

Spilled Beans

A Charles Duke detective story by

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Prologue

The pitter patter of rain upon the windshield of Roberto Dainotto's coupe made him think that his run might be a little more exciting today. The windshield wipers moved slowly and casually, unafraid of the light drizzle which accumulated on the glass. It had been raining the last three days non-stop, and he'd considered staying in today, curled up with Agatha Christie next to his fireplace. But he knew he should stick to his routine, and so he'd put on his running shoes, gotten in his car at 10am just like every other Sunday, and thought about which trail he'd run.

He was on his way now to pick up his friend Ciro, whom he'd convinced to come with him the last four Sundays. He had been reluctant, not apparently liking the idea of running for recreation, or fitness for that matter. Roberto had convinced him though, appealing to the boredom which Ciro probably felt living in Durham in 2020. What else, after all, had he to do on a Sunday morning? And he'd been good on his word so far, ready to go every time Roberto came by to pick him up. This time however, Roberto suspected that Ciro might be more reluctant than usual with the rain and all.

When he pulled up, Ciro stood outside his house on the front stoop, protected from the rain. He wore his running shoes, shorts and a light windbreaker. So, he was game after all, a nice little surprise. Ciro stepped into the car and sat down. He sipped from a small tumbler what Roberto assumed to be espresso.

"I didn't know if you'd show up today Roberto." He said mockingly.

Roberto cocked an eyebrow, "Of course Ciro, I couldn't miss a run. How has your morning been? You seem a bit chipper." He was curious about Ciro's energy. He was never this enthusiastic for exercise. What was the deal? Had he met a woman? Maybe he'd gotten some good news about a research grant. He suspected something of the sort.

"Oh nothing, just been up for a while. Ready to go run." Roberto noticed from the corner of his eye that Ciro's knee was bouncing nervously.

"Oh, very nice. I was thinking we'd go to the Eno, maybe Bobbitt hole? It could be fun in the rain, you know to splash around and see how high the river is."

“Oh yeah, perfect. That sounds like a blast.” He took another draught from his tumbler, apparently draining the contents. His knee had not stopped bouncing. “Would you mind if we stopped at a coffee place before we start? I’m a little groggy I think.” He looks over at Roberto expectantly.

“Sure, where do you want to go?”

“Umm I don’t know, maybe... Mocha Mason’s? It’s sort of on the way, right?”

Roberto knew that Mocha Mason’s was not exactly on the way. He also knew that Ciro wouldn’t accept anywhere else. He was Neapolitan, so it was expected that his taste for coffee would be very particular. He was a little surprised though, as he normally limited himself to a couple of cups a day. He was acting as if he had had four or five already. Besides, he was playing a dangerous game with his bowels if he expected to make it through a nature run after drinking this much caffeine. He thought about objecting, knowing it’d probably be for his own good. However, he realized it was probably no business of his the amount of coffee his friend drank and so would head that way anyway.

He cut it a little fast to turn off of Hillsborough onto Lasalle without putting on his blinker. He had forgotten the street to turn on and Ciro had reminded him at the last second. He checked his rearview instinctively to make sure a cop hadn’t seen. A silver Chevy truck pulled an almost identical turn.

At Mocha Mason’s, Roberto parked in the front lot and Ciro hopped out almost before the car had stopped.

“Are you getting anything?” He asked before shutting his door.

“No I’m okay, I had a cup this morning. I’ll wait in the car.” He slammed the door shut and jogged through the puddles of the parking lot to the front door, disappearing inside. He’d never seen his friend like this. Ciro had generally been the more laid back of the two and it was strange to see him in such a mood. Had he taken something more potent than coffee this morning?

He sat in the running car, idly changing the radio station, humming A-ha’s Take on Me to himself softly. He could never get that song out of his head. He noticed a

few people walking in and out. The shop was active, but not busy. A group of 5 or so college aged girls walked out of the shop holding monstrosities of whipped cream and sugar and syrups, getting into an Escalade parked a few spaces away from him. A brand-new black BMW pulled into the spot to his left and a young kid (couldn't be older than 17) climbed out. He thought how he would never have trusted himself to drive such a car at that age, and how times had changed since then.

A few minutes later an 80s matte black Bronco backed in a few spaces to his right. He didn't notice anyone getting out, at least on his side. He turned the knob on the radio again, becoming aware of the annoying car dealership ad which occupied his air space. What a horrid jingle. When he reached 102.9 he heard the familiar drum beats and synth and tenor voice mid chorus. Oh well, it's a hell of a song anyhow, he thought. He sang along: "Taaake ooonn meeeeee. Taaaake meeeeee oooooon"

Fifteen minutes later and Ciro finally emerged from Mason's with a paper cup in his hand. By now the drizzling rain has slowed from a pitter patter to an occasional drip drop.

"Finally ready slow poke?" Roberto said playfully.

"Sorry, I got caught up talking to a few friends" They pulled out of the parking lot and off toward the river. As he drove away he saw what looked like the same silver Chevy pickup parked across the street.

Getting out of the car, they observed that they were the only people in the muddy parking lot. No other cars were there. A willingness to run in shitty weather had its perks; they'd have the trail to themselves.

"It's only 2 or so miles to the end of the trail." Roberto commented. They started down the path at a slow jog, chatting most of the way. After five or so minutes the rain stopped and their feet began leaving distinct tracks in the silty mud. For the first half mile, the trail was wide enough for the two of them to run abreast one another. Roberto was struggling to keep pace with Ciro. Once the trail became too narrow Ciro took the lead. The autumn leaves which lined the forest floor made for a hazardous and slippery time, but both men remained patient and sure footed.

The river ran fast and high to their left as they made their way further and further downstream and aside from its gurgle, the only sound heard was the splash of their footsteps. They reached the end of the trail about an hour after they'd started, and Roberto thought how peaceful it was here. They had both stopped talking probably 20 minutes before and were just enjoying the beauty and tranquility of nature.

After 20 or so more minutes simply taking in the scene, they decided to head back the way they'd come, down the trail to Roberto's car. The trail had firmed a little since they'd begun, and Roberto was even beginning to sweat a bit. Ciro again ran in front, and Roberto's vision alternated to the point just behind his feet, and taking in his surroundings. He liked to run out here mostly because he felt the river and the leaves and the open forest rejuvenated him for the week. He loved looking all about, especially at the water rushing past him as he ran. He took a long, cool breath deep into his lungs and thought about nothing except where to place his feet next.

On every journey: hike, walk, run, ride, road trip, he felt the way back was shorter. Before he knew it, he noticed a familiar tree and curve in the river that indicated they were only a half mile or so from the trail head. He picked up his pace until he came next to Ciro. He smiled at him and accelerated past, offering a challenge. Ciro of course was eager to accept, and being the younger man, pulled ahead, quickly outpacing him. Roberto kept his steady, distance eating pace. A little competition was fun, but he wouldn't risk a fall just to beat him.

When they were just about a quarter mile from the parking lot, Ciro disappeared around a bend in front of him. A moment later he heard a cry of pain and "Cazzo!"

Roberto chuckled to himself wryly before realizing that maybe Ciro had gotten more seriously hurt than he thought. He hoped he could walk at least, or he'd feel guilty for laughing at him.

He came upon his friend sitting on the ground, the whole right side of his body slick with mud. He was shaking his hung head side to side in embarrassment. He looked up to Roberto.

"These shoes were not meant for trails I think."

“Does this mean I win the race?”

“Yes I suppose I forfeit at this point.”

He held his hand out and Roberto pulled him up to his feet.

Ciro grunted, “I think I should walk the rest of the way.”

“That’s a good idea.”

As they walked side by side, they exchanged pleasantries, laughing over Ciro’s clumsiness. Roberto thought to himself how he might have a towel or something to keep the muddy clothes off of his seats. Perhaps he’d something in the trunk, he-

Everything happened all at once. Ciro’s idle speech was cut off abruptly by what sounded like an explosion, but muffled and without much of an echo. Ciro collapsed to the mud in a heap as a spray of blood hit Roberto’s face. He stood there, utterly shocked. What was happening?

His right arm exploded with pain just above the elbow and his ears resonated with another muffled gunshot. His other hand instinctively rose to the spot of pain. He dove to the ground next to Ciro, not in control of his body in the slightest. Ciro groaned feebly next to him. What was happening?

“Ciro are you...”

Another explosion and another spray of blood and there was a puddle of God-knows-what where Ciro’s head used to be.

Roberto ran. He had no idea what was happening so he ran the way he’d come. Faster than he thought possible, clutching his bleeding arm, he ran. There was a little splash in the mud just to his right and again he heard that strange muffled explosion which he now knew to be a gunshot. This time he could tell that it was coming from behind him, so at least he knew he was running in the correct direction; away from whoever shot at him. Another shot whizzed right by his ear this time he heard the whine of it, which was unlike anything he’d ever heard. With it came the realization that he was probably going to die. His feet carried him on,

pure adrenaline coursing through his veins. He didn't even feel pain in the arm he clutched, or at least he didn't care.

