

SAMPLE

# PROLOGUE

**Thursday, September 25, 1997**

**Phoenix, Arizona**

**1:35 a.m.**

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He heard the faint sound of a phone ringing, the little chirp a cell phone makes. Frantic conversation; mumbled pleas; shuffling footsteps crunching through shattered glass. He couldn't see. Blind. A nylon canvas, slick and full of the stench of blood and vomit, covered his face. From somewhere behind him a beery smell arose, tinged in the stench of excrement released in fear. His weak hands, featherlike, pushed away the airbag, and the world returned as he stared out through the windshield, seeing the desert moon eclipsed in floating black rain clouds. Through the spider-webbed windshield, the world was a misty ruin.

He turned his head, thick in a Novocaine-like haze, and looked around the car, trying to speak, to call out to his passengers, but his words only bubbled on numbed lips. It didn't matter, though. The car was empty.

His dead hand slapped at the door handle, and he heard the door creak open on damaged hinges. He didn't recall unbuckling the seatbelt, but somehow he'd unclasped the latch with numb, nonexistent fingers. His legs were thick, hard to move as he dislodged himself from the crush of the steering column, and he felt his left foot sink into something slick as he stood.

He felt his body swaying, the desert wind toying with him. It all looked calm now. The wreckage in its final resting place; the early-morning air crisp, and quiet. His ears rang, blood pounding thick

through his head. His left eye suddenly stung, and a thick film distorted his vision. He wiped it clear and looked at his finger, slick with fresh blood.

A shard of glass dropped from the slivered rear window like a loose tooth falling from a beaten jaw and shattered on the pavement. Roger started staggering away from the wreckage but his left leg collapsed under him. He dropped to his knees and steadied himself on the glass-strewn pavement and looked up.

And that's when he saw her.

Alma, covered in blood, lay face down on the pavement, left arm stretched over the tangle of blood-matted hair as though reaching for him one last time. Her right arm was twisted in a ghastly way behind her back. He stared at the hourglass contour of her waist, hips he'd held on the dance floor only a few short hours ago, hips and legs that moved and gyrated with life, now unmoving, lifeless. He begged, somewhere in the back of his mind, begged for a sign of life. A breath. A slight movement of any sort. Even a moan of agony. He begged ... who do you beg to? *Who?*

*And God can stand by and watch.*

*God. Please!*

He stood up, legs rubbery, the ground beneath him unsteady. He tried to speak, to call out her name. But his face was numb, dried blood fusing his lips together. A rancid taste erupted from his stomach, and an Absolut-and-orange juice burn seared in his throat. His head pitched forward, a splatter breaking the blood-tight seal of his lips, heaving uncontrollably from his sight-sickened stomach. He continued to heave miserably even after his stomach was empty, visions of her alive, visions of her dead, visions unceasing.

*God! Please!*

He fell against the crushed fender, pressing his cheek against the cold, mangled metal, eyes shut tight, trying to push away the nightmare, make it go away. A ghastly keening sound of anguish filled the air, and he realized that the ungodly sound was coming from him—uncontrollable sobs torturing the night air.

He opened his eyes and the nightmare worsened. Across the road, another of his three passengers, Marianna, lay amidst the twinkle of

shattered glass, as though entombed on a diamond-studded bier along the side of the road. She seemed to be looking at him, an expression of bewilderment asking him *why? Why?* It seemed like only moments ago she was a radiant reflection in the rearview mirror, giggly and entangled in carnal backseat bliss with Jaxie Sosa—the deep-dimpled stud she’d snagged at the club tonight. *Why?*

*God help me!*

He wasn’t sure how long he’d stood there. Almost mechanically, his hand dug into his pants pocket, soaked with blood, and pulled out his cell phone. The numbers were a blur when he looked down at the phone’s cracked LCD, but they were three simple numbers.

“Nine-one-one,” the voice came muffled, the phone engulfed in his bloody, trembling hand. “This is the nine-one-one operator,” the voice repeated.

He lifted the phone to his ear. “I ...”

“Nine-one-one, I hear you sir. What’s the emergency?”

His lips were thick, tongue swollen. “I was in an ... killed two people. Car accident.” His slurred voice, raspy from the bile bubbling in his throat.

“Sir, where is your location?”

He looked around, the world a haze. The road stretched endlessly, north and south. Location. Where is your location?

