

One Too Many

by JT Roberts

It had been over two years since Dylan Taurasi had killed someone in cold blood. He remembered this fact since the last time he had done so he was on the outs with his then-girlfriend, Sheila, and had since moved on to Carmen whom he had been dating for the past two years. Time was often marked by the women in Dylan's life. What he couldn't recall so vividly from previous occurrences, however, was the uneasy feeling of taking another's life. Typically, Taurasi only killed whenever tasked to do so. That, or in necessary self-defense. Last night was different, though. Last night he had let his rage boil over and which allowed his temper to get the best of him. And because of it not only was a college student dead, but his victim happened to be someone with the wrong kind of connections.

Though relatively small in stature, Taurasi never had a problem dealing with confrontations. He was famously known around Chicago and throughout the ranks of his organization to take on guys twice his size without hesitation. And he had the scars to show it from his face past his torso. But he didn't need *this* problem on his hands- not now. He hadn't left Chicago a day early to spend an extra say in Iowa for this kind of mess.

"Drink up, boss" Maury Gazerelli instructed Taurasi. Having known him for decades, Gazerelli could easily sense the dread stemming from Taurasi's every utterance and motion. "This shit'll work itself out- always does."

"Yeah, let's get another round, for sure," Sammy Turtuoro added, motioning to their server. Gazerelli and Turtuoro were Taurasi's top two guys from the Chicago-land outfit that Taurasi had been a part of since he was a teenager. Due to their boss's actions the night before, Gazerelli and Turtuoro knew all too well that they were all in potential

peril, but what they needed now more than ever was for Taurasi to stay focused, to come up with a plan, to do something, anything that could get them out of the mess they were now in. Dylan always got more creative when he had a good amount of sauce in him, both thought in congruence. More drinks indeed.

A few hours earlier Taurasi, Turtuoro, and Gazerelli, along with about a dozen of other mid-level mobsters and thugs, had met with the region's new chief boss, a ferociously built, fifty-something African American by the name of Donald Ambrose. Ambrose had recently relocated to Chicago from the Miami area and requested to meet with key members of his new crew at a designated getaway location in northeast Iowa. Following his high-profile move, Ambrose felt that things were a bit too hot in and around the home base of south Chicago and felt more comfortable to meet with his top lieutenants at the getaway locale. This initial 'meet and greet' meeting got turned on its head when Ambrose immediately cancelled the agenda and informed all present that the son of one of his good college friends had been brutally murdered the night before in Iowa City.

"Fuck everything that you may have on your plates right now or anything that you may have wanted to cover while we're out here in the sticks," Ambrose loudly bellowed to each man that stood before him in an abandoned warehouse some ten miles southwest of Cedar Rapids. The place had the feeling of a low budgeted, Hollywood horror movie set. And Ambrose's stature could put fear in the heart of even the most experienced and hardened gangster. He towered over everyone at six-and-a-half feet and bulged out of his

dark Brioni suit like it was painted on. His look, his voice, and the newness about him had everyone on edge. Especially being isolated by farmland for hundreds of miles seemingly in every direction. Many considered the entirety of the op to be purely subterfuge.

“We’re going to find the cocksucker responsible for this before the cops do and, when we do, well that individual is going to find out what true justice entails. But,” Ambrose hesitated and paced back and forth in front of the crew- he had only been their boss for a few weeks and wanted to look at each man in the eye to be sure he was understood. “I don’t need a dozen of you flooding the streets of a college town at the same time. Taurasi- I’m told that you’re the man when it comes to finding the man. I’d like for you to take the lead in and around both Iowa City and Cedar Rapids. See what you can find out in the next twenty-four hours. I’ll send subsequent groups out in waves as I deem necessary. Our priority is identifying the bastard before an arrest can be made. However, if the Iowa City pigs pick him, or them, up first, then we’ll bail them out so we can take care of business. Understood?”

Everyone confirmed in near unison, much like a well-trained military brigade. Dylan Taurasi, one of the meanest, roughest, toughest brutes of the Chicago-land streets for the past two decades had never been taken so off guard in his life. And in turn, he had never been so intimidated and somewhat terrified either. Was his reconnaissance assignment legitimate or did Ambrose already somehow know? If he didn’t, how hard was it going to be for him to find out? Should he jettison town immediately or was his plight still in his control?

It was nearing dusk. The surrounding farmland of eastern Iowa brought Taurasi no peace, rather a stronger sense of dread. He wished to teleport himself immediately

back to the streets of south Chicago- a place in which he knew well and would be comforted. Ambrose left the warehouse while a handful of the crew followed behind him with others staying put, making calls on their cell phones. Taurasi motioned to Turtuoro and Gazerelli to head to their car.

Taurasi had traveled to Iowa in solitary a day before the scheduled meeting with Ambrose, leaving his Chicago home at the break of daylight. Gazerelli and Turtuoro had driven separately on the same day as Taurasi, but had left a few hours later. Taurasi had many connections throughout the Midwest and East Coast, especially at universities, that served as a pipeline for him to be able to sell substantial amounts of cocaine. These transactions were always done under the radar for the drug trade was not something that his organization wanted any part of as it had brought down many of their leading bosses in the 1980's. It was strictly forbidden throughout the ranks, but even relative to renegade mobsters of the day, Taurasi played by no one's rules.

At places like Iowa City, a college town of about seventy-thousand residents with nearly half of them students, Taurasi could make over twenty-five grand in a single day. He didn't make the trek too often, but took the time to maintain the relationship with his local pusher. On this particular trip, however, Taurasi got thrown an unexpected curveball. While on I-80, only an hour east of Iowa City, Taurasi received a text message from his guy, who he only knew as Rex, stating that something had come up and that he wasn't going to be able to meet up, but inquired if it was O.K. for him to send someone

else in his stead. Taurasi was enraged immediately upon reading the text. ‘Who did this college punk think he is? This was totally against protocol! Did this fucker have any idea who he’s dealing with?’

Nevertheless, money was money and Taurasi didn’t want any part of carrying thousands of dollars worth of cocaine all over the state of Iowa and then potentially back to Chicago. Rex was his only contact in this neck of the woods so, be it as it may, Taurasi had to accept Rex’s request if he wanted to unload his goods and get paid.

Once in Iowa City, Taurasi slipped into a bar named Bo James, located in Iowa City’s famed pedestrian mall, ordered a tall scotch and water, and waited anxiously for Rex’s replacement to contact him. Although he didn’t know Rex that well, Taurasi wasn’t concerned that this had the potential to be a set up. He knew that Rex knew that he had more than enough dirt on him to sink him if he tried to bring Taurasi down. Besides, Taurasi had made it clear to all of his coke-pushing college-aged connections that he was not a typical drug dealer. He never came out and said it openly, but Taurasi made sure that everyone knew that he was no one to trifle with and that in all probability he was some kind of street-tough or real life gangster- which, of course, he was in spades.

Sitting impatiently at the bar, Taurasi ordered drink after drink. Each time his phone vibrated he expected it to be Rex’s replacement, but each time he was disappointed. Gazerelli and Turtuoro had just left the city. ‘Big fucking deal,’ thought Taurasi. ‘What am I, their dad? I don’t need to know their exact whereabouts- just fucking get here so we can get this plan in motion.’ Another vibration indicated another text: Would Taurasi be available to travel to Brooklyn over the 4th of July holiday? It was from his primary gal back in south Chicago. ‘Christ, what is it with women? They’re all out of their fucking minds. Fucking July is still over two months away.’ He

breathed a deep, frustrating sigh, put the phone back in his jacket pocket, and ordered another stiff drink. With each pull of scotch, Taurasi became more and more infuriated with the situation that he had been put in. He decided to send Rex a follow up text:

TELL UR BOI HE HAD BTR SHO SOON OR IM GONNA GET UPSET...

As soon as he sent the text, Taurasi settled back to his drink and all of the pertinent, unconnected thoughts that were running wildly through his foggy mind. He had only worked for Ambrose for a matter of a few weeks and was already fed up. 'How can I be expected to take orders from a nigger? How could the outfit put a gorilla in charge of all of Chicago?' The notion of it all made Taurasi's skin crawl. After all, it was he who had earned the right to move up the ranks and now, more than ever, he was ready to be put in charge of what was his home turf. He had been his organization's number one hitman for a decade and had been a top lieutenant for three past five years. 'Haven't I done everything- and more- that was ever asked of me? Wasn't loyalty and ferocity still rewarded? Didn't the top brass back in Jersey know that I have the smarts and the right stuff to be the top dog?' Taurasi couldn't get past it, couldn't concentrate on anything else. For Taurasi, it was the ultimate insult to not only be overlooked for the position, but to be passed up by an outsider... and worse yet a fucking African!

Taurasi never gave Ambrose a chance. His bigotry and hatred of American blacks ran too deep and was way too strongly ingrained into Taurasi's fiber. His father had been killed in a late night shoot out when Taurasi was only ten and although no one was ever convicted, or even tried, in murder, he had heard over the years that a young, African American male was responsible. This sentiment was more than enough to light Taurasi's fire and for the duration of his youth and throughout adulthood he was as

prejudiced and biased toward blacks as one could be without going too overboard so as to start an internal war within the outfit. But now, Donald Ambrose was his *boss*.

Enough was enough. Taurasi, partly because of his ever-growing alcoholism and cocaine addiction, was setting up to take down Ambrose at all costs, by any means necessary, no matter what the repercussion.

