

THE BLOODY AND COMPELLING HISTORY OF THE MAFIA –
FROM ITS BIRTH IN ITALY TO ITS INVASION OF AMERICA
AND PRESENT-DAY GLOBAL INFILTRATION – TOLD BY
AN AUSTRALIAN UNDERCOVER INSIDER



mafioso

COLIN McLAREN

Bestselling author of *JFK: The Smoking Gun*

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Southern Justice
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For Elena Stella,
my head translator and researcher, who
worked tirelessly for three long years

Tu sei una grande Palermitana

‘ . . . the Mafiosi is by no means unbeatable. It’s
a human act, and as with all human acts it has a
beginning, an evolution and it will have its end . . . ’

Investigative Judge Giovanni Falcone of
the Anti-Mafia Pool, Palermo, 1989



PROLOGUE

MY JOURNEY BEGINS

SICILIAN SAYING:

A moddu cu tutti li robbi

In the water with all the clothes

Meaning, you are in trouble, in deep water,
with all your clothes on

It was the opposite of a joy flight. For the past three days, I'd been in the air dodging radar from one end of Australia – Melbourne, in the south – to the northern tip of Cape York and the mosquito-infested jungles of Queensland, a bee's-dick away from the equator. This remote peninsula is all about sweltering heat, crocodiles, and dingoes hunting wild buffalo in swamps. The company I was in and the humidity had me nauseous. The locals think this is God's country. Let me correct that nonsense, it's the country-for-no-men; it felt like I was in deep water with my clothes on, swimming with the Mafia.

I looked down, 5000 feet below, and saw the last of Australia's territory. White-capped, vivid blue waves crashed against sand dunes the size of a block of flats; it was so divine my breath was lost for the second time that day. I was in the back seat of a rented Piper Navajo Chieftain airplane, whose engines had been running too long. It flew like a bullet, and I knew there were a few real ones on board. Some of them were inside my tiny .32 calibre pistol, stashed away among

the foam innards of the seat, just in case I needed to reach for the weapon quick. I guessed there were another three weapons nearby.

I'd left my home town of Melbourne three sleeps back to get this far: nowhere. We call it the never-never, which means you should never go there as you may never come back; it's where the Mafia grow their massive cannabis crops, undetected.

At the start of my plane trip it was just me and the pilot, as we leapfrogged up the eastern seaboard to outback towns, chasing fuel and keeping out of the way of prying air-traffic controllers. We cut over the Great Barrier Reef to spend the night with cane toads the size of Volkswagens. Then it was on to Cairns, the capital of the tropics, where lobster is served in buckets by uber-rich fishermen who can't look you in the eye.

The next day I met the owners of the other three guns, my Mafia friends. We'd been in business for nearly two years. They jumped aboard as we refuelled, before the pilot recommenced the flight north. That was daybreak, and there'd been some serious body odour since.

What was I doing on this tiny plane, in one of the most remote locations on the planet? I'd been asking myself this question since we'd collected these non-smiling, always-smoking dudes. Since I'd felt the weight of their weaponry in their carry-ons. I was an undercover cop who'd infiltrated the Mafia and was now fat in the middle of a massive drug-importation sting – millions of dollars of skunk-weed cannabis grown in New Guinea, so potent it causes hallucinations and makes the Mafia filthy rich.

Two years earlier, I'd been asked by my police commissioner to attempt a long-term undercover infiltration of the Sergi–Trimboli–Perre clan of the Australian Mafia. I was a detective assigned to the National Crime Authority, which was the premier law enforcement agency, and I'd stumbled on to an informer, an associate of the Mafia, who wanted to cut a deal. So, I got myself an introduction to the Mob and slowly climbed their treacherous ladder until I found myself in this aircraft, conspiring to import millions of dollars of drugs. I'd convinced my Mafia dudes that I was a dodgy art dealer, able to launder money and sell vast amounts of cocaine and skunk weed to my rich and famous clients. A watertight cover story that my crew of covert detectives

worked months on developing. The litmus test of my acceptance into the scourge after a year of working my way up the ladder was having dinner with the Godfather, then cocktails after, and, as if a reward for my perseverance, we shared a hot tub with a couple of beauties who wanted to be movie stars. From there, it was all crime, conspiracies and – unbeknown to my targets – covert tapes, around-the-clock surveillance, satellite eavesdropping, phone taps and evidence-gathering for the biggest sting in our history. Equal to anything attempted worldwide.

