

This is the story of an Italian resistance group in World War II, as well as of the Germans and Fascist Italians who try to destroy them. Three people who knew each other from childhood are on opposite sides in this life and death struggle.

DESPERATE COMMANDS

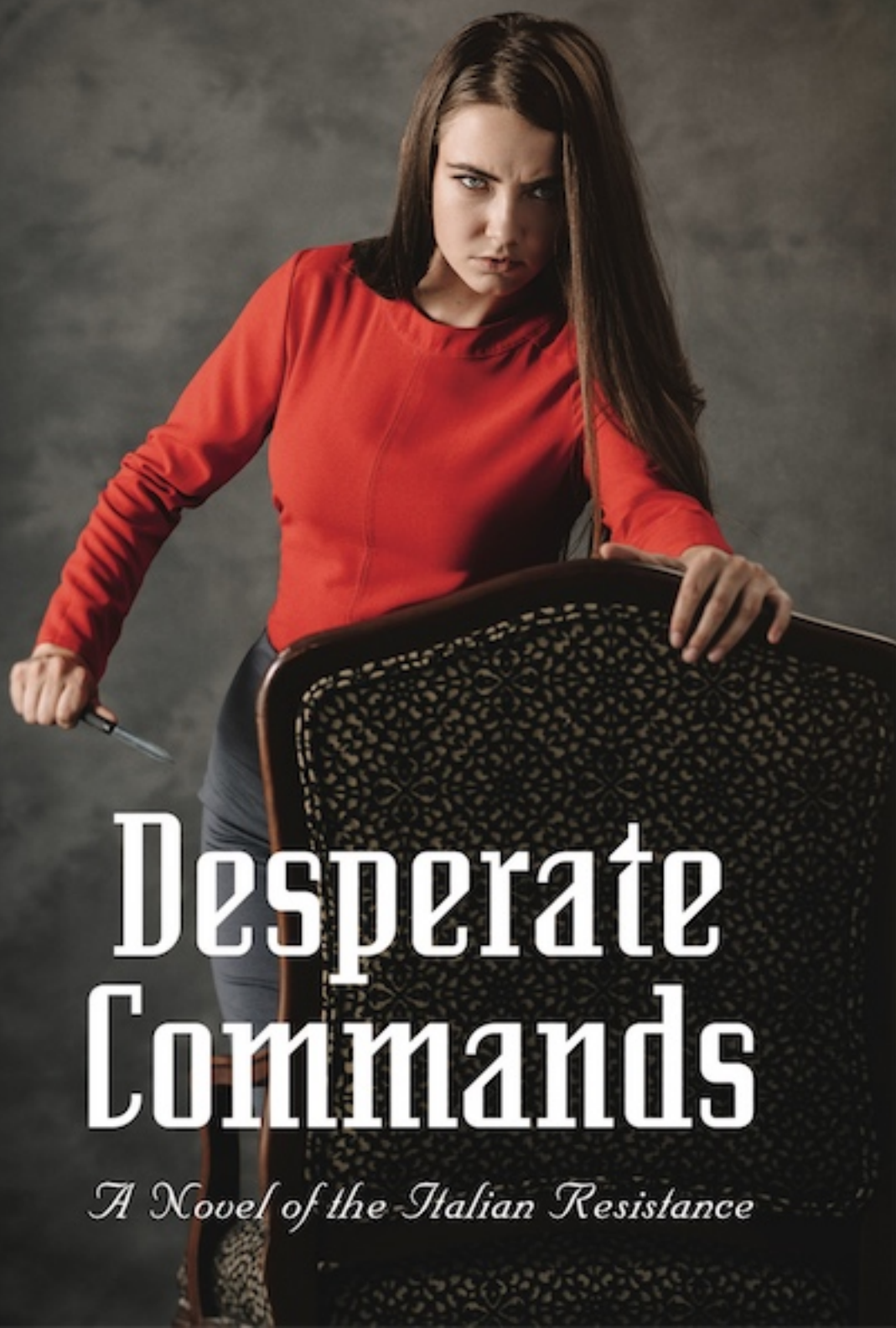
by Anthony Genualdi

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ANTHONY GENUALDI



Desperate Commands

A Novel of the Italian Resistance

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First Edition

Chapter One

6 June 1944

“Antonio, the South African is here.”