The trip to Iowa was going to be his first step. Since Ambrose wasn't a local guy, Taurasi figured that there was no way he could have any idea of his intentions. All he could possibly know was what the heads on the East Coast had told him: That Taurasi had been involved with the outfit since his youth, that he didn't mind getting his hands dirty, that for years he was the 'it' guy when it came time for a high level or difficult hit, and that, in all likelihood, he was a bit of a wild card who could be tough to manage. In order to whack Ambrose in somewhat of an inconspicuous manner, Taurasi knew that he was going to have to get close to his new boss. 'But how?' Taurasi pondered upon how to best execute this objective while bumping a few short lines of cocaine while in the men's room. Then, at last, he received a reply from Rex stating that his replacement was waiting for him at another bar in the Pedestrian Mall about a block away from where he was at Bo James. Taurasi smiled and hastily groomed himself in the bathroom mirror, exited, paying his tab in cash, and then took off for the Sports Column- the designated meeting spot- just before dusk.

Taurasi pulled up a seat to the Sports Column bar right away and ordered a drink- a double of Jack Daniels with a splash of Coca Cola. Rex's replacement followed his instructions and made the initial contact with Taurasi. And to Taurasi's ire, the replacement was a black kid wearing a loose jacket and baggy jean pants. He didn't show Taurasi any respect from the start.

“You buying drinks and not asking me if I want one?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Taurasi replied without making any eye contact.

“Oh, I see how it’s gonna be... You some kind of tough guy, huh?”

“Excuse me.” This time Taurasi did make eye contact and turned directly toward his new buyer, sizing him up and down for a potential throw down. Twenty-five grand or not, Taurasi was not about to be blatantly disrespected by a black guy.

“Whoa, easy there, slick. Didn’t mean nuttin’ by it.”

“Listen, *homie*, first of all I’m already pissed off that your boy, Rex, bailed on me right before I got here. Secondly, you don’t even know me so if I were you I’d tone it down a few notches and just do as Rex instructed you to do. Now, is your car out back?”

“Tis- just like...”

“Don’t care for any more details, that’s all I needed to know.” Taurasi slammed the remainder of his mixed drink, leaned in, and said, “Now, get your ass out there and I’ll be with you in five minutes. You do have the money, right?”

“Yeah, motahfucka, I gots it... And I don’t appreciate...”

“Listen you fucking coon,” Taurasi snarled. “You do as I tell you and this will all be over soon. Don’t, don’t... just get out to your car.” Taurasi was doing everything in his power to not snap the guy’s neck right there in the bar. The scotch, the whiskey, and the blow were all flowing through his bloodstream at nearly uncontrollable levels that edged Taurasi to a near boiling point in dealing with the situation. However, the notion of pocketing the payoff within a few moments allowed Taurasi to gain his composure and restraint.

Taurasi ordered another drink as Rex’s poorly chosen replacement vacated through the backdoor of the bar. He never liked to leave a public place with his buyer at

the same time. He had also built enough trust with Rex over the last two years that he did not have to weigh out the goods in front of him- just a quick inspection of the sack and then a handing over of the dough and that was that- drug deal done, more money for Taurasi's wallet, and more coke than any college kid could handle. Win-win. 'But why on Earth would Rex ever think to send this moronic, cock-sucking ape as his replacement? The fuckstick was going to get his ass chewed the next time I make my way back to Iowa City... an ass chewing at the very least. Fuckin' kids these days. Where's the fuckin' respect? They don't respect shit. Too many of 'em had everything handed to 'em their entire fuckin' lives. Whatever.'

Taurasi had plenty of much more important matters which required his focus. The guy had received the message loud and clear that he was no one to fuck with and would consequently be much more reticent once their deal went down in the car. Taurasi squared away his tab with the bartender and left through the front door, taking his time to make his way to the back while lighting a cigarette with a well struck match as the eastern Iowan wind howled and whipped all around him. He extinguished his cigarette on his foot after only a few drags, turned the corner and saw his buyer in the front of what appeared to be a brand new black Porsche Cayenne. 'Figures,' Taurasi thought. 'Fucker hasn't worked a day in his life, but daddy got him a nice new car for what, God knows?' The engine was on and the radio blaring. 'Maybe the fucker didn't get the message.' He shook his head in disgust and approached the passenger side of the car, but as he went to open the door it was locked. He tapped the window to get the guy's attention, now more enraged then ever.

"Nu uh!!" yelled Rex's replacement. "You ain't gettin' in dis ride till you apologize... and I want to see you start smiling too. Let's see dem purly whites, slick."

Taurasi was at the brink, but still something inside him told him to oblige, to get the deal done, and to do so as quickly as possible. He told the guy that he was sorry, leaning over and looking the guy directly in the eye through the passenger's side window. Then the door became unlocked.

"Now that's more like it." The guy was grinning from ear to ear like the two had been old, dear chums for many years. Taurasi was now having a hard time telling if he was more angered or just perplexed about the situation he was in. This guy obviously didn't have a clue and had probably never met anyone of Dylan Taurasi's ilk before.

"Whatever, just give me the cash and take this sack. I don't wanna..."

"Nu uh- that's not how I roll."

"What? Didn't Rex give you any instructions at all?"

"Sure nuff, he did, but that's not how I do things. We gonna have to weigh this shit out first. I'm putting up most of the money tonight anyhow."

He turned to the back and started to reach for a box that was in his back seat. Taurasi immediately grabbed his arm to halt this action.

"Are you fucking kidding, you stupid fucking ape? We're sitting right behind a bar and could get pinched at any time by some local pickfucker and you're toting around scales and baggies? How did Rex tell you this was all going to go down?"

"Hey listen, slick, I told you Rex told me the whole joint, but *I've* never met you before tonight and *I* don't trust your grease ball ass. You..."

Before the guy could finish his insolent retort, Taurasi finally crossed the over the brink and lost his self control. It was almost an innate reaction, like being insulted by a black man was just something that Taurasi could not handle under any circumstance. He struck the guy squarely in the jaw with his left fist and then in one fluid motion grabbed a

switchblade from his jacket pocket, flipped it upright and slit the guy's throat from below his left ear all the way across to the other before the now slain, would-be buyer had any chance to defend himself or retaliate. It all happened in a flash- in that one moment of heightened intensity all of Taurasi's angst and frustration with the status of his life at the moment, his hatred toward African Americans, and his inner rage fueled by booze and drugs were all unleashed like hell's fury upon the fool Rex had sent as his replacement to complete what should have been a simple drug deal. 'Fucking kids,' Taurasi thought as he thought through his next move.

While Taurasi's heart beat sped up immensely, he did not panic. He first ensured the guy was dead- which he was as he lie slumped over in the driver's side seat. Next, Taurasi found the cash tucked away in the car's console. A quick glance at the loot suggested there was not a total of twenty-five thousand. Instead of searching through the dead guy's person and risking leaving more finger prints, Taurasi chalked it up to another situation where an idiot had the idea to try and stiff him and ended up getting what he deserved.

Taurasi went through the entire past three minutes in his head and wiped down any place where he may have left a fingerprint while also ensuring that he had not dropped any item in the car that could be traced back to him. When he left the car, he wiped down the door handle, the one place he knew the police would scour for prints once they began their investigation. 'There were no witnesses,' Taurasi thought. 'So

there sure as hell ain't no point in fleeing town in this fucker's car. Besides Turtuoro and Gazerelli, there ain't a soul who knows I'm in Iowa tonight.'

Instead of jettisoning Iowa City right away, Taurasi decided to go back into the Sports Column for another drink. He figured that if the worst possible scenario were to occur, being that he would be brought in for questioning, that it would be ideal for there to be eyewitnesses to subpoena that could testify they saw him later in the night- calm, cool, collected, composed. He had one more drink and one more shot, made small talk with the bartender, and left once again, this time with the full intention of getting out of town. He had caught the one break he badly needed in order to get away with the murder and better yet, the dead body in the Porsche still hadn't been discovered. Now Taurasi could flee the college town unfettered and draw up any number of alibis. Chances were, however, that it would never get to that point.

He phoned Turtuoro and Gazerelli to find out if they had made their way to Iowa. They had just checked into their hotel, so Taurasi set off to meet them within the hour. Driving west on I-80, with hardly another automobile on the road save for the occasional semi truck, Taurasi debated whether or not to tell them a thing about what had just happened. Initially, he decided against it, figuring that no one would ever have to know.

"Damn," Turtuoro shot off as soon as Taurasi stumbled into the hotel lobby.
"You already lit up."

"You bet I am," Taurasi said. "So which is why one of you is driving."

The temperature of the eastern Iowa evening had continued to drop considerably since sunset with wind whipping all across the open, Midwestern landscape. At forty mph, it felt like near-freezing in mid-spring. Still though, Taurasi was pouring sweat. Even with the extreme whiskey buzz heightened by all of the cocaine he had snorted both in Iowa City and on the way to the hotel, he could not get the image of the kid he had just killed to escape his mind. Both Turtuoro and Gazerelli knew something was up.

“So, uh, what ya been up to out here in the sticks all day, boss?” Gazerelli asked as the three had just finished placing their dinner order at Da Nalliani’s- a family-owned, upscale Italian restaurant located on the southeastern tip of the Cedar Rapids city limits, some five miles from their hotel. It had been a favorite hangout of Taurasi’s, a place that he frequented nearly every time that he made his way to or through the Hawkeye state.

