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Accidental Son

I was enrolled in a new class being offered seniors in our high school. The title was ETHICS and was being taught by my very brave home room teacher, Miss Fallon

I use the word brave because one of the first topics was political and civic morality and my home town leaders needed that lesson

Everyone knew that our city council and mayor are strongly influenced by “The Family.”

I’ve heard my dad talk with his friends about The Family connections. One of the men said that they recruited some of the younger members of the late Torino and Capone organizations.

Racketeering was widespread and open. Only a deaf and blind person could miss the obvious. Gamblers came from many other communities to play in our wide open, if illegal, casinos. The same could be said for visitors to our ten houses of prostitution

Like most poor communities, the numbers game was played by a majority of our adult citizens and run by The Family.

I recently looked up the word racketeering which is defined as the act of offering of a dishonest service to solve a problem that wouldn't otherwise exist without the enterprise offering the service.

Activity may include kidnapping, extortion, money laundering, loan sharking, obstruction of justice and bribery singly or in combination.

According to my dad, some of each was rampant in our town, although there had been no kidnapping as of yet.

Citizens never used the word Mafia but the meaning was understood.

This particular organization covered the Tri-state district of southwestern Pennsylvania, southeastern Ohio and a corner of West Virginia.

A forty something handsome Italian by the name of Guido Balisteri was the operating head of The Family, probably acting on behalf of his father, who was imprisoned.

Part I

Chapter 1.

My name is Marco Cascio.

It was during my senior year in high school that I discovered that life has a way of providing opportunities in the strangest ways.

A friend of mine, Chris Columbus, loved to play pool. He always had money to treat me to a Coke, take his girl to the movies and pay pool. These were activities for which I had no money.

I ran into him one evening during my senior year just after a trip to the public library. “Hi Marco. Do you have time for a game of pool?”

“Yeah, but no money to play.”

“No problem. I need the company and have the dough to treat you.”

“I never played pool. You’ll have to teach me.”

Ten minutes later, I was learning to hold a cue stick and learning the rudiments of “Rotation”, Nine-Ball” and how to put ‘English; on the cue ball.

It was three evenings later, a Saturday, hat I had a surprise experience. I was about to sink the Nine ball for a victory when I heard someone calling.in a stentorian voice “Hey kid, you with curly hair, Come here.”

I felt the shiver run down my spine. That voice did not sound friendly. It was loud, stern and commanding.

The call came from the glassed in area at the rear of billiards area. Chris explained to me that the area was forbidden to any but high stakes poker players

With a slightly shaking hand, I gently placed down my cue stick and hustled to the doorway of the card room. In an accent that was similar to but not as pronounced as my grandfather’s, he said, “Bring us five Cokes. Tell Joe to put it on my tab, Guido’s tab. Bring them in and don’t open until I tell you.”

I had the feeling he was in a hurry and scrambled to do my best. I started back but Joe added a bottle opener, just in case.

I stood at the doorway. “Put them on the table and wait.”

The only persons in the room were two dark suited, husky men with bulges showing from under their jackets. I was sure they were revolvers. One stood at his back, eyeing the players and the other off to the side watching out the window.

The poker hand was over and Guido was not pulling the pot toward him. “Dammit. I was sure three aces would take the pot. Okay, kid. Open the Cokes.”

A few minutes later, I was holding firmly to a half dollar piece, twice the weekly allowance my dad gave me.

For me that was a fortune. I could buy an ice cream cone for a nickel, a milk shake for a dime and see a Saturday movie matinee for a dime.

Chris, who played pool five days a week, told me that Mr. Balisteri played cards every Wednesday and Saturday from seven-thirty to ten

An hour after delivering the Cokes, I was called again and earned another half dollar tip.

Sure enough, it was a few minutes after ten that the poker game came to an end.

I was home before my eleven o'clock curfew.

The editor of our local newspaper was fiercely independent and extremely critical of our local city fathers. His small plant was twice partially trashed by supposed members of The Family, although that was never to be proved. .

That didn't stop the paper printing editorials and stories that severely criticized the administration and its obvious connections

I stopped by the paper and got permission to use the morgue. I wanted as much personal information on Guido as I could find. I figured that old news stories were one source.

There wasn't much but I discovered that he graduated high school and had enrolled at Pitt some years later. The next item with his name was the story of his

father being sent to prison for racketeering. The mention of Guido was in form of a question. Would he be the next Capo?

His name does not appear again for a couple of years.

The deduction I made was that at a young age he was accepted as the new head. From the dates of the stories I gathered that he must have been in his mid or late twenties.

Chapter 2.

The following could have described any of my friends, whose grandparents were born in France, Syria, Sicily, Latvia, Finland or Russia. In this respect I could have been anyone of a half dozen kids with whom I grew up.

It so happens that my grandparents were born in Southern Italy. Both families lived in the province called Calabria. The families were not known to each other but both families migrated to the United States in the early 1900's, settling in the same steel manufacturing town.

Both came for economic opportunities, since both were of the peasant class. My dad's father did not want to become American, remaining a loyal Italian all his life. Before WWII, he was a great fan of Mussolini.

Both families settled in a small city, in the western part of Pennsylvania, 30 miles south of Pittsburgh. My hometown consisted of about 20,000 people, 40% Eastern Europeans, 40% Southern Europeans and 20% English, Irish and Northern Europeans.

Most men worked in one of four factories. Two were steel plants, one a cable factory and one a foundry. Some worked in the surrounding coal mines.

When a plant or a mine closed down, those employees were in dire financial straits. That was the case in 1937-38 in the midst of the great recession that followed the Great Depression.

Before Congress adopted the Wagner act, establishing the right of union organizing and bargaining, employment was purely at the will or whim of the employer.

I have a vivid picture of my younger years during which I saw my father arriving home after a day on the picketing line, having been beaten by company police while county sheriff deputies and local police watched from the side lines.

I can remember taking some food to him during the 1937 sit-ins at the local mill, the first strike in my hometown after union bargaining became legal.

During the first ten years of my life, I experienced a great deal of joy but the Great Depression arrived in the middle of my tenth year.

Being poor never seemed to bother me in any serious way. In fact, I had experiences that enhanced my maturity. I had to help my dad do gardening, go with him to pick berries on the farms nearby, make daily trips to get milk and bread from the government handout station.

On Saturdays I had to get flour and meat rations. Most of this going for food happened during my early teen years.

Because my grandmother was not always well, my dad did the washing on Mondays and I learned to do the ironing on Tuesdays.

I should explain that I was raised by my Gramma. I never knew my mother who had died before I was a year old.

On the neighborhood sandlot I was competitive and learned the basics of all the sports really well, becoming the captain and sometimes derided as the 'coach', even though I kept emerging as the captain.

I was an outstanding student in the parochial school, almost always at the head of my class and, therefore, allowed to skip class when the priest wanted me for special singing or altar boy duties

I got involved in some fist fights, nearly always to defend someone against a bully of sorts. I also took umbrage when some of the Irish or English kids referred to me as a Dago. I was proud of my Italian roots, especially as I read about the great contribution my people made to the arts.

As was the custom in those days, the best students were chosen for all kinds of opportunities, like being in most of the school plays, being chosen to run errands, chosen to do special readings in front of the class.

I was usually in competition with a girl named Maria, who was the apple of the eye of Sister Ann. For reasons I can no longer fathom, this Sister seem to pick on me which, of course, caused wise ass comments from me and a tension that lasted for two years.

She was the only Sister I had trouble with. All the others seemed to root for me without trying to show it too openly.

In most ways, I arrive at my late teen years probably no more screwed up than my contemporaries. Trying to take stock, I decided that I was a smart student, a high achiever, fiercely competitive, caring for others, especially underdogs.

For a teenager I lacked one important asset I rarely had enough money take a girl to the movies.

My father would not let me take a job because he “never wanted his son to work with his hand.” He wanted me to spend my time studying so that I could make my living with brains not brawn.

Chapter 3.

I was waiting for Chris to arrive when the local Mafia group arrived for the poker game. It was obvious that Guido was the big cheese. Every one catered to him in every respect except at the gaming table where all were on equal terms.

As the clock on the wall was about to display eight thirty I stopped our billiard game and looked toward the glass cage. Precisely at eight thirty Guido called me and simply nodded. A few minutes later, I was standing at the table awaiting his orders to open the Cokes. No one seemed to object when I didn't leave but stayed to watch the poker game

Just before the game to an end, I noticed about ten rough looking thugs gathered just inside the entry. They seemed to be waiting for the poker game to end.

Guido looked up and saw the men .He frowned, stood up and looked at me and nodded for me to leave. As I left the card room, the thugs began to take my place.

I paused to chat with Joe, only to see what was happening in the card room. I watched Guido addressing the group for only a minute. When he reached for his hat, I scooted out the front door.

I was a dollar richer and still on time to make curfew. On the way home, I tried to see if I could recall any faces only two stood out, one with a scar that reached from he left ear to his lip and one with a hair lip.

It seems silly in retrospect but I wanted to bury those four half-dollar coins. I had never felt so wealthy.

I had a source of income but it had to remain a secret. No way could I tell my strict Catholic Gramma that I was playing pool and hustling drinks for a Mafioso.

One of the significant by-producers of the need to keep Dad from discovering my secret was a heightened desire to study more and become a better student in my Gramma's eyes.

In fact, I became a straight A student and then at graduation finishing in the top five of my class.

After a few months of hustling Cokes, Guido asked me if I could rack ten pins in the bowling alley for him on Saturday afternoons. I knew the tips would be significant and wanted to say yes. I told him I would give him an answer next Wednesday.

At home I went to work on Dad explaining that I could earn some money to take a date to the movies and buy her a milk shake. Dad and Gramma liked Maria and was sure Maria would not let me get into 'trouble'.

Gramma finally gave me the green light for Saturday afternoons only.

A month or so later, Maria was waiting for me outside the bowling and billiards hall. Guido walked out with me, his cortege following.

When he saw Maria walk up to me, he asked us, "Would you let me buy you a sundae at the Palace of Sweets? I usually treat myself every Saturday. Some young company would be a nice change."

I looked at Maria who was blushing but gave me a nod.

Guido insisted we call him Guido, saying with a smile, "My father is Mr. Balisteri."

Guido was an easy conversationalist, sort of surprising me. His accent was faint and his grammar was quite good. He was knowledgeable of local affairs, occasionally referring to his friends, the mayor and two of the councilmen.

Later in the conversation I deduced that he was on close terms with our congressman and state senator. Most of the information was elicited by Maria, whose father had political ambitions.

Business was brisk that afternoon. The crowd was noisy. My ears picked up a voice that being disruptive instead of happy like the rest of the patrons. I looked

toward the waiting line and noticed the source of the voice. A man was pushing past the young lady hostess who was attempting to restrain the man.

I thought I heard him say. "I'm not staying."

A warning bell sounded in my mind. Just before the incident, Guido has risen and called his two henchmen for some kind of conversation

The mouthy man was hustling directly toward the conversing trio who were unaware of his approach.

The man was putting his hand in his pocket. I yelled to get Guido's attention and ran directly toward the intruder who screamed at me. "Get out of the way, stupid. I want that sonovabitch"

He started to take a swing at me. I put up my arm to block his fist but was pushed aside as Guido's men had come to the rescue. One of them put an arm lock on the intruder and hustled him out of eh restaurant.

"Thank you, Marco. That took guts. It also was not wise."

"When I saw his hand moving toward his pocket, I acted instinctively."

"Thank you. Let's have some more coffee. I owe you."

"By the way I noticed that you have been observing our card games. You have probably learned that that it is not a pure game of chance but includes skill and psychology. It's an import skill to acquire, just like chess. It may serve you well in addition to making some gambling money."

Saturday afternoons of bowling and treats at the Palace of Sweets became a weekly event. No matter how crowded, Guido's body guards always managed to have his back. That was the uncomfortable part of what were enjoyable afternoons.

I learned a lot about local politics and another side of my sweet Maria. She loved to discuss politics and was a rabid member of the high school Democrats. She knew a lot about the shady side of local politics and spoke openly with Guido.

There were times when I felt like a fifth wheel in their presence. I was impressed with the 'new' Maria.

One of those afternoons when Maria was unable to be with us, Guido asked me, “Marco, do you have a summer job after graduation?”

“Not yet. Things are still slow.”

“Maria said that you know how to type and take shorthand.”

I nodded. “How would you like a part time job until you find something full time?”

The first thought that came to mind was, “My Gramma will not like that. She raised me to be a good boy and stay away from gangs and gangsters.”

I hesitated just long enough to create a question from Guido. “Are you worried about working for our infamous organization?”

“Yes, sort of. My grandmother certainly would not approve.”

“You don’t strike me as a boy tied to his mom’s apron strings.”

“That’s true but I have been raised to honor my family elders and I owe a lot to both who have made great sacrifices for me.”

“All right. I respect that. I have interests in legitimate businesses I get reports on a weekly basis. What is needed is someone to set up a file system, create folders for specific subjects and the various businesses, use the phone or write for clarifications of reports that are not clear.”

“Would I be reporting directly to you?”

No. I don’t spend much time in an office. My business manager is Fred Fox. He will give you instructions. He thinks the job will take about thirty hours a week.”

I was feeling pretty good about the offer. If I said yes, at least I could tell Gramma that I had a good job for the summer.

My mind was trying to sort out the implications. “It’s okay if you say no, Marco. Nothing else changes.”

“Sorry, Guido. I was just trying to think through the offer. I want to say yes for several reasons, including the fact that I can use the money. For whom will I be working directly?”

“The corporate name is Future Corp. If your answer is yes, you can start work the Monday after graduation. By the way, where are you going to college?”

“I will definitely want the job. As to college, I haven’t any plans for this year. All the scholarship offers left the remaining costs beyond my means.”

Guido seemed to go off someplace else for a minute. ”Hmm.”

Maria and I had a date for the early movie after grabbing a couple of borsers at the White Castle I had told Gramma not to expect me for dinner.

We sat in the balcony and spent more time making out than watching the movie, Broadway Melody of 1938. I realized that recently Maria was urging us into heavier petting, a surprise change from the “sweet Maria” of our earlier years.

