

When winter break arrived, Vonni made arrangements to fly home and spend Christmas with his family in New York. He wanted to share with them the success he was having in Detroit, but of course, that wasn't an option. As far as they were concerned, he was a good kid, maintaining a solid 3.0 GPA, staying out of trouble while making a little money on the side working at a local gym. They were proud of him, and he wanted to keep it that way.

His flight to New York was scheduled for Monday morning, the day before Christmas, only two days away, but he still needed to buy some gifts for his family. So, Sunday morning, he decided to hit the mall with Tommy to do a little last-minute Christmas shopping. But first, he needed to stop at "Nicks & Cuts" for a haircut. After all, he wanted to look his best for his family. Normally, the barbershop was closed on Sundays, but because of the holiday Vonni knew Nick would be opening early for business. Wanting to beat the morning rush, he had Tommy drive him there first thing in the morning, hoping they would get there just as Nick opened up at 9:00 AM.

When they stepped inside, Nick and Vicky greeted them with warm smiles and pleasant salutations, but it seemed they weren't the only ones trying to beat the morning rush. It was only 9:05 and already an old man was seated in Nick's chair, getting a trim and shave. Since Vonni preferred Nick's barbering skills to Vicky's, he politely suggested Tommy get his hair cut first while he waited for Nick.

As Vicky went to work on Tommy's thick mane of coarse black hair, Vonni sat in one of the shop's weathered old chairs and began flipping through an issue of Sports Illustrated. But as he scanned the pages, something caught his attention from the corner of his eye. Something that didn't sit right. The front of the shop was a series of plate glass windows that offered a clear view of the street and surrounding neighborhood. Given that it was early Sunday morning, both were deserted and devoid of activity. So when he saw the same blue minivan drive past the shop three times in less than ten minutes, he noticed it right away. But he became even more curious when the van drove past a fourth time and parked across the street, just down the block. From his angle in the barber shop, he could make out two guys sitting in the front seats, both of them scanning the streets as if they were looking for someone. He wasn't sure why, but something about them didn't feel right. They seemed out of place just parked there, the two of them looking around as a light snow began to fall. As he continued flipping through the Sports Illustrated, he found himself periodically glancing up at them, wondering who they were and what they were doing.

Twenty minutes later, after the old man paid Nick and stepped out of the shop, Vonni was climbing into Nick's chair when he noticed a tinted black Cadillac CTS pull up out front. He could just make out King Falcone in the passenger seat, casually talking on his cell phone. A moment later, King's driver, "Big Dean" Diangelo D'Annato, stepped from the car and walked into the barber shop.

"Hey, Niccolo," Dean said, acknowledging Tommy and Vonni with a curt nod. "King will be here in a minute. He's across the street getting somethin' to drink."

"Great," Nick said with one of his amiable smiles. "And will you be getting a trim today, Diangelo?"

"No," Dean replied tersely, a pained look on his face, patting his belly. "I think I got food poisoning or something. My stomach has been messin' with me all morning. Think I can use your john?"

“Of course,” Nick chuckled, gesturing toward the back of the shop. “You know where it is. Just don’t make a mess in there, eh?”

Dean indeed looked pale faced and sick as he headed back to the bathroom without saying a word. But Vonni barely seemed to notice, for his eyes were locked on the idling minivan. Something definitely was amiss. As Nick wrapped a smock around his shoulders, he watched King step from the Cadillac and head across the street to old man Gus’ liquor store. The instant King walked through the door, the two guys in the minivan stepped out onto the sidewalk and made a beeline straight for the store, both of them moving with a distinct purpose in their step. They appeared to be older, maybe mid-thirties, and both were wearing baseball caps, leather gloves, and dark sunglasses. As they hurried up the block toward the store, they looked nervous and anxious, their heads swiveling back and forth as if they were scanning the streets for potential witnesses.

Vonni immediately recognized the intent in their stride, for it was the same stride that the two thugs had that night in the park. He didn’t hesitate. The instant they stepped into the store, he tore the smock off and sprinted across the street. When he got to the door, he stepped inside with his pistol tucked against his side.