“Sir?”

He shut his eyes tight, trying to remember, trying to see the road signs, where had he been? He saw the road racing toward him at a hundred-thirty miles per hour; felt Alma’s touch; heard her laughter. Electrically alive only moments ago.

*God help me!*

“...you said there were fatalities?”

He nodded at the phone.

“Sir?”

“Help. Send help.”

“Are you injured sir?”

He hung up. *Are you hurt? Why are you not hurt? You should be dead ... deserve to be dead...*

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His eyes focused on the wreckage. Funny. Sitting there, a crumpled heap, slightly askew in its lane, but he noticed that it was pointed in the right direction, sitting in the northbound lane, heading due north. Had it not been crippled by the flattened tires and garroted undercarriage, he'd be driving now. He'd be driving home.

And he started to laugh. Not a giddy laugh, but a hopeless cackle; the kind of despondent snort that echoes off of the emptiness of forlorn toil, the mind's last tranquilizing defense against the onset of insanity. Home was only a few miles away. A few more miles and sweet Alma would be surrounded in downy luxury, trundled away and giggling in a king-sized playground, sparkling with life and surrounded in the zest of frivolity and carnal adventure.

*Life.*

Instead, she lay in a forever sleep on a cold, shard-covered asphalt slab, drenched in the violent butchering and harsh elements of a nightmare—mercifully at an end for her—the beginning of a nightmare for him.

And then he felt the tears begin to brim over his lower eyelids, cleansing them of the blood that had pooled from the unseen gash in his forehead. His body trembled, muscles tightening, squeezing broken and bruised appendages. Pain. A sign of life. A life he no longer deserved. At first they started as shuttering sobs, heavy with grief. Soon, his primal cries of anguish filled the air, billowing toward the heavens, and he dove back into the wreckage.

He saw his hands, running over the plush floorboards, the slice of glass shredding skin as he frantically searched under the seat. It was here somewhere. It was always there. The .9mm was a comfort he was never without. He kept it holstered. Extra magazine nearby. Always tucked under his front seat. Normally, for safety, to save his life.

Tonight, it would take his life.

A desperate pant filled the car. He couldn't find it. *Where did it go? There!* Something, in his hand. He pulled it out, and through a tear-filled glaze he recognized the signature green of a Heineken bottle.

*Jaxie!*

His third passenger.

*Where's Jaxie?*

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The image of the last moment he'd seen Jaxie came to him, seeing the slack-jawed horror of his face in the rearview mirror, paste-white and turned toward the window, Heineken neck still touching his lips—watching in disbelief as the cement barrier wall stormed toward them.

He continued his frantic search, looking around the wreckage, seeing only hair, blood, and powdered carnage. Recessed in a fold of the passenger airbag, he saw the black handle of his briefcase. He grabbed it. The clasp had broken in its tumble from the back seat. He opened it. No gun. Insurance papers, contracts, a pen, legal pad, a wad of \$100 bills from a recent drug transaction.

He looked at the legal pad and saw his bloody fingertips tear a piece of paper free. A note. Suicides always leave a note, right?

He staggered toward the front of the car, his stomach still wanting to vomit, life passing by in a blur. He spread the piece of paper on the crumpled hood, and stared at it, pen poised, ready to write ... but write what? What should he say?

He'd be blowing his brains out. They'd need to identify him ... identify the body. He began to scrawl .... HRACH MUNCHIAN ...

Now what? There needs to be more to it than that. . He added his address. *Okay, so they know where you live ... what? Something ... say something ...* His hand trembled as he wrote the only final thought that came to mind, the last words he'd leave this world with: *GOD HELP ME!*

He tucked the note under the damaged windshield wiper and looked up the road. There was no time to find the gun. Somewhere up there, halfway home, he knew there was a bridge, an overpass. If he could make it to the bridge, it would be over. The nightmare would be over.

He started to trot, his left leg searing, the rush of adrenaline and his destiny with death pushing him on.

