



**THE FALL OF THE  
GODFATHER:**

# **BOSS OF BOSSES**

**"RIVETING!"**

—*The New York Times*

**"COMPELLING"**

—*Kirkus*

**"EXTRAORDINARY"**

—*Nick Pileggi, author of Wiseguys*

**THE FBI AND PAUL CASTELLANO  
JOSEPH F. O'BRIEN  
ANDRIS KURINS**







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"FAST-PACED . . . VIVID . . .  
[A] SLAM-BANG POLICIER."—*Time*

Joseph F. O'Brien and Andris Kurins

## **BOSS OF BOSSES**

**The Fall of the Godfather:  
The FBI and Paul Castellano**

"DRAMATIC TO AN ALMOST INCREDIBLE EXTREME . . . not only build[s] to a sustained and moving climax, but . . . also render[s] coherent the results of the bugging . . . some of the characters . . . betray an eloquence evidently not taken from the word processor of Mario Puzo. . . . It would be dishonest to imply that this reader wasn't swept away . . . the authors are right in their claim that their book is a unique combination of 'cops-and-robbers yarn,' 'sociological tract,' and 'personal story.'"

—Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times*

"MARVELOUS . . . MEANT TO BE ENTERTAINING AND IT IS, IRRESISTIBLY SO . . . not only informative, it's high comedy. . . . The FBI has worked itself into a lather over this book: the authors have revealed matters . . . that should have been buried. The FBI is right, but the book is marvelous. The agents decided to take the money and run. And we as readers can rejoice: Oh, no, they shouldn't have done it, but aren't we glad they did."

—*Newsweek*

**"WRITTEN SEAMLESSLY, LIKE A CAREFULLY PACED NOVEL** with stream-of-consciousness passages and with explorations of the motivations of its central characters. There are also numerous verbatim conversations, replete with dialect, that Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Kurins maintain that they had with Castellano and other key figures."

—Selwyn Raab. *The New York Times Book Review*

**"MUCH MORE THAN THE STORY OF HOW ONE GANGSTER GOT HIS . . . a feature length exposure of a pantheon of men, many of them illiterate, some of them imbecilic victims of inbreeding, vicious as only small animals can be, and in particular, one man who deluded himself into believing that the principle of upward mobility, and its attendant respectability, applied to gangsters, too."**

—*New York Daily News*

**"A STREETWISE, COPS'-EYE VIEW OF CRIME AND LAW IN AMERICA."** —*San Francisco Chronicle*

**"BETTER THAN FICTION!** You just couldn't make this stuff up. It whips through an incredible—yet believable—tour of the underworld . . . an extraordinarily fascinating, exciting, funny, wry and even moving book."

—*Detroit Free Press*

**"A COMPELLING, EXTRAORDINARILY RESONANT ACCOUNT . . . AN EXCITING AND YET UNEXPECTEDLY MOVING HUMAN DOCUMENT** done with occasional street-smart humor and lots of style." —*Kirkus Reviews*

**"A TENSE, LIVELY TALE, REDOLENT OF HIGH LIVING AND LAWLESSNESS,** full of shrewd observations that break the code of crimespeak." —*Publishers Weekly*

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# **BOSS OF BOSSSES**

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**The Fall of the Godfather:  
The FBI and  
Paul Castellano**

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**JOSEPH F. O'BRIEN  
and  
ANDRIS KURINS**



ISLAND BOOKS

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**T**HIS BOOK IS BASED on a long and multifaceted investigation into the life and milieu of Paul Castellano—an investigation that was, by definition, a group effort. Amazingly, many of our fellow Agents and several federal prosecutors have contributed to this volume. Special acknowledgment should go to Federal Prosecutors Douglas Grover and Laura Ward. Other colleagues are named and duly credited in the pages ahead. Some, for reasons of space or protocol—are not. But we would like to thank all who helped and to express our admiration of the professional team that has done so much to defeat the Mafia in America. In this connection, let us make particular mention of the FBI Special Operations Technical Team—the experts with whom we worked on the bugging of the Godfather's house.

We would also like to thank Nick Pileggi, our friend and mentor, for guiding us into the literary world, and Joe Spinelli, for believing in this project when few others did. Other early and constant believers who deserve thanks are Arlene O'Brien, Will O'Brien, Alice Alexander, and Guy Hart.

