

CHAPTER 4

The Negro cooking breakfast inside the railroad car had white hair and skin the color of black ink. He wore boots with the ends cut open for toe room and overalls so quilted with patches that the original garment was buried like a level of civilization. He stirred three large pots on the woodstove. Two contained cornmeal, the other weak coffee. He added water to the cornmeal as required, and when the gluey mixture bubbled he added globs of lard, fresh eggs, and handfuls of black pepper. After each handful he looked for approval from the boss, Torino, who sat on a cot lacing up his boots.

“With pepper,” said Torino, “Italians will eat anything.” He stood up full height to test his bones for the day. His great size, bald front, and large mismatched ears suggested an elephant. He wore clean khaki clothing and a leather belt holding a pistol and a blackjack.

Torino pushed aside a curtain separating his quarters from the rest of the car and watched the men slide from their sleeping pallets. They were a sullen lot, unshaven and bad smelling. A few grumbled in their country dialect. Some were flatulent; some covered their private parts angrily, objecting to the lack of privacy inside the car; others displayed themselves with childlike pride.

Torino tasted the cornmeal, then served himself a bowl in plain view of the men. It was barely edible, but considering his feeling toward this particular crew, he wished it were poison.

“Eat! Eat!” he cried.

After the men were served Torino went to a shed that served as a company store. On Sunday the men took a half-day’s rest, and ordinarily his little store would be full of men buying tobacco, food, and even straw hats to protect themselves from the sun. But three Sundays in a row hadn’t seen a single sale to this collection of Sicilian cheapskates. Torino feared that the store income, which accounted for part of his salary, would be lost.

The shed was made of barked poles and slab siding. Torino swung open the door and took a seat in the back where he couldn’t easily be seen. Hanging from the inside beams were *zappe*, the short-handled hoes upon which Sicilians had built their reputation as cultivators of

sugarcane and cotton. Long shelves contained tobacco, overalls, shirts, underwear, socks, shoes, and such a variety of foods that a man didn't have to eat the African's cooking, if the man was willing to pay the price. Here were tins of fish, olive oil decanted into small bottles, wedges of hard, imported cheese, barrels of wine made by local Sicilians, and preserved fruits to make a man's mouth water.

Breakfast was over, and the men were jumping down from the railroad car. Some went into the nearby brush to relieve themselves; others headed uphill toward the single outhouse and a willow grove where they could relax in the shade. A loud banging noise immediately ensued. The men were throwing rocks at the outhouse. It was a game they played, trying to get the man inside to finish quickly. Torino's warnings against it had been ignored. They would wreck the outhouse soon enough. Then they could use the bushes, like pigs.

He'd never seen such a troublesome crew. It was corrupted by city types from Palermo who were devious and hard to intimidate. To these he added a country radical named Santo Regina, who'd convinced the men to boycott the store. This was after the ledger book in which Torino recorded store sales had been stolen. The pages had been ripped out and passed around the camp. Now each man knew what deductions were coming off his pay, and all of them believed—with good cause—that Torino was cheating. There were rumors of a strike if store prices weren't changed. It was an amazing development for Sicilians, who usually worked under any conditions. Torino feared a strike most of all. He was personally responsible for a contract with the plantation owner: two hundred acres of cotton had to be cultivated within a certain time. If the Sicilians quit, the crop loss would be his responsibility.

There was no way this trouble could have been foreseen. Torino tried to hire only first-time swallows, desperate men who would settle for a few American dollars to take home. Most of the Sicilians in the camp today were from villages deep in the Madonie Mountain range. They'd never been to America before, and ordinarily such types would be like clay in his hands. But there'd been political trouble up there in the mountains. The *contadini* had fought for land reform and better crop shares. Although they'd lost, the men could see the pattern in

Sicily being repeated here.

Some of the Palermo boys came up to the shed. One of them shaded his eyes and peered inside. This was the chief instigator, named Zillo, round as a ball and hairy all over.

“Good day to you, boss! We can see you’re working hard already!” He and three younger ones swaggered inside, picking up the tins of food and tobacco on display. All of them kept knives in their boots.

“How much for anchovies, boss?”

“Tobacco! How much is tobacco?”

“What do sardines bring?”

“The prices are marked,” Torino said.

“We don’t like these prices!”

“Then get out! Don’t touch, and get out!” Torino rose up and came forward. He unbuckled the strap on his pistol. “Do you hear me?”

