RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Omertà

Mario Puzo

Contents

ABOUT THE BOOK

Omertà, the Sicilian code of silence, has been the cornerstone of the Mafia's sense of honour for centuries. Born in the Sicilian hills, omertà carried the Mafia through a hundred years of change, but now at the century's end it is becoming a relic from a bygone age. Honour may be silent – but money talks.

New York – a mob boss is assassinated. His nephew Astorre Viola and the head of the city's FBI both launch investigations into the murder. But this time silence spreads like a contagion: the silence of rival gangs, the silence of crooked bankers, even the silence of the courts. The world of the Mafia is riven with greed, and Viola knows that now is the time to claim his destiny…

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mario Puzo was born in New York and, following military service in World War II, attended New York's New School for Social Research and Columbia University. His best-selling novel *The Godfather* was preceded by two critically acclaimed novels, *The Dark Arena* (1955) and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965). IN 1978, he published *Fools Die*, followed by *The Sicilian* (1984), *The Fourth K* (1991), and the second instalment in his Mafia trilogy, *The Last Don* (1996), which became an international best-seller. Mario Puzo also wrote many screenplays, including *Earthquake, Superman*, and all three *Godfather* films, for which he received two Academy Awards. He died in July 1999 at his home in Long Island, New York, at the age of seventy-eight.

By the same author

FICTION
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NON-FICTION
The Godfather Papers
Inside Las Vegas

CHILDREN'S BOOKS
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OMERTÀ

Mario Puzo

arrow books

To
Evelyn Murphy

Omertà:

a Sicilian code of honor which forbids informing about crimes thought to be the affairs of the persons involved

World Book Dictionary

PROLOGUE

1967

IN THE STONE-FILLED VILLAGE of Castellammare del Golfo facing the dark Sicilian Mediterranean, a great Mafia Don lay dying. Vincenzo Zeno was a man of honor, who all his life had been loved for his fair and impartial judgment, his help to those in need, and his implacable punishment of those who dared to oppose his will.

Around him were three of his former followers, each of whom had gone on to achieve his own power and position: Raymonde Aprile from Sicily and New York, Octavius Bianco from Palermo, and Benito Craxxi from Chicago. Each owed him one last favor.

Don Zeno was the last of the true Mafia chiefs, having all his life observed the old traditions. He extracted a tariff on all business, but never on drugs, prostitution, or other crime of any kind. And never did a poor man come to his house for money and go away empty-handed. He corrected the injustices of the law—the highest judge in Sicily could make his ruling, but if you had right on your side, Don Zeno would veto that judgment with his own force of will, and arms.

No philandering youth could leave the daughter of a poor peasant without Don Zeno persuading him into holy matrimony. No bank could foreclose on a helpless farmer without Don Zeno interfering to put things right. No young lad who hungered for a university education could be denied it for lack of money or qualification. If they were related to his *cosca*, his clan, their dreams were fulfilled. The laws from Rome could never justify the traditions of Sicily and had no authority; Don Zeno would overrule them, no matter what the cost.

But the Don was now in his eighties, and over the last few years his power had begun to wane. He'd had the weakness to marry a very beautiful young girl, who had produced a fine male child. She had died in childbirth, and the boy was now two years old. The old man, knowing that the end was near and that without him his *cosca* would be pulverized by the more powerful *coscas* of Corleone and Clericuzio, pondered the future of his son.

Now he thanked his three friends for the courtesy and respect they had shown in traveling so many miles to hear his request. Then he told them that he wanted his young son, Astorre, to be taken to a place of safety and brought up under different circumstances but in the tradition of a man of honor, like himself.

"I can die with a clear conscience," he said, though his friends knew that in his lifetime he had decided the deaths of hundreds of men, "if I can see my son to safety. For in this two-year-old I see the heart and soul of a true Mafioso, a rare and almost extinct quality."

He told them he would choose one of these men to act as guardian to this unusual child, and with this responsibility would come great rewards.

"It is strange," Don Zeno said, staring through clouded eyes. "According to tradition, it is the first son who is the true Mafioso. But in my case it took until I reached my eightieth year before I could make my dream come true. I'm not a man of superstition, but if I were, I could believe this child grew from the soil of Sicily itself. His eyes are as green as olives that spring from my best trees. And he has the Sicilian sensibility—romantic, musical, happy. Yet if someone offends him, he doesn't forget, as young as he is. But he must be guided."

