude, but she made it clear on our wedding night, when I was deeply embedded in her warm and tender (yet firm) *embrace*, that some items in my possession, though belonging to me, were solely for her pleasure and mine to maintain in tip-top. I've never even had recourse to drive my own *hot rod*, as she's ever there to ensure its continued superior performance. So why was I where I was when I bumped into Tommy Ricambi? Or, Ricky Eggs, rather?

It was Tommy who whispered my name into Corozzo's ear when he'd caught me with Bella, the best girl in his stable. He had me by the short-and-curlies and that's how I'd become a lawyer for the Corozzo operation just a few years back. Feels like an aeon now. So far, the work has been legit, even today, I'm not straying outside of the law by being here. But, today, unless I can avoid it, I will sign a man's death warrant.

We stood outside the door, all sound from within muted behind the great oak door. Mrs. Corozzo knocked once then stood aside so I was framed in the doorway briefly as it opened and I was ushered in. I turned to watch her graceful movements as she headed down the hall for other parts of the family home. For the first time, I questioned whether everything I was now able to give to Jane and little Jenny was worth the

personal expense.

The three of us inside the office had a direct line of sight of Mrs. Corozzo's back as she retreated down the hall. The subtle shifting of her black dress as it moved over her form, hinted subtly at entertainments that lie just beneath its unblushing sheen. From the look of pride on Frank's face and that of respect on Luca's, to my own of introspection, not one of us dared utter the thoughts flitting briefly across our minds. We'd both see the end of our lives, Luca and I, while Frank would be in danger of prosecution for murder incited by passions unique to him with which neither of us are acquainted.

"Ray, come in," Luca said as he gestured to a chair next to his own which sat in front of the boss' desk.

"Thank you for meeting with Marazzi so quickly and on such short notice. Would you like a drink?" Frank shifted some papers on his desk. At my gesture of assent, he nodded to Luca who stood by my side.

I took a seat and looked around the room in which I found myself. Where the rest of the house through which I've strolled on more than one occasion spoke subtly yet distinctly of the exquisite tastes of a well-loved woman, this room didn't make any attempt to hide the power and ruthlessness of the man who conducted business for the Las Vegas operations of the Grimaldo crime family. Padrone broke the silence.

"How bad is it, Ray?" Luca asked as he handed me a glass of brown liquid. A few ice cubes clinked against the sides of the tumbler.

"I think the outcome would be a lot better if that federal agent weren't on the case. You know, the one always in a nice suit."

"Yeah, I know the one," he continued, settling into the seat next to Ray. "Too smart and too honest for his own good."

"Yeah, well he smells an opportunity. Bobby didn't do anyone a

favor getting caught with the goods on him. How in hell did he think he could stash all that liquor?”

“He’s a good associate and he’s always come through on a job for me,” Padrone said, then looked at Corozzo.

Corozzo’s brow furrowed as he thought on the problem. The two men in front of him were silent, recognizing they’d reached a juncture in the conversation. I shifted in my seat once and rested the glass on my knee. One look from him and I was still. The big man in front of us said nothing while tapping his fingertips together in their steeped stance in front of his face. He inhaled deeply before speaking again.

“What did Marazzi have to say?” he asked

This was the moment I was dreading. The moment I would seal someone’s fate. I made one last attempt to gloss over the information I had, hoping to save a life rather than take one. Being the mouthpiece for this branch of *Family* operations and not part of the family, I knew I was skating on thin ice. I didn’t want to give cause to question my loyalty, especially not when I didn’t know what my loyalties were my-own-self. I wet my lips before speaking.

“He told me what he could about the situation, knowing we were not alone, he was limited as to what he could say. I was able to ferret out that there was no way to make the crime anything but what it is. They got him dead to rights. Now, the best we can do is try to go for as much leniency as possible. I’ve given him the usual attorney’s advice to cooperate and not give any cause to restrict his privileges further. I also told him to hold his tongue and only say as little as necessary when asked a question.

I paused, looking for a sign in the expressionless face before me that he’d bought everything and wasn’t looking for more. At first I was lulled by his silence into believing I was in the clear, but *damn the devil* he

knew.

“Go on. There’s more, right?”

“That agent--the well-dressed one--is very good. He made it clear there would be time involved and Marazzi’s cooperation would determine how much time”

“That’s no big deal. A little college-time for *The Family* is an honor,” Padrone contributed.

El Capo nodded agreement then looked at me, with that quiet stare of his revealing no emotion no passion, just a lot of knowing. He stilled his fingers and placed his hands in his lap then sat back in his chair. He waited me out in patience. I spoke again just as he raised one eyebrow.

“That fed told Marazzi that if he turned state’s evidence and told them all he knew about *The Family*, it would go easy for him.”

“Naw. I know Marazzi. He’s a good associate. This isn’t anything to make any of our people go canary. We need to get him out on bail.”

“What did Marazzi say to the offer?” Frank asked me then leaned forward and reached for a cigar box. He extended it to Luca then me. We just shook our heads.

“He didn’t say anything,” I finally said. “He just looked at his hands and whispered, ‘Carla’”

Luca went still and sat straight up in his chair. He said nothing and gradually brought his gaze around to meet Frank’s eye. There was a silent exchange between them even I understood.

“It must be done,” was all Corozzo said out loud. It was the chill in the words that climbed from the base of my spine and clawed at the nape of my neck.

“I’m sure I can bring him around if I could only talk to him. Let me get him out on bail. We need him in our camp so I can make sure he sees sense.”

The frost melted and the atmosphere around Frank ignited with his anger. Anger which he communicated in only a few words. The sweat broke out on Luca's brow and trickled down his face, as he waited, knowing what was coming. He reached for a hanky and scrubbed his face in such a way as to remove all peril from himself in this situation.

"You are responsible," the Capo stated in no uncertain terms.

"Caporegime mio," Gianluca uttered in almost a whisper.

"You have exposed me," he growled. "I will have him taken out."

"No, let me. Ricambi will do it."

"See it is done. You are made but not invulnerable. I will speak to *The Concigliere* if this isn't resolved."

Corozzo turned in his chair to look out the window behind him as a cloud covered the face of the sun. A thunder clap sounded not far off. He didn't speak again.

We left without escort, me following Luca. After passing over the threshold of the front door, I stood on the front steps and looked off into the distance. I asked myself, again, "is the personal expense worth the cost of my soul?"



## CHAPTER SIX

*by Tim Rogers*

Bobby Marazzi bounded down the grey stone steps with an unmistakable sense of relief and happiness. “As vacations go,” he said, “that was spectacularly bad.”

The sun was shining and the air was clear, but neither of those things were rare enough to be cause for celebration in Nevada, so the utilitarian and just plain Federal feel of the courthouse lent it’s sombre atmosphere to everyone’s mood.

“Not your sort of thing?” asked Padrone.

“Not my sort of thing *at all*,” said Marazzi. “The food was terrible. The hygiene was crap even my standards and, worst of all, they’d double-booked my room. They had me sharing with some toothless drunk with a gambling problem.”

“Sounds awful,” muttered Padrone. “Not planning to visit again, then I trust?”

Bobby licked his palms and ran them quickly over his hair in a fruitless attempt to smooth it out. “I didn’t say that. It did have en suite bathroom facilities.”

Padrone frowned and put one hand firmly on Bobby's arm. "We take this shit seriously, Bobby."

"Yeah, I know, boss." Bobby's smile vanished. "It wasn't my fault, though. The lawyer, he explained it all to you, right?"

"Yeah, he did." Padrone rubbed his chin with his hand. He frowned for a few moments before breaking into a smile and patting Bobby's arm a couple of times. "Just bad luck. One of them things that never happens. Just make sure it fucking doesn't happen next time."

Bobby nodded quietly and filled his lungs with the fresh air. He closed his eyes and just breathed for a few seconds before turning his attention back to Padrone. His boss had stuck his neck out and come down to the courthouse. Bobby had been worried that he'd be given the cold shoulder for a while, especially since he was looking at a likely conviction down the line for robbery. He asked Padrone what was next.

"Well for one thing," said Padrone. "Your girlfriend is waiting in my car, so you should spend some time making it up to her today."

"Carla?"

"Did I pick up the wrong one?"

"No." Bobby smiled and started looking past Padrone to see if he could spy the car. "There's just Carla."

"You go ahead. I'm parked just round the corner. I want to chat with our lawyer friend and then I'll catch you up."

Padrone watched Bobby carefully as he walked briskly out of the line of sight.

Ray Thompson, the lawyer, emerged from the courthouse just a few minutes later. His face registered the slightest of grimaces and his stride paused for just the briefest of moments when he saw Padrone waiting for him on the steps. Thompson recovered quickly, but Padrone smiled

to himself at the lawyer's reaction. Thompson might have been working for the Family for years, but Padrone still thought it common sense to have these business types hungry for the money and fearful of the price of a fall from grace and favour.

"Hello Ray," said Padrone and offered a firm handshake. "Jane and Jenny okay?"

Thompson nodded carefully.

"Good," said Padrone. "Now, is it safe to talk here? I don't like these Federal places. What was our guy doing being handled up here anyway? Why wasn't he at the usual shop?"

"The... There's nothing sinister about it. They are just using one of the rooms here while the usual courtroom is being renovated. It is perfectly safe to talk here."

Padrone studied the lawyers face with a confident smile before nodding quickly and breaking eye contact. "Great. So tell me about Marazzi."

"What is there to tell? The bail was set at the usual amount," said Thompson. "Although given the obvious evidence against your man, and his behaviour in the cells, we were lucky it wasn't more."

Padrone raised an eyebrow. "Behaviour?"

"Slammed some drunk's head against the bars and busted his nose, I gather. He told the cops he was helping to unblock the guys airway to cure his snoring."

Padrone smiled. "Did it work?"

The car door opened from the inside with a certain practised elegance. Bobby watched it glide to a casual opening and smiled as a pair of slender legs slid themselves neatly off the red leather seat. He watched a pair of green heels touch the pavement with such care as if they might

break if they touched something as rough as a sidewalk. *So gentle*, Bobby thought. It seemed unnecessary to him. He'd seen the damage you could do to someone with a 4" heel. *Still...*

"Hey, Carla," he said, and smiled with all his teeth. She was a real sight for sore eyes after the past few days at the police station. Freshly styled hair, and a simple green dress that matched the shoes. She'd made an effort, and he couldn't help but maintain a broad grin.

"Don't you '*hey, Carla*' me! What the hell have you been up to Marazzi? Why am I being picked up by these random guys and driven to the fucking courthouse. The Federal Fucking Courthouse, Bobby! Are you a fucking idiot?"

Marazzi just laughed at her. "You make me happy, you know that. Don't ever change."

"You're crazy."

"C'mon, give me a hug."

"You're not coming near me dressed like that. You're all creased to hell and covered in who knows what." She held him off with a flat palm to the centre of his badly crumpled tie. "Oh... My... God! What is that smell?"

"That, my dear, is the smell of prison."

"It's disgusting," said Carla, and found a white handkerchief in her clutch purse to hold in front of her face. "I have a job, Bobby. You're suppose to be the one who takes care of this stuff. I can't do bloody everything for you."

"You're not here to bust me out, sweet-knees. You're just here to meet me. Did you think you were the getaway driver?"

"You did two days, Marazzi. Let's not pretend you're Al Capone. They took me out of work. I'm going to get in trouble."

Marazzi took a step backwards and took Carla's delicate hand in his

rough mitts before planting a gentle kiss on one of her knuckles. “Carla, honey. You know as well as I do that these *are* the guys that own your work.”

Carla lent in and lowered her voice. “Padrone came over to me at the casino and told me you’d been arrested. He was all ‘*don’t worry we’ll get the lawyers out to look after him*’.”

Bobby shrugged. “Yeah, what’s your point?”

Carla smiled. “Bobby! They want to look after you! You’re going up in the world!” she said and put both her arms tightly round him.

When Padrone strolled round the corner, he saw Bobby and Carla in full embrace leaning up against the side of the car. He gave Carla a quick glance up and down and called ahead. “You two make a good looking couple.”

Bobby and Carla stopped kissing as Carla screwed her face up in horror.

“Oh, that’s nice that is!” laughed Bobby. “I see how it is.”

She slapped him on the arm. “Shut up. Look at you. You could have spent the night getting kicked by tramps sleeping rough on Fremont St and you’d have looked more presentable.”

Carla turned and smiled at Padrone. “You don’t really think I look like I belong with this prison-ruffled mess do you, Mr Padrone?”

“You look lovely, Carla,” said Padrone. “I was just being polite. Now if you too could get off my car, I can get back to work.”

“Sorry, boss.”

“And stop calling me that.”

“Right.”

Padrone shook his head and wiped the sweat off his brow. “Speak to you for a second, Bobby?”

Padrone walked off and left Carla and Bobby standing by the car. Bobby shrugged and hurried after Padrone as he started to take a stroll up the street. Padrone listened as Marazzi's footsteps hurried along side him and then slowed to synchronise with his, like they were doing a slow march down the street back to the Federal Courthouse.

"What are your movements this afternoon, Marazzi?"

"Well, that's up to you, really. Have we got anything lined up?"

Padrone looked at his watch. 11:35am give or take a few minutes. "Do you really think I dragged your girlfriend all this way just to smudge my paintwork for a few seconds and then send you back to work?" He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a creaky old leather wallet. "You got any cash on you?"

"Sorry."

Padrone opened his wallet and counted out a few notes. "Here," he said. "Have this, and take that girl of yours out to lunch." He handed over the notes, which Bobby folded into his back pocket.

"I'll have someone set up a reservation for 12:15 at Little Napoli." Padrone opened his wallet again and handed over another two notes. "Buy a nice bottle of wine, Marazzi. Let the waiter choose it if you have to."

Bobby scrunched the cash into his pocket with the rest of the notes and headed back to the car with Padrone. Luca said his goodbyes to Carla, with an affectionless kiss on the cheek before nodding a goodbye to Bobby.

"Lunch is on Luca," said Bobby as the car pulled away.

Carla turned to Bobby and gave him a cold hard slap on the face that made his teeth ring. "That's for getting caught," she said, and looked him up and down with complete disapproval. "We have GOT to get you some better clothes."

Bobby and Carla decided to walk to lunch. It took them almost three quarters of an hour, but it was a nice enough day out, and they decided that a cab back to Bobby's place to let him get changed would be tight for time as well. So, Bobby straightened his shirt and tie as best he could, and carried the jacket over his arm. By the time they arrived at Little Napoli, they were a few minutes late, and their feet were grateful for an opportunity to sit down.

The waiter recognised Bobby and showed them straight to a table outside with a little reserved sign on it. While he handed over the menus, the waiter discretely whispered in Bobby's ear. "Mr Padrone as recommended a bottle of wine for your lunch if that is to your liking?"

Bobby nodded, while Carla looked on with a half smile. Bobby knew he could be a bit rough round the edges, but he was ambitious, and he had pride. He knew that they were a good team and both their hard work was starting to pay off. The way he was moving up in the Family meant he'd be able to provide for Carla the way she deserved to be looked after.

And, Hell, if he wasn't going to have some fun doing it, too.

He looked down at his shirt and snorted a little laugh at the small blood stain on his right cuff. He was sure Carla had noticed it but decided not to mention it. It was a pretty disgusting couple of days in the cells. "I'd better wash up," he said.

Bobby stood up from the table and put his suit jacket back on, and turned around to look for the washroom.

It's a common misconception that the human body has only five senses. Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. In reality, the body has far more than that, and some of which are just as important in the right circumstances. Temperature, and balance, to name two. Pain, that's a

pretty important one.

The body reacts to these senses at different speeds, too. The first senses that Bobby noticed were touch, closely followed by balance when he became acutely aware of something shoving him squarely in the back. As he started to lose his footing, he felt his face flush hot with anger. He couldn't believe anyone would be so disrespectful while he was at lunch with his girl.

The fourth was sound. It was kind of like a wet slap accompanied by a metallic clunk. He heard it, not from behind him, but in the reflection off the restaurant window. Before much longer, his taste buds had kicked in and the metallic tang of adrenaline filled his mouth, and all of this happened before his knees had even reached the floor. By the time he heard the second slap, Bobby knew what had happened. He used what strength he had left to knock Carla away from himself before finally turning to get a look at whoever had shot him.

They were already running away, and with his heart pumping so hard he couldn't see straight. As he crumpled gracelessly to the floor, the smell of smoke and blood filled his nostrils.

Finally, as he lay there and with the sounds of crying and shouting all around him, he waited for the slow swell of pain in the centre of his back to grow until it would be, he knew, all he'd be able to think about.

"Bobby?" cried Carla.

"This is good news," he said softly, behind a cough of pain. "You've always hated this suit."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

*by Sue Cowling*

Gallagher stood up and walked from behind his desk. He took a gulp of coffee, it was cold. In pure frustration he threw the half-finished mug across the room, watching as it shattered into what seemed like a hundred pieces, coffee slowly running down the wall, and leaching into the dusty floorboards. A year he had been working on this, a whole goddamn year, slowly gathering small segments of information, building a case, bit by bit. He had undercover men in every hotel and casino on the strip, phones wired, and enough low scum snitches to keep the team busy. How the hell did this happen, not a fucking whisper until after the event?

He was still stunned after putting the phone down, Bobby Marazzi shot, damn it, he had only just come out on bail. Gallagher needed him alive; this was a good chance to loosen the hold of the Mafia on the entertainment industry in Vegas, the whole strip was dominated by them. He was so close to exposing them, the way they worked, their structure, their power bases, the code they worked by and a list of members. He could smell success, there was no way he was going to let that slip

through his fingers. Now he had Marazzi lying in a hospital bed with a bullet in him, and his fucking life seeping away.

Walking across the office he opened the door onto a room of faces silently watching him. Ignoring them he walked towards the front doors, turning as he reached them, he shouts, “Damn it get on with your work, Bobby Marazzi is in hospital with a bullet in him, and I want to know who did it, I want to know what little shit decided to do this on my watch, and I want him in custody by the end of the day. Have you got that?” he waited for the nods and low murmurs that assured him they were on the case. “I will be at the hospital if anything turns up”. He pauses, and then adds, “Oh and by the way get someone to clean up that office”. With that he turns and walks out, slamming the door behind him.

Gallagher stands outside the hospital finishing his smoke, looking at the bleak building. Hospitals were never his favourite place, too many bad memories, lost friends, and the smell, the smell of death, it got to him every time. He dropped the butt of his cigarette and stepped on it, scrunching it into the ground with the toe of his black highly polished shoe. Adjusting his tie and straightening his suit jacket he walked up the hospital steps and into a sterile world of white walls, steel trolleys and antiseptic.

After asking the way, he walks down the long narrow corridor, trolleys lined up along one side, when he reaches the end he turns right, and follows another corridor to the end until he came to double doors, there were a couple of sheriffs lounging on chairs. As soon as they saw him approach they jumped up.

Gallagher ignored them. He pushed open the doors and walked into a room with beds on each side, people attached to tubes, taking fluids in

and taking fluids out, some had curtains around the beds. Walking to the last bed on the left, he stopped, turned and stood at the end of the bed.

Bobby Marazzi, he had tubes going into his arm, blood hung in a plastic bag on a metal stand, snaking its way into his veins. Another tube snaked down under his bed to a bottle of yellow urine streaked with blood. Gallagher did not even want to think about where that was attached to. He had bandages around his chest, blood stained. He looked pale, his eyes closed. Gallagher sighed; he was not going to get much information out of him then. He turns his eyes slowly to the right of the bed to look at the girl, sitting beside him, holding his hand and crying.

She looked up; surprised to see anyone there, and then her eyes went hard. “What do you want?” she asks, her eyes red from crying, and streaks of mascara running down her face.

Gallagher studied her, not a bad looking broad, medium height, nice body and straight brown hair that framed her face. Her clothes looked expensive, not cheap and she smelt of expensive perfume. Classy lady, he liked that in a woman.

“Carla Morelli?” he asked.

Pulling a hanky from the pocket of her jacket, she wiped her eyes, and blew hard. Tucking it away she stood and walked towards the end of the bed until she was facing him.

Lifting her chin, she looked at him with a proud expression. “Yes that’s me”, she paused, looking him in the eye, “and you are?”

Gallagher smiled, “FBI Agent J T Gallagher, but you can call me Joe”.

He glanced at Marazzi, “How is he doing?” he asked, “Do you think he is going to make it?”

Morelli looked down at the bed, “The doctors say he was lucky, bullet

missed a vital organ, so yes he will make it, he can't talk, he has not come round yet, but he will make it".

Gallagher felt some muscles begin to relax in him, so it could still work out as he wanted it to, with just a little luck on his side.

"Let's walk and have a talk, I could do with a smoke, and these places give me the creeps".

Morelli hesitated, it was not an invitation, but an order, still Gallagher watched her as she mulled over what to do. He could sense her desire for some fresh air, battling with her need to keep an eye on Marazzi, just in case he came round. Her desire to get some air won, she turned and went to the head of the bed and dropped a kiss on his forehead.

"Okay, but just a few minutes, I have nothing to say, but I could do with some air".

Gallagher gestured for Morelli to go first, and he followed her through the swing doors, the sheriffs were now standing nervously waiting. He gestured with his thumb back to the ward and Marazzi, "let me know the minute there is any change, and no one goes through those doors without me knowing about it, have you got that?"

They nodded their agreement, and he turned and followed Carla Morelli down the antiseptic corridors to the hospital entrance. Gallagher watched her walking, the sound of her heels clicking on the tile floor, the slim legs and the conservative way she dressed. Dressed to impress, that was how he would describe her, and from the rumours he had heard about this lady, she was right there behind Marazzi, with ambitions of her own.

As the doors swung open and they exited, he could feel the chill in the air, it was cold for March, but still the air was fresh, and that was better than what they had just left. He pulled out his cigarettes, opened the pack and offered them to Morelli, who took one, he took one out for

himself and putting the pack away, got out his lighter and cupping his hand round it lit her cigarette, she inhaled deeply, staring at him as she exhaled. Lighting his own cigarette, he put the lighter away, and they leaned against the wall, beside the entrance.

“Okay Carla, I can call you Carla, that’s okay?” he waited, while she nodded her agreement. “Tell me a bit about yourself, how did you get involved with Bobby, a nice girl like you? I can see you have some class”. He could sense her relax; bit like a contented cat, she liked compliments he guessed, and he smiled to himself.

Gallagher listened as Carla gave a potted history of her life. All the time watching her face, her expressions and her reactions, he needed a chink here, to give him some where to manoeuvre.

“I guess you know already I am from Nevada, met Bobby and knew he was the one for me, we hit it off straight away. I got a job at the Jewel Hotel and Casino, on the strip; got a good job there; get to meet the guests and the stars. It’s a start, but that’s what it is, a start, just a start”.

Gallagher saw the cold calculation in her eyes and believed her. He had to work on that need in her to get what he wanted.

“Well Carla you know it is in the best interests of Bobby if he became States witness and help us out here, it is the only way we can help to keep him alive. I can make sure that all his charges are dropped; he will be a free man to walk away from all charges against him”. Gallagher watched Carla’s reaction, for any sign that she would agree, but if anything she appeared more determined.

He tried again, “We need you to persuade him this is the best thing to do, for both of you. Do you think you can do that Carla, can you persuade him to help us out here, and help you both too?”

Carla laughed. “You think my Bobby will snitch on his family and

his friends. He honours his family, he honours his friends, and he will do his time and be proud doing it”.

Gallagher shrugged, “You think that’s going to help him, really. You don’t think his crew are going to know he is a rat, if they thought it before, and they did Carla, because someone tried to murder him, don’t you think it will happen again”. He looked at her while letting this sink in, “Prison is not going to keep him safe Carla, he will die, probably within 48 hours he will be dead, trust me on this Carla. Let us protect him”.

Carla shook her head, “My Bobby he will keep *Omerta*, and you know what that means? Do you? Let me tell you what it means, it’s a code of honour, family honour, they place a great deal of importance on the code of silence, which means non-cooperation with the authorities and non-interference in the actions of others. Bobby will not help you, he will honour *Omerta*”.

Carla inhaled deeply, and Gallagher could see where the rumours about this girl had come from, she was a tough lady, still he knew from experience, they all had their breaking point, he just had to find hers.

“I am telling you Carla if you want to save Bobby, and I know how important he is to you, to your plans...” he paused, and she looked at him eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean, my plans, what makes you think it will change anything we do?”

Carla seemed less sure now to Gallagher, more vulnerable. He decided to press home while he could.

“Let’s just say, I have heard about your obsession with Jackie Kennedy, she is one smart lady, I know you have some aspirations of your own, and you think you can achieve them without Bobby? “ He paused long enough for her to think this through, “You think you will be

anyone if Bobby gets murdered, and he will, let me assure you, one way or another it will happen. You think your job at the Jewel Hotel and Casino will be safe then?”

“I am one of their best, they are not going to get rid of me”, Carla spat out, “Bobby will not die, he will do his time and then come home, and I will be waiting for him”.

Gallagher laughed, “I am telling you Carla you are living in a fantasy, they will not want you, you are nobody, it’s Bobby that matters, and with Bobby gone, that’s it for you, all over. No fancy home, no Bobby, you will have nothing, just be another has been out on the streets, looking for a way to make a dime. That’s what you want Carla?”