Instead of replying right away, Taurasi leaned back into their booth and looked downward through the candle light as it danced and flickered in the middle of the table. He was trying to ignore the question, but his loyal goons knew him too well.

“Yeah boss,” Turtuoro came back. “You look kinda shaken up, or something. I mean...”

Taurasi cut him off without saying a word, but rather raised his right arm in haste, his palm facing outward, indicating to both of them that he wanted silence. He knew that if he were under the interrogation lights of an investigation he would not be holding up too well- it was time to get his shit together. Neither Turtuoro nor Gazerelli had any idea that he had just killed someone in cold blood and he was still having a hard time just being himself, moving on, and acting as though there was nothing out of sorts. ‘It has got to be the cocaine,’ Taurasi thought. ‘I really need to cut down on that shit- at least for a

while... until this Iowa City thing blows over and I can find a way to get to Ambrose... Everything I've heard about it is kind of true- too much *will* create non-stop paranoia.'

The silence continued to pass over their table until the waitress brought out the first round of drinks. Taurasi took a long pull from his tall glass of whiskey and cola and finally broke the quiet, ushering out, "Let's just say that I was dealing with a bit of business close to here and things went south. That's really it. You play with the hand that's dealt to you, boys, and you give 'em hell... Salute!"

The three banged their glasses together in celebratory fashion and got on with the drinks, but Taurasi failed to just leave it at that. All three had been notoriously heavy drinkers and even much more so when they were all together. Round after round came and went. Not even their immense pasta dinners slowed down the alcohol consumption. The trouble for Taurasi was that he was already way ahead of the other two, but kept up with their pace which was essentially the same degree in which he had been rocking all night. Before he knew it, or could even control it, he was unleashing the entire story about what had occurred in Iowa City to both Turtuoro and Gazerelli. He laughed maniacally when he informed his two troops that he had just 'snapped' and slit the guy's throat- on nothing more than general principles and the guy's lack of manners and respect.

The drinks kept coming and Taurasi kept on going. 'No one fucks with us,' and 'he got what he had coming,' became very common utterances from Taurasi the rest of the night. They ended up staying at Da Nalliani's until close. Most times, the proprietor of the reputable Italian restaurant and bar had wished that Taurasi and whoever he was with would leave much sooner, but he had the correct notion that Taurasi was potential

Chicago mafia, and besides, he did always tip quite well- and this particular night was no exception.

On the way back to the hotel an overwhelming feeling came to Taurasi and he was quite glad that he had confided in his top two guys about the whole ordeal. It was like just talking about it made the whole thing pass over easier- kind of like it already had. It was now time to deal with serious matters and the most pressing and important business Taurasi was ever to undertake in his career as a mobster, up to that point: He needed to figure out a way to get to Ambrose and thus pave the way for his ascension to the top of Chicago and all of the Midwest. No doubt that Turtuoro and Gazerelli would be rewarded handsomely for their efforts, loyalty, and trustworthiness. But Taurasi had no time to concern himself any longer with drug deals gone bad and unintentional kills that took place hundreds of miles away from his home streets. These were Taurasi's thoughts as he drifted off into a hazy and dizzy late night sleep with the sheets on his hotel bed still tucked in, his shoes still on.

Regret overwhelmed Taurasi the next day and not just because of Ambrose's announcement that he was personally involved with the victim. Turtuoro and Gazerelli both handled the whole situation quite well- they were seasoned, well experienced thugs and above all else they were fiercely loyal to Taurasi. Nothing from their demeanor or body language gave anything away as Ambrose paced the floor of the warehouse, spelling out his orders and instructions. Still though, had Taurasi not ushered out any of

the details and kept the incident to himself the situation would have been easier to manage. For Taurasi, it had been the biggest whirlwind forty-eight-hour span in his nefarious professional life.

Following Ambrose's astonishing pronouncement, the three retreated to Spades, a downtown Cedar Rapids haunt located right on the Cedar River. Turtuoro and Gazerelli were upbeat, trying to reinforce the notion that Taurasi had been put in an incredible position with the given circumstances. After all, he had been instructed to find himself. They rambled on and on, but Taurasi paid them little attention. Instead he quietly tried to come up with the best possible solution on his own while taking deep, heavy pulls from the tall, thick glass of his whiskey and coke. Minute by minute Spades filled up with more patrons and consequently more action. A fight broke out directly in the front entranceway. It took all of the bouncers and a few bartenders ten minutes to clear the brouhaha and establish order. Shortly thereafter hordes of women began dancing on top of the primary bar; mere feet away from the three, but none of this ruckus seemed to impact Taurasi's train of thought. He could still get out of town now and avoid a potential set up perpetuated by Ambrose. But that would assuredly incriminate him and shine a light on his involvement and responsibility for the murder- in the eyes of both the outfit and, quite possibly, the law. Besides, running was never Taurasi's *modus operandi*... it just wasn't in his DNA. By his estimation there had never been a fight or a challenge he had backed down from. The thought of pinning the murder on Rex, his original cocaine buyer, crossed his mind, and while that *could* work if every variable and detail fell into play the right way, it was far too risky as it could lure him into both a mafia and law enforcement web he might not be able to weave himself out of. But he had been given the specific assignment to return to Iowa City- that was troubling in itself.

Immediately he decided that he would send Turtuoro and Gazerelli to the college town while he would patrol Cedar Rapids and its few surrounding areas. Just as he was about to break his silence and inform his guys that they would be splitting up tomorrow a dastardly drunken lout came roaring through the front door, dripping wet with some kind of massive amount of liquid- maybe water, maybe booze, Taurasi couldn't be sure. He spun around the bar like a Tasmanian devil on a wild feeding frenzy. Just a few moments after entering the bar, the guy ripped his shirt from over his head while jumping on top of the bar and dancing alongside a cute blonde. He downed shots, yelped incoherently, flailed about loudly, and all the while managed to keep his footing and fend off attempts by Spades' bouncers to kick him out. Taurasi was genuinely impressed by the fool and quickly began to formulate a new plan. When the guy vacated the bar to have a smoke on the back deck of the bar, Taurasi followed closely behind.

Eric Calloway had every intention of hitting the gym for at least an hour after his Friday shift at the Cedar Rapids Midtown Best Buy ended. But, as so often happened for Eric, one invite to imbibe in happy hour was too tempting to reject. A text message from his good friend, Jason Taggert that suggested this idea of post-work Friday drinks had been waiting for him on his personal cell phone just moments after he had clocked back in following his fifteen-minute lunch break. Eric did not want to miss out on any action by taking too long at the gym and then consequently having to tidy up before he went out

for the evening. He was ready *now* so he sent a reply to Jason alerting him that he was indeed on his way to meet up for happy hour.

Eric got the last parking spot at the Cedar Rapids Tee Street Garden, a favorite of both he and Jason's for drinks- no matter what the occasion. Jason had already arrived and secured a table in the back, northeast corner of the bar.

"Long week?" he asked as Eric plopped down in his seat and bellowed a deep, beleaguered sigh.

"Long day, for sure," Eric came back, looking around in all directions to spot a waitress so he could get an order in. "I ended up staying out with Kayla and a few of her friends until God knows how long last night. I know we closed down Johnny A's in Iowa City and I'm pretty sure there may have been at least a few hours worth of after-hours as well. I kinda browned out some time around bar close. All's I know is that when I woke up I was already late for work. Luckily my shift boss was out on a tech run, but I'm sure there'll be an ass chewing for me come Monday morning."

"You just can't turn it off, can you?"

"Not when there's pussy to be had, I guess."

"You're not worried about getting canned, are you?"

"Oh hell, it's always a possibility, I suppose. But so what? Wouldn't be the first time, that's for sure. But enough of all that noise now. I'm here to get away from work. You got anything in the hopper tonight?"

"You know it— I sent out a mass text to around twenty people and I got more than half responding with a 'yes' that they'll be meeting up at some point tonight. I said that we're starting here and then going wherever the night takes us- the kind of nights that are right in your wheelhouse, right?"

“Yes, yes- now let’s get this one started. Where in the hell is our waitress? This place ain’t that busy. I’m going to the bar... What you want?”

“Relax, just sit down. She’s walking up right behind you.”

The waitress named Kellie, who despised Eric due to his often drunken ballyhoo and unsolicited advances toward her, had brought Jason a bottle of Guinness.

“What would your friend here like,” she asked Jason, refusing to make any eye contact with Eric.

Jason barked out genuine laughter about the predicament and responded by saying, “C’mon, can’t you let bygones be bygones? How many times does my man here have to apologize?”

She rolled her eyes back at Jason and said, “Whatever- I’ll just bring out the usual, but I swear if he gets out of line again I’m going to do everything in my power to see to it that he gets banned from here for good.”

“Guess she’s not looking for a good tip tonight,” Eric said just loud enough for Kellie to hear him. “Or maybe that’s exactly what she needs- just the tip... just to see how it feels!”

Jason fell back into his seat, exuding more laughter. Kellie never broke stride and went back to the bar and had a draft of Bud Light and two shots of Wild Turkey poured for her two least favorite customers. She brought the drinks to them immediately, set them down on the table, and looked Eric directly in the eyes saying, “You know, I’m not a super, stuck up bitch like you think I am. You just never know when to quit. You...”

“Hey listen, kitten,” placing his hand on Kellie’s knee. “I never mean any harm and I know I can get out of hand from time to time. Maybe all I need is a good spanking.”