He didn't stop running until he tripped over a root and fell hard, squarely upon his injured arm onto the leaf covered ground. He let out a cry of pain, but got back up in a heartbeat. He looked all around a moment, praying to God he wasn't being chased. If he was, maybe he could lose whoever it was, but he couldn't do that if he stayed on the trail. He cut to the right, away from the river, into the open, leaf covered woods.

He didn't stop running. He just went in a straight line as fast as he could, until his heart was ready to explode. He didn't exactly know where he was, but he knew he'd hit the road eventually. He looked down at his arm as he ran. He hated the sight of blood, and this was more blood than he's ever seen. It's dark slick redness was almost black in the overcast autumn sky, and he would have vomited, except his lungs wouldn't allow it.

His head began to feel light and his vision began to fog. He knew he was probably stumbling more than running at this point. He hoped that the road was nearby. Maybe there was a lone hiker out here who'd save him. Maybe an angel would come down and simply lift him away from this terribly situation. Maybe...

He fell head over heels, unaware of what was happening in the slightest. He nearly lost consciousness as his head jostled around, seeming to hit every rock and root in his path, until he slid to a stop on the asphalt of Cole mill road. He crawled into the middle of the road and waved his good arm wildly. He needed to get someone's attention, he needed help. He prayed that someone might notice him lying there in time, before their wheels squished him like an ant. Arm shaking wildly for what seemed like eternity, he lost awareness of where he was, or what he was doing. He'd lost a lot of blood now. His limbs stopped working and his grasp on reality faded entirely. In his blurred double vision, the last thing he saw was headlights.

I

A break in the pillowy clouds let a stray ray of sunlight peak through the sparse canopy of the forest down onto the damp, muddy ground. The air in Eno River state park was heavy with the feeling of helplessness which always accompanies a

cold blooded assassination such as this. Police tape blocked the entrance to the trailhead of one of the Eno's many hikes. Police cruisers crowded just to the outside of the parking lot, red and blue lights glared annoyingly even in the light of daytime. No one crossed the police line. Not even policemen. Where one might think a crime scene like this would spark maelstrom of activity on the part of the police, no one here moved much. No one talked much for that matter. Most of the men in uniform simply waited.

Charles Duke shifted his nondescript Ford sedan into park in the middle of the road leading up to the crime scene. Though it wasn't particularly bright under the canopy of the woods, he still wore a dark pair of Vuarnet aviators. He shut off the engine, and stepped out of the car onto the gravel road about 500 yards from the nearest policeman. He took off his black suit jacket and tossed it casually back into the passenger seat. He hated how muggy it was this time of year. He shut the door and adjusted the leather straps of the old-school shoulder holster he wore over his plain, white dress shirt. He had never had to use the Glock 19 that hung there, but he'd always carried it with him anyway; it was the agency's policy.

He strolled down the gravel road. He noted how pretty the changing of seasons was. He pulled an unfiltered Chesterfield cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it with a brass zippo. He approached the group of police cars and thought how ridiculous it was that people still didn't understand why day or night he always wore glasses to a crime scene. Apparently establishing motive was not the average beat cop's strong suit.

He flashed his badge to the detective who greeted him. The detective smiled nervously, barely noticing the badge, let alone inspecting it for authenticity.

"Agent Duke, great to meet you. So glad you could come so quickly. We were surprised to hear you were in town." The detective was obviously a little green around the gills. His rural Georgian accent gave Duke the impression that he'd do things by the books. He wouldn't mess things up most of the time. But he wouldn't make the leaps which solved tough cases either.

"Anyone go into the parking lot?" Duke asked

“No sir, not besides the first responding officer. We kept the scene clear as possible for ya.” said the detective. Duke ducked under the yellow tape into the muddy parking lot. The rookie detective followed.

“I took a look at the body though. Man is he a mess. Head nearly blown clean off. Must’ve been a big round at some pretty close range for him to look like that.” He continued. Duke nodded idly. Got a big hole in his midsection too, but I’m sure you’ll go see that for yourself. And the car there belongs to the friend. The Professor fella that’s down at the hospital right now; got a gunshot wound to the arm. They tell me he’s doing okay now.”

“Where’d they find him?” Duke asked, bending down to inspect the slashed tires on the passenger side of the coupe.

The detective pointed back down the road “They found him lying in the middle of the road about a mile and a half down Cole mill. Guy who called it in almost ran him over with his truck.”

“You hear if he’s out of surgery yet?” He took a handkerchief from his front pocket and opened the unlocked driver’s side door.

“I heard he’d just gotten out when you walked up. Hasn’t waked up yet though from what I understand.” Duke was sitting in the passenger’s seat now, rifling through the console and glove compartment. He noticed a distinct smell in the car. He carefully picked up the empty tumbler in the cupholder. He opened it and sniffed the contents. He did the same with the empty paper cup. Coffee. Stale coffee. He hated coffee.

He turned the paper cup around in his kerchiefed hand, reading *Mocha Mason’s* on the sleeve. He put the cups back where he found them and got out of the car.

“Forensics is coming out here soon I’m assuming.” He cocked a questioning eyebrow at the detective.

“Yes, everyone is arriving shortly. We just wanted you to get first peek at it, ya know with your reputation and all.” He ignored the praise.

“Make sure they get back to me on these tire tracks. Looks like the mud’s preserved them pretty much perfectly. I see the victim’s, the original police cruiser’s, and one more here.” He squatted down on his haunches to inspect the tire tracks. “If I had to guess, it’d be a truck, maybe an F-150 or a Ram or something. Definitely something heavy, with these off-road tires and all.” He stood and did a quick 360 of the area. He walked over to the parking spot nearest the trailhead.

“Appears he parked here.” He squatted again, inspecting the dirt. “Hard to tell with these dead leaves everywhere, but it looks like a tennis shoe, maybe size ten or eleven.” He followed a trail of steps to the trail head and stopped by the garbage can. “Looks like he took a few side steps here.”

The detective scratched his head. “Maybe he checked the map. Tried to figure out which trail they were hiking on.”

Duke shook his head. “No, not likely. Tracks don’t get that close to the map.” He lifted the lid off the can. He looked inside, unphased by the smell. On the very top of the heap of trash there was a paper cup and sleeve, almost identical to the one in the Professor's car. He fished it out and once again inspected the sleeve. It read *Fay’s Café* in boxy black lettering.

Duke dropped the cup back into the garbage and replaced the lid. He pocketed his kerchief and squirted some purell from a pocket bottle onto his hands as he walked briskly back toward the police cruisers. He offered some to the detective, who waved denial and followed him.

“Don’t you wanna check out the crime scene?” he asked in confusion.

“I did.” Duke replied as he lit up another Chesterfield.

“But what about the victim... the uh... the body.”

He didn’t slow his pace. “I’ll see it in the formal report.”

“Oh... well don’t you want to-” Duke cut him off abruptly, but not rudely, saying in a gentle, patient tone. “If I have any questions or I need anything, I’ll be sure to call you. I trust you’ll take care of all that needs taken care of here and get me all the information I need. Ain’t that right Detective...”

“Schofield. Jim Schofield.” He thrust his hand out to be shaken.

Duke smiled and patted his shoulder. “Right. I’ll be in touch Jim.” Jim mirrored Duke’s smile and nodded to himself as Duke again ducked under the police tape and walked back to his car.

To tell it true, he’d never actually looked at the body in person at a crime scene. He couldn’t fuckin’ stand the sight of blood.

II

“We’d stopped for coffee right before we ran. Ciro is... was Neapolitan and is always drinking it, although he’s very particular you know. So we stopped that place umm...” Roberto snapped a few times with his good hand, trying to remember the name of the coffee shop whose parking lot he’d sat in the day before. Duke thought to himself that the pain meds were probably messing with the poor guy’s head.

“Mocha Mason’s.” he said casually.

“Yes, that’s the one. That’s the only place he’ll go if he doesn’t make it at home. A real espresso snob.” He paused momentarily, taking a sip of apple juice from the strawed juice pouch sitting on the tray at chest level. He looked horribly pale, having lost quite a lot of blood from his arm wound.

“So he went in for a while, I waited in the car, and he came out and we went to the trail and we ran. And it was fine and beautiful and we were the only ones there and as we were almost back I heard a sort of explosion and he fell and I got hit in the arm and I dove down and his head... his...” His voice choked up and he averted his gaze.

“That’s okay sir, I can get that bit from the officers you’ve spoken to. You don’t need to tell me anything about that, okay? And like I said before, you’re not in danger any more. We’ll take care of you.” Roberto nodded thankfully.

“I just wanna know if there was anything you noticed about your friend that day which was out of the ordinary. Anything at all. Was there anything he did or said that made you think twice?” Duke looked into Roberto’s eyes sincerely and

earnestly. He at once urged him to remember, to think hard, yet somehow also relieved the pressure. He conveyed a sense of empathy which made the poor man feel as if the burden was less, and everything would be okay for him.