We are grateful to the FBI, especially the Office of Public Affairs, Legal Counsel Division, and the Organized Crime Section for their fair consideration, moral support, and sound advice. In this connection, we would like to state that while this book is true and factual, we have taken pains to respect Bureau guidelines in terms of not endangering informants or compromising Bureau methods and techniques.

Our appreciation also goes out to Gloria Olarte, whose candor did much to enhance our understanding of the Godfather, and whose trust and goodwill were invaluable to our efforts at making a full, honest, and authentic presentation of

Paul Castellano, the man. Our thanks go as well to the FBI informant who can be identified only as "G," and about whom we cannot even reveal whether he remains alive or has been killed.

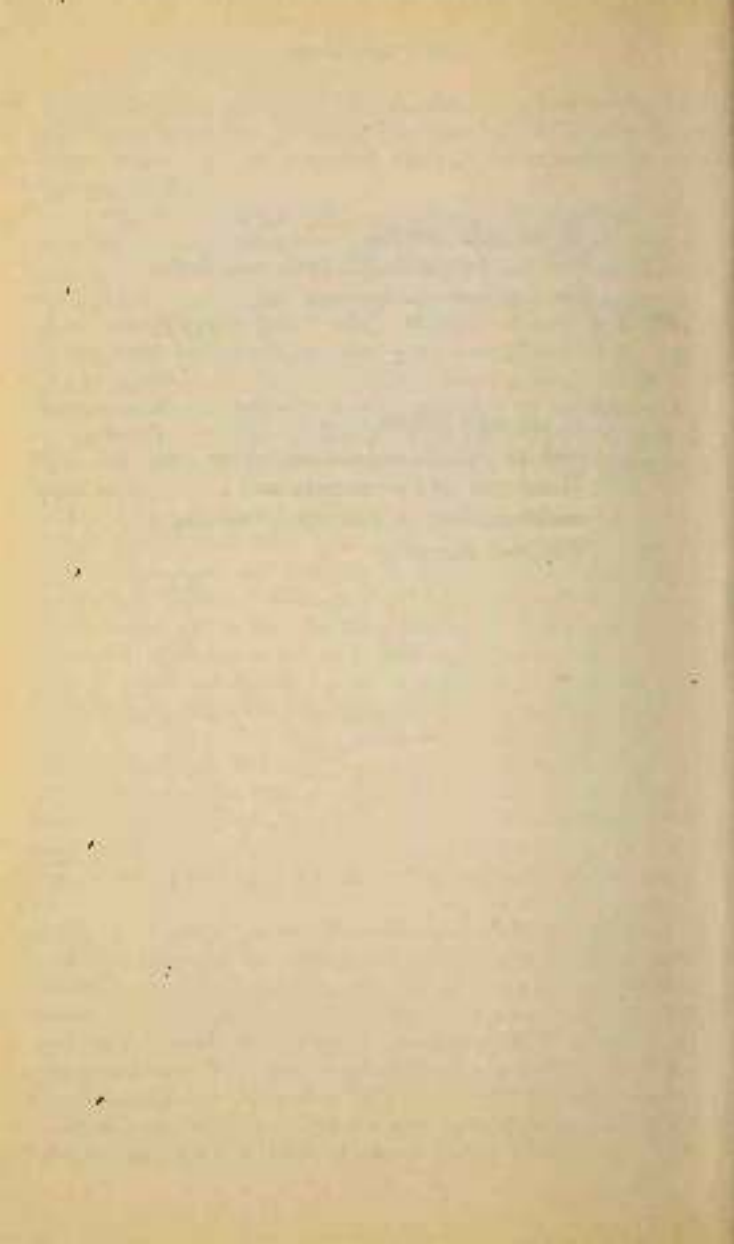
Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to those who shepherded our story from manuscript to finished book. Michael Korda inspired us with his great enthusiasm. Chuck Adams brought to the project a tremendous amount of expertise, good cheer, and hard work. Sterling Lord and Stuart Krichesky labored long and deftly to make sure we were made an offer we could not refuse. And Laurence Shames, a writer of remarkable talent, proved to be an invaluable ally in bringing to life our experiences and the incredible people we met. Without him, we wouldn't have had a ghost of a chance.

To my wife Margie,  
and my daughters Jill, Julie, and Kelly,  
for their unwavering support

J.C.B.