Carla threw her cigarette to the ground; not looking at him. Gallagher knew he had found that chink; he just needed to give her time to think about it.

“I am going back to sit with Bobby.” And with that she turned and walked up the steps, pausing and turning back when he called her.

“Carla, take my card, call me if you need to talk, maybe a drink?” He walked up to meet her and gave her the card into her outstretched hand.

Nodding, she turned and walked away, calling out as she went, “Nice Suit”. He laughed as he watched her enter the hospital and walk away. He just needed to be patient; he smiled and walked towards his car.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*by Waleed Ovasse*

Carla Morelli sat quietly at her desk, watching. Watching for any approaching customers, watching the man in the new suit at the end of the second row of slot machines, watching to see if she'd be needed. That was her job after all - being needed. It wasn't glamorous, although she wished her job was.

Today, as her shift was nearly over, she wore a tan suit, her hair put in a bun, and her shirt's top button coyly undone. It helped with some of the customers. Her straight brown hair was tied up expertly. She made sure it never came in her way when she was working.

But beneath her calm, watching, serene exterior, lay a caged animal: angry, sad, mournful, and worried. Marazzi had been shot, his recovery unknown, and all she wanted was to get to the hospital to see him. Perhaps, perhaps... before it was too late.

Her mind kept flashing back to the lunch, the waiter, the crowd, the individual people, and of course the sound of two gunshots in rapid succession. Her face, in her memory, showed no emotion, but as she had lunged forward over Bobby's body, everyone had told her how



distraught she was, tears streaming down her face, her features contorted and terrified.

But she couldn't let those thoughts get in her way. She needed to concentrate and get back to work.

“Miss?” said a customer in her field of view. He wore a black hat, black suit, and black shoes. His white shirt was slightly stained around the collar. His eyes flitted between her face and her undone button. She knew the type. She knew how to deal with this. She put on her best smile, and continued with her work.

As Carla dealt with her customers, across the casino floor, Luca Padrone entered through the casino's main doors. Carla immediately saw him, of course, but kept dealing with her steady stream of customers. Luca managed to squeeze past the heavily populated casino floor and made a beeline straight for Carla.

He wore a grey suit, brown belt, and an immaculate peach shirt. He thought he looked handsome, but in fact, most people wouldn't.

Carla tried not to make eye contact with him as he waited in line behind all the customers. Slowly, inch by inch, he moved forward as the line shortened. Carla tried to keep talking with the customers, hoping he'd give up and leave, but there he stayed, in the line, waiting his turn. His patience would be rewarded.

Finally, he reached her counter, and extended his hand. “Good afternoon Carla,” he said.

“Good afternoon Luca.”

“I came to extend my sympathies for Bobby. He was a good guy.”

Immediately, ‘was’ stood out in her mind. Bobby was laying unconscious in the hospital, did he die? Did she miss it? Should she have taken off work? Or, perhaps Luca didn't know the truth. Perhaps Luca wasn't all he seemed. Her eyes flitted over his suit, it looked new, his

shoes were shinier, perhaps only a few hours out of the box. His tie's knot was perfect. Perhaps he didn't dress himself today. Perhaps he was an all new Luca.

Carla's brain spun in circles, and Luca didn't know how to carry on the conversation.

"I don't know what else to say Carla, I'm sorry for your loss."

"We'll all move on eventually," she managed to splutter.

"If you...need anything. Anything at all, please-"

"I will Luca. I promise," she finished. She managed to point towards the next customer in line, and Luca nodded and turned out and left. She watched him exit the casino before turning to the customer.

"How may I help you?" she said.

Carla left the hotel, her mind continually spinning. She left through the main gate in a rush, pausing only to excuse herself past customers. Once outside she took a deep breath, her lungs filling with the cool night air. She took off her suit jacket and draped it over one arm and turned around to face the hotel.

She knew she worked for a crime family. She knew her boyfriend was amongst them. She knew who she was, what she was, and what place she had in the world. And this hotel symbolized a lot of it. It symbolized her work ethic both legal and illegal. It symbolized her love for Bobby. She wasn't sure of a lot of things in her life, but of this she was: she was loyal.

Reaching into her jacket's breast pocket, she removed Gallagher's card. From her left breast pocket she removed a lighter and her pack of cigarettes. She took out a cigarette, and opened her lighter: the steady, consistent sound of the Zippo put her at ease. The nicotine would only fuel her adrenaline. She held the card up, spun the striker on the lighter, and lit the card on fire. And then, used it to light her own cigarette.

She dropped the card onto the ground just as the fire was about to touch her fingers. She watched it burn in the shadow of the hotel. Quickly turning around, she steeled herself for the coming confrontation with Bobby. Hopefully, he would be awake.

Even with the cigarette, Carla had been working herself into a state over the past few hours. Ever since Luca had come in, with his smug smile, his flashy clothing, and even just his mere presence, she wasn't sure if she could take any of the entire business. Not when it hurt people so close to her. She had to figure out the reasonings. Was Bobby into something he wasn't supposed to be? How did he get in over his head? And most importantly, how could she help?

She wasn't going to take this lying down. Now, more than ever, she was in it. She could be one of the only legal employees that the family had, but she was going to be in it. She was going to take control, because it was clear that Bobby couldn't, or wouldn't. And she wasn't going to let him get into harm's way again.

Perhaps the hospital nurse gave her trouble this time because Carla looked like she was in a bad mood. Perhaps it was because visiting hours were truly over. Either way, Carla got her way and ended up in her usual spot, sitting beside Bobby, waiting, patiently for him to wake up.

His white hospital gown, with the white bedsheets, and the white walls, paired with his pale face made her even more anxious. His breathing was shallow. His pallor was unimaginably white, as if all the blood had receded back into his heart.

She leaned against the bed slightly, making sure how to disturb him too much. For the past few days she had wondered if it mattered. She could just undress above him and he'd wake up, sensing the sexual nature of their encounter. Or whether she could just jostle him as hard as

she could and he'd wake up.

But, as the doctors had explained, it was for the best that he was this way. It was for the best that he was still unconscious. His body was healing. His body was doing the very best it could. But only if she could do something. Anything.

Paired with her day, his condition was getting to the point of being unbearable. Finally, she got up, and placed her hands on his face, and with all the pent up frustration she jostled his head around as hard she could without breaking his neck.

“Ow.” Carla stopped, uncertain if she had heard right. She looked down at Bobby's face and saw one of his eyes slightly open. She moved his head to the left.

“Ow.” She moved his head to the right.

“Ow.” It was definitely him.

“Are you awake?”

“I think... so... was I sleeping?”

“What was the last thing you remember?” she tried to keep her surprise, excitement, and of course, anger out of her voice.

“Being shot.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“That's about it.”

“So you don't remember any of my pain and agony. And me sitting here for days waiting for you to wake up, and worrying about you, and wondering what the hell happened to you, or anything?”

“Can't say I do...” he muttered.

“You fucking asshole.”

“No need to curse, darling.”

“No need to curse? I have one question for you.”

Bobby's eyes are finally open, and he tried to move, but his muscles

aren't what they used to be, and the pain is smeared across his face. He looked down under his gown and saw the bullet hole. "Darling, if you could, it appears I've been shot."

"I'll just shoot ya again," she muttered.

"What's wrong?" he sighed.

"I've been trying to understand why you'd be hit."

"I don't know, honey."

"I think I do!"

"Why?"

"You're a rat."

## CHAPTER NINE

*by Michael Bywater*

“Hurt?” says Bobby M. “What the fuck do you mean, ‘hurt’? You get fucking shot in the fucking back, some fucking fuck trying to fucking *whack* you in the fucking *back*, you ask me, you wanna know, does it *hurt*?”

*Easy on the language, buddy* thought Sonny Beach, behind the bar. *I should say something*, he thought. *I should throw him out of here*. A brute, that much was obvious. The rat-pack swagger, the JFK sunglasses, the gomina hair, the suggestion of some kind of muscle underneath the suit. *Hood*, thought Sonny, *I should study him* but Sonny knew he’d be wasting his time. He ever made it across the mountains to LA, he ever got his card, his break, he got all of that, still he’d never play a hood. Or a cop. He’d play wispy little faggot guys, schoolteachers, the joke weakling, dead in the first reel. But he wasn’t going to make it across the mountains to LA. Wasn’t going to make it back across the mountains in the opposite direction to Lawton, Oklahoma neither, way things were. Live it out behind the bar, watching swaggering he-men with their girls, thinking *easy on the language, buddy* but unable to do a damn thing about it.

“Watch it with the language, partner,” said the girl. A looker. A hot chick. *Hubba-hubba*, wasn’t that what you said? Sonny Beach didn’t know what you said. Didn’t know when you said it, either. Was this chick *actually* hot? How were you supposed to tell? He kept looking at the guy instead and trying not to think a damn thing, save it up for later, back in his efficiency apartment, wondering.

“Okay,” said the guy. “Okay. Sorry. I’m sorry, okay? I’ll tell you what hurts. In the back is what hurts. What does that say? What’s the message being sent? This business, family business, okay, it’s a war, sometimes. But Jesus Chr—“

The girl looked at him.

“Forget I said it. But listen, you have an enemy, someone needs erasing, removed from the scope of ongoing activity, you have the decency to call in a mechanic, a professional, it’s nothing personal and the guy does it to your face. Looks you in the eye. But *this*... it’s telling me I’m a piece *shit*. It’s telling me I’m worth nothing. It’s telling me, forget it, you think you’re a wise guy, you *ain’t* a wise guy, you know what, you ain’t a *guy*, never mind wise. So how does that feel? I tell you: it hurts.”

And the girl gets that look and Sonny Beach knows she’s going to let him have it, because behind the bar you see that a lot, girls letting guys have it, and some of the guys who’re getting it, they start to hunch in advance, to shrink into some invulnerable guy-type self where what they’re getting can’t get them. But this guy’s already shrunk into it. He’s just waiting.

“Son of a whore,” she says, in a kind of amiable, conversational way like she’s saying “No, actually, you know what? I’ll have the cheesecake” but she’s launching in on speed-load, on semi-auto, on all those gun things that Sonny doesn’t quite understand but they’re the way she’s

talking to the guy. If he thinks being shot in the back was bad, how does he like being shot in the front?

Her words ricochet round the barroom. He catches phrases like cordite, tries not to listen. The hunk guy, the *hood*, is no man, not even a worm, so it appears; a shame to his whore mother may God forgive her, a shame to his idiot father, a man with no spine, a man with jelly in his guts, a man sorry for himself so that he lies down and dies, finishes for himself the job that the shooter failed to do. Does he think — the hood, the guy, the shrunken hunk — that she, Carla Morelli, whose father may he rest in peace—

“He’s not dead,” protests the guy.

“Dead, alive, he should rest in peace and you think that is to happen if his daughter should be with a *coward*, a man who collapses under trouble, a man of no strength...” and then suddenly she changes her tune, it’s magical, Judy Garland couldn’t have done it better, her face lights up, her eyes lick the guy’s face and he’s helpless.

“This man,” she says, “this *man* forgets for a tiny moment that he has the love of Carla Morelli, a love for which men have offered their lives, a burning love which—“ and Sonny Beach really closes his ears this time until he hears her saying “Be strong, my darling. Be brave, my sweet Bobby, Marazzi mio,” and she kisses him and out she goes and the guy stares after her and Sonny wonders how long he should wait before he goes over to the hood’s table with the check.

*Maybe best to wait till he stops crying*, thinks Sonny, but as you’d expect from a guy who took three years to get from Lawton, Oklahoma to Las Vegas (or Henderson, which was almost Las Vegas) Sonny was wrong. Bobby M was no more crying than he’d ever cried; in the Marazzi family, weeping was women’s work and they did it with a will. The Marazzi men’s job was to give the women something to weep about, and for



generations, both in the Old Country and in the USA, they'd done it diligently and well.

What Bobby M was doing, he was laughing. At a thought, came into his head like thoughts do. Someone says "What you thinking about?" you can't tell them, like looking into an empty room. Then you think you ain't thinking about a damn thing — had the thinking chewed the hell out of you by your woman, was how it happened to the Marazzi men mostly — and suddenly there's a thought, like it been there all along.

The thought was: "Pity I wasn't whacked by one of the *fratellanza*. Instead some idiot, so here I am, *mezza morta*." What's to do? You find your own brain wishing an Italian, a brother, a made man, had put you out with a clean cap so you'd be dead but *honourable* dead? What kind of thinking?"

You have to laugh.

And then you see through your fingers that grifter Bruno Salvatore and maybe he's Italian but he's also God knows what, a zip maybe, so the worst of both worlds is descending and what's it going to be this time? Suddenly it all makes sense to Bobby. He fingered this New Jersey pig-butcher for skimming and instead of whacking the fuck he pitched for a skim of the skim... which seemed kind of elegant at the time, the sort of phony mercy the old-timers would have dispensed to show their power. Welcome to the Thirties; meet Mustache Pete Marazzi, dead man walking. Not to mention *broke* man walking, friendless, bailed, gunshot and ten large thrown to the winds in that fucked-up booze heist and now about to be... what? A meat-hook? A cleaver? Is Shitbag Salvatore wearing his old man's bloodstained leather apron under his duster coat?

So you face it. Look it in the eye. Give it a name. Carla was right. He's a shame to his father but screw his father; he's a shame to himself.

So Salvatore's reaching under his duster and not a damn thing Bobby can do about it, so he looks him in the eye and...

...smiles. He didn't know he had it in him but here it is, lights-out time, and Bobby M *smiles*.

And Salvatore smiles back, the fuck, and whatever he has in his hand lands with a slap on the table and Salvatore sits down and he looks at Bobby M and he says:

"So, you're buying, right?"

And he clicks his fingers and over comes the barman, mincing across like this fucked-up bar on Boulder City Highway, within stinking distance of the Three Kids Mine, was the Desert fucking Inn.

So what you going to do? So you pick up the whatever-it-is and it's a packet and you open it and it's the money.

It's the fucking *money*.

"It's the money," says Salvatore, still smiling, and Bobby thinks *maybe New Jersey, maybe it's not so bad, maybe I should go there one time, shoot craps by the ocean instead of the fucking desert, listen to that fine organ they got, you can hear it out on the Atlantic City boardwalk, louder than an express train* but what he says is:

"Took your time, Salvatore."

"Bruno," says Bruno.

*This is a fine deck of money*, thinks Bobby M, riffling it.

"I don't give head on the first date, Salvatore," he says. But he's smiling back.

Sonny Beach brings two beers, thinking: there's something between these guys but I don't know what it is.

"So," says Salvatore, "I was thinking. I was thinking maybe... you ever watch Westerns?"

"Sure I watch Westerns," says Bobby. "Everyone watches Westerns. You don't watch Westerns, how you going to be American? I watch

Westerns. Do *you* watch Westerns?”

“There’s always this guy,” says Salvatore, “and he’s a fuckup, maybe the town drunk or something, whatever, and he’s a fuckup and everyone thinks he’s something like, they don’t mind drinking with him but they wouldn’t want to tread in him. And way I see it, I’m that guy.”

“You paid up. That makes you halfway to being a stand-up fella,” says Bobby.

“Halfway,” says Salvatore, “but there’s the other half. In the Westerns, that’s where you come in.”

“Not a Western, Salvatore.”

“Doesn’t get more fucking Western than Henderson, Nevada,” says Bruno Salvatore.

“You have a point.”

“So in the Westerns, a guy like me, what happens is I meet a guy like you and I become his sidekick, right?”

“Sidekick,” says Bobby M.

“We work together. You’re the boss. I watch your back. We’re a team.”

“Partners.”

“No,” says Salvatore, hurt. “Not partners. You’re you, and I’m your sidekick.”

“What do we do... *sidekick*?”

“Exploits,” says Salvatore. “We do the needful. Whatever. It’s a harsh life—“

“Here in the West,” says Bobby.

“Here in the West,” says Salvatore.

“Deal,” says Bobby, “Sidekick.”

Bobby calls Thompson from the payphone by the men’s room,

wondering if he's only ever going to speak with Thompson in places that smell of piss.

"I'm fine," he says, when Thompson comes to the phone. "Nothing, really," he says, "just thanks again for your... what's that? Jeez, nothing. A whack? I don't think that was a whack. If it was a whack, I'm still standing. A .22 popgun from out of sight? Tell me about it. Thing is, I wanted to say thanks in person, maybe buy you a drink... no, your call... Yes... yes... I'm in your debt, Mr Thompson, and I'll see you there. Look forward to it."

Thompson doesn't know it's a boning knife, Salvatore's grandfather's knife, brought with him from Maniago, passed to his son and then to his son's son, Bruno, honed and whetted to a fine slender precision that will slide through to the bone before you notice it's touched your skin.

Thompson doesn't know that the knife is touching him between the fifth and sixth ribs.

Thompson knows that something that will slide his life away from him is resting right on the spot where that life resides, so he gets up nicely from his seat in the Desert Inn cocktail lounge and walks out beside Bobby M and in front of Bruno Salvatore.

"Fucking briefcase with a hard-on" says Bobby.

"Half a hard-on," says Bruno.

Bobby thinks: this sidekick idea could work out.

Five hundred feet above the Boulder City Field runway, Bobby banks right, heading north. To their left, the lights of Las Vegas are beginning to come on.

"My father taught me," says Bobby. "The government taught him. I

was, what, eleven, twelve, when he came out of the war. He saw it coming. ‘Get your pilot’s ticket,’ he said, ‘and you’ll never be short of work. It’s the coming thing, son. We learned how to use airplanes to burn and smash folks, boil their blood in their veins, grill their cities like cheap cuts on charcoal. Now we’re going to learn to use them for peace.’ He was... partly right.”

Thompson, buckled in next to Bobby, said nothing.

“The Strip Tour,” said Bobby. “You’ll love it. The lights. The buildings. We fly along the Strip, eye-level with the windows. People pay a fortune. On the other hand, accidents happen.”

He pulled the throttle to idle, raised the nose of the Cessna 180 and waited as the speed bled away. The nose dropped and the airplane began to fall. Bobby crossed his arms.

“Aircraft can’t fly, see,” he said. “Too slow. I do nothing, we die. I’m dead already, as far as I can see. How about you?”

“Jesus,” said Thompson, gray as a spoiled oyster. “What could I do?”

And he began to talk. Bobby pushed the nose over and opened the throttle. The Cessna picked up flying speed and climbed away.

“Off to your right, you’ll see the Boulder Dam,” shouted Bobby, “or Hoover Dam. Whichever you prefer. Which *do* you prefer, Mr Thompson? I can’t hear you. It is, of course, intolerably noisy in here since your door so unfortunately became unlatched. Impossible to close it against the wind... okay. Do something for me, will you, then we can just enjoy the Strip Tour.”

Thompson groaned. His hands were shaking violently and he had wet his pants.

“What I’d like you to do, Mr Thompson, is pass a message to Frank Corozzo. From me. The message comes with the respect due to Mr

Corozzo as the *capo* of the Grimaldo family here in Vegas. You have kindly explained to me that Mr Padrone, as you put it, *persuaded* you to inform Mr Corozzo that I was not a stand-up guy. Why the fuck am I talking like *you*, you crap-mouthed legal asshole? Who knows. Corozzo wants me whacked because you play Padrone's punch and tell him I'm going to rat. The whack turns out to be an amateur and disrespectful fuckup. I need you to convey a very clear message to Mr Corozzo, *comprende?* And while we're talking Wop, you phony WASP cunt, '*scusi*.'

Bobby M picked up the microphone and pressed the transmit button.

"Uh, McCarran Tower, Cessna 1351 Hotel with you, twenty miles east of the field, three thousand feet, heading two seven zero, request low approach for strip tour."

The voice crackled back over the speaker.

"Stand by," said Bobby M. "Salvatore? *Bruno?* Let Mr Thompson know the message we need him to deliver."

Salvatore beamed happily at Bobby.

Bobby pressed the transmit button.

"Sorry, McCarran, say again?"

Bruno Salvatore leant forward from the rear seat.

Bobby turned sharply south.

Bruno's arms wrapped gently around the shuddering Thompson.

In the fast-thickening desert twilight, the Hoover Dam loomed up.

"Souls on board?" said Bobby into the mic.

He banked hard to the right.

Bruno unclipped Thompson's harness and pushed him against the unlatched door.

Thompson was too terrified even to scream.

"That's, er, two souls on board, McCarran," said Bobby M.

Below them, continuing his trajectory, Thompson slammed into the

parapet of the Hoover Dam, smearing the windshield of an elderly couple from Oshkosh on the vacation of a lifetime.

“I can’t hear him talking,” said Bobby M to his sidekick, “but it still smells of piss.”

## CHAPTER TEN

*by JC Rock*

“We gotta be made-men Sallie,” Bobby Marazzi hung his arm out the window of the gold Impala and banged on the door. “No two ways about it. That’s the only way to get the respect we deserve”

Bobby’s back twinged from the motion and he straightened up on the seat and started picking at a loose thread on the gold vinyl upholstery.

Salvatore nodded, eyes on the road.

“I mean, what’s the point? That bullet in the back coulda taken me out. If we were made-men it wouldn’t have happened, not like that anyway.”

Bobby was getting himself worked up again. He should have been at home relaxing, letting his girlfriend Carla tend to him, but he had things to do and people to see. A piece of lead in his back wasn’t going to slow him down one bit. Not for long anyway.

“I know how things work, Sallie. Things like this don’t happen when your part of the family.”

“Not unless the Boss says so,” Sal said. It was the first time he had spoken in several long minutes. “The Boss says you die, you die.”



“Ya, well, if that happens then I suppose I deserve it, Boss knows best. Padrone is just a little jealous prick, that’s what Carla says. He can’t handle someone with a little ambition. He will get his.”

The Impala slipped down the Strip, passing the Jewel at a slow pace, the rumble of the 409 begging to be released on an open road. Sal eased the car to a stop at the light at Flamingo. Sal kept both hands on the wheel, but pointed with a couple of fingers at a well-dressed man walking down the street. “Geez, would ya look at this guy? He’s got cop written all over him.”

Bobby was never one to let an opportunity pass and leaned out the window as best he could without making his back scream at him. He yelled out the window, “Hey buddy, nice suit!”

The light changed and Sal pulled away grinning.

“What’s the point of being in organized crime if ya ain’t a part of the organization,” Bobby continued. “Shit runs downhill, Sallie. I’m tired of being covered in it all the time.”

Sal shrugged. “So are you going to tell me where we are going?”

“We are gonna pay a visit to Johnny Coins.” Bobby ripped the filter off of a Camel and lit it, looking out the window. The first deep drag brought a nicotine rush that eased his back off just a bit.

“What are we doing that for?” Sal looked over at Bobby a little quizzically before turning down a side street.

Bobby picked a bit of tobacco off of his tongue and dropped it out the window, turning to Sal. “The Repettos lost some soldiers recently, in that big raid over on Sahara. We are a couple of smart guys, we know how things work, I figured they could use a couple of smart guys like us right about now.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Sal said.

“Of course it does, Sallie.” Bobby pointed to another side street.

“Turn here, I know a shorter way.”

Johnny Repetto's house was nestled at the back of newer culdesac at the edge of town, with the glistening desert beyond. The white, single story house hid behind a row of dwarf lady palms and there was a dark, waist-high wrought-iron fence around the whole property.

Sal pulled the Impala into the drive and got out. Bobby waited for Sal to come around the car and open the door. It wasn't Sal's job to open doors for Bobby, but he seemed happy to take up the task after Bobby's injury. Bobby eased himself out and stood, with Sal standing close. He smiled at his right hand man and waved off the assistance he offered. He had to start doing things for himself, though it was a comfort to Bobby knowing that Sal was close.

Bobby walked stiffly up the sidewalk to the red painted door. He was only halfway to the door when it swung open and two girls walked out, followed by Johnny Repetto. The Capo of the Repetto family eyed them warily as the girls walked by, then seemed to recognize Bobby and waved him up.

Johnny Repetto, otherwise known as Johnny Coins, was a Capo in the Repetto family and cousin to Freddie Repetto, the Boss of the family. He looked small standing there in the doorway to his home, smaller than Bobby by an inch or so.

“Repetto,” Bobby said. “Nice to see you again.”

“Wish I could say the same, Marazzi. You come to my home like this?” Repetto seemed a bit put out by their appearance, but invited them into the front room anyway.

Bobby welcomed the cool air. Vegas was in the middle of a heatwave. 90 degree days this early in March was always a bad sign of things to come.

"I doubt this is a social call, what can I do for you fellows," Repetto asked as he motioned for them to sit.

"Good, good," Bobby said. "Right to the point. I like that. A man of action."

Bobby eased himself slowly down into a straight backed chair and looked around the room. It was a jumbled mix of items, nothing seemed to go together, just like Johnny himself.

The suit Johnny wore was very finely cut, obviously Italian in design with its narrow lapels and tight waist. A crisp white shirt and narrow black tie drew attention away from the birds nest that was his long, greasy hair.

"Look," Bobby said. "I heard about your troubles last week. I thought maybe we could help each other out. You need men, we need a bit of direction in our lives, as it were."

Johnny didn't say anything at first, just eyed them both, then landed his eyes firmly on Sal.

