*The Godfather*

Mario Puzo

It was Tom Hagen who had to make all the arrangements for Michael’s leaving the country, his false passport, his seaman’s card, his berth on an Italian freighter that would dock in a Sicilian port. Emissaries were sent that very day by plane to Sicily to prepare a hiding place with the Mafia chief in the hill country.

Sonny arranged for a car and an absolutely trustworthy driver to be waiting for Michael when he stepped out of the restaurant where the meeting would be held with Sollozzo. The driver would be Tessio himself, who had volunteered for the job. It would be a beat-up-looking car but with a fine motor. It would have phony license plates and the car itself would be untraceable. It had been saved for a special job requiring the best.

Michael spent the day with Clemenza, practicing with the small gun that would be gotten to him. It was a .22 filled with soft-nosed bullets that made pinpricks going in and left insulting gaping holes when they exited from the human body. He found that it was accurate up to five of his steps away from a target. After that the bullets might go anywhere. The trigger was tight but Clemenza worked on this with some tools so that it pulled easier. They decided to leave it noisy. They didn’t want an innocent bystander misunderstanding the situation and interfering out of ignorant courage. The report of the gun would keep them away from Michael.

Clemenza kept instructing him during the training session. “Drop the gun as soon as you’ve finished using it. Just let your hand drop to your side and the gun slip out. Nobody will notice. Everybody will think you’re still armed. They’ll be staring at your face. Walk out of the place very quickly but don’t run. Don’t look anybody directly in the eye but don’t look away from them either. Remember, they’ll be scared of you, believe me, they’ll be scared of you. Nobody will interfere. As soon as you’re outside Tessio will be in the car waiting for you. Get in and leave the rest to him. Don’t be worried about accidents. You’d be surprised how well these affairs go. Now put this hat on and let’s see how you look.” He clapped a gray fedora on Michael’s head. Michael, who never wore a hat, grimaced. Clemenza reassured him. “It helps against identification, just in case. Mostly it gives witnesses an excuse to change their identification when we make them see the light. Remember, Mike, don’t worry about prints. The butt and trigger are fixed with special tape. Don’t touch any other part of the gun, remember that.”

Michael said, “Has Sonny found out where Sollozzo is taking me?”

Clemenza shrugged. “Not yet. Sollozzo is being very careful. But don’t worry about him harming you. The negotiator stays in our hands until you come back safe. If anything happens to you, the negotiator pays.”

“Why the hell should he stick his neck out?” Michael asked.

“He gets a big fee,” Clemenza said. “A small fortune. Also he is an important man in the Families. He knows Sollozzo can’t let anything happen to him. Your life is not worth the negotiator’s life to Sollozzo. Very simple. You’ll be safe all right. We’re the ones who catch hell afterwards.”

“How bad will it be?” Michael asked.

“Very bad,” Clemenza said. “It means an all-out war with the Tattaglia Family against the Corleone Family. Most of the others will line up with the Tattaglias. The Sanitation Department will be sweeping up a lot of dead bodies this winter.” He shrugged. “These things have to happen once every ten years or so. It gets rid of the bad blood. And then if we let them push us around on the little things they wanta take over everything. You gotta stop them at the beginning. Like they shoulda stopped Hitler at Munich, they should never let him get away with that, they were just asking for big trouble when they let him get away with that.”

Michael had heard his father say this same thing before, only in 1939 before the war actually started. If the Families had been running the State Department there would never have been World War II, he thought with a grin.

They drove back to the mall and to the Don’s house, where Sonny still made his headquarters. Michael wondered how long Sonny could stay cooped up in the safe territory of the mall. Eventually he would have to venture out. They found Sonny taking a nap on the couch. On the coffee table was the remains of his late lunch, scraps of steak and bread crumbs and a half-empty bottle of whiskey.

His father’s usually neat office was taking on the look of a badly kept furnished room. Michael shook his brother awake and said, “Why don’t you stop living like a bum and get this place cleaned up?”

Sonny yawned. “What the hell are you, inspecting the barracks? Mike, we haven’t got the word yet where Sollozzo and McCluskey plan to take you. If we don’t find that out, how the hell are we going to get the gun to you?”