Marco Galli, whose *nom de guerre* was Antonio, looked up from cleaning his pistol. “All right, Giacomo, send him in.”

Giacomo, whose real name was Matteo Gallo, replied, “Yes, sir.” He motioned for their guest to come in. A burly, mustachioed man stepped into the room and clicked his heels. “Sir, Lieutenant Jacobus van der Neer, South African Air Force.”

Marco stood up and shook hands with Jacobus. “I’m Antonio. Nice to meet you.”

“Your English is very good, sir.”

“Thank you.” He turned to Matteo and said in Italian, “That’s all, Giacomo.” Matteo clicked his heels and closed the door behind him. Marco gestured to his right. “I took the liberty of pouring some *grappa*. Have some?”

“Thank you, sir.” The men raised their glasses. “*Gesondheid.*”

“*Salute.*” The men turned up their glasses.

Jacobus licked his lips. “Mmm, like plums.”

Marco smiled, “Just how I like it. Sit down.”

“Thank you, sir.” As they sat, Jacobus said, “I don’t mean to offend, sir, but you talk like a Yank.”

Marco smiled again, “No offense taken. Right you are. I talk like a Yank. Part of my youth was spent in Chicago. I was growing up there in the last war.”

“Interesting.”

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“Yes, an uncle on my mother’s side convinced her to bring us over. But we couldn’t make it work. I guess there were too many shoemakers, or we weren’t the right kind, so when the last war ended, we came back here to Brescia.”

“So, how did you get to be a resistance fighter?”

“Well, an uncle on my father’s side was in the Army. He was an *Alpini* soldier fighting the Austrians. He filled my head with stories about the service. So instead of university, I applied to the military academy. I ended up in the quartermaster corps.”

Jacobus laughed, “Well, someone has to stock the shelves.”

Marco frowned, “Naturally, I wasn’t happy about that. I would hear from classmates who went to Ethiopia and Spain, and they got to see action. All I had was making sure our chicken shit colonel wasn’t yelling about our shoes being shined and our buttons buttoned. Also, there were inventories to tally.

“Well, as the war progressed, someone looked at my file and saw my proficiency in English, and they made me a warden. The best part of that was that it was here in Lombardia. I could see my girl when I had leave.” Marco took out his wallet and handed over a picture of a tall, blue eyed woman with straight brown hair. She wore a nurse’s uniform.

Jacobus whistled, “Wow. Those eyes could penetrate a steel plate.”

“Yes, Guilia has armor piercing eyes.”

Jacobus handed back the picture. “I’d forgo going overseas to be near her.”

“Indeed. So, you were part of the raid last night?”

Jacobus nodded, “Yes, I was.”

“You did a thorough job on the railroad station.”

Jacobus grinned, “We aim to please.” They both laughed. “So, last year, I’d have been your prisoner.”

“Yes. We had a lot of you South Africans join us when Tobruk fell.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“We had enough of you Boers to make two rugby teams, and enough British to make two more. We watched you play that, and soccer. The handful of Americans we had played baseball. Well, back in September, when Italy threw in the towel, I assembled the prisoners and told them, ‘The Germans are coming for you. There are rifles, grenades, a machine gun, and ammo in the armory, plus the guards are leaving the machine guns in the towers. God be with you.’ Then I marched my men into the hills east of the city, and here we are.”

Jacobus glared at Marco. “You bugger! You abandoned your post, and those men. You fit the stereotype of cowardice.”