“Ugh! You’re such an ass. I’m switching sections. There’s no way I’m gonna put up with you all night. You’re just lucky that your buddy here is pals with the owner or you’d be outta here for good.” Then she stomped away once more before Eric could respond.

“You know, Jason, the more I think about it I may have slept with her younger sister back in high school.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but I’m sure she hasn’t forgotten about the time you motor-boated her with a mouth full of ice.”

“Shit, that was her? Man, I could of swore that was that big-titted, blonde babe who quit this place not too long ago.”

“No, it was definitely her. It was after we’d all got back to town last fall after the Purdue game.”

“Oh yeah,” Eric recalled laughingly. “She got pissed, didn’t she?”

“You don’t remember, do you?”

“Not a damn clue, man. That was a good day though... But I still don’t remember a single thing that happened after half time. That wasn’t a brown out, my man- that was a full on black out. Probably one of the more extreme episodes I’ve had. It...”

“Shut the hell up,” Jason said as he noticed Eric was about to carry on for a minute. “You black out almost every weekend, you crazy drunk. Now quit your yapping for a second and let’s knock back these little guys.”

And with their first shot and deep swig of beer, Eric and Jason’s weekend had officially begun. Once those drinks were engulfed the action and pace of consumption never really slowed down for either of them. They stuck around the Garden until just a few moments after dusk then met up with a group of ten at a uptown sports bar named

Riders. Just about every drink was accompanied by a shot. Eric had to escape through the back exit on two occasions to gather himself and prevent an unwanted regurgitation episode while intentionally missing out on more rounds.

The exhaustion and weariness from staying out too late the night before and working at Best Buy throughout most of the day had been completely swept away with a fabulous rush of a powerful, intoxicating buzz. Eric was in prime mode to pick up a new woman for the night- or at least do his best trying. He knew that if he stuck around with the folks at Riders his chances would be slim. He had been having an on-gain, off-again fling with a gal by the name of Molly and although she was not at Riders at the moment, two of her best friends were there and were undoubtedly keeping tabs on all of Eric's transgressions. 'But that was quite all right,' Eric thought to himself as he finished off the last of his cigarette. It had been quite a while since he had picked up a new lady and he had the perfect temperament and energy level to do just that. Without mentioning anything to anyone he left Riders and opted to head to Cedar Rapids' downtown district. Unfortunately for Eric, the cab ride from Riders to downtown was the last of his semi-lucid recollections of the night.

Eric was quite groggy and still somewhat intoxicated the next morning. It took him several minutes to comprehend the fact that he was in his own bed and that he didn't have to get up and go to work. 'But how in the hell did I make it back here last night?' he thought. He had absolutely no recollection. He thought back to Riders and the cab

ride downtown. ‘Did anyone go with me? Did I meet up with anyone?’ He decided to check his phone- three missed calls and five text messages. The combination of the eight attempts at communication were from Jason, Molly, and one unknown number. Eric decided to respond to Jason right away via text:

DON’T KNOW WTF HAPPENED LAST NITE. LETS GRAB LUNCH L8ER
ON. LEMME KNOW.

After a shower, a bowl of cereal, and checking out the previous night’s highlights on SportsCenter, Eric laid down on his couch and desperately tried to figure out how he made it home. ‘What is this, *The Hangover*?’ he thought angrily to himself. ‘Am I starting to lose my mind? These fucking blackouts have got to stop! There’s just nothing there.’ He had no idea whether he took a cab, got a lift from someone, walked the ten-mile trek, or heisted a car- he was that clueless.

Had Eric been able to recall anything at all he may have remembered the guy who helped him into the cab and even paid the fare for his way home. It was a situation that under any other circumstance Eric would not have forgotten.

His phone vibrated on the living room coffee table. It was a response from Jason saying that he was down to meet up. The Chicago Cubs were playing the St. Louis Cardinals and afternoon drinks sounded ideal to the pair. Eric decided to take a power nap. He set his phone to wake him up in exactly one hour. And as soon as it did, Eric bolted off the couch, threw on a plain, white T-shirt, blue jeans, and flip-flops, groomed himself in the bathroom mirror in less than a minute, and took off by foot for the Tee Street Garden which was where he had left his car. ‘At least I can remember that much,’ he thought.

As soon as Donald Ambrose checked into his downtown Cedar Rapids hotel suite, he headed immediately for the hotel's lounge to have a drink and unwind. He did not bother changing out of his suit or even removing his sports jacket. He needed strong drink, and quickly, for there were many matters he needed to mull through before subsequent moves were to be made.

The lounge area had a relaxing feel and a breezy, seaside décor that was neither corny nor cliché. If one did not know their exact whereabouts at the time they could only assume they were set in a cool, tropical climate- a perfect getaway from the Midwest, even though that's exactly where they were.

Ambrose ordered a tall Long Island Iced Tea, sat back in the corner booth he had picked out, and began to go through recently acquired information on his Blackberry. To his chagrin, there were no substantial new developments regarding the Iowa City situation. He set his phone on the table as soon as the waiter brought him his drink. Although he felt remorseful about his friend Maurice's son's death, he had known for sometime that the kid was an idiot and that eventually his mouth and his attitude were going to get him into trouble. It was just too bad that it had to end up being trouble of the worst kind. 'Maurice never raised that boy right,' Ambrose thought to himself as he took a long pull from his chilled glass of booze. 'He spoon fed him, coddled him, and he never told him no. You can't do that and expect the little bastards to turn into reasonable adults. No matter- nothing can be done now besides bring the son-of-a-bitch who killed him to justice.'

Then Ambrose sighed and allowed himself a prolonged and satisfying grin from ear to ear. It was situations just like this that had drawn him to organized crime in the first place. From his earliest memories, Ambrose had seen the American judicial system fail time and again to bring about adequate justice and repercussions for those who deserved them the most. 'But never when I'm involved and especially not when I'm in charge,' Ambrose reflected. 'A slime bag is going to pay for something like this... if nothing else than to give Maurice some sense of relief and closure.'

Ambrose had been raised almost exclusively by his grandmother as his mother died in a car accident when he was a toddler and his father had run off before Ambrose was born. Growing up in the inner city of Atlanta, his grandmother had continually preached to him the importance of education, well-roundedness, and forgiveness. She would constantly tell him to be willing to 'play the game' when the time called for it and to be able to take a little shit every now and again. 'Being an angry and vengeful black man will never get you anywhere in this life...' she would tell her grandson any time he got upset or frustrated with any situation in the neighborhood or at school. 'Except for further hatred and anger. It ain't got nothing to do with being an Uncle Tom or a yes ma'am, no ma'am kinda guy neither. But I'm tellin' you- being angry and seeking out revenge all the time ain't the way to go.'

Ambrose indeed took her first two life principles to heart, but he never grasped the third. And could he ever truly wrap his head around how a woman- who had witnessed so much racial injustice occur throughout her life- could be so tolerant and conciliatory. The embrace he got to share with his weathered and ailing grandmother following his high school graduation ceremony became the apex of his childhood- she would pass away only a few weeks later. But through his exploits in track and field-

namely his talents throwing the discus and the shot put- he was able to garner a full scholarship to the University of Georgia and thusly escape the plight of a life on the streets. He competed all four years while he obtained his bachelor's degree and even walked on to the vaunted Georgia Bulldog football team during his fifth year at school while he worked to complete his master's degree in business administration. During his final year of graduate school he studied abroad in Morocco.

Through all of his experiences in university life and competing at the highest level of Division 1 collegiate sports, Ambrose never let go of his animosity. In his mind, he was always a second-tier citizen solely because he was a black man- no matter how much success he achieved. He thought it to be completely absurd that more people in his position did not see things his way- how the system purposefully held down minorities, primarily blacks, to keep power and control in the hands of white males... and how the judicial and law enforcement system used stereotypes and blatant racism to discriminate against blacks on a perpetual basis, especially in the south. Sure there were undoubtedly many dissenters among his ilk, but for Ambrose they were not loud enough. And so it was his intention to find a good paying job in either western Africa or Europe once he had wrapped up things at Georgia rarely, if ever, to return. But it was a chance visit to Italy during the final month of his study abroad program that would change his life forever.

On his next to last night in Naples, Ambrose decided to break away from the half dozen classmates whom he had gone out to dinner with and explore the Italian city's night life on his own. He went from bar to restaurant, restaurant to bar, consuming two to three drinks at each establishment he entered. Although he was seeking somewhat of a wild night, he still wanted to be able to remember the evening in full. Late into the night

as the pm hours faded and turned effortlessly over into the am and the official start of a new day, Ambrose happened upon a group of locals playing cards in the back corner of a smoky and somewhat downtrodden pizzeria. They all meshed with Ambrose immediately as they were impressed at first by his stature, then his ability to speak a little Italian, but most especially his inordinate ability to take down massive amounts of alcohol and still remain coherent. As it turned out, they were all connected to the high ranks of the local organized crime syndicate- a group that had been looking to expand to the United States. On no rest or sleep of any kind, Ambrose found himself agreeing to have a sit down chat over breakfast with one of the local chiefs. Five minutes into their conversation the somewhat elderly Italian gentleman made Ambrose an offer to become a member of the family if he were willing to set up shop in southern Florida.

And so it went. Less than a week after Ambrose finished his graduate degree he found himself in Miami, FL, armed with fifty-thousand in cash and very little direction as to how to establish his footprint. But the business came very easily to Donald Ambrose. In six months he had more than tripled the money he was given as start up funds through a combination of smuggling efforts, shake downs, and racketeering all the while using his newly opened Italian restaurant and bar/lounge as his cover. He never turned back and through his skill set, charm, education, size, and consistent luck he was able to avoid any law enforcement entanglements throughout his career as a Miami-area mobster. He was known as a man of prominence and force, connected to all forms of illegality, sure, but a fair and just man of power by almost all other regards.