"And so what do you wish from us, Don Zeno?" Craxxi asked. "For I will gladly take this child of yours and raise him as my own."

Bianco stared at Craxxi almost resentfully. “I know the boy from when he was first born. He is familiar to me. I will take him as my own.”

Raymonde Aprile looked at Don Zeno but said nothing.

“And you, Raymonde?” Don Zeno asked.

Aprile said, “If it is me that you choose, your son will be my son.”

The Don considered the three of them, all worthy men. He regarded Craxxi the most intelligent. Bianco was surely the most ambitious and forceful. Aprile was a more restrained man of virtue, a man closer to himself. But he was merciless.

Don Zeno, even while dying, understood that it was Raymonde Aprile who most needed the child. He would benefit most from the child’s love, and he would make certain his son learned how to survive in their world of treachery.

Don Zeno was silent for a long moment. Finally he said, “Raymonde, you will be his father. And I can rest in peace.”

The Don’s funeral was worthy of an emperor. All the *cosca* chiefs in Sicily came to pay their respects, along with cabinet ministers from Rome, the owners of the great latifundia, and hundreds of subjects of his widespread *cosca*. Atop the black horse-drawn hearse, two-year-old Astorre Zeno, a fiery-eyed baby attired in a black frock and black pillbox hat, rode as majestically as a Roman emperor.

The cardinal of Palermo conducted the service and proclaimed memorably, “In sickness and in health, in unhappiness and despair, Don Zeno remained a true friend to all.” He then intoned Don Zeno’s last words: “I commend myself to God. He will forgive my sins, for I have tried every day to be just.”

And so it was that Astorre Zeno was taken to America by Raymonde Aprile and made a part of his own household.

CHAPTER

1

WHEN THE STURZO TWINS, Franky and Stace, pulled into Heskow's driveway, they saw four very tall teenagers playing basketball on the small house court. Franky and Stace got out of their big Buick, and John Heskow came out to meet them. He was a tall, pear-shaped man; his thin hair neatly ringed the bare top of his skull, and his small blue eyes twinkled. "Great timing," he said. "There's someone I want you to meet."

The basketball game halted. Heskow said proudly, "This is my son, Jocko." The tallest of the teenagers stuck out his huge hand to Franky.

"Hey," Franky said. "How about giving us a little game?"

Jocko looked at the two visitors. They were about six feet tall and seemed in good shape. They both wore Ralph Lauren polo shirts, one red and the other green, with khaki trousers and rubber-soled shoes. They were amiable-looking, handsome men, their craggy features set with a graceful confidence. They were obviously brothers, but Jocko could not know they were twins. He figured them to be in their early forties.

"Sure," Jocko said, with boyish good nature.

Stace grinned. "Great! We just drove three thousand miles and have to loosen up."

Jocko motioned to his companions, all well over six feet, and said, "I'll take them on my side against you three." Since he was the much better player, he thought this would give his father's friends a chance.

"Take it easy on them," John Heskow said to the kids. "They're just old guys futzing around."

It was midafternoon in December, and the air was chilly enough to spur the blood. The cold Long Island sunlight, pale yellow, glinted off the glass roofs and walls of Heskow's flower sheds, his front business.

Jocko's young buddies were mellow and played to accommodate the older men. But suddenly Franky and Stace were whizzing past them for layup shots. Jocko stood amazed at their speed; then they were refusing to shoot and passing him the ball. They never took an outside shot. It seemed a point of honor that they had to swing free for an easy layup.

The opposing team started to use their height to pass around the older men but astonishingly enough got few rebounds. Finally, one of the boys lost his temper and gave Franky a hard elbow in the face. Suddenly the boy was on the ground. Jocko, watching everything, didn't know exactly how it happened. But then Stace hit his brother in the head with the ball and said, "Come on. Play, you shithead." Franky helped the boy to his feet, patted him on the ass, and said, "Hey, I'm sorry." They played for about five minutes more, but by then the older men were obviously tuckered out and the kids ran circles around them. Finally, they quit.

Heskow brought sodas to them on the court, and the teenagers clustered around Franky, who had charisma and had shown pro skills on the court. Franky hugged the boy he had knocked down. Then, he flashed them a man-of-the-world grin, which set pleasantly on his angular face.

