

TROUBLE at the GALLIANO CLUB

an excerpt from

ROAD to the GALLIANO CLUB, prequel to the Galliano Club thrillers

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May 1926

**The Galliano Club, 601 Hamilton Street,
Lido, New York**

The Galliano Club had two rules.

No cheating. No fighting.

It wasn't a rule, but everyone also knew that Vito would carry a member on the books for up to six months if they ran into financial trouble, longer if a sick kid was involved. After that, a delinquent member either had to start paying their dues or resign.

Since coming to work for Vito Spinelli as bartender, handyman, and general manager, Luca Lombardo had become adept at refereeing arguments and knowing when a drunk needed to be shown the door. But only one member was actually tossed out for violating the rules. A Sicilian by the name of Filippo Morello started a melee in the pool room when he nudged a ball into a pocket with his thumb. Things got so bad that Luca had to wade in with the Commodore baseball bat he kept behind the bar. It came all the way from Dickson, Tennessee, where they apparently grew sturdy trees. The bat performed as well against thick-headed Sicilians as it did against southpaw pitchers.

Flung out of the Galliano Club's front door and into the middle of Hamilton Street, Morello staggered home to beat his wife. She fought back with a cast iron frying pan. Five days later at his funeral, she hid her bruises under a black lace mantilla.

All the married members of the Galliano Club were subdued for a month. Lorenzo Bastico's flower stand sold out.

The club was doing a brisk business on this balmy spring evening and the saloon was full of members drinking illegal beer from the keg hidden in a well below the bar. Brisk games of chess and pinochle went on at the usual tables while laughter and the clack of balls came from the pool room down the hall. Every bar stool was occupied.

As always, the enormous bottle of Liquore Galliano, as tall as any man but as thin as a reed where it tapered at the top, occupied pride of place in the center of the display above the bar. Prohibition meant it had never been opened.

The chartreuse yellow liqueur glowed like a beacon; both reflected by the mirror behind and spotlighted from above by the electric lights hanging from the pressed tin ceiling. No one else in Lido, New York, had a bottle that large. It would take at least four men to lift and pour it.

Almost hidden by the magnificent bar, a parallel work counter jammed against the wall was laden with the usual clutter of glasses and plates. Enormous jars of pickled eggs and onions invited members to help themselves. Centered under the Liquore Galliano, a big brass cash register promised the jingle of coins.

The Galliano Club's saloon was simply decorated. White walls showed off a handful of framed photographs and sports pennants above dark green wainscoting. More than a dozen wooden tables and bentwood chairs filled the middle of the space.

Virtually every Italian male living in East Lido was a member of the club. Most worked at the Lido Premium mill on the far end of Hamilton Street. Starting at 7:00 am, the steam whistle shrilled a note that interrupted conversations up and down the street. The resolute howl started the workday, marked lunch and breaks, and sent men home from the largest mill in New York. Within its stout brick walls, molten ore was shaped into copper and brass for America's bridges, ship hulls, railroad carriages, and power grids.

The Lido Premium mill blew its closing whistle early on Saturdays and didn't reopen until Monday morning, making Saturday the one night in the week when every member headed to the club. The Antonelli brothers still supplied the club, driving down from Canada every few weeks, and the cellar was stocked with beer as well as the legal low alcohol near beer and fizzy tonics from the Utica Club brewery.

Under the Yankee pennants pinned to the wall opposite the bar, two tables of card players were intent on games of pinochle. A group clustered around a marathon chess match prolonged by beer and tall tales. Members drifted in and out of the pool room where the weekly tournament meant nickel bets, scattered applause, and ivory balls clacking loud enough to be heard over noisy conversations in the saloon.