They swaggered off, laughing, and Torino turned his eye on another man climbing down from the railroad car: Regina, the rabble-rouser.

Torino came outside. “You! Come in here!”

Santo came forward but didn’t enter.

“Why are you making trouble here? Why do you ask them to strike?”

Santo lit the stub of a Toscano cigar. “I ask them nothing. But if you want to know the truth, the men may strike unless you lower the prices and wipe our slates clean. According to the record book that came into our hands, most of us will take home half the pay you promised.”

“What makes you say this?”

“I have read the pages in the book. You are charging men for things they haven’t bought.”

Torino pointed to the boxcar, where the cook was wrestling pots of breakfast slops onto a wheelbarrow, which he began pushing toward the hog pens. “Do you see that miserable African? Among his own kind he’s considered rich because he has a job. But the countryside between here and New Orleans is a jungle filled with starving and murderous Africans, those once enslaved by the whites. I can tear up your contracts and send you away. The Africans will pick your bones

and nobody will care. The law protects only the whites. We Italians are just another form of slave, whether we can read or not.”

“Why do you tell me this?” asked Santo, keeping his distance.

“To let you know what you’re up against. There is no choice. I have your steamship tickets. I have your entry papers. Follow my rules or you go into the jungle. And whoever survives will be jailed by the immigration.”

Santo conceded this point in silence and walked up to the willow grove. The men were lying on the grass or sitting against the tree trunks in the shade. Zillo and his cousins had a willow tree to themselves. They waved him over.

“Sit with us now,” said Zillo. “You’re the man we need. What did this boss say to you down there?”

“What you know already. The contract we signed is worthless. We have no protection against him.”

“What can we do then?”

Santo directed Zillo to look down the hill. The boss was standing outside the shed looking up at them, arms folded on his chest.

Zillo stood up and saluted the boss with an obscene gesture. Then he put both hands to his mouth and made a loud, flatulent noise. “So much for him,” he said. Then after drawing the group closer, he pulled out a ledger page.

“Everything is here,” he said, tapping on the page with one finger. “Our friend Regina reports that this *ladrone*, like some great artist, paints numbers next to our names. According to this page, I have bought eight tins of fish, two pieces of imported cheese, a great deal of pipe tobacco, and a cotton shirt made in the factories of L’America. Now, I don’t smoke a pipe. Nor do I see this cotton shirt on my back. And I’m not the only man here to buy imaginary goods. What should we do, my friends, cut him open like a fish?”

Santo leaned back against the trunk of the willow tree and set his hat over his eyes to block the sun. He watched a swallow hover on a wind draft, than sail into one of the barns near the *palazzo* which housed the landowner, a white man who sometimes walked with Torino down the cotton rows to inspect the work. Santo remembered the slogan of Torino’s recruiting agent on the steamship: “Sixty days, sixty dollars!

No hidden costs. This is guaranteed!" There were thirty days left on the contract. Leaving camp with half that money would be a miracle.

"This is like home," said Zillo. "You have men with guns who work for those who own the land. They cheat both sides."

"But here it is different," Santo said.

"How?"

"Here there is no law. There are no *carabinieri*."

"But they have Africans, everywhere. Remember how we saw them on the docks in New Orleans, miserable souls begging for food and money."

"The slaves of the whites even though they've been set free," said Santo. "We are this far above them." He held up his thumb and index finger so they were touching.

Zillo stood over Santo and tapped his foot with his own. "Regina, what's the answer?"

"We can refuse to work and leave the camp, or we can work and hope."

"We can't leave the camp. He has our tickets home!" cried one of the men.

"But we can reach New Orleans," said Zillo. "There's a community of Sicilians there. We can get anything we want. We can get work, we can get papers. The American immigration will be glad to see us go back home."

One of Zillo's cousins wanted to speak. He was a blond, blue-eyed boy with the wispy foreshadow of a beard. He raised a hand for silence. "If we were home and this man took our money, what would happen?"

"Ah, Palermo," said Zillo, making such chopping motions with his hands that his cheeks shook.

"Just so," said the boy.

Zillo looked around as if this idea were now a possibility. He pinched the boy's cheek playfully. "And then what?"

The young man smiled. His teeth were milky and glasslike. "And then we go to New Orleans."

Zillo looked at Santo as if a second discovery had been made.

