

TWENTY-ONE  
STRAIGHT SIX

The train station in Villosti spanned fifty yards of the main road of the light industrial zone on the village's northern end. The station house itself was only a quarter that length, with the remaining stretch made up of tracks and platforms some distance from the street behind a high wall of cinderblock coated in chipped and greying stucco. The wall was plastered with a motley assortment of handbills and posters promoting local businesses, local tradesmen, and local events, many of them long passed. On both sides of the station house the wall banked sharply away from the street to seal off communication between street and platforms and to funnel all passengers, arriving and departing, through the station house's large glass doors. The building that housed the ticket counters and information kiosk and newsstand and snack bar and phone booths and timetable and rows of wooden benches was utilitarian at best but had the luster of solemn dignity all buildings attain that manage to last a hundred years.

Across the street from the large glass doors was parked a

Fiat Abarth 2300S coupe, pointing south. It wasn't a common sight and everyone who'd come out of the station had given it a long look. Dark blue, with a fresh-off-the-lot glow and mohair interior, it was in its first year of production and stood out even with the engine off. With the engine running, it stood out in a whole new way. Its straight six engine with twin carburetors gave it nearly one hundred and fifty horsepower. It was a lot of car, far more than most people needed.

Against it leaned two men. They wore long coats and trilby hats and chain smoked. The taller, heavier one was named Perrone. He was forty-eight years old and had a half smile on his lips most of the time. He had it now as he held up a fifty-lire coin to the other man, who shrugged. Perrone tossed the coin in the air, where the other man, named Galli, watched it spin in the light from the station house.

"Heads," he said.

Perrone caught the coin, slapped it on the back of his hand, and showed it to Galli, who swore. Perrone put on the other half of his smile and pocketed the coin.

Galli was a short and wiry man of thirty-one. He grated his teeth habitually, tapped his foot like a jackrabbit and whistled tunes that sounded improvised and went nowhere. Perrone had hoped Galli's marriage in the spring would mellow him out, but if anything he was even more tightly wound than before.

In front of the wall, a dozen yards to the left of the station house was parked a new Vespa 160 GS, bright white.

"What do you think that costs, the Vespa?" said Perrone.

"Why, fatso? For your son?"

"I'm curious. I like to know these things."

"It cost plenty," said Galli. He didn't know either. "And you're sure it's his?"

Perrone looked over, half-smiling again. "According to the

Villosti questura it is. And how many 160's do you think there are at the station tonight? How many 160's do you think there are in the whole town of Villosti tonight?"

Galli held up his hands in surrender. Across the street and behind the wall a train approached from the right.

"That will be it," said Perrone, "last southbound train of the night."

The train could be heard to slow and squeal to a stop behind the wall.

"This stop," Galli said "Villosti."

"Please watch your step as you leave the car."

"Be sure to remove all personal items upon your exit."

"All items left behind will become F.S. property."

"Especially the clothes."

"Tomorrow you may find us wearing your undershirts."

"If you are a woman, you may find—"

"Quiet," said Perrone, "there he is."

There were only a dozen people arriving in Villosti and one of them was indisputably Martin Bass. His face had become familiar to Perrone and Galli over the past few days. He was very visible around Saraceni and easy to shadow. He seemed to have a lot on his mind, and none of it was a fear of being followed. He came out the glass doors of the station house and checked the sky. Satisfied, he turned right and walked in the direction of the Vespa 160 GS.

Perrone looked at Galli with vindication. Galli didn't look back. Perrone chuckled and got in the driver's seat. He pushed the seat back from where it was. Galli got in the passenger's seat and sulked.

"Tell me again, why don't we go to his apartment and wait for him there?"

"Because very few road accidents happen in apartments, statistically speaking. You can look it up."

“Someone is much too pre-occupied by appearances,” said Galli. “It makes things difficult.”

“It’s not difficult for them, only for us.”

“Exactly.”

“Poor us. Won’t anyone spare us a thought?”

“Shut up.”