"Let me give you guys some advice from an old guy," he said. "Never dribble when you can pass. Never quit when you're twenty points down in the last quarter. And never go out with a woman who owns more than one cat."

The boys all laughed.

Franky and Stace shook hands with the kids and thanked them for the game, then followed Heskow inside the pretty

green-trimmed house. Jocko called after them, “Hey, you guys are good!”

Inside the house, John Heskow led the two brothers upstairs to their room. It had a very heavy door with a good lock, the brothers noticed as Heskow let them in and locked the door behind them.

The room was big, a suite really, with an attached bathroom. It had two single beds—Heskow knew the brothers liked to sleep in the same room. In a corner was a huge trunk banded with steel straps and a heavy metal padlock. Heskow used a key to unlock the trunk and then flung the lid open. Exposed to view were several handguns, automatic weapons, and munitions boxes, in an array of black geometric shapes.

“Will that do?” Heskow asked.

Franky said, “No silencers.”

“You won’t need silencers for this job.”

“Good,” Stace said. “I hate silencers. I can never hit anything with a silencer.”

“OK,” Heskow said. “You guys take a shower and settle in, and I’ll get rid of the kids and cook supper. What did you think of my kid?”

“A very nice boy,” Franky said.

“And how do you like the way he plays basketball?” Heskow said with a flush of pride that made him look even more like a ripened pear.

“Exceptional,” Franky said.

“Stace, what do you think?” Heskow asked.

“Very exceptional,” said Stace.

“He has a scholarship to Villanova,” Heskow said. “NBA all the way.”

When the twins came down to the living room a little while later, Heskow was waiting. He had prepared sautéed veal

with mushrooms and a huge green salad. There was red wine on the table, which was set for three.

They sat down. They were old friends and knew each other's history. Heskow had been divorced for thirteen years. His ex-wife and Jocko lived a couple of miles west in Babylon. But Jocko spent a lot of time here, and Heskow had been a constant and doting father.

"You were supposed to arrive tomorrow morning," Heskow said. "I would have put the kid off if I knew you were coming today. By the time you phoned, I couldn't throw him and his friends out."

"That's OK," Franky said. "What the hell."

"You guys were good out there with the kids," Heskow said. "You ever wonder if you could have made it in the pros?"

"Nah," Stace said. "We're too short, only six feet. The eggplants were too big for us."

"Don't say things like that in front of the kid," Heskow said, horror-stricken. "He has to play with them."

"Oh, no," Stace said. "I would never do that."

Heskow relaxed and sipped his wine. He always liked working with the Sturzo brothers. They were both so genial—they never got nasty like most of the scum he had to deal with. They had an ease in the world that reflected the ease between them. They were secure, and it gave them a pleasant glow.

The three of them ate slowly, casually. Heskow refilled their plates direct from the frying pan.

"I always meant to ask," Franky said to Heskow. "Why did you change your name?"

"That was a long time ago," Heskow said. "I wasn't ashamed of being Italian. But you know, I look so fucking German. With blond hair and blue eyes and this nose. It looked really fishy, my having an Italian name."

The twins both laughed, an easy, understanding laugh. They knew he was full of shit, but they didn't mind.

When they finished their salad, Heskow served double espresso and a plate of Italian pastries. He offered cigars but they refused. They stuck to their Marlboros, which suited their creased western faces.

"Time to get down to business," Stace said. "This must be a big one, or why did we have to drive three thousand fucking miles? We could have flown."

"It wasn't so bad," Franky said. "I enjoyed it. We saw America, firsthand. We had a good time. The people in the small towns were great."

"Exceptional," Stace said. "But still, it was a long ride."

"I didn't want to leave any traces at the airports," Heskow said. "That's the first place they check. And there will be a lot of heat. You boys don't mind heat?"

"Mother's milk to me," Stace said. "Now, who the fuck is it?"

"Don Raymonde Aprile." Heskow nearly choked on his espresso saying it.

There was a long silence, and then for the first time Heskow caught the chill of death the twins could radiate.

Franky said quietly, "You made us drive three thousand miles to offer us this job?"

Stace smiled at Heskow and said, "John, it's been nice knowing you. Now just pay our kill fee and we'll be moving on." Both twins laughed at this little joke, but Heskow didn't get it.