My no-expenses-spared flight to the tropics was close to the home run of this nerve-racking gig where, for anyone who knew me, I disappeared off the face of the earth, to see no one until I got the job done.

I'll never forget the day the Godfather embraced me. Antonio invited me for a stroll through his orange grove on his farm property, far from any big city or law enforcement office. The sun warmed our backs and I allowed Antonio to play host. My tape was on and the satellite picked up our every word. Antonio walked with confidence, giving an occasional glance towards his fruit trees. He was wearing Italian jeans, soft calf-leather shoes, and a brilliant white Versace shirt, pressed to impress. He had the classic Italian style, as well as the charm. We were the same age, nudging forty.

Antonio had recently been anointed top dog: head of the Mafia in Australia. He was on a path of growth, willing to embrace new ideas and discover innovative ways of making money, fast. His 'family' was assessing his every move, as was the now-retired patriarch who'd been at the helm for more than twenty cunning, murderous years. The baton had changed hands.

'You like our ways, Cole,' Antonio said, handing me an orange as he peeled his own.

'Always have, since I was a boy.'

'You know the Italian life well.'

'It's the family ways that work for me,' I replied, enjoying my fruit.

'Why do you feel for family so much?'

Antonio stopped walking. Throwing his peel onto the ground and taking a bite of his juicy orange, he waited for my answer. He looked neither at me nor his fruit. The sun hit his face and he squinted.

‘My road has been different from yours, Antonio. I have always wanted this.’

‘Your road has been hard?’ he asked.

‘You could say that.’ I thought of the frustrations of law enforcement.

‘Don’t ever make our road hard, Cole . . . ever,’ Antonio said, as he shifted his penetrating gaze to me. He finished his orange before wiping his hands on a clean white handkerchief. As we strolled back to the crowd, all Mafia, he placed his hand on my shoulder and spoke his final word on the subject: ‘*Ever.*’

I accepted his words as we wandered back, smiling, to the collection of rich Italian men, women and children mingling in a special day of sausage-making and barbecue. Antonio moved between his guests, all family except me, the lone, white Australian, a long way from home. They spoke their Italian dialect often that afternoon, the perfect way for them to converse without me understanding. I sensed the occasional sideways glance from the bewhiskered men; Antonio was seeking comment from his clan. I felt like I was back in school, being assessed for an exam. I had studied my subject well and wanted desperately to pass.

As I mingled, I saw that each glance I caught was accompanied by the faintest smile. More like a grimace, as each Italian gave me some thought. I liked that, then realised as I filled the wine glasses of many outreached hands that my invitation to their sausage-making day was merely a ruse. Of course it was. Really in play was my membership of the Australian Mafia. Or not. I was useful to them; they needed to launder money, and to sell pure cocaine, and I fitted as one piece in their global puzzle.

At the end of our day, Antonio made sure I left the farm laden with wine, trays of sausages and boxes of oranges. As I walked to my car, fresh-faced kids with peppermint smiles held my hand. Antonio opened the car door for me, whispering, ‘Welcome to our family, Cole Goodwin. Let’s do business.’

It was the 1990s, a time when it was commonplace for the Mafia, globally, to blow up police stations, judges and witnesses who got in their way. Murder was their mantra. In Australia, I watched the

killings, and thought time and again it would never happen to me. Then, all of a sudden, my life changed.

I was flying through the tropics with my three mobster friends when I got the news that caused me to lose my breath for the first time that day: my NCA headquarters had just exploded, the result of a Mafia bomb, killing and maiming as the office was blown to smithereens. It made world news and completely rattled me, just moments before I opened the door to the fuselage and welcomed the Mafia on board, feeling the weight in their carry-ons.

