

*When someone pushes a celebrity poet off the roof of his pad, Homicide Inspector Brennan needs to arrest somebody. His prime suspect is John Maletesta's daughter. The one-armed professor must clear his daughter, even as their own lives are in danger.*

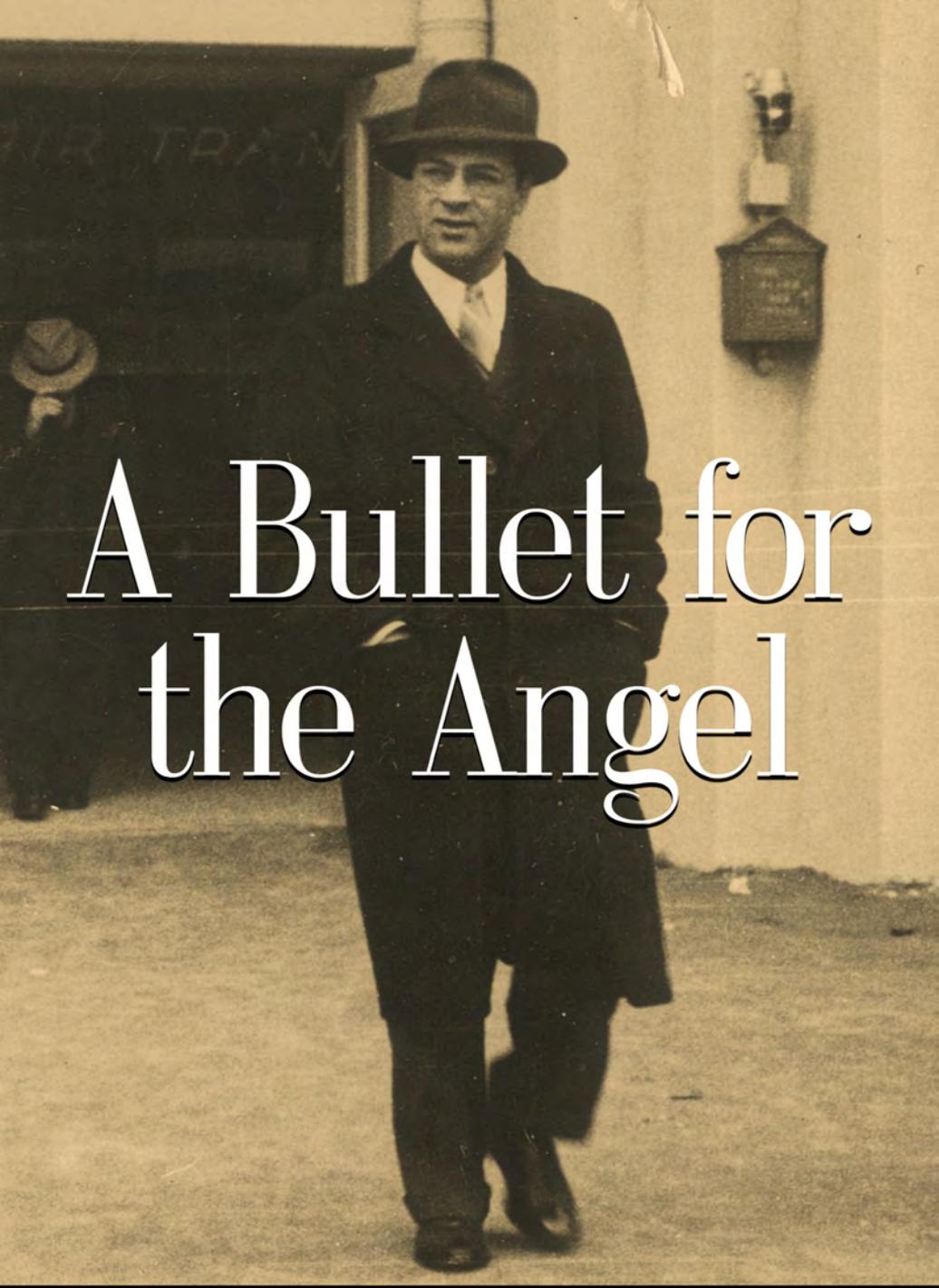
## **A BULLET FOR THE ANGEL**

By Don Santina

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# A Bullet for the Angel

Don Santina

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## ONE

North Beach, San Francisco

Saturday, December 12, 1959

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned . . .”