Cigar smoke blued the air as Luca presided over the bar, filling glasses, ringing up sales, dishing out pickled eggs, and adding a word here and there to conversations. Drinkers at the end of the bar closest to the window planned the Galliano Club baseball team's strategy. They were the favorite in the Lido Industrial League but in the first game of the season, the Teaberry Knitting Mill team trotted out a batter who hit two triples and a home run against the Galliano Club's pitcher, costing the club the game. From first base, Luca had watched in envy as the Teaberry player sent the ball soaring over left field again and again.

On the other end of the bar, the conversation was all about the headline splashed across the evening edition of the *Lido Daily Clipper*:

BYRD POLAR FLIGHT ACHIEVES HISTORIC RECORD

Lieutenant Commander Richard E. Byrd (U.S. Navy, retired) and civilian pilot Floyd Bennett flew over the North Pole, beating the competition and stunning the world. Articles about the historic flight, complete with photographs and diagrams, filled every column inch below the

big headline.

Coolidge Congratulates Byrd on Polar Flight
Story of Byrd's Flight from Brooklyn Over Top of World
Byrd Did in One Flight All He Had Planned
Byrd's Great Fokker Machine

“Big day for America, eh, Luca?” Jimmy Zambrano asked and held up his empty beer glass. Leaning on the far end of the bar, Jimmy was the well-respected foreman at the Lido Premium mill. Nearly 50, with a wiry build, a Roman nose, and closely cropped dark hair fading to gray above his ears, Jimmy was one of club owner Vito Spinelli’s closest friends.

“Flying over the North Pole.” Luca expertly filled the glass from a pitcher of beer and mentally added fifty cents to Jimmy’s tab. “Hard to imagine flying over miles and miles of ice.”

“Atlantic City was far enough for me.” Next to Jimmy, Luca’s cousin Enzo Russo nursed his beer and scanned the newspaper.

Enzo made an appearance at the club once or twice a month, always on a Saturday night. When the club closed, Luca would go back to the farm with his cousin, spend the night in the attic, and on Sunday help Enzo with chores that required an extra hand. Tomorrow they’d start the back-breaking task of clearing land for a new barn.

“Speaking of Atlantic City,” Jimmy said to Luca. “Vito talked about taking Louise somewhere. Did he mention it to you?”

“No.” Luca glanced at Vito across the saloon playing pinochle at one of the card tables, glad to see the boss was still sober and in good spirits. “But it would be good for them to take a vacation.”

Vito’s grief at losing his son in the Great War was getting worse as time went on. Beer and whiskey, when he could get it, took the edge off what Vito had taken to calling his “blue dog days.”

Those were the days when Vito stayed in his office, mired in drunken gloom. Blue dog days gave Luca more and more responsibility for keeping the club running and solvent. Doorman Guido Serra helped, but he got confused if asked to do much more besides greet members and shovel snow. It didn’t take long before Jimmy and others close to Vito knew that Luca was running the club but everyone maintained the polite fiction that Vito was still in charge.

Jimmy moved away from the bar. Enzo picked up the newspaper and showed Luca a diagram of the North Pole flight. “What makes a man do something like that?”

“Maybe he wanted to be first.”

Luca tried to imagine himself in an airplane with the roar of engines filling his ears instead of the mix of Italian, Sicilian, and Calabrian voices that circled the saloon. Byrd and Bennett had flown a round trip from Spitsbergen, which was somewhere north of Norway, in a huge tri-motor Fokker airplane christened *America*. Veteran explorer Roald Amundsen, conqueror of the South Pole via dogsled, was also in Spitsbergen preparing a flight over the North Pole in the Italian-made dirigible *Norge*. Despite delays and hardships, Byrd triumphed and won the air race to the

North Pole.

Luca poured himself a lemon tonic and read the tri-motor's specifications with interest. It was 42 feet, 9 inches long with a wingspan of 63 feet and 3 inches. Two 100-gallon tanks were carried in each wing, with two additional tanks of 110 gallons each in the fuselage. The engines drank 28 gallons of fuel an hour and had a top speed of 117 miles per hour. The flight lasted 15 hours and 30 minutes.