"Ah, sorry. This is Bruno Salvatore, my right hand man. He's like a brother to me. You can trust him, if that's what your worried about."

"And how do I know I can trust you? I barely know you, yet you come to my house, unbidden. This isn't how I like to do business." Despite his words, Johnny poured out three glasses of bourbon and set them on the chrome and glass table.

Bobby eyed the glass and then picked it up. He knew the dark liquid would interact with the pain killers he was taking, but he thought it would be best to drink with Repetto. It burned his throat as it slid down; Bobby wasn't used to the oaky taste of it, he was more of a gin man.

"My apologies, but as you can imagine, I wanted to keep this meeting a bit more discreet."

"Of course." Johnny sat in a comfortable leather covered chair across

from them, but it was clear by his posture that he didn't relax.

“Look Repetto, you need new men, we need work.” Bobby’s head was already swimming from the mixture of alcohol and codeine.

“I'm sorry, Marazzi. I do need new men, but I just can't use you.”

Bobby did his best to contain his anger; he had always had a short fuse, but Carla was helping to fix that. He stopped and counted to ten in his head just as Carla had taught him and he could feel himself calming a bit. “Why not? I'm sorry, I don't see why you couldn't use us.”

“Your a marked man, Bobby Marazzi. I would have thought that hunk of lead in your back would tell you that. We have dealings with the Grimaldos. Taking you on would complicate matters more than it would be worth.”

“What kind of deals? Perhaps its something we could help you with, we have knowledge that would be useful to you.”

“Family secrets, Bobby. You understand of course, yes?” there was something in Repetto’s tone that told Bobby the conversation was over.

Bobby couldn't blame the man. When they existed, connections between the families were tenuous at best. Bobby drained his glass and stood, motioning for Sal to do the same.

“Look Repetto, I'm not sure what you have heard went down between me and Padrone. I'm not sure who the bastard was that plugged me in the back, but I know the hand that guided it. I won't do anything to spoil what you have with the Grimaldos. My beef isn't with the Grimaldo family, I'm only gunning for Padrone. I'm sorry you can't use me. Perhaps sometime in the future?”

“Perhaps. You know family business, things change. Sometimes very quickly.” Repetto stuck out his hand and smiled.

Bobby took it. There were no hard feelings really. He *did* know how things worked, of that he was painfully aware.

“No hard feelings, right,” Bobby said.

“No feelings at all,” Repetto replied, a grimace on his face.

Johnny Coins showed them out and closed the door behind them. Bobby could hear the lock sliding into place.

“What now,” Sal asked.

Bobby walked easily to the car, the alcohol having loosened his back enough to make the pain bearable. “I guess we move on to plan B. Always have a plan B, Sallie.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*by StaceyUK*

Marazzi skulked in the shadows of the Jewel Hotel avoiding being seen by any soldiers of the Grimaldo mafia. It was crucial that they only became aware of his presence once the scene had been set. He was well aware that he was playing with fire but that was nothing new for Bobby Marazzi. His mother spent most of his childhood warning her son about playing with fire. If only she knew.

Marazzi was waiting for the hand over of the goons at the entrance of the hotel. It was easy for Marazzi to spot the Grimaldo henchman that operated as bouncers at the Jewel Hotel and Casino, as they always wore ill fitting suits usually a size or two too small. The waiting around was doing nothing to settle Marazzi's nerves. Having a cigarette would only attract unwanted attention. He needed to do something with his hands so ended up adjusting his ill fitting suit after every time he checked the time. Marazzi was not only worrying about his own personal safety but that of his new car. He had left it on Paradise Road and walked down Flamingo Road towards The Strip where the Hotel and Casino were located on the East side. He didn't wish to be noticed by parking too close

to The Strip. Marazzi decided that a new car was a necessity when he had decided to 'go it alone.' Tick Tock it was finally 2 pm and the goon changing of the guard. Marazzi took a deep breath as he began to play with fire as he started to creep closer to the Hotel that led to his ultimate target. Going out on his own had only changed the nature of the fire that Marazzi was playing with. In some ways it was crueler because it gave you the illusion of freedom.

It was the time to walk through the fire. Marazzi imagined flames on either side of the sidewalk as he made his way crouching to the Jewel Hotel and into Grimaldo territory. His breaths became quick and shallow as he crept closer to his target but it was the only way. Thoughts were racing through his head. Thoughts of cigs and booze, and the opportunities he dreamed of chasing after this was over. He had dreams of a new life after becoming a shark and repaying those had shot him, and those who had ordered the shooting. Marazzi suspected Luca Padrone, for at least one of these things. After his brush with lead, and encouragement from his girlfriend, he decided to go out on his own. Marazzi send a prayer of thanks to Lady Luck, the Goddess of Vegas, as both henchmen at the door of the Jewel Hotel and Casino became attracted by two ladies that often frequented The Strip. Money was exchanged by the goons to the ladies and the four of them disappeared in the shadows in the opposite direction to where he had decided to crouch. Marazzi's forehead knitted in concentration as he took mental notes about the goons and the ladies. It was obviously a planned rendezvous as those ladies did not usually frequent The Strip until the evening looking to drum up business. Marazzi allowed himself a smile as this little scene was a great bit of leverage he could use against these Grimaldo goons, especially now he was out on his own. Marazzi needed

all the leverage he could get now he was outside the Grimaldo's. They offered little protection but it was still protection unless they turned against you. Little fish were snacks for the big sharks that ran the Hell known as Las Vegas. It wasn't just the heat of the desert that made Vegas Hell, but also those who controlled the city that stoked the fires of Baphomet.

Now the coast was clear Marazzi dashed for the door of the Hotel. He held his breath until he was safely inside. This had to work.

One. Two. Three. Four. Exhale. He winced as sparks of pain went over him resulting from the short dash to the Hotel entrance. He wasn't completely healed yet and paid the price for any sudden, quick movements. Marazzi grunted as looked around the hotel lobby trying to keep out of sight. First objective was avoid anyone from the Grimaldo family. He needed to stay out of trouble until he found his target. Marazzi's hand drifted down to the hidden holster where his gun was located. He merged in with the crowds waiting for the pain to stop while searching for his target. She wasn't here. He didn't expect her to be but Marazzi had to make sure. The margin for error was nil. Hell, the margin for error was always nil when you were out on your own.

Marazzi hit upon a sudden brain wave and took a Hotel map as it made him look like he was a regular tourist, although there was noting regular about this Hotel as it was the heart of the Grimaldo empire. He stuck it in the trouser pocket that was the same side of the gun holster to join the hand drawn map of the Jewel Hotel and Casino staff only areas. He hoped that he wouldn't have to visit many of those areas as it greatly increased the risk to himself... and his target.

When he was closer to the interior doors, he took both maps out of his pocket with the hand drawn one carefully placed over the map taken



from the lobby so that anyone watching him would only see the garish hotel logo on the back. Making sure the logo was always on show Marazzi headed into the double doors that took him deeper into the Hotel and deeper into the Grimaldo rabbit warren.

Marazzi needed to find Carla's best friend Lisa. He hoped that he wouldn't have to venture into the hotel laundry room as that was asking for trouble. Bobby Marazzi and laundry did not mix well much to his mother's chagrin. Lisa was not a big fan of him because she mistrusted his mafia connections. Well at least she was smart, Marazzi conceded. Unfortunately smart women didn't get very far in Vegas unless they were prepared to be a Moll, and Lisa was no Moll. He made his way down the corridor until he came to the main guest dining room. Lady Luck was again smiling on him as Lisa was clearing the tables after the guest's long lazy lunches.

The dining room had a chequered black and white floor with black chairs and tables covered in white seats and table cloths. Definitely masonic. To emphasise this all the chairs had triangle decals in the corners.

He calmly waked in and cleared his throat. Neither woman paid attention to him. Guess they weren't allowed to talk to guests. He moved closer, but carefully. He didn't want to startle the women and have them scream bringing unwanted attention. Marazzi thought Lisa glanced up at him but she continued folding white tablecloths. Several of them had red wine stains and Marazzi idly wondered how many of the table cloths saw stains of blood rather than wine. That made him smile before he returned his attention to Lisa. Marazzi watched Lisa's short, jerky movements. She was aware of him but choosing to ignore him. Bitch!

“Lisa!”

More folding.

Marazzi inched closer into her personal space.

“Where’s Carla?”

Silence.

“Don’t play games with me.”

Lady luck was blessing him today as he saw a flash of orange in Lisa’s blouse pocket. He grinned at her as he took his advantage. He snatched the orange card from the blouse before Lisa had time to protest.

“Where is she?”

Silence.

“Where. Is. She?”

“Why should I help you?”

“For Carla.”

She snorted.

“Well if you don’t.” Marazzi sneered. “The Grimaldo’s will discover this on your person. Won’t take kindly to a skivy having a VIP pass.”

Lisa winced. “Why would you help them?”

“Who said I was helping them?”

“She’s in the Casino.”

Marazzi grinned. “I’d better keep this then.”

Lisa scowled.

From the dining room Marazzi moved quickly down the main corridor to the Casino that most of the guests used. He quickly flashed the card at one of the bouncer goons and entered through the double doors of the Casino entrance. Marazzi scanned the room looking for his target. He smiled briefly, before remembering what he came here to do. He checked that he had everything he needed in his trouser pockets before he approached her.

Carla Morelli was cleaning glasses at the Casino bar. She was wearing the standard Jewel Hotel uniform of black blouse and white skirt. Unlike most of the girls that worked at the Hotel she liked to keep all the buttons on her blouse buttoned up.

He smiled at her. "Hey Sweet!"

"Bobby! What are you doing here!"

"Came to see you. Got business to discuss."

"Is that wise, you're out of the family now."

"Won't take long."

Marazzi scanned the room. He thought he could see Luca Padrone in a far corner of the room studying him from the blackjack table. Good. He needed the message to get back to his former boss. It also meant that Luca had been watching Carla since Marazzi had decided to go out on his own after he had gotten shot. This emphasised the necessity of his actions. The shooting had made Marazzi stop being a small fish to become a big shark of his own. He wasn't going to be anyone's cannon fodder. Bobby Marazzi was too good for that. He had big plans for himself and Carla but he need to separate his personal life away from the Grimaldo's with whom Carla was still employed.

Marazzi raised his voice to make sure that everyone could hear. "We're finished Bitch!"

A glass rolled on the bar as Carla began to sob in shock. "But I LOVE you! You love me! You promised to marry me!"

There was a hush now in the Casino as everyone watched on.

Marazzi hand's clenched and one drifted down to the cold metal of his gun. The other found its way to the pocket where there was a dollar bill. He needed to see this through.

"We're done! I owe you nothing!" He thrust the dollar bill into her hand. "Payment for services rendered."

Carla stood there stunned just staring at the dollar bill that Bobby had given her. Something caught her eye. Something was written on it. It said: 'I love you. BM.' She faked a sob and covered her face to hide the smile. Her heart was soaring. Even in Vegas, sometimes a dollar was worth more than a dollar.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*by Claire Woodier*

Bobby sat, tapping at his teeth with the nail of his ring finger. The coffee was cold in front of him, but he downed it anyway. Hand to his mouth, he looked to his left, out of the coffee shop window. No-one was approaching. He lit a cigarette with impatience and lifted his coffee cup in the air to gesture to the owner for another. The Irishman scowled as he poured.

“You’re a bit early today aren’t ya?” he said, with barely hidden derision.

“Why, are you not pleased to see me Paddy?” Bobby mocked as he sucked in the hotter coffee. The owner slow-blinked an acknowledgement of the sarcasm and shuffled back to his station. Bobby caught some movement in the corner of his eye, and a fist of fear pulled his insides up into his chest. He sank lower towards the table and squinted for better vision. It was Sal. He was instantly recognisable from across the street with his formidable size and bright yellow-blonde hair. Bobby raised his eyes to the ceiling in amusement at his own jumpiness. Sal really needed to find a way of being less conspicuous in his line of

work he thought, and convulsed in pain as he downed the much hotter coffee.

“Keep the change Paddy!” Bobby rasped as he shot out of the cafe, keeping low under his collar.

“My name is NOT Paddy!” the Irishman shouted as he sneered at the irony of his customer leaving him a tip with the money he’d just extorted from him.

Sal was bounding towards Bobby like a friendly Labrador.

“HEY Bobby!” he smiled loudly.

“CH-CH-CH!” Bobby quietened, sinking even lower towards the road. Sal’s face dropped in confusion as Bobby scooped him up and escorted him towards the sidewalk.

“Are you *fuckin’* kidding me?” Bobby whispered loudly, keeping close to his friend. “I’ve still got fuckin’ *holes* in my neck from his fuckin’ *thumb* prints, and you’re screaming BAH-BEE at the top of your girly voice. What is *wrong* wid you?”

“Shit sorry Bobby, I didn’t think.” Sal was genuine.

“I’d be fuckin’ shot if there were any one of theirs around right now!”

Sal looked around suddenly, trying to find the shooters, moving his body in front of Bobby’s like a dutiful bodyguard. It was an instinctive move, and it reminded Bobby Marazzi of his friend’s loyalty. He instantly let him off the hook.

“Come on you Goon. We gotta get out of the open air.”

As he led Sal into an alley, Bobby thought about what he was getting his friend into. Sal was useful to have around. He could snap arms like chicken bones, and was as fearless as a three year old, but Bobby was moving into territory that was hard to return from. Carla would be furious at first, he knew that, but she’d be excited by the prospect of what he *could* be. He knew Sal loved the adrenalin but was he ready to

take the steps Bobby was proposing? Being burned by the Grimaldo family was no mouldy lemon. It usually meant you were buried. He was lucky that Luca Padrone was both too old and too stupid to clip him. By staying alive, Bobby knew he had made life untenable for himself. By starting a war, he would at least be building the possibility of a great new life, for him *and* Sal. It just meant that they were playing the ultimate stakes. Bobby pulled Sal into a doorway by the elbow.

“Right Nutsack. Here’s what we’re gonna do. I want you to listen and to think about what I’m saying, and what it’ll mean for you.” Bobby had hold of both Sal’s elbows now, and was searching for him to look him in the eye. Sal unwrapped two pieces of gum and threw them in his mouth. He pointed the packet at Bobby.

“You want some?”

“NO Dummy! I want you to listen.” He lit a cigarette as Sal yawned and laboured on the new gum in his mouth.

“Its *early* Bobby. What are we even doing here? We could be eating breakfast in my girlfriend’s Mother’s kitchen.” He shuddered like a cat as he performed a *huge* stretch without inhibition, causing Bobby to roll his eyes again.

“We’re here my subtle friend, because no Grimaldo goon in his right mind would be up this early. We’re up, because we’re going to conduct Tuesday business as usual.”

Sal narrowed his eyes at his friend and continued to chew. Bobby waited for a response. Sal chewed.

“I’m going to collect the Tuesday contributions as normal Sal.” He reiterated.

“You’re gonna try and *get back in* by collecting? Thats a long shot my friend! I do not advise it!” He shook his head with kind raised eyebrows.

“No you Noodle! We’re collecting the money, and we’re keeping it. I

already started with Paddy Irish before.” Bobby dragged hard on his cigarette and blew the smoke out aggressively. He was nervous, but focussed. He was rogue now. He may as well embrace it. “Do you get what I’m asking you? If you come in with me now, we’re gonna be hunted men. But we *could* start a new organisation. We could be the heads of the new Marazzi family.”

“The Salvatore Family!” Sal rhapsodised.

“Bruno Salvatore, your family is known for having a nice line in pork belly. If we’re gonna work together then we’ll work using my name. Besides, it puts more heat on me than you.” He looked at his friend for his response. Sal was grinning as he chewed.

“You know his name *isn’t* Paddy Irish..”

The two men worked the establishments on Marazzi’s route as usual. Bobby found it difficult to act normal. He usually collected from them in the late afternoon but today they were close to opening time which was around eight hours of earning time less than normal. And they were *not* happy about it. He’d got his story straight in his head, and Sal’s headcrushing skills made everything plausible, but he was sweating it on the little things. When you’re guilty of something you worry about the details and add information you don’t need to add. An innocent Bobby Marazzi wouldn’t *need* to tell them the lie that they’re early because he’s going home to Kansas City that afternoon to visit his family, because his Mother was ill and his Father wasn’t doing so well without her. An innocent Bobby wouldn’t *need* to tell them and lie that he was demanding their money eight hours early because he had to go cook peppers and sausage for Mr Marazzi senior. No innocent gangster would explain *anything*, they’d simply send in Sal. His guilt was fuelling his mouth, and he knew it. He felt suspicious and he really didn’t want anyone to catch



on before they'd got to the last customer. As it was, Sal had been forced to intervene with one owner that thought he could question the time of collection. He was crying like a baby as Sal held him down by the neck, his temple pressed amongst the hot griddle full of burgers angrily spitting fat.

"Close your eyes you'll be blinded!" Sal shouted considerably at the screaming cook as the smell of grilled face began to waft into the extractor fan.

"You're soft as shit Sal." Bobby accused his friend as they walked away with the Cook's payment plus some. "We've got business to attend to, we're avoiding Grimaldo muscle *and* certain death, and YOU'RE there giving him a cold compress for his scorched head!" He folded the cash in his hand and pushed it far down into his trouser pocket.

"Hey! I don't wanna see the guy marked! He's a divorced man after all!" He popped in another stick of gum.

"I'm pretty sure you've sorted him a really dangerous looking scar." Bobby quipped.

"Not with my Mother's cold compress I won't!" Sal assured. "Works like a charm!" He smiled widely, exposing the pink bubble gum in his right molars.

The two men walked into the Little Napoli restaurant and sat down at their usual table. The restaurant was empty but for them, the daylight showing up the tiredness of the decor. Bobby wondered if he had ever been in to see Tony in the daytime before. He certainly didn't remember the place looking like this, but he reminded himself that he was over-observant today. There was no water on the table yet and the cutlery was still in its basket on the bar waiting to be set. Tony Cucina, the chef and owner normally looked after the boys well, but after the

other visits they had made that day, they had no guarantee that today would be the same. Sal opened his crisp linen napkin with a flourish and tucked it into his shirt.

“Are you *trying* to look like a Wiseguy?” Bobby hissed. Sal outstretched his arms in a gesture that said: “What?”

“Bobby? Sal?” Tony Cucina walked into his restaurant with a ladle in his hand the size of a cantalope. Bobby gulped.

“Morning Tony!” he smiled, his eyes he was sure gave away his nerves.

“You’ve come early today!” Tony squashed his features together into the middle of his face. Bobby and Sal waited for his response.

“I don’t think I have anything ready for you to eat!” The men deflated.

“I’ll get you some leftovers from last night. Hold on!” He padded his large frame back into the kitchen, still brandishing his huge ladle aloft. Tony Cucina was one of those clients that regarded the weekly payments as a necessary overhead. He loved to cook, and he needed to pay the Grimaldos their protection just as he had to pay his electricity. What sense was there in crossing these people? He welcomed them in, and kept them close. He was interested in two things: staying out of trouble and making food that ‘made the angels dance’.

In what seemed like just a couple of minutes Tony came out of the kitchen with two steaming plates of pasta. The men suddenly transformed into boys as their appetites took them over. Licking their lips and making involuntary yummy noises, they tucked into the anachronistic Spaghetti with Clam Sauce, pulling apart large hunks of crusty bread and mopping up the juices as they went. Both leaned back in their chairs when they had finished and put both hands on their bellies. Tony had brought his envelope out with the bread, and had left it

underneath Bobby's side plate.

"Bobby?" Sal asked, sucking at his teeth with his tongue.

"Sal." Bobby had opened the envelope and was inspecting the money inside.

"What's gonna happen when the real guy shows up today?"

Bobby stopped flicking through the banknotes. They were back to reality.

"The shits gonna hit the fan that's whats gonna happen my friend."

Bobby knew he needed to come up with their next move. Things had gone well this morning, *for them*, but all hell was going to break loose once the Grimaldos figured out that their protection money wasn't going to arrive that evening. He needed to buy some time. If he was going to start up his own rival organisation he had to think differently; not play by the usual rules. They had tried to kill him. He hadn't the man power to come at them all guns blazing. By rights he wasn't allowed to go near them without the permission from the family. But right now he had no affiliation, they had made sure of that. He looked at Sal. He was spinning coins on the table like tops, contorting his face like a kid with a toy race car.

"You okay there Sport?" Bobby asked, putting Sal off his stroke, and making the coin flick off the table and roll along the floor.

"Ah shit you made me drop a dime!" Sal exclaimed, jumping off his chair and going after the coin. "Ha! Drop a DIME!" Sal laughed, holding up the coin for effect. "Get the cops on the phone!" he joked and sat down again.

Bobby peered at Sal like he'd never seen him before. "WHAT did you just say?"

Sal looked at his friend sat opposite him and caught the serious look on his face. He was back to earlier that morning.

“Oh sorry Bobby, I didn’t think-“

“Never mind that, come on we’re going.” Bobby lifted Sal up by the elbow and they thanked Tony Cucina profusely as they hurried out.

“WHAT was that all about?” Sal whined as he followed Bobby across the street. Bobby was heading for a phone booth. ‘Drop a dime’ in the Grimaldo family’s world, means to rat; be a pigeon. To ‘drop a dime’ is to call the cops, and Bobby Marazzi was doing just that.

“Hello? Police? I thought you might want to know. This afternoon a member of the Grimaldo family will be arriving at the Little Napoli restaurant to extort protection money with menaces. He’ll be armed and dangerous.” He looked Sal right in his astonished eye as he hung up the phone.

“That should buy us some time!” he grinned.

“You play real dirty Bobby.” Sal said. “Your brains come with a sting in the tail!”

“Shut up Clam head.” Bobby laughed. “Lets get out of here and count our winnings.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*by Greg Ray*

Tommy Ricambi leaned back and lit another Chesterfield. There was a beat cop down at the corner he wasn't sure of. Didn't know him. But then this wasn't his regular run. Better to make safe and wait. It was still early.

Directly across the street was the Little Napoli restaurant. A couple of idle patrons sitting out front, and since he had arrived, patrons coming out but hardly one going in. Way he figured there was about nobody in there by now. If that beat cop would stop chewing the fat with the locals and move on.

It was Marazzi's pick up, the Little Napoli, and it wasn't like any kind of gift that Padrone had him working his run. Just somebody had to do it is all, since Marazzi was out of the picture. Still, there are opportunities everywhere, for those that know how to take them. And that was really all a man like himself needed: a chance to make good.

An El Dorado convertible full of youngsters slowed its way up the boulevard. Ricambi tapped back his snap-brim hat, watched them pass. Some beautiful East Siders heading down to the Strip. He cupped his

cigarette and blew a smoke sigh into the air. Another night in Paradise. The cop was still on the beat.

The Summit was all over town just then shooting a movie—casino heist or something. Frank in a casino heist—that was a rich one. Martin was back at the Copa tonight. Maybe Frank, too. And those girls. Boy, it didn't get better than being Frank. That was the way. Every fellow in the neighborhood grew up dreaming of being Frank. And it was still Frank after all these years.

A young couple cut in front of him—some guy from the neighborhood with a chick on his arm — her Neapolitan patter going non-stop on high energy, and her hanging all over the guy. You couldn't take a girl seriously who talked like that—girl's got to really speak the language. But then maybe the guy wasn't really listening to her, he decided, as his eye followed her down the walk. The cop was still on the beat.

He had lost his count of the people going in and out of the Little Napoli, but he wasn't too worried. There was only one fellow left at the tables out front, reading a newspaper. A Florentine by the cut of him. He tried to make out what paper he was reading. He wagered with himself that that would show he was right.

But his interest seemed to have caught the man's attention. The man was looking at him. Dammit. The only thing to do in a case like this was show them who. You fix them with your eye until they get it and then they'll know what's what and move out of your way. He gave the man his most dry look. That was something the movies always got wrong—in the movies it was always the thug look and that was that. The Florentine did not contend with his gaze, but lowered his eyes right away, folded up his newspaper and moved on into the Little Napoli.

Drawing attention was a fumble, but the man was Italian, so it was

alright. Still it made Ricambi antsy to get in there and get the job done. Fortunately, the beat cop had moved off up the cross street somewhere and so, no more waiting. He hummed a few bars of “High Hopes” and crossed the avenue.

As expected, there were few customers—the place was not much more than a stopover for coffee at this hour. Seating was to the right, but Ricambi headed straight for the kitchen. The hostess on duty caught him in transit.

“Can I do something for you?”

He gave her the once over. “Maybe later. I got business.”

He moved to pass, but she intercepted him again.

“No, here, let me get you a table.” She snatched up a menu.

He just shoved on past her. What was she going to do, stop him?

“So, what is this business? It may not look busy to you, but this is prep time for the dinner crowd.”

“I’m here for a mutual friend.”

Cucina’s face broke into a crooked, unamused smile. “What, are you kidding me?”

Ricambi gave him his dry look. What ever happened to business as usual, he wondered.

“This would be a timely time to make a contribution.”

“I just paid. So, what the hell?”

“Time’s a bitch, eh?”

“No, I mean I just paid you guys.”

“Wait.” Ricambi made a show of checking his vest pocket. “Nope. Nothing. Nada.”