I recalled the deepest sense of horror, as I came to terms with the fact that the Australian version of the crime scourge was just as ruthless and dangerous as the Sicilian and the American. And here I was, about to climb into the clouds with men who blow up law enforcement buildings. I was trapped. My passengers were linked to the bastards who had sent the bomb, and they were smiling, showing me the front page of their newspapers: a newsflash of how the parcel bomb exploded covering bodies in red phosphorus, the stuff of match heads, burning and spitting flames in an act of carnage rarely seen anywhere. As the law enforcement world fell into shock, so did I.

But I was supposed to be a gangster, so all I could do was return the smile, masquerading as a death wish as I imagined phosphorus over my own body, burning me alive. Then I did what my training demanded, deflected my horror and got on with business. I had to; there were dozens of surveillance eyes on me in satellites, watching, sweating my every move, and secret lenses and microphones hidden everywhere.

In my one thousand days undercover it had been a constant play of strategies, each one designed to get me a step further, a few inches closer to my goal. Like moving pawns around a chessboard, I would try to be a move ahead of the king or rooks in the game, the Godfather, or the *capi* – the management who ran the day-to-day affairs. I was acutely aware that I was the only white Australian in the game, and should the proverbial shit hit the fan, I was the first person who would be looked at as the odd one out. The Skippy. The Aussie. The one with art brochures, not guns.

My Mafia contacts were no fools. Initially, as they entertained me, they were careful never to get too close to me. Later, after the walk in the orange grove with Antonio, all that changed. They saw great promise in me, with my willingness to launder dirty money. However, they took their time. Nothing comes quick in the Mafia, not even death. Most of the big decisions needed to be discussed, over and over. Talk is everything in the Mafia, so much so it can drive a task force crazy with the endless chatter in various dialects. Luckily, there was one man I owed my life to: my carefully chosen translator, Enzo, assigned to me by the anti-Mafia office in Rome. He spoke many Italian dialects and was an expert at pulling translations together quickly. Each time I was in the field, talking about drugs, murders and conspiracies, Enzo would listen in live. Should the Mafia make a comment in dialect about me or against me, he would hear it instantly and relay it back to me by cellphone codes. He was truly my ears with the Mafia, whenever I was not privy to their secrets. He was the one who listened to my targets' phone calls and ascertained that my hotel room was bugged, so my 'friends' could secretly assess me. He listened to them snooping into my bank accounts, and, in the early days, breaking into my apartment when I was out of town to check me out. Enzo worked around the clock, often sleeping at his desk so he could hear every word in order to keep me safe.

Within months I was buying ninety-six per cent pure cocaine in compressed rocks the size of footballs, worth a million dollars on the street. The business opportunities rolled on. One day the Mafia men drove into Melbourne, a city of five million people, and asked to meet me on the outskirts. They had a truckload of cannabis they wanted me to sell, worth millions. It was all mine! Another time they met me down a dark laneway and handed over ten huge garbage bags filled with drugs, which I purchased with unmarked bills straight out of the reserve holdings of the police department bank account. Another time they spotted me a kilo of cocaine on credit, to splash around my contacts and generate bigger orders. Then there was a conspiracy to import a hundred-kilo shipment of cocaine from Colombia. And on it went. Meetings loaded with numbers: \$4000 a pound, \$185 000 a kilo, 200 kilos of this, ten-pound lots, a tonne of that, kilos of coke,

three weeks before it lands, twenty hours before delivery . . . on and on. Then there were the names to recall, as many as nine *mafiosi* in the room at a time: Pasquale, Antonio, Rosario, Dominic, Sergio, Rocco, Giovanni . . . blah, blah, blah. In the end, my mind was a mess of numbers and names, and my body was like a used dishrag, exhausted; it was the perfect weight loss program. Then, one sleepless morning, I woke up in a sweat and realised I was a *mafioso*.