Marco leaned forward. “Think what you like! My men weren’t exactly elite troops. I had retreats from the last war. I had men who’d been shot up in Russia and weren’t fit to go to the front again. Besides, I left weapons for those prisoners. They could have stood and fought, or if they’d been smart, they’d have headed for the hills too, and worked their way north or south. For all I know, the Germans could have sent the SS, and I had no intention of throwing my men’s lives away.” He leaned back again.

Jacobus and Marco stood up. “I’m tired,” Jacobus said. “I’m also hungry.” Marco went to the door and opened it. “Giacomo.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Our guest is hungry.” Marco turned to Jacobus. “Before you eat, I’d like to ask you, in spite of what you heard, if we could persuade you to stay with us. There are more boys than men in my outfit now, and we could use military men.”

Jacobus shook his head. “I didn’t join the Air Force to fight on the ground.”

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“OK. Your choices are north and south. Switzerland is closer, but you can try your luck going to reach the front.”

“South it is. I might get lucky and reach my fellow countrymen with the Sixth Armored.”

“How much ammo do you have for that revolver?”

Jacobus looked at his holster for a moment. “Uh, just what’s in it.”

“We’ll give you a couple boxes of .455 ammo we got from the last airdrop, plus a map and a day’s worth of food. After that, you rely on the kindness of strangers. After you eat, you can rest until nightfall and then go.”

“Do I get a guide?”

“I can’t spare anyone.”

“I didn’t think so,” Jacobus grinned.

“Go with Giacomo, and *arrivaderci*.”

Chapter Two

30 June 1944

Squad Leader Riccardo Mariani raised his arm in the Fascist salute and exclaimed, in unison with his men, “*Evvive Il Duce!*”

The chief of police for Brescia, Romeo Piglosi, returned the salute. He stepped up to Riccardo and shook his hand. “How good to see you, Squad Leader. Your men look ready to deal with the ‘bandits.’”

“Thank you, sir.”

Piglosi look over the men from the *X Brigata Nera*. This was First Squad, First Platoon, First Company, part of the 850-man strong brigade. Their shoes were shined, their black socks were pulled up, khaki shorts pressed, and their famous black shirts all buttoned and smooth. Their caps were all squared up, and had their silver skull badges with daggers in their jaws. They had their rifles slung on their shoulders, and Riccardo had his Beretta MAB submachine gun slung as well. Over their left chest pockets was the rectangular badge of their formation. It said “*Brigata Nera*” in the red enameled upper left side, and “*Enrico Tognu*”, the “martyr” the brigade was named after, in the black lower right section. “So,” Romeo asked, “how long has it been?”

“I first put the black shirt on in 1925. In fact, it was this very shirt, sir.”

“You’ve stayed loyal all this time, even when our *Duce* was thrown out by those cowards in Rome.”

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Riccardo nodded, "Yes, chief. The only difference now is my squad leader rank." He pointed to the red lanyard on his right shoulder.

Romeo stepped back. "Men, I look forward to working with you in defeating the 'bandits,' both the Garibaldi Communists, and the other subversive elements, like the so-called 'Sword of Brescia' Catholic guerrillas that work with the enemy forces to try to destroy the Italian Social Republic. With my policemen, the other Black Brigades throughout the country, and our German allies, we will gain the victory and peace." He raised his arm in salute. "*Evvive Il Duce!*" The Blackshirts returned the salute. "*Evvive Il Duce!*"

Riccardo turned to his men, "Squad, dismissed." He stepped up to Romeo and took a cigarette from Romeo's proffered pack. Romeo lit his cigarette, then Riccardo's. "So, chief, now are you holding up? I heard about your wife dying in the air raid."

Romeo frowned, "Thank you, Riccardo." He took two pictures from his pocket. One had him with his late wife, a short redhead. "I miss Loretta every day. It's hard to believe it's nearly been a month." The other picture was of the two men with an Army officer. "I wonder what happened to Marco. I haven't heard from him since last August."

"I heard he deserted his post at the prison camp. He and his men deserted *en masse*."