To my wife Sharon,  
and my daughters Lena and Annie,  
Thank you all for the patience,  
understanding, and sacrifice that made  
this book possible.

A.R.



## INTRODUCTION

ON DECEMBER 16, 1985, at approximately five forty-five in the evening, Paul Castellano, the most powerful gangster in America—the Mafia's Boss of Bosses—was gunned down on a busy Manhattan street, along with his driver, bodyguard, and underboss, Thomas Bilotti.

The rubout was a classic instance of how the Mob deals with difficult questions of succession, and with qualms about internal security. Castellano had been at the top of the Mafia pyramid for nine years, since the 1976 death of his cousin and brother-in-law, Carlo Gambino. His reign had been a time of prosperity and relative stability for New York racketeers. But now big Paul was seventy years old, and had diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart trouble. Unprecedented legal pressures were being brought to bear on him. He was a man beset, and he was tired; according to some, his grip on reality was loosening.

Some of his associates hated him, and he knew it. Being hated was not in itself a problem. It went with the job. Being hated without being feared, however, was dangerous, and Castellano was coming to realize that some of his young lieutenants—most especially the cocky and ambitious Joan Gotti—no longer feared him.

Or rather, they feared not his strength but his possible weakening. At the time of his death, Paul Castellano was on trial for running a stolen car ring and conspiring to commit murder. These charges, while serious enough, said less about the full gamut of Castellano's crimes than about the government's subtle and painstaking strategy of buckling cases against him piece by piece, one by one. He had already been indicted, arrested, and found on bail in the famous Commission case, which would come to trial in 1986, and would

essentially dismantle the Mob's entire leadership structure. The even more personally damning Castaway case, stemming from the bugging of Castellano's residence, was also being resolved. The bottom line was that, win or lose, Big Paul would be in and out of court for years, and this made his underlings very nervous.

Unlike younger Malicosi, whose mettle was proved and whose careers were sometimes made by an early show of loyalty and defiance that led to a conviction for contempt of court or obstruction of justice, Castellano had nothing to gain from a prison term. At seventy, the idea is not to impress but to survive. Castellano didn't want to be away from his duties, from his supply of insults and heart pills. He didn't want to be away from the gaudy remnants of his Staten Island mansion. He didn't want to be away from his mistress, who happened also to be his, and his wife's, Columbian maid.

For all those reasons, it was feared that Big Paul might sing. And to those who might be implicated in what Paul Castellano had to sing about, killing him seemed less trouble than enduring the worry and the sleepless nights that would attend his private confabulations with the authorities.

So the hit was arranged.

It was to be a highly public act — an Hottä-like disappearing routine — and this, in the language of the Mob, sent a message. The murder was not a rebellion by some splinter faction of the Carchimo clan, but a stratagem sanctioned by the five major Cosa Nostra families of New York. As in some primitive ritual, all members of the tribe would acknowledge, accept, and share responsibility for the slaying of the patriarch; they would all, so to speak, eat a piece of Paul.

Killing, too, was the fact that the killing took place uptown. Old-style Godfathers, when their time was up, tended to be eliminated in the linguistic joints of Little Italy. They landed face-down in the clam sauce, their blood blended with the red-and-white-checked tablecloths, and the bullet holes in the walls behind them became tourist attractions. But Paul Castellano, who fancied himself a savvy and thoroughly American businessman, and who imagined that he was guiding the Mob into the promised land of legitimate enterprise,

was murdered on the tony East Side—to be exact, on Forty-sixth Street, between Second and Third avenues.

His last meal, had he lived to savor it, would have been eaten at Sparks Steak House, and would have consisted of the third cut of a prime rib of beef. Big Paul, a former butcher, claimed that this was absolutely the most succulent slice; it was his custom to examine the meat, raw, at his table before actually ordering. But regulars were expected to be demanding at Sparks. If the hundred-dollar Bordeaux was the slightest bit cloudy, back it went; sometimes even perfect wine was rejected, simply as a ceremony of power. Only three miles north from Angelo's of Mulberry Street, the uptown eatery was galaxies removed from the straw-covered Chianti bottles of Little Italy, from the communal wedges of pungent cheese, the thick espresso cut with anisette.

