

These Two Guys...

By Craig McDonald

“So what about Saturday night?” Angelo checked his speed as they rolled through the small village - a notorious speed trap - and raised an eyebrow.

Davey James was rooting through a sack lunch. “Don’t know, A,” Davey said. “Let me run that by Alex.”

“What’s to run by?” Angelo Grapelli shook his head, picking up speed now that they were out of the little village. Saturday nights had always been a given until the past two months. Saturday nights were drinks, dinner and more drinks with their ladies *du jour* at La Vecchia.

At least that was so before Davey had begun sparking the recently widowed Alexis DeCastro.

Jesus.

Far as Angelo Grapelli could tell, that skinny Dutch bitch Alexis was drawing his partner Davey’s teeth.

Angelo frowned, palming left onto a county two-lane. He gestured at Davey’s lunch bag with his right hand. Angelo’s fat fingers were spangled pinky to pointer with big sharp and shiny rings. “What’s today’s?”

Davey said, “Fat free pretzels, tuna fish salad in this funny little plastic bowl...sliced tomatoes and some fresh vegetables. Bottled water.”

“Sounds healthy,” Angelo said. “How much you down now?”

“Was 330...325 on a good day,” Davey said. “Down to 280.”

Angelo nodded, sour-faced. “Jesus, Davey, you look like you’ve lost a whole guy - hope this doesn’t affect your work. Gotta say, you’re less imposing from the gates, my man.”

Davey shrugged, chomping on some baby carrots, talking around the orange debris, “Nah, A, I’m getting *stronger*. Benching 320, now. Sounds more impressive to bench more than your own weight.”

“Sure,” Angelo said, stepping carefully now. “Sure - if some stranger could tell what you can lift just by lookin’ at ya,” Angelo said. “I’m just saying, before, you were like a damned tank comin’ at some guy. Now, you’re just another big guy.”

“Don’t sweat it, Ang’.” Davey spooned down some tuna salad, smacked his lips. “You got specific complaints? I let you down so far? ‘Cause if you’ve got specific complaints, we can talk about those. Otherwise, we’re just jawin’ and if we’re just jawin’, it’s a dumb fucking topic and one we want to get off of, right now.”

They locked eyes; Angelo blinked first. And hell, he was driving - had to watch the road.

“Nah, I got no complaints about any of that,” Angelo said. “Hell, no.” He shrugged. “I’m just sayin’, Davey, you know?”

“Well just don’t.”

Angelo tossed his cigarette stub out the window. Lit another. He frowned when he saw Davey roll down his window. Angelo suddenly realized he couldn’t remember

the last time he saw Davey light one up himself. “So, you’ll tell Alexis about Saturday night?”

Davey didn’t answer for a while, then said, “Yeah, well, Alexis, she’s not much of a drinker, see.”

Yeah.

Alexis wasn’t much of anything, near as Angelo Grapelli could tell. She was the beaten-on wife of some deadbeat Mexican grifter. Alexis DeCastro had lost her son about six months before her old man got clipped. The woman had been the DeCastro family’s only legitimate wage-earner, working a paramutuel window at a thoroughbred track. When that racing season ended, the trotters started running at the other end of town, and Alexis shifted to that track.

Angelo’s current steady lady was Molly, a busty, leggy redhead he’d met at the Red Fox Gentleman’s Club. Molly was the joint’s prettiest pole dancer. Molly was always the one selected to appear in all the newspaper ads for the Fox. That made her a minor celebrity in certain circles.

Angelo tightened his grip on the wheel. “So that’s just a way of saying, ‘no fucking way,’ huh, Davey?”

“We could do dinner,” Davey said, chewing his tuna and staring down the hood. “But we could branch out a little, you know? I’m frankly up to here with La Vecchia and that sad-ass crowd - all the wannabes and never-weres and almosts jawin’ and lyin’. And all the civilians who come and stare and try and eavesdrop ‘cause they’ve heard it’s where The Boys like to hang out. Jesus, it’s just tired, A, a tired fuckin’ scene.”

