

*** Prologue ***

Boris – The Ark (*Mondello, Sicily – Early November 2013*)



Mondello, the splendid seaside district of Palermo, was too beautiful for what was about to happen. Boris crouched behind a fig tree near the villa gate, summer still being in the air, despite November time. The Liberty-style mansion shimmered in late-morning haze, all carved stone and shuttered balconies.

Just down the road, rows of sunbeds and umbrellas at the beach were gone - season over - but all Palermo had shown up anyway. Families picnicked on the sand, kids splashed in the water. Off the coast, sleek boats parked gently in the azure bay, their owners drinking prosecco on teak decks, pretending winter wouldn't come. A perfect day to forget the world. Except one of the top 10 most wanted men in the world lived just around the corner. And Boris had spent half his life chasing him.

Messina Denaro strode confidently from the Mercedes, his figure silhouetted against the ornate Mondello villa. Boris's heart thumped in rhythm with his breath. Seven years of pursuit narrowed to this single heartbeat.

Then, as if sensing danger, Denaro paused. He turned back, eyes sharp with intent, gripping a matte-black briefcase. A tiny red LED blinked ominously over a numeric keypad, a smaller black box nestled discreetly beside it. Denaro thrust the case into his driver's waiting hands.

"Guard the Ark," he said, his voice low, urgent.

From Boris's hidden vantage point behind the palms, dread coiled in his gut. Whatever lay within that case was more valuable than Denaro's empire of supermarkets, solar farms, and luxury villas. That briefcase controlled the world.

Denaro pivoted, resuming his march towards the villa. Boris signalled his team silently, hand raised - ready, steady. The moment hung heavy, ripe with tension.

Then chaos detonated.

"Police! Down now!" Boris shouted.

Gunfire crackled instantly, slicing through the Sicilian heat. Denaro's bodyguard reacted first, sliding behind the Mercedes, methodically pumping rounds at the encircling officers. Boris ducked as bullets hammered into the palms, splintering bark into deadly confetti.

He glimpsed Denaro's driver gripping the briefcase, pressed desperately behind the vehicle. The man clutched the Ark with white-knuckle terror. Denaro himself fired from behind a column, eyes darting between Boris's team and the precious case.

"Cover the Ark!" Denaro roared over the gunshots, his command cutting through the chaos.

Police manoeuvred in swift arcs, closing on the villa. The bodyguard staggered, hit, his defence broken. Denaro fired wildly, backing towards his mansion door.

Suddenly, Boris spotted an opening. He surged forward, gun levelled at Denaro. But a wild shot from the driver slammed into his shoulder, pain blazing hot and instant. Boris stumbled, vision blurring, blood slicking his palm.

From the ground, Boris watched helplessly. Denaro seized the briefcase from his faltering driver, who fell under the hail of police fire. The Mafia boss gripped the case like life itself depended on it, eyes locked on the hidden basement entrance of his villa.

"Stop him!" Boris croaked, but his voice drowned in the relentless gunfire. Denaro vanished inside.

Forcing himself up, Boris pursued, shoulder screaming in agony. His breath came ragged as he descended into darkness. Denaro was nowhere - but a wall panel swung ajar, revealing steps spiralling into blackness. The secret tunnel. Boris cursed his oversight.

Descending, every step jolted agony through his wound. He had to get that briefcase. Bloodied fingers gripped the wall for balance, ears strained for echoes of footsteps ahead. But the tunnel was silent, save his harsh breathing and distant gunfire above.

At the bottom, Boris stumbled into a wider corridor, dimly lit, ancient bricks slick with moisture. And there, a shadow - Denaro, gripping the briefcase tightly, face contorted in fury and fear.

"Freeze!" Boris shouted, gun wavering from pain.

Denaro halted briefly, eyes flaring. But another hidden door beckoned, half-concealed behind dusty crates. With a savage snarl, he lunged, escaping through it into a narrower passage. Boris fired once, twice - missed. He staggered forward, following the echo of Denaro's footfalls.

The tunnel led upwards sharply. Heart hammering, Boris reached a heavy wooden door, splintered from recent force. Pushing through, he emerged breathless into the back chapel of the Santa Rosalia monastery. Moonlight filtered through stained glass, casting fractured colours on empty pews.

Denaro stood silhouetted at the chapel's exit, briefcase clutched fiercely.

"Drop the Ark, Denaro!" Boris shouted, aiming again. His voice cracked with desperation. The pain in his shoulder blurred his vision.

Denaro turned, eyes dark, calculating. "You chase ghosts, Detective," he laughed.

Boris fired, his shot ringing futilely against stone. Denaro was gone, vanished into the night.

Boris collapsed. Vision dimmed. Darkness came.

Boris slowly regained consciousness, his eyes fluttering open to the sterile brightness of a hospital room.

Boris blinked against white glare. Monitor beeps echoed off tile. A doctor tightened the blood-pressure cuff, but Boris's mind still raced to the Mondello firefight.

He tried to rise; pain pinned him. A nurse leaned in.

"Easy. Need anything?"

"Where am I?" he whispered, throat raw. "Get me Giulio."

"In Villa Sofia hospital. We saved you, you were shot badly." she replied gently and stepped away to make a call.

Minutes later Giulio slipped inside, raincoat still damp, eyes rimmed red.

"Did we nail him?" Boris asked, voice steadier than his pulse.

Giulio shook his head, sank onto the metal chair.

"Denaro vanished. And everything with him. A basement tunnel straight to Monte Pellegrino - connects to Santa Rosalia monastery."

"A tunnel," Boris muttered, fist clenching the sheet. "We never saw it."

"None of us did," Giulio said, frustration thick. "He surfaced by the road and was gone before units closed the net."

Boris's breath hitched. Darkness crept in at the edges of his vision.

"So close... Denaro gone. The Ark - lost." The thought flared, then vanished with him into darkness.