“Well, he was... enthusiastic. He was never normally excited to run with me, in fact I doubted if he'd agree to run at all in such weather. But when I picked him up, he was primed and ready. On edge almost. His leg was twitching. Normally he was so calm. And not only did he drink whatever coffee he had in his tumbler, but then he got more from the place. I'd never seen him drink so much.”

“So both the tumbler and the paper cup in your car were *Ciro's*?”

“Yes and I even remember thinking to myself how he probably wouldn't make it through a run with so much coffee and no bathroom, but he did.” Roberto looked down, tears welling in his eyes.

“You said you waited for a while at the coffee shop. How long's a while?”

“Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“Did you notice any unusual people coming in or out of there? Any unusual cars pull up? Any one that didn't look like they belonged.

“No, not that I can remember. Nothing too unordinary.”

“You sure?”

“There was... some young kid. He was driving a brand new BMW and I just remember thinking that you didn't see that much. Except of course this is *Duke*, so it's not too implausible. Then there was an old Bronco, probably pretty rare that pulled up beside me which was pretty cool.”

“Ok. Anything else?”

“Well, there was this one moment when I was driving and I took kind of a sudden turn, this silver Chevy truck followed me, which admittedly was a little odd. And then I saw it again as I pulled out of *Mocha Mason's*. It was just parked across the street.”

“It have big off-road tires?”

Duke radioed that he wanted to run tabs on all of the the registered Silver 2000s Chevy Silverados. His assessment of the tire tracks had been confirmed after checking in with forensics. It was judged by the tread that the murderer was most likely driving a half ton pickup with off-road tires, or some time of big, souped up SUV like a Suburban or an Excursion. He'd have to wait to hear back on that, but there were a few things he wanted to check on first. Ciro may have been innocent of any crimes, and as far as he knew the guy was squeaky clean. But Duke was beginning to realize more and more that the Italian had gotten himself into something dangerous.

III

The two baristas at Mocha Mason's moved with a grace and alacrity which befitted trapeze artists. They were both around thirty, real cute, one blonde one brunette. No hesitation in their pours, and certainly no mistaken orders. They even put in a little flair when they made drinks, occasionally tossing a can of whipped cream behind the back, or doing an uber high steamed milk pour. They moved with smooth motions, perfectly harmonious and efficient.

Duke sat comfortably in one of the café's plush couches, facing the baristas, pretending to read a John Grisham novel. He'd been there about 2 hours now, just enjoying a few cups of tea here and there, scanning the shop for irregularities. It was 2:30 on a Monday. Yet, there was a constant line out the door. Most people would simply order, wait about two to three minutes at the other end of the counter, then pick up their drink and leave. It was pretty straight forward. Occasionally people would sit down for a short time and talk to whoever they might be with while they sipped their drinks. The shop itself was a pretty standard layout; one counter, some chairs and tables, and a little section in the corner with a couple couches, a rustic looking lamp and a disorganized shelf of paperback novels.

Behind the counter was a pair of swinging saloon doors which led into what looked like a supply room. He'd scene the Baristas go back there once or twice since he'd been there, and come back out with a jug of milk, or bottle of syrup or something.

Every once in a while they'd come back with a bag of whole bean coffee. When he'd ordered he'd asked the brunette if they had a lot of people buy in bulk like that. She'd told him that they had their own roaster back there, and that they sold their own brand which came from Guatemala, but was roasted right here in Durham.

He'd thought that something was a little off about the Barista's little speech. It'd seemed a little too rehearsed, and a little too nervous. It was as if she'd been auditioning for a part, and had only just started to really remember the lines. So that was when he'd decided just to watch. Just to see if anything happened. Nothing had so far. He thought that it would probably have been smarter to spend his time elsewhere if he was being logical with his investigation. He should probably be checking with forensics, or interviewing his other known acquaintances, or doing something they actually taught you to do in the Bureau. But he had an indescribable feeling that something was amiss here. Something about Ciro's behaviour the morning of his death didn't add up. Why spend twenty minutes in here? Was he hitting on the baristas, or talking with a friend, or were they maybe taking longer than usual to make drinks? And why drink so much coffee that morning? He would wait a little longer. He could feel that something would present itself here before too long.

He waited another half hour until he noticed it. A man walked in, not particularly unusual in appearance, but looking as if he was experiencing the worst hangover in history. His eyes were puffy and all of the color was drained from his face. His hands in his coat pockets seemed to shield his stomach, as if the internal discomfort was coming from the outside. His hair was a mess, and when he did take a hand out of his pocket, it was to scratch his neck roughly. He mumbled his order to the brunette barista, then without paying, moved to the end of the counter to wait for his order. The brunette tapped the blonde, who instantly went through the back saloon doors. A minute later the blonde put a lidded, empty cup onto the counter. The man took it and walked around the counter behind the two women, and disappeared through the swinging doors.

Duke waited intently, imagining all of the things that could be happening behind those swinging doors. He waited for around twenty minutes and he was beginning to think perhaps the guy had left from a back entrance or something. But sure

enough, he came out the same way he came in. It was the same guy, but he was barely recognizable. The fog in his eyes had disappeared, the color had returned to his cheeks, his posture was more upright and he had a light pep in his step, as opposed to a dejected shuffle. Duke was confounded. What had happened back there? He wanted to wait around to see if someone else would go in, but he felt he should probably leave, or else appear suspicious waiting there so long. He'd have one of the guys from the Sheriff's office come in and stake it out later.

He closed the Grisham novel and kicked his feet down from off of the coffee table. Just as he was getting up to go, he saw another customer, this time a mousy looking woman, grab an empty cup and head through the back room. She too looked to be in pretty bad shape. Her cheeks were sunken and her dull flat hair hung limply down her slumped shoulders. But after about ten minutes, she came back through, a woman transformed.

Something was amiss here, but for the life of him he could not understand exactly what. One thing was clear to him however; Ciro's death had something to do with that shady back room.

IV

Ciro Incoronato's apartment smelled like used coffee grounds. That sour, acidic, but still coffee-like smell that isn't exactly offensive, but isn't delicious either. It reeked of it actually. Duke turned on the light and perused casually. It was a nice place, comfortably furnished but not extravagant, with a decent amount of room. Books were strewn about everywhere, yet there still remained an overflowing bookshelves that covered nearly the entire north wall.

He browsed the library, finding everything from cookbooks, to academic essays to collections of poetry, to fantasy novels, to historical texts. Among the books strewn about were mostly detective novels and Italian books whose titles he couldn't read. He made his way over to the kitchen. The calendar on the fridge was covered in notes and surrounding the calendar were accessory sticky notes, or notes held up by magnets. A lunch here, a class there, a meeting there; this was a very busy man.

He scanned the notes, noticing nothing out of the ordinary. They were for the most part organized very well. If this man had had any questions of alibi, he'd have been

prepared. Duke turned and saw something in the shadow of the pantry door. He took a few steps toward it and the movement whooshed over an unstuck sticky note that was laying face down on the counter on to the hardwood floor. He bent down to pick it up. It read *hot soy milk latte with ice. not decaf, thank you kindly*. Duke frowned to himself and pocketed the note.

Then he noticed the scuff marks on the floor in front of the oven. They were faint, but clear enough for him to suspect that the oven had been moved more often than it reasonably should have. Duke stood and unbuttoned his suit, then pulled the oven out of its nook across the floor. There was a tiny gap running across the grain of the hardwood. Duke snatched up a kitchen knife from the block on the counter and pried up the cover of the hidden compartment. It was about two feet long and wide and maybe one foot deep. It was empty. All that remained was the faint smell of the most bitter coffee Duke had ever laid olfactory sensors upon.

He put things back to how they were when he'd gotten there.

V

The line to Mocha Mason's had diminished significantly since Duke had been there a few hours before. It was 6:00pm now and they were nearly closed. He had changed into a less conspicuous outfit since he's searched *Ciro's* apartment and he felt oddly naked in the blue jeans and t-shirt. His gun he'd reluctantly left in the car, feeling it'd raise too much suspicion if there was a frisk of any kind. Behind the counter were a different pair of baristas, this time a younger black guy, maybe 23 or so, and an older white woman, looked to be about mid fifties. Neither were as adept as the two young women from before, but both did their job right.

The man in front of him ordered and moved along to the waiting area for his drink. Duke took off his glasses and tried to appear hungover and paranoid like the people he'd seen go in earlier. He looked from side to side in mock suspicion, hoping the baristas could tell his intentions even before he ordered. The young guy approached the cash register and made eye contact with him.

"Hey man, what can I get you?"

Duke hesitated, looked over his shoulder and leaned in to tell the barista in a hushed tone. “I’ll um, I’ll take a hot soymilk latte with ice. not decaf... thank you kindly.” He scratched at his chin and looked down between his feet. He waited for a cue. The barista tapped the older woman and she set down the steamed milk she held and disappeared through the mysterious saloon doors behind her without a word.

