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**Opening Extract from...**

# Fever City

Written by Tim Baker

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# FEVER CITY

*A Thriller*

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Tim Baker

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For my brothers
Steven, Nicholas, Michael & Chris Baker
And in memory of our father
Colin Baker TG

No one is who they appear in a world that is constantly changing.

LUCRETIUS, *On the Nature of Things*,
translated from the Latin by the author

1

# New Mexico, 1964

The sun rises fast in the desert. There is no warning, no subtle intimation. It is a brutal transition; the end of night. The beginning of suffering.

Hastings stands outside, sipping the too-hot coffee, trying to feel the turn of the planet as it bows to its star. His dog comes to his side, its head lifted in awareness, one forepaw raised. Hastings scans the landscape. Everything seems motionless at first but then he sees it: the cloud of dust defining itself as it fans away from an approaching convoy.

Three black cars.

Coming fast.

For him.

Three cars. That means at least six men. Maybe as many as twelve if they're smarter than the last ones. He sends his dog running into the countryside, watching until Bella disappears amongst the sage grass. He has already saved one of them. They always sacrifice the animals first, spilling the easy blood. No gas chamber for the household pet. But it shows they mean business.

The cars are approaching.

He must act fast.

There is a buzzing inside his head, familiar and comforting. The first time he heard it was when he went hunting with his stepfather. An internal drill, coring its way through his skull. Not going in, not going out. Just present. Being there. Like the

gush and swell of blood he could feel in his arteries as he sighted on the deer and exhaled silently, taking the first pressure; totally still, as close to death as the deer itself.

He had missed on purpose.

It just didn't make sense, taking that animal down. For meat? There was an icebox full back in the house. There was only one reason to kill it: to remove a thing of beauty from the world forever.

He can still feel the sharp sting of his stepfather's hand across his ear; how it burned in the cold morning air. His first ever lesson in philosophy – moral decisions are never painless.

Hastings removes the submachine gun from its vault behind the bookcase. He knew what had to be done that morning with the deer. And he knows what he has to do now.

The cars buck over the ground, corrugated from two weeks of flood and fifty of drought. The house appears, large windows glinting in the dawn light like the eyes of an animal caught in the glare of headlights: unmoving, intuitively awaiting disaster.

Two doors slam with the resonance of a twelve-gauge, footsteps brisk not with determination, but worse – with business. He can tell by the casual, efficient glances they give the terrain as they cross to the house: these men are professionals. They have done this many times before.

The others wait in the cars, undispersed; careless. For this brief moment, they're still within target. In seconds they will all exit; will light cigarettes and piss and spit into the red earth; adjust flies and belts and revolvers; check their ammo; worry their shaving rash as they head round the back, hoping to find a woman or two they could strip and torment; something to distract them from the monotony of murder.

In this swift, fatal interlude, the choice is his: hit the cars first and remove them from the picture, or start with the two men arriving at his front door.

He adjusts his earplugs. The cars are parked head to tail; the hubris of overwhelming superiority. He steps through the window of the laundry into the morning sunlight just as the driver gets out of the lead car, his cigarette falling from his mouth when he sees Hastings.

Metal disintegrates in pockmarks of agony, the cars rocking wildly, sinking fast on newly dead tires, windows going red then exploding.

Heightened, searing silence.

Nobody moves.

The husks of shells click as he steps back inside. He checks the cameras. Nothing for a long moment. Then he sees them, shadows of fear moving in their black-and-white world. Taking up ambush positions. To hell with that. He grabs a rifle, opens all four gas cylinders, rips out the generator's fuel valve and exits through the cellars.

The house is in full, exposed view, the sun in their eyes. He runs everything through his mind. Passports and driver's licenses. Cash and car keys. Weapons and ammo. He has them all. The phone numbers he has in his head. He looks at the cars through the rifle's telescopic sight. Nothing moves except for the wicked wave of flies above pools of blood. If they're halfway experienced, the two inside will have noticed the surveillance cameras by now. That would make them sick with apprehension.

He aims at the window box outside the kitchen, where Luchino's C3 is still stored, and fires, his face to the ground with the

explosion, blue energy rolling across him, the hush and sucking evaporation of gas; and then the tickertape of debris.