*Oh no, D’Angelo again.*

The old priest sighed. Even in the darkness of the confessional, he recognized the profile of the bookie on the other side of the grill: the raspy voice, the telltale Sen Sen on his breath and the overpowering fragrance of Aqua Velva aftershave lotion. The priest frowned. *Aftershave at dinner time.* He shifted on his hard wooden seat.

Just about every two months, Frankie D’Angelo decided that he needed to go to confession. His sins never changed. Inside the musty cubicle, he enumerated the same offenses he had declared two months earlier: bookmaking, flirting with the young woman at the bakery, short changing the tourists at his cigar store. Sometimes he included hitting his children, but he wasn’t sure that was a sin. The priest would remind him that it was only a sin if it was done in anger. D’Angelo didn’t think so: he was not an angry sort of man. And so the discussion continued six times a year in the hushed whispers of the confessional booth.

“Yes, my son,” the priest murmured as D’Angelo poured out his litany of familiar transgressions. Ultimately, the priest gave him his penance and absolution with a pointless admonition to sin no more. The bookie exited the confessional and turned down the center aisle of the church to the altar.

D’Angelo was a small thin man who sported a barely visible Don Ameche moustache on his upper lip. He favored dark shiny clothes, heavily starched white shirts, and flashy footwear. Tonight he wore his palomino wingtips with metal taps on the heels, so as he walked toward the altar with his hands folded and his eyes lowered in penitence, his heels clicked loudly at each step.

In the candlelit alcoves off the side aisles of Saint Peter and Paul’s, old women in black coats and head scarves looked up briefly at the distraction, twitched their mouths in disapproval, and then returned to their prayers. The plaster faces on the saints above them grimaced and glowered in the flickering lights of the votive candles. Now and then a few coins dropped from arthritic fingers into the metal offering boxes, a match snapped and a new candle blazed in the alcove.

D’Angelo paid no heed to the old women. He had gotten the easy priest again. The other priests always scolded him and ordered him to make a novena. This was easy: a rosary. He knelt at the altar and began his penance. He did not have rosary beads, so he imagined a pari-mutual board with ten lights going on and off sequentially as he said each Hail Mary. Soon there were eight lights, then seven.

As D’Angelo prayed, the high-ceilinged gothic church groaned and creaked about him as a brief gust of wind

whistled through the alley between the church and the grammar school. The women finished their supplications and, tightening their coats about them, began shuffling out of the church. It was Saturday night near dinner time, twelve days before Christmas Eve.

He missed a few Hail Mary's in the last decade of the rosary because his mind wandered to the business offer he had turned down several weeks ago. Should he have taken it? No, it was an offer for chumps, and Frankie D'Angelo is not a chump! Maybe his partner is kind of a chump, but he's a rich kid and they both knew that if they waited, they would make a lot more money. He didn't like his partner, but they were in for a pile of money. *That's what's important, that pile of money we'll make if we wait!* So they told that guy to stuff his chintzy offer. He smiled at the memory of telling off that chiseler.

D'Angelo's mind wandered to Serafina, who worked at the bakery. Maybe he'd see her tomorrow when he'd go to get pastries for the family after Mass. Maybe their eyes would touch for a moment. *Maybe.* Abruptly, he put her out of his mind and crossed himself. It was bad luck to think about such things while doing penance. He arose from the altar, genuflected, and clicked back up the center aisle. He stopped at a pew near the door of the church and picked up his overcoat and hat. He pulled the coat on, nodded to one of the old women who was leaving and held the door for her. Then he blessed himself from the holy water font and stepped outside, pulling his fedora down on his head.

There was no one in Washington Square Park across the street from the church and very few people on the sidewalks. An unusually heavy fog hung on the streets of San Francisco

on this eighty-fourth day of the drought. The Christmas shoppers had gone home, and the night club crowd wouldn't be out for a few more hours. Even the beatniks stayed inside. A few cars hissed by on the wet pavement, their windows rolled up against the elements.