Like always, Gus was seated behind the counter, watching an old 13” black-and-white TV. He was about to wish Vonni a good morning when Vonni held a finger to his lips and motioned toward the back of the store with his gun. Confused, Gus glanced up at the parabolic mirror he used to keep an eye on would-be shoplifters. It offered a distorted view of the entire store, and when Vonni looked up at it, he saw the two guys from the minivan creeping down an aisle toward King, who was at the back of the store scanning the coolers for something cold to drink. Ducking low, he peered around the corner of the aisle and saw that they were both carrying pistols. Just as he thought—assassins! King was partially obscured by the corner of the aisle and completely oblivious to their presence.

Without hesitation, Vonni aimed his pistol and opened fire. **POP-POP-POP-POP** “King!” he yelled, pulling the trigger as fast as he could, his gun booming like thunder in the quiet store. “Look out!” **POP-POP-POP-POP-POP**

Chaos ensued. As everyone opened fire at once, the store turned into a hailstorm of gunfire. One of the assassins raised his pistol and fired at King. Vonni opened fire on him. The other assassin spun and fired at Vonni. King dove around the corner, drew his own pistol, and returned fire. In what seemed like slow motion, Vonni charged down the aisle, pulling the trigger over and over, aiming on pure instinct until his gun finally clicked empty.

Then, as fast as it began, it was over, an eerie silence falling over the store, the air filled with smoke and the acrid smell of spent gunpowder. One of the assassins was clearly dead, blood pouring from a gaping exit wound in the back of his head. But the other assassin was still alive, writhing around on the floor, clutching his throat where a bullet had smashed through his larynx, creating a sickening gurgle as he choked on his own blood. Vonni felt a wave of relief when King casually stepped into the aisle and looked down at the two assassins, his coal black eyes burning with rage. A bullet had struck his upper left arm and blood was already seeping through his gray Fila jacket.

“You okay?” King asked, calmly loading a fresh magazine into his pistol.

“You’re hit,” Vonni said, ignoring the question, pointing at his arm.

"It didn't hit the bone," King said, wincing as he slowly tested his arm. "At least I don't think so. What about you? You good?"

Vonni seemed to snap out of a trance. "Yeah, I think so," he said, looking himself over. "Nothing hurts."

King pointed at Vonni's pistol, which had a small tendril of smoke rising from its barrel. "You got another mag for that thing?"

"Yeah," Vonni nodded. "I always keep an extra in my sock."

"Then load up. There might be more waiting outside."

Vonni didn't think there were more assassins waiting outside, since only the two had pulled up in the minivan. Nevertheless, he listened and quickly loaded the spare magazine into the pistol.

Gus stood at the front of the aisle, his face pale with shock. "Omnio..." he mumbled, staring down at the carnage.

King pointed at the door. "Lock up and put the closed sign in the window," he ordered the old store owner, his tone calm and pragmatic. He then turned to Vonni. "Go stand by the door. Tell me if anyone pulls up."

Vonni quickly posted himself by the door and scanned the street. Nothing was moving but he could see Tommy, Nick, and Vicky looking at him through the windows of the barber shop across the street, all of them surely wondering what was happening. There was a chance that they had heard all the gunfire, but he figured they probably hadn't.

While Vonni maintained a vigilant eye on the street out front, King began speaking in rapid-fire Italian to Gus, who was still in a bewildered state of shock, unable to say a word as he stared down at the gruesome scene on the floor of his store. When King asked if there were any security tapes, all Gus could do was shake his head and mumble no. King then stepped right up to his face and looked the old man in the eye.

"Gus, you tell the cops that a pair of black teenagers did this. They robbed and shot the two men on the floor. Understand me?"

Gus nodded his understanding but said nothing. The message was very clear. He knew what he had to do.

King then kneeled down and pointed his pistol at the face of the one assassin who was still alive. "Who sent you?" he demanded. "Who do you work for?"