He runs across the ground, weapon at the hip, flashing back to the beaches, the wet sand, the palm trees; the sting of a bullet in somebody's chest. They taught him well. He was young back then; methodical. It's like the Jesuits. It stays with you. Kill shots through all three cars. Re-kill shots. No one survived the first attack.

Then he waits, sitting on his haunches, until the flames in the house subside enough to allow him to enter. Two shots rise up to the sky, echoless in the vast New Mexican desert, already gone just like the smoke. He looks at his watch. Eight o'clock. They would have rung in by now. The people who sent them will know that they missed. He takes a glowing piece of furniture – the bookcase maybe – and lights his cigarette with it.

Hastings gets into his '63 Thunderbird, the black mirror-gloss camouflaged by red desert dust. He slams the door and drives away, not looking back. He'll head towards the dry river bed and collect Bella. And then he'll disappear.

Again.

## 2

# Los Angeles, 1960

The call comes long before dawn, Cate picking up the phone and handing it to me without even answering. The bedroom is lit by the full moon, the shadow of the blind cord hanging like a noose above our bed.

The receiver is cold in my hand.

Everything is about to change.

Schiller tells me what's happened in his telegraphic style. Old Man Bannister. Called the police chief himself. The Bannister kid is missing. Looks bad. They want to talk. To you. The soft burr of wires and electricity showers into my ear. Then there is a savage click. Someone has been listening in. I swing out of bed.

Earlier in our marriage, Cate would have protested; she would have tried to pull me back into her warm embrace. And if I had insisted on going, she would have kissed me goodbye; made me promise to be careful. Now she turns her back, pulls the covers up. Before my shoes are laced, she will be drowsy again. By the time my car key enters the ignition, she will be asleep. The crickets pulse all around me, stewing on the problem: a two-year courtship plus a five-year marriage equals nothing. And now a stranger's missing child thrown into the mix. The child we don't have. The 'stranger' is one of the richest men in the country. And the child the subject of speculation even before he was born.

The headlights probe the night for weaknesses, tunneling a

way through the darkness towards Holmby Hills. Pampered lawns proudly display placards and campaign slogans. Up here it's a Nixon landslide but my gut tells me Kennedy can still pull this one off. I switch on the radio. 'Cathy's Clown'. I change stations. There's a number from Trane's new album. 'Spiral'. More my style.

The estate is northwest of Greystone Mansion, at 696 Laverne Terrace, just outside the jurisdiction of Beverly Hills. The gates are wide open, an ambulance and three patrol cars sitting outside. I sound my horn as I enter, passing under the wrought-iron arch above the gates, with the name of the estate written in fancy scrollwork – *High Sierra*.

The slick smack of macadam is replaced by the worry of gravel, the car skidding on the turns going up, like me on unfamiliar ground. The trees retract as lawn takes over, a vista opening up: all of LA jeweled in streetlight. A butler is walking towards me before I even stop the car, gesturing towards the house with mute disdain. Every light is on, terror and hope thriving side by side. There's someone over by a grove, digging. I call out to him as I go up the stairs. 'Find anything?' He shakes his head and goes back to his work. Schiller's waiting in the doorway. Even his huge frame is dwarfed by the size of the entrance.

Schiller guides me into the living room. 'Old Man Bannister's upstairs with his wife.'

'Which one?'

Schiller stares hard at me. 'Don't start.'

'I have to know who I'm dealing with.'

'Betty Bannister.'

I knew her from the papers. I couldn't remember if she was number three or four. 'She's the mother, right?'

'Jesus, Alston, they're just married.'

'There's your motive. She kidnaps the kid 'cause it's not hers.'

'Who said anything about kidnapping? This is still a missing person case until I say otherwise, got it?' Schiller looks around, dropping his voice. 'The walls have ears in a house like this.' Houses like this were not meant to be lived in.

'How long have they been searching?'

'Six hours before they called the chief.'

'The kid would have shown up by now.'

'You don't know this place. Believe me, Alston, the longer you nose around this joint—'

'The more complicated it gets?'