**1:48 a.m.**

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High above, rays of moonlight penetrated the dissipating dark clouds, and Roger looked down through blood-tinged tears—tears searing his eyes like hot coals—and stared at his blood-speckled hands. Anguish overwhelmed him again, stopping his faltering gait as he dropped to the

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roadside, pebbles and rock sinking deep into the rotten plum-like flesh of his shattered knee. He felt his mummified lips break the blood-seal that had fused them as a tortured cry escaped from deep within him, filling the air with an inhuman wailing that could only have come from the deepest pit of Hell. Reliving the murder scene again—seeing his hands gripping the murder weapon—the car wheel—he felt the helplessness, a sense of toppling from a window and falling endlessly, never hitting the ground, swirling in his own eternal cries of desolation. In the torrent of cries, he recognized only one phrase, the same words he'd scrawled on his suicide note and left pinned to the mangled wreckage of the death scene:

*God help me!*

He couldn't erase the images from his mind, endlessly tormented by visions of the life he'd taken in a single, drunken moment. He could see it clearly now, as though watching as a voyeur, the very moment the screeching impact with the barrier wall turned the precision machinery that encapsulated the pride of his unquenchable thirst for wealth and power into a murder weapon—and erased two beautiful lives that had been knit together by God's own hands.

*God help me!*

The pavement around him suddenly came alive with the dance of blue and red strobes. Far behind him, he heard the garbled voices, orders and commands barked through intercoms and police mics. Looking back, his stomach sank at the sight of silhouettes exiting police cruisers and fanning out around the wreckage, assessing the scene. He got to his feet, pushing harder now, needing to get to the overpass before they discovered that the murderer was less than a mile away fleeing—not for his life—but for his certain death.

The blinding spotlight from above lit his path. He'd been in the spots of a police helicopter before and he'd given flight—wanting to survive. This time the lights were an aid to death, lighting the way through the tangle and rock of the desert floor as he clawed his way uphill to the overpass. He could feel the warm, desert air swirl around him, the chopper blades beating loose the desert floor, dust sticking to blood and sweat, blinding him in mud-caked tears. He felt his feet hit solid pavement. Wiping the muddy tears from his eyes, he saw the rail

on the other side of the four lanes of the overpass. He was almost there. In moments, the nightmare would be over.

Garbled commands barked from a megaphone from above, commands to halt, arms above your head, on your knees sir, commands he knew too well. Orders to surrender. Not this time. This time, he would only surrender to death.

He pushed on, breaking into a gimping run, the searing pain from his pulverized knee forcing a ghastly cry that rose above the roar of chopper blades. To his left and right he heard screeching car tires, red and blue strobes of police lights animating the overpass, confusion swirling in more barking commands:

“Stay where you are!”

The overpass rail rushed toward him, blurred in a flood of fresh tears. He was almost there. Heart racing, breath coming in choking spasms—he heard the thud of an army of rushing feet pounding the pavement, charging toward him—but he knew they could not reach him in time.

“K-9 released!”

He heard the snarl of the beast behind him as he reached for the rail, his hands getting a firm grip as he readied himself to dive over. Razor-sharp pain shot through his leg as the canine sunk its fangs into his right calf. He felt his scream come from deep within his lungs, first a cry of pain, then a cry of desperation as the beast thrashed its head and pulled him free from his grip on the rail. In the blinding glare of spotlights and strobes, he saw the silhouettes rushing toward him. Dancing on his bad leg, pain bringing him to the brink of unconsciousness, his desperation to break free from the clench of the beast grew fierce. He reached for the rail and caught a firm grip and pulled, dragging the snarling beast along. He’d take the mutt over with him if that’s what it took.

“Stay where you are!”

“Freeze!”

They were within reach now. He could hear the clank of their buckles, the rattle of their cuffs and could smell their BO—ripened in the stress of the day’s shift—mixing in the swirl from the chopper hovering above. He yanked his foot hard, leaving a chunk of his own flesh dripping from the snarling jowls of the K-9—but he was free. He

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heard the desperate cry of the hunters about to lose their quarry as he felt his legs fly into the air. The sharp rocks, dotted in the dried sage and spiked foliage of the desert floor below, glowed in the police chopper's spotlights and rushed toward him as he went over the rail.

It was all over.

*God help me! God help me!*

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# CHAPTER ONE

**Saturday, June 3, 1989**

**Los Angeles**

**6:25 a.m.**

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Hrach “Roger” Munchian was getting ready to work his Saturday morning shift at Security Pacific Bank when he heard his pager go off. With the insane demand for quality weed, hot bumps, and jacked rides, a buzzing pager was better than a ringing cash register. Roger could get anything, really fast, and at a good price. And he had all the right connections: Crips, Bloods, Armenian Power, Mexican Mafia. They all had his digits. They all knew he was a guy who could get them what they wanted. He was well connected to top L.A. area dope suppliers like Chico Martinez who normally wouldn’t give a young punk like him the time of day but saw something in him that told him the kid had a future.

