

# Black Sheep

by Robert Covelli

@ 2009, Robert Covelli

*Forget all you came close to  
being to survive.*

Olga Broumas  
("Sea Change" from **Pastoral Jazz**)

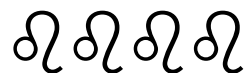
*peh ko rah NEY rah*

# List of Characters

Tasio Pecoranera	Central Character
Danielo Capronigro, <i>il Professore</i> Eleanor, Elle, Washington Capronigro	Parents of Tasio
Dottie Graczek Stanley Graszek	Run the soup kitchen, Loaves & Fishes
Andrew Ross	Friend to Tasio
Carlo Pecoranera	Tasio's uncle, Danielo's brother
Tommy, called the Bruiser	Lieutenant to Carlo
Peter Buonparole	Leader of the New Crew
The Monster or the Giant renowned for a ponytail	Lieutenant to Buonparole
Steven Malvoglio	Current leader of the Mob
Paolo Orlando	Accountant to Malvoglio
Bill Flanders	Plans the new factory
Kazuo Takehara	Represents Japanese investors
Mallory Hunt	Matriarch of a wealthy family
E. (Easy) Thompson Hunt	Husband to Mallory, patriarch
Gerard Hunt	Son to Mallory and Ezekial
Miranda Hunt	The Hunt's daughter, suicide

## Characters, continued

Marianina Vitiello	Lifelong friend of Tasio
Frankie Vitiello	Husband to Marianina
Allesandra Vitiello	Vitiello's daughter, killed by car
Richard Hightower	Tasio's and his mom's friend
Margie Dugan O'Malley	Waitress in Ruby's
Fredrika Brindisi	Waitress in Scarducci's, political aspirant
Lili Gessler	Hired by M. Hunt to spy on Tasio
Louis, Strunz, nel Stronso	Murder victim
Emily Sandoval	Called Mistress of the Dark, Buonparole's lover
Detective Munch, the blond cop The fencepost	Police detectives



# • Chapter One •

## Change Arrives

### 1. In the soup kitchen

A brownstone Episcopalian church stood on 3 uncrowded acres in Buffalo NY, where Forest met Elmwood Avenue. The church was grand and Romanesque. Its pitched roof was mostly unbroken tile. Its windows pictured Biblical love in stained glass. It sat on a rise that was landscaped with grass and arching maples, lovely with philodendron, forsythia and beds of perennials in season. Janitors kept the area as clean as they could.

Blocks of affluent homes surrounded the grounds in protective warmth. Here, daddies usually stayed with their families; and when they did, mommies worked if they wanted. Even troubled children were clever, and bikes and toys littered the lawns, whose brown spots or crabgrass were mitigated by a tree, rosebushes or straight rows of marigolds. Its neighborhood embellished the beauty of the house of prayer.

Inside the church, signs of wealth were modest. Pews were solid oak and rarely scratched, lighting brilliant on grayest days. The nave was long and wide, leading to quotes from Gospel in tiles and quilts, the altar plain, the cross simple. Liquid windows often streamed rainbows, and Christ was loved far more than tormented.

This morning, a queue reached back from the red oaken doors of the church. People in line were dirty and sullen, many of them crippled. They were profoundly out of place. In its community of comfort, this habitation of quiet holiness called to the hungry, inviting them inside.

In the basement, an elderly couple from the working class, named Dottie and Stanley Graszek, operated a soup kitchen called Loaves & Fishes.

Here the destitute rested in friendly compassion, and in the back, singing and shaking his mulatto hips to a Motown beat on his radio, a fellow named Tasio Pecoranera washed dishes and humped those pots and pans.

He got the sway in his thighs from his mom, a black gal who'd been a social psychologist; and he learned to love music from her and his dad, an Italian street boy with a PhD. Tasio favored some of each parent, and he missed them terribly. He'd lost them both, and with him, our story begins. Tasio wrestled demons that were 35 years old. They were his own, and they were Buffalo's. He figured they were everybody's.

Neither painful to look at nor painfully shy around ladies, he was educated and polite. He was a touch over 6 feet, almost 40, of dark hair, eyes and complexion. Playful sometimes, he loved hot tunes and liked to dance, obviously, since he was hip-hopping around his sink. But he more enjoyed a quiet evening at home, a book in hand and Bach soft in the room. His life had left him with demons and much to ponder.

When disjointed sounds clattered outside the kitchen, he glanced over his stacking counters, frowning and confused. He stopped to focus. He wiped his forehead on his arm. Doors swung open to the right of his washing machine, which he liked to consider his office, and he craned his neck, peering into the diningroom. Once a gym, it held 24 long tables now, 12 chairs at each. On bright days, amber sunshine flowed through high windows. Something had crashed there, and voices rose.