Romeo shook his head. "Really? That's shameful. I thought Marco was made of stronger stuff than that. Is it possible that he and his men are up in the hills?"

Riccardo nodded. "That's what I've heard. It was mostly deserters that started the 'bandit' activity throughout the north, and this so-called 'Committee of National Liberation.'"

"That's disgusting. Not only does our king stab us in the back, and Marshal Badoglio as well, but so many soldiers too. It's no wonder the Germans look at us sideways."

“The SS don’t look at my men sideways. They’re appreciative of our spirit in the *Brigata Nera*. They know we’re made of the strongest stuff.”

Romeo nodded. “Well, I’m glad about that.” He took a breath, then asked, “Are you still seeing that nurse?”

Riccardo grinned and took a picture out of his chest pocket. “I still see Giulia. Her job as a nurse means I don’t see her so much now with the war going on. In fact, I think it’s been two weeks. Getting my squad in order left me no social time. But I can’t forget those eyes of hers.”

“Yes, those blue eyes penetrate right to your soul.”

“They do.” He put the picture back in his pocket. “Well, chief, I have to go now. *Arrivaderci*.” He saluted, and Romeo returned it, then Riccardo went back to his barracks.

Chapter Three

3 July 1944

Marco scanned the southern horizon with his binoculars. From the end of the ridge east of Brescia, he looked for two people who were bearing an important package. He lit his cigar and started looking again. It was nearly last light, and they should be here by now.

There they are! The taller one was in front, carrying a pistol. The shorter one had the package on his back. Marco picked up a flashlight and showed three long flashes, waited three seconds, then showed two more. The taller person took out a flashlight and repeated the signal back to him. As they got closer, Marco could see them in better detail. The taller one was a woman, with her long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was his beloved Giulia. She and her companion made their way to the back of the dugout and climbed in.

As they entered, Marco embraced Giulia, whose alias was Lucia. "Oh, *mi amore*, I missed you."

"I missed you, Antonio," she replied. They kissed, then Giulia turned to see a heavy-set man standing with the radioman from the south. "This is Gabriele, from the SIM." They were the military intelligence branch of the Co-Belligerent Forces. "And who is your friend, Antonio?"

"This is Ivan," Marco replied. "He comes to us from Turkmenistan."

Giulia offered her hand. "I'm Lucia."

Ivan shook her hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

"You're a long way from home."

“Very long. The Germans recruited us to fight Stalin, and then sent us to Italy. To hell with that! I found Antonio when your patrol found me. I work for him.”

“He’s great at taking out sentries,” Marco said. “He throws knives like you can’t believe.” Marco then offered his hand to Gabriele. “Nice to meet you.”

“Good to meet you, Antonio.” They shook hands. “I just wonder why I had to hike up here. Don’t you have a new radio from you last airdrop?”

Marco replied, “The Garibaldi Brigade in the next valley stole our last airdrop. They’ve done it before. That’s what you get with Communists.”

“We’re supposed to be working together.”

“Tell them that! That’s why I sent Lucia. She knows a route the Garibaldi Brigade doesn’t.”

Gabriele shook his head. “Terrible.” He started to remove the radio from his back.

“Oh, no. This isn’t where you’ll setup,” Giulia said. “This is just an observation post. You have to hike into town. This is just a rest for now.”

“You can have five minutes rest, and some water. Ivan will take you to the house.”

After Gabriele had his rest, Ivan took him to the hideout in town, leaving Marco and Giulia alone. They sat on a bench and kissed and embraced. “Did I tell you that I missed you, Giulia?”

“Yes, Marco, and I missed you, too.”

Marco put his hand on Giulia’s thigh, wishing those baggy pants weren’t in the way. He longed to squeeze that rock-hard thigh. Giulia’s legs were tempered by ballet training as a girl, and it was only the pull of a desire to heal that made her study nursing. There was more of a demand for nurses than gymnasts in wartime, so that worked out better for everyone. “Do you still see Riccardo?”

