

The Contract

by *Frederick Forsyth*

THE SMALL CORNER bar, like just about everything else on that street in the Canarsie district of south Brooklyn, had seen better days.

It stood back a few yards from the curbside, low-built with flaking walls, surmounted by two floors of empty storerooms. A weary neon strip above the door announced that it was "Joe's Place," but the "c" had fused out.

The houses up and down the street had once been neat, well-kempt residences housing the proud working class of Brooklyn, but had degenerated to squats where the unemployed and unemployable eked out an existence.

None of them noticed or, if they did, gave no sign, when the sleek black limo eased up to the sidewalk in front of the bar just after dark on a dull and rainy day in 1983.

There were four men in the car. The man beside the driver and one of the two in the rear got out. Both were in tight dark suits; both closed the car doors quietly behind them and raked the street with their eyes. Everything about them said "Mob." Crossing the pavement, they approached the door of Joe's Place. One entered, the other turned his back on the door and barred further entry.

The hood who had entered glanced around. Two working men sat at a table. The wan barman wiped at a glass with a towel that did hygiene no favors. He froze when he saw the new entrant. The hoodlum peeled a \$100 bill off a roll and pushed it across the counter, muttering his orders. In seconds that barman had told the working men he was closing down, the drinks were on him. The drinkers shuffled out, slinking past the guard outside the door. Then the barman disappeared to some noisome recess in the rear.

Only then, at a nod from the door guard, did the man remaining in the rear of the limousine alight. He was shorter, older, pudgy, in an expensive dark overcoat and hat, clutching an attaché case. He crossed the sidewalk, his henchman held open the door and he went inside.

The older man's nose wrinkled in disgust, but the place was what he needed: quiet, empty, without witnesses of his meeting. He selected a booth against the rear wall, his bodyguard perched on a bar stool, and they waited.

"Address?"

"Not known," snarled Passante. "But he beds with her at her place. Brownstone, Greenwich Village, she calls herself Victoria Passmore, studying at the Actor's Studio."

He reeled off the address, which the Mechanic memorized, slipped a second photo across the beer-stained table. One had to understand the young lover's infatuation; she was drop-dead beautiful. The contract killer slipped both photos into his leathers, took the attaché case and rose.

"It will all be sorted out," he said quietly. "The girl will never know."

He crossed the bar, past the bodyguard by his stool, and out through the door. On the sidewalk he opened a pannier behind the rider's seat and tipped the bundles of notes inside, reaching in to make the fit. Then he straightened up, closed the empty case and walked back to the door.

"Boss says he wants his case back," he said. The big hood was too slow to wonder why his boss should need the return of a cheap case. He opened the door and was caught by a hefty shove that knocked him inside. The door swung closed, the gloved hand came out from behind the attaché case and the silenced Swiss Sig Sauer fired twice.

Both slugs took the bodyguard in the side of the head. His colleague, across the room conversing with Passante, straightened and turned, right hand diving beneath the left armpit. Too late. Fired from a double-handed grip by the crouching man in black leather, the next two bullets went through his forehead an inch apart. Passante was half-risen when he died.

The Mechanic left the empty attaché case on the booth table, proof of a robbery by persons unknown, went back to his motorcycle and rode away.

Two miles from the bar he paused by the Fountain Avenue garbage dump. The rain had eased. Alone in the night he pulled off his helmet and visor, placed it on the petrol tank in front of him and withdrew the two pictures.

The one of the girl he kept. He stared at the other one, that of the young man, and slowly ran a gloved finger down the scar that marked his face from the left temple to the corner of the mouth.

He tore the photo into fragments, threw them to the wind, which carried them into the dump forever, and rode off. ♣

Ten minutes later the motorcycle arrived, a black machine with a rider in black leathers. He rode onto the sidewalk between the limo and the door of the car, dismounted and hauled the Yamaha onto its stand. He did not remove his helmet, or lift the dark visor.

At the door of the bar the guard raised a warning hand and the motorcyclist waited patiently while he was frisked. It was speedy and professional, but the leathers were tight enough that no gun beneath them could escape detection. Satisfied, the door guard jerked his head the visitor entered.

The Mafiosi stared at the visor in front of him. Behind the dark shield the visitor stared back.

"You the one they call the Mechanic?" asked the gangster. The helmet and visor nodded slowly.

"They say no one ever saw your face. You like to be careful, huh?"

The Mechanic's mouth was visible, above the chin guard, below the visor.

"I'm still around, and I never fail," he remarked. The older man nodded in approval.

"I know your terms," he growled. "Half down, half on completion." He tapped the attaché case. "First half's in here. You want the job?"

"Tell me," said the Mechanic. Privately, he was intrigued. He knew who he faced. Louie Passante, one of the under-bosses of the Gambino Family that controlled Brooklyn. That was the reason for his puzzlement. Old man Carlo Gambino was dead, the family's don was now Big Paulie Castellano, like Passante an old-style don obsessed by concepts, however weird, of "honor" and "respect." But the new young Turks were snapping at their heels, headed by Gotti.

Still, if an under-boss wanted a punk wasted, he could use any of his own "button men," instant triggers, blindly obedient, without charge. Everyone knew Gotti used Roy de Mayo and his "crew," the psychopaths Henry Rosenberg and Joe "Dracula" Guillermo. So why come outside the Family for a hit job?

Passante slipped a photograph across the table.

"Punk's been messing with my daughter. No one messes with my daughter. Take him out, make it look like a street mugging."

So . . . that was it. A question of face. The Family must not know. Nor the daughter.

It was a youthful, good-looking face, not conventionally handsome but rugged, marred only by a thin scar running down from left temple to corner of mouth, the sort women find interesting.