

## Courtesy Call

By Justin Gustainis

The car they were using was an inconspicuous dark blue Chevy Nova, and it made its way through the quiet streets of Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania at a steady 20 miles an hour. This was slow enough for the two men to avoid the hostile glances reserved for those who speed through residential areas, but fast enough so that they wouldn't look like predators.

Suburban mothers tend to pay attention to strangers in slow-moving cars -- nobody wants her kid's picture showing up on a milk carton.

After a brief but thorough tour of the neighborhood, the driver brought the car to a stop at a corner bordering the street where the woman lived. Without turning his head, he asked, "So, what do you think?"

The other man shrugged, then took off his sunglasses and placed them in the breast pocket of his expensive gray suit. "Looks all right," he said. "Nobody sitting in a parked car, no vans with one-way glass, no service trucks that might or might not be legit, nobody digging up the street in sight of her house. I think it's clear."

The driver nodded. "Yeah, me too," he said, and took his foot off the brake.

They parked directly in front of the woman's house. There was no point in leaving the car a block away and walking over. In that kind of neighborhood, such behavior would only attract attention. A green Lincoln Town Car was parked in the driveway, which the men took as a sign that the woman was home.

As he got out of the car, the Chevy's driver made a quick survey of the street, without appearing to do so. He was tall, slightly over 6'3", and at 172 pounds he was underweight for his height. He looked older than his 43 years. The hair had a lot to do with that; it had gone white while he was still in his teens, a family trait that showed up every two or three generations. But the premature lines in his face owed nothing to genetics -- they had been earned, every one of them.

The man climbing out on the passenger's side was shorter than the driver, and wider. He was also younger by twelve years. His thick brown hair was held in place by a liberal application of mousse, something that the driver privately thought looked stupid. In contrast to the driver, who moved with the unselfconscious grace of a dancer, the younger man had a lumbering way about him. This impression was reinforced when he walked -- with shoulders hunched and his head thrust forward, he looked like he was constantly butting his way through life.

They went up the sidewalk to the house, a raised ranch that was covered in white siding and trimmed in brown wood that needed re-staining. The passenger was reaching to ring the bell when the inner door suddenly opened to reveal a thirtyish, attractive woman wearing pants and a striped blouse. The door was solid wood carved into panels; there was no window within it or in the surrounding woodwork, so the men had been as unaware of the woman's approach as she had apparently been of theirs. Certainly, she looked surprised to see them standing there - surprised, and, fleetingly, something more. For an instant she had looked frightened.

The men and the woman stared at each other through the glass of the storm door for two or three seconds. Then the woman pushed the outer door open and said, pleasantly, "Yes? Can I help you?"

"Mrs. Latona?" the driver asked politely.

"Yes, that's right," she replied. "But I'm afraid I'm not buying anything today." She lifted her left hand, which held a large drawstring handbag in black leather. "I was just on my way out."

"We're not selling, ma'am," the driver said. He reached inside his jacket and brought out a small leather case that he flipped open to show an identification card with his picture, vital statistics, and signature. It was topped by another card that read "Federal Bureau of Investigation" and below, in bigger letters, 'FBI.' "I'm Special Agent George Burke, Mrs. Latona, and this is my partner, Special Agent Tom O'Hare. We'd like a few minutes of your time." The man introduced as Special Agent O'Hare nodded at the woman by way of greeting, then went back to checking the street.

The woman squinted at the tall man's identification folder and said, "That picture doesn't really do you justice, you know."

Burke smiled thinly. "The Bureau uses the same photographer who does all those passport photos," he said. "Could we talk inside, do you think?"

She frowned at him. "Well, this isn't a very convenient time, really. I have a hair appointment, and then some shopping that I really have to get done this afternoon." She looked from one of them to the other. "Do you think you could meet me back here in about two hours? I can give you all the time you need, then. I promise."

The man called Burke shook his head firmly. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Mrs. Latona. We're on official business, and it's pretty important. I think you'll agree, once I explain what brought us here, but if we could do it *inside*...."

Her frown deepened for an instant, then morphed into a rather tight smile as she said, "Well, if we have to, we have to. Come on in, and let's get it over with."

Once inside the front door, Burke and O'Hare followed the woman up a short flight of stairs that led into the kitchen. She gestured at a dinette table made out of some kind of blond wood. "We'll talk in here, if you don't mind. The living room is a mess, since I wasn't expecting to entertain gentlemen callers this afternoon."

The men sat down in cheap-looking captain's chairs, O'Hare having to wiggle a little to get his bulk past the wooden arms. The woman put her big handbag down on the table and remained standing. "Can I get you something to drink on a warm day like this?"

O'Hare just shook his head, but Burke said, "No, thank you, ma'am. We're fine."