“You should file a complaint with the union,” said Perrone. He had a wide grin now. “Our grievance should be on the record, that one day—”

“Shut up.”

“—the world will know our struggle, and perhaps one bright spring morning, we will throw off the shackles of oppression—”

“Are you going to watch him ride away?”

“I’ve got him.”

Bass had started the Vespa and put on his coat. As he pulled away from the curb, Perrone turned the key in the Fiat.

“Come on, friend,” he said to Galli. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

He gave the Vespa a good head start in the direction of Villosti center, then he put the coupe in first gear and pulled away from the curb.

There were a few cars going into town and a few others headed in the opposite direction, probably day-trippers visiting family at their summer homes now returning by the last train to Salerno or Naples or Rome. The Vespa trailed a small yellow car and was itself trailed by a taxi. At the first rotary the taxi exited and gave Perrone a clear view of Bass. At the second rotary, a rickety white Isetta intervened.

“For the love of God, look at this thing,” said Perrone. “Do you really think you belong in front of a 2300? You’re not even fit to be on the road!”

The Isetta inched along at forty kilometers per hour over the long stretch of road that ran straight as an arrow and without a rotary or intersection toward the center of town. Every time the road sloped the least bit downward the Isetta braked. Perrone knew beyond all doubt it was driven by an octogenarian, still unaccustomed to the feel of asphalt beneath his wheels. He watched the taillight of the Vespa grow smaller and smaller. He longed to lay on the horn but it was just as likely to slow them down even more. He chewed his bottom lip and drummed his fingers on the wheel. He could barely make out the Vespa now. It was a dim orange star on the horizon. Then the star vanished and the last bit of Perrone's patience went with it. He pounded the steering wheel with his fist, then drove up behind the Isetta until their bumpers nearly touched. He flashed his high beams on and off.

Galli lit a cigarette and enjoyed the moment. He didn't get to watch Perrone lose control nearly as often as he would have liked.

"You need to relax, friend. You're liable to have a stroke."

The Isetta raced ahead then signaled it was pulling over. As soon as it was off the roadway, Perrone slipped the coupe into second gear and roared past the baffled old couple, at whom Galli smiled graciously and tipped his hat as they flew by.

"Sweet old things," he said.

Perrone put the Abarth in third gear and pressed the pedal to the floorboard until the taillight of Bass' Vespa came back into view. He let up on the gas then and downshifted. The Vespa braked as it crossed the bridge over the small canal on the northern end of Villosti center. On the other side of the bridge, the tail and brake lights swerved to the right and disappeared as the road dipped past the canal's embankment. The Fiat reached the bridge ten seconds behind. On the other side of the canal Perrone stayed in second until he reached

the center of town and saw the Vespa again, cruising at low speed.

There was a good crowd at the first cafe they passed, and at the one they passed after that, on the other side of the street. The arc lights glowed bright white at regular intervals, and in between were the yellow glows from the town's hotels and restaurants and police station. The movie house was letting out and people filled the sidewalk out front and talked and laughed. The marquee read *GLI ANNI RUGGENTI*.

"Supposed to be a hoot," said Galli.

The main street split in two at the war memorial. The Vespa went to the right to take a lower, darker road with a large row of apartment buildings on one side and the railroad tracks on the other.

"Why is he going this way?" asked Perrone as he followed.

"Why shouldn't he?"

"No reason why not. I only wonder why. If he planned to take the state road across the plain he would have gone to the left."

"He can pick up the state road at the edge of town."

"But it's more out of the way to get to the junction. Going this way says he's taking the coast road."

"So?"

"The state road is faster."

"Maybe too fast for him."

"But not too fast for us. I think he might have wanted to see if we'd follow him."

"Maybe," said Galli. "Or maybe he just decided to take the coast road."

Perrone took off his hat and put it on the seat between them. "We're conspicuous."

“We’re far enough behind.”

A hundred yards ahead, the Vespa suddenly turned to the right. The taillight picked up speed heading roughly west then slowed to a fast cruise.

“So much for the state road.”

“Son of a bitch.”

