

GUIDO PAGLIARINO



VITTORIO  
THE MAN WITH A BEARD

A Novel



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Translation by Barbara Maher

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WORKS BASED ON THE FIGURES OF VITTORIO

D' AIAZZO AND RANIERI VALLI IN CHRONOLOGICAL

ORDER OF EVENTS

Guido Pagliarino

Note

## CHAPTER I

It was March 30, 1972 and almost 7 p.m., New York time. Governor Montgomery's election banquet was about to begin and Mark Lines and I were arriving at the Wellington Hotel where the conference hall had been adapted for the occasion into a dining room. Mark, a thin fifty-year-old man of medium height with thick salt and pepper hair, was my publisher in the United States

Donald Montgomery, a young and ambitious dollar billionaire, was in the lead in his party's primary elections which has been underway since January in the run-up to the November presidential election. He had high hopes of entering the White House by beating the current president, M. N. Richard, who was running for a second term.

When I got out of the taxi after Mark had left me the task of paying, as was his style, he had said to me: "My friend Donald would be hoping for some nice words from you in public, given that he saved your life during that bad event." He had tossed it there only at that point, even though that morning when I had been in his office to discuss the publication of my last book and the transfer of movie rights, he had only mentioned the invitation to the banquet. I knew that Lines was not only a friend, but one of Montgomery's biggest electors and I was not surprised by his request, but it had annoyed me a little. In any case, I had agreed because it was true that in July 1969, the governor, who at that time was the director of the FBI for the State of New York that he now led, had saved my skin when I was threatened by a crazy international criminal: even if was not just him but together with many of his agents and my friend Vittorio D'Aiazzo, deputy Police Commissioner in Turin who was on a mission in New York at the time, hunting for that madman<sup>2</sup> .

There was so much noise in the banquet hall when we entered that one of my headaches had immediately broken out. The guests had fallen silent when the governor arrived, but only to stand up and give him such thunderous applause that for me it was like a stiletto stab in the brain.

Among others there were two forty-year-old actors sitting at our table: Burt Cooper, a famous stage actor sometimes on loan to the cinema, tall, thin and not much hair that he kept shaved, and Robert Avallone, known as *the bull* because of his extraordinary musculature, exclusively a movie actor. It was not by chance that they had been placed with us; they had in fact starred in a film based on my adventurous American experience three years earlier, Cooper in the role of the madman who had tried to kill me after torturing me, and *the bull* as my alter ego; then just Avallone, still playing the part of myself, Ranieri Velli, Italian writer and journalist previously a policeman under the command of my friend D'Aiazzo, had been the protagonist of a second and third film inspired by my subsequent novels, they too also substantially autobiographical.

There was no physical similarity between the two of us; for a start, the actor had a beard and I was clean-shaven, indeed I hated facial hair so much that, since my friend Vittorio also wore a beard, I had urged him several times to shave it off, even if in vain. Furthermore, Avallone had brown hair and I was blond, he wore his hair very long while mine was very short and shaved high, he was one meter seventy centimeters tall and I arrived at one ninety; but he had been chosen by the producers because at that time he was the movie star who directed the most money to the box office.

When we had taken our seats just before the actor arrived, having noticed the place card on the table with his name, Mark the gossip had told me that Robert wore a beard to hide a deep scar on his chin inflicted with a razor when he had been one of the many thugs of the Bronx while he was still a teenager. He had also invited me to observe, when he arrived, the special orthopedic shoes he wore to look eight centimeters taller. More than Avallone, however, Burt Cooper had attracted my interest because he had not seemed at all relaxed: he had looked around a few times, circumspectly,

as he came towards our table and on several occasions later as well, with a constantly worried face.

Even though I was not very fond of Montgomery who, for the way I had known him in the past, I considered a cold *Robespierre*, after the appetizers at a new invitation from Mark, I had agreed to get up and go to the lectern beside the main table where Montgomery was sitting with his family, to pronounce words of esteem and thanks to him for saving my life. Obviously, taking advantage of the opportunity, I had also talked about my upcoming novel and the film that would be made of it. At the end, with some matter-of-fact applause, I had returned to the table, while Montgomery had stood up and in turn had gone to the lectern: here he had thanked me for the esteem, then he had recalled that criminal case in detail, emphasizing the importance of his participation. One of his colleagues had got up after him and when he arrived beside him had highlighted that in 1969 the governor's "intelligent intervention contemptuous of danger" against that madman, a known cosmopolitan criminal, had been essential for the salvation of national health and the defense of democracy. At that point my headache had become so bad that all I wanted was to go to bed, also because the next morning I had the flight to Turin. I was about to tell Mark that, whether polite or not, I would leave, when...

## CHAPTER II

We had all jumped to our feet at the sound of the shots and, in an instant, we had found ourselves under the tables, including Donald '*Contemptuous-of-danger*' Montgomery.

The actor Burt Cooper, crouching in front of me and Mark, was trembling visibly and continued to turn his head left and right, panting loudly with his mouth half-open, then said: "Did they aim at our table?" he had asked in a barely audible voice.

"I don't know," replied his colleague Robert Avallone, huddled to his right and who, like Mark and me, had managed to stay fairly cold-blooded.

The shots had come from one of the four entrances into the room that were open, each with a security guard standing outside: a man with a grayish beard with black glasses on his nose, which I had barely managed to glimpse, dressed in an elegant suit but with a mismatched woolen cap on his head which, as it turned out, was a balaclava when he lowered it over his face as he fled. He was also wearing very visible white gloves, and had run away and managed to get out of the hotel without being blocked, thanks to the surprise factor: shooting into the air, he'd had an open road.

In the heat of the moment, when he had fired the last shot, he had dropped the empty weapon on the sidewalk, pulling out another gun at the same time. He had pointed this at the head of a passer-by, so that the governor's security detail who had run after him would freeze; he had stopped a passing car, or perhaps an accomplice's? and leaving the hostage, he had got into it and disappeared, firing a few wild shots from the car window.

In the wide corridor outside the door from which the shots had resounded, the security guard who had been positioned there was lying on the ground, killed by a single shot to the head. Inside, a beautiful thirty-four-year-old woman lay dead, a woman I had known very well in the past. Until then, in the midst of all those people, I had not noticed her, a woman who many years before had been my friend Vittorio D'Aiazzo's wife. In 1958, not yet twenty years old, she had left him for a wealthy American that she had married in the United States after divorcing Vittorio. Then she had become a rich widow and a few months ago, as I had learned from Mark, she had been married again to another tycoon, a certain Peter White, not present at the banquet because he was a supporter of President Richard, while she had been one of Montgomery's big electors.

Quite often, after the separation, Vittorio talked about "*Baby*" as he used to call her during their marriage which lasted just a year; or "*my wife*", as he still defined her since he, a strict Catholic unlike me, an agnostic, continued to consider himself her husband: "Marriage in the church is a sacrament and it cannot be dissolved!" he had told me emphatically on a couple of occasions. Now, he was a widower.

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