Ambrose knew that Chicago was going to be different, however, but that did not mean changing how he ran things and went about his business. His plan was to have five

good years in Chicago and then... retirement. ‘Hell, if things go really well, I may be able to buy my *own* damned island.’

Just as this idyllic thought crept into his thoughts, his phone began to vibrate. He was receiving a call from an unknown number. Typically he did not take calls on his mobile phone when he was unsure of who was on the other line, but on this night, with a few drinks down the hatch, Ambrose found himself to be too anxious to wait for a potential message.

“Hello,” he answered, not offering any suggestive evidence that this was a work of personal call.

“Is this Donald Ambrose?” The caller was using a voice muffler. Ambrose immediately thought that it had to be someone he knew well or else there would have been to reason to disguise the voice.

“Speaking,” Ambrose replied in his deepest and most intimidating voice.

“Good. Just needed to be sure. Mr. Ambrose, I wanted to let you know that I have critical information regarding the Iowa City murder you’re currently investigating.”

“I must say I find it quite un-amusing you’ve decided to conceal your voice with that cheap piece of shit in your hand.”

“I get that. But please understand, Mr. Ambrose, it *is* necessary for many reasons at the moment.”

“Very well, but let me warn you that I’m taking this matter very personally and if you provide me with any false information, rest assured I will find out who you are and there will be a serious consequence to pay.”

“I have no false information to report to you, Mr. Ambrose... Only facts. I know who killed the young man in Iowa City last night.”

Eric Calloway never knew what hit him. Just moments after he left his apartment complex a maroon van approached from directly ahead. One second the guy sitting in the passenger side seat was inquiring about where the Wells Fargo bank was located and the very next Eric had been socked in the stomach as hard as he had ever been hit, a burlap bag thrown violently over his head, his hands and feet bound tightly, and then tossed on to his back in the van's trunk. Sheer panic overwhelmed Eric. He gasped for air again and again. People were shouting at him, voices he had never heard before. He threw up all over the bag that shielded his face from view. The stench was nauseating. Eric began to wretch uncontrollably. Finally, he could make out a voice- one that sounded somewhat calm and sincere.

"Listen kid," the voice said as a hand grabbed his left calf muscle. "Struggling ain't gonna do ya no good. You just lay back and relax back there. This trip's gonna take a while."

Then Eric heard a latch click. Immediately the terror swelled all through him as he could no longer hear any voices or the radio or anything else. His mind raced through all possible worst-case scenarios he was about to experience. What remained in his stomach came out violently and an instant later he passed out, covered in his own vomit and sweat, heading toward an unknown destination.

“You really this is gonna work, boss?” Gazerelli asked Taurasi as they jumped on I-380 south in route to their destination.

“Like I told you two knuckleheads before, we’re gonna give this our best shot. If things start looking sketchy, I’ll improvise.”

Gazerelli turned back to Turtuoro who was riding in the backseat of the van while keeping an eye on their captive. Taurasi did not care in the least if they had liked- or even agreed- with his plan. They just needed to follow through with it as if nothing were wrong.

At first Taurasi had wanted to kidnap Eric the night before. It would have been an easy task to accomplish had it not been for the Cedar Rapids Police. When Taurasi followed Eric outside of the bar he immediately struck up a conversation with him. Initially Taurasi thought he may be able to use the guy to his advantage- maybe get him to divulge a few shit bags he could pin the Iowa City murder on- guys that Eric knew to be no good and that would not have an alibi for from the previous night. But when Eric mentioned to Taurasi that he had actually been partying in Iowa City the night before, a light went off in Taurasi that directed him to change his plan. In precision-like fashion, Taurasi spiked Eric’s beer with three grams of Rufolin just as lit Eric’s second cigarette. Taurasi knew there were only a few short minutes before the drug kicked in and would have Eric face down, passed out on the pavement. He was spot-on when he thought he could lure Eric back to his car with the invitation to bump a few lines of coke before they went back into the bar, but just as they neared the automobile, two Cedar Rapids Patrolmen strolled up from out of the darkness. Always quick on his feet around law enforcement, Taurasi lit two cigarettes and jumped right in the middle of a feigned

conversation about Iowa Hawkeye football. The cops never broke stride and continued on their way to the main downtown strip.

Just as Taurasi had caught one break, he quickly learned he had also erred greatly- he had given Eric far too much Rufolin. There was no way he was going to make it another five minutes... perhaps not even another thirty seconds as he wavered on the public sidewalk, swaying in the breeze as if he were only a two-pound solitary branch. Taurasi saw that Eric's legs were going to give any second. He had to improvise quickly. He was able to find out Eric's home address through a series of slurred answers Eric had genuinely tried to provide when questioned by Taurasi. Once he was sure, Taurasi hailed a cab and put Eric in the backseat. He told the cab driver to wait just a few more moments, promising a larger tip if the driver obliged. He rushed into the bar to inform Turtuoro and Gazerelli that it was time to go. True to his word, Taurasi gave the cab driver a one-hundred-dollar bill and thanked him for his patience, telling him that Eric was his nephew and that things had gotten a little out of control during a birthday celebration. And like he had done countless times during his career in organized crime, Taurasi tailed the cab all the way back to Eric's apartment, completely unnoticed by the driver. The address matched what Eric had told him earlier. Although Taurasi's prey wasn't exactly in his clutches yet, he would soon have the perfect patsy to pin the murder on.

Eric Calloway trembled in horror once he came back to senses. But once the panic subsided, he began to ponder how he came into this predicament. 'This couldn't be just some random abduction,' he thought. 'I must've *really* screwed up this time.' He had no real enemies, at least none of the kind that would have had the audacity to pull off something like a forceful kidnapping. 'What did I do last night? What had I said? Did I flirt with the wrong guy's wife? Had I offended someone so terribly that this was their retribution?' Eric didn't know nor could he muster a single memory from the previous night after the sun had set. 'Shit! I've never had this extreme of a blackout. There's not even a flash of a scene from last night's action... not a fucking glimpse! How can this be happening to me? Where in the fuck are these guys taking me?'

Time rolled along unaccountably as Eric lay across the van's trunk. Mere seconds passed by like hours, but as much as he wanted to get unleashed from his tangles and the bag that was tied around his head, he feared far greater what was to come next. 'Do I act defiantly? Apologetically?' Eric's thoughts then drifted to repentance. He had not been proud of the way he was living his life, moving from job to job aimlessly just in order to get by, to afford rent, his car payment, and a few nights of drinks out on the town each week. He began to delve deeper into his own personal flaws as a friend, co-worker, and overall citizen. He recalled the previous night at the Tee Street Bar with Jason and how their waitress detested his presence. 'How many other waitresses around town felt the same way?' he wondered. For as long as he could remember, he had a reputation of spewing out anything that entered his mind- no matter the setting nor the audience. Often times it sparked temporary laughter from some, while others found themselves to be the target of his mouth and insulting putdowns. 'What do my friends really think of me? What's said of me when I'm not around?'

For the first time in a very long time, Eric began to genuinely care about his character more than that of a loud-mouthed, party-boy who had a fair amount of success with the ladies. It seemed to him that his legacy, or lack there of, had already been written and there wasn't anything he could do about it now. 'How many times have I lied, cheated, stole, let friends down, broken my word, or just been an all around piece of shit?' He wanted to take it all back, to make it right, to be better, kinder, gentler. To do so he had to get out of that trunk. He wanted so badly to see his closest buddy, Jason Taggart, he began to cry. He wanted to tell his mom and dad how much he loved them and how sorry he was that he had turned out to be such a disappointment. He thought of his grandpa, his closest pal growing up, and how disgusted he would be with Eric were he still alive today. The overall sorrow overwhelmed him so that his cries turned into an uncontrollable weep and he began to struggle just to get adequate amounts of fresh air into his lungs. The smell of puke would have induced more if he had anything left to regurgitate.

After nearly suffocating, he calmed himself down and his sorrow shifted back again to repentance. Although he was not a practicing Catholic, Eric had been baptized, confirmed, and attended enough Sunday school over the years to have a basic understanding of the tenants of Christianity. The overall theme of his prayers and pleas of forgiveness revolved around change and how he was going to *transform* if the good Lord saw to it that Eric made it out of this mess alive.

But thoughts and prayers could only do so much. Eric had calmed himself down to the point of rationale thought. Now was the time to decide how exactly to behave once the van stopped and the trunk door opened. He decided he was going to be conciliatory and accommodating. 'Whatever I did the night before I will apologize profusely then

offer them money, my car, whatever. But most importantly of all I have to convince them that no matter what I will NOT go to the police. I have to make them believe that... it's my only chance. Hell, maybe I should keep my eyes closed when they take this bag off my head so there's no way I'll be able to identify them anyway.'

Just then the van began to slow down as if coming to a complete stop. It sped up temporarily then stopped again. It turned numerous times, but Eric was far too distraught to keep count or maintain any kind of semblance of direction.

'How long have I been in this van?' The latest turn was down what must have been a dirt or gravel road. 'Holy fuck,' Eric thought. 'These guys have taken me way out into the country and now they're gonna torture and kill me... What in the holy fuck did I do last night!' Eric passed out, face down in his own vomit yet again, over the weight of immense fear and shear panic that overwhelmed him as the van continued down what was in fact a country, gravel road.