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Giulia looked Marco in the eye. “Yes, I still see him.”

“Do you love him more?”

Giulia looked down for a moment. “A first love is tough to forget, but I don’t like what he stands for. So, no, I love *you* more.”

Marco touched Giulia’s hair and held her close. “I’m glad to hear that. How much do you hate the Fascists?”

“If you mean could I kill, it would take a lot to do that.”

“I know as a nurse, you prefer to save a life. If it came down to it, could we ask you to fight? I mean, could you defend yourself?”

“Yes. You showed me how to use the pistol. I know what it means. I won’t look for a fight, Marco, but I’ll kill to save a life.”

They looked each other in the eyes again. “That’s all I ask, for now.”

Chapter Four

5 July 1944

The Via San Gallo, leading into Brescia from the north, was a good source of supply for the German and their Fascist allies. It could also be a supply source for Marco's partisans if his men did their jobs right. These nighttime convoys were safe from air attack, but not from determined men on the ground.

Marco saw the blackout lights of the lead armored car rounding the bend. "Nicola", the demolition man, was ready to set off the charge in the road to stop it. The men under "Giacomo", at the other end of the convoy, would do the same to the tail end of the convoy. Marco pressed his Beretta MAB submachine gun to his shoulder and fingered the front (semi-auto) trigger. The armored car had just passed him when Nicola pushed the plunger. The charge went off perfectly under the car, gutting it and killing the crew.

"*Fuoco*," Marco yelled. He shot the men in the cab of the first truck, then heard the explosion and saw the flash from the rear of the convoy. Giacomo had knocked out that armored car, and the convoy was bottled up. Marco's men shot up the cabs of the trucks, and then turned to the Germans bailing out of the backs of them. Grenades flew and went off, bayonets were thrust, and men on both sides screamed as flesh was torn. Marco and Nicola ran to the back of the second truck and found cases of grenades. They dragged one out and dropped it, picking up grenades and passing them to the other partisans.

When that was done, they started working their way to the middle of the convoy, taking care of Germans who had hidden under the trucks. Giacomo and his men worked their way

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forward from the tail of the convoy. They were just as efficient and deadly from their continued practice. After passing up about ten trucks, Marco saw Giacomo and his men. Marco recognized the UD42 submachine gun Giacomo carried, a present from the Americans. Giacomo was just putting in a fresh clip. “Well, Giacomo, how did we do?”

“I’ve got three dead, and four wounded, sir. But we killed a lot of *Tedeschi*, and got rifles, ammo, and above all, bread. I think about fifty loaves of bread.”

“Wonderful! I figure we got twenty crates of vegetables, so we don’t have to beg for a while. We also got rifles and thirty crates of grenades.”

Nicola spoke up, “Sir, our group has two dead, and five wounded, but none of them severely.”

“Good. All right get everything out of here. Make sure the dead men are moved, then get the food, finally the weapons, then set the trucks on fire.”

“*Salute*, Giulia.”

“*Salute*, Riccardo.” They clinked their glasses and sipped their wine. “How did you manage such a dinner as this? You got *ossobuco* and *polenta*, and cheese too.”

“It just depends on who you know. I have friends in the mess hall who make a ‘diversion’ from the officers a few times.”

“Oh, some nice *risotto*, too. It’s like mama makes. Do you think I could get away with taking some of this?”

Riccardo glanced at Giulia’s nurse’s bag. “I’m sure there’s room in there.” There was a knock at the door. “Enter.”

A private entered. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Squad Leader, but a convoy has been attacked.”

Riccardo threw down his napkin. “Damn bandits.” He got up. “Well, wake up the men. We’ll be moving out in five minutes. Get a truck from the motor pool.”

“Yes, Squad Leader.” The man left.

“I wanted it to be like the old times.” Riccardo growled. “Take what you can, Giulia.” They kissed before he left. Giulia looked at her watch. Right on time, she thought. She then tried to use her napkin to wrap the *ossobuco* to take home to her parents.