“Can’t I carry it on me?” Michael asked. “Maybe they won’t frisk me and even if they do maybe they’ll miss it if we’re smart enough. And even if they find it—so what. They’ll just take it off me and no harm done.”

Sonny shook his head. “Nah,” he said. “We have to make this a sure hit on Sollozzo. Remember, get him first if you possibly can. McCluskey is slower and dumber. You should have plenty of time to take him. Did Clemenza tell you to be sure to drop the gun?”

“A million times,” Michael said.

Sonny got up from the sofa and stretched. “How does your jaw feel, kid?”

“Lousy,” Michael said. The left side of his face ached except those parts that felt numb because of the drugged wire holding it together. He took the bottle of whiskey from the table and swigged directly from it. The pain eased.

Sonny said, “Easy, Mike, now is no time to get slowed up by booze.”

Michael said, “Oh, Christ, Sonny, stop playing the big brother. I’ve been in combat against tougher guys than Sollozzo and under worse conditions. Where the hell are his mortars? Has he got air cover? Heavy artillery? Land mines? He’s just a wise guy with a big-wheel cop sidekick. Once anybody makes up their mind to kill them there’s no other problem. That’s the hard part, making up your mind. They’ll never know what hit them.”

Tom Hagen came into the room. He greeted them with a nod and went directly to the falsely listed telephone. He called a few times and then shook his head at Sonny. “Not a whisper,” he said. “Sollozzo is keeping it to himself as long as he can.”

The phone rang. Sonny answered it and he held up a hand as if to signal for quiet though no one had spoken. He jotted some notes down on a pad, then said, “OK, he’ll be there,” and hung up the phone.

Sonny was laughing. “That Sollozzo, he really is something. Here’s the deal. At eight tonight he and Captain McCluskey pick up Mike in front of Jack Dempsey’s bar on Broadway. They go someplace to talk, and get this. Mike and Sollozzo talk in Italian so that the Irish cop don’t know what the hell they are talking about. He even tells me, don’t worry, he knows McCluskey doesn’t know one word in Italian unless it’s ‘soldi’ and he’s checked you out, Mike, and knows you can understand Sicilian dialect.”

Michael said dryly, “I’m pretty rusty but we won’t talk long.”

Tom Hagen said, “We don’t let Mike go until we have the negotiator. Is that arranged?”

Clemenza nodded. “The negotiator is at my house playing pinochle with three of my men. They wait for a call from me before they let him go.”

Sonny sank back in the leather armchair. “Now how the hell do we find out the meeting place? Tom, we’ve got informers with the Tattaglia Family, how come they haven’t given us the word?”

Hagen shrugged. “Sollozzo is really damn smart. He’s playing this close to the vest, so close that he’s not using any men as a cover. He figures the captain will be enough and that security is more important than guns. He’s right too. We’ll have to put a tail on Mike and hope for the best.”

Sonny shook his head. “Nah, anybody can lose a tail when they really want to. That’s the first thing they’ll check out.”

By this time it was five in the afternoon. Sonny, with a worried look on his face, said, “Maybe we should just let Mike blast whoever is in the car when it tries to pick him up.”

Hagen shook his head. “What if Sollozzo is not in the car? We’ve tipped our hand for nothing. Damn it, we have to find out where Sollozzo is taking him.”

Clemenza put in, “Maybe we should start trying to figure why he’s making it such a big secret.”

Michael said impatiently, “Because it’s the percentage. Why should he let us know anything if he can prevent it? Besides, he smells danger. He must be leery as hell even with that police captain for his shadow.”

Hagen snapped his fingers. “That detective, that guy Phillips. Why don’t you give him a ring, Sonny? Maybe he can find out where the hell the captain can be reached. It’s worth a try. McCluskey won’t give a damn who knows where he’s going.”

Sonny picked up the phone and dialed a number. He spoke softly into the phone, then hung up. “He’ll call us back,” Sonny said.

They waited for nearly another thirty minutes and then the phone rang. It was Phillips. Sonny jotted something down on his pad and then hung up. His face was taut. “I think we’ve got it,” he said. “Captain McCluskey always has to leave word on where he can be reached. From eight to ten tonight he’ll be at the Luna Azure up in the Bronx. Anybody know it?”