A minute later she reappeared and set an empty paper cup, sleeve turned upside down, on the counter. Duke wordlessly snatched up the cup and brushed past her into the room.

It was dark dingy room, and it took a moment for his eyes to fully adjust. When they did he saw that a massive, vintage, copper coffee roaster stood solidly in the middle of a room the size of a college dorm. Two of the walls were lined with shelves of paper cups, straws, single serve sugar, packaged beans, and any other disposables one might find in a coffee shop storage room. Behind the the roaster there was a large square of yellow light from the floor. Duke walked around the roaster and saw that a rug had been rolled away to reveal a hidden trap door, with a wooden staircase leading down below.

He stepped down into the basement, the coffee smell with each step becoming stronger, and less tolerable to him, and the light French café music which played became louder. At the bottom of the stairwell there stood a giant man in a too-small black polo and black pants standing in front of a thick tapestry which blocked the entrance to whatever lay beyond. He stuck out his arm to block Duke’s path.

“Arms out, spread your legs.” The man’s voice must’ve been an octave below James Earl Jones’ and twice as raspy. Duke did as he was told and was patted down lazily. The man must not have viewed him as much of a threat.

Wordlessly, the man stepped aside and gestured for Duke to enter. He did. The scene was like some strange, twilight-zone type version of a prohibition era speak easy. About 10 people sat around the room, longing in couches or on one of the thick shag rugs which looked to be straight out of the 70s. There was a bar of some sort on the far end of the room, at which 5 more average looking people sat, and

behind which there was greasy, mustachioed man serving them mugs of nearly black liquid. Everyone of the people in the room were drinking coffee, and none seemed to pay him much mind when he entered.

There were four or five open stools at the bar, and he sat in one, trying his best to hide his confusion and act as if he belonged. The “bartender” walked over and stood in front of him expectantly. Duke didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing and so let him make the first move.

“What’ll you be having today?”

“Well, this is my first time at this particular place, so um I’m not really sure what you got.”

“Oh I see, you were at Fay’s before huh?”

“Yeah but, you know...”

“Yeah from what I hear, their quality is taking a dive. Not at liberty to say why, but I have my suspicions.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep, but I’d just as soon not go around spreading rumors and all.” The man raised his voice a bit, almost questioning his own statement.

“Yeah” Duke said, “best not.” The man chuckled, slapped the table congenially.

“True enough, but.” He leaned in a bit closer, conspiratorially. “I can show you.” He turned and pressed a button on one of the several espresso machines behind him. The ground beans began spewing into a filter in response. The man sitting in the stool beside him nudged him with an elbow.

“Going for the good stuff eh?” He smiled wryly.

“I guess so. What’s so good about it?”

“You never tried it?”

“No.”

“Well let me just say, it’ll put you in another world. Shit’s better than I thought possible.” Duke cocked an eyebrow, gestured toward the mug in the man’s hands.

“That what you’re drinkin’?”

“Nah, this is just some lower grade stuff: cheaper, easier. I had some last week though. Don’t wanna get hooked on the shit. Seen it happen too often ya know. I’m an addict, who isn’t? But... the people that drink that shit, like every day... they’re different.” The man got a far off look, like his mind went to a place where just his memories lived.

A slight shiver ran down Duke’s spine. The bartender set a double walled four ounce espresso glass before him. Inside was a liquid that seemed to eat the light of the room. It was blacker than the night. The thin layer of foam which rested atop the blackness contrasted it with a bright, almost neon orange. He picked up the glass and brought it to his mouth. He hesitated a moment. God, he hated coffee.

He downed it in a single gulp. It tasted like hell. Like bitter hell and seemed to burn his throat going down. He started coughing a rasping, guttural cough. The Bartender laughed.

“Now I know it’s your first time, ain’t no one takes it all in one swig like that” He slapped his knee and continued his chuckle, replacing the empty cup with a receipt. “Cash only please. It’s cool if you hang for a bit. When you leave though, you can go out the way you came, or the elevator there.” He pointed to a rickety looking lift in the corner. So that was how these others had come in. Duke thought that he’d have to go out that way.

He looked at the receipt. The single shot had cost him 65 dollars.

“What the fuck was that?” He looked at bartender accusingly

“Good shit huh?” He leaned in a little closer again, “I’m just the server ya know, but I hear things now and then. Nuggets of things at least. This shit came in a week ago and they call it *El Tiburón Negro*. Apparently, Fay’s has been serving it for months, it comes up from the south. Took a good chunk of our clientele and started creating these addicts who just could not get enough. From what I hear, a guy we

know may have intercepted a shipment so to speak. Now we got this good stuff and coincidentally that spike they had has levelled out a bit. I'm getting paid a bit more too, because of it. I just wanna shake hands with whoever..."

As the man spoke, the shit he'd drank took effect almost all at once. His left knee started bouncing uncontrollably. He felt all over his muscles taut and strained. His entire body was like the belly wood of a longbow at full draw, labored with tension, fully contracted and ready to extend in one explosive burst. What was just a body minutes before was now pure potential energy conveniently shaped like Charles Duke and at his conscious disposal. His body beckoned his mind to action. Any action. He stood up abruptly, cutting off the bartender's speech.

"Woah there cowboy, slow it down now, I know it's strong stuff, but it might time for you to head out if you're getting a little too antsy." The bartender said with a regular calmness. No doubt this happened often. Duke pulled a 100 dollar bill from his pocket and slapped it on the receipt.

"Keep the change bubs." He ran over to the elevator and pressed the call button. He had all he needed here. It was time to get busy.

The elevator arrived and an operator, nearly identical to the guard by the tapestry, opened the door for him. They rode two floors up and arrived in a tiny toolshed in the alley behind the coffee shop. No one would notice. He left the elevator, then the toolshed, and walked around the building to his car.

He wondered how long these effects would last. He hoped it was a while, because he suspected the come down would not be particularly pleasant.

VI

Fay's Café was a mere 10 minute drive from its apparent rival, and had an almost identical storefront. Duke parked his car in the parallel parking spot out front and neglected to pay at the meter, instead choosing to walk immediately through the front door without even casing the joint. Normally he might have sat across the street, looked at possible escape routes, called the local department to insure they knew his whereabouts, kept an eye out for suspicious individuals, so on and so forth. But now it was as if his body was calling the shots, and his mind was simply

along for the ride. It just so happened that his body felt invincible, and so he was barging right in, not concerned in the slightest with any notion of legality or common practice.

The place apparently closed a couple hours after Mocha Mason's, and by now it was nearing 8 pm, way beyond when he'd expect anyone to want a cup of coffee. Nevertheless, there were still seven or eight customers inside, one of whom stood looking at the menu, debating. Duke paid his surroundings almost no attention. He shoved the customer out of the way, hopped over the counter and grabbed the lone barista by the collar of his t-shirt, pushing him up against the wall behind him. The kid was skinny (maybe 6'0" 140lb) and almost seemed to snap in half when he grabbed him. He gave a look of shock and fear that nearly made Duke loosen his grip out of pity, but Duke knew better than to give him an inch when he'd started off so aggressively.

"Now I don't know how it works here, but I know there's gotta be some sort of shady shit going on huh? Some little password I give you to go into some dusty old back room? Or maybe some shady little alley? Why don't you just save me some time and tell me where I gotta go, okay? It'll save you a lot of dignity." The terrified teen did not move a muscle. His eyes stayed glued to Duke's the entire time. He pointed across the shop.

"Go thru the boutique next door. There's an employees only sign next to the bathroom."

"Is there a guard? A password? There must be something." Duke snarled at him, bringing his face within inches of the kid's

"A guard. Tell him Mildred sent you. He should let you right in. Please that's all I know, just don't hurt me." He raised his hands to cover his face.

"Show me" Duke replied, dragging the kid with him as he walked out of the shop and into the boutique next door. "Where?" he asked as he let go of the teen's collar.

"This way. It's umm, it's in back to the right." The kid brought him to the door he'd described. Duke turned him back to the exit and kicked him square in the butt.

“Go back to the fucking coffee. And keep your little mouth shut, ya hear?” The kid ran off back the way they’d come, happy to be out of the situation altogether. Duke adjusted the Glock tucked now in his jeans at the small of his back, covering it with the t-shirt and light sweater he now wore. He pushed open the door quickly, but calmly. Inside was a storage room similar to the one he’d been in earlier, but instead of coffee shop supplies, there were supplies related to a boutique. A wide metal door with peep slot on the far side of the room. He was tired of this weird underground bullshit.

He banged on the door four times with a closed fist. Immediately the peep slot slid open and a set of dark brown eyes looked him over skeptically and in a seedy accent, probably from long island, “This is employees only sir, how can I help you?” Duke’s body was unwilling to play these games any longer and although he knew he should be more tactful, it was impossible.