"Well, if this is going to take a while, I want to fortify myself with something cool," she said. Opening the refrigerator door, she peered inside for a moment or two before bringing out a quart-size carton of orange juice. She stepped over to the sink, opened one cabinet door, closed it, opened another, and brought out a short, broad glass. She poured juice and carried the glass over to the table where she sat down, the handbag in front of her.

Watching her move around the kitchen, Burke was struck by the contrast between what he had expected to find and the woman he was looking at. There hadn't been time for him to get a photo or description of Angela Latona, but he'd seen plenty of Mafia wives before, and in his experience they tended to run to a type: dark, dumb and dumpy. Once they'd passed thirty and squeezed out a couple of bambinos, the weight really started to build up, along with the growth of dark hair along the upper lip. Angela Latona, however, was fair of skin, and her hair was a light brown color that verged on blonde. Although apparently in her mid-thirties, she had kept her figure trim and toned. And her lip contained no hint of a mustache at all.

Once she was seated, Burke said, "Mrs. Latona, have you had any contact with your husband recently?"

She frowned and shook her head. "Not directly. I haven't spoken to Carlo in almost a year, when I moved out. But every couple of months, he sends Oreste Castellino, one of his goombahs, up to visit me. Orie tries to get me to see the error of my wicked ways. He goes on about how

Carlo is a changed man these days, no more hitting, no more bimbos. He tells me I should come home and see for myself." The frown was again replaced by the tight smile. "He hasn't been too convincing, so far."

"He probably won't be coming to see you again," Burke said. "We have reason to believe that your husband's hopes for reconciliation have undergone a change recently."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"He means that Carlo Latona has decided to have you whacked," O'Hare said.

She stared at him, her face rigid, then shifted her gaze to Burke. "Is this true? Are you *serious*?"

Burke nodded soberly. "Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid it is true. Our intelligence people, the ones who keep tabs on your husband's branch of the Terrana Family, tell us that the contract has already been tendered. For some reason, he's not using one of his own people. The word is, he went outside the Family to an independent contractor named Renfer - he's new to the business, apparently, and we don't have any information about him yet. Rumor has it that he used to do a lot of government work, but our friends at the CIA are saying they never heard of him. Of course they lie a lot."

O'Hare shrugged and said, "Doesn't matter. If Carlo Latona hired him, he'll be good. A situation like this, you've got to figure it's a real Hallmark moment - he cares enough to send the very best."

The woman gave O'Hare a disgusted look, then turned back to Burke, bafflement and fear chasing each other across her face. "But why would Carlo want to kill me? Over the separation? I don't believe it - he still hopes that I'll go back to him!"

"You're right, he does," Burke said. "Or rather, he did. That was before he found out that a Suffolk County grand jury is going to indict him next week for the murder of Frank Brogna. You knew Frank, didn't you, Mrs. Latona?"

"They used to call him 'Frankie the Foot,' on account of all the money he spent on shoes, remember?" O'Hare said. "Kidskin, ostrich skin, maybe even rhino hide, for all I know. If it was expensive and you could make a shoe out of it, Frankie would buy it."

"You *did* know Frank Brogna, didn't you?" Burke asked again.

"Well, I'm not sure," she said impassively. "Carlo has so many 'business associates,' I'm sure I never learned the names of half of them."

O'Hare gave a bark of sardonic laughter. "Cute," he said. "Very cute. The grand jury is just going to love that."

"Nobody's asking you to go on the record, Mrs. Latona," Burke said patiently. "You're not under oath, or anything. We're just making conversation here. But the agents in the Bureau's Organized Crime Unit say that Frank Brogna visited your house at least twice a week, every week for almost three years."

The woman said nothing.

"Only seems right that Frankie'd be over at your place a lot," O'Hare said. "After all, he was the *capo* responsible for washing a lot of the cash that came in through your husband's various enterprises -- until Carlo caught him skimming."

"Why would I know anything about that?" she said angrily. "Do you think Carlo used to discuss *business* with me? You figure he used to lie in bed next to me at night and talk about how much money the heroin brought in last month, how much from the whores, whether the union kickbacks were up or down? Is that how you think it *works*?"

"No, as a matter of fact, I don't," Burke replied. "But I'm pretty sure of this: even if you didn't know exactly what Frankie Brogna did for your husband, you knew him by name and by sight." Burke picked up a glass saltshaker from the middle of the table, stared at its contents for a few seconds, then replaced it. "Anyway, what *I* think isn't really relevant. It's what your husband believes that matters."