Angelo bit his lip. He reached down to the ashtray, sucked hard on his unfiltered Marlboro and then ground it out and tossed the butt out the window. “They still let a man smoke at La Vecchia,” Angelo said. Angelo and Davey had personally seen to that. The joint sat on the wrong side of the city corporation limits, rested in township jurisdiction. There were only three township trustees, all old men, so they weren’t hard to manipulate - not hard to cajole into passing a smoking exemption for La Vecchia.

“That’s the other thing,” Davey said. “You go into that place and *everyone* is fuckin’ smokin’. It’s like eating inside a damned car muffler. Who needs it? You walk out of that joint stinkin’ like some whorehouse ashtray on dollar night.”

Angelo couldn’t *believe* this shit. Did someone kidnap Davey and replace him with this scrawny prissy replica? Angelo shifted gears:

“Alexis have any notion as to how you contributed to her, *ah*...widowhood? Any pillow talk yet about how you did her old man?”

Angelo could feel the weight of Davey’s death stare - those dark dead eyes on him. He kept looking straight ahead. At bottom, it was all really Angelo’s own fault. Luis DeCastro had been asking around for someone who would clip his wife...open the door for Luis to get some insurance money when his wife Alexis fell. Someone talked to someone who talked to Angelo who recommended Davey.

But plans went sideways. Lonely Davey had taken out Luis DeCastro for reasons that still bewildered Angelo. Then, more stunning, Davey had moved in on the woman he had widowed.

“No, she don’t fuckin’ know,” Davey said. “She will never fuckin’ know, and if anyone thought about seeing Alex know, that someone would fuckin’ rue the day he fuckin’ made that big ass fuckin’ mistake.”

Davey slapped one big hand to the dashboard to brace himself as the car went into a skid to the berm. With his other hand, Davey wrapped his fingers around the butt of his gun - didn't even bother drawing it clear - just pointed it in the direction of Angelo's head. If he pulled the trigger, Davey would just be out a sports jacket. Hell, the damned thing hung on him like a tent now, anyway.

Angelo had his hands off the wheel now. He started to reach, then saw Davey's hand under the too-big sports jacket and raised his hands. "I fuckin' resent the implication of that last statement of yours," Angelo said. He slowly reached down, shifted into park and put his hands back up. "Jesus, Davey! Look at us! I was just askin' a question." Angelo swallowed hard and lowered his hands. "That was no fuckin' threat, Davey," he said. "I know you construed it as such, but it was not a damned threat."

Davey looked at him with those dead black eyes. "Yeah? You swear?"

"On the soul of my dead daughter, I swear, Davey."

Angelo reached down, shifted back into drive and then rolled off the shoulder and started picking up speed again. "What's happened to you, Davey? What's happenin' to us?"

Davey put away his gun and dipped his hand into his bag of pretzels. He held it out and Angelo took a handful.

"I don't want this thing with Alexis messed up," Davey said. "You start raggin' on my gettin' small, then you ask a question like that about what Alex knows about what happened to her ex...you bein' you and all. Me knowing you like I do, Ang'...well, wheels start turning in my head, you start bustin' my balls that way. Pieces starting fitting together into a picture I don't fuckin' like and won't abide. I get this notion you've got a notion to try and fuck up what I've got going with Alexis."

Angelo shook his head. "Jesus, Davey, what kind of traitorous fuck do you make me for? You're happy, maybe first time in your life, and I'm gonna go monkey with that? You believe that? We've known each other since we was, what, eight? Nine? I'm frankly disappointed, David. Let's not go this long and suddenly let some woman get between us."

"Let's forget it," Davey said.

"Sure, sure." Angelo checked the mirror, said, "You two starting to talk some long-term thing?"

"It gets talked about," Davey said. "We'll see." He ate some more carrots. He offered the bag and Angelo declined:

"Nah, eat too many of those, you'll friggin' turn orange."

"That's a myth," Davey said.

"Nah, I seen it happen," Angelo said. "Remember that one that danced over at the Lair? The blond with the nipple rings?"