Towel in hand, Tasio walked to the doors. The room was crowded, but tables were empty. Usually quick with motion, now the air was taut with fear. Women were backed away from something, and kids huddled behind them. Several dark brothers were pointing, rigid and mumbling. Tasio followed where they pointed.

He watched a cocky white dude swagger across the room. The guy wore a baseball cap, a couple days beard and a Metallica tee shirt. His camouflaged pants were bloused in camouflaged boots. Called Louis Strunz, he looked good; but Tasio cocked his head, because Louis confused him every time. Louis was Italian. In a soup kitchen ... these days?

Then he realized that Louis was hallucinating again. Well, Tasio thought, that explains the ruckus; Louis was a regular, and he forgot his medication. That's all. But that wasn't all. Drying his hands, Tasio saw 3 white males advancing. They were coming after Louis Strunz, while Louie was conversing with nobody at all.

They looked Italian, too, and Tasio shook his head. What? Two of them swarthy, one wore a brimmed hat and knit sweater, another a suit. They were standard, but the third was unique. The man was enormous. This giant had on a luau shirt?

They looked like mobsters, they certainly weren't poor or homeless, and Tasio's spine went cold. Volunteers were coming in from the kitchen and adjoining rooms. Tasio saw them, knowing that anyone might guess where this was going. Except he should have known these guys.

Why didn't he know them? Who were they, and what'd they want from a screwloose in second hand fatigues? He thought this kind of Mob had died. Tasio had watched the FBI gut them, corporations usurp their businesses and Caribbean crews sneak inside their drug trade. Then he snapped; the Mob doesn't change, he thought. But then he thought, of course it does; I saw it change, and he moved.

He had to admire them, remembering their world and feeling the gravitational power of Hell. He would want to know them, find out who they were and how they made their money, because he'd want to enjoy a bit

of their profits. Was Louis Strunz a drug mule? He'd probably thrown away a thousand dollars in his Big Mac box. Christian ladies, the volunteers who served the poor, were comforting children. But moving on 3 newcomers he didn't know, Tasio grew way scared. Why didn't he know them?

Was something shifting underfoot in the underworld? Tasio locked eyes with a behemoth in a blue island shirt. The guy wore a ponytail ... Watching Tasio approach, the guy turned away, as a second one, a smaller version in brimmed hat and knit sweater, smiled! Do you know me? Who are you, Tasio thought. The giant in the ponytail elbowed the smaller guy and signaled with his giant head toward the rear exit.

Then Tasio heard a shout and saw Louis Strunz in the middle of the room, standing tall and manic to the end, legs apart and gesturing with both hands. C'mon, said his grimy mitts; and his psychotic eyes said, come get a piece o me. Daring them, challenging these guys!

More Christian ladies hurried to the trouble. They and brave deluded Louis distracted Tasio's attention, and Tasio wrinkled his nose, grinning. He swatted his demons out of mind and joined Dottie Graszek, who ran the operation with her mate Stanley. She'd gripped Louis' arms, trying to calm down a crazy, but wouldn't you know?

Louis Strunz defied her and Tasio, both. Those goofball eyes were faraway and zapping fast. That looney punk even bared his teeth, and Tasio smiled for a kindred soul, recognizing Louis in himself and laughing inside, but a growl arose from the black folks.

A thin brown man, one of the homeless regulars, stepped in front of his wife and son. Her face was blank. Her child was scabbed. Warning Louis, the father glared, and the contrast of 3 buttonmen was surreal. Tasio

felt their presence when they stopped to look back at Louis, felt their power hovering across the room, their threat as they agreed on their move.

Who are you people?! In a moment, he'd find out, as soon as Louis chilled. But the small brown child, grasping his daddy's pants leg, put his thumb in his mouth, shrinking into some everyday terror and drawing Tasio to him. That skinny little boy absorbed his love, and when he looked up, Tasio saw that the gunmen were gone. In wonder, he stared at every corner of the diningroom. Gone where?

Confronted here in public, they'd have to slip away, remain invisible. Tasio knew that, because his father had come up with their kind and introduced Tasio to their lives, but their speed amazed him, and he still couldn't place them. Tasio's uncle had been the boss of the last established family, and Tasio had been left to the mercy of such men in his adolescence. But who were *these* men? They knew their business, these boys, and Tasio's head was buzzing.

He'd chosen politics, as his father had, read novels and poetry, earned a degree, learned the arts and studied philosophy. But he still had to turn a profit in Buffalo, and here they were! They'd come here into his sanctuary, where he sought to heal the hole in his soul, which their kind had scorched in him, and his books felt useless, profoundly beside the point, without point, without any point, at all.