Tessio spoke confidently. “I do. It’s perfect for us. A small family place with big booths where people can talk in private. Good food. Everybody minds their own business. Perfect.” He leaned over Sonny’s desk and arranged stubbed-out cigarettes into map figures. “This is the entrance. Mike, when you finish just walk out and turn left, then turn the corner. I’ll spot you and put on my headlights and catch you on the fly. If you have any trouble, yell and I’ll try to come in and get you out. Clemenza, you gotta work fast. Send somebody up there to plant the gun. They got an old-fashioned toilet with a space between the water container and the wall. Have your man tape the gun behind there. Mike, after they frisk you in the car and find you’re clean, they won’t be too worried about you. In the restaurant, wait a bit before you excuse yourself. No, better still, ask permission to go. Act a little in trouble first, very natural. They can’t figure anything. But when you come out again, don’t waste any time. Don’t sit down again at the table, start blasting. And don’t take chances. In the head, two shots apiece, and out as fast as your legs can travel.”

Sonny had been listening judiciously. “I want somebody very good, very safe, to plant that gun,” he told Clemenza.

Clemenza said emphatically, “The gun will be there.”

“OK,” Sonny said. “Everybody get rolling.”

Tessio and Clemenza left. Tom Hagen said, “Sonny, should I drive Mike down to New York?”

“No,” Sonny said. “I want you here. When Mike finishes, then our work begins and I’ll need you. Have you got those newspaper guys lined up?”

Hagen nodded. “I’ll be feeding them info as soon as things break.”

Sonny got up and came to stand in front of Michael. He shook his hand. “OK, kid,” he said, “you’re on. I’ll square it with Mom you’re not seeing her before you leave. And I’ll get a message to your girlfriend when I think the time is right. OK?”

“OK,” Mike said. “How long do you think before I can come back?”

“At least a year,” Sonny said.

Tom Hagen put in, “The Don might be able to work faster than that, Mike, but don’t count on it. The time element hinges on a lot of factors. How well we can plant stories with the newsmen. How much the Police Department wants to cover up. How violently the other Families react. There’s going to be a hell of a lot of heat and trouble. That’s the only thing we can be sure of.”

Michael shook Hagen’s hand. “Do your best,” he said. “I don’t want to do another three-year stretch away from home.”

Hagen said gently, “It’s not too late to back out, Mike, we can get somebody else, we can go back over our alternatives. Maybe it’s not necessary to get rid of Sollozzo.”

Michael laughed. “We can talk ourselves into any viewpoint,” he said. “But we figured it right the first time. I’ve been riding the gravy train all my life, it’s about time I paid my dues.”

“You shouldn’t let that broken jaw influence you,” Hagen said. “McCluskey is a stupid man and it was business, not personal.”

For the second time he saw Michael Corleone’s face freeze into a mask that resembled uncannily the Don’s. “Tom, don’t let anybody kid you. It’s all personal, every bit of business. They call it business. OK. But it’s personal as hell. You know where I learned that from? The Don. My old man. The Godfather. If a bolt of lightning hit a friend of his the old man would take it personal. He took my going into the Marines personal. That’s what makes him great. The Great Don. He takes everything personal. Like God. He knows every feather that falls from the tail of a sparrow or however the hell it goes. Right? And you know something? Accidents don’t happen to people who take accidents as a personal insult. So I came late, OK, but I’m coming all the way. Damn right, I take that broken jaw personal; damn right, I take Sollozzo trying to kill my father personal.” He laughed. “Tell the old man I learned it all from him and that I’m glad I had this chance to pay him back for all he did for me. He was a good father.” He paused and then he said thoughtfully to Hagen, “You know, I can never remember him hitting me. Or Sonny. Or Freddie. And of course Connie, he wouldn’t even yell at her. And tell me the truth, Tom, how many men do you figure the Don killed or had killed.”

Tom Hagen turned away. “I’ll tell you one thing you didn’t learn from him: talking the way you’re talking now. There are things that have to be done and you do them and you never talk about them. You don’t try to justify them. They can’t be justified. You just do them. Then you forget it.”

Michael Corleone frowned. He said quietly, “As the Consigliere, you agree that it’s dangerous to the Don and our Family to let Sollozzo live?”

“Yes,” Hagen said.

“OK,” Michael said. “Then I have to kill him.”