Roger hadn’t been scheduled to work this morning, but one of his fellow tellers had called in, and he grabbed the shift because he needed the money. He was still in hock twenty-two hundred bucks to his parents for the bail money they’d recently thrown to spring him from the L.A. County lock up. He did have a serious wad of cash in his sock drawer, most of it coming courtesy of the owners of one Jag and one Audie who’d been kind enough to make a roadside donation to him off Sunset Boulevard the other night, but he didn’t feel right paying his parents back with money he’d gotten from the point of his Bulldog .38 and his charming smile. He’d gotten \$500 a pop for each of the luxury vehicles he’d driven straight from the Boulevard to his favorite chop shop. All in a day’s pay.

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The arrest happened up in Burbank. He was a straight A student, sitting on an academic scholarship to Cal State, L.A., and it all went down on April 24<sup>th</sup>, just a month before high school graduation. It was his first beef, and he had no idea that it was just the beginning of an eight-year journey that would end at the door of Death Row.

He'd had a perfect two-year stretch before the misstep in disconnecting a car alarm drew him his first sheet and revealed a hidden life beneath the "model student" veneer. Along with his stellar academic record, he was also a varsity jock and a second-chair violinist with the John Marshall High School orchestra. Fast on his feet as a running back, he'd made the first string by his sophomore year. But that was also the year that his teammate, Ernesto Sanchez, a third-stringer with lungs baked from his two pack-a-day Newport habit, introduced him to his first toke of weed. Man, it felt good. One toke restored a self-esteem that had been shattered by the injustice of growing up as an inner-city Armenian immigrant. His Dad, Andranik, had learned the survival virtues of vodka in the Siberian gulags, the bottle now his only version of the American Dream. His mother picked up work here and there, keeping minimal food on the table for Roger and his sister. But things got really good when Roger learned the rewards of moving hot goods and brokering dope. He hooked up with the right people and learned the value of packing armor and being effective with the hardware. With the snub nose Bulldog or his Smithie .357, he could jack a car in seconds for a quick \$500 turn. For night shift duty, he always kept a couple of screwdrivers handy and a pocket full of sparkplugs. Spot a car loaded with nice bumps, shatter a spark plug on the pavement and chuck a shard of the ceramic casing at the car window, and the window implodes. With a reliable partner standing at the front bumper, he could reach in, pop the hood, and get the alarm wires snipped before the first chirp and have the stereo out in seconds.

Two years without arrest. Down the toilet now because he'd gotten careless and let that idiot Ernesto jack up his deal. The idiot, standing there in front of the hood, too jagged on weed to figure out which end of the wire snips to use, let the car alarm sound too long as Roger worked the stereo from the dash. The stone-headed carelessness drew heat, and

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now he was a straight-A student, varsity football player with a full-ride scholarship to Cal State—with a record.

He walked over to the marred nightstand next to his unmade bed and looked at the number on the pager. It wasn't one he recognized. Always a good sign. It usually meant a new customer.

Wearing his slacks and white undershirt, he walked into the kitchen and dialed the number.

“We got unfinished business, onion.”

Roger recognized the voice immediately. He went by the street name of Hondo—a rogue member of the Armenian Power street gang. Although Hondo ran with an Armenian gang, he wasn't one of them. He shared their gang colors—not their ethnicity. He was a Euro white trash punk who didn't fit in anywhere else. AP was an emerging L.A. gang, not quite with the rep of the Crips or Bloods, but their current leader, Boxer, was determined to get them into the major leagues fast. Roger had grown up with most of them, the guys immigrating at the same time Roger's family had come over, the experiences of poverty and broken homes pushing them into the acceptance of the gangster world. The more lethal ones, like Boxer, had come over later, the scars of war-torn ugliness intensifying their ruthlessness. Boxer allowed hybrids like Hondo in to add to the AP numbers. Hondo figured his affiliation with the AP gave him license to use the racial barb for Armenian immigrant, 'onion' whenever he wanted.