We were going to her home where we would have a light dinner with her folks. When we arrived, her mom was gracious and welcoming as usual but her dad, as usual, was cool and remote.

Dinner conversation was mostly between mother and daughter. As soon as the meal was over, Mom said, “We’re going to the movies. Danny will be home by eight. “

The scowl her dad gave me was saying “You’d better behave until Danny arrives.”

Maria excused herself for a brief period, retuning with change of blouse, this one cut low and revealing her beautiful unsupported by a bra breasts. She saw my stare and laughed. “I was sure that would get your attention. “

She went to the record player and spun Tommy Dorsey ‘s version of Song of India.”

She pulled me in tight, pressing her breast into mine and her lower body right up against my arousal. She moved away, gave me a wide grin, turned her

body round and moved her back into my chest. Her hands were moving mine to cup her breasts.

My body heat was reaching a new high when the phone rang. Maria went into the next room to answer the phone.

I heard her talking but not hearing her words. When she hung up, I heard her ascending the stairs.

It must have been ten minutes before she returned. Without saying a word, she took my hand and led me down to the play room.in the basement

“The call was from Danny. He won’t be here until ten thirty. Marco, we are about to fulfill our silent dream. I've been doing a lot of reading and ready to put into practice the art of making love. Ready?”

It would have made no difference if I chose otherwise. This was not the sweet Maria of my past, but a young woman determined to take us to a new land.

I said, “Busting with desire but scared. Aren’t you scared of getting pregnant?”

“Not if, when the time is ready, you let me put this condom on your prick.” She took me to the long sofa.

Maria was ten miles ahead of me, having done her homework. It took us a number of tries to get it right. She prepared me with, “We may get the timing all wrong the first time.”

We did and she chose to laugh it off and start all over again.

The problem with discovering this marvelous gift was to find a time and a place where we could renew the joy.

Kids, who live with their parents, have limited funds and the girls, with a brother determined to protect her virginity, have to get creative. We were dedicated but ham strung.

My Dad’s graduation gift was a small box with the key to our house. His words were, “We’ve done what we can to start you on the right path. No more

curfews. No questions but a willingness to listen and answer your question. Remember that we love you.”

Chapter 4.

I was given a good orientation and training by Mr. Fox. I was shown to a desk by a window adjoining a set of metal file drawers with combination locks. I was not given the combination. Mr. Fox held that combination to himself.

Future Corp was a wholesale distributor of various paper products such as writing paper, wrapping paper for stores, butchers paper for markets, paper bags and newspapers. Our clientele stretch fifty miles in all directions from our home base.

I was to learn, eventually, that all competition in that district had abruptly gone out of business a few years ago.

All through the summer, I never met any of our employees. Neither did I see Guido at work although I still set ten pins for him on Saturdays then adjourned to the Palace of Sweets.

Early in June I picked up some inside information. Maria was telling us that her dad was grateful for the early financial support from the Balisteri brothers for her dad's campaign for City Council.

We lingered after Guido left. We were planning on an early movie and a chance to be alone when Maria's folks went to a movie later.

“Maria, how do you feel about your dad's being a political bedfellow of Guido?”

“I’m okay with that. It’s better than living on starvation wages. Councilmen find special ways of making extra money.”

I decided not to pursue the subject because I was feeling uncomfortable. I was struggling with my own marginal participation in the Balisteri business.

Maria said, “Did you bring protection? My folks are planning to go to the movies and Danny is out of town. By the way, Mom knows about us. I admitted that I took a condom from the stash which she keeps in the cabinet on her side of the bed. I had to open a new pack.”

“Damn. What do I do when we see each other?”

“Act natural. The discovery gave us a chance to talk, something that Mom said was late coming. She told me of her teenage affairs. Notice I said affairs. She explained about counting the days between my periods and watching for increases in body temp, suggesting we play it safe even if we use protection.”

“By the way, when I walked into the Palace, you ad Guido wee finishing a conversation about tests. Do you want to share?”

“Sure He has arranged for five full scholarships, called state scholarships to be given to sons or daughters of voters in the valley. I am one of the twenty students taking the test.

“Well, I have no doubt that you will be going away to college this fall. I’m sure you will ace the test. I’ll have to find a new boyfriend.”

“By the way, Guido is lining me up for a well-paying part time job. He wants me to have plenty of spare time to work on Daddy’s campaign. He said that he is determined to see that Daddy wins the election.”

“He wants me to get my driver’s license. He’s helping Daddy buy a newish used car and says we will have some sigs to hang on the sides and rear advertising Daddy’s campaign. Isn’t that great?”

I nodded while thinking that her family was a willing captive of the Tristate Mafia. I had discovered Guido’s connections when talking with Uncle Mike who

was dabbling in local politics and hoping to elect a very honest candidate in another council district.

Maria, after more research, was into experimenting that evening. She was also insatiable making me totally wrung out by the time I had to leave.

I did ace the scholarship qualification test. In fact, I finished twenty points higher than the next best.

Guido called me for a lunch date two days after the test. “I have the results. You’re bright, real bright. We need to talk.”

We had a corner table at Johnson’s restaurant I noticed two of his henchmen seated two tables away and no one at our adjoin table.

“Congratulations, Kid. Great job. Have you decided where you want to study?”

Some place where I can find part time work to earn living expenses.”

“Won’t your summer income be enough?”

“Almost. I want to have enough money to join a fraternity. I understand that relationships in fraternities can help one’s professional life.”

“Yeah, I heard that. Good thinking and planning ahead.”

“I want to thank you, Guido, for all your help. I would have had to delay a whole year if I did not have this scholarship.”

“You’re welcome, kiddo. Would you mind telling me more about your family and your high school years?”

I spent the next half hour telling of my close relationship with Gramma, explaining my mother’s early demise. When I concluded a brief survey of my high school activities and achievements, he thanked me.

He said, “I quit Pitt at the end of my sophomore year and regretted it. Later, when I had the money and some time, I hired tutors to broaden my understanding

of the world and how to deport myself with proper dress, good grammar and, I guess, you could call it civility.”

“You are the closest thing I have to the son I would have wanted. I’m sorry that your family would not understand or appreciate you’re working with me. I never had children much to my wife’s and my sorrow. You would love my Angela.”

“Perhaps I could meet her sometime.”

That would be nice. Maybe we can arrange that before summer is past.”

He continued, “We still have a few more Saturday dates before you will be leaving. Let me know your plans. Maybe I can help you find some part time work. If you choose Pitt or Penn in Philadelphia, I can definitely help.”

“What are you planning for major?”

“I’ve been talking about that with our vice principal who had been helpfully guiding me for the last two years. We have a tentative plan. I will register in the Business School and take my electives in a variety of liberal arts courses to broaden my education.”

“I don’t know anything about college but that sounds like good advice. You can become a polished business man.”

When we were polishing off chocolate sundae desserts, Guido handed me a business card. “That’s my direct line. If you have an emergency, then call, day or night. Think of me as your adopted father. I would be honored “

Now, stay and finish your coffee for a few minutes after I leave. I will call you when my Angela thinks she is ready for a visit.”

Looking out the window, I saw Guido talking with a good looking blond, six foot athletic type who looked to be about twenty five or so.

What I didn’t know were the private thoughts Guido was having as he walked to his car. “If I had a son, I think I would like him to be like young Marco Casci. That kid makes no judgments about my vocation and honors me as a respected elder even as he is aware of my family business.”

I had a confirmation of my suspicions last Wednesday. Gramma had asked me to buy a few handkerchiefs at a locally owned store downtown. I was in the rear, apparently forgotten by the owner.

I heard another customer enter. He was a tough looking man, who walked to the owner and asked, "Got the money?"

The owner mumbled, walked to the cash register, took out some bills and handed them to the man. As the man turned I saw the long scar that led from ear to lip. I remembered the thugs at the meeting weeks ago. To myself, "I just saw an extortion payoff."

The proprietor was surprised when I came forward to pay for the hankies. Realizing that I may have seen the payoff, he said, "It would be smart to forget what you saw."

I nodded and left, looking for the scarred thug. I moseyed along the street window shopping and saw him leaving the Palace and drapery store, looking very pleased with him.

I had a funny feeling, thinking about struggling merchants during a recessing, having to share part of their income with racketeers.

Up to this point, I hadn't even thought about the state of affairs in my hometown. I remember my dad brushing me off when I tried to point out the folly of playing the numbers game. Even when I reminded him that the odds of his winning were a thousand to one and that he would only collect paid six hundred for each unit he bought

I didn't even try to talk about his being a willing victim to a racket. He would not want to hear that even when he won, The Family still made a forty percent profit on the transaction.

I was curious about how a crime gang could operate so openly in my hometown. Over the years of schooling, I was taught that the law and its enforcement were about justice and protection of the citizens. What I was discovering was my new friend and benefactor was a honcho in a gang that controlled our town and could not be or would not be arrested for violating the law.

Uncle Julio was considered to be the wisest of all the men in our extended family, so I went to see if he could enlighten me.

“Marco, that’s a great question. There is a peculiarity in our commonwealth law that prevents the Pennsylvania State Police from enforcing the law within the city limits of an incorporated city with notification or permission of local enforcement or the city administration.”

“In our town, the mayor and most of the councilmen are friends of The Family. When the city fathers do agree to invite the State Police, The Family is notified and their activity is essentially shut down. They do allow a few underlings to operate so that the State Police make some arrests.”

“When the police operation is over, life returns to the norm. The money of The Family buys a lot of protection.”

I walked away with a lot to think about.

Guido was standing just outside the Palace entry when I arrived on the following Saturday. Three men were walking away, one waving goodbye to Guido.

We walked in, followed by the same two men that accompanied us to the restaurant. “Maria won’t be with us today. She is busy politicking. I was hoping that today was a good day for your visit to see my Angela.”

I smiled. He had been serious “Great. This is a good day. I have no other plans.”

Guido smiled. I thought I saw a glimmer of moisture in his eyes but he buried his face in the menu.

“Have you made a decision?”

“Yes. I have applied to University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.”

“I hear it is a great university and has very powerful alumni.”

“So I’ve heard. What appeals to me is the opportunity to get exposed to a great liberal arts program and then a grad course in business administration. I will need to put away some real dough for that fifth year but it looks doable.”

“Marco, with your brains and drive, nothing is impossible. Congratulations.”

I was flattered by his comment and thanked him. “What time do you want me to come to meet Mrs. Balisteri?”

“Why don’t I have Tony pickup up at six? By the way, do you have any snapshot of yourself when you were about five or six?”

“I do.”

“Would you bring one or two with you?”

“No problem.” I couldn’t help wonder what that was about.

I was surprised, having no idea that any homes existed in the wooded area on the tops of the highest hill in my hometown. The driveway must have been a half mile long after we passed through the guard’s gate built into the ten foot wall

Tony parked the car on the side of the house. We ascended a short set of stairs to a porch, then walked to the main entry way. It seemed like a strange entrance to this palatial home.

I was to find out later that the porch was the roof of another guard station, manned by three armed guards with tow thirty caliber machine guns.

The door was opened by a husky butler just as I approached the entry. “Welcome, Mr. Marco. May I present you to Mrs. Balisteri?”

A beautiful smile was welcoming me. She was beautiful, her shining black hair pulled back into a chignon, her green eyes sparkling and her modulated voice saying, “I’ve been hearing so much about you from Guido.”

What really shocked me was the wheel chair in which she was seated. “If you please, you may wheel me to the sitting room. Guido is on the phone and will join us shortly.”

The butler led us to the sitting room where I placed the wheel chair next to an armchair as she directed.

“May I offer you a small glass of wine? I know you are underage but it is permissible in the privacy of a home.”

I nodded and in an instant the butler was handing me my first alcoholic beverage.

Angela was saying, “It’s a new variety, shipped in from California. It is now my favorite.”

With the first taste, I understood. It was nectar of the gods.

It was forty minutes before Guido joined us. In that time, Angela, who insisted I call her by her first name, had squeezed more information from me that Guido had in all the hours we spent together. She probed my mind about my hopes for my future and my feelings about growing up without a mother.

She was effervescent, thanking Guido for bringing this engaging young man into her life. She turned to me. “Marco, I hope I am not embarrassing you, but this is the nicest thing to happen to me in years. I do hope you will come to visit often

She was the one who kept the conversation sparkling through the dinner and the delayed dessert serving. I discovered that she had gone to a finishing school, not a university. She, however, was well read and steeped in national public affairs.

She laughed when she said, “There isn’t much else to do when you are a princess, the daughter of the head of a Family and married to the prince.”

I was a bit stunned as she spoke so frankly. Noting the expression on my face, which I was slow to mask, she giggled.

Her tone grew somber. “It was not the life that I would have chosen but it is the life into which I was born. My only regret is that Guido and I, who have a great personal love life, have no children to fill out our lives.”

Guido rose and stepped out of the room for a moment. He returned and hand a framed picture to Angela.

I saw a tear forming in her eye as she took the picture and pressed it to her heart. She did not try to stem the flowing tears that followed.

Guido asked me, “Did you bring the snap shots?”

I nodded and reached for the envelope in my inside jacket pocket. Within seconds of viewing the snap shots, Guido and Angela were gushing tears. Angela handed me the framed picture.

I could not help the gasp that escaped my lips. The resemblance was so strong that I could have been seeing my brother at that age.

Guido broke the silence “I hadn’t paid an attention to the kid who was bringing cokes but I had a good look at you the day we went to the Palace of Sweets. I began thinking that our Mario would have looked like you if he had lived. When I finally mentioned the fact to Angela, she insisted I invite you.”

Angela had finally wiped away the tears. “Based on all that Guido has told me of you and what you so openly told me today, you are everything I would have wanted our son to be at your age.”

I could feel myself blushing. I didn’t feel I deserved the compliment that she was offering but she had touched me. I wanted to do what I could for the princess who had lost her only child.

I don’t recall where my mind travelled but Guido’s voice was breaking through. “I have cursed that drunken driver a thousand times. He took our son away and left my sweet Angela in that damned wheel chair.”

“Hush, dear one. It has been a dozen or so years and time to forget and forgive.”

