

An excerpt from *Falange armata*

Carlo Lucarelli

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I'm dreaming I'm at the movies watching *Terminator 2* – awesome! – when this huge woman comes in and as she sits down her seat crushes my hand. It kills but I can't scream, because Schwarzenegger's firing a machine gun and the shots drown out my voice and the woman, damn her, isn't moving, and even punching her on the shoulder is useless, my fist just sinks into her blubber, and so I reach inside my jacket to grab my gun but a chill runs down my spine when I find the holster's empty. It's the panic that wakes me even before the shooting pain in my left hand, and I realise I've been sleeping on my busted finger.

I groan, rub my face and curse in the dark – I've hit the bridge of my nose with the fucking aluminium splint. I sit up in bed and look at the alarm. I've never been able to make out those stupid glowing digits... I think it says three. Three a.m.? Shit!

I haven't had a good night's sleep in ages. Until a month ago it was because of the heat, but now that it's September it's cooler, so how come I'm still here every night staring at the ceiling, eyes wide open like an owl? Beats me...

I put my feet on the floor and stretch my neck, which creeeeeks, ugh. I've got to get back to the gym, I think, as the light from the street falls on the ten-kilo dumbbells up against the wall, and I toy with the idea of doing a bit of a workout. Yeah right, and what about my finger?

I decide to get up and get dressed, because when I wake up like this, in the middle of the night, the only thing for it is to go for a drive. Driving relaxes me, and I've got a sixteen-valve Turbo GT I've had specially modified... Once I get into the hills, Niki Lauda can eat my fucking dust. I stuff my shirt into my trousers, buckle on my shoulder holster and grab my gun off the bedside table. I used to keep it holstered and hanging off the bedhead just like that guy in *Lethal Weapon 3* – awesome – until once I rolled over in my sleep and caught my ear on the buckle and, bloody hell, I still can't bear to think about it. I had to get two stitches. Back at the station I had to say it was some African guy.

Once I'm on the road, with both windows down and the night air whooshing round my ears, I'm fully awake. I race along the wide streets,

through the flashing amber lights, revving the engine at intersections without overdoing it, because with the octane booster I put in they'll hear me way up in San Luca.

Bologna is packed even at this hour. It's past three-thirty on a Wednesday morning, but there's a shitload of traffic, so I have to slow down near the city centre. My finger, held stiff by the splint, sticks out awkwardly so I can't hold the steering wheel properly. I'm overtaken by a black Mercedes driven by a nerdy little bald guy wearing glasses, with three hot babes who look at me like I'm a piece of shit. Then a blue Citroen Dyane pulls up beside me at the lights, and a girl sunk in the passenger seat, hair all over her face and feet curled over the dash like a monkey, glances across at me before the lights turn green and the car sways off, a Bob Marley sticker plastered on its rusty rear end. I'm already thinking of going after them, because they're bound to have at least a bit of pot on them, when just before Porta Saragozza I end up stuck behind all the arseholes looking for hookers, and I get caught in a bottleneck like on the freeway at the start of a long weekend. I'm in the Austrian girls' section, and this bored-looking blonde in a yellow vinyl trench and high heels parades up and down, then, looking the other way, she casually opens the coat baring tits and lacy underwear. The green Fiat 127 in front of me slams on his brakes and I miss him by a centimetre – Jesus! – and only because I caught the red of his lights out of the corner of my eye. I give up on the idea of going for a spin – with this finger it wouldn't be much fun – and I stay around town. I know that after the traffic lights there are the Slavic girls, but I've never understood what the difference is, they all look the same to me, blonde, brunette, cute, naked, blowjob or fuck fifty thousand lire, my place a hundred thousand... Then I notice that they're no longer opening their coats and they all look peeved and avoid eye contact as I drive past, so I sit up and check in the rear vision mirror to see what the hell's wrong with me, but everything looks normal: my face, the part in my hair, my jacket and tie, my gun's out of sight... and then I notice the red and white paddle I picked up from the guys in Traffic and left on the dashboard – shit! – right under the windscreen. So I shove it under the seat, do a U-turn at the intersection and go up the other side where the black girls are. I think about having some fun playing the arsehole by calling one over and then showing my badge, but then again, these chicks can get violent. Carrone went around for a week with a heel mark stamped on his forehead. There's no way I'd be scared of a hooker, but if I cop a shoe in the head from some black tart, shit, I'll end up shooting her. I turn onto the bridge and down to Fiera where the trannies are. There's a lot of traffic, like Rimini in summer, but fags make me sick and just seeing a really tall one with footballer's legs and fake tits exploding out of a hot pink bustier makes me change my plan. But then I see a squad car parked on the side of the road and two officers talking to a man in a tweed jacket and some African guy. I flash my headlights and pull over behind the blue and white Alfa. One of the cops gives me a dirty look and signals for me to get lost, but as soon as I show him my badge he

rolls his eyes and reluctantly salutes. The car doors are open and the radio static is like the sizzle of frying seafood. A faint voice cuts in and out and all I can make out is "Fucking hell, Sarge, for fuck's sake!" repeated over and over.