But despite the thin veneer of sophistication, the Mob was still the Mob, and the assassination of Castellano and Bilotti might as easily have happened in the Chicago of Al Capone.

Three men in trench coats, tipped off to Castellano's expected arrival by a confidant-turned-traitor named Frankie De Cicco, entered in the urban shadows of the early Christmas-season dusk. Thomas Bilotti turned his boss's black Lincoln into Forty-sixth Street, and parked it directly in front of a No Parking sign; the car had a Patrolmen's Benevolent Association sticker on the windshield. As the two victims emerged, the assassins approached them, producing semiautomatic weapons from under their coats and loosing a barrage of bullets at close range. Castellano and Bilotti were each shot six times in the head and torso. Nothing if not thorough, one of the killers then munched over Castellano's body and delivered a coup de grâce through the skull. In no particular hurry, the assassins jogged down Forty-sixth Street to Second Avenue, where a getaway car was waiting. Witnesses of the hits, of whom there were several, remembered no details except for the trench coats, and that the getaway car was a dark color.

Thomas Bilotti, a short, thickly muscled man who in life had been a hothead, a loudmouth, and a show-off, ended up

sprawled in the middle of Forty-sixth Street, his arms and legs splayed wide apart in a final insistence on being noticed; around him spread a huge red stain, as though little Tommy's last gesture of machismo was to demonstrate how much blood his squat body had contained.

Paul Castellano, by contrast, had lived a life that was all discretion and self-effacement. He had worked hard at keeping his name out of the papers, and even in death he hid his face from public view. Shot, he fell backward toward the open door of his Lincoln, coming to rest with his head and neck grotesquely propped against the floorboard, his spine cantilevered over the curb, his long legs blocking the sidewalk like those of a sleeping wine. He hardly bled, as though age, sickness, and dread had already drained him dry.

If it is true that the manner of a person's death speaks the last word on his life, then the death of Paul Castellano, Boss of Bosses, made it clear that, for all the man's illusions of legitimacy and savvy, of business savvy and executive prowess, he had in fact remained a thug. Stripped of his power, bereft of his mystique, he ended up as one more gangbust corpse, dead in public with his trousers unflatteringly biked up to reveal a white sliver of calf above the translucent nylon sock.

If Paul Castellano's murderers had needed justification for killing him, they could have made a fairly persuasive case that their leader had doomed himself by a singular act of carelessness, lack of vigilance, or fatal overconfidence: he had somehow, in March 1983, allowed the FBI to bug his house.

Special Agents, with court approval, had foiled Castellano's complex alarm system and eluded the Doberman pinchers that patrolled his grounds. They had entered the Boss's private quarters—the sanctum sanctorum of Mob business—and planted a live microphone that functioned, undetected, for almost four and one-half months. From the point of view of law enforcement, the Castellano bug was one of the most significant and fruitful surveillances in history.



From the Mafia's perspective, it was not only an unforgivable blunder on Castellano's part but a calamity of major proportions—probably the greatest breach of Mob secrecy since a small-time hood named Joe Valachi decided to go public with his life story in the early 1960s. More than thirty Gambino crime family members were recorded discussing their illicit activities. Schemes were hatched, roles were assigned, while the Bureau listened in. Conversations with high ranking members of other Cosa Nostra families provided fascinating insights into how the Mob's pie is divided up. The machinery was laid bare.

So fertile were the Castellano tapes that even as the 1990s were beginning, prosecutions stemming from the three thousand pages of transcripts were still under way. In all, more than a hundred indictments resulted from the bugging of Big Paul's Tudr Hill residence. It is not an exaggeration to say that the destiny of the entire Gambino crime family was reshaped as a direct result of the surveillance.

Castellano's power and prestige were irreparably compromised by the bug. Not only did its successful placement cause him profound loss of face but the miffing microphone caught him detiding associates, mocking fellow mobsters, setting factions against each other. As prescribed by law, everyone against whom the tapes were used as evidence had a right to review their contents; hearing themselves victimized by Big Paul's caustic wit, even formerly loyal cohorts turned on him. If ever a man was undone by thinking out loud, that man was Paul Castellano.

We—the authors of this book—are in a unique position to write about the Castellano surveillance, because we conducted it. We went in. We planned the mike. And we listened to the voices.