“You may be willing but—“

Angela was saying, “Hush, honey. I don’t mind the wheel chair. I only regret that I cannot give you another son.”

Her voice broke and the tears were flowing again. It was Guido who broke the silence that accompanied the tears.

“Marco, I am sure that Angela would agree with my asking. Would you like to come to dinner next Saturday? Angela is a complete game player, especially cards. You could bring a date, if you wish.”

I did not take long to answer. I looked at Angela, “I’d be delighted to come but no date. I was sure I saw approval in Angela’s eyes when I said I’d come alone.

As I reflected on the evening, one question stood out for me. “How could a man who loved so deeply be the same Mafioso with his reputation for ruthlessness?”

Guido came by the office on Tuesday. “Marco Angela wanted to know if you could come earlier on Saturday. I could take you directly after our Saturday bowling and date at the Palace. “

“No problem. I will get all my chores done early in the day and tell Grumman I have a date for dinner. She will be pleased if she thinks it is with Maria.”

“Speaking of Maria, she hasn’t been with us recently. Have you two broken it off?”

My laugh was a little less than hearty. “Yes. She has two new loves, politics and Tony, who is a hell of a lot better looking than I.”

Guido took me the news and then said.” You deserve better. She probably will take after her mother.
Good riddance.”

That surprised me. What did he know about her mother? What did he mean by “you deserve better”?

Angela had a photo album that she wanted me to see. It was all the pictures of Mario starting with the nude baby pics through the day he started school.

When she closed the album, she said, “I missed the experience of a son telling me of his days at school, his success or failures in sports, his friends or the

kids that he didn't like. Would you be willing to tell me stories of your growing up?"

She listened to my stories as if I were the greatest story teller in the world. A few were exciting such as a fist fight during a softball game or the no hit game I pitched and relived again as I told the story. Most were routine kid stuff, making "ants or failing a quiz. My first kiss. No matter the subject, she sat, seemingly captured by my stories.

After dinner she thrashed Guido and me in a game of cut throat pinochle and whipped me in a game of gin rummy.

I spent all the Saturday evenings in August having dinner with the two of them. Twice, Guido was called away during dinner, leaving the two of us alone.

She was interested not only in my plans but why and how I got to those plans. She teased me about having no girlfriends and laughingly said she ought to get me a date. "The only problem is I only know princesses and you deserve better."

On the last Saturday, I had to promise to write a postcard at least once a month and come to dinner when I was home for the holidays. After a very loving hug, Angela handed me a small envelope.

"It's a savings pass book. Uncle Sisto started a savings fund for Mario when he was a year old. I haven't been to the bank since Mario died. I have no idea the amount but there is a note making you the sole owner of the account. Guido says to use it as your pin money."

Now, go before I start to bawl again."

Chapter 5.

I haven't said much about life at home because it was so wonderful routine. Gramma and I always had a great love relationship.

She was thrilled when I began earning some money since she and Dad had been so restricted with financial help during these last years.

She had actually cried when I brought the news of a full scholarship. She said, "I will miss seeing you every day. You have been a very good boy, never getting into serious problems, even when you started playing pool."

I did a double take. "How did you know about my going to the pool hall? I thought I was discreet."

"You were but I have my sources. As long as you never missed a curfew, I figured you weren't in any serious difficulty. Now, let's talk about letters."

“I promise to write regularly and I have another plan. Since you usually have dinner on Sundays with Aunt Mary, I will plan to make a phone call every other Sunday for a brief chat. How about that?”

She wrapped her arms around e. “You are a good boy. Now, grow up and do us proud.”

Besides clothes and some personal items and a few books, I packed some papers including his birth certificate, the bank book that Angela had given me and my black book of addresses, most of which were family members.

Maria was coming by to drive me to the Pittsburgh Pennsylvania Station to catch the eastbound Twentieth Century flyer.

She pulled up, in a new black Buick sedan she laughed when she saw the question mark on my face. “It’s Tony’s.”

She flashed her left hand to show him the diamond on her finger.

”We’re going to be married next week. It’s not widely known. For your ears only, I’m pregnant and we’re both glad. You know, he is a nephew of Guido. I’m not sure you meet him. Tall and light skinned, not like us He is handsome and something special in bed. Have you been seeing anyone?”

“Not really. I’ve been busy studying for the exam to win a scholarship. It’s paid off, obviously.”

During the ride, Maria asked questions of my plans beyond college. “You seem pretty tight with Guido. Are you planning to work with the family?”

“I doubt that. I like Guido personally and I make no judgments about his activities but it’s not my dish of tea.”

Maria grinned. “I like it and hope they let me be active instead of one of their princesses. I told Tony that I’d rather just live with him, unmarried, unless he lets me stay active on the political side.”

I wanted to know what that entailed but Maria switched the subject. “I hope you find some gal who treats you like I did. I want to thank you for being my first and letting me learn and experiment on you.”

By the end of the ride, I learned more about her life with Tony than I cared or should know. She certainly was not the sweet Maria my Gramma visualized.

I spent several hours of the long train ride studying the two books on poker that Guido had lent me. During the interval from Harrisburg, I had no seat partner, so I dealt out some poker hands with my new deck of cards.

The dormitory room was comfortably spacious. I had arrived before my roommate so I chose the shadier side of the room, marked off my half of the closet space and chose the top three drawers of the six drawer chest for my personal item storage. I chose the bottom drawer of the desk for my writing materials.

I was taught to be neat and hoped my roommate would be the same.

As it turned out, Johnny Johnson was a carefully groomed and neat roomie. He was a bit on the heavy side, obviously not into exercise and, as I discovered, always hungry.

As he breezed in, he put out his hand for a shake. “My friends call me JJ. I’m from Tenafly in northern New Jersey.”

He didn’t wait for me to respond but continued with, “My brother tells me I don’t snore and I hope you don’t. I plan to study pet-law and find some coeds who like to drop their pants.”

“How about you?”

I had decided to become Mark so I said, “Mark Cascio from a Pittsburgh suburb. I don’t think I snore and I plan to study business.”

JJ said, “You seem to be a neatnik and so am I. Looks like we lucked out.

I decided that the three days until classes began would give me ample time to find some part work. I knew that there was a staff member in the “Dean of Men’s office who assisted students to find either loans or jobs to help fund a student’s education.

He was busy but his secretary handed me a folder with pages of part time jobs available, some on campus and some in the city. I also picked up a copy of the *Philadelphian Inquirer* in order to scan the want ads

I was intrigued with the offer of a position as waiter in the faculty club (training provided). When I discovered that the remuneration was three free meals a day, five days a week, I made a beeline for the hiring office. Two and half hours work for my meals plus a share of the monthly tips contributed by faculty members when they paid their monthly bill.

The next afternoon I responded to an ad in the *Inquirer*. Freight Forwarding, Inc. needed a part time file clerk. (Some experience required.)

His office was only a fifteen minute walk from the campus. After just a brief interview, the manager said, “You’ll do. While our system is a bit different, you will use your learned skills easily. Thirty day trial. Hourly rate goes up a dime if you qualify.”

All that stood between me and matriculation was registration for courses.

I had just returned after making the all to Gramma two weeks after my arrival. JJ asked, “Would you be interested in playing poker with some of my friends. We were buddies from St. Lawrence two are sophomores and for of us freshmen. We play low stakes for two hours and then five dollar limit for two hours.”

“I haven’t played any poker other than low stakes.”

“That’s okay. Some of the guys never play during the second session.”

I went mostly to measure he skill level of the players. I lost four dollars, a lot of money for me, but got the measure of the others. There was no shark in the

crowd. In fact, after watching the players in the higher stakes session, I decided there wasn't even a decent poker player

I was invited back and became a regular. I managed to limit the amount I won on the following Sunday. When I was forty dollars ahead on the third Sunday, Tommy was pressing me to play in the higher stakes game "We need a chance to recoup."

I laughed. "Okay, but your own rules are that a winner can walk away anytime just like the gamblers do at Vegas."

"Yeah, yeah, but I feel my luck changing after winning the last pot."

The cards were good to me during the first hour and my stacks of chips were high. When my cards turned the other way, I intentionally bet foolishly so that some of my chips were spread around. I walked away losing a third of my earlier winnings. It turned out to be a good thing for me. Although I was a winner, the others saw me as the person to beat

I knew then that I would have a regular source of income because my moneyed friends would be playing me instead of playing poker.

Six weeks into the first term, the fraternizes began serious recruitment of pledges, prepaying for pledge week

JJ probed to see if I might be interested. He told me he was guaranteed a membership in Phi Gamma Delta, he being a fourth generation "Fiji"

I indicated an interest. . The next day he apologized. "Sorry Mark, I should have asked. The president guessed that you may me Roman Catholic. Fijis never invite Catholics. No hard feelings, Okay?"

I was disappointed, so on the spot I decided “to hell with Greeks.”

I aced all my exams and had a 4.0 report for the initial six week report and then precede end to the same for all four years.

Gramma and Dad were delighted with my reports during the Thanksgiving visit but it was Angela who made a fuss about my “coming home.”

“You brought the sunshine with you. I have been eagerly awaiting your visit ever since your note said you would be here. My heart jumped when I recognized your voice on the phon. Please remove your jacket and give me a hug.”

As her tears wet my cheek, she said, “Damn, I promised myself not to cry but I guess my joy is in command.”

Guido came forward to embrace and welcome me. “I’ll get us some wine.”

If Angela had her way, I would have to account for every minute since my last visit. She seemed to relish every detail. She laughed when I told her about my poor poker buddies and then cried when I told her about the fraternity rejection.

She was worried that I was working too many hours at Freight Forwarding in addition to long hours of study. “You must not be getting enough sleep.”

“How about fun? Have you a girl friend?”

“I’ve had few dares but nothing serious”

“Marco, you need a woman in your life. A young man your age should not be without female canonship” Her cheeks were tinged with a little blush but she continued, “You know what I mean.”

“Now let’s have more wine. Will you stay to dinner?”

I nodded. “Good.”

Guido was in good spirits at diner. He told us a few off color stories, the kind that Angela enjoyed.

Angela introduced the subject of the Christmas visit. “How does your family celebrate the day?”

I said, “About twenty of us gather at Aunt Mary’s on Christmas day.”

Guido said, “We do the same at my brother’s house.”

Angela asked, “Do you think you can spend Christmas Eve with just the two of us, Marco?”

There was no way to refuse that gentle request, even if I wanted. I very much wanted to be with her and Guido. Perhaps it was a feeling of finding a substitute mother who openly expressed her love for me.

“I’ll be here with bells on.”

Later as I wheeled her to the door and had donned my coat, she asked, “did you ever get to the bank with that savings book?”

I felt my face break into a blush. “I never did, I am so sorry. I will do that and telephone you.”

Her hug was as enthusiastic as ever.

“Angela, I can’t take that money. There is over five thousand dollars in that account with all the accumulated compounded interest.”

“It’s yours, Marco. It only belonged to my son and now you are that son. Use it to reduce your work hours and spend some of it on a woman who is kind to you.”

My boss at Freight Forwarding was of Northern Italian heritage. His name was Primo Como. The dialect was a little different but he kept trying to talk to me in Italian. I need to brush up when I have the chance.”

Almost from the beginning, he had taken a shine to me. When he saw how easily I took on the job, he offered more hours, more responsibility and more money, of course.

Two weeks after Thanksgiving, he asked, “how would you like to work weekends instead the hours we have scheduled?”

I assumed there would be more money so I said I was interested.

“Eighteen hours every weekend as the weekend manager not clerk. You are practically doing my job when you are here. With that responsibility, your income will be increase by half.

Your accounting knowledge had helped me and will be an asset in that new position.”

The grin on my face was a mile wide starting today and next session I will start briefing you and making sure you don’t miss anything. You have several weeks to prepare. I know you need to get home for Christmas so let’s set your start date as the first Saturday after New Year’s Day.”

“There is a long report form that you must leave for me each Sunday night. I also need how to call you in case of a question.”

While the promotion was earned and deserved, I had no way knowing that phone calls had sped up the timing of the promotion. Freight Forwarding had contacts with a half dozen firms in which The Family had major interests.

The major negative in his life was the limited conversation he had with his dad and Gramma. He wanted to share with them the joy of his relationship with a substitute mother. It also meant carefully speaking on any subject that might lead to a slip of the tongue.

Life was about to get more complex. I had started dating Kathleen Obrien a few weeks before Thanksgiving. Kate was a sophomore at Penn and lived in an apartment off campus.

Her dad was the President and Chairman of Steel Fabrications in Pittsburgh, a successful company that easily survived the depression.

Kate shared an apartment with Sue Erin. They co-owned a 1936 Chrysler four door sedan but both biked to campus most days.

Sue, who was in my English Comp class, introduced Kate and me to a tea dance for freshmen in late October. Once my arms were around her waist on the dance floor, I refused every cut-in tap of the shoulder for the next two hours.

Kate laughed and twice broke off to accept the dance with the other. It would have been obvious to a bystander that she was flirting and making me work for the privilege.

She was full of laughter and fun and certainly seemed to enjoy the way I took possession, fighting off any intruders at the dance.

Poor me. I didn't know it at the time but I never had a chance. She agreed to have dinner by the end of dinner; she definitely wanted to know more about her Romeo with the dark curly hair.

Before two weeks had passed, we had either a coffee date or a movie date on four occasions. On the fifth date, she picked him up at the office and drove me to the apartment to share dinner with Sue and her Mike.

On the third Saturday, I took her to the Penn Christmas dance at the Bellevue Stratford. Kate flirted with a couple of others just to make me jealous.

When I caught on to her game, I decided to cold play that game. Within a minute, she reined me in when I began talking with that tall slim blonde.

Kate loved to dance tight and she made sure that was the case during the last tip of the evening.

As we broke from the kiss at the end of the last number, she asked, "Mark is I reading you right? Are you about to ask me to be your girl?"

"I sure am."

"Will you make love to me tonight?"

“Wow. I didn’t see that coming, but given the right place and time, I am more than willing. You sort of prepped me during that last number.”

She grinned. “I know. Come with me.”

We took the elevator to a room near the top, a room overlooking the lights of the city.