"Yeah. What was her name?"

"Hell if I know...some cartoon name...maybe Bambi. We only went out about half-a-dozen times. But she started eating all these little carrots just like those ones...went on a juice diet...she turned orange."

"No shit?"

"Nah, it looked like one of those fake tans," Angelo said. "Kinda tan you get out of tubes or from sunlamps...just this kind of off-orange. Right down to the whites of her

friggin' eyes. It was like lookin' at a TV with bad color balance. Disturbing...like a jelly bean with tits."

Davey half-smiled and sipped his bottled water. He resealed it and said, "What's the drill?"

"New tavern, just opened. It's on the county line, but our side. Guy who owns it is an ex-vet."

"Iraq?"

"Yeah, but from the first time around. You know...Bush One."

"A Desert Storm vet, huh? This will not go smooth," Davey said.

"Expect not," Angelo said. "I was in there the other night. Guy's an ex-Ranger. Goes six-three, maybe six four, and probably 260 - all muscle. Why I said, you know, 320, you'd dwarf the cocksucker."

"Don't sweat it," Davey said. "We'll get her done."

* * *

The place looked more like a VFW hall than the sticks tavern it was conceived to be. Davey looked at his watch. The wristband was loose now and Davey had to reach across with his right hand and twist the face around to where he could see the time. Eleven a.m. Davey reminded himself again to have his watchband tightened. Angelo saw Davey adjusting the watch and smiled crookedly. Davey flipped Angelo the bird.

A man rose from behind the bar, wiping his hands on a dishrag. He said, "Hey fellas." Neutral - not even mock cordial. Davey narrowed his eyes, getting this feeling like they were maybe already made.

The tavern owner was big enough - probably six-three barefooted. Broad shoulders and a short sleeve shirt to show off mature muscle. *Imposing* was the word for the tavern owner. Even if Angelo hadn't told him, Davey would have made the big vet for an ex-Ranger.

The keep said, "Township laws are a little hinky out this way. Can't serve you anything hard until after 1 p.m."

"That's the shits," Angelo said, taking a stool near the TV. "Well, make my mine..." he paused, looking at tap pull knobs, then said, "...a Sam Adams."

Davey didn't really want a beer - all those empty carbs - but he didn't need Angelo bitching at him either, particularly in front of this Goliath that Davey was supposed to maybe muscle. Davey said, "Amstel Light for me." That wasn't much better than ordering nothing. Davey thought he could hear Angelo's eyes rolling sideways to appraise him. That damned mock smile was on Angelo's face again.

The keep tossed down a couple of cardboard drink mats and placed frosted mugs atop them.

"Nice touch, frosting the glasses," Angelo said. "Real classy."

"Glad you fucking approve," the tavern's owner said.

"Spect we'll run a tab," Angelo said.

The keep said, "No, these two are on the house. Enjoy 'em. Then I'd ask you to leave. I know who you are. I was warned by others who you've shaken down. I ain't playing that game. Closed discussion."

The keep was standing close by the bar now, his arms at his sides. He was standing closest to Angelo, who blinked several times, then said, "Come again?"

Davey scowled and sipped his beer. He figured the tavern's owner had something close at hand on a shelf under the bar. A club - maybe a ball bat or a tire iron. Or maybe a handgun...perhaps something bigger, like a sawed-off. The keep was looking at Davey, sizing him up. Davey shot the sleeves of his loose fitting jacket, covering up his watch that sat sideways on his thinner wrist. There was enough space between the band and the bones that Davey could have slipped his own big thumb in the gap and still have had wiggle room.

The stranger said to Davey, "What? You sick or something? Cancer, or the like? Looks like you've lost a shitload of weight." Davey heard Angelo cluck his tongue. Davey sipped more beer and said, "Nah. I ain't sick. Just cut back on my bad diet habits. Got tired of eatin' gym jockeys like you for breakfast. Tired of havin' chunks of guys like you in my stool."

The man behind the bar shook his head. "That line wasn't funny when Phil Hartman coined it fifteen years ago."