But when the assassin responded with only a choking gurgle, King shot him in the head and began rifling through his pockets. When he had both assassins' wallets, he stood and again looked Gus in the eye.

"Gus, you're going to be fine," he said, setting a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Just remember what I said. Vonni and me were never here. It was a couple of young *melanzani*. That's all you saw. Now wait five minutes and call the cops. *Capisce?*"

"I understand, Omnio," Gus answered nervously, his voice trembling with fear.

With that, King beckoned Vonni to follow him out a door in the back. In the deserted alley behind the store, he pulled Vonni next to a dumpster and said something that caught Vonni completely off guard.

"You're coming with me," he said, tucking his pistol into his waistline. "I need you to get my back. If Dean reaches for his gun, or even looks like he's reaching for it, pop the motherfucker."

"What?" Vonni whispered, confused, glancing up and down the alley nervously. "Why? What did Dean do?"

King motioned toward the store. "Those were professional hitters. They must've got antsy and jumped the gun when they saw me go in the store. Dean set me up. He's the only one who knew I'd be here this morning. Fuckin' Judas! Now come on, we don't have time to stand around and bullshit. He probably still thinks the hit is supposed to go down while I get my hair cut..." He paused and looked him in the eye. "Now I need to know, Vonni, can I trust you? Because if Dean thinks I'm onto him, he might try to do me himself. And I don't want to kill that fuckin' Judas until I find out who paid him to set me up."

Vonni could barely believe what was happening. It felt surreal, like some kind of bad dream or movie. But it was real. A thousand questions flashed through his head, but he met his eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I got your back," he said, knowing he really had no choice at this point.

"Good," King said, looking relieved. "Now come on. Follow me and don't say a word. Just sit in the back of the car and keep an eye on him. If he makes any sudden moves, pop his ass in the back of the head."

Then, without adding another word, he led them around the building and back to the barber shop, both of them moving at a casual pace, making sure not to draw any attention to themselves. The street was clear and there was an eerie silence, the only sound coming from the minivan still idling by the curb down the block. But when they stepped into the barber shop, Dean was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Dean?" King asked, his fury masked under a facade of calm.

Nick motioned toward the back. "Using the john," he said, and then noticed King's bloodstained sleeve. "What happened to you?"

"Some hitters just tried to get me in Gus' store," King answered matter-of-factly, staring at the door leading to the back of the shop.

"Oh my God, baby!" Vicky exclaimed, stepping over to look at his arm. "Are you alright?"

Dean suddenly stepped out from the back and froze in his tracks. "Yo what the fuck happened to your arm?"

"Two hitters just tried to whack me across the street," King answered, his tone completely indifferent. "Now come on, we need to get the hell outta here before the cops show up." He turned to Nick and Vicky. "None of us were here. The cops are gonna come over and ask if you saw anything. Tell them you saw a couple of teenage *melanzani* run out of Gus' store about five minutes ago."

Vonni looked at Tommy, who was wide-eyed with confusion. "I'm going with King, but you stay here and back their story about the two black kids. Then go home and wait for me to call."

"Omnio, you have to go to a hospital!" Vicky pleaded.

"I will," King said, offering her a reassuring smile. "But right now we have to go."

With that, he motioned Dean and Vonni to follow him out to his parked Cadillac. Just as Dean put the car in gear, the sounds of distant police sirens could be heard racing toward their location.

"Where we going?" Dean asked, concentrating on driving casually through the snowy back streets, trying not to draw any unwanted attention to themselves.

"My grandpa's warehouse," King answered, and then used his cell phone to call his grandfather.

Meanwhile, Vonni sat in the car's back seat, pistol in hand, prepared to shoot Dean if he made any sudden moves. But after King hung up the phone, Dean dove into an earnest apology

for not being there when the assassins showed up. King responded by patting him on the shoulder reassuringly, telling him not to worry, that it wasn't his fault.