The double bed was already turned down, lamps on either side casting dim light toward the bed, leaving the room in shadow with a window displaying the brilliance of city center lights.

“It’s so beautiful.”

I was nodding my agreement. This was a far cry from my nights with Maria.

Kate moved into my arms. She whispered, "I know you will be gentle. I want this so much but I am so scared. I have read so much fiction and nonfiction on the subject that I have no real idea what to expect.

Some books say that women rarely have a good experience on their first night. That is hard to believe if you read very many fictional accounts, which must have basis in fact. Wow. Listen to me babble.”

I kissed the top of her head and pulled her close, hoping that our beating hearts would send comforting messages to each other. “I’ve had some experience, although not a great deal. What I don’t have is a condom to protect us.”

“Last summer Mom insisted that I be fitted with a diaphragm. The gynecologist suggested, and I agreed, to have my membrane pierced so that it did not occur during my first experience.”

She let out a nervous laugh. “My Lord, Father Kelly would die if he heard me talking like this.”

I laughed. “Yes, he would. Now, let’s begin like we did on our last date. I could use one of those sexy kisses that you do so well. Sit on my lap and show me.”

A full minute later they came up for air. “Whew. What came after that?”

She didn’t say a word but put her lips to mine and moved my right hand to cover her breast inside her bra. “Hmm, that’s nice.”

“It might be more comfortable if I removed your bra.” She agreed, then said, “Take the blouse, too and let me remove your shirt.”

A minute later, Kate smiled and she said. “I am going to love running my hands over those shoulders and my fingers through that mat on your chest.”

“Before we get to that part, why don’t you set your diaphragm and come back.”

While she was gone, I decided to strip down to my briefs. I tried to imagine what kind of nightgown she would be wearing”

Since our first date, I mentally tried to undress her in my times of reverie, but my imagination fell far short of what I saw approaching me. She was the model for Miss America, wearing nothing but tiny patch of light green at the eve of her gorgeous body.

She gave me a wide smile. “If I donned the nightgown, I figured we would eventually take it off Besides, I was sure you’d like this. Now where were we? Oh, yes. A lesson in the art of seduction of a woman who wants to be seduced.”

She pushed me back onto the bed and slid in next to me. “Now where your hands and what were is their next move?”

I moved in slow motion, as hard as it was for me. I wanted her first time to be an explosive success and it was.

It took very long minutes for us to recover. She turned, wrapped her body around mine ‘I had no idea that making love could be so suspenseful and thrilling.’”

She smothered me with kisses and burst into laughter when she rolled back onto a very damp sheet.

She rolled back on top of me. “This is cozier.”

After a delightful joint bath and shower to rinse off the suds, we donned the hotel terrycloth robes. She placed large towels over the damp sheet, she sat on my lap in front of the window overlooking the city lights slowly dimming at the hours passed.

Kate slept in my arms for an hour, and then awakened with a start. “Where am? Oh, hello, lover boy. I just had the nicest dream that someone was caressing my breast. Oh, that wasn’t a dream.”

It was another hour before we were asleep.

It was hardly light when I sensed her lips gently blowing in my ear and fingers trailing across my chest. I pretended to continue sleeping which of course, increased her seductive moves.

When she realized what I was doing, she rolled on top of me and said, “You’re shameless making me almost begging.”

I laughed. “No. That was just a reminder that we are equal. You have the same right to initiate seduction as I do. The word shameless does not exist in our relationship.”

“Oh, Mark. You are more than I dreamed of. You are a keeper, as my girlfriends say. You’re fun to be with. You strike me as a man of integrity with compassion. That became obvious as my new lover and teacher made love to last night.”

“If you are willing, I want to be your girl, at least for our university years.”

“That sounds like an offer that I can’t refuse. You may tire of me before graduation, but I’m willing.”

I looked at my watch. “We have time for a lot of getting to know each other, biblically speaking, before check out time.”

Meanwhile Angela was making plans for Christmas. “Guido, let’s not wait until Christmas Eve to set up our tree. We need to have Marco several days ahead since your brother and family are coming Christmas Eve morning.”

Guido answered with, “That sounds like a plan. By the way, did I tell you that Marco just received a promotion in his part time job?””

“No you haven’t. Dammit, Guido, have you arranged for him to work for The Family enterprise? You promised me you would not let that happen.”

“Don’t get angry, dear. The answer is no. I am just as committed as you are. I made you a promise when our own son was born and again when Marco seemed to be the fulfillment of what we wanted for our own.”

“Thank you, dear. I wonder if he has a steady girl yet. If so, I hope we have a chance to meet her.”

Guido laughed. “If she shows up, I feel sorry for her. You will make sure she meets your standard for Marco.”

Angela joined in the laughter because she knew he was right.

Chapter 6.

The Christmas holiday for us started out on a great note. Her roommate was taking the train to Connecticut to visit her family, leaving the Chrysler for Kate to drive us across the state.

She called her mom to let her know that I would be staying overnight. Mom pressed her for details but all Kate would say was, “You’ll love him.”

I sensed wariness in her dad’s eyes as he greeted us on the twenty first. Despite Kate’s assurances, I was sure that the Irish always had reservations about darker skinned Mediterranean’s. That’s the way it was in the melting pot of the world, Western Pennsylvania.

Within hours I felt a warmth and receptivity from Maureen, Kate’s mom, but not yet from Michael, her dad.

The tension did not go away easily. Kate was feeling embarrassed but she had been expecting it. Dad had done this with every boy she brought home, stating when she was thirteen.

It was only when I explained my promotion to weekend manager at FF that Michael’s attitude began to change.

“I’m surprised that they are giving you such major responsibility. You’re not even old enough to vote.

The conversation took a different turn after dinner. Kate was laughing when she said to Maureen, “Mom, and look at Dad now. I’ll bet he tries to recruit Mark to come to work at the factor next summer.”

Mom gave her a hug. “Sweetie, you never disappointed me. Ever boy you brought home was a boy I approved of. Do you mind if I ask a personal question?”

“You don’t ever have to ask, Mom. The answer is yes and I am sure you would approve. He is as warm a lover as the man you see getting Dad’s respect.”

She continued. “After you and I had that great discussion and visited the gynecologist, I took a year of dating before I found the man to whom I yielded my virginity.”

“I am so pleased, Kate. As usual you show great judgment. I have set Marks room as the one next to yours, guessing that might be a sound idea.”

Her mother's hug was warm and approving, not like some of the moms that her friends talked about.

We promised her folks that she would be back for Christmas Eve and I would be back for several days before the New Year.

Gramma and Dad were excited to see the kids I was delighted that neither showed concern that my girl was Irish not Calabrese. Gramma later said, "Italians and Irish make smart babies as well as happy marriages."

She didn't pay attention to Kate's blush. She prepared her special pasta and salad luncheon and was delighted to have Kate with her in the kitchen while Dad and I caught up.

Later arrangements were made for me to sleep at Mary's while Kate slept in my room.

I called Angela saying I was free the next day. She said, well. Lunch will be served at one." To herself, "I hope it's a girl. He didn't say."

One look at Kate and Angela was thinking, "He sure knows how to pick beauties. She is everything that Maria is not."

Within minutes, Kate began to feel that she was with another of Marks' family. It was obvious that Angela doted on her Marco.

As we sat down to lunch, Angela said, "Guido will not be here until the dinner hour. I hope you are available for dinner. Guido and I have a special Christmas presented for you."

Luncheon conversation was led by Angela, gently probing Kate's background and testing the degree of relationship between the two young ones. Kate responded with openness because she knew I was important to Angela.'

As she thought about Angela and Mark, Kate needed to find a discreet way to allow them time together. She said, "I think you need some alone time. Why don't I take a ride to see the town and maybe walk in your beautiful garden?"

When Kate left, Angela said, “She’s beautiful and sharp, the kind of girl I imagined you would find.” A minute later, she was getting the kind of information she had hoped for. She hung onto every word I shared about my classes and my work.

I saw her pleasure as I told her of meeting and dating Kate and the Christmas dance.

Kate and Guido arrived at the same time and introduced themselves as they got out of their cars. Kate made a mental of the big back sedan, with a chauffeur and the extra muscular man in the shotgun seat.

Guido served his California white wine when the butler set out the canapés. Much later, the butler interrupted the long conversation with “Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.”

Kate read that as some sort of signal. Guido switched subjects. “When our son was two, he loved toy cars so the Christmas before the accident, I bought him a real Ford Model A convertible with a rumble seat. That model had been his favorite. He could hardly wait for the years to pass.”

“Come with me.” He led the group to the attached garage where we saw the shiny green convertible. “Angela and I have been hesitant to sell it because of its sentimental value. We finally found our reason. Marco, you could use a car and since you are the closest that we have for a son, this is our Christmas present to you.”

I was stunned. I could hardly get out a word of thanks. I shook Guido’s hand and walked into Angela’s arms and mingled my tears with hers

We adjourned to the living room where Guido handed over the title and offered a toast to the young ones.

Kate was moved as she figured out the deep feelings that were displayed that day and evening.

Snow had begun falling during the dinner hour. A couple of inches had accumulated. According to the weather man it was promising to be a heavy wet snow, ceasing on Christmas Eve.

We were in time for a short visit with Gramma before her bedtime. I insisted on walking the block to Aunt Mary's after a long and warm hug from Kate.

It was a long wait for the sandman to arrive. The next morning, Kate told me that she too had trouble falling asleep. We had both remembered an old saying about people who come bearing gifts

Yet, I had no sense that wads Guido's intent. I would have bet that the idea had come from Angela.

The next morning, Dad and Gramma wanted to do some last minute shopping. They were adamant about Kate not driving in the snow, insisting on taking the bus which stopped in front of the house.

We had no way of knowing that was the last time we would see the alive. Twenty minutes later a drunken driver ran a red light, slamming directly at the area where my family was seated, both were killed on impact.

About an hour after they had boarded the bus, a police car parked in front of the house. The policeman knocked on the door. Kate answered.

Are you related to Marta or John Cascio?

"No, but wait a moment. A minute later, I received the news that Gramma and Dad were at the police morgue.

It was a long wait for the policeman who would drive them to the morgue for identification and instructions. It took me quite a while to compose myself.

I broke down when their faces were revealed for identification. The tears would not cease. The attendant brought me some hot black coffee and said the police would return us when I was ready.

“Where should I send the bodies?”

“Oh. The Cipriani Mortuary, I guess. “

I was reasonably composed by the time we got home, thanks to Kate.

She asked, “What can I do to help?”

I suddenly remembered that Gramma hated banks. There wasn't much humor in my laugh but I did laugh when I said, “Start looking for money hated banks and has money stashed round the house, I'm certain. Look under rugs, in hat boxes, jewelry cases and underwear drawers. Just use your imagination.”

I will find their papers. I know that each had insurance policies. I'll join you later. Yours will be a long task.

Neither thought about food until Angela's butler appeared with dinner which he served then departed, saying, “She was sure you wouldn't think about food.” Before we returned to the task of finding money Kate and I went to Aunt Mary's where I could call the priest and mortuary to arrange for the funeral to take place on Monday, two days after Christmas.

By eleven that evening, we figured we had covered every nook and cranny as well as every square inch of the house. We had found over five thousand dollars in an assortment of bills.

Both had insurance coverage for five hundred dollars which would be enough to cover the plans I had agreed upon

The two of us fell into my bed, totally exhausted.

Kate was in the kitchen preparing bacon and eggs. “Make some toast and set the table. Butter and jelly are already on the table. Eggs are up in two and half minutes.”

I laughed. “Hidden talent has just been revealed.”

“I have enough secrets that I will reveal only when you are ready.”

Aunt Mary raised an eyebrow when she arrived while we were still in PJ’s but said nothing.

I introduced Kate who was warmly welcomed by Aunt Mary.

She turned to me. “What are your plans after the funeral?”

“I’m still working on that.”

“Did you find the money?”

“Yep, over five grand.”

“Mama was stubborn.”

“Marco I have a suggestion. There is little if anything of value in this house. Why don’t you pack whatever you want and ship it to Philadelphia? Uncle Julio and I will hold a sale of the rest or get rid of it.

Your dad was on a month to month rental. I think you have until the fifth of next month.”

“That’s very kind you and uncle.”

She smiled. It’s so little I can do for my favorite nephew, the son of my closest sister.”

“Now, how about Christmas?”

“Kate’s folks have invited me. I don’t feel like being with the big family that will gather at your house. I hope that is okay with you.”

“I understand. There are holidays when I can’t wait for some of your cousins to leave.”

“Why don’t you come by for an early lunch? Julio would like to talk with you and would be upset if he didn’t meet Kate.”

“I looked at Kate and then said “As long as you understand we need to leave early for South Hills. The going will be slow in this snow.”

She wrapped her arms around me and left a couple of tear drops on my shoulder.

Kate made no pretense to her dad about where she was going to spend the night. Maureen said, “Comfort him, dear, whatever is required. I will handle your daddy who is always overly protective forgetting that is little girl is now a s young woman

Kate was there when I awakened after a horrible dream that morning. She took me to the shower so we could perform a little ritual that we had developed.

Maureen and Michael had delayed breakfast that Christmas morning until after the gift openings. Kate was delighted with the gold chain and cross that I had for her. I was pleased with the soft eel skin wallet that she had for me.

Kate oohed and aahed at the expensive silk panties and bras that Maureen gifted to her.

Meanwhile, Angela was fretting. She was stuck with family and could not reach out to me. “He must be beside himself. I have no idea what kind of extended family he has for support. I hope his Kate is there to comfort and help him Damn these relatives, spongers, the whole bunch of them.”

Once Michael understood the situation, he put all his weight into supporting me. He took the family to a Christmas movie that afternoon and then to dinner. He suggested a game of monopoly that when we got home.

He was the first to notice my drooping eyes and suggested Kate take me to get some sleep. It was a comforting feeling to awaken with Kate cozied up close.

The mortuary was crowded for the viewing and the Rosary on Sunday night I was overwhelmed as Aunt Mary and I greeted hundreds.

Aunt Mary had asked the family, at my request, to make donations to the Paris in lieu of flowers. Never the less, two huge sprays adorned the casket, one signed "From a friend" and the other with no name.