One of Franky's friends in L.A., a freelance writer, had once explained to the twins that though a magazine might pay him expenses to do an article, they would not necessarily buy it. They would just pay a small percentage of the agreed-upon fee to kill the piece. The twins had adopted that practice. They charged just to listen to a proposition. In this case, because of the travel time and there were two of them involved, the kill fee was twenty thousand.

But it was Heskow's job to convince them to take the assignment. "The Don has been retired for three years," he

said. “All his old connections are in jail. He has no power anymore. The only one who could make trouble is Timmona Portella, and he won’t. Your payoff is a million bucks, half when you’re done and the other half in a year. But for that year, you have to lay low. Now everything is set up. All you guys have to be is the shooters.”

“A million bucks,” Stace said. “That’s a lot of money.”

“My client knows it’s a big step to hit Don Aprile,” Heskow said. “He wants the best help. Cool shooters and silent partners with mature heads. And you guys are simply the best.”

Franky said, “And there are not many guys who would take the risk.”

“Yeah,” Stace said. “You have to live with it the rest of your life. Somebody coming after you, plus the cops, and the feds.”

“I swear to you,” Heskow said, “the NYPD won’t go all out. The FBI will not take a hand.”

“And the Don’s old friends?” Stace asked.

“The dead have no friends.” Heskow paused for a moment. “When the Don retired, he cut all ties. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Franky said to Stace, “Isn’t it funny, in all our deals, they always tell us there’s nothing to worry about?”

Stace laughed. “That’s because they’re not the shooters. John, you’re an old friend. We trust you. But what if you’re wrong? Anybody can be wrong. What if the Don still has old friends? You know how he operates. No mercy. We get nailed, we don’t just get killed. We’ll spend a couple of hours in hell first. Plus our families are at stake under the Don’s rule. That means your son. Can’t play for the NBA in his grave. Maybe we should know who’s paying for this.”

Heskow leaned toward them, his light skin a scarlet red as if he were blushing. “I can’t tell you that. You know that. I’m just the broker. And I’ve thought of all that other shit. You think I’m fucking stupid? Who doesn’t know who the Don is?

But he’s defenseless. I have assurances of that from the top levels. The police will just go through the motions. The FBI can’t afford to investigate. And the top Mafia heads won’t interfere. It’s foolproof.”

“I never dreamed that Don Aprile would be one of my marks,” Franky said. The deed appealed to his ego. To kill a man so dreaded and respected in his world.

“Franky, this is not a basketball game,” Stace warned. “If we lose, we don’t shake hands and walk off the court.”

“Stace, its a million bucks,” Franky said. “And John never steered us wrong. Let’s go with it.”

Stace felt their excitement building. What the hell. He and Franky could take care of themselves. After all, there was the million bucks. If the truth were told, Stace was more mercenary than Franky, more business-oriented, and the million swung him.

“OK,” Stace said, “we’re in. But God have mercy on our souls if you’re wrong.” He had once been an altar boy.

“What about the Don being watched by the FBI?” Franky asked. “Do we have to worry about that?”

“No,” Heskow said. “When all his old friends went to jail, the Don retired like a gentleman. The FBI appreciated that. They leave him alone. I guarantee it. Now let me lay it out.”

It took him a half hour to explain the plan in detail.

Finally Stace said, “When?”

“Sunday morning,” Heskow said. “You stay here for the first two days. Afterward the private jet flies you out of Newark.”

“We have to have a very good driver,” Stace said. “Exceptional.”

“I’m driving,” Heskow said, then added, almost apologetically, “It’s a very big payday.”

For the rest of the weekend, Heskow baby-sat for the Sturzo brothers, cooking their meals, running their errands. He was not a man easily impressed, but the Sturzos sometimes sent a chill to his heart. They were like adders, their heads constantly alert, yet they were congenial and even helped him tend to the flowers in his sheds.

The brothers played basketball one-on-one just before supper, and Heskow watched fascinated by how their bodies slithered around each other like snakes. Franky was faster and a deadly shooter. Stace was not as good but more clever. Franky could have made it to the NBA, Heskow thought. But this was not a basketball game. In a real crisis, it would have to be Stace. Stace would be the primary shooter.