Jason Taggert was not surprised one bit. His pal, Eric Calloway, was notorious for his repeated tardiness and this time was no different. After thirty minutes had gone by from the time in which he and Eric were supposed to meet, Jason decided to send out an invite, via text, to a few more folks he was hoping would meet him for a late, Saturday afternoon lunch and a few drinks to kick off the night and help wash away the lingering effects he still felt from the night before. As he waited for replies, Jason became solemn and disappointed at the same time and for the same reason: He had always put too much

faith and trust in Eric. Sure Calloway could be a hell of a good time any Friday or Saturday night when he was *on*, but he also brought far too much baggage along with his company. There were certain individuals- whom Jason considered to be friends- that he could never hang out with whenever Eric was around. Either Eric did not like them or they did not like Eric. Often times, it was a combination of both, but way too often Jason chose Eric's side and, in turn, had lost a few friends along the way.

Looking down at his mug full of draft Budweiser, Jason began to contemplate why it was that he normally chose to hang out with Eric as opposed to the many others that he knew and liked. If he were to ever add it all up, Eric had probably caused him more grief and headaches than the value of their friendship was worth. And this particular afternoon was a perfect example. Jason had other options like joining a couple down in Iowa City for dinner and live theater. He could have stayed in and invited a handful of his buddies over to grill out at this place. But inevitably there would have been a few that Eric didn't get along with. So, like usual, he had decided to meet up with his friend Eric. He wanted to find out what kind of misadventures he had gotten into the night before after they got separated and then see what kind of action they could get into on this ensuing Saturday evening. But Eric didn't have the common courtesy to show up on time or return any of Jason's calls or texts.

'What an asshole Calloway can be,' Jason thought to himself. 'I've about had it with the guy. I'm gonna keep my distance from him for a while.' Just then another one of Jason's friends responded to the message he had sent out moments earlier informing Jason that he was going to take a quick shower and then meet up with him downtown within the next twenty minutes. Jason slammed the remainder of his beer, ordered another, and didn't think about Eric Calloway again that night.

“As much as you might *think* you want to be here, I strongly advise against it.”

“What, you don’t think I can handle a little blood and carnage, Donald?”

“How about you have no fucking idea, man. Believe me- you do NOT want this memory.”

Ambrose had called his friend, Maurice, to inform him that he had all but caught his son’s killer and that some ‘mob justice’ was about to be performed. He then spent the next thirty minutes trying to dissuade Maurice from attending so that he could witness firsthand the demise of the man who ended his only son’s life. But Ambrose had uncharacteristically wavered a bit and offered up the location of their whereabouts. Now his main concern was covering for this mistake so that his friend would not come to witness something so gruesome, something that would assuredly stick with him for the rest of his life. And most importantly for Ambrose, he did not need a green rookie on the scene to worry about. He was now getting frustrated with Maurice’s insistence.

“Listen Donald, you have no idea what I’ve been going through. I *need* this, buddy. I have to have some closure.”

“I’m not gonna tell you again, my friend. I can’t have you out here. The situation is slightly more complicated than I wish to disclose, but rest assured the son-of-a-bitch who took your son’s life will pay for his crime with his own life. You will have your closure.”

“Damn it, Donald! I wanna be the one who puts the bullet in his head! I...”

“You want no such thing. You don’t want to get mixed up in what’s going on here. You have the rest of your family to worry about.” Ambrose paused for a few moments to let their conversation burn with trepidatious silence, then concluded, “I’ve been doing this for over thirty years and believe me, it never gets easier. I did not get into this business to kill, but sometimes it is necessary... it becomes a very real part of the business. But not a day goes by where I don’t get a sense of regret and remorse. Each and every kill has its own unique way of staying with you, even haunting you. Let me handle this, Maurice. I promise that I will deliver justice for your son.”

“You’re not going to let me come out there or even let me know when this is all going down no matter how much I plead, are you Donald?”

“No- no, I am not. I’m doing this for you, Maurice. And for your family. There are too many risks. The last thing I want to occur is for there to be yet another victim in this mess all because of a lack of judgement on my part. Let me do what I do best. I’ll call you again as soon as it’s over.”

Ambrose then clicked the end button on his Blackberry before Maurice could respond. The time was now at hand. A dusty cloud was making its way along the gravel road that led from the highway to their secluded warehouse. Dylan Taurasi, Sammy Turtuoro, and Maury Gazerelli were approaching. For the first time in many years Donald Ambrose experienced a tinge of dread slowly creep down his spine.

Earlier that morning, the murder of Maurice Schneider Jr. had made the front pages of both the Iowa City Press Citizen and the Cedar Rapids Gazette. The resounding feeling throughout the Eastern Iowa Corridor was one of astonishment; a combination of wonder and horror pertaining to how such a violent and seemingly senseless crime had been committed at the door step of one of America's finest Midwestern universities. The Iowa City Pedestrian Mall, or Ped Mall as it was most commonly referred, was a place where literally millions of local residents, students, and visitors flocked year-round to shop, eat, drink and the like- all right in the heart of the unique college town.

There had been murders in the Iowa City area before, but none in recent memory and certainly not of this nature. Initial reports and rumors aligned with the fact that the local law enforcement were clueless and had no indication of any suspects. There were no witnesses and no known motive. The police ruled out that it could have been a domestic dispute and although it would take a few weeks for toxicology reports to come back from the deceased, there was no evidence to indicate the murder was drug related. Rumors began to swirl that the killing could have been racially motivated. Not because of any concrete facts, but simply because there were no other clues that presented themselves twenty-four hours after the fact.

When questioned by the local authorities, Dylan Taurasi's name or description was never addressed by the bartenders of the establishments he had been to on the night he killed Maurice. And even if one of the fellows had happened to mention a stranger in his late thirties it would have been inconsequential- for Dylan Taurasi had never provided his name and, like he always had done, paid his tabs in cash. From the law enforcement side of matters, Taurasi was all but in the clear.

And then there was Maurice Schneider Jr.- son of the prominent economics professor, Dr. Maurice Schneider Sr. Maurice had been a troubled youth perhaps, but neither newspaper focused on Maurice's run-ins with the law nor his dropping out of the university where his own father had taught for over twenty years. Instead the reports showcased Maurice in a favorable light- a young star athlete throughout his high school days and potentially on the verge of giving his best sport, football, one more try in a spirited effort to walk on to the illustrious Iowa Hawkeye football team. And the reports concentrated on how the young man had come from a loving, successful, and well respected family...

'The *horror*- how could this have happened to the Schneider's? How could this have happened *here*?' This was the feeling that permeated over the area from coffee shop to barber, pub to post office. There were no answers, no reasons. This kind of thing happened in places like Chicago, St. Louis, and Detroit, but not Iowa. Not in the Hawkeye State.

No one who was at the warehouse had read a word about the killing of Maurice Schneider Jr. - neither on line nor in the local papers. All but one of them- that being the kidnapped and horrendously terrified Eric Calloway- had come to do a job. But that *job* was different for some than it was for others.

The previous chilly Iowan days and nights of the past weeks had finally given way to a glimpse of warmth and the hint that the lingering effects of the wicked upper

Midwestern winter were finally nearing their end. For the first time since the turn of the calendar year the ground had completely thawed and green buds were beginning to pop up arbitrarily around the countryside. For many it would have been one of the first ideal days to play a round of golf in the New Year. For Donald Ambrose, an accomplished amateur golfer in his own right, a relaxing eighteen holes was the furthest thing from his mind.

“So this is the guy then, huh?” Ambrose asked as Taurasi pulled Calloway out of the van and removed the sack that had covered his head since the moment he was abducted. Eric Calloway’s terror doubled as he knelt, trembling at the feet of the mob boss, Donald Ambrose who was backed by ten other men all decked out in sports coats, slacks, and shades.

“Listen, I didn’t, I mean I...”

“Shut the fuck up, kid, if you know what’s best for you,” Ambrose snapped. “Not a single word until *I* ask you something. Understood?”

Calloway, still trembling uncontrollably, nodded in affirmation.

“Yep, I gotta say,” Taurasi said. “We got lucky with this one. But you know how these towns are- kind of places where people run their mouth and everybody has to know everything about everybody. Just last night I overheard this piece of shit bragging about what he did. I listened some more and I was convinced I had my guy so I followed him home from the bar and nabbed him for ya this morning.”

“So, Dylan, let me get this straight so I understand completely. As you know this is a deeply personal matter for me and I’d like to be able to convey the details to my friend, the father of the departed. Am I to understand that we were fortunate enough to

be in a bar in a city that has over one hundred bars and just happened to overhear the guilty party chatting about slitting another young man's throat?"

"That's damned right, boss," Taurasi responded. "Sometimes the ball bounces your way, ya know?"

"Oh yes, Dylan. I certainly know that."

Right at that moment Eric Calloway found out that he hadn't in fact screwed up at all the night before, but instead was being framed for murder. This new nugget of knowledge did not quell his terror or fear any less, but instead presented him with a new dilemma: 'Should I start yelling and screaming and professing my innocence or should I keep my mouth shut as I was told?' One peak back at the giant African American man who had told him to refrain from speaking unless spoken to reassured him to choose the latter.

"But Dylan, I do need some more specifics. What did he say exactly that led you to believe he is our guy?"