I guess that Michael and Guido were the mystery donors.

I had held back the tears through most of the greeting period but could not contain the tears when Guido wheeled Angela to the front. The crowd, who witnessed the embrace and tears from both were at a loss as they tried to figure out the relationship.

I was surprised to see Monsignor Kennedy saying the mass alongside the parish priest. He had been our priest when I started parochial school. I asked myself. "Guido or Michael?"

Kate drove me to see Angela and to pick up the Ford convertible. I assured Angela that I would be fine she kept pouring more coffee, delaying my departure until I insisted that the motor vehicle office would close before I got there.

I spent the night with Kate who made love to me until her subtle and gentle seduction drove us to Nirvana.

Chapter 7.

Michael, Kate's dad and I had two long conversations about range plans, assuming g that I would pursue a degree in Business Administration. The essence of those conversations was making a choice of the path I wanted to follow.

“The route that most grads follow is the large corporate route. Most assume that there is more security under the corporate umbrella, an idea that was disproven during the last eight years. Yet, the fact is that most grads take that path...”

“The other extreme is the ownership of one's business. The sense of independence is important to those individuals, Success is very rewarding but statistics show a high rate of failure. Raising enough capital to get past the early losing years and/or the lack of enough capital to take advance of new opportunities often spells either bankruptcy or stagnation.

There is another path. That is the one I chose. There are successful middle size companies, some family owned and some with limited partners, corporate or otherwise.

If such a company has a history of good performance and a solid balance sheet for its size, there may be great opportunity.

Some of the family owned au faces the fact that the next generation had not produced worthy successors to the founders but the family financial holdings depend on contused successful operations.

Another situation might be a very successful business that is on the verge of a breakthrough but lacks the executive personal to take advantage.

You get my point. The key factor for you to consider is the width of the path. In big companies, there is the risk of upper level managers are unable to evaluate the talent or skills of low level managers because the rigidity of management limits the lower level managers to bypass their mediate supervisors.

That risk is practically eliminated in the smaller firms where the view of all managers is wide and clear, with rare exceptions, of course.”

If you want to take a look, I can offer you a summer position in our firm. If that makes you uncomfortable, I can get you some interviews with some supers or even a competing company.”

I asked “How long do you think it will take to get past this recession? My hometown seems to be in worse condition than two yes ago. At least that was what my dad said to me.”

“On the contrary. We are already breaking out Your town happens to have two major emperors whose technology is dated.IN fact, U.S. Steel if planning a replacement twelve miles away I believe the war in Europe will make great demands from our manufacturing firms which will, in turn, improve our economy. By the time you graduate, we should be in a prosperous state.

“Thanks, Mr. Obrien. I wish I could finish earlier in order taking advantage of what you said.”

“It’s possible, if you chose to take more courses per term.”

“That means I would have to give up my work. I do have a small savings but I need that in reserve.”

“You could borrow the money. Interests rates are low.”

“Thanks. This has been an enlightening conversation. I have much to think about.”

‘You’re welcome. Write or call me when you have questions”

Kate let me set the pace of their drive to Philadelphia. Her Chrysler was a much faster at than Ford which was eight years older.

Her roommate was due back for two days. I dropped off his few items from home at his doom room and drove to Kate's apartment Kate whipped some bacon and eggs which she had purchased at her favorite family owned grocery.

While he washed a d she dried the dishes, she asked, "Care to talk about your conversations with dad?"

"No problem."

"When I finished, she asked, "What are reactions? I'm sure you thought about it during the drive?"

'I appreciated his discussions of the paths that lie ahead I also like his suggestion of trying to get my bachelor's degree in three years, but I have some big decisions .I won't be able to work all those hours, study and go to more classes. That takes a lot of energy, more than I may have.

I have some money but I feel need to keep that for some emergency."

"How about borrowing enough to replace the money you are making at FF?"

That might be if I can find the source Banks want collateral. Wow, I just thought of an answer. I can use the Ford for collateral, especially since it is in mint condition."

"Great thinking. Are you going to do it? That means we can get our bachelor degrees at the same time."

'Yes. That's what I'll do."

"Good. I have a special room waiting to help us celebrate."

Much, much later, Kate, all aglow after a glorious mating wither lover, decided on a little teasing. She rolled on top of me. "Honey, you're good enough to be a professional. Instead of going to the bank, I' pay you ten bucks a romp.

You could make all the money you need in a month. I'll hire you every day and pay overtime on Sunday."

I sputtered and burst into laughter. "Marco, the hustler, is going into competition with The Family."

The laughter was boisterous. Kate was glad that none else was in the apartment building.

At the bank the next day, the loan officer told me, "You don't have to put up your car as security. Your savings account is greater than the loan amount. Our papers will ask for your agreement that will allow us to put a lien on your account in the event of default."

We celebrated with a nice lunch. I said, "Now all I need is a room that is not in that noisy dormitory. I need to find a rooming house that doesn't serve meals. My two hour waiter job provides all my meals except on Sunday."

"Good. Let's pick up a copy of the Inquirer and scour the rental ads." An hour later, we had made no progress.

Kate said, "Let's relax. There's a showing of the classic, "Wuthering Heights" at the Bijou. If you get bored, we can make out in the balcony."

We were too absorbed and shed tears instead of making out at the theater.

When arrived at the apartment, Kate had a letter from Sue, her roommate. A few minutes later, after finishing the letter, she pushed me onto the couch and jumped onto my lap.

"Sue is pregnant and is going to be married She asked me if I can find a roomie to let her off the hook. She has prepaid the next month's rent and says I can keep the deposit at the end of the term.

She wrote "That should give you time to find a roomie."

She wrapped her arms around my neck and started nibbling my ear.
“Wouldn’t you like to be my new roomie?”

I don’t know why but I started to protest, but she was ready with an answer.
“You can give up your job at the faculty club. Sharing two good meals a day will not be that expensive.”

Furthermore I will be here to support you in any way that you need me. We can do some joint study. I will still have loads of privacy if you are bogged down with extra classes and trips to the library.”

Her eyes were daring me to say otherwise. I was lovingly trapped into a wonderful future.at the university.

Kate and I registered for courses in the university’s Wharton School of Business. She explained. I was planning on being a teacher but Daddy reminded me that most school districts will not hire married women.

He said that Accountants, Statisticians and Finance executives are always in demand, single or married. With a business degree, I will certainly have more options.”

The next three years were difficult. We did have the pleasure of supporting each other in a number of classes.

One term, Kate bought a portable record player so that we could listen together the recording of classical music from our music appreciating class. That was also another source of relaxation when we bought and played dance music by the Dorsey Brothers, Bennie Goodman, Chick Webb and Red Nichols.

Those were happy years in spite of the academic struggles on my part Kate was always there to support me. Thank goodness,

We were not sure the university would approve our living together but we were far enough off campus to avoid any suspicion.

We had a major fright in October of that year. Kate was five days late for her period. Of course, we could not go to the university clinic.

We found a gynecologist in Haddonfield in New Jersey a few miles across the Delaware River but we could not get an appointment for three days. It was panic time in our apartment.

Kate was in shock, deciding to cut classes. I did the same just to keep her company, but sitting at home and moping just made us sadder.

Early in the morning of our appointment, Kate screamed. I reached for her before I realized that the scream had come from the bathroom. I jumped out of bed and dashed for the bathroom. In those seconds, a dozen images flashed through my mind. I expected to find Kate on the floor, writing in pain. What I found was Kate, sitting on the toilet with the widest grin one can imagine.

“It happened with a rush. My period is in full bloom.”

Two relieved young student kept the appointment in Haddonfield and were assured that all was well and anomalies did happen that put the fright into couples who were not planning parenthood

During the summer of 1940, I was feeling nervous about the news. Congress as discussing a Selective Service (military draft) Act that meant a possible interrupt into our educational plans. We both sighed with relief when the bill passed and the minimum age was set at twenty one.

We figured that I would have my bachelor’s degree by then but were once again shocked on a Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbor Day.

I registered for the draft and drew a low number, meaning that I was weeks away from being drafted in the army.

After a long debate with Kate, I opted to apply for a commission in the Marine Corps and was accepted. I had one more semester at Pen which would have to wait for whatever time my country needed me.

I was given a three day delay before reporting. Kate and I had a tender and tearful visit with Angela and Guido I expected the tears from Angela but not from Guido whose gruff last words were “Watch your ass. Son.”

We spent a few hours with Aunt Mary and some other family members. We had two days with Kate’s folks.

Three months of military and physical training and then additional leadership training elapsed before I was sent to Hawaii.

After a month of field training I was dispatched to a place with a strange name. The place was Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in the south Pacific.

My commanding officer in Hawaii gave me the news. For some reason, you are being assigned as the aide to the famous Chesty Puller, one of the most decorated military officers of all times.”

“You should need to know as much as you can about the man you are about to serve. I just received this report about his latest action.

Soon after arriving on Guadalcanal, he led his battalion in a fierce battle in which his quick thinking saved three of his companies from annihilation. In the action, these companies were surrounded and cut off by a superior force.

The report says that Puller ran to the shore, signaled a United States Navy destroyer and directed the destroyer to provide fire support while landing craft rescued his Marines from their perilous position.

The coast guard also provided covering fire from their landing craft for the Marines as they evacuated the beach.

The feat was so great that the Coast Guard skipper was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Puller, for his actions, will be awarded the Bronze medal.

Right now his Marines are involved in a battle to defend Henderson Field. You’ll be exposed to enemy fire even if you are aide.”

I arrived at headquarters on the morning of the twentieth of October. My new boss was having a light breakfast and asked me to join him. “This may be the only ten mints we have together for the next week. Our intelligence says that a

major attack is coming. The Japs are determined to regain control of the air field and our job is to stop them.

“We can look at the duties of an aide after the next six or seven days. For now you will serve as a messenger between my desk, the G2 desk and G3.

If you get an order from either, G2 or G3, treat it as an order from me don't take time to salute. It uses up valuable time.”

“Now, let's hustle over to G2.

I had to adjust to the noise of machine gun fire, artillery booms and the rapid fire of small pieces. It didn't take me long to distinguish between ours and the enemy's.

I overheard and learned a lot of what was going on as I sat in G2's area. “We will be short of food rations tonight.” or “Our artillery needs relief, they're fagged. On the line since day one.” or “The Japs are bringing up the heavier stuff.”

“Cascio, get word to Puller Looks like a battalion of Japs stumbled into our lines about ten minutes ago. Two hours later G2 sent me to tell my boss that the enemy was sent flying.

The boa and I were at G2 when word came that another was impeded by heavy barbed wire placed in front of the our line and then hit heavily by our machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire The victory was actually a slaughter.

Simultaneously, machine gun fire and artillery were routing another attack group.

The attacks came more often and with more ferocity on the 25th. We had to insert our reserve forces in order to hold off the enemy.

The attacks were fewer and less intense. As far as G2 could tell, the enemy was retreating slowly, leaving only snipers to slow any out troops that might try to follow.

I heard the boss call. “Cascio, let's get some fresh air even if there is nothing refreshing on this damned island.”

We were less than twenty yards from the tent. I felt the pain before I recognized the shot from a Japanese rifle. I looked to see blood rushing from the spot that previously held the last two fingers of my left hand.

I must have gone into shock although I do remember someone calling “Medic, Medic.” I think it was the boss who was stuffing a cloth to stem the flow of blood.

I may have fainted since I had no memory of vents until a doctor was asking me questions. I was in the operating tent. It seemed like no time that I was reentering the world after some long trip to dreamland.

A very beautiful face of Nurse Erin was a foot from my face. “Lieutenant, the operation went well. The doctor saved your hand.”

I heard myself saying, “The last time I looked I saw nothing g but blood.”

“Yes and you did lose two fingers but the operation will enable you to use your thumb and two fingers. I bet you will adjust quickly. I am glad you are right handed.”

She held my hand as she answered all my questions without hesitation. To my last question, she said, I can’t even guess. Transportation off the island can’t start again until the airfield is not under attack an enough of the Japanese troops have been beaten back, giving us access to the sea.”

It was six weeks before I arrived at the naval hospital in San Diego where three letters from Kate and two from Angela were awaiting my arrival.

The real surprise came the follow day when Angela was wheeled in by a handsome dark Italian Army Captain.

It must have taken a full five minutes of tears and embraces before a word was uttered. I had to recount every detail starting with my arrival at Guadalcanal until I arrived here.

Her tears flowed as I described my view of the battles during my short sojourn to the island and, of course, the incident with the sniper.

Our conversation paused for a full two three minutes when I explained that I had lost two fingers.

Two hours later, she was making her excuses. “Our train for Los Angeles leaves within the hour in order to connect to the transcontinental train.”

Our tears intermingled as I leaned over for a long hug.

As I reflected on that short visit, I was moved. Angela had made that long trek to spend such a shirt time with me.

Given the option, I chose my separation from them Marine Corps to be in Philadelphia where Kate would meet me and take me home.

Part II

Chapter 8.

It was a glorious two day reunion with Kate. While there was tenderness in my left hand, I suffered no pain. Once I was able to convince Kate, all bets were off. She quit holding back. Her hugs and her kisses were even more fervent than I remembered.

She wrestled with me in bed, finally pinning me down to earn the right to lead our love making. She prepared a delicious prime rib dinner, having saved the ration stamps since she knew I would be returning. The red wine, a Merlot, was a perfect choice.”

The reception on Friday evening at her parents’ home was joyous. Michael was especially warm and welcoming. I had a feeling like I would imagine a son returning from war would receive.

Neither pressed me for details but I was sure they were curious so I gave them a short hand account of the battles and of my injury. If I was not mistaken, it seemed that Maureen was more deeply moved with my account of the amount of injuries and deaths of young men than of my injury. The idea struck me as that of a woman grieving for the mothers of all the dead, American or Japanese.

Much of the weekend was spent planning the wedding the evening before we left for Philadelphia. Kate Obrien had accepted my proposal. I wasn't willing to wait until I had my degree. That had been our pledge a lifetime ago.

I called Angela who pressed us to have brunch with her on Sunday morning.

Guido met us at the door. He gave Kate a light hug and me a bear hug. "I am so glad you made it. I had the dandiest fear that you would not."