CHAPTER

2

THE GREAT 1990s FBI blitz of the Mafia families in New York left only two survivors. Don Raymonde Aprile, the greatest and most feared, remained untouched. The other, Don Timmona Portella, who was nearly his equal in power but a far inferior man, escaped by what seemed to be pure luck.

But the future was clear. With the 1970 RICO laws so undemocratically framed, the zeal of special FBI prosecuting teams, and the death of the belief in *omertà* among the soldiers of the American Mafia, Don Raymonde Aprile knew it was time for him to retire gracefully from the stage.

The Don had ruled his Family for thirty years and was now a legend. Brought up in Sicily, he had none of the false ideas or strutting arrogance of the American-born Mafia chiefs. He was, in fact, a throwback to the old Sicilians of the nineteenth century who ruled towns and villages with their personal charisma, their sense of honor, and their deadly and final judgment of any suspected enemy. He also proved to have the strategic genius of those old heroes.

Now, at sixty-two, he had his life in order. He had disposed of his enemies and accomplished his duties as a friend and a father. He could enjoy old age with a clear conscience, retire from the disharmonies of his world, and move into the more fitting role of gentleman banker and pillar of society.

His three children were safely ensconced in successful and honorable careers. His oldest son, Valerius, was now thirty-seven, married with children, and a colonel in the United States Army and lecturer at West Point. His career had been determined by his timidity as a child; the Don had secured a

cadet appointment at West Point to rectify this defect in his character.

His second son, Marcantonio, at the early age of thirty-five, was, out of some mystery in the variation of his genes, a top executive at a national TV network. As a boy he had been moody and lived in a make-believe world and the Don thought he would be a failure in any serious enterprise. But now his name was often in the papers as some sort of creative visionary, which pleased the Don but did not convince him. After all, he was the boy's father. Who knew him better?

His daughter, Nicole, had been affectionately called Nikki as a young child but at the age of six demanded imperiously that she be called by her proper name. She was his favorite sparring partner. At the age of twenty-nine, she was a corporate lawyer, a feminist, and a pro bono advocate of those poor and desperate criminals who otherwise could not afford an adequate legal defense. She was especially good at saving murderers from the electric chair, husband killers from prison confinement, and repeat rapists from being given life terms. She was absolutely opposed to the death penalty, believed in the rehabilitation of any criminal, and was a severe critic of the economic structure of the United States. She believed a country as rich as America should not be so indifferent to the poor, no matter what their faults. Despite all this she was a very skilled and tough negotiator in corporate law, a striking and forceful woman. The Don agreed with her on nothing.

As for Astorre, he was part of the family, and closest to the Don as a titular nephew. But he seemed like a brother to the others because of his intense vitality and charm. From the age of three to sixteen he had been their intimate, the beloved youngest sibling—until his exile to Sicily eleven years before. The Don had summoned him back when he retired.

The Don planned his retirement carefully. He distributed his empire to placate potential enemies but also rendered tribute to loyal friends, knowing that gratitude is the least lasting of virtues and that gifts must always be replenished. He was especially careful to pacify Timmona Portella. Portella was dangerous because of his eccentricity and a passionate murderousness that sometimes had no relationship to necessity.

How Portella escaped the FBI blitz of the 1990s was a mystery to everyone. For he was an American-born don without subtlety, a man incautious and intemperate, with an explosive temper. He had a huge body with an enormous paunch and dressed like a Palermo *picciotto*, a young apprentice killer, all colors and silk. His power was based in the distribution of illegal drugs. He had never married and still at age fifty was a careless womanizer. He only showed true affection for his younger brother, Bruno, who seemed slightly retarded but shared his older brother's brutality.

Don Aprile had never trusted Portella and rarely did business with him. The man was dangerous through his weakness, a man to be neutralized. So now he summoned Timmona Portella for a meeting.

Portella arrived with his brother, Bruno. Aprile met them with his usual quiet courtesy but came to the point quickly.

"My dear Timmona," he said. "I am retiring from all business affairs except my banks. Now you will be very much in the public eye and you must be careful. If you should ever need any advice, call on me. For I will not be completely without resources in my retirement."

Bruno, a small replica of his brother who was awed by the Don's reputation, smiled with pleasure at this respect for his older brother. But Timmona understood the Don far better. He knew that he was being warned.

He nodded respectfully to the Don. "You have always showed the best judgment of us all," he said. "And I respect what you are doing. Count on me as your friend."

