

NIGHT SHIFT
By Caldwell Butler

It was night in Chicago but it wasn't dark, it never quite gets there. Streetlamps and buildings lit like Christmas trees illuminated the nearly abandoned sidewalks and just-as-empty streets.

One young man stood on a curb outside a Mexican fast food joint waiting, waiting for someone. Adrian Melloti was tall kid of around twenty-something with black, mopy hair and a bony face. He wore a gray suit jacket and tie and black slacks to look professional, but still wore converses just like the ones he wore in high school. He was obviously nervous about something; sweating like a pig and sucking his way through a box of cigarettes like someone would take them away if he stopped for some oxygen. If you met him, you'd never think he was a triggerman. Just didn't look the part, that's all.

Someone walked up behind Melloti, he didn't notice until the man was right behind him.

"Jesus, Frank!" Melloti gasped at his partner.

"Bit on edge, kid?" Frank Keller asked him.

"You can't do that to me man! Where the hell have you been? You're never late."

"Sorry, I got held up."

If you looked Frank Keller down, he, unlike Melloti, fit the role of assassin to the inch. He was a short, thuggish man built like a bulldozer with wild brown hair and an almost permanent scowl. He wore a trench coat over a white shirt and khakis with big boots on his feet that shook the earth every time he took a step. If Melloti was the student, Keller was definitely the master.

"You okay, kid?" said Keller, tapping Melloti on the shoulder again. He jumped around five feet.

"Jesu-what?!"

"Christ kid, calm down! Relax!"

"Yeah right, relax."

"You okay to work tonight?"

"You say that like I have a choice."

Keller glared and said, "You know what I mean, you little shit, are you good to back me up?"

Melloti didn't answer because he was struggling with a lighter, trying to get it to produce a flame to light a fresh smoke. Keller produced his own silver Zippo and lit it for him. Melloti nodded his thanks before taking an almost endless drag.

"I've got you tonight," he finally said, breaking the silence.

"Good, what time do you have?"

"Twelve-fifteen."

"Good, we've got time. Come on, I'm starving. I haven't eaten since lunch."

Melloti nodded as they went on their way. Keller had parked his car in a lot around half a block away. They got in a drove down State and took a right on Roosevelt to the White Palace, an all-night diner they liked to regular. They were the only two people in the place aside from the staff and some homeless guy who had pulled a few coins together for a piece of dry toast that sat untouched in front of the booth he was laying asleep in.

Keller ordered a chicken-fried steak and ate ravenously as Melloti worked his way through two cups of coffee and more cigarettes. His hands shook as he lifted his mug to his lips periodically.

“So you get yourself a new piece?” Keller asked Melloti between bites.

“Yeah.”

“Another Beretta?”

“Nah, HK-forty.”

“One of them German gats, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Supposed to shoot pretty good.”

Melloti grabbed a few napkins and wiped his brow.

“Jesus kid,” said Keller. “If you don’t relax and lay off the coffee you’re gonna give yourself a stroke.”

“I think I’d take one right about now,” Melloti answered, his voice dry and arid despite the liquid he was continuously gulping down. Keller continued to eat.

“Well?” said Melloti.

“Well what?”

“You’re acting like nothing happened.”

Keller didn’t say anything but his scowl intensified.

“What?” said Melloti. “You just gonna blow it off?”

The clatter of Keller’s silverware as he tossed them on his plate startled him.

“Waitress!” Keller called across the diner. He twiddled his thumbs together as she approached the table.

“Everything good here?” she asked him.

“Gonna need a chocolate shake,” Keller replied, not taking his eyes from his anxious partner.

“Coming right up,” the waitress said before walking back to the kitchen.

“You don’t get a chocolate shake unless shit is serious,” said Melloti.

“Well kid, you wanted to talk,” said Keller, biting his lip. “And if you’re talking this business, steak and gravy ain’t gonna cut it.”

Melloti leaned back in his seat.

“How bad?” he asked. Keller chuckled at the question.

“How bad?” he repeated. “That’s all you’ve got? ‘How bad?’”