As they sped down Jefferson Avenue toward downtown, King studied the contents of the two assassins' wallets. Each contained a few hundred dollars in Canadian cash and a Canadian driver's license that was surely counterfeit. He figured they must have been contracted from across the river in Windsor, where contract killers were often recruited when assassins with no ties to the Syndicate were needed. This was a clear indicator that whoever hired them had wanted there to be no connection to anyone in the Syndicate.

Ten minutes after leaving the barber shop, Dean turned down a deserted alleyway that ran between two long rows of warehouses in the Eastern Market. The fresh snowfall squeaked under the tires as he eased the car to a stop in front of a nondescript metal door. As they stepped from the car, a flock of pigeons burst into the air from behind a dumpster, causing the three of them to flinch nervously. Vonni immediately noted the stench of death and decay in the air, as the bay doors directly across the alley belonged to the largest slaughterhouse in the city.

King glanced up and down the alley before keying open the squeaky metal door to the warehouse. Inside was cool, dark, and smelled of fresh produce. Leaving the lights off, he led them through a labyrinth of wood pallets stacked with crates of fresh fruits and vegetables. When he came to a large, industrial-style elevator, they stepped inside and he cranked a brass hand-lever that lowered them down to the basement. When the elevator came to a jarring halt, he flipped on a light switch and a series of dim bulbs illuminated a cool dank room that was cluttered with wooden vegetable crates. Inside the crates were accounting ledgers. Thousands of them.

At the back of the basement, King keyed open the door to a spartan little office that had a concrete floor and rafter ceiling. Besides a pair of metal filing cabinets, the only furnishings in the office were a small desk, a pair of metal folding chairs in front of it, and a tattered old couch.

"Everyone sit and chill while I think for a minute," King said, gingerly taking off his jacket to examine his wound.

While Dean dropped onto the couch and lit a cigarette, Vonni remained standing with one hand inside his jacket pocket, where it remained gripped tightly around his pistol. "What is this place?" he asked, taking in the room but alert to Dean's every move.

"My grandma's office," King answered, grimacing in pain as he removed a first aid kit from one of the filing cabinets. "She balances all the sports books down here. My grandpa has over fifty bookies working for him. All those books you saw out there? That's what they were. Bets and vig. She's the Family accountant."

"Oh," Vonni said, still discreetly watching Dean's every move. "I was wondering what those were."

King said nothing more as he cleaned and bandaged his wound. Fortunately, the bullet had indeed missed the bone and made a clean pass through his upper bicep muscle. Because the hot bullet had partially cauterized the wound, there was surprisingly little bleeding. Once he finished bandaging it with gauze and surgical tape, he put his track suit jacket back on and began rummaging through the office until he found a dusty old bottle of Johnny Walker Red. After taking several long swigs straight from the bottle to calm his nerves and dull the pain, he decided it was time to get down to business. Without warning, he drew his pistol and pointed it at Dean's face.

"Don't even blink, you Judas motherfucker!" he growled menacingly. "Vonni, get his gun."

"What the fuck is this?" Dean demanded as Vonni relieved him of the .357 tucked in his shoulder holster.

"You didn't think I would figure it out?" King asked icily.

Vonni tucked the big .357 in his waist and stood off to the side with his 9mm Beretta trained on him.

"Figure what out?" he asked, the look on his face a combination of confusion and outrage.

King slowly shook his head. "Paisan, do you take me for a fool?" he asked, his eyes burning with malevolence. "I've known you all my life. We went to Sunday school together. Our mothers are goomadi. Why—"

"This is bullshit, King!" Dean snapped, cutting him off. "I had nothing to do with this shit. I can't believe you'd even suggest I did. Like you said, our moms are *migliori di amici*."

King leaned against the edge of the desk and silently studied him. "You know something?" he said, taking on an almost philosophical tone. "My grandpa always tells me to be careful of the people I trust the most, because they're the ones that can hurt me the most. Now, why don't you make this easy on yourself and tell me who paid you to set me up."

Dean looked up at him like he had truly lost his mind. "Omnia, you're talking crazy! I don't know what the hell you're talking about. You should know I'd never—"

**CRACK!** King shot him in the knee, causing Vonni to flinch and nearly drop his pistol.

"What the fuck!" Dean wailed, a searing white-hot pain shooting through his leg. "Are you crazy? I would never set you up!"