“Very good, very good,” the Don said. “Now, as a gift to you, I ask you to heed this warning. This FBI man, Cilke, is very devious. Do not trust him in any way. He is drunk with his success, and you will be his next target.”

“But you and I have already escaped him,” Timmona said. “Though he brought all our friends down. I don’t fear him but I thank you.”

They had a celebratory drink, and the Portella brothers left. In the car Bruno said, “What a great man.”

“Yes,” Timmona said. “He was a great man.”

As for the Don, he was well satisfied. He had seen the alarm in Timmona’s eyes and was assured there would no longer be any danger from him.

Don Aprile requested a private meeting with Kurt Cilke, the head of the FBI in New York City. Cilke, to the Don’s own surprise, was a man he admired. He had sent most of the East Coast Mafia chiefs to jail and almost broken their power.

Don Raymonde Aprile had eluded him, for the Don knew the identity of Cilke’s secret informer, the one who made his success possible. But the Don admired Cilke even more because the man always played fair, had never tried frame-ups or power-play harassments, had never given publicity pin marks on the Don’s children. So the Don felt it was only fair to warn him.

The meeting was at the Don’s country estate in Montauk. Cilke would have to come alone, a violation of the Bureau rules. The FBI director himself had given approval but insisted Cilke use a special recording device. This was an implant in his body, below his rib cage, which would not show on the outer walls of his torso; the device was not

known to the public, and its manufacture was strictly controlled. Cilke realized that the real purpose of the wire was to record what he said to the Don.

They met on a golden October afternoon on the Don's verandah. Cilke had never been able to penetrate this house with a listening device, and a judge had barred constant physical surveillance. This day he was not searched in any way by the Don's men, which surprised him. Obviously Don Raymonde Aprile was not going to make him an illicit proposal.

As always, Cilke was amazed and even a little disturbed by the impression that the Don made on him. Despite knowing that the man had ordered a hundred murders, broken countless laws of society, Cilke could not hate him. And yet he believed such men evil, hated them for how they destroyed the fabric of civilization.

Don Aprile was clad in a dark suit, dark tie, and white shirt. His expression was grave and yet understanding, the lines in his face the gentle ones of a virtue-loving man. How could such a humane face belong to someone so merciless, Cilke wondered.

The Don did not offer to shake hands out of a sensibility not to embarrass Cilke. He gestured for his guest to be seated and bowed his head in greeting.

"I have decided to place myself and my family under your protection—that is, the protection of society," he said.

Cilke was astonished. What the hell did the old man mean?

"For the last twenty years you have made yourself my enemy. You have pursued me. But I was always grateful for your sense of fair play. You never tried to plant evidence or encourage perjury against me. You have put most of my friends in prison, and you tried very hard to do the same to me."

Cilke smiled. "I'm still trying," he said.

The Don nodded in appreciation. "I have rid myself of everything doubtful except a few banks, surely a

respectable business. I have placed myself under the protection of your society. In return I will do my duty to that society. You can make it much easier if you do not pursue me. For there is no longer any need."

Cilke shrugged. "The Bureau decides. I've been after you for so long, why stop now? I might get lucky."

The Don's face became graver and even more tired. "I have something to exchange with you. Your enormous success of the past few years influenced my decision. But the thing is, I know your prize informant, I know who he is. And I have told no one."

Cilke hesitated for only seconds before he said impassively, "I have no such informant. And again, the Bureau decides, not me. So you've wasted my time."

"No, no," the Don said. "I'm not seeking an advantage, just an accommodation. Allow me, because of my age, to tell you what I have learned. Do not exercise power because it is easy to your hand. And do not get carried away with a certainty of victory when your intellect tells you there is even a hint of tragedy. Let me say I regard you now as a friend, not an enemy, and think to yourself what you have to gain or lose by refusing this offer."

"And if you are truly retired, then of what use is your friendship?" Cilke said, smiling.

"You will have my goodwill," the Don said. "That is worth something even from the smallest of men."

Later Cilke played the tape for Bill Boxton, his deputy, who asked, "What the hell was that all about?"

"That's the stuff you have to learn," Cilke told him. "He was telling me that he's not completely defenseless, that he was keeping an eye on me."

"What bullshit," Boxton said. "They can't touch a federal agent."

