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Kill the Messenger

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LA traffic.

Rush hour.

Rush hour at four hours and counting. Every Angelino busting it to get home before the heavens opened up like a bursting bladder and the rains came in a gush. The city had been pressed down beneath the weight of an anvil sky all day. Endless, ominous twilight in the concrete canyons between the downtown skyscrapers. The air heavy with expectation.

Legs pumping. Fingers tight on the handlebars. Fingertips numb. Eyes on the gap between a Jag and a FedEx truck. Quads burning. Calves like rocks. The taste of exhaust. Eyes dry and stinging behind a pair of swim goggles. A bag full of blueprints in cardboard cylinders riding his back.

The two-way strapped to his thigh like a six-gun barked out bursts of static and the rock-crusted voice of Eta Fitzgerald, the base dispatcher. He didn't know her real name. They called her Eta because that was what they heard out of her all day, every day: *ETA? ETA sixteen? Base to Jace. ETA? What's your twenty, honey?*

He had three minutes to make it to the developer's office on the seventeenth floor of a building still blocks away. The guard at the front desk was a jerk. He locked the doors at six on the dot and had no sympathy for anyone standing on the street trying to get in. The guy would have turned his back on his own mother, if he had

one, which Jace doubted. He looked like something that had sprouted up out of the ground. A human toadstool.

Shift his weight to the right. Cut around the Jag.

He caught the blast of its horn as he ran on his pedals to put a few inches between his back wheel and the car's front bumper. Just ahead of him the traffic light had turned yellow, but the FedEx truck was running the intersection. Coming up on the right side of the truck, Jace reached out and caught hold above the wheel, letting the truck carry him through the intersection and down the block.

He was a master at riding the blind spot. If the person behind the wheel saw him and didn't want him there, a messenger could become a bug on a windshield in a hurry. The FedEx drivers were usually cool. Simpatico. Messenger to messenger. They were both connections between people who didn't give a rat's ass who they were unless they were late with a delivery.

The building was in sight. Jace checked over his shoulder, let go of the truck, and dipped right again, cutting across another lane, drawing another blaring horn. He angled to jump the curb in front of a fire hydrant and behind a Cadillac idling in a red zone. The car's passenger door swung open as the bike went airborne.

Shit.

Jace turned the wheel hard right and twisted his hips left as the bike came down. The old lady getting out of the car screamed and fell back into the Cadillac. The bike's front tire hit the sidewalk clear.

Jace held his position as tight as a tick on the back of a dog. He touched the brakes with little more than his imagination. Just enough to break the chaos.

Don't panic. Panic kills. Ice water, J.C. Steel. Focus. Calm.

He kept his eyes on his target. He could see the security jerk walking toward the front doors, keys in hand.

Shit!

Panic. Not at threat of injury, but at threat of being locked out. The customer wouldn't care that he had sent the delivery impossibly late or that the messenger had nearly been killed by the door of a Cadillac. If the package didn't make it, there would be hell to pay.

He dropped the bike ten feet from the door, sick at the thought that it might be gone by the time he got out of the building, but there was no time to lock it. He bolted for the door, tripped himself, fell like a boulder, and tumbled and skidded, arms and legs bouncing like pickup sticks. Cardboard blueprint tubes shot out of his bag and rolled down the sidewalk.

No time to assess damage or recognize and catalog pains.

He forced himself to his feet, tripping, stumbling, trying to scoop up the tubes even as his momentum carried him forward. The security jerk stared at him through the glass. A lumpy gray face, twisted with sour disapproval. He turned the key in the lock and walked away.

"Hey!" Jace shouted, slamming into the glass. "Hey, come on!"

The guard pretended not to hear him. Son of a bitch. One minute to six and this guy had nothing more on his mind than getting on the freeway and creeping out to Pomona or to the Valley or to whatever nondescript shithole suburb he squatted in every night. He wasn't staying three extra minutes to log in a delivery. Having the power to walk away was probably the only power he had in his miserable life.

"Asshole!" Jace shouted. He would have kicked the door, but with his luck the damn thing would shatter and he'd be hauled off to jail. Not that he couldn't have used the rest and three squares a day. In Jace Damon's life, rest was not an option.

Juggling the cardboard tubes in one arm, he yanked his bike up off the sidewalk and climbed back on. The entrance to the underground parking garage for the building was on the side street. The chain gate would be down, but as soon as a car rolled

out, he could slip in. If there was a God in heaven—which he doubted, except in times of dire need—someone would still be in the developer's office on the seventeenth floor. Hopefully it would be Lori, the receptionist, who was blond and bouncy and would give him a Snickers bar from the stash in her bottom drawer. He hadn't eaten since breakfast—a day-old bagel and a shoplifted PowerBar.

He parked himself to the right of the garage entrance, back just far enough so as not to be noticed by anyone coming up the ramp. He had learned a long time ago to fly below the radar, to be invisible and furtive and resourceful. Survival skills of the street kid.