A few months after my joy flight to the tropics, as if an alarm went off to remind me it was time to come home, come back to normality, my covert house of cards came crumbling down, and my career as an art dealer ended. It was time to claim our targets, lock up our Mafia friends. With my life and sanity still intact, every police department in Australia was gathered to implement over a hundred raids across the country, ending the criminal careers of dozens of *mafiosi* and filling high-security prisons to the brim in three states. My targets and (now) ex-‘friends’ were all gifted an unwanted holiday in prison.

Such was my life in the Mafia . . .

PART ONE

Writing history

CHAPTER 1

RUST BUCKET

SICILIAN SAYING:

Cu ti ci porta?

Who takes you there?

Used when you wonder why a person does such a silly thing

I was perched on a rust-bucket passenger ferry that chugs back and forth between the poverty-stricken port of Villa San Giovanni, Calabria, and the port of Messina on the island of Sicily. Relics from a slower era, these vessels work the murky waters, connecting the deep south to the long, svelte leg of Italy. They all look the same, painted deep ocean-blue and white, and wafting diesel fumes. I had found the ideal vantage point on the uppermost deck and was making short work of an *arancino*, a sticky Arborio rice ball.

The ferry made headway under a glorious heat haze from a scorching Mediterranean sun. Across Messina Strait, I could see the enigmatic island of Sicily. Sitting under a cloudless blue sky, it enticed me, like the backdrop to a snow-dome scene, teasing me to step ashore.

I pondered its majesty and imagined fragments of history that have shaped this land and its island people. Strategically located, it has witnessed the changing fortunes of a great many kingdoms. My mind's eye visualised the regimented Norman era with its impressive, circular stone forts that still dominate the coastline. I spared a thought for the

bloodthirsty Greeks, scrambling off timber-hulled boats 3000 years earlier, planting grapevines and erecting their imposing temples to make their mark. So much history!

Located just off the ‘toe’ of Italy’s ‘boot’, Sicily is the second-largest island in the Mediterranean archipelago. After twenty-one invasions, it stands defiant, even in the face of more treachery than the Elizabethan court. It has more dialects than the rest of Italy combined. What you see, however, is a withered land of granite mountains that seem to reach, painfully, for the heavens. The scrappy terrain is dotted with villages and Baroque cities, presided over by a volcano that won’t sleep. Like its inhabitants, Mount Etna spits its anger often. Encircling this picture postcard are turquoise beaches, edging onto sunburnt soils carpeted in olives, with an Australian influence: eucalypt trees, imported a hundred years earlier in a failed attempt to stop soil erosion. In time, everything erodes in Sicily. I had arrived from my homeland to step into the sun and soak up some much-needed warmth. But I was also on a mission.

For years, since I left the life of a cop, I have been drawn to Sicily. I put aside what I’d experienced as an undercover cop and went in search of *casalinga* cooking, lime-washed villas, world-class wines and a rich sense of community.

For me, eating in Sicily is one of life’s most idyllic experiences. Walking into your favourite *gelateria*, for example, and slurping down a massive dollop of gelato *fior di latte* smacked into a freshly broken brioche is unforgettable. Culinary utopia comes in many forms in Sicily. But, on this day, I just wanted to get off this rust bucket, back onto terra firma, and go on with my journey.

Messina is a big, brash, sometimes dark city, with never-to-be-spoken-about memories of the crime wars of the 1970s. Like so many others, it is just another town hiding its scars. Having suffered a devastating earthquake in 1908 that ruined ninety per cent of the city, the rebuilding program was waylaid due to the Mafia fleecing the repair money. But Messina is not alone when it comes to the Mafia: a disease, a plague, a criminal revolution and a way of life that encapsulates, violates and rapes all that is good in Italy, before stretching its slimy, suckered tentacles all over Europe. Then, without

resistance, it embarked on an Atlantic crossing, surfacing, bigger and nastier than ever, to capture the Americas and the world.

The scourge has left an indelible mark, like a tattoo; its influence on Sicily will, it seems, never be erased. The Mafia's staple diet of standover tactics has flattened the enthusiasm of local businesses and their workers. I could only imagine the hurt that many have suffered, the losses that will never be recouped, and the fear of speaking out. Not forgetting the sideways glances locals get from affluent tourists. Everyone in Sicily has been looked upon, at least once in their lives, as a potential Mafia member, a relative or acquaintance of, a next-door neighbour to, or someone employed in a business that might be. The tough reality of living in the south of Italy.