Chapter Five

7 July 1944

“I congratulate you, Platoon Leader Mariani. Your promotion is long overdue.” Company Leader Boscolo said this as he affixed the silver and red lanyard on Riccardo’s right shoulder.

“Thank you, Company Leader.” Each man raised his arm in salute. The witnesses, including Giulia in her nurse’s uniform, applauded. After he was dismissed, Riccardo went to the crowd and hugged Giulia. “I’m so proud of you,” she said.

“Thank you, my dear.”

As they walked away, Giulia asked, “Does this mean you get to eat in the officer’s mess now?”

Riccardo beamed, “It sure does. The best for you from now on!”

Giulia laughed, then whispered, “My father loved the *ossobuco*. He said it was just as good as mama makes.”

“Then I’ll be sure to give you some when we have it,” Riccardo whispered back.

Giulia looked at her watch. “I have to get back to the hospital. Goodbye, my love.” They kissed and she walked away.

“Mariani,” Company Leader Boscolo called.

“Yes, sir.”

Riccardo went to Boscolo. A German officer was with him. “Mariani, this is *SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer* Gruber.” The men raised their arms in salute, then shook hands. “His company will be working with us against the bandits.”

“How do you do, Platoon Leader?”

“Fine, *Hauptsturmfuehrer*, how are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“I can’t place your accent.”

“I was born in the Tirol province,” Gruber replied, “Just over the old border. I look forward to working with you.”

“Me too, *Hauptsturmfuehrer*.”

“So, that big jackass is a platoon leader now?” Marco shook his head.

“That’s a fine way to talk about an old friend,” Giulia smirked.

“That’s why I can call him that.” Marco took a gulp of water and a mouthful of *polenta*. After swallowing, he asked, “So you saw him with a German?”

“An SS officer. I think he was a captain. He had blond hair and blue eyes. Just another *Tedeschi*.”

“He’d never blend into a crowd here?”

“No,” Giulia laughed. “He’d stick out.”

“Well, that’s lovely. The Germans play dirty, and the SS more so. Plus our own people helping them. The Americans and British can’t come soon enough.”

Gabriele cursed his own stupidity. He should have known better than to step out in the daylight in a strange town. He should have stayed away from the market. He should have ignored that five-year old boy. Children always speak up when there’s a stranger, and Gabriele had to make it worse by not ignoring him. He yelled and made the boy cry. The police came along and found his papers were wrong.

That had been some eight hours ago. Now, Gabriele found himself naked and handcuffed to a chair. A light shone into his eyes, and Piglosi, the police chief, was hovering over him.

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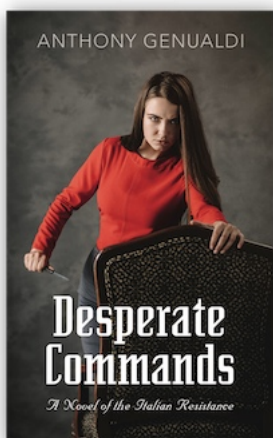
“You’re one of those bandits, aren’t you?” Gabriele said nothing. “I can always give you to our German friends. They have great powers of persuasion. But I’d like not to do that. It’s better to talk to one of your own, isn’t it?”

“*Cagata,*” Gabriele replied.

Piglosi shook his head. “Yeah, you Southerners with your foul mouths. You’re so tough in a dark alley. But not so tough when confronted with real men.” He took a long drag on his cigarette and pushed it against Gabriele’s scrotum, causing him to howl in agony. “Come on, tough guy, just admit it. You’re a bandit. Give it up.”

“*Andare a puttane!*”

Piglosi laughed and said to his men, “What did I tell you? The king who betrayed us sends this Southern trash against us. See how desperate they are?” He took another puff and moved the light around Gabriele’s body. There wasn’t a millimeter of him that wasn’t black and blue. “Oh, well, tomorrow is another day.”



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