D'Angelo turned up the collar on his overcoat and walked down the steps of the church to the sidewalk. Some hardy soul had left his window open in one of the apartments next to the school. A radio was playing Christmas carols and he cocked his head to the strains of "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." He smiled and stepped into the street after quickly looking both ways. The D'Angelo family lived in a flat on Stockton Street two blocks from the church.

Down on the corner of Columbus, a dark green Buick hardtop eased out of its parking place. There were two occupants in the car. The driver flicked the headlights on and crawled slowly up the street. The electric window on the passenger side slid quietly down as the Buick moved forward.

D'Angelo had reached the sidewalk on the Washington Square side of the street when the Buick drove alongside and stopped.

"Hey, Frankie," a voice called from inside the Buick.

He turned, a smile on his face. A bookmaker never knows when business will come to him. The smile vanished when he saw the long barreled automatic pistol poking out of the car window at him.

"Merry Christmas, Frankie!" the voice laughed, and the automatic fired.

*No!* D'Angelo thought he said as the first bullet hit him in the chest. He staggered at the impact and grabbed at the parking meter as the automatic fired once more. His legs collapsed under him, and he slid down the meter pole. Another bullet hit him as he landed on the sidewalk.

The bookie named Frankie D'Angelo was dead when he flopped over into the gutter, his overcoat falling open and exposing his sharp pressed slacks and polished palominos to an overspray of the park's broken sprinklers. Above the lifeless body, Gene Autry continued his story about the reindeer who saved the day for Santa Claus.

"Hey, what's going on?" someone yelled from outside the restaurant on the other side of the park.

The Buick sped up the hill, turned the corner on Grant Avenue and disappeared into the night.

## TWO

Fillmore, San Francisco

Saturday, December 12, 1959

He couldn't understand why his arm was on the ground and his watch was still ticking. He studied it like a biologist analyzing a new splat of something new on a glass tray under a microscope. The second hand on the Waltham continued its course around the dial, but his fingers were not moving. *That's odd.* He followed the arm up to a point just past his elbow. The cloth of his GI shirt sleeve sliced neatly, his arm a mass of butchered bone, muscle and blood no longer attached . . . he screamed.

"Johnny, Johnny, it's just a dream, baby, please, baby, it's just a dream!" Cayenne Phillips held John Maletesta in her arms, rocking him as he cried aloud. "Just a dream, baby, just a dream."

Maletesta stopped shaking, pushed his fingers through his dark curly hair and opened his eyes. He was soaking wet in perspiration.

“Cayenne, I’m sorry,” he strangled the cry in his throat.

“I love you, Johnny,” she whispered, holding him tighter as they slipped into an unquiet sleep.

They awoke about 5pm, and he reached over with his right arm and slowly pulled the sheet down. Cayenne’s dark eyes blinked sleepily as he stroked her silken bronze skin. She flashed the smile that had so enthralled him when they first met. Her short natural hair accented her high cheek bones and full lips.

“Johnny, stop it! It’s time for you to go. You’ll get in trouble.”

“Drink to me only with thine eyes,” he murmured as he caressed her breasts.

“Corny ass professor . . .”

Shortly before seven o’clock, Maletesta slid out of bed and began putting on his clothes at the dressing table near the window. Cayenne watched him dress, studying his thin athletic body marred by the stump of his left arm.

There were some scary times when her man with the enchanting hazel eyes burst out of his usually genial demeanor. Once, while they were walking on Geary, they came upon a middle-aged man beating his dog with a cane. Maletesta flew into a rage, grabbing the man and shoving him up against a chain link fence. Suddenly, he stopped and turned back to her with an awkward smile. He had no memory of the incident.

Cayenne frowned at the memory and then jumped out of bed to help him with his shirt buttons.

“Cayenne,” he said hoarsely, “I do have to go. Put something on quick, before I lose my job.”

She made a face at him and reached for a red satin robe on the chair next to the dressing table. She tied it loosely and turned back to him. The petite robe barely covered her jutting breasts and shapely legs.