“I’m asking you, how bad?”

“Oh it’s pretty fucking bad.”

Melloti muttered to himself as he put his head in his hands.

“What did you expect?” Keller asked him. Melloti didn’t answer. “Hey!”

Keller snapped his fingers and Melloti snapped back to reality.

“What...the fuck...did you expect?”

The waitress came back with Keller’s shake.

“Here you go, one chocolate.”

“Thank you.”

Keller took out a hip flask he kept filled with whiskey and took a swig before pouring a generous amount into the glass.

“It’s bad, kid,” he said. “It’s fucking bad.”

He stirred the shake and downed half of it in one go.

“And even chocolate shakes ain’t fixing this one.”

They finished up and paid the tab soon after. Melloti didn’t have much to say because Keller didn’t have much more to tell him, it was just that simple. They drove back north on State again up towards the river and pulled off into a parking lot between Balbo and Harrison. Across the street from the lot was the 7th Avenue Hotel. It was a dingy, ramshackle old place that looked like it had been through a hurricane. When they entered the building the lobby was deserted with the exception of a tired and bored looking clerk who sat behind the desk.

“What do you think I should-”

“Stopping you right there,” Keller interrupted Melloti as they traversed the lobby.

“What, you don’t have an-”

“I said stop.”

“Goddammit Frank!

They stopped at the elevators and Keller pressed the button.

“What do you want from me Adrian, hm? A hug?” said Keller. “You want me to pat you on the back and say it’s all gonna be okay?! You honestly think you’re gonna bullshitting your way out of this?!”

“Look,” said Melloti. “I know, okay? I know I fucked up, but I-”

Keller held up a finger as the elevator bell rang and the doors slid open.

“No no no, taking a corner too fast and dinging the back door of a taxi, that’s fucking up,” said Keller as they stepped into the elevator. “I’d say this is another level entirely, wouldn’t you?”

Melloti was on the verge of tears when the doors slid shut again. They stood in silence for a moment as they ascended with crappy elevator music playing overhead.

“So he’d mad I’m guessing?” Melloti said, his voice quivering.

“What did you say?”

“I said I’m guessi-”

“Yeah I heard you, I’m just trying to comprehend the stupidity of the question!” Keller barked, baring his teeth like some angry animal. “‘Is he mad.’ He’s not mad, you dipshit, the Boss gets mad when he gets too much sugar in his coffee. Like I said before, we’ve reached an untamed realm of damage here.”

There was another pause.

“So that’s a ‘yes’ then?” Melloti questioned. Keller sighed heavily as the doors opened on the 10th floor. They stepped out into a hallway covered in stained green carpet that was dimly lit by tarnished brass fixtures on the walls on either side.

“So I’m done, right? I’m finished,” Melloti continued. “Do I even have time to get out of town at this point?”

“If you had left two seconds after shit hit the fan you might’ve had a head start,” Keller confirmed.

“Good to know. Where are they watching?”

“O’Hare, Midway, trains, buses, cabs, rickshaws, if it moves more than ten miles an hour the Boss as eyes on it.”

Melloti stopped for a moment, trying to think of an exit.

“The Boss...I mean, the Boss respects you, Frank,” he said. “Who doesn’t? You’re the man around-”

“Look kids, I wanna help you,” Frank interrupted him again. “The Boss listens to me on a good day because I respect him, not the other way around. That’s what you don’t understand; it’s not who you are, it’s who you respect.”

“Well who does the Boss respect?”

“Whoever he wants to, that’s why he’s the Boss.”

Kelley continued down the hallways, Melloti followed close behind him.

“What room are we looking for?”

“Ten-eleven.”

“Who’s in there?”

“Some shmuck from out of town the Boss wants gone, said he’s making things difficult.”

Melloti suddenly stopped again. Keller looked back at him.

“What’s his name?” said Melloti.

“Think it’s Davis, why?”

“Making sure it’s nobody I know.”

“Would it matter if you did know him?”

“Probably not.”