“Mildred sent me”

“We’re closed now, come back tomorrow.” The guard started to close the slot.

“Cut the shit asshole. I know you guys are running low on the good stuff. Tell your boss in there I have a business proposition for him.” He looked a little past the brown eyed man to get a glimpse inside. “I know someone above you has got to be in there, why don’t you fetch someone like a good little dog and you can let me in.”

The eyes narrowed in obvious anger and Duke thought he could see the man’s lips purse without their even being in view. The slide slammed shut and Duke waited impatiently. His weight shifted from side to side without his control. He spent the next three minutes fidgeting, still unsure of what exactly he was going to do once he got in there.

The slide opened again. The man said, “Alright slick, you caught us at a convenient time with no customers. There’s two guys in there. One has a denim jacket and a ball cap, the other a sweater. You talk to the guy in the sweater, okay? Don’t worry about the other one. And no funny business, got it?” He waited for Duke to respond.

“Got it.”

The slide closed and as he heard a lock disengage before the door swung open. After his first step inside the doorman went to pat him down. Duke shoved him away roughly.

“Hey, hands off the merch bud!”

The guy grabbed his collar and cocked back a fist, like he was making to punch him. Duke headbutted him in the nose. He cried out in pain, but still held a tight grip on Duke’s collar.

As he tried to break free, attacking the wrist of the large man, a rich sing-song voice came from within the room.

“Come Danny, would you give it a rest?” The voice said calmly. Both Duke and Danny stopped wrestling and looked over to where the man in the sweater sat. He was a small man, about 50 years old and balding on top. He sipped a cup of coffee and seemed to be writing things in a ledger.

“I’m supposed to search people.” Danny whined. He still held Duke’s collar.

“If this guy wanted to kill me or some shit, he wouldn’t do it here. Besides, if he has some info on our beans, it’d behoove us to start the negotiation off friendly.

Danny released Duke’s collar, who brushed himself off dramatically and gave the guard a savage glare. He walked into the dimly lit room and stood in front of the sweater man. The man in denim faced away from Duke at the far corner of the room. He seemed to be cleaning out an espresso machine carefully.

The balding sweater man addressed him with a smirk. “Ya know I don’t really care to know who you are to be honest. I just want to know what you know about the product which was stolen from us. So, what do you know?”

“I know it was the good stuff. South of the Border. The stuff that everyone’s been trying to get their hands on. And I know it’s illegal. And I’m guessing your employer has dealt with a lot of shit getting a steady supply line. And I’m guessing that he’s not too happy that it was taken.”

The sweater man chuckled to himself, “Some detective you are. Every junky that comes through here and his mother knows that.”

“Yeah but, I can tell you something you don’t know.”

“And what’s that?”

“I can tell you where it is.” The Sweater man’s eyes narrowed and the man in the denim looked over his shoulder at Duke. “Most of it at least.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. But we have a mutual acquaintance. *Ciro Incoronato*.” At this, the Denim clad man dropped the rag in his hands and turned around completely, mouth slightly ajar. Duke turned and saw that Danny had taken a few steps toward him. The Man in the sweater remained still. He gestured toward the seat in front of him.

“Take a seat please.” He said. Danny walked right behind him and put a hand on his shoulder roughly. Duke ignored the hand, but followed the man’s lead and sat down. Denim quickly came over and whispered something in the ear of sweater, who nodded, then whispered something back. Denim pulled the keys from a pocket and walked out the door through which Duke had come.

Duke asked, “Where’s Canadian tux there heading off to?”

Sweater replied, “He’s gonna go tell our boss we caught the little rat that’s been snooping around.” He lit a cigarette. “And you’re gonna tell us everything you know while we wait.”

“He couldn’t just call him?” Duke lit a cigarette of his own. His hand was shaking as he did it. The coffee was still coursing through his veins. He tried to steady himself. This confrontation was not going to end smoothly, and his body longed for the excitement about to unfold. He mustered all of his mental strength to appear calm and unaffected.

“Eh, we’re not that stupid. Too much heat, and we’re damn sure the FBI’s got all the phones and cell phones tapped. In person’s the only way nowadays, maybe the

occasional burner text.” Sweater took a drag. He seemed unconcerned with the level of information he revealed. That was not a good sign.

“You’re being pretty open with the details of your little scheme here friend.”

“Eh, it don’t exactly matter no more. You’re not getting out of here alive.” He smiled as he said it. Duke could feel his heart pounding in his chest. His mind was a whirlwind of anxiety and fear like he’d never felt. He’d always preferred a more hands-off approach. None of this life-threatening nonsense. His body on the other hand, longed for this yoke of self-control to be lifted, and the years of built up anger and fury to be released in a sudden burst of well-trained explosion.

“You’d kill an FBI agent? Really?” He asked rhetorically. “They’d send in the fucking calvalry. That’s not what you want, trust me.”

“We’re not worried about that. Our influence is quite far-reaching.” He said confidently, crossing his legs.

“Don’t you wanna know where the product is?” Duke said it in faux-desperation.

“Nah, There’ll be more. It was a small loss in the scheme of things. My boss has connections like no on else. And we pretty much insured we won’t be stolen from again. We’re more worried about you. You’re the rogue agent; the guy who solves case in his own way. You’re the wild card. And this game don’t have room for a wild card in the deck.” Sweater stood up slowly. He nodded at Danny gravely, turning way from Duke. He was probably making his way for the coat rack behind him.

“Wildcard?” Sweater paused and looked over his shoulder back at him. “You got that right.” It all happened in a flash. Duke heard the hammer of Danny’s pistol click behind him: too close to his head. His body was like a spring long compressed, now released.

His hands flicked up behind him and grabbed the barrel of the .45. The gun fired as his hands pushed the gun up and he folded his head forward. The bullet whizzed a few inches over his head into the chair in which Sweater had just been sitting.

He kept ahold of the gun, keeping it pointed toward the chair as he slid his body out of his own chair and off to the left a bit. Danny tried to wrench the gun free, pulling it up toward the ceiling and fired another shot in the attempt. Duke's grip was like a vice. He donkey kicked the chair with his right foot at full force, which sent it right at Danny's shins, hyper-extending his knees and making him lose his balance.

In the moment of pain and unbalance, he loosened his grip on the gun just enough for Duke to rip it free. It went careening across the room, landing on the chair with the bullet hole in the cushion. Even before it landed, Duke had drawn his gun, gotten both hands on it, taken a step back and aimed it at his target.

Before Danny could regain his balance he had three 9mm holes in his chest and a bad case of lead poisoning.

Sweater lunged for the piece on the chair in a desperate attempt to keep his life. He got a bullet in the arm for his efforts. He screamed in pain, clutching his wound by reflex. In an instant Duke had him by the collar against the wall, his gun pressed roughly against the man's temple.

"Where'd the idiot in the denim go?"

The man whimpered in utter fear, "I don't know, the meeting place always changes." Duke presses the barrel harder in to his temple. "He would have gotten a coded text on a burner phone with a place and time. Probably south toward Chapel Hill though. That's all I know!"

"What kind of car does he drive?"

"Black Bronco. Can't miss it. P-Please don't kill me."

Duke felt his arm put the gun to the man's heart and his finger pull the trigger. The body became dead weight and he let it slump to the floor.

VII

He pulled onto the freeway heading south. The chaos of driving at high speeds, objects whizzing past vision in a blur, barely observed or comprehended, was not

present. His vision was utterly focused, and his mind totally clear. No thought penetrated the brain which controlled his body. It was as if he was unaffected by consciousness, unburdened by the thoughts that distract a person from completing the tasks in front of him, and unwilling to hesitate acting on this single-minded pursuit. The man in the Bronco was heading this way. There was no question to that fact. It simply was. And he was going to catch him and catch the boss he was meeting. Even in this sea of cars, and this sea of possible routes, he felt no doubt that he would spot him.

He wove through traffic unafraid of the risky passes and lane changes, unphased by the many sideswipes he narrowly avoided. He figured he was averaging around 100 miles an hour and he'd been on the 501 for about 10 minutes. He had to be gaining on him. He took the exit where the road branched off toward Chapel Hill. There were stoplights on this road. This would be where he'd catch him.

He sped past a changing light, entering the intersection as it turned red. Light after light, he took risks he'd normally never take, narrowly avoiding accident after accident. When he finally had to stop at a red, he peeled out off the line, racing ahead of the cars around him. The fact that he'd not been pulled over truly amazed him. He neared the turn toward Franklin street, hesitating for a split second at the fork in the road. He got into the right lane to make the merge. That's when he saw the Bronco making a left at the next light. He cursed silently and whipped the car over two lanes, cutting off a pickup truck who honked at him angrily. He saw the driver lift his hands in indignation in his rearview mirror.

He turned left at too high a speed where the Bronco had gone, drifting a bit in his back tires and nearly spinning out. He turned the wheel back right and gave it more gas, gaining control again. The Bronco was two cars ahead of him. He had him now.