Angela spotted the diamond on Kate's left hand. "Have you set a date?"

Kate smiled. "The Sunday after New Year's Day and you are definitely invited."

Both beamed. Naturally, moisture glistened in Angela's eyes.

The brunch was elegant. It may be winter but Angela had found violets, Kate's favorite flower, a secret I had shared with Angela in the past.

What thrilled me was the affection that both showed for Kate. When Angela began probing Kate regarding wedding plans, Guido signaled me to join him in the den.

Once he discovered that the Steelers were winning, he turned off the tube. "What are your plans after you get your degree? That is only a few months from now."

"I haven't made any specific plans. I've been thinking about finding a position with medium sized firm. I'm looking for a position where I can make an impact and be noticed by the top level management. I feel I need to be involved in real decision making early in my career."

"I'm not surprised to hear you say that. Are you considering working with your father in law?"

"Only if I can get a fair shake without this direct influence."

“I guess you would say the same thing if I offered you a job in one of our legit companies.”

“Absolutely. I want to feel good about myself and rise to the level of my capabilities.”

“That’s very sound thinking, Marco.”

“Guido, we are like family and you know I am not comfortable about the kind of work you do even in your most legitimate firms, The Family will insist on one of their representatives serving in some capacity to protect The Family interest.

If I were to stand in opposition to some move that I believe served the interest of The Family rather than the interest of the firm or our customer, the outcome might be disastrous.”

“It might lead to a rupture either of our personal relationships or your relationship to The Family.”

Guido’s face turned into a scowl. “Kid, I never ever thought of that possibility. Thank you.”

After a moment, he continued, “I told Angela that I thought you were exceptional and this just proves my point. Still, I want you to remember that I can still be of help. Many of our customers fit the category of medium size.”

The graduating class was small contrasted to pre-war years, mostly female, of course. In addition to the Oren’s and Balisteris, an Aunt Mary and Julio were present at the graduating exercise.

Guido insisted on taking the entire group; to dinner. Aunt Mary stiffened at the suggestion but could not find an excuse her face turned bright red when she found herself seated next to Angela.

By the end of the meal she was captivated by Angela and even laughed at some of Guido’s jokes.

She said to me later, “I can’t abide the things he does but both of them adore you, Mario, and they are charming.”

During the following four weeks, I had seven interviews, three of which felt right. One was in Philadelphia, one in Harrisburg and the other was Dad’s firm in Pittsburgh, Steel Fabrications.

Calling Michael, Dad, had come so easily during the months since Guadalcanal, we had become close friends. Closer than I had ever been with my own father.

He promised me that the interviewers and managers at the firm would have no idea that we were related.

Before the first hour of my interview with the personnel department, the interviewer was trying to slot me as a clerk in the fiancé department. He explained, “Your studies in accounting and finance make you a perfect fit for an opening in the Controller’s section.”

“What kind of career path might be available?”

“After some significant period, you could become the Controller or Treasurer.”

Pretending that I was leaving, I rose. “I have grater ambitions. Even as a part time employee at FF, I attained a managerial position. Did you consider that?”

“Not seriously. I have certain slots to fill.”

That’s too bad. I’ve been offered a position with a career path toward top management. I am not worried about the level of my entry job. I just want an opportunity for good advancement based on my perforce.”

He looked befuddled. After a thirty second pause he said. “I need to talk with my supervisor. Will you be so kind as to wait for a few minutes?”

Thirty minutes later was escorted to the office of the VP of Operations. “Good morning, I’m John Scott, Operations. This is Bill Treat, VP of Sales and Mike Miller, VP of Finance.”

He gave me a warm smile. “We’ve never had an applicant tell Personnel that he wanted to supplant one of the three of us.”

I smiled back. “There isn’t anything personal. I want to contribute and be noticed if I do. My transcript from Penn will indicate the breadth of my studies as well as my achievements. Although I lack experience, I know I am a quick study.”

Mr. Treat spoke up. “You sure did a good sales job on Steven, from Personnel, which is why I wanted to be here.”

Mr. Miller said, “Your unique approach already had our attention. I doubt that any of us would miss your accomplishments on the job.”

Mr. Scott said, “I agree that you are a quick study. Magna Cum Laude and a degree in six semesters only.”

I tried to follow his eyes as they moved toward each of his co-workers.

It was only seconds before he said. “We would like to make you an offer. Since you have enough background to start in any of several departments and you said that you would be willing to start at any position, we would like you start working with Miller in Finance.”

Young Steven had good instincts by trying to recruit you into that department. “We’re hurting there at the moment and you could be of immediate help.”

“When do I start?”

Miller laughed. “You haven’t asked about terms or benefits.”

“I’m assuming they will be fair. That is your reputation. Otherwise, I would not have walked in the door.”

I could sense from their demeanor that I had made a good decision.

Dad was a little late that evening. We were just about done with pre dinner drinks when he arrived. He glanced my way and I gave negative nod. He gave Maureen a kiss while I poured him a drink I added a topper on each of our glasses.

“I presume that Mark has not mentioned the news.”

Kate asked, “What news?” Her voice was tense, meaning she was expecting bad news.

Dad smiled, raised his glass, waiting for us to do the same. “Here’s to Steel Fabrication’s newest employee.”

Kate sputtered a punched me in the armⁱ, spilling my bourbon on the rug, put down her drink and smothered me with kisses.

Maureen and Michael slipped away, giving us the privacy to celebrate our way.

At dinner, Kate showed us some nice rentals twenty minutes closer to town in the old incorporated city of Fairglen.

She had done some research on the history of Fairglen and commented. “This old community was poor, had a low tax base and seriously deteriorated during the depression. A developer bough up a chunk of land and put in a new home development, starting in 1939 the new section occupied about forty percent of city area and about the same percentage of the population”

She asked me, “Shall we have a look tomorrow?”

After dealing with Maureen’s protest, everyone pitched in with ideas. Rent or buy? Dad went into his study to do some calculations.

He showed us the figures, saying, “You can see that with the down payment the monthly payments are less than the rental quote. I can lend you the down payment at two percent interest. Your total out of pocket is only six dollars more per month and you will be building equity.

Kate looked at me and read my mind. “Dad, let us think about your proposal.”

“Take your time. As you can tell, Mom would prefer you to live here but we know that you need to plant your own roots.”

Kate insisted on a very private celebration in our bedroom before entertaining any talk of renting or owning.

It wasn't that I had a series objection to Dad's offer. I simply had an uneasy feeling about being indebted to family or close friends.

At breakfast, I told Dad that we would proceed with his suggestion to buy, not rent.

While Maureen was bringing refills of coffee, Dad asked, “Since you are starting today, do you want to ride in with me?”

“I think I will take the bus. It seems too soon to let my associates know that I am related to the big boss. In fact, we need to make a plan, or rather; you need to make the plan.”

Most new home owners are so preoccupied with the idea of owning a home, that they forget to ask all the right questions Kate and I were no better.

Meanwhile, Angela had gone to the mountains for a two week respite from the summer heat. Guido promised to spend the weekend with her, allowing no interruptions to their anniversary celebration.

She asked, “Wouldn’t it be nice to invite Marco and Kate to come up on Friday for our diner and stay overnight. Then you and I can have a private celebration Saturday night?”

Guido could never deny a request from Angela. She put up with so much and asked so little. “Great. Do you have the phone number at her family hoe?”

Her smile gave him the answer.

She left on a Saturday morning with the butler and her chauffeur. An hour later, the executive committee members of The Family began to arrive for the semiannual confab.

The official business was dispensed of in two hours so that the party could begin. Angela would have been devastated to know that most of the rooms were being used for entertainment with the imported whores who arrived later in the day.

The business centered on expansion of the enterprise. Guido chaired the meeting with three items on the agenda.

He explained. The first is to expand our control of the lucrative numbers racket in at least five communities. The second is to get control of two new corporations that should see a rise in income from their roles in fulfilling government contracts. The third is to take control of the expanding city of Fairglen.”

Someone asked, “Are we moving operations?”

Guido smiled. “Good question. I’m thinking that we will probably move everything except the whores. We own all that property and guys are used to their own whores.

Someone asked, “Who’s the point man at Fairglen?”

“Any suggestions?”

“I think young Tony Garafalo has developed nicely. His wife is a good-looker and can blend in with those young couple who have been moving in. By the way, boss. I think the choice of Fairglen is good. Many households are headed by young women whose husbands are in the army.”

There were nods of approval of the boss’ choice.

Guido said, “We have several men in place at Pitt Supply Corp and on the verge of gaining operational control.

Steel Fabrications may be much more difficult. We need to get our nose under their tent so we can test the ease or difficulty of moving in the way we did at Pitt Supply.”

Butch Minardi said, ““We could put squeeze on Pete Gambo’s son. He’s been losing heavily at the poker table. He’s an accountant or something like that at Steel Fabrications.”

“All right. Let’s party.

When the party came to an end and the cleaning squad arrived, Guido went to his den to congratulate himself on another success.

Chapter 9.

Dad and I agreed that it was better not to make a point of our relationship to the staff at work. I settled into a position where they were shorthanded and not getting the data they were expecting. I spent the first three months, analyzing data in the cost accounting sector of the controller's office.

Within a two week period I had found an error in the cost accounting process that was immediately corrected. The results were still not what Mike (Miller) had expected.

He called me into his office. "Mark, we have an opening that is a step up for you. You can start on Monday."

I demurred. "Mike, There is something strange going on. Will the position stay open for a few more days? I'm following a clue that might help us discover the reason for your disappointment."

"Are you on to something or simply have a feeling?"

“It’s a little bit of both.”

“Okay. I’ll ask our retiring employee to hand on for a bit.”

“Thanks Mike.”

What I didn’t tell Mike was that I was looking at the paper work that was part of the cost accounting process. I was looking for a discrepancy between purchase orders and invoices

Our PO’s were written in hard lead pencil in order to minimize corrections or changes. A good many, but not all, PO’s issued to Pitt Supply seemed to have evidence of erasures. I began to examine the paper with great care, finding evidence of erasures of high numbers replaced with lower amount It seem that soft led had been used originally and carefully erased and rewritten with hard lead.

The same initials appeared on each of the altered PO’s. I carefully examined ten samples and compared the paperwork with the number of items actual entered into the inventory the discrepancies varied from six to twenty six percent.

I took the evidence to Mike who invited Pete Giannini, a four month employee, into his office. Pete was nervous, sweating and frightened. Under Mike intense grueling, he addicted to his action and finally saying that hi gambling debts were being reduced for each discrepancy he created.

The first thing that hit my mind was Guido and The Family. I was sure they controlled the gambling games in Pittsburgh and surrounding area. I held on to the guess until further evidence appeared.

After firing Pete on the spot, Mike asked me if I had any ideas as to the why. He said, “He had to know that were not being hit very hard. I wonder why or who put him up to this?”

I said, “Anyone’s guess, but it may have only been a test. Have you heard ay rumors of a competitor fighting you for army contracts?”

“None that I can think of who would try the dirty way.”

“I think you or John ought to bring this up with Pitt Supply. Someone on that side had to be in on this,”

“You may be right, although we have been a valued customer of theirs for a long time. It is hard to imagine their putting that at risk.”

He continued. “Thank you for pursuing the matter. In the big picture, it didn’t seem worth the effort but if there is more than the eye can see, you may have made an important discovery.”

I moved into a new office and received a detailed orientation from my predecessor.

Three Days later, John Scott, Bill Treat, Mike and I had lunch in John’s office. The agenda was Pitt Supply. “There’s been a major shakeup at Pitt Supply. Bob Hughes, the GM for twenty five years has retired. Joe Bruno, his replacement has replaced all the key executives, demoting some of the others and retiring some.”

As the junior member I waited to hear the questions and speculation. Mike asked, “When did this happen?”

“Within the last three months.”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. Bail asked “What is it, Mark?”

“Could it be a coincidence that our problem started shortly thereafter? I wonder if there is a connection.”

John said, “I don’t like coincidences. Any thoughts?”

The silence was defining. I ventured an idea. “It could be the Mafia investing in legitimate businesses in order to launder their illegal funds and avoid IRS investigations.”

At home that evening, Kate answered the phone during the cock the hour. “Oh, hello Angela.” There was a slight pause. “I’ll call Mark.”

She whispered, “Invite to go the mountains.”

I listened for a minute, and then lied. “I’m sorry, Angela. We have a commitment for that weekend. Perhaps we can get together the weekend after you return.”

I could hear her deep disappointment and a request that we save a Friday night here weeks hence.

He had never lied to Angela before but in light of his thoughts about Pitt Supply, he preferred not to meet with Guido under any circumstances until there was some clarity.

On Friday, they closed the paper work on the home purchase and drove to their new home. Naturally, the utilities were not operating, but Kate had borrowed a large sleeping bag from her folks so that the two of them could sleep over

They walked around several blocks after a light dinner at a family owned café. Just before turning the last corner into their block, I spied his high schoolgirl friend, Maria. She was weeding a plot of flowers

“Hello, Maria.”

Startled, Maria looked up and gave a gasp. “Marco Cascio, what are you doing here?”

“Maria, meet my wife, Kate. We just bought a home around the corner Kate, Maria and I dated while in high school.”

The women acknowledged the introduction Maria said, “This where Tony and I live. I guess we will be neighbors.”

Remembering her CommNet a long time ago about being pregnant, I asked, “Any children?”

Her face flushed as she stammered, saying something like “miscarriage.” She turned away, saying nothing more.

Deciding that I had touched a sore subject, I said, “Nice to see you again, Maria”

As we walked on, Kate said, “She didn’t seem leasod to see you or hear the news of being her neighbor.”

“Yeah. That was strange. The last time I saw her, she was warm and friendly, telling me about her engagement to Tony.”

We continued our walk in silence, I, wondering, why a member of The Family was living here while the center of Family activity was back in his home town.

Ten days later, Kate and I moved into their home. Partially furnished with some discards from her folks and some used furniture found in the for sale adds of the Pittsburgh Press and a new bed, they were pleased with the beginning.

Our immediate neighbor to their right came over to help unload the rental truck. “Hi. I’m Fred Steka and this is Juliet my wife, ready to help if you wish.”