Before Luca could calculate the distance between Byrd's base in Spitsbergen and the North Pole, a commotion erupted across the room. Vito boiled out of his chair at the card table.

"Procopio, I want to see your hand!"

Another card player bolted to his feet. His chair overturned and hit the floor with a crack as loud as a gunshot.

"I got nothing to show you, old man," Nick Procopio snarled.

"I'm asking you with respect, Nick," Vito said.

Nick thumped his chest with a fist. "You calling me a cheat?"

"With respect," Vito repeated hotly.

"Show your cards, Nick," added one of the still-seated players.

Conversations about the North Pole and baseball trailed off. Members lining the bar two and three deep turned as one. Pool players hovered in the mouth of the hallway.

The saloon lapsed into an ominous quiet. Tobacco smoke swirled noiselessly to the ceiling.

A big brute of a man with hands like shovels and a voice tuned to be heard over pounding machinery and molten metal, Nick was Jimmy's deputy at Lido Premium. He had the neck and shoulders of a bull as he loomed over Vito, who was a head shorter and twenty years older.

Vito's vest buttons strained across a belly that grew more ample every year.

Nick lowered his head, the better to glare at Vito. "You saying I cheated?"

The saloon throbbed with tension; the other pinochle players frozen in their seats. No one had ever challenged Vito like this before. Luca backed away from the bar until his hand closed around the Commodore bat in its usual spot by the work counter.

"Prove me wrong or get out," Vito said, his mustache quivering in anger. "You know the rules."

"Not my rules, old man!" Nick grabbed the table with both hands and heaved.

Luca vaulted over the bar as precious glasses of beer and wine lofted into the air, along with a confetti shower of pretzels and pickled onions. Everyone on that side of the saloon scrambled to get out of the way. Chairs scraped against the floor and overturned. As the pinochle deck of cards and half a dozen glasses rained down, the upended table crashed to the floor hard enough to rattle the pictures on the wall. The lights over the bar flickered.

Nick threw a wide looping punch at Vito that went wide as the Commodore smacked into the deputy foreman's elbow and caused him to lurch sideways. Luca followed up with a swing worthy of the Teaberry Knitting Mill that connected with the man's ribs. Nick cannoned into the wall and doubled over.

The fight was over as quickly as it began.

Helped by Jimmy and Enzo, Luca hustled Nick past a stupefied Guido and out the front

door. Cool night air cleared hot heads as they gained the sidewalk outside the Galliano Club. A few automobiles rumbled past on Hamilton Street, but there was nothing remarkable about four men having a chat outside the well-known Italian hangout.

“Go home, Nick,” Jimmy said quietly, a hand on Nick’s massive bicep. “Sleep it off.”

“Not your fight, Jimmy,” Nick growled. His breath stank like sour beer, but even drunk he didn’t challenge Jimmy’s quiet authority.

“You’re out, Nick.” Luca held the bat held across his chest in both hands. “You know the rules. I’ll refund your dues for the month.”

Nick wrenched himself away from Jimmy and spat in fury. The goblet of saliva landed at Luca’s feet. “You tell Spinelli that Nick Procopio don’t forget.”

“Go home, Nick,” Jimmy said again.

Nick snorted and staggered away, one hand pressed to his ribs.

They watched him go until he turned left into the warren of narrow streets north of Hamilton Street.

Luca hoped Nick’s wife had a cast iron frying pan.

Overhead, a canopy of stars competed with streetlamps on both sides of Hamilton Street. The glow illuminated the signs of shops up and down the street. Like the mills, most would be closed until Monday.

Six blocks away, the gold crucifix on top of Saint Rocco’s steeple glinted in the moonlight.

Enzo was the first to speak. “Jesus. Nothing like this ever happens on the farm.”

Luca gave a shaky laugh.