The “unfinished business” that Hondo spoke of was the fact that Roger had dropped him hard a week before graduation. It went down on the last day of school, Hondo and his AP flunkies sitting in their usual spot outside school grounds, Hondo entertaining his homies by picking on a squat kid, a fellow Armenian named Ara. Roger felt compelled to step into the gap, standing in for Ara, and it was over in two hits. Roger hitting Hondo, Hondo hitting the pavement. Roger ended his high school career a hero, standing up for a fellow Armenian and dropping a gangland punk with barely an effort.

Now Hondo wanted to even the score.

“Hondo! You never call. You never write. It feels like it's been simply forever! So, tell me, how's the wife and kids? You get that halitosis under control yet?”

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“Halitosis?”

“Bad breath, moron. Do I constantly have to explain these jokes to you Hond’?”

“You got a lucky shot in, onion. That don’t sit so good with me.”

“You know, I only let my friends call me onion. And even then I ain’t so sure I like it.”

“You wanna do something about it? You know where we hang. Tonight, onion. Don’t bring no homies. You and me. No blades. No irons. Skin on skin, hom’. You got it?”

“Name the time.”

“Eight o’clock. Sharp.”

“Sounds good. I have an eight-fifteen appointment. Five minutes to finish you off and ten to get to where I need to be.”

“You know what I hate about you, onion? You got one eyebrow. Stretches across your whole forehead. I’m gonna separate that for you.”

Hondo hung up.

### Hollywood Boulevard

7:50 p.m.

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The giant hot dog, loaded up with oversized faux cubes representing onions, rested on top of Red’s Hot Dogs, a shack-like drive-in on the corner of Hollywood and Western. A graffiti-etched, bulletproof Plexiglas wall surrounded the drive-in’s patio with a sign that said, “Parking in Rear,” which Roger did. Across the street was the Texaco gas station the AP had claimed as its turf.

*You know where we hang.*

Roger stared at the Bulldog .38 resting on the passenger seat of his Camaro. *No blades. No irons. Just skin on skin.* But instinct told him to pack. He was heading straight for AP territory. But there was honor at stake. His word was his bond and he’d agreed to no irons.

He slid the Bulldog under the front seat and got out. A warm June breeze blew in and swirled a crumpled section of newspaper and a discarded paper cup around his feet. Tucking his thumbs into his jeans’ pockets, he walked to the corner. The Texaco gas station was aglow in

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harsh red and white neon. Around the corner of the building, Roger could see the shadows of AP milling around. He couldn't pick Hondo out from the group, but he did spot the Low Rider, the one Hondo always got chauffeured around in by a flunky named Detox, parked in its usual spot. Detox, the ride's owner, was leaning against the hood, sucking from a bottle wrapped in a crumpled paper sack.

Roger looked at his watch. Straight up 8 o'clock.

Detox was the first to spot him. Leaving his wrapped bottle on the hood, he pushed away from the car, brushing imaginary crumbs from his hands, then held them out, giving Roger an inviting come-on-in sign with a smile on his face that told Roger he shouldn't have left the Bulldog behind.

"Hey Boxer!" Detox shouted. "We got company!"

The AP's attention turned to Roger as he crossed the street, and they moved in unison, forming a horseshoe around him as he walked into the parking lot. At the tip of the horseshoe stood Boxer, meaty arms folded, gothic-lettered AP tattoos covering arms thick as tree trunks.

"You packin', little man?" Boxer said.

"I'm here to see Hondo."

"Hondo?" Roger felt his heart sink as he watched Boxer looked around in mock curiosity. "I don't see no Hondo around here. You got an appointment?"

Roger felt the horseshoe tightening and he knew he was in trouble. The first blows came from behind, a steely array of knuckles into the lower ribs, propelling him into the oncoming kick that indented a Nike swoosh into his forehead. He felt his heart race, his adrenaline surge, standing his ground as they closed in fast, Roger desperately swinging, blocking, crouching, protecting vital organs as they converged on him like a rabid pack of jackals tearing at prey. He heard jaws crack, teeth gnash, ribs pop, and bellies heave as he swung hard and fast at anything that came close. But his efforts only intensified their savage attack.

Exhausted, unable to lift his arms, he dropped first to his knees, then several blows to the head and chest dropped him into a fetal position. The blows came endlessly, the frenzy pulverizing bone, tearing skin, crushing internal organs. Roger felt the world around him fading.