"I think we need to educate you a little on the way things work out this way," Angelo said. "This thing we offer, it's what you call, *compulsory*. It's not an opt-out kind of thing." Angelo frowned and said, "Your name, it's Tom, ain't it?"

"Tom, yeah," Tom said. "But you ain't staying long enough to need my handle again."

Angelo slapped Davey's smaller arm. "This dude's got himself a temper, eh, Davey? I can see it building. What do you think? Guy's a Desert Storm vet. Think he's maybe got that, what you call it? Gulf War syndrome? Some headcase shit like that, maybe? Read me an article about all these guys, they get back from Iraq, they got temper issues. First thing they do, they flip and beat on or kill their old ladies. All these Gulf War guys, they're all damaged goods. Head cases, you know? How's your old lady, Tom?"

"I'm single," Tom said evenly.

"Me, too," Angelo said. "Mostly. Though old Davey, here, he's got himself a woman. Getting himself skinny to spark her more. High school shit, ain't it?"

Davey said, "A..."

Angelo switched directions, said, "Think we got us a 'roid monkey in Tom here. What do you think, Davey? Apart from the fact that 'roid junkies are nearly all homos, they've got anger control issues, too. All those hormones go to work on 'em. Maybe they lose it, too, 'cause the pills shrink their balls."

Davey toyed with his beer mug, pointedly keeping both hands wrapped around the cold mug where 'Tom' could see them. Despite the beer, Davey's mouth was dry. He felt spreading sweat stains under his arms. Davey looked Tom over again. Davey decided that on his best day, he still couldn't take the retired Ranger hand-to-hand. And Christ only knew what the professionally trained soldier could do with a firearm. It was a revelation to Davey - that he'd met a man he considered more than his match. Tom shot him a glance, then turned full attention back to Angelo. In that instant, Davey knew that Tom had also decided he could take Davey. But Davey sensed Tom had reached that conclusion a good while before Davey arrived at it.

Angelo said, "Think we're gonna have to take this asshole apart. What do you think, Davey?"

"I think Tom has opted out on the program, A. I think we walk."

Now Angelo and Tom were both looking at Davey. Davey hefted his mug to drink more, then changed his mind and sat it down.

"Looks like the one opting out on the fucking program here is you, Davey," Angelo said.

Now Davey took a drink. He put down the mug, keeping both hands on the bar so Tom could see them. Looking at Tom, Davey nodded, said, "Could be, A. It could fucking well be."

Angelo was seething. Red-faced, he said, "This cocksucker's got you cowed! That's it! You're fucking afraid!"

"That could be half of it," Davey said.

Tom was scowling now, confused. Like he was trying to grasp the dynamic - to decide if this was some arcane ploy they were running on him.

Angelo turned to face Davey. "What's the other fucking half?"

"I'm sick of the life, A," Davey said. He drained his beer. "Time for a new line of work. Maybe time to be self-employed, like Old Tom, here. So I'm walking, Angelo. You got any brains left, you'll follow me."

"You fucking believe this?" Angelo said to Tom. "Davey here goes sweet on some cooze he widowed and he turns pussy on me. Fucking unbelievable. Drops a ton of weight, goes soft, quits smoking and drinking. You fucking imagine that, Tom? Big bastard like you - you imagine letting a fucking woman draw your teeth like that? We wrap this up, first thing I'm doing, is I'm gonna go visit that pathetic bitch and let her know how you did her husband, Davey. Save you from your fucking self."

Dave swiveled on his stool. "You are a fucking dead man, A."

Tom bit his lip, said, "Take it outside you two."

Angelo said, "You shut the fuck up, Tom. Sorry, but I gotta teach this smaller-but-still-fat fuck Davey here a fucking lesson. And I'm afraid you're the lesson, Tom." Angelo's hand dipped into his jacket for his piece. Tom reached under the bar, got clear first.

Angelo shuddered and then looked down at his nearly severed right arm and the spreading red stain in the center of his shirt. His lips and chin were sprayed with blood. Angelo said, "Well fuck me." Then he fell backward off the barstool, arms spread and eyes to the ceiling.