Michael Corleone stood in front of Jack Dempsey’s restaurant on Broadway and waited for his pickup. He looked at his watch. It said five minutes to eight. Sollozzo was going to be punctual. Michael had made sure he was there in plenty of time. He had been waiting fifteen minutes. All during the ride from Long Beach into the city he had been trying to forget what he had said to Hagen. For if he believed what he said, then his life was set on an irrevocable course. And yet, could it be otherwise after tonight? He might be dead after tonight if he didn’t stop all this crap, Michael thought grimly. He had to keep his mind on the business at hand. Sollozzo was no dummy and McCluskey was a very tough egg. He felt the ache in his wired jaw and welcomed the pain, it would keep him alert.

Broadway wasn’t that crowded on this cold winter night, even though it was near theater time. Michael flinched as a long black car pulled up to the curb and the driver, leaning over, opened the front door and said, “Get in, Mike.” He didn’t know the driver, a young punk with slick black hair and an open shirt, but he got in. In the back seat were Captain McCluskey and Sollozzo.

Sollozzo reached a hand over the back of the seat and Michael shook it. The hand was firm, warm and dry. Sollozzo said, “I’m glad you came, Mike. I hope we can straighten everything out. All this is terrible, it’s not the way I wanted things to happen at all. It should never have happened.”

Michael Corleone said quietly, “I hope we can settle things tonight, I don’t want my father bothered anymore.”

“He won’t be,” Sollozzo said sincerely. “I swear to you by my children he won’t be. Just keep an open mind when we talk. I hope you’re not a hothead like your brother Sonny. It’s impossible to talk business with him.”

Captain McCluskey grunted. “He’s a good kid, he’s all right.” He leaned over to give Michael an affectionate pat on the shoulder. “I’m sorry about the other night, Mike. I’m getting too old for my job, too grouchy. I guess I’ll have to retire pretty soon. Can’t stand the aggravation, all day I get aggravation. You know how it is.” Then with a doleful sigh, he gave Michael a thorough frisk for a weapon.

Michael saw a slight smile on the driver’s lips. The car was going west with no apparent attempt to elude any trailers. It went up on to the West Side Highway, speeding in and out of traffic. Anyone following would have had to do the same. Then to Michael’s dismay it took the exit for the George Washington Bridge, they were going over to New Jersey. Whoever had given Sonny the info on where the meeting was to be held had given him the wrong dope.

The car threaded through the bridge approaches and then was on it, leaving the blazing city behind. Michael kept his face impassive. Were they going to dump him into the swamps or was it just a last-minute change in meeting place by the wily Sollozzo? But when they were nearly all the way across, the driver gave the wheel a violent twist. The heavy automobile jumped into the air when it hit the divider and bounced over into the lanes going back to New York City. Both McCluskey and Sollozzo were looking back to see if anyone had tried doing the same thing. The driver was really hitting it back to New York and then they were off the bridge and going toward the East Bronx. They went through the side streets with no cars behind them. By this time it was nearly nine o’clock. They had made sure there was no one on their tail. Sollozzo lit up a cigarette after offering his pack to McCluskey and Michael, both of whom refused. Sollozzo said to the driver, “Nice work. I’ll remember it.”

Ten minutes later the car pulled up in front of a restaurant in a small Italian neighborhood. There was no one on the streets and because of the lateness of the hour only a few people were still at dinner. Michael had been worried that the driver would come in with them, but he stayed outside with his car. The negotiator had not mentioned a driver, nobody had. Technically Sollozzo had broken the agreement by bringing him along. But, Michael decided not to mention it, knowing they would think he would be afraid to mention it, afraid of ruining the chances for the success of the parley.

The three of them sat at the only round table, Sollozzo refusing a booth. There were only two other people in the restaurant. Michael wondered whether they were Sollozzo plants. But it didn’t matter. Before they could interfere it would be all over.

McCluskey asked with real interest, “Is the Italian food good here?”

Sollozzo reassured him. “Try the veal, it’s the finest in New York.” The solitary waiter had brought a bottle of wine to the table and uncorked it. He poured three glasses full. Surprisingly McCluskey did not drink. “I must be the only Irishman who don’t take the booze,” he said. “I seen too many good people get in trouble because of the booze.”