"And what Carlo believes," O'Hare said relentlessly, "is that you saw some of his soldiers bring Frankie over to your house through the back door on the last night anybody ever saw the poor bastard alive. And, although nobody says that you were actually down in the basement while your husband and his buddies were questioning Frankie about the money he'd ripped off, Carlo seems convinced that, from upstairs, you heard the screaming and yelling and all the other sounds that Frankie made while they were working on him. And Carlo's got it in his head that maybe you got a glimpse later on of what his boys carried out the back door of the house and dumped in the trunk of a car."

"A car that was apparently driven to a landfill in New Jersey," Burke said. "The same landfill where an earth mover accidentally turned up a partially decomposed corpse a couple of weeks ago -- a corpse with multiple broken ribs, whose finger joints had all been crushed, probably by a pair of pliers, and which had in his mouth a shriveled little thing that the coroner finally figured out was his penis. A corpse that has now been positively identified as the remains of one Frank Brogna."

"Carlo knows that you're going to be subpoenaed by the government when the case comes to trial," O'Hare said. His voice was quiet now, almost compassionate. "He thinks you're going to get up there on the witness stand and send him to prison for life. Hell, he might even get the death penalty."

"But they can't make a wife testify against her husband," she said quickly. "That's the law, isn't it?"

"Sure it is," Burke said. "But the law doesn't *prevent* you from testifying, if you want to. And Carlo seems to feel that you're going to want to."

"Why? Why would he think that?"

Burke shrugged. "You left him, right? You must have had your reasons. And you've refused to come back. How long did you say it's been? Almost a year? That shows pretty clearly that you're still mad at him. Maybe mad enough to testify."

"And besides," O'Hare said, "if you decide to go for a divorce, having Carlo in prison on a murder rap would give you a hell of a strong case to take in front of a judge. But that's only if he's convicted."

"But I told you I haven't decided if I even *want* a divorce," she said.

"Carlo doesn't know that," Burke told her.

His words seemed to hang in the air during the lengthy silence that followed.

Finally she said, "All right, you've delivered your warning. Is that all you came for?"

Burke made a tilting side-to-side movement with his head. "Well, yes and no," he said.

"This is basically a courtesy call, Mrs. Latona. O'Hare and I work out of the Scranton field office. We were briefed late this morning, after our boss got a lengthy call from FBI headquarters about your husband and his intentions toward you. Our boss's orders were to get somebody out here right away to give you the word and also to provide short-term security for you."

"What's that mean?" she asked. "Short-term security?"

"It means that we're supposed to keep you alive until the cavalry gets here," O'Hare said.

"There's a flight from Washington that arrives at the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton airport at 7:10 every evening," Burke said. "Today, it's bringing several agents from Bureau Headquarters, along with a couple of people from the Organized Crime Division of the Justice Department." Burke glanced at his watch. "By the time they get organized on the ground and get out here, it'll probably be around 8:00 p.m., about six hours from now."

The woman took a tiny sip of her orange juice. "So what do all these big important Washington people want with me?"

"To sell you on the joys of the Federal Witness Protection Program," O'Hare said with a grin.

Burke shot the younger man an annoyed look. To the woman he said, "They'll want to talk to you about testifying against your husband in the Frank Brogna murder, and probably in some other matters, as well. And if you agree to testify, there will be provisions made for your security, before, during, and after the trial. That *may* include an offer to include you in the Witness Protection Program- " another glance went to O'Hare " -or it may not. And if it does, acceptance is, of course, up to you."

"And how about whether I testify or not?" she said sarcastically. "Is that up to me, too? The law says I don't have to, remember?"

"That's right, you don't," Burke said. "And if that's your decision, then you can convey it to the people from Justice when they get here."

"How about I just *convey* it to you right now? Why don't you just call your important Washington lawyers and special agents and tell them I'm not scared by your stories about Carlo and his big, bad hit man, which I don't believe for two seconds. Why don't both of you get out of my face, and out of my life, and out of my fucking house!"

After her outburst, Burke's voice seemed very quiet in contrast as he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to tell the Justice Department people yourself, Mrs. Latona, face to face. They won't abort the mission on my say so. Now, if you want us out of your home, that's your right, of course. But our orders are to stick with you, so we won't be far away. We'll stake out the house as best we can while staying off your property, if that's the way you want it. If you go out, we'll be behind you - at a discrete distance, of course. We'll do our best to keep you alive in case a guy named Renfer gets here before our people do."

"You're being dumb, lady," O'Hare said scornfully. "If you don't accept protection, you'll be dead meat within forty-eight hours."

It was then that she buried her face in her hands and started to cry, her shoulders shaking with the spasms. The two men watched, saying nothing.

After a half-minute or so, she reached for a paper napkin from the small pile on the table and began to dab at her eyes. "I don't know," she said miserably. "I just don't know what to *do*."