The clanging of metal chains and idling motors below deck told me Messina was upon us. Within minutes our ferry kissed the tired wharf, jolting the metal beast to a stop. The ferry staff, an unshaven, swollen-bellied lot, all chewing pistachio nuts, lassoed the gigantic ropes to the pier joists. The drawbridge dropped, a signal for my real journey to commence. The purpose of which was more earnest on this occasion. This time I had come to Sicily chasing a far tastier morsel. I'd come to understand how the Mafia found its way onto the cultural table. *La Cosa Nostra*. And how it got to America and everywhere else.

As both a practitioner and student of the Mafia, and having jailed thugs who were a part of it, I had a long-held desire to answer one question: When was the Mafia born? My years undercover gave me an insatiable itch to know the origins of this gang of bad men. Though I had read avidly about the Mafia, from books that mostly sent me to sleep, I was always dissatisfied with the story of its creation and growth. Usually written by historians, academics or authors taking a stab at telling their tale, the books were often repetitious and rarely went back further than the Prohibition days. The origins, I thought, must go deeper than that. Surely, Al Capone didn't just wake up one day in 1925 and open a speakeasy with a gang of Mafia mobsters!

While undercover, I learnt about their tenacity in getting ordinary people to do extraordinarily bad things. I knew them to blow the leg off a suspected snitch (informer), by holding him down like a lamb to the slaughter, and placing a shotgun behind a kneecap before pulling

the trigger, then leaving him to bleed out. Also, to shoot dead thugs they believed had ratted them out. And dumping their bodies to become fly blown in the outback. I met a hitman, imported from Italy to find a rodent in the organisation, trying to locate a weakness within the ranks (he never suspected it was me). The Mafia hate snitches more than anything else; they call such a person a *pentito*, a *mafioso* who is a police informer. I once tried to gain verbal evidence from my 'friends' after they had murdered a brave anti-drugs campaigner; just snatched him off the street, shot him dead, never to be seen again. I learnt how they applied pressure to innocent Italian immigrants, conned them into having their migration sponsored by the Mafia. Once they were in Australia, the Mafia called in the dirty favours.

I was fortunate to be able to walk away in the end. I was amazed to have survived my infiltration – despite the death threats – and I could slip back into society. Yet, from that moment, I remained petrified they would cash in their vendetta on me. As I kept on the move, trusting only in my own instincts, from one flophouse to another, ultimately, what followed were the many court cases. Where my 'friends' sat in the dock and stared me down, giving me looks of utter hatred as they listened to my evidence. They watched me standing in the witness box, sweat dripping down the back of my shirt, day after day recalling my con job on them. In these painfully long hearings, I had to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, including how I and my 'friends' would go out on the town, wining and dining, the Italians with their mistresses, naive women attracted to the Mafia. My evidence humiliated the wives sitting in court enough for them to ultimately storm out. It was daunting watching tough men, encaged behind bulletproof glass, glaring at me, day after day. All I could do was fire more evidence at them, hoping they would desist. They never did.

Why didn't they destroy me? At times my 'freedom' would wear me down. Not knowing whether they would, eventually, come for me. Tap me on the shoulder as I walked home after a late-night drink. Detonate a bomb inside my letterbox. Come at me in a crowd. But no. Instead, I would think the worst, every day, every night, for years. Until, one day, ten years after my Mafia 'friends' went to prison, the Godfather at the time, Antonio – the boss I befriended in his orange

grove – was released from prison on early parole and travelled back to his home town to reacquaint himself with his mobsters. Trouble was, by then, a new broom had cleaned everything up, and all that was waiting for him was a sniper with a long-range scope. Antonio, the handsome Godfather figure, the man who had shared my dinner table dozens of times, was executed in his orange grove.