“There, I’m ready.”

Maletesta looked at her, swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Who’s at the club tonight?” he blurted. Cayenne, a reserve bartender at the Fillmore’s finest night club, the Club Carolina, replied sassily.

“Bobby Bland, and you’re gonna miss it.”

“Nope. I should be there in time for his first set, but not the warmup acts.”

“Only if those smelly old beatniks let you out early. They gonna beat on their bongos?”

“Maybe,” he laughed, “but the poetry reading shouldn’t last more than an hour. My class put the program together, but I wasn’t involved in choosing the featured poet, who does not impress me. Sister Agatha wants more participation from the students in these events, so there it is. Whatever happens, happens.”

After Cayenne finished with the buttons of his black dress shirt with the shortened left sleeve, Maletesta ran a comb through his hair. He studied himself in the mirror and smirked

at his vigilant eyes and hawky nose. Not bad, but no movie star. He saw Cayenne in the mirror and turned to her.

“Cayenne, I think I’m the luckiest man in the whole world. How did I ever find you?”

“Cuz you dig R&B, Johnny, and R&B led you to me,” she replied, snapping on his clip-on tie and lightly running her hand down the front of his shirt. He caught her hand and kissed it.

“You see,” she laughed, “it’s poetry: R&B led you to me.”

“And mysteries,” he added, nodding toward the latest Ross McDonald paperback on her dressing table.

The window next to the table looked out on the intersection of Turk Street and Divisadero in the heart of the Fillmore District. Maletesta glanced briefly at the cars in the intersection and sat down on the cushioned chair to pull on his black slacks. Cayenne smiled.

“What?” he asked, buckling the narrow black leather belt.

“You’re old Sister Agatha is something else, isn’t she? Sometimes I get jealous.”

“I owe her a lot,” he answered. “She probably saved my life after the war. You’ll have to meet her one of these days.”

“Well, when?” she shot back.

“Hell, our schedules never seem to work out. Like tonight: I’m at a poetry reading at the school and you’re at the club. During the week, when I’m teaching, you’re sleeping.”

“I’m up by eleven!” she protested, “and I’ve got my own classes to attend at City College, Mister Professor.”

They had moved into her living room. The leather sofa, side chairs and the low Danish modern coffee table were a birthday gift from Maletesta. He stepped into his black loafers and Cayenne helped him with his dark red checkered sport coat at the door. The empty left sleeve was carefully stitched up.

“Now, doesn’t my man look fine?” she smiled as she buttoned the middle button of his coat.

“Not half as fine as his lady,” Maletesta said, kissing her on the forehead. “*Ciao, bella mia*. See you later.”

“You know what John Hardy says, ‘remember your ABC’s: always be cool.’” They both laughed.

Maletesta was through the door and down the stairs in under a minute. Cayenne went back to the window and watched him get into his cherry 1949 Oldsmobile Rocket 88 parked in the bus stop across the street. Maletesta always parked in bus stops and driveways. Parallel parking in tight spaces was out of the question, even with his adept use of the suicide knob on his steering wheel. She watched as the Oldsmobile roared off.

Cayenne pulled down the shade and went into the bathroom to run the tub. As the steam filled the room, she threw in some fancy-named bath salts that Johnny had given her. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Maletesta had given her many things, but she would not let him pay her rent. Even though he seemed to be rich, he didn’t act like a rich man. He didn’t have to teach, but he loved it.

He was thirty seven; she was thirty. Was it the age difference that mattered? No, that was not the problem, and she knew it. Did he love her? She thought so. She took another deep breath. *Johnny, my Johnny, where will our love go? Where can it go, Johnny? Johnny?* She was too afraid it would never work.

*Girl, you stop thinking this way!* She dropped her satin robe and stepped into the bathtub. She hummed “Fever” as she slid under the soothing bubbles, smiling as they tickled her nose. She had plenty of time. She did not have to be at the club until eight-fifteen, fifteen minutes before the doors opened. She knew it would be packed tonight, so she would leave early. The club was only four blocks from her apartment.

A half hour later, she was applying her lipstick when the phone rang. After two rings, she groaned, put the lipstick down and picked up the phone.