“What is it?”

Perrone pointed to the intersection they were about to reach. Just off the road the Vespa had turned onto, a glow began to engulf the row of cypress trees.

“The last train to Rome,” said Perrone. They reached the crossroads and sat watching the train pass by. When it was gone the Vespa was nowhere to be seen. But Perrone was smiling now. He crossed the tracks and started up the winding road. “He’s only half smart.” He put the coupe in third gear and accelerated.

“I can’t even see him.”

“He bought himself a little time, but he paid too much for it. He’s got no other options for the next ten minutes and we’ll catch up with him in three.”

The road cut across a hilly patch of scrubland and rose slowly until it disappeared into heavy woods. This was a sort of peninsula that stuck out between the towns of Villosti and Saraceni. After winding through a heavy pine forest the road tended to the west and about halfway down the peninsula it reached the coast and followed it into Saraceni’s *Zona Lago*, where it split and offered the choice to pick up the state road or continue along the waterfront.

Not a single house, store or church stood between here and there. The road they were on was the one they would stay on, through dense woods and then along a ragged shoreline some twenty yards above the waves. Perrone liked the choice Bass had made. He was almost making this easy.

“I still don’t see him.”

“That’s because he’s reached the woods.”

“Are you sure there’s no other turn-off?”

“I’m sure.” Perrone slapped the dashboard and raised his index finger. “It’s a good thing I won that coin toss. You’re about to get a real demonstration.”

“Lucky me.”

“That’s right, lucky you. These roads are no joke.”

He put the coupe in fourth gear and drove flat-out as far as he could. Where the scrubland turned into forest the ground rose steeply. He dropped back to second and rode that way until things had leveled out. By then they were well into the forest and they couldn’t see anything that wasn’t in their headlights.

“Can’t you go faster?”

“No,” said Perrone. “Don’t worry, neither can he.”

The road wound to the left and for a second a red light shone off to the right.

“There he is,” said Galli.

The road turned sharply to the right and the light was gone.

“We’re almost out of the woods,” said Perrone. The moon appeared just then and in a second the horizon was visible. “See? I know this road.”

The forest opened and they were on the coast. The moon was high and bright and reflected off the sea to light up the cliff face. The Vespa was still ahead, a couple of turns away. They could have seen it even without the taillight.

The coupe roared low and steady in second gear. It sounded happy. This was exactly what it was meant for. Perrone stared out the windshield. He saw the Vespa, then it disappeared, then he saw it again, and the whole while he looked ahead with the focus of a cat. He was happy, too.

“Around this next turn it straightens out. For the next



minute it's one long straightaway, just bending a little bit with the coast."

They came around the second turn and sure enough there was the Vespa, with a long, straight stretch of asphalt laid out in front of it. Perrone put the coupe into third without so much as a jolt. He hit the gas. The distance between the coupe and the Vespa began to close.

The Vespa found a little more throttle and pulled away. He was going full speed now. Perrone shifted to fourth and put the pedal to the floor. He did it beautifully, smoothly, robotically. He stared out the windshield as the headlights picked up the road behind the Vespa. Then Bass was in the lights twenty yards away as the coupe kept picking up speed. Fifteen yards. The engine purred contentedly. Ten yards.

And then, incredibly, the Vespa slowed down. Bass had eased up on the throttle. He grew in the windshield. A button on his coat sleeve flickered in their headlights. They were practically on top of him.

And then he was gone.

Perrone slammed the brake and shifted into reverse. He backed up to the place the Vespa had disappeared. The Fiat idled with its headlights aimed at the turnoff Bass had found. It was overgrown with juniper and buckthorn but unmistakably a road, marked by a sign that read *ACCESO VIETATO*. Perrone put the car in first and nosed it in the same direction.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

"Is it safe?"

The Fiat pushed through the undergrowth and settled on level ground. The sound from the tires was low and gritty.

"It was safe enough in the forties. It's the old coast road that leads to Via Mazzini in Zona Lago. They only built the new one to allow traffic in both directions."