Special Agent Joseph V. O'Brien is one of two men who first penetrated the Staten Island mansion and made the bugging operation plausible, thus rapping a four-year assignment to corner the Mafia chieftain. For this, in 1987, O'Brien was awarded the Attorney General's Distinguished Service

Award, the nation's greatest honor for a law enforcement officer.

Special Agent Andris Kurins spent months monitoring the Castellano bug and supervised the painstaking process of transcribing the more than six hundred hours of recordings. In doing so, he became so conversant with the tapes' contents that he has been called to testify at eight different trials in which the material has figured as evidence.

It is our belief that there has never been a book like *Boss of Bosses*—a work that, from the inside and largely through actual dialogue, tells the true story of a Godfather. It is a story that exists on several levels. In part, it is a classic ups-and-robbers yarn, a tale of slakents, pay phones, code words, confrontations, and occasional danger. It is, in another sense, a sociological tract, a look at a curious organization which, in some surprising ways, resembles many other businesses—except that this business's product line features extortion, theft, intimidation, and sometimes murder.

But beyond that, this is the very personal story of one man, Paul Castellano. In the course of our investigations, we got to know Big Paul intimately—perhaps too intimately, because it seems to be part of our human makeup that intimacy carries with it sympathy, and we did not want to feel sympathy for our sworn enemy. Castellano was a hood—but he was also a gentleman. He presided over an evil enterprise—yet in his dealings with us he was always gracious, even courteous. Without question, Big Paul was responsible for many deaths, yet there is no evidence that he ever pulled a trigger, and some of his associates despised him for being too eager to make peace and too reluctant to take decisive, violent action. He was a bad man, but not the worst man.

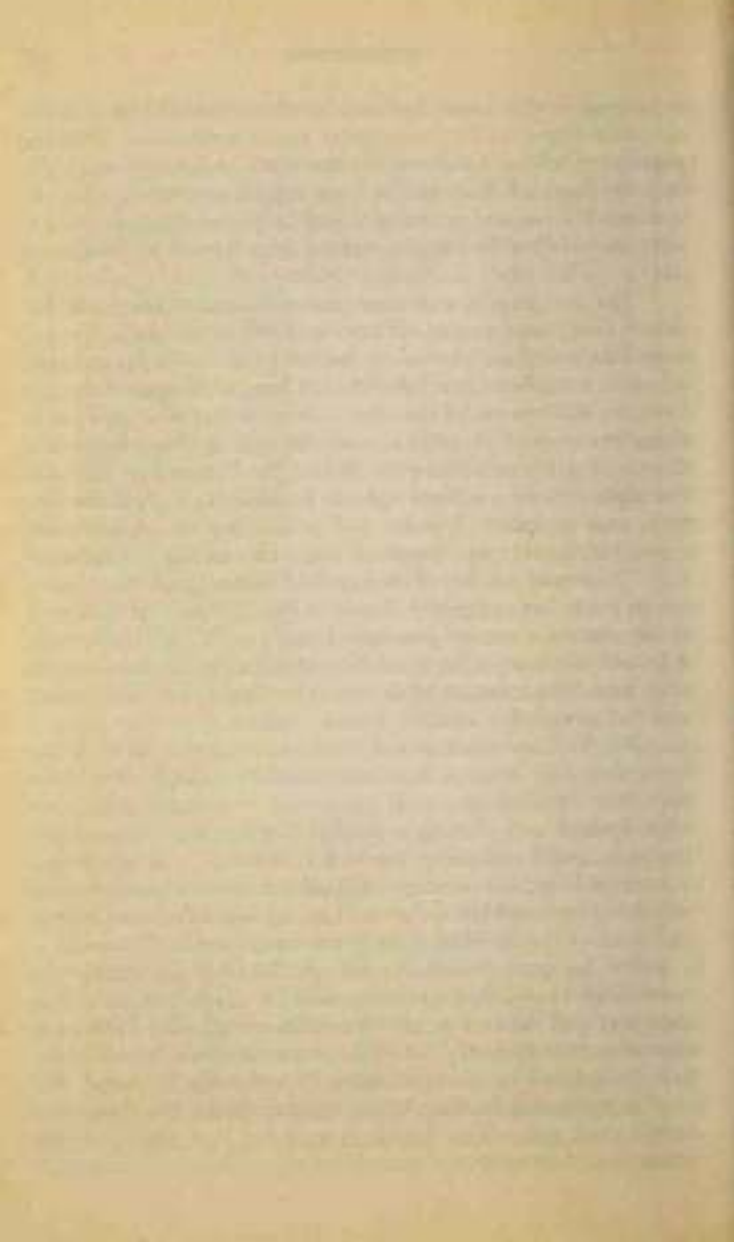
Through the unnoticed microphone, we learned details of Castellano's private life that we almost wish we didn't know. His affair with his maid, under his own roof, was a squalid and blatant violation of the Mafia code of the sacredness of the home. Mafiosi had mistresses, of course, but they were not domestic servants, they were not Spanish-speaking, and they did not usurp the marital bed. Moreover, Castellano's age and infirmities were rendering him impotent, and as the