“Yes?” she said.

“Cayenne . . .”

“Yusef.”

“Hey, baby sister, you finally got it! How’s it goin’?” the voice drawled.

“Look, Mama said it might break her heart because she named you after her favorite brother Alexander, but you got a right to call yourself any fool name you want to. So, what do you want?”

She took a cigarette from the silver box on the table and lit it.

“Alexander’s a slave name! Don’t you understand that? The people in the Muslim world they know . . .”

“Yusef,” she interrupted, “I’ll be late for work.”

“Work? That juke joint?” he spat through the phone.

She paused. She wouldn’t let herself be drawn into the same old argument. She blew a smoke ring into the mirror above the telephone table.

“And just what line of work are you into now,” she said finally, “still handing out Ko-rans door to door?”

There was a silence on the other end. Cayenne frowned. Her brother was never at a loss for words. Then he spoke.

“Pepper, baby sister, I’m in a jam. A big one.”

“What kind of jam?” She softened. He’d used her kid name.

“Some white dudes been followin’ me around. I think I’m on to something. I can’t tell you, but I gotta blow town for a while. Do you have any ready money?”

“Sure I do, but what’s the matter? Yusef, tell me, what’s the matter? What can I do? I mean it.” He had never asked her for money before.

“I can’t . . . uh, makes no sense. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Yusef, meet me at the Club tonight!”

There was no answer.

“Yusef! Yusef!” Cayenne yelled into the phone.

“OK, I’ll be there. Don’t worry, baby sister.”

“Yusef, please take care. I love you.”

Cayenne replaced the phone on its receiver, leaned against the wall and looked at her watch: 8 pm. She would have to run now. She grabbed her coat and left her apartment.



## TEN

Richmond, San Francisco

Sunday, December 13, 1959

There wasn't much traffic on Sunday night, so Maletesta and his daughter arrived in the fog at Mel's drive-in on Geary about fifteen minutes after they left their house. No one could see it, but the sun had already set on this short December day and late afternoon had abruptly turned into night. Drivers had their headlights on. The lighted marquee on the Coronet announced in large letters, "Ben Hur Opens Wed. Dec. 23."

The parking lot outside the drive-in was nearly full with teenagers in sedans mainly borrowed from their parents. Some older teens made their scene in rodded up old Fords, Chevys, and Dodges, some of them works in transition covered in flat gray primer. All of the cars were eclipsed by a stunning candy apple red 1958 Impala hardtop parked front row center. The younger brother of a local singing sensation with hits on all the charts preened behind the wheel of the hardtop, enjoying the attention without noticing it. His own singing group was mediocre, but girls waved at him, hoping they might have a chance with the star if they hung out with his little brother. Car hops bounced between the rows of cars, taking orders, giving directions on how to lower the car

windows, and delivering trays of hamburgers, shakes and fries.

Maletesta and Tal parked in a side lot and walked into the diner. As they opened the door, the din inside was palpable, a mix of loud cracking teenage voices giggling and shrieking, order pickups called out from the kitchen, and a Rockola juke box blasting out Bobby Freeman's "Betty Lou Got a New Pair of Shoes." Freeman was another local favorite who played high school dances, sock hops and pep rallies.

The red leatherette, formica and chrome booths in the front were full, so Maletesta and Tal navigated their way through the waitresses and table hoppers to a recently abandoned booth in the back.

"What a great idea of yours," Maletesta grumbled, as they dropped into the booth.

"Oh, c'mon, Dad, don't be such an old curmudgeon," Tal answered, picking up a menu. "Hey, maybe you can study them for a paper!"

"Sure, a paper titled 'Urban Madness and the Hamburger Culture.'"

Their waitress, a skinny teenager with a severe case of acne, cleared their table, swiftly gathering up used silverware, plates and glasses, straws, and crumpled napkins.

"I'll be right back to take your orders," she mumbled and dashed toward the kitchen with a trayful of diner debris. The noise did not subside. Bobby Freeman was followed by Little Richard and Ronnie Hawkins.

When the waitress returned with her order pad, Tal was flipping through the selections on the table juke box.