Davey hands were still flat on the bar. He'd never even tried to draw his own gun. Tom's sawed-off was now leveled at Davey's heart. Tom said, "One barrel left, asshole."

"You don't need it," Davey said, calm now. "I'll help you get him out of here, bury him out back, I guess, and then clear out."

Tom considered that. He lowered the gun, but kept it at hand. Davey said, "We go back, me and Angelo, like you guessed. But it's been strained for a long time. And this latest, over my lady, that was the breaking point. Fuck, I nearly shot him myself on the drive over here."

Davey stood up carefully, looked at the tables and walked to the closest one. He moved the ashtray and condiment tray to an adjacent table and pulled off the table's

vinyl, red and white checkered tablecloth and spread it out on the floor next to Angelo's body. He looked up and said, "Tom, you want to help me wrap this fucker up in this thing, or what?"

The vet stowed his gun under the bar and came around to Davey's side. Tom locked the bar's front door and then Davey took Angelo by the ankles and Tom got him by the shoulders and they rolled Angelo over onto the plastic sheet. Tom took another tablecloth off another table, and they bundled up Angelo, then wound several turns of duct tape around the body to hold the plastic in place. Davey rose and waved a hand at the spotless floor. He said, "Neat fucking job. Not a single bloodstain."

Tom said, "I can take it from here. You bein' his friend and all. Just get your ass out of here."

Davey said, "Nah. I owe you for your trouble. I tried to talk him out of this. And like I said, he and me go back. Least I can do is see A in the ground. I'll take his legs." Before he stooped down, Davey took a look around at the tavern and said, "You've really got a real nice place here, Tom. I *like* this joint."

Tom shrugged. "That's great," he said.

They hefted Angelo's body up between them and lugged him out back and through a stand of shoulder-high weeds down to the bank of a small stream. "I own the acreage back here - all flood plain, stuff," Tom said, "so there's no danger of anyone developing this later and digging your friend here up."

They dropped the body there, then went back to the bar together to fetch a pickax and two shovels. The creek bank was relatively moist and the digging went quickly. Tom said "Think that's big enough?"

Davey turned his head on side, narrowing his eyes and measuring angles and depth. He said, "I'm worried about erosion. Hate for you to have to do this again. I think we should go deeper. Maybe a little longer, too."

They dug for another twenty minutes. Davey looked at the mounting dirt pile and decided he didn't want to have to deal with more than was already there. He said, "I think we're good." They muscled Angelo's body into the hole. Davey groaned and pressed his hands to the small of his back and said, "Jesus, I'm too old for this. Think I pulled something."

Tom nodded and dragged Angelo's body further toward the top of the hole so his feet would fit in. Davey said, "You know, I'm looking at all that plastic and thinking it's a mistake - gonna slow down decomposition." He reached into his sports jacket's pocket and pulled out a switchblade. He sprung the blade and handed it down to Tom. "For the tape," he said. "I think we ought to unwrap Angelo before we bury him."

Tom nodded and set to work on the duct tape, his back to Davey. "Makes sense," he said. "Back doing any better?"

"Yeah, better," Davey said. "That place of yours really is a nice one."

"Thanks."

"So nice, I've decided to take it over."

Davey shot Tom twice in the back of the head, pressing the gun up tight behind Tom's ear to muffle the sound.

Tom fell across Angelo's body, most of his head gone.

Davey tucked Tom's arms into the hole and bent the big man's legs at the knees, forcing those in, too. When he was done, it looked like Tom was humping a checkered mummy.

Davey set to work filling the hole.

Craig McDonald's debut novel, Head Games, is now available from Bleak House Books. His short stories can be found in the anthologies Dublin Noir, Danger City II and The Deadly Bride & 21 of the Year's Finest Crime and Mystery Stories. Art in the Blood, a collection of interviews with 20 major crime authors, is available from PointBlank Books. A second collection of interviews, Rogue Males, is forthcoming from Bleak House Books. He can be found on the web at www.craigmcdonaldbooks.com