That was when it dawned on me. They had been waiting for the release of Antonio. His death was a stronger message to send, internally and globally, than killing an undercover cop. The family was sweeping up the errors of a past decade. From that day, I got it: there was no value in killing an undercover cop and having the might of every police department in the land come crashing down on them, when it was far neater to eliminate the cause of the problem, Antonio. Once I understood their strategy, I would learn to sleep again. Learn to stop seeing my pillow as the enemy. But I would never lose the itch to know more about this gang of men, how this hell came to be. The answer, I thought, might well be a seed hidden deep in the soil of Italy, roots buried far into the culture, and I wanted to try and find it. As I drove my rented Fiat Punto across the drawbridge and entered the streets of Messina, all I could think of was my mission: to find the earliest Mafia.

I headed south, towards Agrigento, which played a major role in the Mafia wars of the 1970s. My idea was to snoop around, ask a few people if they had any insights into when the Mafia started. To keep from exposing my real identity, I told people I was a researcher enquiring into the immigration of Sicilians to Australia. An uncontroversial cover story that no one questioned. I quickly came to see the lack of knowledge among locals about the old Mafia; no one seemed to know. Although I suspect they really did know. There was one reaction I won't forget: the stony, blank stare. This usually came from aged men. I soon learnt it was a look that said they don't want to answer, don't want to offer any information. Not even a smile, just a polite stretch of dry lips. I translated this stare as 'Fuck off'.

I sucked it up as I looked at these angry unshaven men; I had seen the same faces from my Mafia infiltration years earlier looking back at me. Hard Italians. Full of spit and low on compassion. I needed a

better plan. Any plan, in fact. I was staying in an old villa, perched on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean coastline on about thirty acres of harsh land. The owner had decided to subsidise his income from his struggling olive plantation by creating a four-roomed bed and breakfast hotel. It had an inground swimming pool, and a kitchen that offered a range of tasty dishes, cooked by his mother, an elegant old lady who had the most personality in her family.

I spent five nights at this sun-bleached hideaway, catching up on my vitamin D and enjoying the *nonna's* home-style cooking. On the last night, I discovered the *nonna* was a published author and local historian. She told a story that would change the direction of my search. She went into detail about the time of unification, the taking of Sicily by General Garibaldi and how it was ushered into the federation of mainland Italy around 1860. The great Garibaldi sailed into Sicily with a band of followers and marched on Palermo. Her great-great-grandfather, she said, took part in the unification march. He and his brothers downed their farming tools and walked to Marsala to join the Garibaldi volunteers. She went on to explain that her long-dead forebear was promised a slice of land for his trouble, if he stood behind Garibaldi. He did. And, she said, apart from farmers, some of those who gathered with Garibaldi were hardened rural men, tough guys. I realised I was hearing a historical narrative, peppered with facts passed down her family line. I was on the edge of my chair, the antipasto ignored.

I asked if her grandparent received his slice of land. The lady and her son drew smiles then said words at the exact same time, gesturing with their hands towards the floor, 'This is it; you are sitting on it.' I had goose bumps. The villa, I learnt, in which we were seated, the *casa* I was relaxing in, was built on the promised land, gifted by the administrators of Sicily to her great patriarch for his assistance with the unification efforts. On the wall was a framed certificate of the land subdivision and allotment, stamped c. 1862 and in the family name.

While the story of Garibaldi was ideal dinner-table conversation, I wasn't in Sicily to research the ways and victories of a red-shirted general. My interest lay in the black-shirted Mafia, so the next day I tossed my bags into my Fiat and readied to leave. As I fussed over

my car, I explained my mission to the *nonna* historian. She whispered in my ear that the only place to find out about the Mafia would be Palermo, the capital of Sicily. However, she doubted I would be successful as the subject is almost never discussed.

A challenge, I thought! And with that I turned my Fiat Punto west towards Palermo with the view of knocking on as many doors as I could, to prove to the old historian that answers could be found in matters of secrecy. I felt a surge of enthusiasm the closer I got to Palermo, buoyed by the story I had been told the night before. The framed land title mounted on the dining room wall had convinced me that the truth in history could still be found.