Sollozzo said placatingly to the captain, “I am going to talk Italian to Mike, not because I don’t trust you but because I can’t explain myself properly in English and I want to convince Mike that I mean well, that it’s to everybody’s advantage for us to come to an agreement tonight. Don’t be insulted by this, it’s not that I don’t trust you.”

Captain McCluskey gave them both an ironic grin. “Sure, you two go right ahead,” he said. “I’ll concentrate on my veal and spaghetti.”

Sollozzo began speaking to Michael in rapid Sicilian. He said, “You must understand that what happened between me and your father was strictly a business matter. I have a great respect for Don Corleone and would beg for the opportunity to enter his service. But you must understand that your father is an old-fashioned man. He stands in the way of progress. The business I am in is the coming thing, the wave of the future, there are untold millions of dollars for everyone to make. But your father stands in the way because of certain unrealistic scruples. By doing this he imposes his will on men like myself. Yes, yes, I know, he says to me, ‘Go ahead, it’s your business,’ but we both know that is unrealistic. We must tread on each other’s corns. What he is really telling me is that I cannot operate my business. I am a man who respects himself and cannot let another man impose his will on me so what had to happen did happen. Let me say that I had the support, the silent support of all the New York Families. And the Tattaglia Family became my partners. If this quarrel continues, then the Corleone Family will stand alone against everyone. Perhaps if your father were well, it could be done. But the eldest son is not the man the Godfather is, no disrespect intended. And the Irish Consigliere, Hagen, is not the man Genco Abbandando was, God rest his soul. So I propose a peace, a truce. Let us cease all hostilities until your father is well again and can take part in these bargainings. The Tattaglia Family agrees, upon my persuasions and my indemnities, to forgo justice for their son Bruno. We will have peace. Meanwhile, I have to make a living and will do a little trading in my business. I do not ask your cooperation but I ask you, the Corleone Family, not to interfere. These are my proposals. I assume you have the authority to agree, to make a deal.”

Michael said in Sicilian, “Tell me more about how you propose to start your business, exactly what part my Family has to play in it and what profit we can take from this business.”

“You want the whole proposition in detail then?” Sollozzo asked.

Michael said gravely, “Most important of all I must have sure guarantees that no more attempts will be made on my father’s life.”

Sollozzo raised his hand expressively. “What guarantees can I give you? I’m the hunted one. I’ve missed my chance. You think too highly of me, my friend. I am not that clever.”

Michael was sure now that the conference was only to gain a few days’ time. That Sollozzo would make another attempt to kill the Don. What was beautiful was that the Turk was underrating him as a punk kid. Michael felt that strange delicious chill filling his body. He made his face look distressed. Sollozzo asked sharply, “What is it?”

Michael said with an embarrassed air, “The wine went right to my bladder. I’ve been holding it in. Is it all right if I go to the bathroom?”

Sollozzo was searching his face intently with his dark eyes. He reached over and roughly thrust his hand in Michael’s crotch, under it and around, searching for a weapon. Michael looked offended. McCluskey said curtly, “I frisked him. I’ve frisked thousands of young punks. He’s clean.”

Sollozzo didn’t like it. For no reason at all he didn’t like it. He glanced at the man sitting at a table opposite them and raised his eyebrows toward the door of the bathroom. The man gave a slight nod that he had checked it, that there was nobody inside. Sollozzo said reluctantly, “Don’t take too long.” He had marvelous antenna, he was nervous.

Michael got up and went into the bathroom. The urinal had a pink bar of soap in it secured by a wire net. He went into the booth. He did it very quickly, then reached behind the enamel water cabinet until his hand touched the small, blunt-nosed gun fastened with tape. He ripped the gun loose, remembering that Clemenza had said not to worry about leaving prints on the tape. He shoved the gun into his waistband and buttoned his jacket over it. He washed his hands and wet his hair. He wiped his prints off the faucet with his handkerchief. Then he left the toilet.

Sollozzo was sitting directly facing the door of the toilet, his dark eyes blazing with alertness. Michael gave a smile. “Now I can talk,” he said with a sigh of relief.

Captain McCluskey was eating the plate of veal and spaghetti that had arrived. The man on the far wall had been stiff with attention, now he too relaxed visibly.