“Any Bobby Blue Bland?” Maletesta asked as he scanned the menu.

“Dad,” Tal laughed, “this is a drive-in in the Richmond, not the Fillmore.”

“There’re no drive-ins in the Fillmore.”

“What would you like?” the waitress interrupted, raising a pencil to her pad.

“A grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee, please,” Maletesta answered.

“Fries?”

“No thanks.”

“And you?” she asked, turning to Tal.

Before Tal could answer, a voice broke out behind them.

“Hey, pimples, how about some more coffee back here?”

The waitress blushed beet red.

Frowning, Maletesta half turned in the booth to the direction of the voice. He saw a young blond man with a white sidewall flat top who had obviously spent a lot of time in the gym, judging from the biceps bulging from his white tee shirt. The man laughed and a dark-haired young woman across the table from him giggled.

Tal broke in quickly.

“I’ll have a hamburger with fries and a strawberry shake.”

“OK,” the waitress murmured as she jotted down the order. “Hamburger with fires and a strawberry shake, grilled cheese and coffee.”

“Thanks,” Tal replied.

“Hey, pimples, I said how about some more coffee, huh? You got lead in your pants?” More laughter and giggles burst from the booth.

“I’ll be right back with it,” the waitress blurted and dashed toward the kitchen.

The din continued around Maletesta and his daughter, noisy teenagers unaware of the festering drama in the rear booths. Tal watched her father’s jaw grinding and his eyes grow cold.

“Dad,” she pleaded, “please don’t make a scene. There are a lot of jerks like that in this world.” She nervously re-arranged the silverware on the table in front of her as she spoke.

Maletesta said nothing. His mind was churning. *The eagle-owls are calling. The eagle-owls are calling, calling. Deploy the men, Gianni! Goddamn it, the Japanese are coming! Deploy the men. Protect the men, Gianni, for Chrissake, the Japanese are coming! Check their positions; check their positions!*

Maletesta shook his head to dispel the images.

“What?” he asked Tal.

“It’s OK, Dad; it’s OK,” she whispered, placing her hand on his hand which still held the menu.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned, walking toward the blond man’s booth with a carafe of coffee.

“Thata girl, pimples. Get the lead out of your ass!” the blond man shouted at the waitress as she made her way toward his table. He laughed again.

Suddenly, Maletesta shook off Tal’s hand and stood up in front of the waitress as she passed their table.

“I’ll take that,” he stated, taking the carafe of coffee out of her hand. The waitress stood there, unsure of what she should do in the situation. She tried to say something.

“It’s OK, miss,” Maletesta said. “Don’t worry. Thanks.”

Maletesta turned away from the waitress and strode to the blond man’s table with the carafe of coffee in his hand. Tal gasped.

“Here’s your coffee, flat top,” Maletesta announced through gritted teeth when he reached the table, “special delivery.”

“Thanks,” the blond man began to say as Maletesta splashed some of the hot coffee on the cup and saucer on the table and then poured the entire pot of coffee onto the man’s chest and lap.

The man screamed in pain and then, soaked in hot coffee, jumped up to confront Maletesta. As he emerged from the booth, Maletesta dropped the carafe on the table and caught the man’s right hand with his own right hand. Then he twisted

it around to his back, tangling the man between the bench and the table. The man's dark haired companion screeched as Maletesta quickly changed the grip to an arm lock, pulled the man out of the booth and pushed him toward the door.

“God damn . . .” the man shrieked as he was being hurled forward.

“Shut up,” Maletesta rasped.

The juke box continued blasting. This time it was Link Wray with the street fight guitar anthem, “Rumble.” Most of the customers were unaware of what was happening, but those in the booths near the fracas sat stunned by the action unfolding in front of them. Maletesta hurled the man through the door, smashing his face into the safety glass as the door swung open, almost hitting a car hop who deftly jumped out of the way while keeping her tray intact. Maletesta gave one more push and the man tripped over one of the concrete car tire bumpers and tumbled onto the asphalt parking lot. The dark haired girl followed behind them screeching “oh, my God, Randy, oh my God!” Heads popped out of car windows nearby, startled expressions on their faces.