“That’s true,” Cilke said. “That’s why I kept after him, retired or not. Still, I’m wary. We can’t be absolutely sure . . .”

Having studied the history of the most prestigious families in America, those robber barons who had ruthlessly built their fortunes while breaking the laws and ethics of human society, Don Aprile became, like them, a benefactor to all. Like them, he had his empire—he owned ten private banks in the world’s largest cities. So he gave generously to build a hospital for the poor. And he contributed to the arts. He established a chair at Columbia University for the study of the Renaissance.

It was true that Yale and Harvard refused his twenty million dollars for a dormitory to be named for Christopher Columbus, who was at the time in disrepute in intellectual circles. Yale did offer to take the money and name the dorm after Sacco and Vanzetti, but the Don was not interested in Sacco and Vanzetti. He despised martyrs.

A lesser man would have felt insulted and nursed a grievance, but not Raymonde Aprile. Instead, he simply gave the money to the Catholic Church for daily masses to be sung for his wife, now twenty-five years in Heaven.

He donated a million dollars to the New York Police Benevolent Association and another million to a society for the protection of illegal immigrants. For the three years after his retirement, he showered his blessings on the world. His purse was open to any request except for one. He refused Nicole’s pleas to contribute to the Campaign Against the Death Penalty—her crusade to stop capital punishment.

It is astonishing how three years of good deeds and generosity can almost wipe out a thirty-year reputation of merciless acts. But great men also buy their own goodwill,

forgiveness of betraying friends and exercising lethal judgment. And the Don too had this universal weakness.

For Don Raymonde Aprile was a man who had lived by the strict rules of his own particular morality. His protocol had made him respected for over thirty years and generated the extraordinary fear that had been the base of his power. A chief tenet of that protocol was a complete lack of mercy.

This sprang not from innate cruelty, some psychopathic desire to inflict pain, but from an absolute conviction: that men always refused to obey. Even Lucifer, the angel, had defied God and had been flung from the heavens.

So an ambitious man struggling for power had no other recourse. Of course there were some persuasions, some concessions to another man's self-interest. That was only reasonable. But if all that failed, there was only the punishment of death. Never threats of other forms of punishment that might inspire retaliation. Simply a banishment from this earthly sphere, no more to be reckoned with.

Treachery was the greatest injury. The traitor's family would suffer, as would his circle of friends; his whole world would be destroyed. For there are many brave, proud men willing to gamble their lives for their own gain, but they would think twice about risking their loved ones. And so in this way Don Aprile generated a vast amount of terror. He relied on his generosity in worldly goods to win their less necessary love.

But it must be said, he was as merciless to himself. Possessed of enormous power, he could not prevent the death of his young wife after she had given him three children. She died a slow and horrible death from cancer as he watched over her for six months. During that time he came to believe that she was being punished for all the mortal sins he had committed, and so it was that he decreed his own penance: he would never remarry. He would send his children away to be educated in the ways of

lawful society, so they would not grow up in his world so full of hate and danger. He would help them find their way, but they would never be involved in his activities. With great sadness he resolved that he would never know the true essence of fatherhood.

So the Don arranged to have Nicole, Valerius, and Marcantonio sent to private boarding schools. He never let them into his personal life. They came home for the holidays, when he played the role of a caring but distant father, but they never became part of his world.

And yet despite everything and though they were aware of his reputation, his children loved him. They never talked about it among themselves. It was one of those family secrets that was not a secret.

No one could call the Don sentimental. He had very few personal friends, no pets, and he avoided holiday and social gatherings as much as possible. Only once, many years before, he had committed an act of compassion that astounded his colleagues in America.

Don Aprile, when he returned from Sicily with the infant, Astorre, found his beloved wife dying of cancer and his own three children desolate. Not wanting to keep the impressionable infant in such a circumstance for fear it would harm him in some way, the Don decided to place him in the care of one of his closest advisors, a man named Frank Viola, and his wife. This proved to be an unwise choice. At the time, Frank Viola had ambitions to succeed the Don.

But shortly after the Don’s wife died, Astorre Viola, at the age of three, became a member of the Don’s personal family when his “father” committed suicide in the trunk of his car, a curious circumstance, and his mother died of a brain hemorrhage. It was then that the Don had taken Astorre into his household and assumed the title of uncle.

When Astorre was old enough to begin asking about his parents, Don Raymonde told him that he had been