"Listen to me," the young man said. "Here is a man who reaches into our pockets every day and takes our money. We'll never see this

money. I've heard these *padroni* often pay wages after the workers have boarded the steamship for home. The money is passed along by someone who knows nothing. So there's nobody to answer for what's been done to you. Why not kill him now? It may make life better for those who follow us. We've already been sacrificed."

Santo picked at some mud on his shoes. "Do you kill so easily?"

The boy reached into his boot and came up with a long knife whose blade was ground to a slight curve. He drew the tip gently across his throat.

"He'll do it," said Zillo, touching Santo's foot with his own once more. "This boy can do it!"

Santo looked past his little group to the *palazzo* where the owner lived. It was a massive white house with four brick chimneys and it connected to some smaller buildings that housed Negroes and animals. There was always activity around the house, usually Negroes tending animals, hanging laundry, splitting firewood. The camp was actually a cotton factory, set in the middle of endless acres of cotton plantings, untilled fields, and woodland. Here was the same pattern of ownership as in Sicily, only the land was richer, and here the Negroes took the place of the *contadini*. Santo had seen them working in the fields, walking behind mule-drawn cultivators. Like the Sicilians at home, they walked in their sleep.

He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the talk of strikes and revenge and whether they could reach New Orleans. He'd signed on to Torino's crew with every intention of minding his own business. He'd even resigned himself to being moderately cheated, if he could return home with most of his pay. Then someone stole the ledger book and asked him to read it.

One of the men cried out, "Look at that!"

Santo sat up.

Torino was downhill talking to a group of Negroes carrying shotguns. He looked up toward the grove and gestured with a sweep of his hand. The Negroes came uphill and surrounded the willow grove, holding the guns at their chests.

The boss came into the grove and clapped his hands for attention.

“Don’t go beyond these Africans! They’re instructed to shoot!”

He came up to Santo and said, “Hello, my friend. Do you still want to go to New Orleans?”

“The men will decide,” said Santo.

Torino cried “Get up!” and began to kick at Santo’s feet. Zillo immediately jumped on Torino from behind. One of the Negroes fired in the air. Torino shook Zillo off, and in one motion pulled his blackjack and struck Zillo on the head. When Zillo didn’t go down, Torino struck him on his temple. Zillo fell to his knees then, and Santo kneeled beside him, pressing a handkerchief on his temple to stop the blood flow. Santo looked up. Torino held the blackjack near his ear and jiggled it obscenely. “Don’t even breathe in my direction,” he said.

Zillo had a lump on his temple the size of a bird’s egg. “No man does this to me,” he said later to Santo and the blond boy.

“They think Sicilians are fools and dogs,” the blond boy said. He flicked a thumb on his knife edge. “I can do it while he sleeps.”

“He does it,” said Zillo. “Then we follow the railroad to New Orleans. We can do it tomorrow. Let him think that we now behave like good little swallows and work hard. We will buy things in his crooked little store and pretend all is forgiven.”

“I can’t be part of it,” Santo said.

“Why not?”

“I’m not free, like you. I can’t risk my family.”

Zillo had raised his eyebrows as if he understood everything now. “Listen to me,” he said. “I will share a secret. In New Orleans there is a friend of mine, a famous Sicilian with balls like this!” He held up two hands in the shape of great globes. “Perhaps you know of him, for he came to your part of the country during the *Fasci* strikes. His name is Don Vito Cascio Ferro, and for me he will do anything. We only have to reach New Orleans.”

That night Santo lay on his pallet, not sleeping. His packed valise was his pillow. He felt himself already in motion. Just above him an air hatch was propped up with a stick. The opening had served him well and would serve him again. For many nights he’d slept with his face to the cool night air, seen the moon and stars in a hazy sky, heard the

comforting wheeze of swine and the clanking of pots from the house where the Negroes worked. With the speed of thought he could rise and float into the night, sailing over moonlit fields in the flight of a saint. This opening was the door to his freedom.

He sat up, thrust the valise out of the hatch and onto the car top. Then he lifted himself part way out. It was the quiet hour, insects buzzing, the mockingbird that sang all night. There were no Negro guards at night. He pushed himself out, found the ladder, and with the valise in one hand, climbed down, one rung at a time. Then something hard struck his head from behind, hands tore him from the ladder just as he made out the shape of Torino beating him with the blackjack while the Negroes held him down.