I'm curious: "What's going on?" I ask.

"Attempted robbery," says the senior officer who's holding an open flick knife. "A doctor on a scooter coming back from a house call..." He points to the man in the tweed jacket, standing hunched over in front of him, arms folded across his chest. Meanwhile, the African is leaning against the car, hands in the pockets of a grey leather jacket with worn elbows. He's looking down, staring at the road. I give the senior officer a killer stare and the African a solid whack across the back of the head.

"Get your arse off the car, shithead," I growl, "and get your hands out of your pockets."

He looks at me, eyes popping out of his head, mouth wide open sucking in air, unable to speak. I'm about to give him another whack when the officer yanks my jacket, almost pulling it off.

"No! Wait! What are you doing, sir? That's Dr Kalili from Saint Orsola's. *This* guy's the robber!"

Christ, what a dickhead! I freeze, at a total loss. I turn to the guy in the tweed and give him a kick up the backside that lifts him off his feet, and then I crack the shits with the officer.

"Is this how you do things? Why isn't he handcuffed?" *Thump!* I kick him again.

The officer shrugs while the younger one looks the other way, and – bloody hell – Dr Kalili takes a deep breath and starts spitting out a barrage of words that at first sound like Arabic, but no, it's Italian and fuck, it's about pressing charges.

"Fucking hell, Sarge!" The voice over the radio is clear, despite the static, and I recognise the voice of Baraldi from Dispatch, answering the call from a squad car. "Pilastro district... shots fired... squad car on the scene... Fucking hell, Sarge!"

I can only make out a few words, but that's all I need. I ditch the officers with the arsehole in tweed, run to the car, rev the engine and tear off, while the African doctor is shaking his fist in the middle of the road and cursing me to hell and back first in Arabic, then in French and Italian.

Pilastro is a big place and I don't know where to go. I fall in behind a squad car that flies past me at 160 km/h and tailgate it into the car park of a big ugly apartment block lit up by the car's flashing blue strobe. The place is packed. It's a bloody madhouse. There are two cars from the polizia and one from the carabinieri, men in dressing gowns, women in slippers with their hair in rollers, a young cop leaning against a rubbish skip, vomiting, and a trigger-happy photographer from the *Carlino* taking rapid-fire shots of anything and everything. I hop out and try to squeeze through the wall of people that's formed in one corner between a badly-parked car and a small van. Then I see someone I know from Homicide and grab his arm.

"What's happened?" I ask.

"Outta the way!"

I jump when I feel a hand on my back. It's Nardini, the medical examiner, who must have come with the ambulance that's currently trying to get around something blocking access to the car park. He pushes me aside, then peers at me through the thick lenses of his glasses, which gleam with the reflection of the flashing lights.

"Hey, Coliandro....what are you doing here? Did you just fall out of bed? Get out of here, because if you faint again, this time we'll leave you on the ground... I don't have time to take care of you now, there's a dead man in the middle of all this."

He overtakes me, knocking over a carabinieri, and I again put my hand on the arm of the guy from the squad. If I'm not wrong he's just a constable so he can't be an arsehole with me because I'm an inspector. "What happened?" I repeat.

"They shot one of ours, off-duty. He was taking his girlfriend home and noticed something going on behind a van, in the car park... there was some guy with a girl, who was shouting for help as though he was raping her, he went over, identified himself and the guy shot him four times in the stomach."

"Fuck!"

"Yeah... poor bugger. If it had been me, I'd have kept right on driving and called for a squad car. But I've got to go now, sorry."

He moves off and weaves his way through the wall of people. I take advantage of the fact that he's fat and leaves a nice big gap for me to follow him through to the middle, where the flash from some dickhead photographer completely blinds me for a few seconds. When my eyes start to focus again the first thing I spot, through the flashing lights that

blur my vision, is the numbered yellow circles chalked on the ground next to bullet casings, the gun and a shoe. Then I see the officer's green-striped sock and the officer, fucking hell, lying in a pool of dark blood that spreads out from under his back then narrows to a dribble stopping only at the edge of a drain. My ears are singing and my stomach contracts, but it lasts just a few seconds because all of a sudden my heart starts pounding.

I've seen the officer's face, eyes shut and mouth open, and I recognise him straight away. It's the cop who was with me at the soccer match.

"What the fuck's going on? Get out unless you're supposed to be here!" The low, clipped tones of the Questore echo like a shot, startling me.

"Okay, wake up everyone. Get those rubber-necks the fuck outta here. And I want the name of the fucking dickhead who's left his car in the middle of the ramp blocking the ambulance."

A chill runs up my spine and I tighten my jaw. I turn to look, and take off like a rocket, desperately rummaging in my pocket for the keys. That fucking car blocking the fucking ambulance is fuckin'-well mine. Shit!

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