Kate’s usual bubbly self was introducing us and inviting all the help they offered. Two hours later, we were sitting in their breakfast nook having pie and coffee.

Fred said, “I’m the chief of detectives and Juliet spend most of her time herding our nine year old twin boys.

We got a lot of information about other neighbors and some history of the town, including tensions between “old citizens” and the “newbies.”

In answer to my question, Fred said, “Not much serious crime. Lately, there has been an upturn in home burglaries. The new problem is the increase in numbers game runners we’ve turned our backs on the small stuff in the past when

we knew the few runners and spots that sold numbers. The sudden increase is frustrating.”

My mind began connecting dots. Tony and numbers raised a warning flag

“Have you called the State Police for help?

“Our chief and the mayor are reluctant, depending on the foot police and my small department to get to the bottom of this.”

That night I lay awake for an hour .Guido must be in an expansion mode. The Pitt Supply incident hinted of Mafia and now this. They seemed unrelated but-. The evidence was only suggestive but my Gramma used to say “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

As more employees were drafted, the quality of their replacements decreased and the member available decreased. Women could be hired and were for some of the factory jobs but management jobs were offered only to males.

I expressed my feeling to Mike. “If The Family tries to insert another employee into our firm, it will be at the management level. My guess is that is what happened at Pitt Supply. I would recommend that we spend the funds to hire a private investigator to vet any applicants for those openings when they occur.”

At first Mike though that was a bit too much but John Scott thought it Waa worth a try and recommended the new budget item to top management.

Three weeks later, an applicant with a great resume applied for a position in Accounting He was from Chicago.

Mike offered him a low level bookkeeping job pending letters of inquiry to his previous employer. Meanwhile our instigator went to Chicago to verify his background.

At the end of the week, the report was on the desk of President Michael Obrien. He called a meeting of hi stop execs and the head of Personnel.

“John, as you suspected, this applicant is a plant. His name never appeared as an ample of the firm. The investigation into the firm showed the owner ship buried in a sea of other corporations but the attorney who signed is a known representative of the North side Gang in Chicago.”

Mike Miller said, “I’ll find a discreet way to turn down the applicant.”

Mr. Obrien said, “We need to applaud the employee, who suggested this investigation, perhaps give him a raise or even a promotion. Who is he?” In fact, I would like to meet him now. Is that possible?”

John replied. “Certainly.

May I ask Mildred to fetch him?”

“Certainly. Permission to talk to her.”

Ten minutes later, I made my entrance.

Michael Obrien was stunned. He was totally surprised. He hadn’t had a hint form Kate or me and the name never came up in previous reports. He looked at me with a question i his eyes.

I realized that their secret would not hold up any longer, so I nodded.

“Gentlemen. As you saw in my expression and reaction, I am flabbergasted. I’ve been holding secret for a good many months. I want to reintroduce my son-in-law who has not discussed his work with me during the months of his employment.”

The silence was deafening. Michael continued. “He wanted to make it on his own, figuring that some of you might resent his presence or else cater to the boss’s family member. He had no way of knowing who you were when he walked in the door.”

Mike Miller was the first to react. “Mr. Obrien, he had our attention from the first day and my recognition of his special talent within ten days under my wing. Congratulations on a great recruiting job.”

A chorus of “here, here,” followed.

John Scott had a recommendation. “Whatever follows, I think that for the present, that information should stay in this room. Mark has made good friends with employees at various levels and considers that to be important. I am sure he will agree that would change if it were known about the family connection.”

All could see that Mark was in agreement.

Michael Obrien could hardly wait to share the news with his Maureen and probably with Kate

He was also sure that any promotions in Mark’s future would come because of his performance inspired by his connection to the President.

Chapter 10

The private dinner party was not a great success. Guido kept pressing me for information about his work and the name of his employee. Kate stepped in with a change of subject, just as we planned when we accepted Angela's invitation.

After pouring another round of coffee, Guido raised the question again.

Angela scolded Guido for trying to talk business. "Guido, I want to know about their family plans"

She turned to Kate. "Are you planning on quitting wok soon? Don't wait too long to start your family."

Her voice choked as she continued. "I hope you are planning on more than one child."

As her tears started to flow, Guido took her in his arms. "Don't cry dear. It was so long ago."

For some unknown reason, Angela could not recover as she had on other occasions. A signal from Guido brought the evening to an early close. Her tears did pause when I hugged her and gave her a good night kiss.

After getting Angela to bed, Guido tried to recapture the conversation that seemed to thwart his getting to know about Marco's job. It wasn't that I didn't answer. Somehow the subject changed before he responded.

“Oh, well. I'll call him for a lunch date.”

John, Bill and Mike decided to keep me analyzing direct costs and overhead. That occupied about half a day the rest of my time was to be devoted to visits with all their suppliers to determine if there were hints of Mafia inroads.

Slowly, the purchasing department began ordering material from two competitors of Pitt Supply. Concurrently, Pitt Supply would ship a short count, hoping that Steel Fab would not notice the small discrepancies.

I recommended that the receiving department keep detailed track of numbers and value but take no immediate action.

Mike approved his recommendation. Sixty two days from the day the count started, the value of the shortages reached fifteen thousand dollars

Mike called a meeting with the executive committee and got approval to pull the plug.

When the news reached Guido's desk, he blew his top. “We need to kill the stupid bastard in our organization who caused this disaster and find a way back into Steel Fab.”

Typical of Guido, once he had blown his top, his mind turned cold and calculating.

He initiated an investigation to determine why and how Pit Supply was dropped from Steel Fab's purchasing list.

When he discovered that it was the sales manager with approval of the new General Manager, Joe Bruno, he realized that his ext. steps would take some finesse.

Joe was a favorite of Jack DellaValle, the oldest member of the executive committee and his dad's rival for the position of Capo of The Family.

He invited Bruno to meet for lunch at the Wildman Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh. Bruno became defensive when Guido raised the question of losing Pitt Supply's largest customer. He tried to shift the blame to the sales manager but Guido nailed him with the evidence of his approval of the scheme.

Bruno got snarly and suggested that Guido was beyond his ken when it came to operating a wholesale supply company.

That was the point at which Guido decided that Bruno had to be replaced. He also knew that demoting Della Valle's handpicked favorite would be a challenge. The old man had friends that went back to the earl days.

What he was to find out was that this was the excuse that DellaValle together with Bruno and a few others needed. The old man had been upset with Balisteri choice of his son to be The Family's top dog while senior was in jail.

This off hand decision without executive committee approval was reckless and gave Della Valle the opportunity to make his move and take control of The Family from the Balisteris.

The first step of the plan was to divide the executive committee by arguing that Guido was tightening control by firing a smart and experienced manger of one of their lucrative firms.

Despite the use of innuendo and half-truths that implied Guido was countermanding a vote of the committee, Jack got no significant support.

That called for step two. "If we can't get the votes, then eliminate Guido. That will scare the hell out of the others, which puts us in the driver's seat. "

Jack, who played in those high stakes games, laid out his plan. "Guido has only has his two body guards with him on those nights. Bruno, you can lead a group of five guns to wipe out Guido and his two men."

He took a breath. “He usually orders cokes for the men at the table at nine. At precisely nine you can bring your men from the hallway.

I will have bent over to tie my shoe lace, thus giving the five of you a clear shot to take out all three .Collateral damage is acceptable”

What DellaValle didn’t consider was that like all smart and overly suspicious crime leaders, Guido had a loyal spy in the midst of Della Valle’s group.

On the chosen night, Guido kept one eye on his cars and one eye on Jack who seemed unable to relax, even when he was not in the hunt for the pot. That assured Guido that this was the night.

As usual, he ordered the cokes. When they arrived, he smiled as he watched Jack bend down. He thought, “So, that’s how he expected to avoid the danger of being hit by flying bullets.”

Jack was waiting for the bullets to start flying but no rush of men into the building occurred. No smacking of bullets into bodies. For Jack, the silence was an omen. “Where is Bruno?”

Guido ordered one of his guards to pick Jack up and take him outdoors. Jack sputtered as he tried to resist. He yelled and fought to break loose but to no avail. He knew what awaited him and so did everyone in the room. There was only one response to rebellion.

Three minutes later, a fusillade bullets ended the lives of five former members of The Family.

As the weeks rolled by, Kate and I settled into our new home and even had Michael and Maureen to dinner. They brought several expensive housewarming gifts including a dozen bottles of California wines and our favorite scotch.

At dinner, Michael asked me if it was okay to announce the business news. I nodded. He raised a glass of wine inviting us to join him in the toast. “To the new

Special Assistant for Security and the youngest member of our executive committee.”

When the glasses were back on the table, Kate came over to give me a hug and kiss and then in sotto voce, “Wait until I get you in bed.”

During those weeks, my friendship with neighbor Fred Steka blossomed. One Saturday morning, we met in town for coffee and scones at a café that seemed to be the favorite hangout for politicians.

He was filling me in on the strengths and weaknesses of some of the local power players I happened to glance at the newcomers as the front door opened. In walked Tony and a huge rotund bald man dressed in an expensive suit that did not come off the rack.

Fred noticed my stare and quietly said, “Jake Griffin, our city’s largest landlord and slumlord and perennial losing candidate for city council. No one trusts him.”

I asked, “Do you know is companion?”

“No, except that I know he lives around the corner and has a hot looking wife.”

“Fred, I guess it’s time to let you in on one of my many secrets. That woman was my high school sweetheart. No, that is not quite correct. She was my regular date who taught me things that teenage boys are dying to know.”

Fred covered his mouth to keep from laughing aloud. When he was ready, I continued. “She is a sharp political player, as young as she is. She worked closely with The Family to get her dad elected to city office when she was just out of high school.”

You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Her husband was, which means, still is, tied to The Family. That combination spells trouble for my new home town.”

“How do come to that conclusion”

Once connected to The Family means forever. The Family never cuts one loose.”

“How do you know this?”

“I can’t go into the detail but I will at some time soon, but I once racked pool for an important member of The Family and hustled cokes for him. I saw more than a teenage should have. You should trust me. For personal reasons I have to delay more detail.”

“Okay. I can wait.”

Fred, this is only a guess but I am sure that you will find the answer to your numbers game problem lies with Tony. I recommend you get the mayor to bring in the State Police. If I am right, you are facing big time racketeering that your small crew cannot successfully take on.”

“These guys are ruthless. You know about the gang killing recently in which six men, supposed members of The Family, and were executed gangster style.”

“How the hell can I convince the mayor or some councilman to believe my story?”

I wrote two names on a napkin. “The first is the name of an elderly retired lawyer, a man of great repute. Take someone who is trusted by the mayor to have a talk about The Family in my former hometown and specifically about this other name Maria’s dad, who got his council seat with the help of The Family using their forceful ways to intimidate voters.”

“I think I can do that but I still have to tie that to our local problem.”

I asked, “How about a plan to locate the presence of Tony at the local Numbers Bank where the runners bring the cash and the slips? You probably have discovered the location. The best plan is to your own operative to work as a runner.

The other choice is to threaten one of the runners who is already violating a parolee and can be induced to help you or got to jail.”

Fred laughed. “Mark, I can use you on my squad. Do you need a job?”

Fred ordered more coffee and scones, indicating that he want to talk.

“What thoughts do you have about this Maria connecting with Griffin, our slum lord?”

“My guess is that she represents money to help buy the election for Griffin. She might even get Griffin into a compromise situation which would guarantee his loyalty to The Family interests

Closer to the election, the community needs to be alert to the arrival of hoods, enforcers, who can intimidate voters at the polls.”

“My lord. This town has no idea how vulnerable it can be to Mafia rule. We could wake up one morning and find that there is something rotten in our town.”

“Mark, I need your help to convince our town fathers of the potential risk.”

“I can’t go public at this time, Fred. In the meantime, we have time before the election in the spring.”

That evening, Tony was telling Maria about his day with Griffin. “He is willing to take our help and promises to protect us to the best of his ability when he is on the council. You and I know that is not enough. Guido will want assurances.”

“I guess that means I need to get Griffin in bed and have Sly take some photos. Lordy, I hate that part of the job.”

“Well, there is a side benefit. Two Hundred and Fifty smackers get added to your bank account and Five Huard more if the caper brings the real result.”

She grinned. “Now, how would you like a freebie?”

Angela was feeling down. She had played poorly at Mash Jong earlier in the day. Guido was out of town and she was tired of the radio comedian who was yakking. She turned off the radio and decided that even a brief conversation with Marco would bring some relief.

She found the new phone number that I had given her. She was pleased when I answered the call. “Hi, Marco. It is nice to hear your voice. Guido is out of town and I am feeling lonely.”

“I am glad you called, Angela. Why are you so lonely? Don’t you have a good book?”

“Yes but It isn’t enough. Guido is away and even if he were here, he would not be total present. He has been so withdrawn since the killing of some of his friends.”

“Friends. The newspaper speculated that someone was trying to kill Guido.”

“Perhaps, but one of the men has been a longtime associate of Guido’s father. Yet, I think the newspaper may be right. The only gang shooting that has taken place since Guido’s dad went to prison has been when Guido was the target. Maybe someone was trying to kill Guido. If so, that only makes it worse. I wish my husband would give it up.”

I was surprised. This was the first time Angela ever made reference to Guido and The Family when I was present”

“I am sure that he would like that. He loves you so, Angela.”

“I know and he loves you. It would be nice if you and he could spend more time together. The war news also added to my mood. It is so horrible. I am glad you escaped with your life, son.”

“Thank you. Say, I just had an idea. Since several of your friends have sons in the service, why don’t the group of your mail some “care packages” that their sons can share with their buddies. You will make some young me very happy.”

“What a great idea. You are so caring, Marco.”

I said, “I hear a car door closing. It must be Kate. I have to run. I love you, Angela.”

“I love you, son. Give my love to Kate.”

Meanwhile, Guido was hard at work. The strategy committee of the executive committee was in session at the mountain retreat near Ligonier. One of the older members was pushing for expansion he huts finished saying, “Every police force is working shorthanded with their younger members in the military.”

Another voice added. “We can set up some discreet gambling locations and some controlled bingo games to entice the gamblers’ souses.”