“What the hell is this? Where’s Marazzi?”

“What say we stick to business and that's none of yours.”

Cucina stared—his expression churning through everything he was not saying in reply. Finally, he tore off his apron and threw it down.

Now it was Ricambi's turn to wonder what the hell this was. This was supposed to be *nice 'n' easy* — a simple in and out operation. The movies always lied about that stuff, too. Like it was all tough guys leaning on folks all the time. But that's not how it was. *Just friends helping friends*. Most days, it was like picking up a paycheck. But not today.

This Cucina was a whiner and Marazzi hadn't had the discipline to make it go smooth; never got a handle on this guy. He wondered if Luca knew. Like a test of some kind, giving him this pick up. There are opportunities everyday, if you know how to look for them. Somebody needed to show this guy.

Ricambi squared off his shoulders and looked at Cucina dead on.

At 4:20pm, two uniformed officers burst through the front doors of Little Napoli where an altercation was taking place between two men, the owner of the restaurant, Tony Cucina, and another man, name unknown.

“I don't care. You just get the hell out of my place!” The older man punctuated his words with a hard knock to the younger man's chest. “Ask Marazzi.”

Their argument had proceeded all the way from the back office and grown steadily in volume — Ricambi trying to control the situation and Cucina hounding and very nearly hustling him right out of the place. “They sent me a punk.”

That's about when the cops busted in. Ricambi tailed it for the kitchen hoping to make his exit out the back, but a third cop stepped out the kitchen door and put a stop to that. It was the beat cop from the corner.



Cop in the kitchen, thought Ricambi. He turned to Cucina, but could see that he was just as startled by this.

The Florentine, who was still seated in the dining area, rose and strode up to where all were standing.

Those weren't beat cops coming in here. Somebody had tipped the cops about his pick up.

He looked round for the hostess. She was still in the room, standing back by the wait station. She was looking at him—a rebuke. *Now see what you've done.* Maybe she had wised to the undercover cop and he had just pushed on through. The knowledge stung him. It was not enough to be smarter next time. You had to be smart the first time.

The other cops were just waiting. Clearly, the Florentine was in charge here and Ricambi hated him for that. They separated the two men and he went from one to the other asking questions.

“What’s your name? You got some business here? What business?”

Ricambi knew better than to even open his mouth.

“What about you, eh, Cucina? Somebody send you a punk? Now, who would that be? Or maybe I should be asking ‘Marazzi.’ He seems to be the man with the answers.”

The cop could get nothing out of the men and when they searched Ricambi there was no payment to find either. The cops told Ricambi to beat it.

Good thing Cucina had not paid him—was his first thought when he got out of there. But it was also bad that Cucina had not paid him, because now he would have to tell Luca everything and all the news was bad or worse.

Little Napoli’s upstairs dining room was reserved for special parties. Tonight that special party was Luca Padrone.

Cucina, in dress clothes and hair slicked back, sat across from him. Padrone gently swirled the wine in his glass.

“Ricambi tells me you tire of our friendship.”

Cucina sputtered but bit back whatever words were there.

“And that saddens me. There are no better friends than good friends. Friends like family.”

Cucina grabbed his glass and took a gulp of wine.

“You know, you’ve got a good place here, Cucina. And it could be a better place if nurtured along in the right way. You know me, you know I think that. But how am I supposed to help you, Tony, if you don’t keep up your end? Look, this is me, Luca. If there’s a problem, we talk, right? We come to an understanding. Now, my boy here pays you a visit and things got kind of ugly. I heard there might even have been some cops involved. Now, that can’t be good for business.”

“I pay regular, Luca, you know I’m good for it. So, I pay Marazzi just like regular and, bang, here comes another one to collect again. We’re close to the bone here. I’ve got expenses. What am I supposed to do, bleed dry? I paid just like always, I don’t know maybe Marazzi kept the money or lost it, I don’t know, I don’t care. That’s just not my problem.” Cucina was on his feet now.

“Well whose problem is it then?” Padrone’s voice was steady.

Cucina fetched for an answer—he couldn’t say what was really in his mind. “I don’t know—someone else’s problem.”

“No, Tony, its our problem; your problem and my problem. When there’s a problem, we take care of it together. You know why?”

Cucina sat back down, crossed his arms solid.

“Because everyone makes a contribution, Tony.”

“And I’ve made mine and for how long? How many years, huh? And did I ever call for anything? I never called. And now look what. I been

ripped and maybe that Marazzi has just punked off with my payment. You're supposed to back me up. Where's even an ounce of what I'm paying in for?"

"Like you're not being looked after here every day? Every day, Tony. What do you think would happen around here? What do you want, Stacher's boys in here?"

"Well maybe I don't know. They charge triple?"

Padrone suppressed a smile at this barb. "Stacher. There was a marriage made in hell, eh? But that won't be forever. My advice: don't put your bets on a marked card."

"You know I didn't mean that."

Padrone swirled the wine in his glass again, but didn't drink.

"It's like this. When you've got a problem, you've got a problem and you want it to go away quiet. No more trouble." Padrone drew a long breath. "So. Best thing—the easiest way this goes—is you do your part like I'm asking you. You lay down the money and let this thing wash away. And it doesn't happen again, I swear."

"Aw hell, what kind of—"

"Oh for Christ sake, Tony, this isn't about you."

"You owe me this!"

"I don't owe you shit."

Some time later, the two men sat facing each other over a long silence and two empty wine bottles. Cucina took an envelope from his vest pocket and placed it on the table. Padrone gestured for Ricambi to take it up. He rapped on the table. Ricambi leapt from his post and ran over. "*Mi dispiace.*" Seeing the envelope, he pocketed it and retreated.

Ricambi was dreaming of a table at the Copa. A regular table. His

table. A martini in one hand, a girl bent on the other. Frank giving him the nod before starting the show.

The waiter arrived with food and more wine for Padrone. Nothing for Ricambi, he knew. Still, things were righter than they had been. Cucina paid and was back in his kitchen, and it looked like Pardone was just going to brood over a late meal alone. He checked his watch — wondering idly when the Late Show started.

Luca Padrone looked down at the *timballi* before him — a peace offering from Cucina. He looked over at Ricambi who was as usual out of it. The kid was worthless, he knew. This could have been avoided. He should not have had to come here. He should never have been on the spot like that with Cucina.

He took up his fork. Maybe Cucina was sharper than he was giving him credit for. A deal made in hell, he thought. The payment was made so that could be smoothed over, but Cucina still had the right of it. One of his own got ripped on Padrone's watch. That fucking Marazzi. And now he was going to have to do something about it—had promised he would do something about it — take care of the problem, he said. Right now he didn't want to think about what that meant. He prodded the *timballi* with his fork. *Drumbeat*, he thought. He put the fork down again. He didn't have the stomach for it.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*by Barry Lees*

Bobby Marazzi closed the glass panelled door behind him and looked around the big office. Filing cabinets along two walls, two desks covered in papers and shelves also covered in papers. Window blinds closed. He switched on the light. It could be a long night looking for what they wanted.

“You look over there,” he said to Bruno Salvatore, who was bleeding slightly from the glass that sliced into his arm as he had reached through the broken window pane. “I will take this side. We want anything that shows a connection between the Local and Gianluca Padrone. I know he had a contact in this office who was feeding him the haulage schedules so we had the pick of the hijacks. It can’t have just been luck that we always hit the jackpot, even in Vegas. Just find something. And don’t bleed on anything.”

Bruno opened the first cabinet and started to flick through the files. Bobby did the same on his side of the room. It was slow progress and they found nothing to make a direct connection between Luca Padrone and the Hauliers union. It was obvious to Bobby though. Danny Cole

had signed off every schedule. He was the only one who new every single shipment. Danny Cole was the local organiser of the National Brotherhood of Hauliers, the big man, and this was the office of the brotherhood; Local 5193.

“It has to be Fat Danny. He is the only one who know what goes out and what comes in. When, where from and where to. No one else knows. He needs the money with his ex bleeding him dry on the alimony. Luca must be lining his pockets for the schedules. A word with the drivers and an easy hoist. Luca can pick the cream, Bobby closed the cabinet.

Bruno looked at Bobby, “Doesn’t help us though does it? And what went wrong last time when you were picked up by the Feds?” He said

“I don’t know but I will find out and if Luca snitched I will kill him,” Bobby smiled at Bruno Salavatore and slid his index finger across his throat.

“He’s a made man Bobby. Soldato. You would have the whole Grimaldo family after you. And me!” Bruno looked at Bobby who just smiled again.

Bobby Marazzi walked over to the desk pushing aside the papers, three ashtrays, coffee cups and and picked up a wooden tray with a handwritten sign on it marked “OUT”. In the tray was a despatch manifest for the morning. Bobby picked it and motioned to Bruno to have a look.

“A truck full of French dresses and lingerie on its way from the East Coast to California, stopped over in Vegas, one night. It’s leaving at 7.00am tomorrow from the Flamingo Road Depot. This is the jackpot, Bruno. This stopover has Luca all over it. I know Luca will be picking this one up. We just need to get there first. The truck is a ’59 Mack B-61. Red. Should be easy to find. The driver will be expecting a stop from

Luca's men and he won't know one hold-up from another. We pick him up straight outside the depot on Flamingo Road and hot tail it out of Vegas. We can make a few bucks on this one and Luca will be pissed." Bobby was grinning ear to ear.

"OK Bobby," said Bruno, "but you know I will be the guy the driver remembers. Blond hair, blue eyes, big guy. I have heard it all before. They connect me and they have you."

"Let me worry about that Sal. Luca is past it and now I know how to muscle in on this little sideline. I don't think the Grimaldo's know about all this hijacking. Luca was always a bit quiet on the hits and I think he gave me to the Feds just to keep it quiet and keep the family out of it. Made man ratting on his family don't look good either. We pick up the truck tomorrow, what is he going to do? Tell the Grimaldo's he blew a hijack they knew nothing about. Hijacking is not their game. It's too easy for the Feds to get involved. Gambling, loan sharking, broads, rackets never leave a witness willing to talk. You take a truck and leave the driver behind the Feds are all over him." Bobby put the manifest in his pocket, took a look around and swept everything off the desk. Bruno pulled the shelves and cabinets over leaving everything on the floor.

"Some poor sap will be cleaning this lot up tomorrow while Fat Danny sweats over his cut." Bobby turned and left the office with Bruno behind.

It was 3 am. The truck was leaving in 4 hours and they needed to have a look around the depot on Flamingo Road. They walked to the Strip and turned left, walked past The Sands casino, opposite The New Frontier. There were tourists everywhere and girls looking for every family guy with a few dollars to spare. On another night Bruno would be looking to get laid

"Hey Bobby, see Frankie and Dino over there?" Bruno Salvatore had

only been in Vegas for two years and still enjoyed seeing the stars. He had grown up in the slums of New Jersey and worked for his father in the family butchers. A bit of excitement and movie stars led him to Vegas. He had been to the movies to see *Oceans 11* at least 5 times and loved everything about the Rat Pack life. One day he would be in the movies; he just needed a break. Bobby had took one look at him and saw the start of his own family. Bruno as his caporegime with 20 guys, made men, reporting to him. Bobby the big boss. Don Marazzi sounded good.

They carried on down the Strip past The Jewel, Casino and Hotel and legitimate front for the Grimaldo crime family, and just hit Las Vegas Boulevard South before they turned into Flamingo Road and past The Flamingo Casino itself. Across the road it looked like a new joint was being built. Bobby wondered just how many casinos Las Vegas could hold before the money ran out. Surely there weren't that many saps around. Bobby's girlfriend Carla Morelli, ran a number of scams on the tourists and he had met her when she tried one on him just after he arrived from Kansas. He was green in those days but he learned quickly and soon came to the attention of Gianluca Padrone who saw his talents could be used by the family and in a private capacity. Being able to drive a big truck came in useful.

The depot was surrounded by high walls and wooden gate. This was the only exit so the Mack had to be coming through there. Bobby looked around and saw nowhere to hide but that was not going to be a problem.

"Hell Bruno. We just wait outside the gates until he is out and flag him down. He will stop, he is expecting it, and we drive off into the desert. No witnesses. I know Luca's men will be a couple of miles down the road. That is the usual plan. Out of sight, in the dessert. Only this time I drive straight through them and watch them scatter. You OK Sal?" Bobby looked at the big guy and knew this was going to be a good



day.

Bobby and Bruno walked on for half a mile and then sank down at the side of the road leaning into the scrub.

“We have two hours to kill before the truck comes out. Let’s take a break. Bruno was asleep in seconds but Bobby was wide awake. He needed to stay alert if this was going to work. The sounds of Vegas at night mixed with the sounds of the desert, not too far away. Bobby thought about the future. A casino of his own, legit, maybe. Carla with a ring on her finger and a couple of kids. Visits to his mother and father back in Kansas. Happy families. Maybe, maybe not.

It was exactly 7:00am when the gates opened at the depot. Bobby and Bruno out of site each side of the entrance. The Big Red Mack B-61 pulled through the gates and turned left onto Flamingo Road. Bobby looked at the truck admiring the gleaming silver grill with the Mack emblem leaping forward. Bobby loved big trucks and in another life would have had his own driving interstate, free as a bird. He jumped onto the footplate and smiled at the driver motioning him to slow down and stop.

“What you doing here. Luca said out in the Desert,” the driver looked at Bobby as the truck came to a halt. Bruno climbed in beside him and pulled out his revolver.

“Hey man, no need for that. I know what gives,” said the driver.

“Get out of the truck” said Bruno. The driver shrugged and opened the door as Bobby stepped off the the footplate, and climbed out.

“Sorry Joe. Change of plan. We need to rough you up a little to make it look good. I am sure Luca will see you are OK.” Bobby hit him with his bare fists, left and right and the guy dropped to his knees. A kick in the ribs and a stamp on his outstretched hand had the guy screaming.

Bruno sat in the cab and watched, felt sorry for the guy but he would mend. Nothing too bad.

Bobby left the guy on the floor and climbed into the drivers seat, shifted the gears and set off with a judder.

“Bruno, you now own more dresses than Lauren Bacall! What the hell are we going to do with a truck load of French dresses, knickers and brassieres out in the dessert.” Bobby, eyes on the road, smiled, then laughed. “We did it Sal. We fucking did it.”

Bobby carried on driving and turned to Bruno, “What are we going to do first?”

“Bobby, I am gonna get me a nice suit.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*by Astrid Stevens*

Marazzi pulled up the car outside the El Cortez Hotel and Casino, and stepped out into the soft spring air. On a day like this, you could walk from the Strip to downtown Fremont Street, which would be unimaginable in the ferocious heat of summer. At least, you could walk if it weren't so far, or if you didn't mind being seen on foot. Marazzi had often trudged those several miles before, back in the old days, when he was trying to make a name for himself and get in with the Grimaldo family, but now that he was his own man, he had an image to uphold. And that image wasn't of some loser who walked places. He'd chosen the venue for this meeting carefully, making sure that it was as far away as possible from the Jewel and from the relentless eyes of Frankie Dice and his made men, but not so far that observers might suspect he was up to something out of the ordinary. He didn't want to draw attention to himself. Anyway, he belonged here. The new casinos on the strip may be big and flashy, but downtown was the real Vegas, and Marazzi was developing a few interests in this neighbourhood on his own account. Alcohol and off-track betting, mostly, with some ice-making and

cigarette machines thrown in for good measure, and he was beginning to edge into more lucrative involvement. Starting to make good money, too. Enough to convince him that he could make it on his own, if he stayed out of the way of the Grimaldo mob. He had no commercial interest in the El Cortez, though. At least, not yet. If he had to meet an FBI man on neutral, unincriminating ground in Vegas, this was as good a place as any.

As Marazzi stepped through the arched verandah of the hacienda-style building, he paused briefly to wipe the dusty chocolate and cream of each two-tone brogue on the back of the opposite trouser leg — first the right foot, then the left. Shoes make the man, he thought. When Padrone had first taken him on as an enforcer, and he had some spare dollars in his pocket, one of the first things he had bought was this pair of shoes. He thought of them as his lucky shoes — a symbol of everything he had become already, and hoped to become in the future. Reassured that the ornately hole-punched leather uppers were gleaming, he straightened his collar and tie, smoothed his hair, and stepped into the dark Spanish interior, making his way through to the Coffee House.

In a corner table, with a good vantage over the room, Gallagher rose to greet him. He nodded curtly. “You came, then. I thought you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, I came.” Marazzi sneered at him. “Nice suit.”

Gallagher shrugged, and sat down again. “It’s a suit. It does the job.”

“Yeah? Well, Cary Grant, you ain’t. You look like shit in it. How much did it cost you? Five bucks? Six? Doesn’t J. Edgar Hoover pay you enough to dress properly?”

Gallagher shrugged again. “We’re not here to talk about me.”

“Well, maybe we *should* talk about you. Like what you think you’re playing at, hassling my girl all the time to get at me while I’m stuck in

hospital and can't stop you. Like turning up to meet me in a disrespectful outfit like that. Here!" Marazzi pulled a wad of banknotes from the inside pocket of his own sharply tailored suit jacket, peeled some from under the gold money-clip and slapped them onto the table. "Buy yourself a new suit."

Gallagher ignored the money. "Are you going to sit down, or not?"

"I'll sit," said Marazzi, "but that's all I'll do." He tucked the remaining bundle of notes back into his pocket and sat down gracelessly.

A waitress rushed over immediately, and handed each of them a red-and black-printed menu, the front adorned with line drawings of a charcoal-broiled steak and a pan of skillet-fried chicken, each marked at \$1.95. "What can I get you gentlemen to drink?"

Gallagher asked for an iced tea.

"Buttermilk, please" said Marazzi, but as the girl turned to leave he interrupted her. "Wait! We'll order the food now." And he opened the menu, scanning the columns quickly while the girl eyed the vast sum of money on the table nervously. A typewritten blue insert was attached with brass fasteners to the thicker paper of the menu, and he flicked that up to inspect the dishes described beneath it before opting for the menu of the day after all. "I'll have the Dinnerette, at a dollar seventy," he said. "The baked spaghetti with chicken livers Caruso. It comes with whipped potatoes, buttered carrots, rolls and butter, and coffee, doesn't it?" He read the list of accompaniments slowly from the blue sheet.

The girl nodded, "Yes, sir, it does." She turned to Gallagher. "And what would you like, sir?"

Gallagher growled. "Nothing, thank you. Just the iced tea."

Marazzi slammed his fist down on the table, startling the waitress, who took a step backwards. "Scared you can't afford it? Don't worry, I'll pay."

Gallagher shook his head. “Honestly, no, I’m not hungry. It’s only five o’clock.”

“Yeah, well, that’s because they don’t serve food here until five, and it’ll be busy later on and I don’t want to be seen meeting you if it can be helped. Order something and eat. I’m not eating on my own.”

Gallagher flipped the menu open then closed it again. “I’m not hungry.”

“Try the spaghetti Caruso. It’s got mushrooms, chicken livers, marsala... I insist.”

His companion handed the menu back to the waitress, looking up at her. “I’ll just have a hot roast beef sandwich, please.”

“That comes with potato *du jour* and gravy, sir, is that all right for you?”

“However it comes is fine by me.”

Marazzi snorted. “Discerning, aren’t you? Don’t you want to know what you’re getting for your eighty-five cents?” He turned to the waitress. “What is the potato *du jour* today?”

“Whipped, sir.”

Marazzi looked at Gallagher. “Is that OK for you? Answer the lady.”

Gallagher nodded impassively, and the waitress smiled with apparent relief.

“Coming right up, gentlemen.”

They sat in silence until their drinks arrived, each trying to out-stare the other. It was Marazzi who caved in first.

“So tell me what you mean by going to the Jewel and sending me messages through Carla? What’s she done to you that you have to put her job on the line like that? You think maybe Frankie Dice likes having G-men round the place, talking to his staff? Like some sort of government-sponsored decoration? You think maybe the Portland crew

don't pull weight around here, too? Grimaldo's reach in Vegas is more than just Frank Corozzo, you know. They can bring in others, and it isn't in your interest or mine to push them that way."

Gallagher held up his hands in a brief gesture of surrender, then started fiddling with the cutlery again, turning a fork over and over. "I am always sorry to have to involve innocent parties. But Miss Morelli is not quite innocent is she? She's a local girl who has chosen to work for the mob. Twice, in fact. She works at the Jewel Hotel and Casino, and she... associates..." (he emphasised the word meaningfully), "with you."

"So?"

"So you're a hard man to get hold of, and she's generally somewhere to be found in the Jewel. I can talk to her in the casino or at the reception desk without it looking odd. I could be just another guest asking for advice on Vegas. And knowing that she knows you..."

"But you're not just another guest, are you? You're a Fed."

Gallagher smiled for the first time. "Yes, I'm a Fed. A Fed who has been looking for you. I want you to help me break the Grimaldo connection. You know, tell me stuff, name names, give me dates. Anything to help me put them away."

It was Marazzi's turn to stare in silence. "You want me to squeal on the capo? On the boss? No way!"

"But why not? You've split off from them now. You have your own concerns here in Vegas, and I hear you're starting to make an impression. You don't need Luca Padrone any more, or Frankie Dice for that matter. I could turn a blind eye to your little enterprises."

The waitress arrived with their food, and the two men sat back and stopped talking as she set the plates down in front of them. "Enjoy your meals," she said, and walked away.

Marazzi tucked his napkin into his shirt collar, and started eating

without looking up from his pasta. Gallagher laid his napkin over his knee, poked his sandwich with his fork, then laid the fork down and pushed his plate away. He waited patiently until Marazzi had finished mopping up the last remaining juices with his bread roll.

“That was good,” said Marazzi, pushing his chair a little further away from the table and removing his napkin. He wiped his hands and mouth on the red gingham cloth, then folded it neatly and set it beside his empty plate. “The answer’s no.”

Gallagher considered his response carefully. “I thought it might be,” he said. “But then I reasoned that you wouldn’t have thought it through properly, and that once all the facts were in front of you, you would certainly reconsider.”

“I won’t reconsider. I’m no traitor.”

“Perhaps not. But it’s one thing being loyal when you’re free and at large, and quite another when you’re locked behind bars for, say, let me think... selling illegal alcohol, perhaps. Or extorting protection money from the Silver Nugget or the Golden Slipper. Or that artichoke racket you have going on with Antonio’s Italian Charcoal Broiler.” He tapped his finger lightly and rapidly on the table, waiting for a reply.

“You can’t pin anything on me.”

“Oh, I think I can. Maybe not immediately, but with a little help from, say, Miss Morelli, or that lovely wife of Padrone’s — what’s her name again? That’s it, Jenny. Lovely girl. No children, you know, which must be hard in a big Italian family like theirs, and she left all her relatives behind in Portland when Padrone moved to Vegas, so she’s quite lonely. Likes to chat.”

“They don’t know nothing.”

Gallagher leant forward. “They know more than you imagine. And, let’s say that I can be quite persuasive.”



“Leave the women out of it. And stop sending messages through Carla. I will not allow you to risk her life any more than you have already.”

“Then what do you suggest I do?” Gallagher flexed his fingers. “I, or perhaps I should say ‘we’, because clearly I have the support of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in this venture... we could ensure that you have another little stay in hospital. Would that convince you? Nothing so clean as the gunshot wound that kept you there while I chatted to your beautiful lady friend, but nothing quite fatal either. Disfigurement, maybe, or some sort of crippling. I don’t know which would be the most... efficacious. What do you think?”

“I think you’d have to find me first. And if I don’t want to be found, I don’t fancy your chances. Las Vegas isn’t the only city with opportunities.”

“But you’ll run into the Mafia wherever you go. One branch or another. If you run, I’ll make sure that every major Sicilian family in every state hears a rumour that you’ve spilled the beans and informed on Grimaldo’s crew. They won’t know it’s a lie, but they won’t be impressed, I can tell you. I would go so far as to say that they would take immediate action, both punitive and preventative. Indeed, if I could find a betting joint in this city that wasn’t riddled with corruption, I’d lay odds that you would soon find yourself wearing concrete at the bottom of Lake Tahoe.”

“I can look after myself.”

“To tell you the truth, it seems to be something of a miracle that you aren’t already swimming with the fishes.”

“Perhaps because we are in the middle of a desert,” grunted Marazzi.

Gallagher laughed coldly. “They already think you’re a rat, you know. Oh, I know it’s just the one corrupt little clan at the moment, but even

so, it's still only a matter of time before the Grimaldo family get rid of you. I... we... can offer you protection. Help to keep you alive a bit longer. Maybe even a lot longer. Think of all that extra time you will have to spend with Miss Morelli. Maybe she might become Mrs Marazzi in due course. Think of the bambini, Bobby, bouncing on your knee while your lovely, stylish wife cooks you arancini and caponata every day."

"It's Mr Marazzi to you, Gallagher."

"So, *Mr Marazzi*..." (that sarcastic emphasis again). "The big question that I have to ask is why you won't tell us what we want to know. Surely you want revenge? Isn't that reason enough? Ask yourself what loyalty you really have to these people, and I think you'll find that you owe them nothing. Revenge, Mr Marazzi, isn't that a wonderful thought? Vengeance, and justice, and satisfaction beyond anything you have ever experienced before." He leant forward over the table, his green eyes shining with fervour, but Marazzi shook his head slowly.