30 minutes later and Duke was still following the man in the Bronco. It was clear the man had no clue he was being followed. Despite that, Duke was being tactful. He maintained a distance of at least a few cars for the majority, even allowing himself to lose sight of him for short stretches of time. They'd been driving almost entirely on main roads, never taking strange detours or half turns that would make it suspicious for him to follow. He was confident that wherever they were meeting,

it was probably a public place, not too far out of the way. The Bronco slowed and pulled into a gas station on the left, parking in one of the mini-mart spots rather than a pump. This wouldn't be the place. He wondered what was going on.

He pulled into a restaurant parking lot across the street. He drove around until he could park in a spot that gave him a good view. He left his accessories on but turned off his engine and waited. The man in denim got out of the car and went inside the mini mart. Moments later he emerged opening a pack of Marlboro menthols. He lit one and leaned against the front of his truck smoking. When the cigarette was nearly out he pulled his phone from a front pocket and put it to his cheek. He nodded, said something, flicked the cigarette butt, got back into his car and drove off in the direction they'd come.

20 minutes later Duke was pulling into a street parking spot perhaps 100 yards in front of the Bronco on Franklin street. By now it was around 11:00pm. The restaurants were closed but the bars were open and a mix of masked UNC students and older Chapel Hill inhabitants strolled the sidewalks, either going to a function or from a function or both. Denim got out of his car and put on a face mask. He had a ballcap on and it was pulled down low. He put his hands in his pockets and walked down the street toward the UNC Campus. Duke got out and followed him. He kept his distance, blending in behind groups and trying to appear like he belonged.

Denim jogged across the street after walking maybe 200 yards and made his way to a bench in front of the planetarium building. He looked around a bit, doing a double take and trying not to act suspicious. He sat on the bench, which faced away from the road and pulled out his phone. Duke could see the bluish glow from his screen from across the street. He stopped walking once he reached the Bronco and pulled out his phone too. He had a great view of the man from this angle and no one walking by seemed to pay him any mind. He'd learned long ago that no one bothered you if you stood there on your phone.

He stood watching the man for a few minutes, pretending to scroll idly. He started looking around, trying to figure out what he might be doing. Was he waiting for a person? Was he just sitting here waiting for another call? He began scanning the Bronco. He suspected it wasn't a coincidence that Roberto had seen one when he'd

stopped for coffee at Mocha Mason's. He inspected the tires. Standard all weather Goodyear, average diameter and width for the vehicle. There was no mud on them at all and the tread didn't match the tracks at the crime scene. He noticed a fair bit of mud on the wheel well and even some splattered up on the fender. No mud on the tires, but globs of mud on the car itself. He looked closer at the tread of the tires. It was almost untouched. These were brand new.

He checked on Denim; he sat in the same position, still looking at his phone. Duke tried the front passenger side door: Locked. He tried the back door: Unlocked. He carefully stepped up into the truck. He looked all around for clues. It smelled like cigarettes and there were pieces of garbage scattered about. He searched the glove box and the console, the dash and under the seats. He found nothing. No registration, no insurance card, no identification of any kind. He felt around the back seats, hoping there might be some sort of clue as to who this man was. A receipt, a ticket, something. His hand brushed against a nylon strap which hung down below the seats. He looped his fingers and pulled. There was a click and he pulled a little harder. A latch released and the seats all retracted up with some sort of hydraulic system, hinging at the back and opening up to reveal an 8 inch deep compartment that stretched the width of the car. Inside the compartment there laid clear as day a camouflage polymer gun case. Duke unlatched it and opened it up.

Inside was a scoped, bolt action hunting rifle, probably a .308 by the looks of it. An improvised suppressor, probably a foot and a half long rested parallel with the barrel.

There was no doubt about it. This was Ciro's killer. But Duke knew this man was but a pawn in the game. The corruption he'd stumbled upon transcended the sins of this one man. There were more people like him and a lot more people would get hurt if he didn't find out who was behind it all. This murderer would be brought to justice eventually. Now, he needed to be smart and play this right. The stakes were too high.

He looked over to where the murderer sat. Another man had joined him. He wore a plain gray hoodie with the hood pulled on and blue jeans. That was all he could see from this angle. They sat on opposite sides of the five foot bench. Duke cursed himself, wishing he could hear what they were saying. Was this the man the head

of the operation, or was he simply a messenger? After two minutes or so, the mystery man stood and walked down the gravel path that led toward Franklin street.

Duke had a clearer view of the man now. On the front of his hoodie was the blue Duke university logo. He wore a royal blue cloth mask over his nose and mouth and a pair of oddly small eyeglasses. In the dark, with the mask and hood however, he couldn't make out the details of his face exactly and he'd only gotten a glimpse before he turned and walked down the side walk. Something was oddly familiar about those glasses. Where had he seen those before?

He'd follow him on foot until he got into a vehicle. He'd note the license plate, make and model and it'd be smooth sailing after that. He was close to solving this thing, he could feel it.

It was unfortunate then, that as he quietly slipped from the Bronco, the effects of the illegal coffee he's drank began to wear off.

VIII

His head whirled as his knees buckled and he stumbled, nearly collapsing on the ground altogether. He regained his balance, but felt a wave of intense nausea come over him. He leaned against the outside of the car to regain his composure. He looked back to where the murderer was sitting. He was seeing double and it seemed his eyes were like a camera lense that had trouble focusing. He thought he saw him stand up. He needed to get out of there, he couldn't let this guy see he'd been snooping around. He lifted a heavy arm, barely closing the door. He started walking back to where his own car was, just trying to get some distance between himself and the murderer's truck.

He stumbled and tripped back to the driver side door of his own car. He looked around for the mystery man, but couldn't find him. Another wave a nausea. He wretched violently, but nothing came up. He hadn't eaten all day, or even thought to drink any water. The nausea ceased, but was replaced by a pounding headache. He got the keys from his pocket and opened his door, slumping into the driver's seat. Since he'd had the coffee, his mind had seemed to serve the whims of his body, thinking only of moment to moment necessity. He had lost the ability to

think in terms of a bigger picture. But now it was as if all of the thoughts he'd neglected came rushing back to him in a moment of panic.

He'd killed two men today. One in arguable self defense, but the other guy... the guy in the sweater. Oh God. He fumbled with his keys. He should leave. What was he doing here? His fingers moved so slowly and his head still throbbed. He couldn't drive. He thought he remembered who the mystery man was. He should call somebody. His father. The police station. Somebody. He'd killed. He gagged a bit again. A wave of drowsiness came over him. He needed to rest. He felt himself pull the lever at the side of his seat and lean back. He fell asleep.

He awoke to a light tap on his window. A traffic cop shined a flashlight in, then motioned for him to roll his window down. His headache and nausea had subsided a bit, but it still felt much worse than any hangover he'd had. He looked at his watch. It read 4:34am. He groaned and put the keys in the ignition. He turned it two clicks over and rolled down the window. The cop looked inside skeptically.

"You have a bit to drink sir?"

Duke rubbed his eyes tiredly. "No sir, just tired is all." He fished his FBI badge from his pocket and handed it over. The cop studied it suspiciously.

"Wait right here sir." He walked back to his police cruiser to check the validity of his credentials. Duke yawned. That coffee had really fucked him up. If you could even call it coffee. He had been totally out of control and totally uncaring of the consequences of his actions. His mind had been so clear, discarding the normal human thoughts one might have in everyday life, and opting for the most obvious approach in every situation. That was not the way Duke operated. Since its wearing off the cloud which obscured all of those peripheral thoughts in his head had lifted a bit, and he could piece it all together, despite the painful withdrawal.

What scared him was that more than anything, he wanted to go back to that café and get some more of it. He needed to get this shit off the street. If it became more widespread and people started sneaking it into teenage girls' pumpkin spice lattes, they'd be in trouble.

The cop came back with his badge, looking a little paler than when he'd left Duke's window. He handed it back to him.

"I'm very sorry Agent Duke. I see a man passed out in the driver's seat of a car parked on a busy street at four in the morning, you can see my..." Duke held up his hand in dismissal and shook his head slowly. The cop hesitated. "Is there anything I can do for ya. You need anything from me?" The cop looked at him earnestly. Obviously he'd radioed in, asking about him. Duke knew that his reputation had reached almost mythical status, most of the stories about him barely had a grain of truth to them. Usually he'd never use his name as a tool for favors or help, but just now he was hurting a bit. Besides, he thought he knew where he remembered those glasses from. In some dark recess of his mind there had been conjured up a shadow of past events.

"Could you maybe find me a bottle of gatorade and a sandwich or something like that?"

"A sandwich?"

"Yeah or a wrap or something to that effect. And make that two gatorades if you would. Lemon-lime."

"Sir?"

"There should be a gas station around here somewhere. I just need to make a call right quick. I'll wait for ya here." The cop simply shrugged and gave a curt nod.