“You’re a good man in a fight, Luca,” Jimmy said and rubbed Luca’s shoulder with a work-roughened hand. “You got somewhere to be tomorrow?”

“I’ll be at the farm with Enzo,” Luca said. “Why? Do you think Nick will come back?”

“I’ll talk to him on Monday,” Jimmy said. “Square things with him. You take care of Vito.”

“Sure.” Luca knew what Jimmy really meant was *don’t let Vito drink himself to death over a card game*.

“Jesus,” Enzo said again.

They went back into the club, which was abuzz as everyone told everyone else what they’d seen from their vantage point by the bar or the vestibule or the hallway to the pool room. Luca got a cheer and a dozen reenactments of his batting technique. There was general agreement that Nick had cheated and deserved to lose his membership, although the stigma was considerable, especially given his lofty status as deputy foreman of the Lido Premium mill.

Despite the clamor, Luca got tables and chairs righted, and the pinochle games and chess match resumed. The tournament in the pool room wound down as balls clicked together in rapid succession. Luca refilled his pitchers from the cask under the bar, rang up another fifteen dollars’ worth of the Antonelli brothers’ fine Canadian beer, rehashed the North Pole flight, shrugged off his prowess with the Commodore, and worried that the boss was headed for another blue dog day.

At closing time, Vito patted Luca’s cheek, told Enzo goodnight, and left without saying a word about the encounter with Nick Procopio.

Enzo was still wound up as he drove Luca to the farm around midnight. As Luca fell into bed in the attic, he heard muffled voices coming from below. Enzo had woken his wife Rosaria to recount the evening's big event.

It was times like this that Luca missed having a wife next to him, listening to his version and telling him that he did the right thing and that she was proud. Instead, he was living like a priest. The irony gnawed at him.

The years were passing, but Luca wasn't willing to settle for the women East Lido had to offer. An endless supply of sisters and cousins just arrived from Italy, with long skirts and kerchiefs over their hair, who knew how to cook and clean and pray and produce children but not how to read, write, or add a column of numbers. They were all versions of Rafaella and afraid of this new place called America.

He wanted something different; a woman who wasn't tied to the old ways. A woman who wanted more.

But he couldn't shake the fear that Rafaella and their child had died seven years ago because of what he'd done in Italy.

Luca had been a child when he saw a military officer named Humberto Orsini kill his father Matteo for being a deserter from King Victor Emmanuel's army and then his mother Viola for protesting the execution. A dozen years later, Orsini became head of the local army garrison in a nearby town and called upon the tutor preparing a teenaged Luca to enter the priesthood. Shocked, Luca remembered Orsini and his ruthlessness.

Soon thereafter, Luca confronted Orsini. The wily officer stabbed him twice before Luca pulled the trigger of his father's gun.

No one ever knew. The authorities ruled Orsini's death to be a suicide.

Although he believed that taking another man's life was a sin, Luca never confessed to a priest or asked for absolution. He felt no remorse for having killed the man who murdered his parents. But he'd married Rafaella in the church, compounding his state of mortal sin.

His punishment was to watch her and the baby die of the Spanish influenza.

Below him, Enzo and Rosaria ended their whispers and were quiet. Luca thought about the surprising events of the evening. Nick Procopio wasn't a man to take humiliation lightly.

Whatever happened next, Luca would deal with it, whether it was Vito's blue dog days getting worse or Nick Procopio bent on revenge. The Galliano Club was more than a job. It was a sanctuary, a refuge. A place where neither Luca's sins nor his father's defined him.

It was home. Yet he knew that someday, someone like Nick Procopio was going to try and take it away.

And Luca was never going to let that happen.

to be continued . . .

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR Carmen Amato is the author of the Detective Emilia Cruz police series set in Acapulco, the Galliano Club historical thrillers and standalone thrillers. A 30-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency, many of her own experiences find their way into her books. Join the thousands of readers who enjoy her Mystery Ahead updates at carmenamato.net.