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Blood Law

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Three Months Earlier

DREADNOUGHT had just three days left to serve on his latest sentence, but he was about to put his release date in jeopardy. He'd been banged up on an assault beef, and the six months that the judge had handed down had passed relatively uneventfully up until now. During his time in Pelican Bay, three inmates had ended up in the hospital wing and two had been laid out on a slab in the morgue, and none of them could be traced back to him. Like he said—the stretch had been a quiet one.

He was standing on the first-floor gantry, looking down at the bulls and the inmates below, watching for anything out of the ordinary. All aspects of the human condition were on display, well, all *negative* aspects, anyhow. Envy, greed, cruelty, fear, hatred—you name it, it was there, many times over, coursing through the blackest of hearts, and by black, he didn't mean negro, because Dread was a man of colour himself, and the one thing he'd learnt in his thirty-odd years on the planet

was that all muthafuckas had the capacity for evil, no matter their race, colour or creed.

He flexed his considerable biceps then ran his hand down the prison ink he'd had inscribed on his left arm. The sleeves of his blue penitentiary shirt had been torn off to make sure everyone got the message. The words, rendered carefully in Gothic script, read, 'Only God Can Judge Me.' He wasn't a religious man, but he'd seen the phrase spraypainted on a wall somewhere and had liked it immediately. It made him stand out from the crowd. The cops, the courts, the whole damn legal system could do what the hell they liked, but it didn't mean shit to him. No one but *God* could judge him. All the rest could go hang.

'You ready?' he asked, turning to the brute alongside him.

All he got in response was a grunt. Cyclops. When that cat was in the zone he was all the way gone. Cyclops was Dread's number one go-to guy when it came to busting heads. He'd been a violent son of a bitch since kindergarten, and he'd been known by many different names over the years, his most recent coming after a prison fight in which a member of the Aryan brotherhood had gouged out his left eye. Cyclops may have lost fifty per cent of his vision, but the white supremacist prick had come off far worse—he'd lost all motor function from the neck downwards.

Dreadnought strode along the walkway until he'd made it as far as the shower block. He exchanged a quick nod with the brother standing guard by the door, waited for him to turn up his boombox to a near deaf-

ening level, then stepped inside. The sinks were laid out in a row to his left, while the communal shower area was off to his right, kept separate by a dividing wall that had gaps for ingress or egress at either end. There were three people using the facilities—a geriatric career crim washing up at one of the sinks, and a pair of Latino faggots soaping up in the showers. When Cyclops gave the old guy at the sink one of his looks, he quickly realised that personal hygiene was off the agenda and slunk out the door in a hurry.

'Well, ain't this nice and cosy…' said Dreadnought, as he walked into the shower area with shiv in hand—a shard of glass with a length of bed sheet wrapped around one end to form a makeshift handle.

The two Latinos turned as one, both of them sporting impressive erections, their members standing proud like twin flagpoles yet to receive their standards.

'You don't wanna start no shit, Dread…' said the taller of the two. 'You'd have to be loco to mess with da Mex Mafia.'

'Yeah, well, my pops always said I was a crazy son of a bitch.'

The Latino took a half-step forward with fists raised while his companion wilted into the background.

'You wanna dance with me, Rodriguez?' asked Dreadnought, keeping his back to the wall and forcing his target to circle around and face him.

'Rodriguez! Look out!' shrieked the other Latino, his voice high-pitched and feminine.

Rodriguez started to turn but it was too late. Cyclops, who had entered the shower area from the far end, came

up fast to deliver a piledriver of a punch to the naked man's kidneys. Rodriguez slumped onto the wet tiles, mewling like a kitten as he curled into a ball.

'Now you're gonna tell me all you know,' said Dreadnought. 'Or you're gonna find yourself in a world of pain.'

CHAPTER ONE

ZAC HUNTER took another pull on his ice-cold Asahi as he walked to the edge of his deck and leant on the balustrade. He was a big man, around six feet tall, with a powerful, athletic physique, and the length of pine creaked slightly to acknowledge his presence. The view that confronted him was spectacular: a 150-foot sheer drop down his own private cliff face, then the land evened out and ran gently away to the valley that stretched out below. Rocky foreground, followed by thick clumps of sagebrush and chaparral, followed by civilisation—the sprawling megalopolis of Los Angeles.