Guido held up; his hand. “There is no doubt that what you say is true. There is also some repair work that must be done. Getting Pitt Supply profitable again should take less energy and be three times as profitable as setting up; four very good games we need to remember that we need profitable corporations to launder our illegally obtained dough. Capone and Shultz should be reminders. ”

That statement changed the direction of the discussion. One of the recently discharged injured veterans, whose father retired to allow his son a seat, spoke up. “Guido, we need to get a new kind of face at Pitt Supply.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“We should make a clean sweep of the management. Hire an Irishman or Englishman or even a Swede. If we make the right choice and give the new man the right to clean house, our old clients will be more receptive to renewing our relationship. If I understand correctly, we were highly thought of prior to this last management fiasco.”

The younger man had everyone’s attention. He continued “All we need is one diplomatic sharp finance man on the top staff to protect our interest.”

The next few minutes were chaotic as everyone wanted to affirm the suggestion.”

When Guido finally got the group to silence. He said, “It sounds like you want to recommend the idea to the full executive committee”

The eyes were unanimous.

Now, let’s have a report on our stalled plan for Fairglen.”

Boots Manado made a brief report. “Tony reports that the numbers game has been under surveillance of the local police. No arrests have been made but his recruiting has been slower than planned. He recommends we hold off on the gambling until the police are off guard.”

“What about politician?”

“He and Maria are about to set the trap.”

Guido said, “Boots, set up another meet with Tony. Ask him what help we can offer that would increase the pace. That community looks like it’s ripe for the taking.”

“Anything else that’s good for the order.”

“Okay. Enjoy yourselves.”

Weeks later Pitt Supply was purchased by a corporation, S&S Supply, but continued to operate under its tradition name, Pitt Supply. The new General Manager, Edmund Rowe, was instructed to bring his own team with one exception. The VP of Finance would come from the holding company headquarters. His name was Peter Rose, legally changed from Pietro Rossi, ten years ago.

Prior to the hiring of Mr. Rowe, all banking had been moved to Pittsburgh Community Bank. The major stockholder was Guido Balisteri, who had a clean record and passed every other requirement of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Rowe and his VP of Sales, William Nasser, requested an appointment with the chief purchasing agent of Steel Fabrications. The PA immediately contacted John Scott who approved the meeting as long as it could be secretly monitored by Mark.

Chapter 11.

I reported the presentation by Mr. Rowe or our executive committee. Asked for an evaluation, I said “I’m sure that all or most of his staff will come out clean after being vetted by any investigators. I agree that their history except for the recent event is spotless in relating to our firm. They made a good point of proving that not competitor in the past has been able to deliver the variety of supplies and the quantity we demanded with as much regularity.”

Based on that information as well as the reporting of their organization, we should consider resisting our previous relationship. I am convinced that this new administration would not allow a repeat of what we experienced.

Perhaps, Mike Miller picked up some subtle nuance that I had tried to mask. He asked “Do I hear a faint but?”

“It’s more of a feeling than something solid. I am sure that if we delved deeply enough into the new ownership, we would find the same principals in control.

We had no direct proof of Mafia involvement but I am sure that will prove to be the case even though we could not prove it.”

“Are you raising an ethical issue?”

“That’s the question but I have no basis for recommending denying Pitt Steel a chance to bid on our need.”

John Scott suggested, “Let’s move slowly. We certainly can use the services and materials of Pitt Supply. Mark, you’re responsibilities can be understood to continue digging for the full backgrounds of all our customers and vendors”

Mike spoke up. “Two of our principal stock holders have extremely high ethical standards.

I had the permission and therefore the ability to use a lot of resources, within reasonable limited to cast a wide net. My employers wanted a clean reputation

I found myself sitting on the edge of a very sharp knife blade. My life training and my job were pulling me in the directing that, if successful, might lead to serious problems for Angela and Guido.

That was also true in my personal life, since Kate and I had chosen to live in Fairglen, the apparent focus of The Family’s expansion program.

I had no way of knowing of another developing event that would impact my already complicated life.

Jack Della Valle had a grandson, Jimmy, who was part of the North Side gang in Cleveland. The news of his grandfather’s murder hit him hard. His Gama had loved him and showered him with gifts in his young years. Gramma had suffered a severe heart attack when she had received the news.

Jimmy went to his Capo. “Sir, I want to avenge the killing of my Gramper Jack, who was your longtime friend If Guido Balisteri was out of the way, there may be some advantage for us to move in on some of their territory.”

The Capo took his tie responding. “Perhaps there may be. What do you propose?”

“I think that our own, Ben, The Trigger, if given the assignment and the time could find a way to erase Guido.”

“We’ll talk it over. If there is advantage for us, I will make the arrangement. If not advantageous, the Del is off. Killing for revenge only leads to greater problems, a lesson that you need to learn.”

In Fairglen, Tony was looking at the pictures Sly had taken of Griffin being straddled by Mario. Sly had cleverly created a pornographic scene while protecting Maria’s identity but revealing the compromised politician.

Confidant that their money would get Griffin elected, Tony decided to advance the opening of the private high stakes poker game and let the word out n surrounding commutes.

He arranged for the importuning of a dozen intimidators for the three day before and including Election Day.

He recruited more runners for the Numbers game.

He was confident that his timing was good. He paid Maria both bonuses; sure that he had nailed Griffin.

Guido had been extremely busy and missed two chances to talk with Marco who had dinner with Angela during Guido’s absence. The day after that last dinner, he decided to invite Marco to lunch.

Mark accepted the invite for a week hence, knowing that he would have to discuss details of his job at SF

The following day at lunch at his favorite café, he watched the waitress step in front of his table and keel over from gunshot in her left shoulder. Guido was ducking and one of his guards was shielding Guido, while the other called for help as he tried to discover the source of the rifle shot.

In retrospect, Guido knew that he had escaped only because of a flue last second movement into the scene by his waitress.

After making sure that the waitress was in the ambulance and that he had her name and address, he left the café, unable to eat his meal.

In his office, he was still shaking. He had been surprised. His intelligence system had not picked up any sign that a hit was on. That smelled of trouble from outside.

The following morning, he received a phone call from Cleveland. He recognized the voice. “The fool has been taken care of. He did not take my advice. It was Jack’s grandson.”

“Thank you. I was afraid it was a move from someone muscling in.”

“Not from this direction.” Guido heard the click of a broken connection.

Guido almost choked on the crust of bread when I said, “I’m the chief of security for Steel Fabrications.”

Guido thought about that. “He must have been privy to the fiasco with Pitt Supply. I wonder if he made any connection to The Family. I hope not. At least the new ownership and all WASP executive seem to have healed the wounds of the past.”

“Tell me how come you got that position for one so young and tell more about the job, Marco.”

I was sure he was suspicious and was fishing. I decided that he may as well have a picture of where I stood.

I was working in accounting when I discovered some shenanigans between our staff and someone in Pitt Supply. Since they had no such position and thought I had potential, I got the promotion.”

“It turns out to be a big job as head of physical security, defending against raiders, if any and making sure our vendors are not selling us black market material. That means doing research on all our vendors.”

I watched to see if Guido had any reaction but his mask was in place.

I continued. "I've decided that we need to determine if ownership of our vendors might turn up some unsuspected problems."

In my mind, I had warned Guido that if I had guessed correctly about The Family, we might be in opposite corners in the near future.

I decided to switch subjects. Mom was no hell when I called about the shooting while you were at lunch. Is the paper's speculation right about an attempt on your life?"

Guido hesitated for only a moment. "I'm afraid so. An out of state thug, who thought I did his grandfather wrong, put a hit on me. By the way, I did not admit that to Angela."

I decided to bring up the subject of Fairglen. By the way, I ran into an old friend, Maria, who is living with Tony in my new hometown. I hear the Numbers game is on the rise."

Guido nodded but said nothing. I continued, "I hope he is not expanding The Family business in the place where Kate and I want to raise our children that would be your grandchildren, sort of."

Guido nodded his understudy nag of the dilemma that might develop.

Guido steered the conversation away from Fairglen. "When are you and Kate coming to dinner again?"

I laughed. "When mom calls with a guarantee that you will be home."

"Touché." He joined in the laughter.

Five days before election, mysteriously, two staff members at the Numbers Bank were taken ill with food poisoning at lunch. Tony was called to handle the emergency. Runners would be arriving and no one with authority to receive the money was present.

Runners were standing in line, waiting for Tony to check them in. Suddenly, the State Police were coming through all three doors. Every runner resent was arrested along with Tony.

Fred had managed to convince the mayor to invite the State Police to take over.

The contract for the ten intimidators was cancelled and a fair election took place.

Tony was released on bail and a week later, he and Maria had vacated their rental.

The large house that was to become the gambling center, stayed vacant for a year, the lessee choosing not to occupy the building.

A week later, I received a phone call at the office from Guido “Angela is one the way to University Hospital in Pittsburg. She has just had a heart attack. She has been asking for you.

Angela was still in Emergency when I arrived. I sat next to Guido, who was holding a very wet handkerchief to stem the flow of tears.

I put my arms around Guido who let his head fall onto my shoulder. We let silence reign while our hearts reached out to Angela and to each other.

I let my mind run over the memories of how I came, accidentally, to be adopted, informally as the son of a Mafioso and his loving wife.

It all happened when my friend, Chris Columbus, needed someone with whom he could pay pool. Words kept punctuating my meteor. Hey you. Curly hair. Cokes. Place of Sweets. Scholarship. Ford convertible.

I was jolted out of my reverie when I heard the doctor saying, “She’s going to be fine but will be bed ridden for several months with someone present at all times.”

Guido poked me in the arm. “Did you hear that? Angela is going to be fine.”

We had to wait an hour before we could visit her in ICU, one at a time.”

I took that period to call Kate. After giving her the news, I listened to the news of her day. I ended by saying, “Don’t wait up. I have a feeling that Guido will not want to go home. We’ll probably end up in a hotel nearby so we can return to the hospital by ten.”

Her smile was weak but welcoming as I leaned over for a kiss on the cheek. Guido was so excited and so loving.”

Her laughter was hardly audible as she continued. “I ought to have a heart attack every month.”

The nurse interrupted. “She must rest. You may come back tomorrow after ten.”

We checked into the Webster Hall, just off the Pitt campus and were assigned a suite facing the University’s Cathedral of Learning

Guido order up a bottle of Haig and Haig and some ice. I took that as a signal that we were going to have some conversation. When the bellman brought the scotch, we gave him our suits to be pressed overnight and asked him to buy new shirts which were to be delivered by ten o’clock.

When I finished pouring out some scotch, Guido asked, “Marco, have you heard any information that any of your vendors may be connected to some Family besides ours?”

I answered truthfully. “Nothing from our investigators but one of our men said he heard that the FBI is about to initiate a look at Pittsburgh Community Bank about some irregularities.”

Guido didn't blink which I took to mean that he had no direct connection to the back.

After a moment, he said, "I have some friends who own stock in that bank."

He asked me about the elections in Fairglen and smiled when I told him how that turned out. I didn't mention the result of the State Police investigation since I felt he had arranged for the least damaging way to move out of Fairglen. I also felt sure that Tony would get a bonus for the humiliation of spending a few hours in jail.

Angela was feeling much better. After Guido's turn, I was ushered into the room. After a hug and kisses, Angela asked, "Marcos, I need you to find a way for Guido to retire from his position in The Family He listened to my plea and said he would consider the idea but could not make a promise."

"Please, Marcos. I must stay in bed for months with someone in constant attendance. I need more than a nurse, a professional paid to sit with me. I need Guido, too. I am afraid to lose him if he doesn't retire. You know that he has been targeting twice during the as t year."

She hardly got out those last words before the dam of tears broke.

The nurse came dashing in. I told you not to excite the patient. Her heart is very fragile. Now, get out of here."

I had to explain the situation for Guido. He nodded his understanding when I mentioned Angela's plea.

I called Kate to check in. She said that she had called in and was off for the day. She said, "I know you and Guido have to work, so I will spend the day sitting with Angela. I presume you will both visit with her after work. I think it would be good to have Guido come to a late dinner. How does that sound?"

"I'll check and call you back in a few minutes."

After checking with Guido, dinner was on.

When we were ready to head home from the hospital that evening, Guido asked me to ride in his car while he had someone drive my car home.

In the privacy of back seat, he said “Marco, I now it’s a lot to ask, but have you heard any info from your investigator that may impact The Family?”

Fortunately at that moment I had not so I was able to avoid my responsibility to SF, my employer. “No Guido but he was speculating that the Federal agents may be digging into ownership of Pitt Supply.”

“He drew that conclusion from an event at the Hall of Records. As art of his job for me, he is checking ownership of all our vendors. When he asked for the file yesterday, it was checked out. The only other person reading records were what he believed could only be a Fed.”

“Thank you. I heisted asking because I don’t want you to be compromised. I made a decision today. I went to see my dad, the real Capo. He became really upset when told him of Angela’s heart attack. Even before I could raise the subject he decided to have me replaced. He insists that I make a complete break and started taking steps to replace me as of today.”

“Wow that is fast.”

“Yes but he explained. He is aware of more intense scrutiny by the Feds. He loves Angela just as I do and does not want me involved in case Feds decide to prosecute on some charge.”

“The other main reason will surprise you. He is aware of how deeply Angela and I feel about you and he wants our relationship to continue without any chance of embarrassing you and Kate.”

“Guido, you do surprise me. I had no idea that you had such a continued close tie to your father.”

He laughed. “There is much you do not know about me, but I am close to my dad and visit him every week.”

We rode in silence for a minute while I tried to absorb all that I heard in these last minutes.

I turned to him. “Guido, I have no need to know, but I am curious. An outgoing Executive in any organization has a lot of information in his head that need to be given to his replacement. If you are terminated today, how will that happen?”

He laughed. “It is better that you do not know. I will tell you that my successor was chosen long time ago and are well informed. By midnight today, everyone will have been informed of the new Capo.

When we arrived home, Kate met us at the door. I was so pleased to see the warmth in both of them as they greeted each other. In that moment, I knew that Kate was the latest adopted child of Angela and Guido.

The end.

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