He's staring at a decanter full of brandy. 'The more dirt you'll find. Isn't that why they always call in a private dick? To shovel through the shit?'

'So, who was the last person to see the kid?'

'The nanny, Greta Simmons . . .'

'Let's go and have a friendly chat with her.'

'Can't. She's gone.'

'There's your suspect. She's already skipped town.'

'It's her night off, and will you can it with that suspect stuff.'

'So what happened?'

'Greta put the kid to bed. Then she went out for the night. Twenty minutes later, when the other nanny checked—'

'The *other* nanny?'

'It's Rex Bannister, for Christ's sake. When the other nanny checked, the kid was missing.'

'So send a car to collect Greta Simmons.'

'She's a live-in nanny. Christ knows where she is. Probably out somewhere trying to get laid . . .' His voice trails off, but

this time he's looking past me, out to the reception area. I turn. Betty Bannister is gliding towards us, a floor-length silk robe wrapped carelessly around a black negligée, her hand extended as though I were the mayor. 'You must be Mr Alston,' she says, her voice warm and strong as morning coffee.

'How do you do?'

'Mr Schiller – *Captain* Schiller told me so much about you.'

Schiller's eyes protest.

'Won't you come this way, Mr Alston?'

I turn to Schiller, who nods darkly and goes back inside the living room, heading towards that decanter. As far as he's concerned, it's intermission and the bar has opened. Mrs Bannister indicates the staircase.

'Not a very agreeable man, Captain Schiller . . .'

The first testing question. It must always be rebutted. 'Not a very agreeable profession, being a cop.'

'Yet perhaps nobler than private investigator?'

At the beginning of every case there is this moment, when the client can't quite believe it's come to this – they actually need a private investigator. It is a moment when the enormity of their situation hits them; a moment of revolt. Of panic. Of denial. A moment when they turn against the very person they expect to help them, questioning how a man can make a living snooping through dirty laundry – maybe even theirs. This is when the fee is suddenly doubled, or the case declined. This is the only moment of power. Once you decide to take the case, you are locked into the gravitational pull of the client, and gravity always pulls down.

'I didn't ask you to drag me away from my wife in the middle of the night.' I turn and start going down the stairs. Her

hand takes mine; soft, warm, surprisingly strong. Determined. 'I hope I can make it up to you one day.' I look up at her, at the way her gown has opened, providing shadowed glimpses. She mounts the stairs, speaking over her shoulder. 'This way, please. My husband is anxious to speak with you.'

'Tell me about Greta Simmons.'

'There's nothing to tell. I had as little to do with the boy as possible.'

Had. 'And was that your decision, or Mr Bannister's?'

Without answering, she opens a large door with a crystal handle. Old Man Bannister is by the windows, sitting in a wheelchair. He gestures dismissively at a doctor, who snaps a medical bag shut and strides out of the room with the dignified anger of an insulted ambassador. I turn back to Mrs Bannister. She smiles before she puts out her hand. 'Good evening, Mr Alston. Please don't hesitate to call should you require anything.' I feel the loss as soon as she withdraws her hand. 'I am entirely at your disposal . . .' This time she doesn't try to hide the teasing inflection in her voice.

I cross the room. The Old Man gestures for me to sit down; clears his throat. '*Evil is rampant.*'

I wait, but there's nothing more. 'Mr Bannister, if you could please just start at—'

'Did you not hear me?' He leans forward, red-faced.

'Evil is rampant?' He nods. 'What exactly does that mean, Mr Bannister?'

'Matthew 24:12: *Evil and sin shall be rampant, and the love of many shall grow cold.*'

I had expected many things from Old Man Bannister but not Bible verse.

'If you understand that, you understand everything.'

'Everything about what, Mr Bannister?'

'This household. Her. What my life has become.'

'What has your life become, Mr Bannister?'

His face fills with slow, bitter exasperation. 'Mr . . .'

'Alston. Nick Alston.'

'Mr Alston, if there's anything in the world I am certain of, it is that I love that boy above all else and consider him not just my son but my only heir.' He clears his throat, shifting his weight in his chair. The emotion appears genuine. 'Unfortunately, several months ago my lawyer started receiving representations from a man claiming to know the identity of the boy's true father.'