“Is it wide enough for us?”

“Of course it is. Don’t worry, we won’t meet anyone headed the other way.”

The road might have been widened since the days of donkey carts, but not much. Galli looked out his window and couldn’t see more than four feet of ground. They were descending harder than they had been, too. The guardrail of stone and cedar was intermittent. Up ahead, Bass seemed as uncertain as Galli was.

Perrone had no qualms. He already had the car in second gear and was gaining ground. Bass had covered half the distance to Zona Lago. Perrone wouldn’t let him cover the other half. The headlights picked up the Vespa. The road was practically straight now, sloping downhill ten degrees. Bass was dead ahead with the cliffside to his left and to his right a fifty foot drop to the sea and the rocks. There wouldn’t be any more detours. Galli saw the road ahead turn to the left. The headlights lit up Bass’ back, growing in the windshield. Galli saw the pattern in his coat. Bass would only see his own shadow on the ground in front of him and hear only the roaring engine about to overtake him. He gave a desperate look back.

And then the night swallowed him whole.

Perrone stomped on the brake just before the turn. The Fiat stopped dead, and suddenly everything was quiet except for the low steady drone of the straight six. Galli felt his heart race and heard his own panting. Perrone lit a cigarette, exhaled, pulled the hand brake and smiled at him.

“Lucky you.”

Galli opened his door and checked the ground below him. He had three feet of sloping rock and dirt covered in long, thick grass. He stuck a foot out the door and tried it. Dry enough, and firm. He pushed his foot down and felt reassured. He was on solid ground.

“Hey.”

He turned and took the flashlight Perrone offered him. He found the track of the Vespa through the matted, twisted grass and saw how it led straight as an arrow over the cliff. Bass hadn't slowed, hadn't turned. He had no idea how it would end until he was airborne, fifty feet above the rocks and pounding surf.

Galli crept to the edge on his hands and knees. He craned his head by inches until it was over the edge and stabbed at the darkness with the flashlight. The Vespa, bent in a heartbreaking horseshoe shape, was wedged between the sharp-edged rock where it had landed and the cliff face. The wheels had stopped spinning; the lights were out. The bike shifted back and forth with the surf between the two rocks, again and again while he watched it. Top of the line Vespa, nineteen sixty-two.

“Do you see him?”

Galli painted the rocks with the flashlight but saw nothing else of interest.

“Just the Vespa.”

“Did he have a prayer?”

He looked some more at the crashing waves and jagged outcroppings, at the sea beyond the shore and the fast and relentless beating of the tide.

“Not a prayer.”

Galli stood up and brushed off his knees. He backed away from the edge. Just then he felt the ground slip out beneath his left foot. As he went down he reached back for something to hold.

His arms landed on the wide-open door of the Fiat coupe, which began to slide across the thick matted grass at the edge of the road.

Perrone reached across the passenger seat with his hand stretched out. Galli's eyes fixed on his own. There was no

understanding in them. They didn't see the hand that was offered. They just saw another pair of human eyes, more or less trusted ones, and searched them urgently for some sort of answer to the situation, some reassurance, maybe even a measure of consolation.

Perrone had none of it. He reached to the driver's side door and forced it open as the coupe listed sickeningly to the right. The last he saw of Galli was a hand clutching the door handle and the crown of his trilby. Perrone held his own door open with all of his effort. It shut on his arms as he grasped around for something that could be held. It was grass, only grass, so he held grass.

It didn't come loose. He wrapped the grass around both hands until his knuckles were in the dirt and held tight as he felt his body slide from the driver's seat and his legs drag under the door that kept trying to break them until the ton of metal he'd been in complete control of a minute before spat him out onto the grass like a newborn calf.

He heard the car leave the cliff with the hollow thunk of rocks and roots coming free of the soil. Then he heard nothing for a few seconds before the horrible noise of the machine and his partner being obliterated together on the volcanic rock below.

The noise dissolved into the ordinary crashing of waves against the coast. Slowly, shaking, Perrone got to his hands and knees and vomited into the grass.