Then it stopped abruptly.

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He sensed someone kneel down next to him, grabbing a fist full of his hair and yanking his head back, getting his full attention. Through the one eye not yet swollen shut, Roger looked through a stringy web of blood and pus and recognized the blurred apparition of Hondo, staring down at him with a yellow, Cheshire grin. He heard a familiar click and saw the bright parking lot lights glint off the blade, followed by the feeble plea of his own voice saying ‘no’ as the razor edge started down toward his face.

“I’m gonna separate that one eyebrow for you now, onion. Just like I promised.”

“Slice him head to groin, Hondo!” Boxer’s voice came from the distance, booming like the voice of God.

The blade came down slowly, and he felt the tip pierce his forehead, right between the eyes, as Hondo promised.

In the distance, police sirens grew louder, approaching fast.

“Drop it Hondo—let’s move out!” Boxer’s order becoming a voice of salvation.

In the distance, the blue and red flash of police strobes danced off the buildings, and he heard Hondo’s blade click shut.

“You got lucky this time, onion.” Hondo bending down close to Roger’s ear, his fermented breath ripe and combustible.

The AP scattered. Roger got to his feet and staggered toward his car. His legs buckled and he collapsed in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard, cars careening around the bloody mess lying in the street. Horns blaring, tires screeching, headlights blinding, he crawled the rest of the way to his car, leaving streaks of blood that looked like crimson highway lines painted by a drunken road crew. He managed to yank his car door open, pulling himself behind the wheel as a black-and-white’s tires screeched by, turning into the Texaco station, siren whaling and lights spinning. Roger pulled the Camaro into gear and wheeled it into the street, turning left at the light and driving away as another black-and-white passed him coming from the opposite direction. Through his one good eye, Roger watched the police cruiser fade in the rearview mirror.

He was only a few miles from home. Sitting in a deepening pool of his own blood, he was sure he wouldn’t make it.

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## CHAPTER TWO

He could not quench his thirst for revenge—and it only intensified with time. Roger’s hatred festered as he spent the rest of the summer healing from the stripes Hondo and his band of flunkies had inflicted. It had taken well over a month before the pulpy veil over his left eye receded, and his chest, back, and arms remained a blistered indigo mass for several weeks. Three broken ribs forced choked agony with every breath.

Despite making necessary preparations to start his first semester at Cal State in September, revenge absorbed his every thought for the rest of the summer. He registered for his classes, bought his books, organized his supplies—and loaded his Uzi. Keeping the automatic weapon tucked under the front seat of his car, he’d detour by the Texaco station nightly after classes, Uzi in his lap, ready to fill Hondo full of .9 mm holes, but he could never zero in on Hondo in the group.

On a crisp October evening, the full moon high over Hollywood Hills, he was sitting with Ernesto in the bed of Ernesto’s pickup truck. Roger’s ribs had healed enough so that he could get a decent toke on the thick joint Ernesto had rolled.

“Your offer still good?” he asked, passing the joint back to Ernesto.

“What’s that?” Ernesto’s drug-addled mind had already forgotten the conversation they’d had less than ten minutes ago. “What offer?”

Roger pulled a toke slowly into his lungs and let the smoke absorb, the dope going to his head real nice. Offering the joint back to Ernesto and said, “Like I was just telling you, moron. I need some guys. You know, to back me.”

Ernesto took the joint, shaking his head. “Oh. The Hondo thing. Wow, man.”

“Yeah, wow, man.”

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“Dude, like, wow man.”

“Wow man what? Spit it out, moron.”

“Wow, man. Don’t you, like, think it’s over now?”

“Hondo and me, we ain’t square yet. I just need some guys behind me so I can get close enough to him to put one between his eyes.” He watched Ernesto’s bloodshot eyes focus on the healing slit where Hondo had planted the tip of the switchblade.

“You look like an Indian,” Ernesto said. “You know. The dot on their forehead. Spots for dots.”

“You gonna back me on this, or do I gotta go somewhere else?”

Ernesto nodded his head and said, “Okay. Yeah. Don’t worry. Ernesto’s got your back on this one. I’ll get some guys.”