tapes revealed, he would resort to extreme and bizarre medical procedures to try to recover some semblance, or some purity, of sexual manhood. At moments at least, it was difficult to think of him as the mighty, all-powerful *capo*; he seemed like an old, sick, and ordinary man, trying desperately to hold on to what remained of a flawed and faltering life.

There is an odd and sometimes uncomfortable bond between law enforcement officers and criminals. In a strange way, they need each other, as hunters and hunted need each other to establish their identities. Cops need criminals as a basis for their sense of mission. Criminals need cops to make them feel important and to assure them that they are, in fact, flouting legitimate authority. But in the case of the FBI and the Mafia, there is a more specific bond as well. Both Bureau men and gangsters live by codes that are in certain ways more stringent than those of ordinary citizens. Codes of duty. Codes of loyalty. The fact that those respective codes are in every way opposed does not change the fact that they share certain common emotional and psychological threads. A good FBI man understands the Mafia mind. And it is probably true that a smart Mafioso understands the motivations and the pride of a Special Agent.

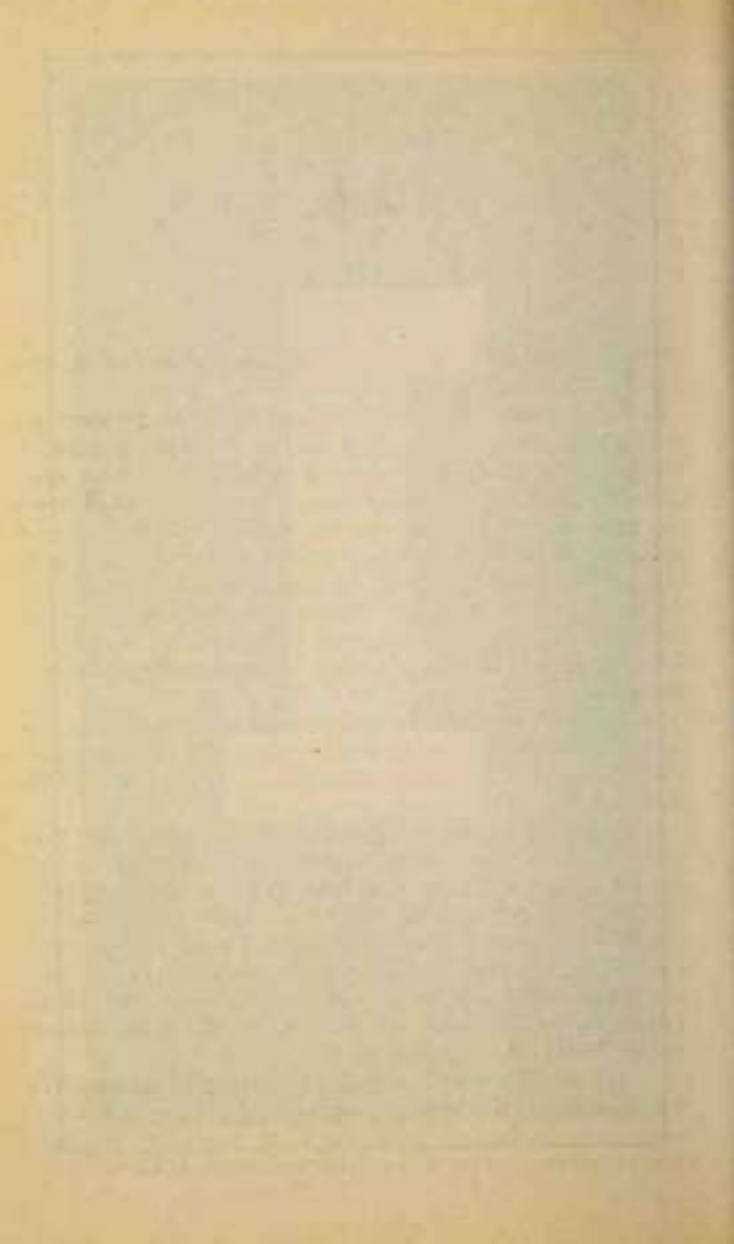
We feel we understand Paul Castellano, and it is our hope that this book reflects that understanding. While we bore Big Paul no personal animosity, we realized that we were locked with him in a deadly serious game where only one side could walk away the victor. We had confidence that, sooner or later, we would win. Did Castellano know that he was fated to lose? He never told us, as it would have been a violation of the stoiborn dignity he retained to the end.