Michael sat down again. He remembered Clemenza had told him not to do this, to come out of the toilet and blaze away. But either out of some warning instinct or sheer funk he had not done so. He had felt that if he had made one swift move he would have been cut down. Now he felt safe and he must have been scared because he was glad he was no longer standing on his legs. They had gone weak with trembling.

Sollozzo was leaning toward him. Michael, his belly covered by the table, unbuttoned his jacket and listened intently. He could not understand a word the man was saying. It was literally gibberish to him. His mind was so filled with pounding blood that no word registered. Underneath the table his right hand moved to the gun tucked into his waistband and he drew it free. At that moment the waiter came to take their order and Sollozzo turned his head to speak to the waiter. Michael thrust the table away from him with his left hand and his right hand shoved the gun almost against Sollozzo’s head. The man’s coordination was so acute that he had already begun to fling himself away at Michael’s motion. But Michael, younger, his reflexes sharper, pulled the trigger. The bullet caught Sollozzo squarely between his eye and his ear and when it exited on the other side blasted out a huge gout of blood and skull fragments onto the petrified waiter’s jacket. Instinctively Michael knew that one bullet was enough. Sollozzo had turned his head in that last moment and he had seen the light of life die in the man’s eyes as clearly as a candle goes out.

Only one second had gone by as Michael pivoted to bring the gun to bear on McCluskey. The police captain was staring at Sollozzo with phlegmatic surprise, as if this had nothing to do with him. He did not seem to be aware of his own danger. His veal-covered fork was suspended in his hand and his eyes were just turning on Michael. And the expression on his face, in his eyes, held such confident outrage, as if now he expected Michael to surrender or to run away, that Michael smiled at him as he pulled the trigger. This shot was bad, not mortal. It caught McCluskey in his thick bull-like throat and he started to choke loudly as if he had swallowed too large a bite of the veal. Then the air seemed to fill with a fine mist of sprayed blood as he coughed it out of his shattered lungs. Very coolly, very deliberately, Michael fired the next shot through the top of his white-haired skull.

The air seemed to be full of pink mist. Michael swung toward the man sitting against the wall. This man had not made a move. He seemed paralyzed. Now he carefully showed his hands on top of the table and looked away. The waiter was staggering back toward the kitchen, an expression of horror on his face, staring at Michael in disbelief. Sollozzo was still in his chair, the side of his body propped up by the table. McCluskey, his heavy body pulling downward, had fallen off his chair onto the floor. Michael let the gun slip out of his hand so that it bounced off his body and made no noise. He saw that neither the man against the wall nor the waiter had noticed him dropping the gun. He strode the few steps toward the door and opened it. Sollozzo’s car was parked at the curb still, but there was no sign of the driver. Michael turned left and around the corner. Headlights flashed on and a battered sedan pulled up to him, the door swinging open. He jumped in and the car roared away. He saw that it was Tessio at the wheel, his trim features hard as marble.

“Did you do the job on Sollozzo?” Tessio asked.

For that moment Michael was struck by the idiom Tessio had used. It was always used in a sexual sense, to do the job on a woman meant seducing her. It was curious that Tessio used it now.

“Both of them,” Michael said.

“Sure?” Tessio asked.

“I saw their brains,” Michael said.

There was a change of clothes for Michael in the car. Twenty minutes later he was on an Italian freighter slated for Sicily. Two hours later the freighter put out to sea and from his cabin Michael could see the lights of New York City burning like the fires of hell. He felt an enormous sense of relief. He was out of it now. The feeling was familiar and he remembered being taken off the beach of an island his Marine division had invaded. The battle had been still going on but he had received a slight wound and was being ferried back to a hospital ship. He had felt the same overpowering relief then that he felt now. All hell would break loose but he wouldn’t be there.

On the day after the murder of Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey, the police captains and lieutenants in every station house in New York City sent out the word: there would be no more gambling, no more prostitution, no more deals of any kind until the murderer of Captain McCluskey was caught. Massive raids began all over the city. All unlawful business activities came to a standstill.

Later that day an emissary from the Families asked the Corleone Family if they were prepared to give up the murderer. They were told that the affair did not concern them. That night a bomb exploded in the Corleone Family mall in Long Beach, thrown from a car that pulled up to the chain, then roared away. That night also two button men of the Corleone Family were killed as they peaceably ate their dinner in a small Italian restaurant in Greenwich Village. The Five Families War of 1946 had begun.