King aimed at his other knee. "Who?" he asked calmly. "And what did they pay you?"

"Omnia, calm down," Dean pleaded, holding his hands up. "I'm sorry I wasn't there when those fuckin' hitters showed up. I get it, I fucked up! But that doesn't mean I set you up. For Christ's sake, man, think about it. Your own grandfather commissioned me to be your *protettore*. We've been like brothers ever since."

Losing his patience, King slid one of the folding chairs over and sat directly in front of him. "You must really think I'm stupid," he said, looking him deadpan in the eye. "Besides my mom, you were the only one who knew I'd be at the barbershop getting my hair cut this morning. And I'm pretty sure she didn't set me up. So that leaves you. You asked me twice yesterday if I'd be getting a cut this morning. Why would you ask me twice? Stupid. That was your first mistake. Your second was hiding in the bathroom while the hitters were supposed to show up."

"King, that's crazy! Just coincidence."

King studied him incredulously. "Then why would you ask me twice to confirm where we would be at a specific time this morning?"

"I... I don't know," Dean choked out, the throbbing pain in his knee growing more and more intense by the second. "I guess because I haven't done any Christmas shopping. I wanted to know if we were gonna have time to hit the mall today."

King considered this for a moment, nodded his understanding, and then shot him in the other knee. "Was it Anthony?" he asked, aiming the pistol at Dean's face.

Dean wailed in agony. "No, wait, King, please don't!" he pleaded, tears streaming down his face, knowing the ruse was up. "It wasn't Anthony. It was the Scroi brothers. They said you were cutting into their business."

King lowered the pistol, a disgusted look on his face. "How much did they pay you?" he asked, fighting to control himself.

"They... they..." Dean stammered, choking on his words, his eyes pleading for mercy. "They promised me Vanzetti's."

King reeled back and laughed maniacally. "My club? They told you they would give you my club? And you believed them?"

Dean dropped his head in shame. "I had no choice, King," he groveled pitifully, finally breaking down. "When I told them to go fuck themselves, they threatened to kill my kid brother, Mikey. He's only fuckin' twelve! What could I do?"

"Really, you fuckin' coward?" King scoffed, staring down at him with complete abhorrence. "You could have come to me. Do you really think my grandfather would have let them kill an innocent kid?"

Dean shrugged pathetically, tears of guilt streaming down his face. "I don't know. You said it yourself the don is retiring. Leoni and the others are taking over his territories. The Scrois are Made guys. They got a lot of pull with the other Bosses."

King suddenly looked more offended than disgusted. "So you're saying you fear the Scrois more than my grandfather?"

"I'm sorry, Omnio," Dean whimpered. "I had to protect my kid brother."

"And my club was just going to be an added bonus?"

"Fuck your club!" Dean yelled, spittle flying from his mouth. "I was protecting my kid brother. I'm not you. I don't have the goddamn Boss of Bosses protecting me."

"What does that have to do you and me? Haven't I always taken care of you? Haven't I always been a friend to you? Hasn't my grandfather treated you like one of his own?"

"Fuck you, King!" Dean spat defiantly. "You're a goddamn *dragoni difetto!* You'll never be Made. You'll never be a *capo* or take over the Family. I had to think about myself and my own future. What the fuck did you think? I was gonna spend the rest of my life driving you around? The others think you're just a punk ass kid who hides behind Don Falcone. But you can't hide forever. Your grandpa is being muscled out and new guys are taking over. Guys like the Scrois. They don't give a shit about you or your grandpa. They're Made guys. They were gonna kill my kid brother if I didn't help them do it."

King nodded his understanding. "Yes, well, now your little brother will never know you gave your life to save his."

Just as Dean registered the meaning this, King raised his pistol and fired one shot. The bullet struck him in the forehead, sending a geyser of blood and brains splattering onto the wall behind him.

In that instant, Vonni's life changed forever.