The man cursed again and tried to get up while reaching into his pocket for something. Maletesta side-kicked him hard in the shoulder and sent him sprawling, dropping a flattened can opener as he rolled on the pavement. A moment later, he scrambled to his feet, his eyes wide with fear. The dark-haired girl helped him up and they stumbled quickly across the lot.

Less than two minutes had passed since Maletesta had dumped the coffee on the man. He stood outside the door, breathing heavily.

“*Apai, apai!*” Tal called, running up to him.

He turned and saw a stranger, and then slowly recognized his daughter.

“What, what? What’s the problem?” he asked, a puzzled look on his face. He shook his head a few times.

“Let’s go, *apai*,” Tal said, taking his arm.

A gray-haired security guard came huffing over to Maletesta, his hand on the butt of an old revolver in a worn holster.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Maletesta replied flatly, “just taking out the garbage.”

The security guard scanned the parking lot importantly and then returned to his post on the other side of the lot. Maletesta turned to Tal.

“Will you settle up, Tal?” he asked, producing a couple of tens from his pocket.

“Sure, be right back, Dad.”

He picked up the flattened can opener on the pavement.

“A church key, for Chrissake,” he muttered, tossing it into a nearby dumpster.

When Tal emerged from the restaurant, they walked silently across the parking lot to their car. No one paid any attention to them. The drive-in scene returned to normal.

They said nothing until they got into the car and Tal switched on the ignition.

“Dad,” she asked, turning toward him, “are you OK?”

She paused as she backed the Olds out of the parking lot. Maletesta looked through the front window of the car like there was nothing to see. He yawned and then frowned.

“You haven’t called me *apai* in a long time, Tal. It’s nice to hear Dayak.” He shook his head again. “I don’t remember what happened, some punk . . . I grabbed him . . .”

Maletesta stopped, shaking his head again. They were silent as Tal drove down Geary.

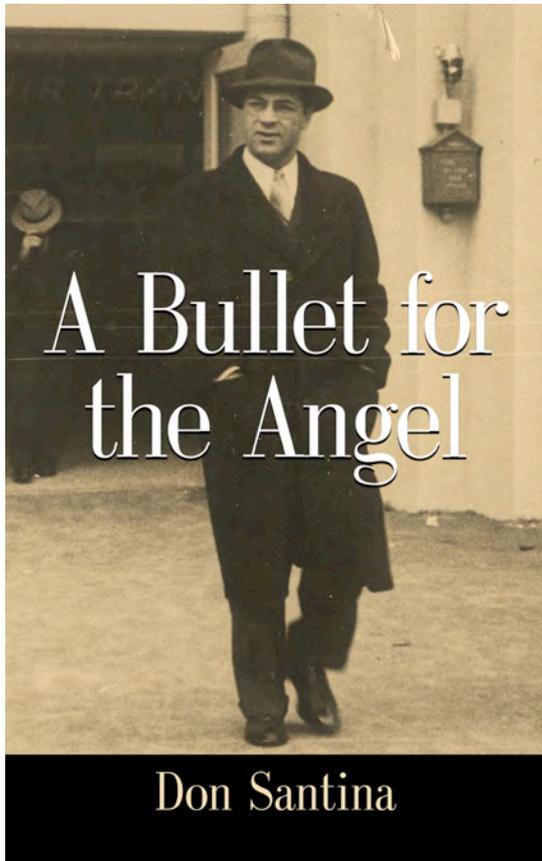
“Let’s get a pizza,” Maletesta said suddenly. “That place on Chestnut near Fillmore.”

“OK, but I have one condition.”

“You have a condition for pizza; you have a condition for pizza?” He turned to her with an incredulous look on his face.

“Yes,” Tal announced, smiling, “the condition is that you won’t start counting the people who are eating pizza with forks, as you usually do.”

“Ha! All right,” Maletesta conceded.



*When someone pushes a celebrity poet off the roof of his pad, Homicide Inspector Brennan needs to arrest somebody. His prime suspect is John Maletesta's daughter. The one-armed professor must clear his daughter, even as their own lives are in danger.*

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