The man in Management, Stanley Graszek had collared the loon, and Tasio diverted his mind that way. Oblivious, Louis Strunz was grinning, chin high. "G'mon," Stanley growled. "G'mon, you!" Seventy-five years old, short and balder than Popeye, Stanley was an institution, and he was showing Louis Strunz the door.

"Dear God, Stanley, don't let him go outside!"

“Why not?” Squeezing Louis’ arm, Stanley grimaced and sighed long and hard, as though one more trouble would now interfere with the devoted works of his last days. Oh, beautiful Stanley, thought Tasio, you are the quintessence of Buffalo. Tasio smiled, but his smile was sad.

The sweet ancient hadn’t noticed 3 killers in his soup kitchen, but Louis had. The transformation was inspiring. He glanced askance, eyes smug and arrogant, mouth curled in scorn, entirely relaxed, and he left through the double front doors. Tasio raced to follow him and found him strolling through the parking lot, at ease. jaunty his step, no threat anywhere, no danger nearby, and he stopped, did Tasio, breathing through his mouth, befuddled. What should he do?

“Louis! *Louis!*” he pleaded, gesturing after him, and a thin middle finger arose on Louis’ grimy right hand, upraised and eloquent and mad. Tasio dropped his arms to his side, opened his lips just enough to draw a painful breath, and spread one entirely useless hand as Louis Strunz walked away to meet his fate eyeball to eyeball. That’s what he should do?

He had responsibilities, and back inside, Tasio paused, wiping his dry hands while poor folk and volunteers scurried round him. He frowned at himself, because something unpleasant happened in his stomach.

Had he just abandoned a schizophrenic to murders?

What the hell was happening? The mobsters Tasio knew these days would never come to a soup kitchen. They affected confidence, but they were ghosts of a gone life. They played roles, turning profits, but their power had changed—he thought. But more than that.

Killers had profaned this soup kitchen, where good work was done, and Tasio felt love that he believed he’d vanquished! He’d pored over Dante and *I Promessi Sposi*. He’d argued Levi, Pavese and hegemony in

seminar. He believed in the *Green Knight* and revered Dostoevski and Conrad. He spoke softly of Akhmatov and Mandelstam, Gramsci and Bonhoeffer, but he was happy to be a middleman to killers?

Of course, he was. He had to survive. He had to earn a living, and why shouldn't he live as well as any self-absorbed yuppie? Besides, they were his past. They were what he knew best. The gangsters he knew were corporate enforcers now, anyway; he stroked their crippled egos with tawdry lies about a past that never existed. To a hustler like him, they were connected as naturally as the day was long.

But not these 3 new guys. This was different. Was this new? This didn't feel like corporate business; this felt like action on the street. That life of Italian crime on the street was gone, or was it? Where? Gone where? Where the fuck did they go?

"I feel for that crazy devil."

Tasio jumped a bit, awoken to Stanley's gentle tone.

"He provokes the blacks. He bullies the little guys and takes their food!" Tapping his temple, Stanley rounded his sunken Christian eyes. Clearing tables, he shook his shining head, infinitely sad.

"What is it, Stanley?"

Chewing his bottom lip, anxious and forlorn, Stanley hated violence. He'd survived 60 years in a working city that had always been rough and then had failed and become impossible, and Stanley hated violence more than ever—probably *because* he'd survived. Or maybe he was just a frail old man. "They caught him after lunch one day and giv' him a real beatin'." He looked at Tasio through rheumy blue eyes, and Tasio thought Stanley might cry when he murmured as if this were inexplicable: "He don' learn."

Tasio hurried to his conference room behind the church. There, he tied trash bags, conferring with reality, repulsing confusion. He scanned the entire perimeter of the grounds and saw nothing. He smashed empty boxes, a happy chore that spent his crazy energy and calmed his nerves. Then he wandered along the pine trees bordering the parking lot, afraid of what he might find. He thought, did they disappear because they recognized me?

A branch lay broken by the far curb. His tongue poked his cheek, when he noticed a gap in the underbrush. He saw a sandy brown and olive green boot protruding from the forsythia, even though he was 30 feet away. Tasio glowered, aware of his stomach again. He thought, how could they recognize me? He meandered toward the bushes.

Brambles twined among them, sticking his thinnest skin, and Tasio had to mind his language while he worked to get a clear view. There he was. Poor Louis was probably delirious when he died. Trying to be a tough guy, Tasio smiled and wavered his head a bit, as the stiff he was viewing had earlier done. Stanley said he didn't learn.

A thorn dug into Tasio's neck, but since he'd reached the body, he toed his Nike underneath. How do they know me, he thought, and rolled Louis over. Then he grimaced, and his grimace became a ghastly stare, as old as iron weapons.

Something about iron affects relationships, and Tasio saw the glint of an ice pick broken off in Louis's heart. Precision work.