**Saturday, October 21, 1989**

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Ernesto got some guys, rounding up six members of The White Fence, an L.A Chicano gang run by a hulking gold-toothed Mexican named Oso. They were tipping bottles and blowing smoke outside Ernesto’s truck as Roger pulled up in his Camaro.

“We can get ’em all, man!” A banger named Loco shouted, the guy all jagged up on blow tonight, the white powder snorting out of his nostrils like smoke from a crazed dragon. He was trouble, and Roger didn’t want him along, but he had no choice. He needed the numbers.

Loco pulled a .22-caliber pistol from his jacket. “I can pop them easy, man. We blaze through and cut ’em down.”

“That’s not the way it’s gonna happen,” Roger said. “I just need some iron backing me so I can pop Hondo. But no one gets capped till Hondo hits the pavement, understood?”

Loco said, “No, man! AP goes down tonight! All of them! Down, man!”

He got in Loco’s face. “You pop off one round, and I sink you in the pavement next. We clear on this?”

Oso’s second lieutenant, El Lagarto, The Lizard, stepped forward. His narrow head sat perched on top of a thin, vein-stripped neck and his eyes popped out of deep sockets, neither one looking directly at

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you. "Don't worry about it, onion. Like you said, it's your gig. It's all understood. But you own it, holmes. Anything goes wrong, I hold you accountable."

They loaded up. He got into his Camaro, and The White Fence loaded into the bed of Ernesto's truck.

Ahead, he saw the glow of the Texaco sign as he turned onto Hollywood Boulevard. Adrenaline surged. Wearing his floor-length trench coat, his Savage .12 gauge shotgun, sawed off at a manageable 18 inches, made him feel invincible the way it rested within reach inside the flap, five deer slugs in the pipe. Rage consumed him to the point of irrationality when he spotted the Low Rider. The sound of his squealing tires and the smell of burning rubber turned his rage lethal as he roared into the parking lot. The AP reacted fast, taking position as he jumped from the Camaro. Their eyes suddenly squinted, Ernesto's high-beams throwing a high-noon blaze as his truck careened into the lot and screeched to a halt. The White Fence poured from the truck bed. Roger took the point, The White Fence falling in behind him, fanning out, making their numbers look greater. Hearing Loco's high-pitched, nervous giggles behind him, he got a sick feeling in his stomach, sensing that the amateur hour was about to get him killed.

Blowing the feeling off, he shouted, "Where's Hondo?"

Keeping both hands at his sides, flap of his overcoat open, he knew he'd have less than a second to pull the trigger before an armory of AP lead blazed his way.

Boxer wasn't there, which was a good thing. This kept the AP drunk and in disarray.

"Right here, onion!"

AP colors separated in a wake of confusion as Hondo pushed his way through. Their eyes locked, Roger's hand moving as deft as a trained gunfighter, and a moment of understanding reflected in the nut-ball's eyes, realizing that he was about to have his head separated from his shoulders. Primed and ready when Hondo reached for the gun tucked behind his back, Roger pulled the Savage, pointing it skyward as he pumped it ready for action before the moonlight made its first glint off Hondo's steel.

SAMPLE

Roger still had the barrel pointing high, not yet aimed at Hondo when it happened. From behind, Loco's hiccupping giggle went insane, and out of the corner of his eye, Loco was a blur, charging for the AP, gun blazing.

In a roar of gunfire and the stinging stench of cordite, Roger froze, gun barrel still pointing heavenward. He watched stunned as Hondo's body twitched and convulsed in the rip of lead before going down.

Gunfire roared from behind, orange muzzle flashes animating the graffiti painted on the side of the Texaco building. With gunfire now coming from both directions, Roger dove over the hood of his car, hearing screams and war cries rise over the roar of gunplay.

Looking over the hood, Roger watched a spray of lead stop Loco in his tracks, and he stood there, his giggle turning into a high-pitched squeal as bullets ripped his body apart, reminding Roger of that scene from *Scarface*, Tony Montana standing on top of the world, bullets shredding him, refusing to go down.

The shooting stopped, scrambling bodies mere silhouettes in the red haze of smoke and neon, fleeing in every direction. From somewhere behind the cordite mist, he heard shouting, authoritative voices barking commands, but they were distorted by the metallic ring roaring in his ears.