"You don't have to make any decisions right now," Burke said softly. "Take the afternoon, think things over, then talk to the people from Justice when they get here tonight. See what they have to offer and --"

Her head suddenly spun to the left, toward a closed door. "*Did you hear that?*"

Burke was already pushing his chair back, but slowly, soundlessly. "Hear what?" he asked quietly.

"From the living room," she said in a hushed whisper. "It sounded like the screen in the window was rattling. It hardly *ever* does that."

Burke stood up and drew a Glock 19 from a holster at his right hip. "Stay where you are, both of you," he said, his voice barely audible.

"Probably just the damn wind," O'Hare muttered, but did as he was told. The woman stayed still, except for her left hand, which moved slowly to the glass of juice and gripped it firmly. She did not drink.

Burke crept over to the door that led to the living room and stood listening. Finally, he used his free hand to grasp the knob, took a deep breath, then flung the door open, using his pistol to cover the room.

If Burke had seen something that fit his expectations, like a man climbing in through the window, he would have reacted instantly and effectively. But what he saw instead was a corpse - the body of a dark-haired, rather heavy woman lying on the carpet in a pool of blood. She appeared to have been shot twice, once in the heart and again between the eyes. Taking in the head wound, Burke noticed the fringe of dark moustache along the dead woman's upper lip. The whole tableau was so unexpected that, for a crucial second, Burke froze in astonishment.

At that moment, the woman sitting at the kitchen table dashed the contents of her glass, about seven ounces of orange juice, right into O'Hare's face. He gave a yelp of pain and clutched at his eyes.

A lot of professionals use .22 automatic pistols because they can be silenced effectively. But a round fired from a .22 doesn't have a lot of stopping power, and a silencer on the end of the barrel reduces muzzle velocity even further. So if you expect to kill people with a silenced .22, you'd better be a hell of a good shot.

The woman in the kitchen was a superb shot. She knew that Burke had his pistol already out, and that made him the main threat. He was just spinning to face back into the kitchen as the woman snatched the silenced .22 from her open handbag. His finger was tightening on the trigger of his weapon when the .22 round struck him in the chest, entering the left ventricle of his heart.

He jerked with the impact, which gave the woman another precious second, which she used to fire again, this time putting the bullet into the bridge of his nose, from which the angle of entry carried it into his brain. Burke was dead before he hit the floor, although the woman, eyes narrowed and mouth set in a thin line of concentration, lost interest in him from the instant the second shot went home.

O'Hare's eyes were in agony from the acid in the orange juice, and his mind was reeling from shock and the panic that came from knowing that he was, very suddenly, in very bad trouble. He had been trying to reach his weapon, but sitting in a chair with armrests is the absolute worst place from which to draw a handgun holstered behind your right hip. The woman had counted on that.

Failing to get a grip on his pistol from the chair, O'Hare was trying to stand when a .22 bullet took him in the sternum. It was a snap shot, and the woman had made it relying on her peripheral vision only, being unwilling to take the extra half-second to turn her head before firing. But now she was facing O'Hare, and her follow-up shot was placed precisely in the center of his forehead. O'Hare fell forward onto the table, then slid slowly to the floor, taking the tablecloth with him.

None of the four shots was any louder than the snap of a pencil breaking; the noise would not have been heard two rooms away, let alone outside the house.

The woman sat where she was for almost a minute, forcing herself to breathe deeply and damp down the adrenaline that was racing through her bloodstream. Adrenaline was essential for quick action, but it could interfere with clear thinking afterwards.

As her heart rate slowed, the ability to think quickly and coldly reasserted itself. When the woman finally rose from the kitchen chair, she moved with certainty and confidence. First she

looked cautiously out of each window, to be sure that the two FBI men had not left backup waiting outside. Then she picked up the four spent cartridge cases from her .22. Next she wiped down every surface that she had touched since coming back into the house with the two Feds; she had already cleaned up the rest of the place before her abortive effort to get out the first time.

She replaced the silenced pistol in her purse, took a final look around the kitchen to be sure she was forgetting nothing, then turned toward the stairs that led to the front door.

Carlo Latona would be pissed off about the two dead FBI men; it would mean a lot of heat directed his way for some time to come. But the Feds would have no proof connecting him with the crime, and Latona would be consoled by the knowledge that his estranged wife would not be testifying about Frank Brogna, or about anything else, ever.

The woman had spent more than a decade in Western Europe, removing people who the CIA had decided posed some kind of threat to American security. But the Cold War was over now, and a girl still had to make a living. And compared to her former adversaries, the KGB and the East German Stasi, these FBI people were easy.

Before leaving the house, Carolyn Renfer took a pair of Wayfarer sunglasses from her outsized purse and put them on. There was no reason to give any nosy neighbors a clear view of her face. Besides, she thought, the glasses made her look sexy.

She was right. They did.

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