"Ok." He walked back to his car and went to fetch Duke his breakfast.

He checked his watch again. It was 4:45. The first light of dawn was yet to break the thin autumn clouds above. Nearly everyone slept. Most activity, even that of the unsavory, underground variety, such as that which he currently investigated, would be slowed for a while longer. Duke thought of his Father. He'd be up. He'd have been up for an hour already if he had to guess, or maybe more. He sighed. It had been a long time since they'd spoken. Circumstances however, had led him inevitably back to this, as they always seemed to do.

He opened the contacts list on his phone. He typed J-E-F into the search bar. Jefferson H. Duke appeared first on the list.

He called his father.

IX

He answered almost immediately.

“Hello?”

“Hey Dad.”

“Charlie? Could it be?”

“Yeah” He sighed deeply, “It’s me.”

“It’s been a while my boy.”

“It certainly has.”

There was a silence that stretched eternity. Charlie could hear the click of his father’s zippo lighter as he lit a cigar.

“I have a question.” He said

“Ah and there it is.”

“What?”

“Let me guess. It’s one of your cases isn’t it?”

“Dad don’t start..”

“It is. You need something from the wise old sage you call a Father. Hmm it must be quite pressing if you called me at such an hour. I have to say I was quite surprised to hear from you before first light. Where are you now? I’d wager somewhere familiar. Perhaps a place I know. You’d want to ask me something that uses my knowledge, without harnessing my intellect to such a degree wherefore you might think I helped you in any substantive fashion. New Jersey. No. North

Carolina.” Charlie was silent. “Yes indeed.” He heard his father take a few large puffs from his cigar in satisfaction.

“Yeah dad, you’re a regular fuckin’ Sherlock Holmes. Are you happy with yourself? You psycho-analyzed me within thirty fucking seconds. All after over a year of silence. Great job you old, washed up has-been.”

“Don’t hurl insults at me. You’ve had your mother in despair for months. Why don’t you ever call?”

“You have my number. Can’t you guys call?”

“As always you miss the point. You know, considering your profession, you do seem to overlook quite a few key details when it comes to your mother and me. Our well being. Our love for our children. We’ve always wanted to best for you Charlie. It’s not that we disdain law enforcement. She’s just always thought you were destined for something more.”

“You couldn’t do what I do.”

“Oh?”

“This job isn’t just some intellectual fucking exercise. It’s real life. You’d be eaten alive old man.”

“I don’t doubt it. I just want you to remember that the few gifts you were given didn’t simply appear out of the blue.”

Duke put the phone down and rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t deal with much more of this in his state. Talking with his father was like arguing with a brick wall. If that brick wall had a genius level IQ. He heard his father’s voice ask if he was there.

“Yeah I’m here.”

“I don’t want to fight boy. Tell me what you need.”

“A suspect. I saw him last night and I recognised his glasses. He was wearing a Duke sweatshirt. I didn’t see his face clearly but he looked to be a bit older by the

way he walked. I would have had no idea, but those glasses. They're small and round and low. Like Mr. potato head's almost, but the bridge is long and curved. I remember seeing those at a dinner party at our house one year. Must have been when I was still in college."

"An older man with glasses. That's who you want me to remember?"

"Yeah but these glasses. I've only seen them once. Could it have been a professor? Or maybe someone you were working with at the time. I remember you always had a lot of people involved with the University over. Is there some way you'd remember him?"

"I'm sorry son, but you overestimate my mind. My memory is exemplary, but not perfect. If you had a picture I'm sure I could tell you who it is."

"If I had a picture I wouldn't need to ask you."

"Fair enough." His father said. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of more use there. So is that all you wanted to talk about? Is there anything else?"

Duke sighed, disappointed. "No that's okay. I'll talk to you later."

"How much later?"

"I'll... I'll call you next week. We'll just catch up. I could... I could talk to Mom too. Hash things out I guess."

"We'd love that. We both hate to have such a rift between us all."

"Yeah. I wanna make it better too."

"I love you son."

"Bye."

Duke hung up the phone. He wasn't ready for so much affection. He was as vulnerable as he'd been in a long time at the moment, and so his defenses had been down. Why had he agreed to talk to his mother? That was a conversation that he wasn't quite ready for.

Just then the cop he'd sent on his errand came back with his gatorade and a turkey wrap. He rolled down the window to receive it. He thanked the officer who smiled half-heartedly and went back to his cruiser and drove off. Duke nearly drained one of the Gatorades in a single draught. He eyed the wrap. A few bright red cranberries fell out into the plastic container. His mind went to the two men he'd killed. He tossed the sandwich onto the passenger seat in disgust. His appetite vanished instantly.

He sat in silence trying to understand things. His father had been no help and he knew the glasses could have been a coincidence. He knew that often times the details alive in memory could be entirely fabricated in a person's subconscious. His gnawing suspicion that he recognized the man he'd seen, could be entirely made up. Now was not the time to rely upon a hunch. He needed to look at the facts. The hard facts and the clues.

Whoever ordered the murder had to have some connection to the coffee shop. He or she also had to know that *Ciro* had stolen the coffee shipment. How had *Ciro* stolen the coffee in the first place? He himself had to have access to some information that no one else at *Mocha Mason's* had. It was obvious that *Ciro* had been a patron of the front business at *Mason's* for a while. But how long had he had access to the underground, illegal varieties they held? He had the password written down in his apartment, which meant that he hadn't had access to the back room for very long. From what he could tell, *Ciro* hadn't been using *El Tiburón Negro* long either from the way *Roberto* told it. He also had no roasting capabilities in his apartment, so he must have needed to sell the raw beans he'd stolen in order to use them at all. Duke took another sip from his Gatorade.

It's likely *Ciro* had no idea who he'd stolen from. He'd gotten a tip somehow of the shipment of *El Tiburón* going to *Fay's*. He'd have had access to a stop the truck made. He'd stolen it at said stop, probably alone. It wasn't much, maybe fifty pounds of it by the looks of the compartment below his oven. The truck wouldn't have had any sort of guards, as that would look too suspicious. He'd slipped in the truck while the delivery man was inside the building and wheeled it out with a dolly, put it in his car, and been on his way. He'd probably stolen it without knowing where he could sell it. He'd heard only that there was a top notch coffee of the highest quality and that it was super expensive. Duke thought that he

probably hadn't even wanted to sell it. He probably just wanted a bunch of the best coffee he could find, not satisfied with the swill available in Durham, hence the makeshift compartment. When he realized there was no way to use it he asked around for a buyer and the scumbags at Mocha Mason's (Fay's biggest competitor) were more than happy to take part in the secret brew which was stealing all of their business and creating these droves of desperate addicts. They probably even counted on Ciro getting them more shipments, since it'd gone so smoothly the first time. Until it didn't.

There were still a few questions. Why did Ciro have access to the shipment details that no one else did? Duke thought. Ciro worked at Duke University. He had access to a lot of buildings and rooms which the ordinary citizen did not. It's possible some of his coffee loving friends and co workers had been to Fay's themselves and had relayed information caught in gossip. The University did get food shipments almost daily, and Ciro would have no problem getting to those trucks.

It's likely that the demand for *El Tiburón* was high enough that they ran out at Fay's and the next time it would be available was speculated upon often. He probably heard the date it came in, found out that the truck would stop on campus before Fay's, and took the opportunity. Still, Who was in charge? And how had that person find out it was him so quickly? Duke thought he knew where to start looking. He started the car and pulled out onto Franklin street, back toward Durham.

For a few minutes his mind began making progressive jumps in reasoning. He was coming nearer to uncovering this corruption. He just needed a few more pieces of information. He drove almost alone on the road, stopping at the lights as a solitary driver in the early morning when traffic was almost non-existent. Things were serene and easy.

Until they weren't.

X

He came around a corner and the next intersection had a road crew with signs set up which told him to detour to the right down a side road. He followed the signs

and after his right turn there was an almost immediate left turn into a neighborhood, houses lining either side. About 300 yards ahead was a stop sign at a four way intersection. He braked as he approached the intersection, slowing gradually. Shortly before he reached a full stop a plain white milk truck blew past the stop sign and stopped suddenly in the middle of the intersection. He stopped, looked behind him. Two Duke University Police vehicles in their blue and neon green paint, whipped around the corner behind him and screamed toward him, sirens and lights off. It was a strange sight in the middle of Chapel Hill.

He looked for an escape route, something was undoubtedly amiss, and he knew it would be better to get out of this situation altogether. From around the truck, two more identical vehicles pulled up, blocking him in completely.

He made no movements, waiting for some indication as to what was going on. Everything seemed to slow and despite his lethargy, he focused up and was ready for any eventuality. Two cops from every vehicle opened their doors and stepped out and drew their guns, taking cover behind their doors. Five men and three women. All in Duke PD uniform, all silently pointing their instruments of death at a Federal Agent. Duke couldn't help but chuckle at the fucking absurdity of it.