A bloody apparition emerged through the haze, arms outstretched, staggering disjointedly toward him. Loco's eyes, glazed and dead-white, pleaded for help as a red gore bubbled past his lips, his white T-shirt slick with blood. Collapsing, he threw his arms over Roger's shoulders, the dying kid's dead weight nearly pulling him to the pavement.

Car tires squealed. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the tail end of Ernesto's pickup disappearing from the parking lot, followed by a chorus of squealing tires and confused shouts. As the smell of melting rubber overpowered the stench of cordite, chrome raced past him and the flash of headlights painted Hollywood Boulevard, racing engines converging in a full-throttled roar off surrounding buildings and concrete.

Dragging Loco to the Camaro, he tumbled him into the passenger seat and tossed the Savage into the back seat. Sliding behind the wheel, he punched the accelerator and got out of there.

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He sped three blocks at 80 mph before slowing down. The ringing in his ears cleared, and for the first time he heard the choked gurgle coming from Loco, the kid's chest heaving, his lungs fighting for breath, his mouth working up and down with every labored gasp, his eyes pleading, but fading.

"You stupid, stupid—*stupid hack!*" Roger slapped at the steering wheel, looking ahead at the road. Somewhere there was a hospital. A hospital nearby. Where? He knew ... think clearly. *Think!* "You *hack!* What were you *thinking!* Look at you. Just *look* at you!"

He wasn't sure how he'd gotten there, but up ahead he saw the sign aglow in the words "EMERGENCY." He pulled into the half-circle drive in front of the Emergency Room doors and hopped out. The triage nurse's eyes widened as he came barreling through the door. She picked up a phone and called for help, then her eyes went from shock to confusion as Roger sat the bloody patient in a seat and ran back out the door.

"You're on your own, you dumb, stupid, crazy plebe!" Roger said into the rearview mirror as the hospital faded away in the distance.

The hours passed slowly. He'd gone to a self-serve car wash and cleaned Loco's blood off of the passenger seat. His pager had gone off several times, each call from Ernesto, with the tag 9-1-1. Their signal: stay away. Stay away as long as you can.

He finally arrived home just before midnight. Turning onto his street, a flash of headlights in his review mirror caused him to squint. As he rolled to a stop in front of his apartment, the vehicle pulled in behind him. He reached back and grabbed the Savage, pointed it at the door, finger on the trigger, until he recognized the approaching silhouette as Ernesto.

"Man, you gotta get out. You gotta go now, Rog'!"

"What happened?"

"Word from the hospital. Loco is dead. *Dead*, man! Word got to Oso. The White Fence. They're holding *you* responsible!"

*But you own it, holmes.*

Ernesto said, "Loco took a bullet meant for you. El Lagarto told Oso the gig was yours. They've been on me all night, asking me where you lay your head. They're everywhere tonight, looking for your car. And the

AP—man, Hondo, he'll hunt down your crib. It's only a matter of time before they find you!"

"I saw Hondo go down."

"Man, it's all a mess! We don't know who went down. Just that Loco's gone, man. And now you got Oso and Boxer tagging a price on your bean. Man, Rog', what are you gonna *do*!?"

There was shock on their faces, but no surprise. Things added up quickly for his parents. His Dad sobered up quickly as Roger gave them a story he thought they'd believe, and that there was no time for debate. He had to go. He had to go tonight. If he stayed, if he didn't leave now—he would be dead.

"I'm going with you." The sober words from his father shocked him.

"Dad, no."

"I'm going, Hrach. In Armenia, it's tradition. The father follows the son. Hrach, we do this together." In the spirit of Armenian tradition. Like vodka. Always with tradition.

"Where?" His mother's voice cracked with tears. "Where you go?"

"I don't know, Mama. All I know is we can't stay here. We can't stay."

They loaded his Dad's car with what they could and took the Camaro to his cousin's and hid it in the garage. He was always careful to never let any of the homies know where he laid his head, but they knew the black Camaro. They'd be looking for it, and he knew that he'd have to hock it as soon as possible. He could no longer have anything to do with his ride. He could no longer have anything to do with his life in L.A.

They were soon heading eastbound on the I-10 in his father's car. As they hit the peak of a hill, he looked up in the rearview mirror, saw the last twinkle of L.A. lights vanish in a black void. He was still pumped and full of adrenaline. He wasn't sure how far it would carry him. Long enough, he hoped, to get far away from that place.

Far away.