'I see . . .'

'This . . . person stated that he would commence court proceedings to remove Ronnie from my legal custody unless a significant sum of money was deposited in an account in Mexico.'

'And did you pay this money?'

'I am old, Mr Alston, but I am no fool. To acquiesce to a demand such as that would only be to invite every felon in the state of California to feast at the same trough of iniquity.'

'Have you ever been subjected to blackmail attempts before this incident?'

'What happened before is of no concern to you.'

'I beg to differ, Mr Bannister.'

Old Man Bannister pushes himself fast towards me, his arms shaking from the effort. He sits upright and rigid: an uneasy man soon to die. 'I will not tolerate contradiction.'

I whistle. 'I can see you're still a tough old bird despite all the doctors and nurses.'

He gives a harsh, dry laugh. 'And I can see you're not one to mince words.'

'So, allow me this. What do you tolerate less: contradiction or kidnapping?' Old Man Bannister sags back against his wheelchair, worn out. 'Cigarette?' He looks at the offered pack, torn between easy temptation and righteous denial. He shakes his head. 'When were you first blackmailed?'

The Old Man stares at me, his head inclined to the side, as though a tainted fluid were slowly draining from his ear. It's too much for him. He gestures for a cigarette, his fingernails rasping against my hand as I follow it with a lit match. What does it matter? This greedy old man is already on borrowed time.

'Tell me, Mr Atlas . . .'

'Alston.'

'Mr Alston . . . Tell me, have you read Balzac?'

I blow out the match, shake my head.

His eyes gleam with the malice of superiority. '*Behind every great fortune there is a crime*. Balzac was wrong. Behind every great fortune there are *many* crimes. Oh, don't look too shocked, Alston.'

'I'm not the shocking kind.'

He laughs, his wheeze ghosted by smoke. I gesture towards a decanter, and he nods. I pour us both generous shots. 'These were not my crimes, per se; they were crimes thrust upon me, extorted payments to corrupt and lazy officials to facilitate access to instruments of business I had every right to enjoy in the first place. These were the very first instances of blackmail. I was the victim, Alston, but I was guilty too. I consorted with these evil men. I also profited from these crimes; they permitted an unjust advantage over my competitors.' Old Man Bannister sighs as he

sips his brandy. 'One day, a newspaper reporter came to interview me, in this very room. It was not an invalid's sickroom back then, but a place of study and reflection. The reporter had done his research. He was blunt. Avaricious. He demanded payment for his knowledge. I determined to silence this reporter. Not with cash but with fists, Alston, brutal, compelling fists. They knocked the reporter's teeth out, one punch at a time. You may remember it; Goodwin James?'

Everyone who was old enough remembered Goodwin James. His working over was legendary. Only real pros could have inflicted that much damage without killing a man. His photo did the rounds – a good-looking, arrogant young man with a chip on his shoulder the size of his IQ transformed into a monster. I stare at Old Man Bannister, a slither of terror now overtaking me. He stubs his cigarette out against the wheel of his chair. 'You can therefore imagine my reaction when this man stepped forward, claiming to know the identity of Ronnie's father and demanding payment for his silence.'

Where can we find his body? is what I want to ask, but instead I play it safe. 'And who was this man?'

'*Was*, Mr Alston? Is. I haven't had him killed. Not yet, at least. This man, Mr Alston, is called Johnny Roselli.'

I gag on the brandy.

'I see you know of whom I speak.'

Choose your words carefully. 'Mr Bannister, have you ever considered just paying Roselli and letting sleeping dogs lie?'

'Sleeping dogs never just lie; they always awake, savage and ravenous. You are not here to give me advice, you are here to find my son, and when you do, you are here to deal with Roselli.'

'That's a tall order, Mr Bannister.'

'That's why I chose you.'

'To tell you the truth, Mr Bannister . . .'

'I am not interested in the truth. Or even justice. I just want peace.'

'I'll do my best.'

'You're not a Boy Scout, Alston. I want more than *best*.'