"You wouldn't understand, Gallagher. It's a family thing. I'll never betray family. It's a code of honour, for all of us."

Gallagher smiled wryly. "So help me find a way in, then. A way that doesn't involve family."

Marazzi fell silent. Gallagher's finger started tapping again. The waitress cleared their plates, and brought Marazzi's coffee.

"There might be someone...", he started.

Gallagher sat up straight, immediately alert. "Yes?"

"I don't know if this is the right thing to do."

"Does it feel right, Marazzi? Does it feel like this is your big chance?"

Marazzi stood up, bumping the table as he did so and sloshing coffee out of his untouched cup and onto the banknotes that neither man had glanced at since they were first flung down.

“All right, I’ll do it. But you must promise me that you will never talk to Carla again.” His voice was raised, and people in the now-busy restaurant turned to stare.

“Shh now,” said Gallagher quietly. “Remember that we are being discreet.”

Marazzi bent down towards him, whispering. “Someone who isn’t family... You might find it worth your while talking to Danny Cole. He’s a union man, in the National Brotherhood of Hauliers. From Chicago originally, I think. Does a bit of driving for Frankie Dice, and doesn’t ask questions about what is in the boxes he loads in the back of his truck. But don’t tell him I gave you his name. If anyone finds out that I have spoken to you, we’ll all be dead.”

And with that, Marazzi turned and walked briskly out of the El Cortez and into the fading light on the street, without looking back.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*by Matt Tobin*

Agent Gallagher climbed out of his car and tugged on his suit cuffs to straighten the sleeves. It was a subconscious gesture, born of his unsure rookie agent days and ingrained through many years in the FBI. As his first partner used to say when he was guiding the rookie on the finer points of agenting:

*If you can't think like an agent, at least look like an agent.*

Of course, as was always the case in the old days, his partner was on the take and received his suits for free from the local mafia boss's tailor, but the habit had stuck with Gallagher regardless. And so, he straightened his suit as he stepped out of the car, an expensive fitted Italian suit that he didn't get for free from a mob tailor, but instead paid five hundred dollars to get made and more money again for dry-cleaning and pressing.

In his heart of hearts, he knew two things about his suit: one, that all the money he paid for the tailoring and pressing and dry-cleaning made its way to the mafia anyway, firstly because it was an *Italian* suit, and secondly because everything in this town ended up in the mob's hands

one way or another. The second thing he knew about his suit involved his mother's disappointment, and that was even worse: *looking fine at other people's weddings was no substitute for looking fine at your own.*

He may have had no wife, no kids, but he had his suit, and he looked sharp, and he damned well looked like an agent as he locked his car and wrapped his eyes in dark glasses and strode to Danny Cole's door.

In the end, you can obsess over small details like suits as much as you like, but it is no substitute for a pleasing narrative. What he needed right now was to think less about suits and more about finding a doorbell. That, and how to turn a unionist who was probably already in the pocket of the mob into an informant on them instead.

As it turned out, he didn't need the former, because the door was already wide open and filled with the dark blue silhouette of uniformed constabulary.

Gallagher stepped onto the porch, and one of them nudged the other with his elbow.

"Nice suit," he muttered to his partner.

The older, more heavily set partner stepped forward.

"What do the suits want with a dime-a-dozen break in?" he asked.

Gallagher flashed his badge.

"Agent Gallagher, FBI," he said with the pride of someone who chooses to take pride in such things. "What's going on here?"

"We are responding to a call about a break in," he said, looking over his notes. "A Mr Daniel Cole made the call. We were just questioning him now."

Gallagher stepped past the officers into the hallway, where Danny Cole was still recounting the evening's events. Gallagher introduced himself with another flourish that eventually finished with him straightening his tie.

“Agent Gallagher, Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Gallagher removed his sunglasses and looked to the room off the right side of the hallway. The floor and lounge were covered with dirt and broken glass where the burglars had thrown a potted plant through the window. The kitchen further down the hallway was undisturbed.

“Why don’t you wait for me in the kitchen,” Gallagher said. “I will join you shortly, and you can tell me what happened.”

Gallagher turned his attention back to the officers.

“Vegas PD, I assume?”

“Yes sir, Sergeant Richards,” he said before indicating his partner. “And this is Constable Nicowski. I assure you we can handle this ourselves. It is hardly a matter for the bureau.”

“I don’t care about the break in, Mr Cole is of interest in another matter.”

“Would you care to tell us what this *other matter* is?”

“I would not,” Gallagher said. “I don’t want to act like *that guy* who steps in and throws bureau authority and jurisdiction about the place, but I am that guy, and I can act like him too if I have to. So let’s cooperate on this and stay out of each other’s way. I will take a statement about the break-in while I talk to Mr Cole about the other matter. You and your partner have a look around, see what’s taken, find any evidence left behind.”

Sergeant Richards cleared his throat.

“Right, we’ll start here then,” he said, indicating the broken window. “Take a look at the window, they might have cut themselves on the way in.”

Danny Cole was sitting at the kitchen table when Gallagher found him.

“Alright, Mr Cole, why don’t you tell me what happened.”

“Like I said to the others, I found the window like that when I arrived home.” Cole looked suspiciously at Gallagher. “Why is the FBI responding to a break in, anyway?”

“We will get to that. What time did you arrive home?”

“Let’s see, what’s the time now? I came home, saw the window. So I called the cops right away. It took them maybe half an hour to get here, another five minutes after that before you arrived.”

“And did you see anyone when you got home? No one hanging around?”

“Not that I saw.”

“What was taken?”

“My radio, some cash, a gold watch that my wife gave me as a birthday gift. Small things, easy to carry and easy to pawn. I haven’t had a chance to look around completely.”

“In half an hour before the police arrived?” Gallagher said. “You didn’t get the chance to look around?”

“I didn’t know if they were still here,” Cole said. “I didn’t want to disturb them and get knocked on my head for the trouble. So I made plenty of noise, and gave them a chance to go out the back door if they wanted to. No one did.”

“A big union guy like you, I think you could handle yourself if it came to it.”

“How do you know I’m union?” Cole said. “Why are you here?”

“Had any disagreements or run-ins recently, anyone who might bare a grudge?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I had to step in and settle a dispute a couple of the lads were having down the union branch, but nothing that doesn’t happen every time you get a few hotheads, a few beers, and some

misdirected anger.”

“And there’s nothing else that comes to mind?”

“Not really,” Cole said. “Not unless you tell me what you’re angling at, at least. Its just a break in, probably just some kids. I called the cops so I could get a police report for the insurance claim. What does any of this have to do with the FBI?”

“I have a proposal for you,” Gallagher said. “One that you will find very hard to turn down.”

Before he could continue, Gallagher heard a kerfuffle in the other room, and the scratchy buzz of a police radio as information was conveyed back and forth to the police station. Moments later, Sergeant Richards appeared at the door, a cardboard box in his arms.

“Is there a Mrs Cole?” he said.

“Divorced,” Cole said. “Five years ago.”

“A mistress, then?”

Sergeant Richards dropped the cardboard box onto the kitchen counter and picked up a picture frame.

“Is this her? Your mistress?”

“That’s Joan, my ex-wife.”

“Excuse me Sergeant, but how is this relevant?” Gallagher said. “I would appreciate it if you could leave me to take Mr Cole’s statement alone. I will give you any relevant information at the end.”

“I’m afraid not, sir,” Sergeant Richards said. “We found women’s clothing in his bedroom.”

Constable Nicowski appeared at the doorway carrying a second cardboard box and several garments draped over his shoulder. Cole’s eyes fixed on the red dress on the constable’s arm, and Gallagher watched as first his shoulder, and then each successive muscle in his arm tensed. On the table, Cole’s flat hands curled and tightened towards a



fist. The chair, already under strain from Cole's ample girth, groaned under his shifting wait and clenching sphincter. The officers appeared not to notice his reddening face, but the bureau had warned of Cole's appetite for violence during his Chicago picket line days, and there was something in Cole's nature that suggested to Gallagher that he needed to defuse the situation quickly.

"I'm sure they just belong to his ex-wife," Gallagher said.

Nicowski dropped the second box next to the first, and looked at the picture in his sergeant's hands.

"A fine woman like that?" Nicowski said. "They aren't exactly women's sizes."

He grinned, briefly, as he stretched the red silk out to its full breadth, pressing it against his body and stepping half a dance. A single movement left Cole's chair tumbling backwards in one direction and a startled constable lifted upwards in the other.

He hit the wall hard, and Cole pushed the advantage to pin him against the wall and press a forearm to his throat.

"Give it to me," he breathed.

The dress fell from the constable's hand, cascading and folding on the tiled floor. Cole, too, released his grip, backing off until the constable could swing his knee hard into his groin.

Cole crumpled to the ground, somewhat less elegantly than the red dress that lay beside him.

The exchange lasted little more than a second, barely enough time for the twitchy-fingered sergeant to reach for the gun on his hip. Gallagher shook his head, but the sergeant drew the gun regardless and pointed it at the crumpled Cole.

"You've had your turn," he said. "You have a nice suit, but he just assaulted a man in uniform, and that puts me in charge. Now, constable,

please inform Mr Cole that we are arresting him for assaulting a police officer *and* for receiving stolen goods.”

“What stolen goods?” Gallagher said. “Mr Cole is an important FBI witness, and I am not about to lose him to your petty revenge over a minor altercation.”

“We have already established that the clothing doesn’t belong to anyone here, and the assault that —”

“Me,” Cole interjected. “The clothes belong to me.”

“Yours!” Nicowski sneered, still smarting and embarrassed by his loss of face. “Like wearing pretty things do you?”

Cole remained on the floor, defeated and silent, fuelling Nicowski’s sense of power and confirming that he had found a cutting edge. He took the dress off the floor, pinching the silk in his fingers and rubbing them across the material.

“I can see why this one is your favourite,” he said. He threw the dress at Cole. “Put it on.”

“I hardly think this is appropriate,” Gallagher said.

“He’s our suspect now,” the sergeant said. “I’ll decide what’s appropriate, not you. If Mr Cole wants to prove the garments aren’t stolen, it seems only reasonable that he be asked to demonstrate that the garments fit him.”

The constable gestured at Cole with his gun.

“Put the dress on,” he said.

Gallagher thought about reaching for his own gun, but the constable had already drawn his, and adding a third could only make things worse. If he was going to turn Cole into his informant, he needed this business with the uniforms resolved, and allowing the constable his humiliation ritual may be the quickest way forward.

Cole looked to him for assistance, but Gallagher could only shrug and

nod. The bureau taught him to take advantage of every situation, and perhaps a downbeat and humiliated Danny Cole would be easier to turn. At the very least, he'd have something to hold over him later if Cole developed doubt.

Cole lifted the dress towards his head. Nicowski stopped him.

"Not like that," Nicowski said. "You couldn't wear a pretty dress like that over ugly union clothes."

Gallagher remained silent as the sergeant indulged his constable's bullying thirst. Cole removed his shirt and trousers at police gunpoint, and then slipped the dress over his head.

"Very pretty," Nicowski said.

He stepped forward, kissed Cole on the forehead, grabbed two fistfuls of silk, and ripped a tear in the dress from the neck down to his waist.

"Now you look just like the filthy tranny hookers on the make."

"Right then," Sergeant Richards said. "Cuff him, and arrest Mr Cole for assaulting a police officer and receiving stolen goods."

"But the dress is mine," Cole said.

"That dress, yes," Richards said, "but that was hanging in the closet, we knew it was yours all along. Nicowski just wanted to see you wear it. It is this box here that we have already confirmed as stolen from a truck two days ago."

"I have never seen that box before," Cole said. "It must have been planted. You bastards are setting me up!"

"Right, of course, didn't you notice us respond to your call with a whopping great box under our arm?"

Under the table, Gallagher reached for his gun and unclipped it from his hip, just in case.

"You can't take Cole," Gallagher said. "He is my witness."

"We don't want to step on the toes of the FBI," Richards said, "but

the bureau can't step on ours either. He has stolen goods in his house, he assaulted a police officer, and unless you are arresting him yourself on a federal offence, you have no right to stop us hauling him down to the station in his pretty little dress."

"But the box isn't mine," Cole said. "I've never seen it. The burglars must have done it."

Constable Nicowski snorted.

"Of course, they stole it off the back of one of your union trucks, and broke into your house with a gift to update your wardrobe."

"Think about it," Cole said. "Why would I have called the police if I knew I had stolen goods in my house?"

"I can only assume you share the same low opinion of Vegas police as Mr FBI does," Richards said. "It doesn't matter either way. You're under arrest, and there is nothing either of you can do about it."

But there was something Gallagher could do about it. By the time the officers bundled Cole into a car and arrived back at the police station, Gallagher had already been on the phone with his boss, who had in turn called the Las Vegas police chief and the officer's direct captain. As soon as Richards and Nicowski arrived back at the station, they were berated for half an hour and then sent to find appropriate large-size clothing for Danny Cole to change into.

Gallagher left it an hour for emotions to settle, and then strode into the station, straightening his tie and tugging on his cuffs. Richards and Nicowski remained out of sight as he was led to the interview room where Danny Cole was waiting.

"I assume I have you to thank for the sudden change in circumstance?" Cole said.

"I made a few calls," Gallagher said. "I see you've found some new

clothes to wear.”

“Clothes, yes. I take it all this is going to cost me?”

“It’s not going to cost you, Danny, it’s going to help you. We are reliably informed that your position at the Haulier’s Union has given you access to information about certain mafia activities. And so, rather than lock you away for the stolen garments that will probably trace back to the mob, and the inevitable bribes and kickbacks that definitely will, we are going to allow you to pass said information on to us in exchange for your freedom.”

“I’m not stupid enough to get involved in mob business. And if I was, I wouldn’t be stupid enough to talk about it and get myself killed either. A dodgy tipoff and a planted box? You don’t have anything.”

“What we do have, Danny, is a mutual interest in not letting your secret out. Now I was going to try all manner of things to convince you it is the right thing to do. But the truth is, now I don’t have to. Which is unfortunate, because the carrot was going to be much more interesting and worthwhile than the stick.”

“You’re a bastard,” Cole said. “You’re worse than those other two. At least they had the decency to wear their hatred in plain view.”

“I don’t have any hatred, Danny. I couldn’t care less what you do or how you dress. But clearly, you do. Otherwise you wouldn’t have reacted the way you did when that goon was parading your dress around. And I wouldn’t be a good agent if I didn’t take every opportunity that presented itself. So here’s the deal: you give me the name of your contact, and all those open minded people at the Haulier’s Union won’t get wind of your proclivities before they elect their next leader. The elections are soon, I believe?”

Cole slumped forward and held his head in his hands.

“Fucking bastard,” he said. “They’ll kill me.”

“They’ll never know it was you. All I need is a name.”

“Luca,” Cole said. “Luca Padrone. He works for Frankie Dice.”

Gallagher banged on the wall until he heard footsteps running down the hallway. The door burst open, replaced in its frame by a panting Constable Nicowski.

“Get this man his dress,” Gallagher said. “He’s going home.”

He dropped a fifty dollar note on the table.

“Here, get yourself something nice to replace the ripped silk. I’d suggest something sapphire, match it against your eyes.”

Gallagher looked again at Nicowski.

“And I don’t want to hear or read another word about Mr Cole’s clothing choices again, is that clear? Not a word. Like it never happened. Collective amnesia from every person involved as soon as they leave the room. Just like every other time we have a day like this.”

He stood up, straightened his tie, and tugged on his cuffs.

“If anyone wants to talk about clothing,” he said, “then they can talk about my suit.”

They usually did, anyway.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*by Beth Cutter*

A crash and a muddle of voices shouting jolted Luca Padrone awake. He thrashed in the bed, fighting to get free of the covers, to get to his feet. Men yelled, heavy footsteps pounded down the hallway, he heard Jenny scream! He had to get to the gun in the drawer across the room-

The door slammed against the wall. A bulky silhouette burst into the room. "Police! Freeze! I've got him!"

"What the hell?" Padrone finally managed to drag the blanket free of his legs. He started to stand up.

"I said freeze!" The man rushed toward him. "Move again and I'll shoot you!"

Two more bodies hurried in, and then light flooded the room. Padrone squinted, but it was a couple seconds before his dazzled eyes could make out that the intruders were dressed in blue uniforms. And they all held revolvers pointed straight at him.

"I got him, Lieutenant," the cop standing right beside his bed said.

A fourth man walked into the room. "Good work, Marston." Unlike the others he was in plain clothes.

Padrone was wide awake by now. He saw the cops were keyed up, their faces bright with excitement. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, but was careful not to move except for looking around.

“It means you’re under arrest,” Marston said.

“What? What d’you mean? What for?” *Always act surprised.* Practically the first words of advice his mentor had given him.

The man in plain clothes gave him a hard look. “Racketeering. Marston, get him up, get him dressed. Pat him and the clothes down first, just in case.”

“Luca! Luca! What’s going on?” He saw his wife just outside the door, the pale cream of her nightgown seeming to glow in contrast to the drab blue of the men.. She was reaching towards him, trying to push past the cops. One cop elbowed her so hard she staggered back out of sight.

Padrone shot to his feet. “Nobody treats my wife that way!” Before he could take two steps the cops were on him.

“Stand still!”

Marston’s revolver was shoved hard against his belly. Padrone froze.

“He’s right.” Another man entered the room. He was in plain clothes, too, but unlike the police lieutenant’s rumpled jacket, this man was sharply tailored. “There’s no need to rough up the woman.”

The lieutenant snorted. “Probably no better than a common streetwalker.” Padrone clenched his fists. No one called his wife a whore and got away with it. Even if he was a cop. Before he could do anything the lieutenant had turned his head toward the door. “Adams! Get Mrs. Padrone back to her room and keep her there. Gently,” he added with a sneer.

“Jenny!” Padrone shouted. “Let Frankie know!”

One of the cops holding his arms said, “What, you can’t wait till we give you your phone call?” and another cop snickered.



“I suggest you stop wasting time.” The lieutenant looked him up and down. “Ten minutes from now you’re going to be down at headquarters. It’s up to you whether you’ll still be wearing your jammies.”

“I’ve never heard of Tragett’s.”

“No? How about Holliston Jewelry?”

“I’ve never heard of Holliston Jewelry.” Padrone’s voice was flat and calm. He was smiling inwardly. He could stonewall like this forever. It had only been an hour or so, and the cops were already looking frustrated.

“Lerner and Brothers?”

“I’ve never heard of Lerner and Brothers.”

“How about the Cartier in Boulder City? Or are you going to claim you’ve never heard of Cartier?”

“No, not at all. I’ve been there, in fact.” Padrone let his lips curve. “That’s where I bought my wife’s wedding ring.”

Lieutenant Green slammed his fists down onto the table. “You think this is funny?” He leaned down and shoved his face into Padrone’s. “All those stores were robbed in just the past three months. And we know it was your crew that did it.”

“Yeah?” Padrone shrugged. “My grandmother knew that when a bird flew into a house, someone who lived there would die.”

“Oh, we don’t just know it. We can prove it.” Green straightened back up. He picked up a manilla folder that was lying on the table and casually flipped through the pages for a few seconds. Then he smiled at Padrone. “So, you don’t know anything about retail jewelry stores? How are you on wholesalers? Does the name Alajajian mean anything to you?”

That sent a jolt though Padrone. That slimy fucker! He’d known he shouldn’t be trusted. What was he, Armenian? Who ever heard of an

Armenian gangster? He fought to keep his face unmoved. "I don't know anyone called Alaja-- drian."

"That's funny. He says he knows you. And it's not just his word." Green flipped another page. "And then there's the driver who made the deliveries and ...." He smiled and set the folder back down. "Are you sure your memory isn't getting clearer?"

"I don't mean to intrude, but don't you think this might be a good point to give Mr. Padrone some time to think things over?"

It was the man in the sharp suit. He had been simply standing in the corner for the past hours, saying nothing at all. Padrone had almost forgotten he was there.

For a moment Lt. Green and the man locked gazes, then Lt. Green nodded. "Perhaps you're right. C'mon, Joe," he tapped the other cop on the shoulder, "let's go get something to eat."

Padrone watched as the two men left, then looked at the other man who was still standing in the corner. "Aren't you hungry," he asked sarcastically.

The other man ignored that. "I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Special Agent Joseph Gallagher of the FBI."

Huh. Padrone looked him over again. I bet he wants to be Eliot Ness. He's got the hair, and certainly dresses the part. That weak chin would never stand up to Capone, though. He smiled.

"Something amuses you?"

Padrone let his smile widen. "Nice suit," was all he said.

Gallagher hesitated a moment. "You are in serious trouble," he said. He walked over to the table and sat down across from Padrone, carefully hiking his trousers to preserve the crease. "They have enough evidence to convince a jury, no matter how good your lawyer is." He cocked his head. "Or do you even have a lawyer now that Thompson has met with

misfortune.”

“Like there’s a shortage of mouthpieces in the world,” Padrone scoffed. “Every other jewboy is a lawyer.”

“But, as I said, that doesn’t matter if the evidence is overwhelming.”

“There’s no evidence against me. There can’t be.”

“What you mean is, there are no eyewitnesses that *you know of*. What about the little guys? The ones on the bottom, the ones who matter so little you don’t even notice them? The problem with rising in the world, Padrone, in any organization, of any kind, is that the higher you are the easier you are seen by those down below.”

His voice was calm, assured, knowing. Padrone felt something squirm in his guts.

“And circumstantial evidence counts, too. Little things, but they add up in a juror’s eye,” Gallagher went on. “Pile them up, one by one by one, and they add up to, what? Twenty years? Twenty five?”

Padrone was silent. *All those years.... No! It wouldn’t happen.*

“Maybe even thirty? How old will you be when they let you out? What sort of life will be left for you? An ex-con in his seventies? Are your compadres going to be waiting to welcome you back? You certainly won’t be stepping back into management. Will your wife still be waiting there to take care of you? Hell, will you even live long enough to see freedom?”

Padrone refused to say anything.

“On the other hand, it doesn’t have to be that way. They have you cold, but it’s not like they have a huge hard on for you. They’d be happy to trade you away for a chance at Frank Corrozo, or someone else of his level. You’ve been running with the mob at some level since you were seventeen. You’ve got to know where a lot of bodies are buried. A few months spent testifying and then a nice, safe new life is better than

rotting out the rest of your life in a cell, isn't it?"

His hands were clenched rock hard. "I am not a rat," he gritted out.

Gallagher looked at him for a moment. "It's a major decision," he said. "I think you need to give it serious thought. Well, you'll be spending the rest of the night in the cells here. What else is there to do but think?"

"I will never be a rat."

"Never say never." Gallagher stood up. "You'll be processed and released in the morning. You can go back to your life. For a little while. I strongly suggest you use that time well, because we'll pick you up again soon enough. We'll have another little talk, you and I, and if you have any smarts you'll have a different answer for me then."

"Leather wallet with thirty four dollars, sixty three cents change, keys, and a plastic comb." The desk sergeant dumped the contents of the envelope onto the counter between them.

Padrone scooped the lot up and dropped it into his side pocket and started to turn away. Then he swung back and sneered at the cop. "I guess I should count the money, shouldn't I?"

But the man, a running-to-beef guy with thinning hair and a florid face just gazed at him blandly. "See you again sometime."

Padrone snorted and walked toward the door. No one had come for him. Of course, he hadn't needed to post bail. Still. He made his way through the handful of people scattered about the lobby. When he shoved through the door he stepped out into a gloriously sunny spring day. He started down the steps to the sidewalk, glancing around for a taxi.

"Over here, Padrone!" someone called.

It was Tommy Ricambi. He was leaning against the front fender of a

blue Dodge, waving casually at him. After a tiny hitch in his step, Padrone headed in his direction. No ‘Mister’, eh? Like he and I are on the same level? Does Tommy think that he’s risen that much? Or that I’ve fallen?

The most critical messages are sometimes delivered without a word spoken, and he suspected this was a mixed one. Having a driver there was good. And Tommy reported to him, so in one way it was reasonable for him to serve as the driver. On the other hand, who sends an enforcer as a chauffeur? Ricambi had been the one sent to kill Marazzi, Padrone had played a major role in kicking that action off, and it had turned out badly. Was Frankie Dice reminding him of that, like rubbing a dog’s nose in his shit?

He reached the car. Tommy said, “Hiya.” He turned and opened the door for him. “They said to give you a ride home.”

Padrone just nodded to Tommy and got in.

As Tommy pulled out into the street he asked, “Did they treat you bad?”

He stared at the back of his head for a moment. *And now I’m supposed to report to you?* “Everything’s fine,” he said shortly. He guessed Tommy got the message because he didn’t say anything more.

Suspicion was a nasty thing. He had liked Bobby Marazzi, he genuinely had, but once the worm of suspicion got into you, it ate away at liking, friendship ... trust. He had had to pass along his suspicions about it, it was the only thing to do. But now, was the worm gnawing in Corozzo? Had someone dropped a quiet little word in his ear about *him*? It wouldn’t take a genius to suspect why Gallagher had wanted to talk to him alone. One of the clerks or some such might be on their payroll. Maybe even one of the cops that had been in on questioning him last night. The Untouchables. The idea of tagging any cop with that label was

a laugh.