"Well, I first noticed the creep when he stumbled into the bar. He was incredibly drunk and making all kinds of noise. He was hard *not* to notice. Anyway, a few minutes went by after that and I went out for a smoke and there he was again standing outside and chatting it up with some other guy. I had just run out of matches so I asked to borrow a lighter. He lent me his lighter, but not without spewing out some derogatory comment."

"And what comment was that?"

"That since I wasn't a *coon* it would be all right if I borrowed the lighter."

Ambrose turned back to Calloway to make eye contact with the prisoner.

Calloway, flushed with tears, shook his head in disagreement, but then let it fall back

down in utter horrified exasperation. Ambrose then motioned for Taurasi to continue with his tale.

“Yeah- not only did I find such a racist comment out of line, but I also thought it was bizarre.”

“In what way?”

“It was just so out of left field, ya know? I mean, these yokels don’t know who I am. It’s not too often that folks ever start shit with *me*. I kept thinking how these two could possibly know that I wasn’t going to be offended by the comment- as I very much was- and not end up kicking their teeth down their throat.”

Ambrose motioned for Taurasi to pause and again turned back to Calloway who was still kneeling down, facing the van with his ankles and wrist bound tightly. He stared at Calloway for a few moments then turned back to Taurasi and insisted that he continue on.

“Well, I didn’t say much of anything right away, but I decided to keep an eye on him for a little while, if not for the rest of the night. It wasn’t too hard ‘cause, like I said, the dipshit was piss drunk and as loud as a freight train. It would have only been a matter of time for the pigs to track him down. Anyway, I situated myself at a place in the bar in which I could eavesdrop without making it too obvious... and sure as shit I overhear him bragging about whacking some black guy. You see, I’ve seen this kind of thing a bunch, boss. The adrenaline these crazy fuckers get after a kill- especially their first- they don’t know how to contain it. And then you gotta take into account if the kill was religious, political, or racially motivated... that ups the adrenaline even more. And this guy right here- he couldn’t keep from yammering about it. His adrenaline had taken him over. It’s like being on pure Columbian cocaine tenfold, boss. And it was written all over him.”

Eric Calloway had heard every word of Taurasi's fabricated tale. But sheer panic crippled him and would not allow him to usher out a single word of rebuttal against his vile kidnapper. He instead wept uncontrollably, remaining in a knelt-down position. His bladder went next, urinating all over himself. Ambrose's troops remained standing directly behind their leader. They soon noticed Calloway's humiliation and laughed and hissed at him. Calloway was sure a violent death would be his fate.

"Well, I do agree with you, Dylan," Ambrose said as Taurasi had seemingly wrapped up his tale. "Sometimes the ball does happen to bounce your way. We sure caught ourselves a break this time, didn't we?"

"We sure did, boss. Now would you like for me to finish it and put this piece of shit out of his misery?"

"Uh, wait now. Before you do that I have another question for you, Dylan... What were *you* doing on the night that my friend's son was murdered?"

Dylan Taurasi had been a party to- and often times that main perpetrator of- dozens of mob-land killings. The question that Ambrose posed and, more importantly, the manner in which he posed it, sent a chill down Taurasi that could have frozen a flaming bonfire in an instant. It also sent off a synapse that Taurasi followed as such:

I am now a suspect in this murder— The only people who knew anything were Turtuoro and Gazerelli. In this mere second of connected thought, Taurasi turned back to his two most trusted and loyal mafia confidants. He saw the unequivocal emotion of fear in both sets of their eyes knew they had ratted him out to save their own hides or to get on Ambrose's good graces or... whatever their reasoning, Taurasi realized he was in a world of trouble and that his only chance of survival would be to strike decisively before his foes knew what hit them.

“Dylan, I asked you a question. Can you please tell me what you were doing on the night my friend’s son was killed? It was less than forty-eight hours ago, Dylan. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Yeah, sure, I was drinking at Shorty’s Bar back home on the south side.”

“But I called back home. I was told that you left town *three* days ago.”

Taurasi was just stalling as he inched closer toward Gazerelli. Both he and Turtuoro were blocking Taurasi’s backside. Ambrose had six of his other goons confronting him head on, but if could get past Maury and Sammy then Taurasi knew he would have a chance to get away.

“Yeah, that’s right, boss. I’m sorry.” He turned to Sammy Turtuoro head on.

“Sammy, help me out here. Do you recall what we were doing two nights ago?”

Before Turtuoro could answer, Taurasi whipped out his 9-caliber from the back of his pants and smacked Turtuoro violently across the left side of his head. In the very next motion he pulled the gun back across the front of his body and fired twice. Both bullets blew straight through Maury Gazerelli’s chest. But before he could take off and make an attempt to flee, one of Ambrose’s men fired a single shot square into Taurasi’s left upper hamstring. He fell to the ground immediately. Ambrose calmly approached Taurasi, knelt down picking up his gun, and tossed it into the cornfield.

“So— you thought that you could kill that kid, pin it on this poor bastard here, lie to me about the whole damned thing, and get away with it?” Ambrose smiled maniacally as he leaned over the fallen Taurasi. “I guess you thought that since I’m just a dumb spook that it would be a piece of cake... What’s the matter now, Dylan? Are you having a hard time speaking?”

Just then Ambrose plunged his fist into the back of Taurasi's wound. Taurasi, doing everything in his power to abstain, shrieked out a wickedly agonizing scream. None of Ambrose's men moved a wink. Gazerelli lay dead just behind them. Turtuoro had been knocked out cold by the pistol-whipping he had sustained at the hand of Taurasi. Calloway, still very much awake and alert, pissed himself again as Ambrose continued to inflict pain upon Taurasi.

"You know ordinarily, Dylan, in circumstances such as these I would just shoot the guilty culprit once, right between the eyes and be done with it. I've never been too keen on the notion of torture or elaborate executions, but I've given this all some very serious thought and decided that we're going to make an exception in your case."

"Go fuck yourself, you fucking orangutan!"

"Stupid. Racist. Defiant... All the way up until the end, huh? Well, I think even such a tough guy like you may be singing a different tune in a few moments once you find out what we have in store for you. Gentlemen!"

Ambrose signaled to his small army. The crew split, going into two separate trucks, while one sprinted into the warehouse and emerged a few seconds later with over one-hundred feet of rope, a harness, and a bundle of hooks and latches. Two men raced toward Taurasi and held him down while the remaining man cleared Gazerelli's body off the gravel road and tossed the still unconscious Turtuoro right next to Calloway and the van.

In less than five minutes Ambrose's men had Taurasi tightly strapped into the harness with it being tied off at both ends to separate lengths of rope whose ends were tied to the two trucks. Taurasi was placed squarely in the middle. He was still bleeding

profusely, but that paled in comparison to his overall plight as he realized he was about to literally be ripped in half.

Just before Ambrose gave the final order to carry out the heinously extravagant execution of Dylan Taurasi, Sammy Turtuoro regained consciousness. It took only a few moments for him to decipher what was about to go down. Ambrose was in no way going to offer his former boss and long-time friend, Taurasi, any kind of mercy. Turtuoro felt ill and it was not because of the hit to head he had taken from Taurasi, but because he was about to witness this execution that he had assisted in setting up. But it wasn't entirely his fault. The night before Maury Gazerelli confronted him about the situation- the frame job they were about to pull on some 'stupid' and unexpected kid, and all of the lies they were about to bestow upon their chief, Ambrose.

"I ain't going along with it, man. Not this time. Fucking Taurasi has lost it!" Gazerelli was pacing back and forth a few steps from their hotel, chain smoking, and much more inebriated than Turtuoro.

"What are you suggesting, Maury?" Turtuoro asked as he lit his own cigarette. "It's Dylan's deal. All we gotta do is back him, keep our mouths shut, and the whole damn thing will blow over by the time we get back to Chicago."

"Nah- you don't get it, man. Ambrose is smart. He's not like the rest. He's gonna see straight through Taurasi's bullshit... I just know it. And when he does he's gonna find out what happened. We're not talking about some random, accidental killing

here. This shit is personal to Ambrose. You see what I'm saying, Sammy? The man is gonna find out... there's no doubt about it."

"So, what you're saying is that we're screwed either way?"

"No way, man. We ain't gonna let Taurasi take us down with him. Not like this... Not when we ain't got shit to do with this. We gotta card to play, but we gotta play the damned thing now. And I mean right fucking now."

"What's all this 'we' talk, Maury? I'm sticking with Dylan- you know where my loyalties lie."

"You're one dumb son-of-a-bitch if you can't see what's going on here. Taurasi has lost it! Between his being pissed off about not getting Ambrose's job, his crazy women, and all that blow he's been snorting up his nose- he's totally fried, man."

"What, then, are you proposing, Maury?"

"We come clean. We call Ambrose and tell him the whole story. And I mean *everything* we know. That's the card we gotta play. It's our one and only shot. If we go along with Taurasi and his crazy plan and Ambrose finds out the truth- which I guarantee he will- then we're all dead. It's that simple. But if we come clean now with what we know then I say we gotta good shot of getting out of this dog-shit situation that Taurasi put us in. From everything I've heard on the streets and from some of my boys down south, Donald Ambrose is a fair and reasonable guy. And a smart man."

"And in doing all of this, Maury, we throw Dylan Taurasi completely under the bus- quite literally. The guy has been our friend and leader for how many years now? Are you..."