We are proud of the work we did in investigating the New York Cosa Nostra, and proud of the effect it had in exposing and disrupting the workings of organized crime in America. But it would be callous and dishonest not to acknowledge that we also feel some dim element of regret that in the process a human being named Paul Castellano was humiliated, discredited in his own circle, and ultimately destroyed.



PART

1



**B**ACK IN 1981, a lot of people wanted to talk to Paul Castellano.

Every street-level wiseguy, from the garment district to the docks to the union halls to the espresso joints of Bensonhurst, would have jumped at the chance to sit down with the Boss and humbly inquire if he had any small favors he wanted done. Law enforcement officers from half a dozen different agencies would have found it very edifying to spend a quiet hour with Big Paul, learning what was on his mind. As for the media, they had long before established the convention of making celebrities out of Mafia bigs; they would have given a lot for an interview or some exclusive camera footage.

Strangely, though, for all the people who wanted to chat with Castellano, no one seemed to adopt the simple expedient of going to the front gate of his house and ringing the doorbell.

There were few things easier than finding Big Paul. Even in 1981, before his serious troubles had begun, he was mostly a stay-at-home, a recluse: the Howard Hughes of Mafiosi. Why go out? Why sit in traffic, why hang around on a torn vinyl chair in the back room of some craggy social club, when everything he needed was contained in his three-and-a-half-million-dollar mansion—nicknamed the White House, which it somewhat resembled—in Staten Island's pricey Todt Hill neighborhood?

At home, Castellano was literally on top of his world; his house occupied the highest point of land in the entire city of New York. He had a bocce court in his backyard. He had a swimming pool, Olympic size. He had ornately carved furni-

ture upholstered in brocade, and huge lamps shaped like Renaissance sculptures and covered in gold leaf. He had a gorgeous view of the bold arc of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, looking across the water to profitable Brooklyn. He had a loyal and devoted wife, a frisky and diverting mistress, and an affectionate and charming daughter, all right there in the compound. It was pleasant, it was quiet, and it was safe. Why leave?

Still, though Castellano's whereabouts were hardly a mystery, most people seemed disinclined to drop in uninvited on the *capo di tutti capi*.

One of the few who weren't disinclined was Special Agent Joseph F. O'Brien of the New York office of the FBI, who, in late summer of 1981, had some rather pressing business to discuss. A contract, it seems, had been taken out on the life of one of his colleagues and the lives of the colleague's wife and children.

Such an action was out of bounds even in terms of La Cosa Nostra's own rules. At the Lannus Apalachin, New York, conference of 1957, the Mob—with Paul Castellano already a ranking member—had decreed that certain activities were forbidden, not on humanitarian grounds but because they were lousy for public relations and would bring too much heat from law enforcement. Why get the cops mad if you could avoid it? Why make stars out of prosecutors? Why get the public clamoring for more funding and more manpower for the feds? Certain pastimes, while pleasurable or profitable in both, were just bad business. Taking revenge on FBI agents was one such activity. Dealing in narcotics was another.

But as in many sorts of American organizations, traditional Mafia standards had been eroding in recent years. Respect for the old rules was fading, internal discipline was getting ever harder to maintain, and no one knew this better than Paul Castellano. More and more of his time and energy seemed to go toward keeping his troops in line.

Rather like their counterparts on Wall Street, younger Mafiosi tended to put personal income ahead of the long-term good of the firm. It nettled them, for example, that they



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