The question was, how could he reassure Corozzo? There was a razor thin line between saying enough to reassure and so much as to arouse fresh suspicions. It was as tricky as walking a high wire, and look how well that had worked out for the Flying Wallendas.

Tommy turned right at a light.

Padrone knew he hadn't exactly chosen a safe career. If the cops didn't get him, the robbers very well might. A slight smile twisted his lips. He had been pretty good at math in high school. The counselor had suggested he become a bookkeeper. A nice solid profession, he'd called it. There was always work for bookkeepers, he'd said. Still, not even bookkeeping was perfectly safe, of course. Padrone could name two bookkeepers whose finaglings had led to quiet graves out in the desert.

Tommy made a left turn. Well, at least he did seem to be heading along the most direct route for his house. But he kept thinking: who sends a killer to be a chauffeur? But maybe they didn't think of Tommy as a hitman any more? Marazzi was his first assignment, and he screwed that one up. Maybe they don't think he's got the chops for it, and he's been busted back down to errand runner.

But Tommy's attitude hadn't been that of someone feeling demoted, disgraced. He'd been positively jaunty. But if they were going to kill him, would they do it in his own house? In front of his wife? Surely not.

Just then his stomach growled. It was hours past his usual breakfast time. That was one of the things Jenny was great about. She always cooked a full breakfast for him. Got herself up, and dressed decently, too. Looked really good for a woman pushing forty. Not like so many Italian women did, letting themselves get fat and sloppy after they had a kid or two.

Not that they'd ever had a kid. He'd regretted that, but what could

you do? She just never got pregnant. He'd always regretted never having a son. But maybe it was better, if...

Listen to me! Here I'm maundering over breakfast like I'm planning my last meal.

Tommy turned onto his street. I'll know soon now.

At least they won't hurt Jenny, even if they whack me. She's part of the family, they're not animals. Maybe they'll even toss a few bucks her way sometimes. Not that she should need it, though. Mr. Coslow was right, I was smart with money, and I took my opportunities.

Tommy pulled the car into his driveway. Padrone shoved the door open and got out without waiting. He glanced around at his house and yard. It was a nice house. The lawn looked good now, though he would... someone would have to water the damn thing twice a day come summer or it would turn as brown as burlap.

Padrone refused to even look toward Tommy. He marched up the front walk. *I won't run. I won't beg. I won't cry.* He reached out for the doorknob. *I am a man.* He turned the doorknob.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*by Lee Powell*

Luca Padrone looked like he had seen a ghost as he caught a reflection of himself outside the entrance to the Jewel Casino. Stopping mid-stride, he turned to face himself squarely in the dusty window. He spat into his hands and padded down the sides of his hair, squared off his tie, and then licked his index fingers and smudged them against his angry eyebrows. He moved closer to the window and took stock of himself with silent contempt. Despite his efforts, a protruding eyebrow hair mocked him glistening with saliva in the spring sunshine. He knew he was losing control. He knew because of all the small insignificant things, things that when weighed together amounted to something - something he wasn't able to articulate, but he felt it - a deep simmering unease in his gut. These silly things he could not share with anyone. His eyebrow hairs had not been an issue a year ago, but now he found himself constantly plucking them in his bathroom mirror in fear that a thorny bush of hair would over grow its designated patch and he'd look like some feeble old professor; what woman would find that attractive. His burgeoning waist line was another aspect of his physical appearance



that plagued him, it had once been subservient to diet and exercise, but now was stubborn and fiercely independent despite him. Years ago, it had been easy to shift weight to muscle, but now, even his once respected muscle, was turning slowly to fat. He stood up straight and sucked in his stomach and checked out his profile. ‘Damn it!’ he muttered. He was tired of walking around sucking his stomach in all the time pretending, but too embarrassed to just be. He couldn’t shake his sense of being a fraud, a man who was, and now, was not. How long could he trade off his past reputation before people started to notice the cracks? He poked at the wrinkles on the old man’s face staring back at him - age was a bitch he thought. Bobby Marazzi going rogue on him was the final confirmation he needed – he had to get his shit back together; he needed Padrone back. But deep inside he wasn’t sure if he could find him again. He’d seen what happened to old soldiers that had become a liability to the family’s best interests and he wasn’t ready for that. If he didn’t get a handle on the weeds growing in his own backyard soon things were not going to end well.

Tommy Ricambi and two associates waved at Luca from across the street. He waved them over.

“You two, stay outside. Tommy you come with Me.” said Luca.

He thought about telling Tommy to keep his mouth shut and let him talk to the girl, but decided against it - Tommy rarely wasted words. He was a natural in this line of work, faithful and intimidating - like a vicious dog. He was the sort of pedigree you could give a job to and know it would get done - without any fuss. The guy could take heat and keep his trap shut even if that meant time in the joint. Tommy was the sort of crew Luca knew he needed around him more than ever, but his breed were hard to find in these days of impatience.

Luca lit up a Winston and peered over at the two associates who were

leering at some girls in the back of a Plymouth.

“Che cazzo!” said Luca in a plume of smoke.

Tommy spun on his heels and grabbed them both by their ears. They cowed and screamed like girls as Tommy’s eyes stabbed each of them with disgust.

“I think they got the message Tommy, come on let’s go.” said Luca.

Inside the Casino, like always, Luca felt uneasy. For starters, he didn’t like bringing his dirty laundry into his bosses place. Secondly, he didn’t particularly like crowded places - he preferred the openness of the street and a clean line of sight - he felt safer knowing he could see what was coming. He took a deep drag and started for the main area in search of Carla.

He didn’t have to look far, she was standing near the central roulette table talking to a couple of GIs and a large man in a Texan hat. She looked gorgeous in her yellow and white checked shift dress and stockings. How Marazzi had tossed such a picture of a woman was beyond his comprehension. He sucked a breath of the alcohol inebriated air through clenched teeth and loosened the tie around his neck. He made a bee-line for Carla, sucking in his stomach as he went.

“Will you excuse me gentleman.” said Carla. She turned and feigned surprise and extended a hand towards Luca. He bowed and planted the longest kiss he could without appearing inappropriate.

“Mr Padrone, what brings you here.” she said, wiping the snail trail of slobber from her hand.

“Just Luca, call me Luca.”

“I know who you are Luca.”

There was an awkward silence as Luca twitched and fingered his trouser pockets in search of his words.

“We’re looking for Bobby,” he said fumbling with another cigarette.

The cranking, back and forth, of poker machine handles and people bustling around them were starting to make him nervous.

“Can we go somewhere quieter?”

Carla led them into the main reception. She made an effort to sway her hips just a little more evocatively and subtly than she would normally.

“You know that Bobby and I...”

“Split. Sure. I’m sorry about that.” Luca lied.

“We just want to talk with him, that’s all. Do you know where he might be?”

Carla thought for a moment placing a theatrical finger on her chin. She knew what ‘talk’ meant. She also knew what business Bobby was really into. And despite his performance dumping her publicly, it all didn’t stack up in her mind. For starters, Bobby wasn’t a public or flippant kind of guy. That’s what she loved about him, he knew what he wanted straight off the bat. She’d always been attracted to men like that, men that could fast track themselves to riches and have the gumption to take care of all the necessary ugliness that come with it. She didn’t buy it. Bobby was up to something big and she wanted in. He was playing the game, and now she needed to step up her own. She wrestled with how to play her hand and decided that bringing things to a head might give Bobby the push he needed, and she still appear trustworthy. She could have her cake and eat it.

“You could try downtown on Stewart Ave, he had a place. I don’t know the number, but it’s a ranch style house - the only one on the street.”

“Okay, we’ll check it out.”

Luca went to take Carla’s hand again but she pretended not to notice and pointed out the window.

“Is that your red Corvette?”

“No, mine is the grey Falcon Futura.”

“Oh.”

“One hundred and seventy eight break horse power V8 with a three speed column shift synchro. She’s all steel unitary construction and even got safety belts.”

Carla arched her eyebrows and parted her lips feigning interest and surprise at the podgy man’s attempts to impress her.

“I really should be getting back to work.”

“Hey, how about lunch tomorrow at Little Napoli?”

“I’ll think about it.” grinned Carla as she made her way back to the main floor area of the Casino, and then she was gone.

Outside Luca took a gulp of air and took his tie off.

“Tommy, I want you and the boys to check out the place downtown on Stewart Avenue. I want this on the quiet and clean - last thing I need is nosy neighbours and cops.”

Tommy nodded and lifted his chin to the two associates to start moving. Luca watched as they crossed the street and climb into Tommy’s Chevy Impala. Carla watched them too, from a window on the first floor.

“Hey take it easy with the Saturday Night Special,” said Tommy to his rear view mirror as he eyed one of the associates fooling around with a 32.calibre. They ignored him and continued fooling around pointing the gun at each other cursing and pretending to be gansters.

“If either of you gets a shot off at this place before me I’ll put a bullet in you myself.”

Silence prevailed until they pulled up to Stewart Avenue.

Tommy immediately spotted Bobby Marazzi in the lounge room facing the street and sank into his seat. Marazzi was talking with another

man with tanned skin, short blond hair and blue eyes. Tommy had never been good at maths, but he was good at estimating. He starred motionless at the man with blond hair, he estimated that the man was about his size and build.

“That’s him - Marazzi, come on what are we waiting for?” said one of the men in the backseat.

Tommy turned to face them. His lips tightened as he raised one of his huge palms. He exhaled pushing his palm towards them in a slow controlled motion. His message was clear - Stop! Wait, and ‘Shut the fuck up!’ No need for further clarification. Tommy hated dealing with the street thugs Luca pushed his way, the help was often nothing more than a hindrance, and one that could get him killed. He learned over the years that spoken words were wasted on these types of people – muscle, deathly stares and silence often worked better than words, or even a gun. He turned his attention back to the lounge room window. The blond guy seemed to move like someone who could handle himself - a nibble sort despite his size. He’d have to take him out first.

Tommy sat and watched the house for another thirty minutes in silence. There were five men in the house that he’d counted and Marazzi appeared to be leaving with the blond guy.

“Get down!” Tommy ordered as the front door to the ranch house opened.

He heard two cars doors open and then close, an engine start, and a car roar past. Gradually he slid back up his seat. The car in the driveway was gone, three men were left in the house - the blond guy and Marazzi were not among them. Tommy was ready with his plan of attack.

“I want these guys alive if possible - understand?” said Tommy popping the hood to the car.

Both men nodded in a way that signified they didn’t understand.

Tommy pointed to the smaller of the two.

“Roll up your sleeves and come to the front of the car.”

“What?”

Tommy ignored him and got out and stood at the front of the car. After a few moments the two others joined him, the smallest one had his sleeves rolled up. Tommy rubbed under the hood with his hands, he then grabbed the smallest guys hands and wrists and started smearing the grease and grim up the man’s wrists and onto his hands.

“Like to play dirty huh!” the man quipped.

Tommy ignored him and popped the radiator cap a fraction. A steady stream of steam buffeted under the hood.

“Now go and knock on the door, act like the idiot you are and say that my cars broken down and you want to use the phone. Idiot number two and I will go around the back and enter. We take care of business inside the house not on the street. You follow my lead, okay?”

Tommy checked his 38 special and secured it firmly into the back of his pants and pushed his greased up decoy towards the front door while making his way towards the back.

Charlie Dimeo opened the front door and starred at the man with greasy arms.

“No phone man, sorry.” said Charlie.

“Phone line to the house says you have.” Said greasy arms pointing at the cable leading to the house from the street.

Charlie eyed the man suspiciously. He wasn’t used to folk talking back to him.

“It’s broken. Now beat it!”

“It’s just a phone call man?”

The sound of breaking glass and a tornado of noise came from the back of the house as Tommy bulldozed his way through the utility room,

kitchen and into the foyer knocking plates and cutlery everywhere. His huge frame pounded on the floor boards as he raced towards the front door. To all those inside the house, Tommy's entrance felt more like an earthquake than an intruder. The speed and violence of his entry bought him just enough time in doubt and shock from his victims for him to get the upper-hand. Tommy stood panting in the foyer with his gun swaying back and forth between the lounge doorway and the front door. Greasy arms pushed Charlie back into the foyer and jumped inside the house, but Charlie was onto it now and grabbed him and had a Colt 45 pushed hard against his skull in a heartbeat.

"I'll shoot the little bastard." said Charlie.

Tommy had his gun on the other two men in the lounge, while his backup pointed towards Charlie.

"Take it easy," said Tommy

"We just want to talk."

Tommy motioned with his gun for the other two men to come out from the lounge into the foyer. They moved quickly. When everyone was in the foyer Tommy pointed his gun towards Charlie.

"Put the gun down!" said Tommy.

Tommy could see the fear in Charlie's eyes. They were trying to pretend everything was okay, but he'd seen the look many times, the look that tries to stare you down eye to eye, but the slightest flicker of the eye is all it takes to read doubt and fear. A millisecond sideways glance gives them away every time. Tommy found that glance in Charlie's eyes and knew he'd already won.

"I will shoot if you don't put it down, now!" said Tommy.

Charlie hesitated and then put his gun down.

"Take it easy man." said Charlie.

Tommy took a breath.

“In sixty seconds we are going to walk out of here and no one is going to get hurt. I just need to tell you something,”

Tommy paused for effect and locked his gaze onto each of Marazzi’s men. He had their attention.

“There is a sizable amount of cash and a job for any of you that kills Marazzi. If Bobby Marazzi is still alive the next time I see anyone of you, I’ll make sure I’m the last person you’ll ever see.”

With that, Tommy nodded to his men and edged his way to the door with his gun still fixed on Charlie. They left Marazzi’s men speechless and unharmed. Tommy was smiling when he got back into his car. He didn’t hear the bickering from the back seat until the second mile, then his smile vanished.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*by Frédéric Dupont*

Luca Padrone had arrived early and was now seated peacefully at his corner table in Little Napoli. He was reading the sports section of the Las Vegas Sun. The front page announced the coming execution of some Nazi war criminal, and showed the picture of a recent nuclear test explosion in nearby Northern Nevada; but who in Vegas cared about these things? The story that had kept America mesmerized for nearly a month and still captivated Luca was the hundred points Wilt Chamberlain had scored for Philadelphia: “Who the heck were they playing against?” he kept thinking, “The New York Preschoolers?”, as he chuckled to himself once again.

The chimes triggered by the opening of the door interrupted his reverie. Lisa Hanley was moving towards him. Her blonde hair, slim silhouette and impeccable dancer’s posture made her appear taller and more attractive than she really was. A few heads turned in her wake. Luca was not impressed. Vegas was a strong magnet for these girls on their way to Hollywood, heads full of glamorous images, or on their way back with shattered dreams. You could not always tell which tide they moved

with, but it did not matter. They were easy picks, and quickly dropped. The girls got used to it, expecting empty follow through on the promises too. Money was the great healer of many a broken heart in Vegas!

Lisa was pleasant enough with her wide spontaneous smile and full lips revealing pearly teeth. She should have returned home a long time ago. She carried a message for Luca.

Antonio, the restaurant owner approached: “I prepare the *‘epeciale’* Signore Padrone?” he announced in his dancing Italian accent. Lucas acknowledged with a nod and a curt smile; he liked Antonio. He extended the pinkie, ring and middle fingers of his right hand while holding his thumb over his index. “Va bene, for three, and a flask of the wine?” guessed Antonio, before hurrying back, not needing an answer from his regular patron.

Lisa had hardly had time to explain what was going on to Luca when a tall, athletic man appeared. “What’s this whore doing here?” Tommy Ricambi grumbled inaudibly to himself as he approached the table where his boss was sat. He was slightly annoyed by her presence for he had wanted to brag about yesterday. With a movement of the hand, Luca enjoined him to remain silent, so he sat himself at the table and listened patiently. Lisa was explaining that Carla Morelli would not be joining them, that she had come to replace her, that she’d be happy to stay ... or go.

“Or do whatever Luca wanted her to do,” but Tommy prudently kept that thought private...

Luca smiled. He had guessed correctly: the Morelli girl did not want to see him and was making excuses. It was not very important, yet just a small warning flag raised somewhere in Luca’s devious brain. Something to keep in mind. He might have to deal with this ambitious bitch later. For now, Lisa could stay and eat what he had ordered. Antonio had now

finished setting wine and food on their table.

“Hey Tommy, nice suit!” said Luca, raising his glass, “How did it go yesterday?” he asked jovially as soon as Antonio had disappeared back in the kitchen.

“It went well” replied Tommy sternly, wondering what this suit was all about; he never wore a suit! In fact he was wearing his old weathered leather jacket, immune to his boss’ humor.

Lisa was already eating voraciously, not paying attention to the conversation; both men exchanged a knowing look.

“Will they go along?”

Tommy slowly sipped his wine: “Ma! Who knows?” he replied. Then added: “Worst case they tell Marazzi and he realizes he can't trust them anymore.”

“Put more pressure on them?” suggested Luca.

“Good idea Boss. I go now,” replied Tommy. He stood up, ecstatic to be dismissed early, uneasy as he was to discuss business in front of strangers.

Tommy was not a very bright man. He was not funny either; truth be told, he was outright boring. Yet, he had one quality that made him rare: he loved the wait! Waiting was his speciality. There were little distractions in his life, but waiting and observing, transformed him. He became an ambushed predator, hidden, ready to strike and pounce on his prey in an instant. Time passed easily for Tommy, his long legs comfortable in the spacious car, his ample clothes hiding his muscular body. He had just relieved himself in a bottle that he kept specially for this purpose. He was ready.

Tommy never thought of what might happen, never speculated on what he would do, and in the improbable event he would project himself

in the future, he wouldn't have had a darn clue anyway. The general idea was to seize an opportunity to interfere with whatever the target was doing and take advantage of it, make a mess of his prey's life. When waiting, all he did was wait. It was always a matter of responding to what happened. When you waited long enough, something always happened.

It was dark for several hours already, the house was quiet, the neighborhood asleep, and Tommy's wait was over.

The porch fixture was turned on from inside, casting a dim light on the four persons standing in the doorway; two women, starlets or hookers, and two men that that had been banging them while Tommy waited. They appeared to be slightly drunk and all four entered the battered car parked in the driveway. Tommy knew them. Both men worked for Robert Marazzi. Pete Harding, a young wannabe poker player turned enforcer, and Charles DiMeo, a young local thug desperate for money. Some said he was an occasional gigolo. The girls did not matter, in all likelihood they would be dropped somewhere soon.

Tommy followed at a distance. As he had predicted, the girls were driven to the Desert Inn. They left the car at the corner of Twain Avenue and The Strip. The car turned left, heading South on The Strip for a little while, then turned right, heading West on Tropicana; shortly after, right again, into the dark alleys and construction sites located behind Boardwalk and Dunes. It stopped in front of some barracks occupied by workers; the two men got out and entered what seemed to be an unlit construction site, littered with equipment and supplies.

Tommy had parked the moment he'd seen the car slow down and was now prudently following them. He moved silently on foot, unseen in the shadows, and had gained on them. The contrast between the brightness of The Strip and the near total darkness surrounding them now was striking. A third man appeared. Tommy froze. He could not see the face,

but the man had the wide back and huge hands and forearms of people working in construction.

Tommy could hear them talking, but could not quite understand what was being said. He inched closer, fully alert.

“Where is my money?” the heavy set man was asking with a powerful voice. Getting no response, he asked again, louder this time: ‘Where is my money? I delivered the goods, I took the risks, I want to be paid now! You understand? NOW! I have a family to feed you little punks!’ Charles DiMeo was dancing uneasily from one foot to the other. Pete Harding was now talking, his hands out, seemingly trying to appease the big man. It was not working. The man was fuming, and pacing, his rage building up. He was becoming dangerous.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, he produced a length of steel pipe in his heavy hand and lunged forward without warning, with a powerful and precise swing. The attack was swift and DiMeo could not react to protect his head. He would have been killed but the pipe took a lucky deflection off an overhead beam. The blow that should have broken Charles' head and killed him, hit the side of his neck at an odd angle and knocked him out. The large man struggled to recover his balance, cursing the beam that made him miss.

Pete had not seen this coming and was lucky the victim was his companion. He reacted rapidly, pulling out his knife in one fluid motion. It was a sort of slick switchblade knife, short, razor sharp and fine as a styllet. Pete had already stabbed three times before the attacker could adjust his balance. Pete had struck the left side of the torso, where the abdomen connects to the chest, in the small space between the ribs, right under the elbow. The wounded man did not feel any pain, but he stopped to wonder what was the dark red dampness growing on his shirt; that was his demise. Although severe, the injury was not life

threatening and the steel pipe would have smashed Peter to pieces at that moment. It was not to be, the slight hesitation killed him. Pete lost no time stabbing him in the neck with two fast thrusts in rapid succession. The length of pipe dropped and the man collapsed. His eyes met Pete's and he knew he was going to die. His enormous hands reached for his throat in a futile attempt to contain the rapidly fading spurts of blood gushing from the punctured carotid. The desert sand avidly drank his blood.

Pete was having the shakes: the post adrenalin dump seizure that all combatants, in war, fight or crime get to know intimately. It makes them as vulnerable as lambs for slaughter after having transformed them into fearless warriors insensitive to pain just a little while before. The shaking was so violent that Pete dropped his knife and crumbled on the floor. It did not last long. Pete knew he had to get back in charge, had to take care of Charles, had to get out of Dodge, fast. The short time it took Pete to regain control was fatal.

Tommy had moved in, picked up the steel pipe, and when Pete looked up, he did not hear the whoosh nor the thud that tore through his skull and crushed his brain. Pete died faster than the man he had just bled. The man with the throat slit was still gasping air, his heart already stopped, emptied of his blood. Charles, oblivious of the mayhem, had not regained consciousness.

Tommy very carefully left the scene without calling attention to himself, nor leaving any clue that he was even there. On his way home, he got rid of the now full piss bottle, throwing it through his open car window and letting the wind clear away the night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*by Chia Evers*

Charlie flicked his cigarette out onto the highway and made the right onto Stewart Avenue. He looked totally relaxed, hair Brylcreemed into place, fingers tapping out *Duke of Earl* on the steering wheel. Greg, whose pits were damp with fear-sweat, wished he had half of the younger man's confidence.

"Are you sure we're doing the right thing, Charlie?"

"We talked about this, Greg. Marazzi talks a good game, but he's going nowhere. Not in this town. He got Pete killed already. You want to be next?"

He switched off the radio just as the DJ said, "This is KENO 146, and *this is The Lion Sleeps Tonight.*"

"I hate that fucking song," he said. "It creeps me out."

"I like it."

"So turn it back on." His voice was a challenge.

"No, that's alright." Greg slouched down into his seat, bruising his spine on the gun tucked into his waistband.

Charlie nodded, satisfied.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Yeah.”

“What if something goes wrong?”

“Nothing’s gonna go wrong. We get in, we get out. We follow the plan.”

“But, Charlie—“

“You know what your problem is, Greg? You worry too much.” He reached into his pocket for a comb, fingertips brushing the reassuring outline of the gun nestled inside his jacket. “Now sit up straight and do something about your hair. It’s showtime.”

Marazzi was out in the driveway, polishing his big silver Lincoln, letting the neighbors see him. He said it was part of their cover—give them something to look at, so they wouldn’t see anything they shouldn’t. Charlie thought he just liked showing off the car. He wheeled his own convertible into an open spot in front of the house and waved.

“Hey, guys.” Marazzi gave the spotless fender a final swipe and tucked the chamois cloth into his pocket. “Come on in. Can I get you a beer?”

“No, thanks,” Charlie said. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Greg’s mouth snap shut. “I promised Greg I’d let him drive the ‘Vette later.”

Marazzi laughed. “I can see why you’d want him sober for that.”

Charlie winked at Greg and tossed him the keys before he could say anything. “Put those in the glove box, would you? You might as well put the comb in there, too. It doesn’t seem to be doing much for you.”

Later, he’d tell Greg he was only ribbing him so Marazzi would think he was sweaty and flushed because he was mad, not because he was scared. Right now, though, he just followed the boss inside while Greg



leaned back through the open roof of the convertible to throw the keys in the glove box, where they'd be easy to get to if they needed to get out quick.

"Carla's been decorating again," Marazzi said. The entryway was bright yellow now. "Looks good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it's really... colorful." There was something in the corner that looked like it might be an umbrella stand. Just the thing for a safehouse in Vegas.

She'd been at work in the lounge, too, where the old flowered sofa had given way to an expensive hardwood-and-fabric thing that Sal was currently using as a foot rest while he studied the sports pages.

"Carla'd have a fit if she saw your feet up on that new couch," Marazzi said.

"Good thing Carla's not here, then," Sal said, but he put his feet down.

"The lounge looks great, Mr. Marazzi." Charlie wondered if Greg meant it. He sure sounded sincere. "How's Miss Morelli?"

"She's good. Sit down. You sure you don't want coffee or something?"

"No, we're good."

Charlie waited until Marazzi sat down, then settled into one of Carla's fashionably uncomfortable chairs, facing his boss across the coffee table. Greg perched on the edge of an identical seat in front of the window, right next to Sal.

"I'll get to the point, then," Marazzi said. "I've got some big jobs planned over the next few months—the kind of stuff that's going to carry us into the big time. But we've got to move fast, and we're going to need more guys, especially now that Pete's gone."