The pair arrived at room 1011, taking positions on either side of the door.

“You go first,” said Keller. “I’ll cover the sides, you go right in.”

“You want me to go first?”

“Figured you deserved a break tonight.”

“Some break,” said Melloti, taking out his H&K .40 Compact. Keller pulled a stainless Para-Ordnance LDA and they both checked their guns over. Melloti stood in front of the door as Keller kept to the side.

“Ready?” said Keller. Melloti didn’t answer, he just stood there with a scared look in his eyes and sweat running down his forehead.

“Kid?”

“Yeah, ready.”

Keller looked up and down the hallway.

“Go.”

Melloti kicked the door in. The lock broke and the door swung inward. The two gunmen slid into the room; Melloti sweeping what was in front of him as Keller checked either side.

The room was tiny with only a bed in the middle, a side table, and a stand for an old TV that sat next to the door. Keller closed the door behind them and turned on a lamp in the corner. There wasn’t anyone in the bed. Melloti went around the corner to the bathroom, opening the door and turning on the light. Nothing, the room was empty.

“Fuck!” Melloti cursed. Without even looking behind him to confirm his suspicions he jumped into the bathroom just as a gunshot exploded behind him. Melloti took cover, huddled down next to the bathtub as Keller put two more rounds off. Clouds of plaster dust puffed into the air as Keller’s bullets whizzed by the bathroom door and into the opposite wall. Melloti stuck his arm around the doorframe and fired blindly as Keller took cover around the corner.

“Goddammit Frank!” Melloti cried out.

“I’m sorry kid!”

“I let you walk me all the way up here!”

“That’s your own damn fault! Second time you didn’t listen to your gut! Didn’t the first time teach you anything you moron?!”

Melloti kicked the sink repeatedly, cursing his own stupidity.

“Come on, man! Not you!” he almost sobbed.

“Who else? With the shitstorm you raised? He can’t just kill you, kid, he’s gotta make a statement!”

Melloti covered his face with his hands and groaned.

“Dammit...” he muttered, his hands slumping down into his lap with the right one still holding his smoking USP. “I’m not gonna insult you by asking if we can talk this out.”

“Appreciate it,” said Keller.

There was a silence as they sat and waited.

“I don’t wanna die tonight, Frank,” said Melloti. “Not here. Not here in this shitty hotel next to the fucking can!”

“Well you know what you’ve gotta do if you wanna leave.”

Melloti mumbled to himself.

“I don’t wanna die tonight...I don’t wanna die tonight...”

He said it over and over. After a moment he stopped. He looked up with fire in his eyes and shook his head.

“I’m not dying tonight,” he said, nodding to himself. “I’m not dying tonight. You hear me Frank?! I’m not fucking dying here tonight!”

Keller closed his eyes and sighed as he slid out a second Para-Ordnance that matched the first one.

“I’m not taking it easy on you kid,” he said, flicking the gun’s safety off.

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Melloti replied.

There was another pause.

“He didn’t even give you a choice, did he Frank?”

“There’s always a choice, kid.”

“Between killing your partner and dying?”

“Pretty shit choice, isn’t it?”

They both laughed. Melloti took out a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. He took out his lighter and remembered it wasn’t working.

“You got a light?” he said. Keller took out his Zippo and tossed it around the corner. It landed on the carpet next to the bathroom door. Melloti quickly snatched it up and lit his smoke. He took a long drag before checking his pistol.

“I really don’t wanna fucking kill you, Frank,” he said.

“You think I’m all happy about putting you down?”

“No, it just sucks, that’s all.”

“I asked you before we came in if it would matter if you knew the guy.”

“I said it probably wouldn’t.”

The two went silent for the last time. Melloti moved first, jumping out of the door as his pistol threw lead across the room. He wasn’t shooting at Keller, though, his bullets hit the lamp in the corner. The room went dark as Keller came out with both guns blazing. The partners in crime fired their guns wildly in the dark, muzzle flashes lighting the room for milliseconds at a time until the shooting stopped. After that there was only dark.