His radio made a sound like Velcro tearing free. "Sixteen? You out there? Base to Jace. Base to Jace. Hey, Lone Ranger, where you at? I got Money chewing my ass."

Money was Eta's word for a customer. The developer was on the phone screaming at her.

"I'm in the elevator," Jace answered. He keyed the radio on and off, on and off. "You're breaking up, Base."

A nasty-looking snot-green Chrysler nosed its way up out of the garage. The security jerk was behind the wheel. Jace gave him the finger as he turned into the drive and shot the bike down the ramp.

The Korean guy in the ticket booth barely looked at him as Jace darted around the lowered arm that prevented cars from simply rolling in. He rode the bike straight to the elevator and jumped off as the doors opened and an assortment of well-dressed professional people stepped out, freed from their cubicles for the day. A woman with a helmet of blond hair and a leopard-print raincoat gave him a look like he was dog shit and clutched her designer bag to her as she stepped around him.

Jace forced a grin. "How's it going?"

She sniffed and hurried away. People in suits and offices tended to look at bike messengers with wary suspicion. They were rebels,

road warriors, fringe citizens in strange costumes invading the orderly, respectable world of business. Most of the messengers Jace knew had tattoos all over their bodies and more piercings than a colander. They were walking billboards for life on the edge, their individuality screaming from their very pores.

Jace made no such statements. He wore what he could get for little or nothing at Goodwill—baggy shorts and sweatshirts with the sleeves cut off, worn over bike shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt. His hair stuck up in spikes through the openings in his helmet. The swim goggles made him look like an alien.

He pulled the goggles down and rubbed at the grit in his eyes as he rolled the bike into the elevator and punched 17. He could smell himself—stale sweat and exhaust fumes. He had run twenty-three packages that day and could feel the filth of the city clinging to him like a film. He had skinned his knee on the sidewalk out front. Blood was running in a slow, thick trickle down his dirty bare shin to soak into the top of his baggy gray sock.

When he finally got home and could take a shower, the day would come off him like a mud slide and he would become a blond white kid again. He would spend a couple of hours with his little brother, Tyler, then hit the books until he fell asleep on them. Too soon it would be five-thirty and another day would begin with him shoveling ice into the coolers at the fish market they lived over in Chinatown.

My life sucks.

He allowed himself to acknowledge that fact only once in a while. What was the point in dwelling on it? He didn't plan on staying where he was in the grand scheme of things. That was the thought to focus on: change, improvement, the future.

He had a future. Tyler had a future—Jace had made sure of that, and would continue to make sure of it. And their futures would be a thousand times better than anything life had given them so far. It was only a matter of time and focus and will.

The elevator dinged and the doors pulled open. The developer's office was down the hall on the left. Suite 1701. Major Development. Lori the cute receptionist was gone, along with the chance for a free Snickers. Mr. Major Development was standing at her desk, shouting into the phone. He stopped abruptly and slammed the receiver down as Jace walked in with the blueprint tubes.

"Well, it's about fucking time!" Major shouted. "My eighty-year-old mother could have gotten here faster with her walker!"

"Sorry," Jace said, handing over the manifest. He offered no excuse or explanation. He knew from experience it wouldn't matter. What mattered to Mr. Major Development was that he now had his blueprints and could get on with his life.

Major snatched the manifest away from him, scribbled a signature, and shoved it back at him. No thanks, no tip, no nothing. Lori the receptionist might have noticed the scrape on his knee and given him a Band-Aid and sympathy along with the Snickers bar. All he got was the fantasy. At least in his imaginary social life he could afford to take a girl out someplace decent.

Back out on the street, he radioed Base to confirm the delivery. He would make it back to the base office in fifteen and spend half an hour matching his delivery receipts with Eta's floaters—the notes she made assigning jobs to messengers. By seven-fifteen he could be standing in the shower.

"Sixteen to Base. Jace to Base. Got POD on Major Pain In The Ass."

"Ten-four, angel. You'll go to heaven yet."

"I don't believe in heaven."

"Darlin', you got to believe in a better world than this."

"Sure. It's called Malibu. I'm gonna get a house there when I'm rich and famous."

"And I'll come be your kept woman. Give you a big ol' dose a brown sugar, baby boy."

Eta weighed more than two hundred pounds, had three-inch purple fingernails and a Medusa's head of braids.

"You'll have to get in line behind Claire Danes and Liv Tyler."

"Honey, I'll eat them skinny white girls for lunch and pick my teeth with their bones."

"Eta, you're scaring me."

"That's good. How else can I boss you around and tell you you got one more run?"

The groan came from the deepest part of his soul. "No way. Not tonight. Call someone else."

"Ain't no one else left. You're it, Lone Ranger, and baby, you're the best."

She gave him the address for both the pickup and delivery and told him he could use the tip he would get to buy her a diamond ring.

Jace sat on his bike under the security light beside the garage entrance and stared at the note he'd written with the names and addresses, and he thought of the only tip anyone had ever given him that was of any real value: It's better to be lucky than good.

As he folded the note, it began to rain.