Sal folded his newspaper and set it aside. "I'm already talking to some

guys I know,” he said. He didn’t look at Marazzi for permission to speak, so Charlie guessed they’d already worked this part out. He and Marazzi were always trying to show off how much they knew, how many people they could call on. “But you guys have connections, too.”

“I’ve only been here a few months,” Greg said. “You guys know everybody I do.”

“But we don’t know everyone your brother knows,” Marazzi said. “What’s his name again?”

Greg was quiet so long Charlie started to worry that he’d have to answer the question. Finally, though, Greg said, “It’s Tom.”

“Right, Tom. And he’s a bouncer at the Flamingo.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, then. The Flamingo’s still Meyer Lansky’s territory, whatever Lansky says, and that means the Syndicate, so don’t step on any toes, but you let Tom know that you’ve got some work for anybody who’s looking.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

Greg had told Charlie more than once that he’d rather move back to Florida than let his big brother know what kind of work he was doing, but in about fifteen minutes, it wouldn’t matter anymore. He’d have to let Greg know he was proud of him for realizing that.

“And Charlie, you’ve been around this town your whole life, haven’t you?”

“Off and on, yeah.”

“Then you know what I’m looking for.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” *More guys like you.* Associates. Like Marazzi had been. Like he still should be. Low-level gunmen and thugs for penny-ante bullshit. Tommy Eggs had it right—even if the Grimaldos let Marazzi live, he was never going to make it to the big time, not even

with Carla pushing him. He'd already screwed too many of the people who mattered, thinking that smarts could get him farther than loyalty would. Well, Charlie knew where his loyalty lay, and it wasn't with Bobby Marazzi.

"All right, Greg," he said. "Let's do it."

Greg's eyes widened, and he tried to stand up, but the butt of his pistol caught against the back of his seat and the chair came up with him. By the time he'd struggled free and gotten his hand onto his gun, Sal was on his feet, and Greg's first shot went wide, tearing a chunk of brightly painted plaster out of the wall behind Sal's head. Charlie, cursing, kicked his own chair into the doorway and took aim at Marazzi.

Greg fired again, clipping Sal's right arm this time. Charlie's ears were ringing. He hadn't realized how loud the guns would be in this small room. Could the neighbors hear? It didn't matter. The license plates on the 'Vette were fake, and he'd be gone before the cops arrived. He pulled the trigger—too hard, too fast—and the gun jerked in his grip. Blood fountained out of Marazzi's side, but he was still standing, and so was Sal. The big blond man launched himself at Charlie, who stumbled over the chair he'd blocked the door with and went down with Sal on top of him and the gun between them. His next shot recoiled painfully against his ribs, but it tore through Sal's chest and coated him, and everything around him, with gore. A moment later, Greg was rolling the limp, wet corpse off of him, his green eyes glistening with tears.

"He got away, Charlie. Oh, dear God. Charlie, he got away. He got away."

"Why the fuck didn't you shoot him?"

"I tried! Charlie, we gotta get out of here. What are we going to do?"

"Help me up." He let Greg drag him to his feet. He was shaking. Why was he shaking? "There should be some clean clothes in the bedroom.

Find me something to wear.” No time for a shower, but he could get the blood off his face and hands. “We’ll have to leave Sal here. We’ll come back for him if the cops don’t show.” He’d need another car. Something with a big trunk, this time. And he’d have to call Tommy Eggs. Oh, fuck. He’d have to call Tommy Eggs.

Bobby Marazzi stumbled down the steps of his formerly safe house with his hands pressed against his bleeding side. He veered toward the red Corvette, but the neighbors were starting to come outside, looking for the source of the gunshots now that everything was quiet. No point drawing attention to himself. Charlie couldn’t drive so far that Bobby couldn’t catch him.

Inside the Lincoln, he stripped off his t-shirt and used it to bind the chamois cloth in his pocket against the wound. Grimacing at the blood on the white leather seats, he eased the car out of the driveway and turned toward home. Carla would know what to do. Carla always knew what to do.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

*by Ioa Petra'ka*

Marazzi had a habit of whistling mindless little repetitions, slaughtered versions of tunes he had picked up from radio stations never paid attention to, all combined together into a talentless melange of notes. It burst like little spits of rain in the lulls, waned to a dribble of mostly breath and terminated by brutal cursing, fist slamming into the palm. Pavement passerby's worried over their shoulders and quickened their pace. He proceeded, muttering and whistling, stomping and straightening his suit, the flustered and utterly flappable Bobby Marazzi rounded the final corner to find himself rooted before the Jewel Hotel and Casino.

An ever endless stream of cars circulated along the front entrance, swapping loaded patrons for broke ones on their way out, amidst a swarm of little valets keeping things efficient, tidy. He grimaced down at the tattered cigarette packet that had been in his hand for a time, and fixated on a single drop of blood smeared along the side of one like morbid lipstick. *Why did I come here?* He muttered to himself and then crushed the pack with his hand. Dried tobacco leaves fell softly around his shoes. *An hourglass,* he thought to himself, *I have come to die loudly.*

Going through the old composure checklist, he straightened his back, adjusted his tie, lifted his chin and kicked his toe once against the ground before setting off toward the destination his muttering mind had brought him to. *If this is how it's going to be, then there is nothing more to say about it.*

A blast of gritty, dust-laden air announced passing the threshold into the casino, replacing the ceaseless grinding of automobile engines with the roar of conversations, exultations, lamentations and of machines constantly eating, turning their peculiar food into whirs, blurs and ringing bells. Ordinarily, the sound of so many being fleeced would have perched a confident edge to the corner of Marazzi's lips, but the contrast between his own traumatic context of the moment and that of the patient and plainly ordinary industry all around was enough to gently make the point that had already been forcefully made, and in admitting that, that life did not need him, his ordinary confidence became a sneer that lingered a little too long on his face.

Carla wasn't at her desk, typically, but then he wasn't sure if he was here for her or himself. He walked over to the cigarette machine, sitting between two potted plants and surrounded by a semi-circle of empty overstuffed chairs. The lever for King Sizes stopped, hesitating over the selection. He let it snap back with a metallic clang, pulling instead on the lever for the 6's, it was Carla that tried to get him on filters anyhow. That first drag always made him hiccup, he looked around embarrassed, not that anyone was watching. The frantic nature of his thoughts calmed as nicotine flooded through him. As always, it was like fresh mint, like steak and potatoes, like afternoon sex.

Leaving the remaining half to smoulder in an ashtray, Marazzi padded through the lobby and down toward the cage. Approaching the counter, he ran his thumb down a crease, parallel to the edge of a fifty-dollar bill and pulled a thumb back red and sticky with half-congealed blood.

Burning a hole in his pocket, you might say. A burning hole is more like it, several of them, before that last one slips through the old sack of pudding up there. Performing a little ruse of having just received a paper cut, while also concealing the tremor in his hand, Marazzi started dealing bills over to the clerk, rewarded with that old meditation as the click of tokens were snapped flush on the table into stacks. Almost, just for a moment, a trace of that old feeling that tonight one might walk out with two stacks instead of one. But it was only a small moment. A moment one might not even remember having had.

Marazzi gave a furtive glance around the corner of the change booth. He still had to decide whether or not he wanted to see Carla, embroiled yet in that familiar post-breakup cocktail of bitter-coated tenderness. Of course, coming to the Jewel at all was an admission of needing to see her one last time.

Limbering up to the blackjack tables, Marazzi made his way around the interior of the Jewel, stopping at the bar for a glass of some flamboyant Southern whiskey, ice already popping in the heat of people and electricity. Familiar faces that should have nodded back to him to looked away more quickly than they ordinarily would have. Although surely within his imagination, the pits felt subdued and overly aware of his tension. He lit another cigarette and looked for a promising table.

The sound of ice within his glass gradually became the most prominent noise within his awareness, until Marazzi set his drink down gently and carefully aligned within a red disc of paper beside his dwindling rows of chips. He jumped, *I really am losing it*, at the sound of Carla's voice behind him.

"What are you doing?", she hissed.

Marazzi glanced down at the stack of chips by his elbow, in answer,

Carla retorted by firing off a hostile dart of the eyes at the unfiltered butt of his cigarette.

“You must be insane, come with me,” she said, looking around the room protectively.

Winking to the dealer, he picked up his chips and bourbon and took a final drag on the unfiltered fag before standing up, taking extra time to push her buttons by smoothing out the wrinkles in his suit. Interrupting his procedure, Carla grabbed him by the sleeve and led him over to a shadowed alcove, wherein a table was set, buffered on all sides by a convenient lack of patronage.

“What are you doing here?”, Carla repeated in a low voice.

“I went for a little bit of a walk, why wouldn’t I end up here?”

“A walk,” Carla exclaimed, “you just decided to stroll right in to the Jewel and proceed to... you’re shaking, what’s happened with you?”

“How did you find me?”

Carla looked over her shoulder at the pit boss who was watching them with his glittering black eyes.

“It’s Padrone, he’s got to Greg and Charlie. Carla, they tried to knock me off! He got to the Stewart house somehow,” he closed his eyes against a well of emotion, “Salvatore is dead.”

Carla’s eyes darted to her fingernails, “*What* were you doing at the Stewart House, of all the places to go, and then you come here? Have you lost your mind?”

“What’s wrong with the house, why wouldn’t I have been there?”

She paused again, head down and wringing hands, and said almost inaudibly “I had to tell them about the Stewart place,” she paused and then more forcefully said, “you should have known that, the only reason I gave them the location at all is because you should have known that.”

Marazzi watched the creases on her brow furrow and shift between



familiar configurations. He flipped a red chip between his thumb and forefinger in an attempt to remain calm. Every time he opened his mouth, his voice tried to lurch out of his throat with bile instead of air, and that vein in his neck was purple and angry.

She raised her eyes to his, and for a moment the context of the moment was vanquished, she was just his Carla again. Every abnormality in her irises memorised. That point along her neck that disappeared down into the cleanly cut collar. He watched as her features sharpened smoothly along the strop of the moment, “Never mind that, why are you not on your way to South America or something, why are you here?”

“I had to see you,” Marazzi set the chip down slowly on the table, “this is it, y’know, last stop,” and flicked the chip over to her. It bounced off of her arm and landed on the floor, “I can’t do this any more,” he said, and fished for another cigarette while she habitually bit the inside of her cheek the way she did, and he remember when he used to think it cute.

“You were a fool to think you could go against them in the first place, you know that right?”

“It doesn’t matter any more. I am ruined and I couldn’t hide at the North Pole, you know that.”

“You had to see me...”

“It’s silly, right. I know, but up until this point I can’t have said that this was a good day. I don’t want it all to end on a day like today, y’ssee?”

“I am not going to be your bookend, Robert, get that through your thick skull for once,” and she fished a cigarette out of his pack. Marazzi lifted an eyebrow and she returned him a hard look while he flipped his light and lit her cigarette.

“Now here is how it is going to be, and I’m going to number these all out” she started.

Marazzi downed the rest of his whiskey and wiped his mouth with his hand.

“...First, you’re going to take that big, ridiculous stack of chips there and walk out to the cage. You’re going to get them turned back into bills and smile at the clerk. You’ll give her a tip and you’ll walk out straight back the way you came in.”

“To what, Carla, to what am I going to strut back out through the front door to do? I have nothing!”

“Never you mind nothing, you’ve still got this,” she reached across the table and put her hand to his heart, “that should be all that matters.”

Marazzi’s gaze dropped to her hand and he slumped in his chair.

“No, none of that now,” Carla exclaimed, and withdrew her hand quickly, self-consciously, “so you say it’s all over, well so what? What if it is, the least you can do is go out with your chin up. What’s the use of slouchin’ around here?”

“I wasn’t slouching. If anything I’m here for a bang,”

“That’s not what I’m talking about and you should know it. Dying in a haze of bullets you know you can’t beat is no better than fading off into a husk, the least you can do is fight with *meaning*, if you must settle upon the least.”

Marazzi rolled the empty glass between his hands.

“Second,, I can’t help you, but I can talk to you,” she glanced back at the pit boss, “you know me, I know how to get out of this town inconspicuously even if I never have. Take a taxi the bus station and take the first bus wherever it goes. You might die here, on the way, there or ten years from now, but don’t let them turn everything you have left of your life into resignation.”

“Just run away from everything? How is that not giving up as well?”

“Well, I can’t tell you where to go or what to do, but whatever you

do, you do it on your own terms. 'This pile of...' she gestured in his direction, "it's not you. Padrone won't be stupid enough to think like you and come here, but he'll hear about it soon enough," her eyes darted to the ceiling.

"Who I am is what got me here," he said, and sighed smoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Then do it for me if you've got no other reason. I know, things didn't work out like we thought, and maybe that is in part my fault, but that doesn't matter does it? Don't you think I do still... don't you think I'd rather wonder what you're up to out there, than to know you got offed in some back room of the place where I work? What were you thinking, coming here?"

Marazzi dropped his chin to his chest and nodded to himself. Minutes seemed to elapse as the glass beneath this hands gradually warmed, "Let it rest, I'm going already. I'll be out of your hair."

Carla grabbed his hand in hers and the silent admonition in her glare provoked his eyes to drop apologetically.

"Goodbye, Bobby," she said tightly, the second time she had said it that way.

He nodded once more, eyes half closed, spurred by one last gesture of survival, stirred by one last bitter-coated flame, and stood, once again taking a moment to once again memorise a face he intended to leave behind forever.

Marazzi found himself back in the lobby of the hotel, staring at that vending machine framed by potted plants. The cigarette that he had left in the ashtray had gone out. Picking up the remainder, he lit it up and turned toward the grand entrance, constantly wheezing air as rich people came in and poor people came out.

He approached the glass, and the velvet gloved hand of the doorman

closed around the handle, pausing ominously before opening the door. Bobby saw the details of the casino behind him flash across the rotating pane of glass. *This will not do!* Dropping the cigarette into the lush pink carpet and snuffing it out under the disapproving stare of the doorman, he turned, squared his shoulders, tightened his tie, tapped one good toe against the ground, and walked back into the casino.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

*by Kirt van der Woude*

She was right. He knew it. It was like he was being tested by the universe. Some big, sick fuck, that universe. Somehow, God – no, the Man in the Moon – whoever the fuck was up there, playing those cosmic strings like a harp – was testing his mettle to see if he was worthy. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but if it wasn't for Carla he would've left it all behind already, talked her into finding a quiet beach town somewhere down south where they could have a normal life, grown old together, have lots of babies. A couple of fat walruses in the sun, like the Sicilians in the old country.

Bobby reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and fished out his smokes, thrusting the pack up to his mouth and letting the moisture on his lips snag a cigarette precariously before returning the pack back to his pocket again. The motion awoke the ache where he'd been shot, a sensation that strangely strengthened his resolve. Tonight was the night. All the shit that had happened would be set right again, here and now. Frankie would see he'd fucked up. He never should have trusted that viper, Padrone. Bobby would be the one to show him. All he had to do

was to get Frankie Dice alone in his office and make his move.

“Hey buddy, you got a light?” He flicked his thumb against his index finger as if the security guard standing next to him at the Jewel’s front entrance was an idiot and needed the demonstration to understand.

“You bet,” the guard said, tossing one over with a silly grin. Poor idiot indeed. The security guard must have been pushing sixty and was fat as hell. What could he keep secure, anyway? Bobby lit his smoke and smugly slipped the lighter into his own pocket. He always found that funny about the Jewel, and casinos in general. So many guards inside, hardly any on the out. Usually only one, in fact, at the front door. If only he could find a way to get more of them outside. That would make it easy to get to Frankie. He took a pull on the cigarette and idly thumbed the guard’s lighter in his pocket. He knew it would take a big scene to create the diversion he needed, and he had just the idea.

The Jewel wasn’t a big casino, but it was a busy night and her parking lot was nearly full. Slipping between the rows of parked vehicles, Bobby scanned the cargo beds of the pickup trucks parked amongst the cars until he found what he was after – a nearly full jerry can, someone’s hedge against running dry on a desolate stretch of wind-swept Nevada highway. It would do perfectly. What better way to bring out the Jewel’s cavalry than with an unexpected parking lot bonfire? He chuckled to himself, feeling a bit of a boyish thrill at the thought of a car going up in flames, and no less at the thought of the look on that fat fuck of an idiot security guard’s face when the thing went off on his watch.

Surveying the parked cars, he decided on a sacrificial lamb – a big, beautiful Buick Electra. The 401 cubic inch Wildcat V8 wasn’t only powerful, it was thirsty, and had the fuel tank to match. Bobby placed his hand momentarily on her graceful, wing-like nacelles. It was a shame to

torch such a fine car, but then again, it's not like it was his anyway. His hand slid to the chrome driver's side door handle, glowing in the moonlight. Now if only it was – click. The catch released. Walking around the car, Bobby opened the doors wide one-by-one, jerry can in hand like some businessman fixing to stow his briefcase. He would empty the jerry can all over the seats and then toss the lighter in. With all of her doors open the Buick would go up fast, and he would have the diversion he needed.

He had only just opened the fourth and final door when the approaching crunch of gravel underfoot sent him reeling for cover behind a nearby pickup truck, narrowly avoiding clanging the metal jerry can against the truck's bumper. That fat fuck security guard! Doing rounds through the parking lot no less. Bobby cursed under his breath as the beam from the guard's light bounced over the Buick, its doors spread open like the ridiculously stubby wings of a suddenly ungraceful steel behemoth trying to take flight.

"What in the hell," muttered the guard. "Moe, what do you make of this?" A second skinny guard followed behind the fat one, fiddling with his light. Bobby doubly cursed under his breath, slid the jerry can under the truck he had hid behind and began cautiously working his way back towards the casino, as the guards stared in puzzlement at the Buick and its gaping doors. "Must have been in some kind of a hurry!" Idiot. Frankie must have added extra security. It was time for Plan B, whatever that was.

Walking back through the Jewel's doors, Bobby knew he would need Carla's help. It was a bad idea to get her involved; jeopardizing the family's trust in you was a surefire way to an early grave. That crazy Sicilian Luca Padrone had decided Bobby was a rat and turned on him,

and it had gotten him shot and almost bled out in the street as a result. Carla had worked long and hard to gain Frankie's trust as one of the Jewel's key employees, but trust from a capo could be pissed away in an instant and leave you a cold, rotting corpse six feet under. It didn't matter though. She would understand. With the hit out on him, he was living on borrowed time, needed a diversion to get to Frankie, and was running out of options.

The familiar din of the crowd and the ringing of the slots greeted him as he strode into the lobby. Bobby wasn't concerned about casino security recognizing him; Frankie didn't trust any of them with family secrets, so they wouldn't know he was *persona non grata*. The *soldato*, on the other hand, would probably fight over who got to whack him and take credit for carrying out the hit. Cautiously, he looked around for Frankie and any of his *soldato*, though Frankie didn't walk the floor much anymore. He was getting old, fat and complacent, and sat on his ass in his office most of the time now.

Usually Carla was out walking the casino floor schmoozing the guests as if she was the Jewel's first lady, but he didn't see her, so he began to cross the Jewel's gaming floor, heading for the front desk, the next most likely place she'd be. Passing the blackjack and roulette tables, he caught sight of Frankie himself coming out of the high-roller suite with one of his pit bosses, headed straight for him. Distracted by his company, Frankie hadn't yet spotted him. In a split-second decision, Bobby headed for the only conceivable nearby cover – what looked like a closet door set between two banks of slot machines, behind a vacant craps table. Slamming the door behind him, he found himself in a cramped crawlspace barely wide enough for a man to move about. That man's jaw was still slack with surprise when Bobby's uppercut connected with it, closing it with a crack as he crumpled to the floor like a rag doll.



On both sides of the crawlspace, the hulking backsides of slot machines loomed with their inner workings exposed, like a phalanx of disemboweled robots. Mechanical override switches for each machine were illuminated by light passing through a bank of windows set above each slot – one-way windows. Bobby had stumbled upon the Jewel’s slot-fixing room.

It was a straight-forward slots racket: Frankie’s guy – who was now laid out cold on the floor – would read whoever sat down at each machine and manipulate how the machine paid out. The goal was simple: to squeeze as much money as possible out of each player. The gambler who started to lose interest in the machine would be given a small payout to keep them playing. The one who sat down calmly and mindlessly pulled the handle over and over again wouldn’t get a dime. There was an art to it, but it all boiled down to just enough payouts to keep stringing them along, all at a tidy profit for the house.

Bobby turned slowly, taking in the nearly 360-degree vantage of the casino floor around the slot bank through the one-way windows. The slots were busy tonight; a large group of drunken servicemen, navy boys it seemed, were hooting and hollering one another on as they played the slots. Some sort of wartime buddy reunion. As he looked back towards the secret room’s door, his heart skipped a beat. The pit boss who had been walking with Frankie was setting up shop at the craps table right in front of the only way out of the slot-fixing room, and a small crowd had started to gather around. “Fuck,” he cursed under his breath. “Just perfect.” Frankie was nowhere to be seen, no doubt sitting on his ass in his office once again.

Things were going from bad to worse. Carla, the last hope to stage the diversion he needed to corner Frankie, was nowhere to be seen. Even if she had been, he might as well be imprisoned in the slot-fixing room,

with no way to signal her without blowing his cover. The navy boys continued to drink and plug their money into the slots machines as Bobby mulled the dire situation, when all of a sudden Frankie's slot patsy woke up. The slot-fixer's arm lashed out, catching Bobby's leg, bowling him off his feet. In the cramped room of the crawlspace, Bobby couldn't help but fall directly on top of the man, managing to neatly plant a haymaker that knocked the man right back out, while at the same time uttering a reflexive and very loud "Fuck you!"

On the other side of the nearest slot machine, a baffled drunken sailor replied "No, fuck you!" He unsteadily sat back and turned to his comrades. "This machine ain't paid me a penny all night and now it's tellin' me fuck you?" The bafflement on his face slowly turned to anger as he pounded on the slot machine several times. "What kind of shit is this?" The level of his voice rose. As the other sailors circled round, Bobby had a brilliant idea.

"This machine don't pay out to no Micks," he yelled through the slot. The sailor was getting really pissed off, and his buddies were getting riled up too. "It don't pay out to no Niggers, either". The sailors were now furious. Hammering away at the slots in anger, casino security was starting to circle the pack of navy boys, a powder keg almost ready to go off. Bobby dished out a final "Fuck you, bilge turd" provocation, and the brawl was on. Fists flying, it was an all-out melee – sailors, security and swinging fists. As the brawl picked up momentum, Frankie must have gotten word, as he burst on to the gaming floor to join the fray. The crowd around the crabs table by the doorway to the slot-fixing room scattered.

"What kinda racket you runnin' here, you fuckin' Guinea," bellowed one of the sailors as he came at Frankie. Bobby slipped out of slot-fixing room unnoticed and headed for the back office just as the sailor popped

Frankie right in the kisser.

Frankie's office smelt musty and like old man, even though he wasn't one. As Bobby slipped inside and closed the door behind him, the smell hit him in the face like a boxing glove filled with stale cigars that had gotten wet and not been dried out properly. There was no window, of course. Facing the door, Frankie's big wooden desk and leather chair dominated the room. Even though there was no need to be stealthy anymore, Bobby crept around Frankie's desk and sat down, the leather chair creaking and sighing beneath him. He ran his fingers over the desktop, worn smooth from Frankie's elbows, down past the drawer and underneath, and found what he expected. Fastened on the underside of the desk, a sawed-off, double-barrelled shotgun easily covered the door and the chair right beside it. It was a security measure that was at the same unsophisticated and remarkably practical. So was the .44 six-shooter Bobby already knew Frankie kept in the right-hand drawer, and the second pump-action 12-gauge leaning up against the back wall inside the armoire behind him. Bobby felt beneath the cocked hammers for the brass-bottomed shells he knew would be loaded and ready for action. Frankie might have been a bit of a buffoon sometime, but he was no idiot.

Muted cursing and groaning approached the office in the hallway outside. As the doorknob turned, Bobby instinctively sat up straight in Frankie's chair. The door swung open and in he came, hand to his mouth, gingerly touching a cracked and rapidly-swelling upper lip. At the sight of Bobby sitting in his chair, he froze like a deer in the headlights, his hand slowly dropping to his side. A moment of uneasy silence followed. "You got a lotta nerve, showin' up like this pal." If there was any fear, Bobby couldn't see it in his eyes. A bit of a buffoon, but a capo

through and through, that Frankie Dice.

“Have a seat, Frankie.” Bobby laced his fingers together on the desk. “You and me got some business to talk through. Oh, and I ain’t no Rube either. I know what you got under the desk here and you can bet I can get to it before you can make it over here.” He tapped his fingers on the desk over the sawed-off shotgun for emphasis.

“Talk is cheap, pal.” Frankie’s eyes flicked towards the desk drawer with the .44 in it and the armoire, as if weighing his odds. “I ain’t got time for a snitch.” Deciding the odds weren’t in his favour for either option, he slowly sank into the chair by the door.

“Well it’s a good thing I ain’t one, then. I don’t know what Luca told you or why, but it ain’t true.” Bobby cocked his head, trying to read whether there was any chance Frankie remotely believed him or not. He still couldn’t tell. He sighed. “You know, you’re right though. Talk is cheap. I gotta set things straight.”