Hunter lived up high in the hills that ringed the north side of the city, in a one-storey adobe house that was just off Mulholland. Prime real estate. The house had been left to him by his mom, who'd succumbed to cancer when he was just sixteen. Thanks to her prudence and foresight, he now owned it outright, although that didn't stop the other bills from rolling in. He finished his beer and went back inside, where Rage Against the Machine's 'Battle of Los Angeles' snarled

out of the micro hi-fi unit in the far corner. These days, mid-afternoon meant beer, rock music, relaxation—just one of the many perks of being self-employed.

Once he'd retrieved another bottle from the fridge, he turned on the TV, muted the sound, and settled back into his sofa to scan the banner headlines that scrolled across the bottom of the screen. The TV was tuned to the news on a local Fox affiliate, and the reports were full of anger, violence and despair. Gang activity was on the rise, turf wars were getting ever more vicious, and the body count was headed for the stratosphere. Hunter watched on as a talking head brought the latest update from East LA, her perfect make-up and expensive coiffure distinctly at odds with the blood-splattered wall that loomed large behind her. Two more African Americans wiped out in a drive-by, plus an eight-year-old facing life as a paraplegic after she'd caught a stray bullet in her lower spine. And it wouldn't end there. One violent act would demand another, retribution would be the order of the day, and the cycle of violence would continue. Random death was a way of life in the poor parts of town, but something sure had riled the protagonists into a frenzy this summer. East LA was an increasingly Hispanic enclave, and it looked like any black family left in the region was now being driven out. In days gone by, it would have been Hunter's job to do something about it, but now that he was no longer with the LAPD it was someone else's problem.

His departure from the department had been acrimonious. After sixteen years of dedicated service, an internal affairs review board had stripped him of his

badge and shown him the door. It had all boiled down to a difference of opinion. The board believed that police officers should respect a suspect's rights at all times, whereas Hunter didn't—not when you were dealing with the dregs of society and innocent lives were on the line. But what was he going to do now? He couldn't live off his savings forever, and being a cop was the only job he'd ever wanted, ever since his mother had sat him down as a six-year-old and gently explained why he'd never met his father. Two stick-up kids, a local diner, his father the bystander gunned down in cold blood. Just another act of random violence in the City of Angels. The senseless killing had shaped Hunter's life from that point on, prompting him to join the cops. He'd wanted to clean up the city's mean streets, but now that he was no longer on the payroll, he didn't see why his mission had to change. Maybe he'd be more effective than before, now that there were no rules or regulations to get in his way.

His plan was to become a PI, but not the kind of licensed PI that spent most of his time working divorce cases, no, he'd set his sights a little higher than that. What he wanted to do, what he needed to do, was to make a difference. To fight crime, to take down the bad guys, to save lives—but first he had to find himself a client.

The telephone buzzed to life as he took another slug from his beer. He reached for the handset and answered it on the third ring.

'Yep?'

'Hunter? Is that you?'

The voice was low, sensual, and on edge—to the

trained ear the mixture of desperation and fear bubbling just under the surface stood out like a screech owl in a choir. The voice was also familiar. He scanned through his memory banks trying to match it to a face.

'Who wants to know?'

'Hunter? It's Angel…'

And in a flash, there she was in his mind's eye. Angelica Cortez—Angel to her friends—a Latino gangbanger who ran with the Santa Ana Ghosts. Long brown hair, free flowing and wild. Big doe eyes that sparkled with passion. A curvaceous figure that turned heads wherever and whenever.

'Angel,' he began. 'It's good to hear from you.'

'Hunter, you gotta help me, I'm in a lotta trouble…'

'What's wrong?' he asked. This wasn't the Angel he knew. She was tough. She had no choice. When you grew up in the gangs any sign of fear was a sign of weakness, and weakness meant you'd be culled from the herd.

'I don't know where else to go, Hunter, you're my only hope,' she sobbed. 'They're gonna kill her, I know they are…'

'Kill who?'

Hunter flinched as a sharp slap reverberated down the phone line.

'No! *Hijo de puta!* Leave me alone!' shouted Angel.

'Angel! What's going on? Where are you?' he yelled, but all he got in reply was the sound of a brief struggle before the connection was cut.

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