"You goddamned right, Sammy! I know that you see it, but your loyalty to the guy is clouding your judgement. He's totally lost his mind. His hair-brained scheme to

pin the whole thing on this kid and present it to Ambrose as such should be proof enough that he's gone completely bat shit. Staying with Taurasi on this is the same thing as committing suicide."

"There's no doubt that he's been spiraling out of control..."

"So, you *will* go along with me then?"

"I didn't say that... Damn it, Maury! This is all totally fucked! The more I think about it the more I think that we're both fucked either way."

"That may be, my friend, but our chances are much better if we jump off Taurasi's ship- and I mean right fucking now!"

Turtuoro was coming to the understanding that Gazerelli's assessment of the situation was correct. Taurasi's psyche and demeanor had been slipping into the realm of paranoid, delusional narcosis for the past two or three years- ever since he had gotten himself addicted to cocaine. But it was the appointment of Donald Ambrose as the head of Chicago that sent Taurasi over the edge. He had convoluted his mind into allowing him to believe he could overthrow Ambrose and assume complete control over the city and all throughout the Midwest. Turtuoro had never really attempted to talk his boss off the ledge. He had hoped that it was all just a passing phase for Taurasi. But it never did, and now due to his boss's irrational actions and ideas he found himself at a great precipice.

"How do you propose we go about protecting ourselves if we do end up making this call?" Turtuoro asked Gazerelli as he extinguished his cigarette and lit a fresh one in the next motion.

"It's simple: Brutal honesty. We tell him everything. It's our best chance. I know it's tough- Taurasi and I go way back too, but the fucker has lost it. You know this

as well as you know the moon is full,” Gazerelli said as he pointed up to the sky to illustrate his point. “We’re going to end up dead and buried in some shitty cornfield in bum-fuck Iowa if we don’t do something and now. So what d’ya say? Wanna save both our hides?”

“Let’s go over exactly what we wanna say to Ambrose,” Turtuoro answered. Gazerelli smiled from ear to ear, relieved that his comrade had come to his senses.

But that was all yesterday. ‘Sure Dylan Taurasi had gone down a depraved and debauched path, but wasn’t he there for me providing cover and coming up with jobs for us to score substantially?’ Turtuoro had never been pinched in all of the years he had worked under Taurasi. He had never needed any money out of desperation in all of those years either. In fact, Taurasi had made him somewhat wealthy, at least from the perspective of his childhood.

Essentially Turtuoro had adamantly believed- until yesterday that is- that he would be working for Taurasi for the remainder of his life. ‘And this is how I’m going to repay my boss and confidant? The guy who pulled me out of poverty?’ These sensations and emotions swirled through Turtuoro’s mind as Ambrose gave the order. Less than twenty-four hours prior, Sammy Turtuoro reluctantly decided to offer Dylan Taurasi’s life so that his may have been spared. He now made up his mind to give his own life so that his boss would not be executed so horrendously. In one fluid motion Turtuoro flung his switchblade into the belly of Ambrose’s guard who had been standing over him since he had regained consciousness. He then pulled the guard’s semi-automatic rifle from his holster and sprayed bullets through the front windows of both trucks while running toward Taurasi.

“I’m so sorry, boss,” he muttered out as Ambrose’s remaining guards filled his backside with an array of bullets. Sammy Turtuoro fell dead to the ground, but not before he was able to cut Taurasi free and arm him with the rifle.

Taurasi fired once at the truck positioned closest to the warehouse. BAM! Ever the marksman, he was able to explode the truck by nailing the gas tank with a direct hit from the rifle. Two of Ambrose’s guards were killed instantly from the explosion. He aimed for the second truck which was now turned over on the gravel road that was to be his route of escape. But just before he could get the shot off, Ambrose flung himself on top of him and wrestled the rifle away. The two traded blows to the head. Taurasi desperately reached out for the rifle which lay only a few feet from his grasp. Ambrose drove his fist into Taurasi’s wounded thigh to prevent him from reaching further. Taurasi kicked Ambrose in the jaw, temporarily stunning the boss. In the next moment, he picked up the gun and fired two shots at Ambrose, both of which hit. Ambrose fell to the ground.

Taurasi had two choices: make his run for freedom or finish off the man that had so deceptively and maniacally orchestrated his execution. He looked around to see if any of Ambrose’s guards were taking aim. Astonishingly there were none in sight, only the kid whom he had abducted about an hour earlier who was still tied up and now leaning against the van, witnessing all of the carnage first hand. Taurasi was set to put a final shot through Ambrose’s skull, but he never got to pull the trigger.

Ambrose had been donning bullet-proof, Kevlar protection underneath his sports jacket and had been unaffected by the two bullets fired from Taurasi's rifle. In the brief moment that Taurasi had taken to observe his surroundings, Ambrose had pulled a switchblade from his boot and struck Taurasi in the chest with a well-aimed toss. Taurasi fell to the ground, dropping his rifle in the process. Ambrose jumped to his feet and fell back to the ground almost immediately by thrusting his left knee into Taurasi's chest. Taurasi spewed dark blood from his mouth. With his final few breaths, he did everything he could to fight Ambrose off, but Ambrose closed his extraordinarily large hands around Taurasi's throat and squeezed the remaining life out of him. He stared into the lifeless eyes of Dylan Taurasi, spat on his face, and picked the rifle off the ground.

Moments later the last two remaining survivors of Ambrose's squad cautiously reappeared from out of the warehouse.

"Hey, boss," one of them said as Ambrose walked in their direction. "We were just making sure that the no part of the warehouse was catching fire since there's that big gasoline tank in the back."

Without responding or even looking at them Ambrose, fired off the rifle's remaining bullets into both men. He knew that as soon as Sammy Turtuoro fired upon the trucks and set Taurasi free that they had both panicked and hid in the warehouse, doing nothing to protect neither him nor their colleagues. Ambrose had no time for men of their ilk and figured that the fewer witnesses the better. Now the only remaining survivors were him and Eric Calloway.

"Kid, I want you to grab a shovel out of that warehouse and start digging a hole in back," Ambrose said as he cut Calloway free from his constraints. "It's gotta be big and deep enough for, uh," Ambrose paused a moment to tally the body count. "Nine. Yeah,

nine bodies- damn, that's my entire crew. Hurry it up. We probably only have another hour before someone might put their nose around here."

Ambrose made Calloway dig for all of ten minutes before he came to the realization that this mess was far too big to just bury under the ground. He instructed Calloway to help him gather all of the bodies and place them in the warehouse. Then he stood back and fired a few shots into the gas tank which caught fire and exploded after the third shot.

"Get in the van, kid," he told Calloway. "We're getting the hell outta here."

Ambrose drove Calloway to his home in Cedar Rapids using the van that Taurasi and his two stooges had acquired earlier.

"I don't think that I need to tell you to NEVER speak a word of this to anyone, do I?" Ambrose asked as they neared Calloway's apartment.

"No sir. I, uh, I—"

"I don't need to hear a thing from you. But believe me- I WILL be keeping tabs on you, understood? Please don't make me have to come knocking on your door. You have no idea on how vast my network is, kid. You open your mouth just once and you'll be praying those guys would have just finished you off in the cornfield today- got it?"

Calloway nodded and got out of the van. Ambrose spun around immediately and headed back for the interstate. Eric Calloway ran up the stairs of his apartment and stripped himself of his soiled clothes as soon as he got in the front door. He showered

and fell down on his couch. But he was far too anxious and nervous to lay there in solitary for the remainder of the evening. His cell phone had been taken from him when he was abducted earlier in the day so he decided to call Jason Taggart from his land line as Jason's mobile phone number was one of the few he knew off hand. The phone rang once, but then went abruptly to voicemail- a noticeable signal that Taggart saw who was calling and hit the ignore button on his phone. Calloway decided not to leave a message. He then tried his parents' home line, but they were either not home or answering-mood. He slumped down in his couch, still naked and wet from the shower, and began sobbing once more. There was never a time in his life in which he felt more alone, pathetic, or useless. But he also had a tremendous feeling of relief: Relief that he had somehow, some way been offered a second chance. Relief that he didn't suffer any real physical pain or torture. Somewhere between lingering terror and grateful respite he passed out on his couch with the full intention of attending church services first thing in the morning.

Ambrose went straight to the Eastern Iowa Airport as soon as he dropped off Calloway. Although it was time lost in his overall getaway, he figured he owed it to the kid due to everything he had been through that day because of Dylan Taurasi. He was sure he could scare the kid enough to never say a word of what had just happened to anybody. Ambrose considered everything that went down in the last forty-eight hours and decided that not only had he made a poor choice in leaving Miami for Chicago, but that he wanted out as well. But getting out of a mob outfit like the one he was a part of

over the past few decades wasn't as easy as putting in a two weeks' notice. He was going to fly into New York City and explain the entire situation to his bosses first hand, face-to-face. He was going to do so unannounced, and if he got any blowback he was going put a couple bullets in their heads and retreat once and for all, completely off the grid. He had made the decision to leave Miami solely for monetary reasons- for greed, essentially. Ambrose realized this was the first time in his life in which he had made such an important decision based exclusively for fiscal rewards. From his days of immense success in Miami, he had saved enough money for a fine retirement, but the allure of making even more money over a set amount of years in Chicago pulled him away from his principles, and he was quite upset with himself about it. He was even more upset that the top brass out east who provided him with the new position did not warn him about the volatile Dylan Taurasi. Not a word. Ambrose's expectation was for them to be completely conciliatory and apologetic upon receiving him and hearing his tale. They either would be so, or they would not live long to regret it.

The End