“All for some damn coffee.” He said to himself. He put the car in park and shut off the engine, then raised his hands to head level. The female officer from the passenger side of the car to his left rear walked forward to his door, gun still pointed at him. She opened the door with one hand and backed away quickly.

“Keep your hands where I can see them. Get out of the vehicle and lay down on your stomach, palms facing down.” She said in tense, husky voice. He complied calmly. “Cross your wrists behind your back!” She cuffed him and yanked him up roughly. She practically dragged him to her squad car where her partner opened the back passenger side and she shoved him inside and slammed the door shut. He heard her bark muffled orders to the other cops.

“Franklin, Andrews get rid of the car. Smith and I are gonna drop him off. The rest of you head back and continue as usual. No one uses the radios. Jackson's gonna tell the boss we have him, personally. As the cops got back in their cars either Franklin or Andrews hopped into Duke's. They all pulled off in separate

directions. The lead cop walked over to the truck driver and handed him a small fold of bills. The man nodded and drove off. She walked back to the car in which Duke sat. Smith walked over and had a word with her which he couldn't quite make out. He gestured over to Duke and the woman seemed to argue. He threw up his hands in what seemed like frustration and they both got back into the car. Smith drove.

They took off down the road the way they'd come. For a long while they took a strange route, turning at odd times and staying for the most part away from the main roadways. He was thoroughly lost. He figured this was by design on the part of the officers. He did know however that he was not heading toward Durham and the University campus. The two officers were silent. Duke decided to break the ice. Maybe he could get some information out of them. He leaned close to the plexi glass which divided them.

"Smith, my man. Have you got the time?" He saw Smith's eyes flick over to his partner. She answered for him.

"Shut up back there."

"Come on, you can't at least let me know the time?"

"We don't have to tell you shit. Now quit talking. Otherwise we'll pull over and shut you up with a can of mace." The woman was nearly yelling at him. Duke shut up. He didn't exactly think that the woman was the type to bluff.

"It's 6:30." Smith said robotically. His eyes flicked over at the female officer again and he gave a slight shrug. She reddened and shot a glare at him.

"Thank you Officer Smith." Duke replied. "You know, I am a law enforcement officer myself. In fact I'm a federal Agent. I don't know if you know that. I'm actually a pretty important agent too. I think people would know that I'm missing. I don't think they'd be too happy about it either."

"Stop talking." She squawked.

“I’m just letting you know. I can tell you didn’t sign up for something like this. I know you do what you’re told but I think you know you’re a little out of your wheel house here.”

“One more Goddamn word and I swear...”

Duke let out an exaggerated sigh. Smith was silent and didn’t betray much, but he white knuckled the steering wheel and his jaw was clenched tightly.

When they finally stopped it was at an abandoned, rundown warehouse at the end of a dirt road. A thick forest surrounded the clearing and weeds and bushes grew where none were meant to. He had been relatively calm until this point and even when he saw the warehouse he was not particularly worried. But when the female cop opened the door, pulled him out and put a black hood over his head, the beginnings of panic rose up from a pit in his stomach. She lead him by the arm, pulling him along.

“Stay with the car and keep watch.” She told Smith.

He heard a door on rusty hinges open and heard the buzz of fluorescent lights turning on. He was lead to what sounded like the middle of the cavernous warehouse, onto what felt like a sheet of plastic beneath his feet. She kicked the backs of his knees, forcing him to kneel on the concrete ground.

He heard her take three steps back, then the sound of a pistol being drawn from a leather holster. He was stunned. His energy was sapped from the coffee yesterday and even if he’d been physically able, he didn’t think his mind would be able to focus enough to perform any evasion. He tried to rack his brain. Say something. Do something!

The rusty hinged door swung open.

“Smith, I told you to stay with the fucking...”

Three rapid shots, the sound of meat smacking the floor. A handful of quick footsteps. Another shot.

The light hurt his eyes as the black hood was pulled from his head.

“It’s ok.” Smith said, “I’m letting you go.”

Duke turned to look at the mincemeat the 12 gauge semi-automatic shotgun had made of the female cop’s corpse. A Jackson pollock painting of blood was splattered across the far wall and across the floor. Her leg was blown off. Her chest was a giant hole. Her face was concave. Duke thought that must have been Smith’s follow up shot. He violently threw up the Gatorade as Smith unshackled his wrists.

When he recovered he saw that Smith was turned toward the destruction he’d just wrought, entranced.

“She was gonna execute you. I couldn’t just let her. I know we should follow orders and all but...”

“It’s okay.” Duke said, “It’s over now, it’s done. You did the right thing. Now I need your help again.” Smith turned.

“We were brought into our Captain’s office. He said that there was an immediate order from upstairs that you were to be taken in, regardless of your FBI status. We didn’t ask any questions. That’s the way it is with us. Strange orders that seem, well... They just don’t seem right, ya see? Vasquez gets called in separately. I can kinda guess now what was said, but she didn’t say shit to me. I’m just supposed to listen and all.” He looked at his uniform. It was splattered with Vasquez. “That’s all I really know.”

“You have no indication as to who might be giving your captain his orders?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. I- I should go now... Maybe.”

“I need you to shoot me. In the leg or something. I can’t go back to the station without a mark.” Duke looked skeptical. Smith seemed to steel himself.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll radio in for help once you’ve gone. Just do it already.” He stuck out his leg and winced in anticipation

Duke was numb. He hefted the shotgun, pointed it at the man’s calf so as to graze him and fired.

Ten minutes later and he was roaring down the road back toward Duke's campus. He'd pieced it together now. There was only one man with this kind of specific power. He was going to go straight for the top. The ultimate source of this evil. He didn't know who was in the pocket of this master of corruption, and he didn't care to find out. He was going to end this.

XI

Mocha Mason's had been open when he stopped in. The first light of dawn was peaking over the horizon and he secured two shots of *El Tiburón Negro* without question and slammed them both onsite. The effects were nearly immediate. Every physical pain or weakness he might have felt was eradicated and replaced with that same, uncaged call to action he'd felt the day before. He was no longer Agent Charles Duke, he was an ambassador of ultimate Justice.

The shotgun in the seat beside him, he drove the police car which bore his name onto the campus which did the same. Ciro's death was one of many. This man he sought would answer for it and would pay dearly for his atrocities. This society may be rotten in and out, but he could at least cut away this rot. He could at least fix this one problem. The legal system was flawed. No one could stop this now.

The gate leading up to the house was closed. The two guards at the gate control saw the vehicle and opened it, waving him in. He pulled into the driveway and walked up the steps to the front door, shotgun leveled. The door was unlocked. Inside he went. Up the stairs, past the empty master bedroom, right to the closed door of the study. Two men's voices. It was time.

Duke kicked open the door and stormed into the room. Sitting behind his desk in a giant plush chair which looked more like a throne than office seat, was Vincent Price, the President of Duke University.

Duke had enough time to see him smiling from behind his small round glasses before two prongs of a stun gun were shot into his neck and the eight million milliamps of electricity seized his nervous system. He dropped the shotgun and stiff as a board, dropped to the floor. His head smashed against the hardwood and his body kept convulsing uncontrollably as he was being electrocuted. The shocking finally ceased just in time for two giants of men to lift him to his feet and

drag him limply to the villain's desk, where they held him by the arms. Price's grin remained.

"Hello Charles. I was expecting you." He said merrily.

Duke regained control of his speech "You bastard. I know it was you. Just admit it!" It came out slurred and retarded. He cursed himself silently as he tried to form a plan.

"You mean the Italian? Yes I ordered his murder. He stole the coffee being shipped to my cafe. I couldn't let a slight such as that go unpunished."

"You're evil. This stuff you're selling creates addicts."

"It creates people of action. Of focus. The addiction is a side effect which results in consistent profit."

"You see people as profit?"

"Your family was built on the addiction of millions. The Duke name, your fortune, this school: all of it is a product of addiction. Helpless addicts coming back for another pack of cigarettes. I need no moral grandstanding from the likes of you.

"You had a man killed... for money?"

"No I had a man killed because he wronged me egregiously. And Charles, despite the respect I have for your father, I'm afraid you've wronged me as well. I will say, you're a good detective. I never thought someone would be able to trace this whole thing back to me."

"Yeah? Maybe don't wear those stupid fucking glasses when you're meeting with one of your hitmen. In fact," Duke spat on Price's desk, "you're a dumb fuck for meeting with the guy at all. You literally just had him kill a guy." He chuckled weakly. "What were you thinking?"

Price's smile disappeared. He was not used to being called dumb.

"You know what, Charles?"

“What, fuck-face?”

“I guess I just like doing things myself.”

Price opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a snub nosed .38 special. He pointed it at Duke’s forehead.

“Last words?”

“At least I solved the damned case.”

He fired.

The tiny entrance hole of the hollow point lead bullet left a tennis ball sized exit hole in the back of Charles Duke’s head.

At least he solved the damned case.

The End