“If you gonna whack me just get on with it, wise guy. You better believe you ain’t gonna get away with it though.” Still no sign of defeat, that Frankie Dice. Defiant to the end, ever the capo. Bobby sighed again, and as he reached for his breast pocket, Frankie inhaled sharply, tensing and clenching his teeth, and finally there it was – a chink in his emotional armour of defiance.

With a flick of Bobby’s wrist, a wad of cash fell to the desktop. Flinching reflexively, Frankie’s defiance melted to genuine surprise. Bobby watched it sink in for a moment, inwardly thrilled from orchestrating the capo’s emotional turn, and from the rush of holding Frankie’s life in his hands. And Frankie would always know it. “This is your cut, Frankie.” Without taking his gaze off the capo, Bobby flicked his thumb through the tightly-bound stack of hundred-dollar bills thoughtfully. “The business I’ve been running has been going well.

That's the most important thing I want you to know." He rapped the wad of cash on the desk again to drive home the point and stood up. "And Padrone is a liar. I don't know what he said, but I ain't told the feds anything. I swear it on The Family, Frankie." Looking him in the eye earnestly, Bobby moved out from behind the desk. "In spite of what happened 'cause of that snake Padrone, my loyalty still belongs to you, Frankie. And now my money's where my mouth is. I'm ready to be made, Frankie."

Moving towards the door, Bobby paused to give Frankie a pat on the back, resting his hand there momentarily as if in reverence to the capo. Slipping back into the hallway, he left a still silent Frankie counting the wad of cash on his desk. Carla was right. He would prevail. His mettle had been tested, and the universe could go fuck itself.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

*by Pete Becker*

Carla walked her usual route through the casino. The mechanical whirrs and the occasional ringing of bells from the slot machines on her left, the drone of the dealers on her right, and the murmur and occasional shouts of the crowd everywhere didn't have their usual soothing effect; instead, they jangled her nerves and amplified her inner turmoil, driving her racing mind to a faster and faster pace. She'd made nice with Bobby so that she could ride along with him to the top. When he pushed Padrone aside and Corozzo saw what he could do Bobby would become Corozzo's favorite. Corozzo didn't need to know that she was the brains behind Bobby. But Bobby had gotten scared. He thought he wanted out. He wasn't thinking clearly. She had to make him see that his future was with Corozzo, no matter how scary it was along the way. Of course, deep down inside he knew that; but when it came to facing up to Padrone, maybe on his own he didn't have the balls. Damn, why had she bet her future on such a wimp? She'd have to be the strong one, not just the thinker. She couldn't let him chicken out now.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a commotion ahead of her.

Someone was running in her direction, knocking people out of the way and creating a wake of upset patrons. She'd have a lot of work to do later to clean this up. She heard her name called out loud, and finally recognized the intruder as Lisa Hanley; in addition to the patrons she was knocking aside, she was annoying many more by screaming "Carla, Carla" over and over.

Carla stopped walking and looked across the room, directly at Lisa. Fortunately, Lisa stopped yelling. Unfortunately, she didn't stop bumping into people.

When Lisa got to where Carla was standing she was panting so hard that she could barely speak. Dancing was supposed to keep you in shape, but you couldn't prove it by Lisa. Well, her kind of dancing didn't really involve much movement.

"Carla..."

"What is it?"

"Carla..."

"What?"

"Carla..."

"Lisa, calm down! What are you so bugged about?"

"Carla..." Lisa made a small gesture with her hand back in the direction she had come from.

Carla looked over, and saw Tommy Eggs pushing his way through the crowd toward them. He wasn't running, but his broad shoulders moved people aside much more effectively than Lisa's little mass, despite her faster pace.

"Carla, I was talking to Luca, ... and Tommy came up ... and said that he'd seen Bobby ... talking to you. ... Luca's pissed. You'd better be careful!"

Carla looked again at Tommy Eggs and saw the expression on his

face. She decided quickly: she turned and ran to a door marked “Staff Only”. Her key let her through, and she locked the door behind her. She’d gained some time; Tommy didn’t have a staff key. But it wouldn’t be long before he got someone to let him into the back corridors: after all, he worked for the Grimaldo family, and the Grimaldo family ran the place.

Carla turned to her left and ran down the corridor, past the door that led to the kitchen and past the stairs down into the utility rooms. She pulled open a small door into another corridor that led to the back stairs up to the casino’s control room and the executive offices. At the end of the corridor, past the stairway, was a small red sign: “Exit”.

Carla burst through the door into the alley behind the casino, turned right, and ran toward the main drag. The bright lights of the strip glared against the darkening dusky sky. She spotted a cab cruising past the Casino, raised her arm to hail it, and felt a burst of pain as the setting sun stabbed into her eyes. The cab pulled over next to her; she opened the back door, and as she climbed in she yelled Bobby’s address to the driver.

She pulled on the cab door to close it, but it pulled back. She felt the grip of a large, strong hand on her upper arm, and heard Tommy’s voice: “The lady made a mistake.” Tommy gave the driver a different address as he slid in beside her without letting go of her arm. He pulled the door closed, and the cab started to move. Apparently Tommy had guessed where she was headed and ran out the main entrance instead of following her. Now they were on their way to Luca Padrone’s house.

“Tommy, what are you doing? Aren’t we friends?”

“Shut up, bimbo.” Tommy’s voice was higher than usual, and a little choked. She knew better than to push him when he sounded like that. She shut up.



Tommy maintained the grip on her arm throughout the drive. Her forearm started tingling; apparently he was cutting off her circulation. But she didn't dare say anything.

When they got to Padrone's house the driver announced, without looking back, that the fare was \$1.35. He put his hand up over his shoulder, palm up, and waited.

"Pay him."

Carla fumbled in her handbag and pulled out her change purse. She counted out six quarters and handed them to the driver. "Keep the change." Tommy pushed the door open and stepped out into the driveway, still gripping her arm. He pulled her out and slammed the door. The cab quickly left, and Carla knew that her last chance at being rescued had left, too. Tommy pulled her around to the back of the house, unlocked the back door, and dragged her inside. They moved through the utility room, past the kitchen into the hall, and from there into the lounge at the front of the house.

The curtains on all the windows were closed; the only light in the room came from two small lamps on a pair of end tables. Without letting go of her arm, Tommy pulled a straight-backed chair into the middle of the room.

"Sit."

He pulled her down. She sat.

He moved behind her and grabbed her other arm. He pulled both of her arms behind her and moved his right hand from her upper arm to her wrists. She felt the bite as his left hand wrapped some kind of cord around her wrists and pulled it tight. He stepped away from her. She couldn't raise her arms; apparently he had not only tied her wrists together, but had also tied them to the back of the chair.

He stepped in front of her and dropped several pieces of thin rope

onto the floor. She kicked him in the shin and he slapped her, hard. Her pink pillbox hat flew across the room. She started to cry.

He knelt in front of her and tied each of her ankles to a chair leg. He stood up, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and crammed it into her mouth. A short piece of rope secured it in place. She struggled to breathe with her nose stuffed from crying and the handkerchief in her mouth.

“Luca won’t be here for an hour. While we’re waiting, we’re going to have a little fun.” He pulled the lapels of her jacket away to the sides and began to unbutton her blouse. She closed her eyes and continued crying as she struggled to breathe.

“Get away from her.” Corozzo’s voice was low and firm. He rarely spoke in that tone, and only when he was furious. Tommy stood and moved away from Carla. Carla still couldn’t breathe, but she was relieved that Tommy had gotten his information wrong and Corozzo had interrupted him before he had gotten any further.

“Luca. Take that thing out of her mouth.” Still low and firm. Still menacing.

Luca untied the rope around her head and pulled out the handkerchief. Carla gasped for breath, feeling the air rushing in and out of her lungs, relieved that she wasn’t going to die of asphyxiation.

“Luca,” Corozzo continued, “what is the meaning of this? What has this jamook done?”

Tommy, hearing the menace in Corozzo’s calm, cold tone, tried to protect himself before his boss could put the blame on him. “Luca wanted her snatched. I snatched her.”

“I’ll get to you later. You don’t need to say anything now.”

“Capo,” Luca began, “Bobby Marazzi is about to drop a dime on us. We need some leverage to keep him in line. That’s why I sent Tommy

after the broad.”

“Padrone, you lying piece of shit! Bobby’s no rat. And you’ve blown it now. When you kidnapped me you brought the FBI into this. Lots of people saw what happened at the casino, and you’ll pay.”

Corozzo’s calm, quiet voice cut her off. “Luca, you’ve made a mess and now I have to fix it. You and your soldier will do nothing except what I tell you. After this is cleaned up I’ll decide what to do about you two. Do you understand?” Luca and Tommy both nodded. Both knew that their futures depended on getting back in Corozzo’s good graces. Their prospects weren’t good.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

*by Rodrigo Seisdedos*

It was late at night when Marazzi's car approached his girlfriend's apartment. He had been careful enough to turn off the lights a few miles back on the road. He stopped the engine as he parked casually on the opposite side of the street. He looked around before getting out and decided to have a smoke. The events in the last few days called for a dose of caution.

He pulled out from his pocket the golden lighter that had once won to Luca Padrone in a Vegas style poker game, and lighted a cigarette. Unlike the "no facial hair," the "keep family secrets" or any other of the unwritten rules of the mafia code, defeating your headman on gambling was not penalised. It was not a sign of disrespect, but of ambition. And ambition is welcome, when playing by the rules.

And Carla loved that about him. She even pictured herself as something equivalent to a first lady someday. She encouraged him a lot, up to the point of giving him inside information about the family business she overheard from time to time, in order to help him become acquainted about how things really work behind the curtains. And that

he loved about her too, even at the price of knowing too much at times, which kind of disturbed the middle management of the highly hierarchical mafia structure.

He looked around once more. Everything seemed to be fine. A female was walking on the sidewalk towards the building's front door. It was dark around her, but the purse she was carrying looked familiar, as well as those high heel shoes she insisted in wearing from time to time in spite of being, in Carla's own words, "uncomfortable for anything other than a wooden floor."

"That's my girl," he thought, "I'll give her a surprise."

He left the car and crossed the street behind her, carefully avoiding to produce any unfortunate noise which would reveal his presence. He caught her up in no time.

"Hello, beautiful," he whispered to her ears.

The girl suddenly stopped but managed to drown a scream on her throat while turning around. It was not Carla, but her friend Lisa.

"Lisa? What are you doing here?", Marazzi said.

Lisa, the young yet-to-be-discovered actress who serves as a dancer on the mean time. The never ending story.

"Bobby! Is it really you? You scared the hell out of me!"

"Why, sugar? Do I look like a pesky FBI agent on a nice suit? Now *that's* scary!"

"Where have you been?" Lisa asked, still somewhat disturbed.

"Would you believe me if I told you I was at my folk's, in Kansas?" Marazzi smiled. "Not even Carla would dare to ask, honey, nor would I consider to answer either," he added sardonically.

"But isn't she with you then? Oh my god!" Lisa said in tremor.

"No, we haven't seen lately. That's why I'm here. But what's all that divine evocation about?"

“Bobby, Carla has not showed up for work in a few days. That’s why I decided to come over and check if she needed anything.”

“What? Are you serious? Have you not even spoken to her?”

“No, Bobby, no. People are talking. You know the family is looking for you, don’t you? But since no one seemed to know your errands either, I was hoping she were with you, petting each other here, at her place. But now...”

“Let’s not waste any more time, come up with me,” Marazzi said, while dragging her firmly by the left arm.

“Bobby, I cannot run with these shoes!”

“Shut up, bitch.”

Marazzi found pointless to explain her that they had a more important matter to attend than a blatant whining about a pair of shoes. Lisa tried to say something in reply, but she somehow understood Bobby’s sense of urge.

They took the stairs upwards on an increasing step spree. A few feet before the apartment entrance Marazzi slowed down a bit. He plunged his ear to the wooden door.

“We should better call the police...” Lisa whispered.

“Yeah, sure, that was precisely what I was thinking,” Marazzi said, ironically.

No sound came from the inside. He knocked, but got no response either. Marazzi inserted his key silently into the lock and twisted it gently as well. His other hand turned the knob and pushed the door with calm. But it would not open.

He thought it might require a second full turn, and twisted the key once again. But the lock was broken and the key kept turning like a windmill on a prairie.

“What the hell?” Marazzi said close to despair.

“Isn’t it working?” Lisa asked.

“Wow, that’s a remarkably keen observation,” he said, “the lock has been forced.”

“But it did not open,” Lisa added, “that’s good, it means they couldn’t get in.”

“Not this way, at least.” He replied. “There’s a security lock which only opens from the inside. Back off, I’ll have to kick the door.”

He stepped back and proceeded fiercely as announced. The door forfeited to provide any further resistance and they finally got inside.

The lights were on. Everything seemed to be in order and in place. The portrait photograph of Jackie Kennedy did definitely stand out on the coffee table in the living room, as usual. No signs of struggle or an emergency runaway were noticeable.

“Stay here, I’ll check the rooms”, Marazzi said.

“I’m not going anywhere, you moron”, Lisa replied in a low voice.

Marazzi walked through the hallway quietly. He entered the kitchen. The lights were off in there and he tried to reach for the switch on the wall, but it did not work.

He pulled his golden lighter again from his pocket and made it lit his way while walking in. The pieces of the window glass already spread throughout the floor cricked at his feet.

“Somebody broke in through the kitchen window,” Marazzi said.

“Oh my god! I think we should really call the police now,” Lisa replied.

“Oh, woman, you’re never gonna get it, are you?” Marazzi added, refusing himself to explain the obvious once again.

He returned over his steps and continued to move forward. He glanced into the bathroom. There were no steam leftovers in the mirror nor droplets in the lavatory, as if it had not been used for a while already.

He found no signs of Carla in her bedroom or anywhere else. Her bed looked just like freshly made. However, over the night table he found a note. The note was brief, handwritten, and weighted by a pair of dice from the craps at the Jewel. He sat on the bed and read it in anxiety:

“Carla is paying us a visit. You should get those dice rolling and join us too.”

No signature was needed. Even though it looked like Padrone’s handwriting, this was not about the golden lighter. “Frankie Dice” Corozzo was undoubtedly the mind behind that note.

He remembered that day, while still working for the family under Padrone, when he unwillingly mentioned a thing or two that he knew, and perhaps he shouldn’t have known. Eyebrows went up inquisitively in Corozzo’s face towards Padrone, shoulders went up cluelessly in Padrone’s torso as a response, and Marazzi realised he might have better kept those tidbits for himself, but it was already too late.

That had been enough for Corozzo letting him know that he considered him too nosey: “You should mind your own business and thus live longer”.

Crystal clear. And that he had done: start his own business away from the family. And now they wanted their share?

Indeed. There was still the “tribute” unwritten rule. And rules in the mafia code are not to be taken optional, regardless of any legitimate ambition you -or your girlfriend- may have.

“You, suckers!” Marazzi thought.

But of course Corozzo would not be holding Carla, or anybody else, ever, at his own place. That’s what *soldatos* like Padrone are for: to do the dirty work like abducting a rogue associate’s mistress and delivering unexpected party invitations. Capos must be kept out of reach as much as possible. After all, they were once *soldatos* too, they know better



already, and they have accumulated enough blood on their hands to spare some for the wannabes.

Marazzi got back to the living room. Lisa was still there, shaking like a bowl of jelly in the hands of a Parkinson patient.

“They took Carla.” Marazzi said. “Probably at least a couple of days ago. And they got out the same way they got in. They surely wanted to keep the door locked from the inside and avoid being seen on their way out.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Bobby! I insist, we ought to call...”

“No, honey, we won’t,” interrupted Marazzi. “She’ll be safe, don’t worry. It’s me the one they want.”

He knew there were not many options to choose from. In fact, there were none. He went to the bathroom and opened the bath-tube’s hatch. His hand pulled a brand new silenced pistol he reserved for a special occasion, sincerely expecting never having to use it. Ever.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Lisa said.

He checked the weapon to make sure it had a full charge and hid it in under his garments.

“Minding my own business,” he replied. “And you should do the same.”

Having said that, he went out after his car and eagerly departed towards Padrone’s place. He would not turn off the lights anymore when approaching his destination. They were expecting him, anyway.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

*by Victoria Griesdoorn*

Marazzi rolled the car past Padrone's house. Up the drive, he had a clear view of the dining room and lounge at the front of the house. No light or movement there.

He pulled up forty yards down the street. Marazzi turned off the engine and lit a cigarette. After bellowing out the first draw, he rolled it repeatedly between thumb and forefingers. He listened to the dull ticking noises of the metal car cooling down. The bulbous streetlights paved him in a soft orange glow. Marazzi looked over at the house. He rolled open the window to flick out the wasted fag. The night air felt warm but stale on the back of this throat.

Padrone must have Carla in the study or a bedroom, behind the lounge. They're not in the kitchen or the area behind the dinin' room, or he'd have seen the light spillin' through the glass inner doors.

Marazzi rested his head on the doorframe for a second, then got out of the car and walked back to the drive. Padrone knew he was comin'. The note was not for nothin'. It was an invitation. A written come-on-over. There was no point pretendin' he wasn't showin'.

Marazzi walked up the drive, making sure to stay in the shadows cast by the shrubs. Padrone must have more johns in there than just Carla and himself. He was showin' alright, but he wasn't ringin' the doorbell, neither. No need to put himself out of the game like that.

Marazzi halted when he came to the corner of the building. There was no-one around. He crossed to stand at the lounge window and turned the corner, keeping as close to the house as possible. He crouched when he neared the study. There was light spilling out and he could see movement inside. Someone's standin' at the desk, messin' with some papers. Tommy Ricambi. Figures.

The coarse upholstery of the couch was uncomfortable on Carla's legs. The rope around her wrists and ankles was getting old too. She sighed. The dude at the bottom of the pecking order stood at the desk, randomly examining stuff from the desk. He chewed gum as if it was a mildly painful experience.

Carla shifted her gaze to the other two guys in the room. They were sitting in identical armchairs of the same brilliant blue, scratchy fabric. The one in charge, Frankie Corozzo, looked back at her. She directed her question to the other joe, Luca Padrone. Carla nodded to the dude at the desk, "are you okay with that?"

Padrone shifted his eye to her, then to Tommy.

Grabbing a framed photo, desk guy opened his mouth wider than necessary, the gum clearly visible. "Ah, Padrone don't mind that I look around... Do ya, Padrone? He knows I get bored easy." Tommy nodded at Padrone then at the picture in his hand. It was a photo of Padrone with two women and a young boy. The adults looked ready for a night on the town. The kid was wearing a batman costume. "Hey Padrone, nice suit! Who were you? Alfred?" The inflection in his voice suggested

amusement, but there was no smile on Tommy's face.

"That's my wife's nephew last Halloween," Padrone said. Carla noticed no emotion as he walked over to Tommy, took the picture and set it back on the desk. But for a second Padrone's finger lingered on the frame.

"So this is your place," Carla said, looking at Padrone's back. She hadn't said it as a question, and it wasn't meant to be one.

"Yes," he said, without facing her.

"If you were in my establishment, I would make sure you were comfortable."

Padrone turned and pursed his lips. He raised an eyebrow. Carla looked pointedly at her tied wrists.

"I can give you a cup of coffee. Will that make you shut up?"

"Not exactly what I had in mind," she mumbled, as she found Corozzo looking at her, peering over his folded hands at his chin. Carla attempted to sit up straighter, scratching the back of her leg.

"Tommy, go fix the lady a coffee," Padrone said.

Ricambi tossed the Rolodex he was holding back onto the desk and made his way out. "There best be summat around to stiffen up that drink, or *she* ain't gonna be the obnoxious one," he said, closing the door behind him.

Marazzi opened the back door and stalked into the utility room. He hadn't expected it to be locked. Nobody's dumb enough to enter here uninvited. He peered through the open inner door into the kitchen area. The breakfast bar had a dated diner look, with high chairs and a Formica-topped table. The kitchen behind it, in light blue panelling, stood out against the black and white checkered linoleum. It could do with a more modern ensemble.

From where he was he could see into the hall and lounge, but not the study. As he made to cross to the kitchen, Marazzi heard a door open, saw light building from the kitchen door and heard Tommy say; "...*she* ain't gonna be the obnoxious one."

Marazzi shot back into the utility room and took his piece from his waistband. He watched Tommy hit the kitchen light, open the pantry door and take out a tin of coffee beans. Tommy crossed to the grinder and Marazzi heard a hollow tinkling as the chute was filled with beans. Tommy checked the coffee machine for water while the grinder made a god-awful racket. Masked by the noise from the labour-saving appliance, Marazzi walked up to Tommy and stuck his piece in the man's back. "Ciao, compare."

"Ahh... Bobby. There you is. Knews you weren' gonna be long," Tommy said in his wide-mouthed, amused tone.

"Take me to Carla," was the only reply Marazzi offered.

"They is in the study. Corozzo an Padrone an all." Tommy started toward the hall, then grabbed hold of Marazzi's head, shook and patted it as if the two just scored a field goal after a tricky play.

Marazzi stuck his piece between Tommy's ribs. "Now, goddammit!"

When the door to the study opened and Marazzi stepped in, shielded by Tommy, he saw three people look up. They sat together on the three-piece conversational grouping. Padrone smiled a crooked grimace. Corozzo exclaimed a soft, "ah!" behind his folded hands, which did nothing to hide his amusement. But Bobby's eyes were roving Carla. Her hands and feet were tied, but she looked swell. She emitted a genuine smile, with her eyes alight. Then indicated her bonds, exasperated.

"You alright, babe?" Marazzi's voice was husky with relief.

She curled her nose in delight. "I'm good, Bobby."

Marazzi bore into Padrone with a glare. "Is this how we do this

now?” His anger formed in his gut. “You go for my girl now? A comare?”

Padrone smirked as he got up from his armchair and laid a hand on Carla’s shoulder, who was attempting to wriggle her wrists out of the bond. “Clearly we needed your attention. And we got it.”

Marazzi seethed at the gesture, touching his butt of his piece to his forehead. Marazzi saw Tommy glance down before putting his piece back in place against the dude’s ribs. “Okay, so the wives are fair game now. Good to know. Next time I want *your* attention, I’ll take Jenny for a stroll.”

Padrone made a start, as if lunging at Marazzi. Corozzo held up his hand to stop Luca. “I want this done and over with tonight, boys.” Carla frowned. The man’s voice was softer and more polished than she remembered.

“I’m sorry we got your beau involved, Bobby. But she is unharmed, eh?” Corozzo turned to Carla and nodded expectantly. Carla looked from Corozzo to Bobby and back. She nodded.

Corozzo got to his feet. “I want a truce,” he continued. He stepped over to Marazzi. “I want this to end. Now.” Corozzo took the piece from Marazzi. “Tonight.” Corozzo smiled and dropped the gun in Carla’s hands. “Here. Now she can defend herself. And we can agree.” He grinned.

Carla swallowed and held the gun away from her, pointed at the ground. Marazzi looked from Carla to Corozzo to Padrone.

Padrone’s scowl was back. He threw his head back. “Capo. Really! A truce...”

Corozzo glared at him and raised his voice. “I will have it!”

Padrone threw himself back into his armchair and waved indiscriminately. “Sure, a truce. Why not?”

“And since this is your house and she is your guest, you will take the young lady home now,” Corozzo said, with a smile in his voice.

Padrone blanched. “Of course, why not?”

He moved over to the couch, where he set to untying the rope around Carla’s feet. He did the same for her wrists and drew her onto her feet by her elbow. Carla stumbled over to Marazzi with the gun held loosely in both hands, as if they were still bound. He took his piece back from her and kissed the angry red marks on her arms. “You’ll be fine now. Padrone will take you safely home.”

“Okay,” she smiled. She kissed him before being led out of the house.

The sound of opening and closing of cabinet doors came from behind Marazzi, from the direction of the desk. Tommy was rummaging again.

Marazzi lent back against it and folded his arms, sinking his head with a sigh. “I can’t do it, ya know. There’s no workin’ with him.”

Corozzo pursed his lips and clenched his jaw. “I hear you.”

A metal rasping sounded from the cap, as Tommy poured himself a drink. Evidently Padrone kept a bottle in his study.

Marazzi whisked away the glass and winked at Tommy. “Thanks.” Corozzo chuckled, as Tommy pulled up his shoulders and settled himself on the couch, swigging the bottle.

“So...,” Corozzo repeated, “you can’t work together.”

Marazzi put the empty glass down and refolded his arms, staring at his feet. “That’s right.”

Corozzo pulled up an eyebrow. “Then how about we create a vacancy?”

Marazzi’s chin shot up, looking the Capo straight in the eye. “A vacancy?”

“Yeah. Perhaps we can even wrangle you a promotion.”

Tommy looked between the two men. Then swigged the bottle again.

“A promotion.” A smirk extended across Marazzi’s face, matching the dark glint in his eye. “All right.”

“In that case...,” Corozzo said, while getting to his feet, “I have a job for you tomorrow.” He sidled over to Marazzi and squeezed his shoulder.

Marazzi tipped his forefinger to his brow. “Sir.”