

*It's a bloodthirsty town, Hollywood is. No matter
how popular you are, there's always someone
who'd be happier if you were dead. And in some
cases, you can be so despised, that **everyone** would
be happier if you were dead.*

CHAPTER ONE

Roger and Aggie held hands as they watched the kid bleed out. He was on his back, head flopped to the left. The gurgling in his windpipe had stopped, and now there was just a silent stream, as if Roger had left the tap open.

‘Practice makes perfect,’ Aggie said.

Roger accepted the compliment by giving her hand a gentle squeeze. He was definitely not the type to slit somebody’s throat without doing some serious prep work. So he had practiced. On pigs. He tracked down a copy of *Comparative Anatomy and Physiology of the Pig* at the Texas A&M library. After that it was just a matter of working on his technique.

‘Did you know that swine have the same basic characteristics as people?’ he had said to Aggie. ‘That’s why they use ’em in biomedical research.

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You could live for years with a pig heart in you.'

'I think Ermaline Hofstader's already got one in her,' Aggie said. 'You see how that girl eats?'

Roger slaughtered four hogs in all. By the third one he got the hang of it, but he did one more for insurance.

'You sure you can't switch over to cows or chickens?' Aggie said one night at dinner. 'I'm getting pretty damn sick of pork.'

Four pigs, one Mexican, Roger thought, looking down at the kid. The only difference was that the kid's blood wasn't bright red like the pigs'. In the murky light under the freeway it looked more like Hershey's syrup.

The pool of chocolate soup got wider, caught a crack in the concrete, and one satellite stream oozed its way toward Roger's left foot.

'Careful it don't get on your boots,' Aggie said.

Roger backed up a few steps. 'The boots are fine,' he said. 'More'n I can say for my...' His lips started to form the F-word, but he caught himself. He had given up profanity for Lent. The results had been spotty at best, so on Easter Sunday he made a silent vow to try and hold off cursing another fifty days till Pentecost. 'More'n I can say for my dang shirt.'

He looked down at his right sleeve, sopping with

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the kid's juices. 'Darn kid spurted. Got blood all over my good Roper.'

'Told you ten times not to wear that shirt,' she said.

'I must not have heard you,' he said. 'And it was more like a hundred and ten times.'

'Don't worry. I can get it out. I'll take it to a laundromat tonight.'

'Good idea,' he said. 'And make sure you buy a big box of that new Tide with DNA Remover.'

'I can get out the blood.'

'Blood's not DNA. Trust me, this muchacho's genetic code is in this shirt till I burn it. Besides, a lot of these laundromats in Los Angeles have security cameras, and I don't want to star in no movie about you and me washing blood out of no shirt.'

'It wouldn't be you and me in the movie,' she said, 'because when in the past twenty-seven years did you ever help one time with the washing?'

'Same amount of times you ever split one stick of firewood.'

Aggie looked down at the body. Eighty feet over her head she could hear the hum of tires rolling along concrete. She inhaled a noseful of freeway fumes and caught a whiff of garlic. The kid's last meal, probably.

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Roger knelt down beside the body and tightened his grip on the knife. It was a seven-inch Ka-bar, the same Marine Corps fighting knife he had carried with him since Nam. 'Let me get this over with,' he said.

'Don't,' Aggie said, grabbing his arm. The shirt was wet and sticky, but she didn't let go. 'Leave him be.'

'Ag,' he said, 'we decided.'

It had made sense when they were planning it. Make the murder look like a rival gang did it. Mutilate the kid's face beyond cosmetic repair, so that even his own mother couldn't look at him. Street revenge.

'It ain't necessary,' she said. 'The cops won't investigate a dead gangbanger. How old is he? Fourteen? Fifteen? You gave some poor woman a dead son. At least give her one she can bury in an open coffin.'

'I don't know why I bother planning, if you're gonna change everything last minute.' Roger felt the F-word welling up in his throat. 'Fine,' it came out.

She released the grip on his arm and rubbed her hands together to dry off the blood. 'Thank you. You saying he got his DNA in your shirt?'

Roger stood up and slipped the Ka-bar back into its leather sheath. 'Yep. Never get it out.'

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‘Then fair is fair. We should leave him a little DNA of our own.’

She puckered her lips and sucked them in and out, gathering up a generous gob. She let it fly. The frothy mix of saliva and bile hit the kid’s vacant left eye and trickled down his brown cheek toward an ear.

A few minutes later, they were in the Chevy pickup creeping along the freeway with the rest of the rush-hour traffic. He could feel her eyes on him. Reading him. ‘You upset?’ she finally said.

‘About what?’

‘About the high cost of chintz in China. You just cut a boy’s throat. You upset about killing someone?’

Roger forced a little laugh. ‘No big deal. I’ve killed people before.’

‘But that was always in the line of duty.’

Roger wiped one watery eye with a wrinkled blue bandana. ‘Yeah. Well, that’s what this was, Aggie. Killing this little fucker was the line of duty.’

CHAPTER TWO

If you're looking to get rich, being a cop is not the way to go. Especially the honest variety.

Last year I made ninety-three grand working homicide for LAPD. My partner, Terry Biggs, who is one pay grade lower, managed to make eighty-eight with overtime. Not bad money. Except that my plumber cleared one-fifty. And he didn't get shot at. Of course, I don't have to snake toilets. Life is full of tradeoffs.

Then one day the phone rings and some guy offers me and Terry fifty thousand dollars to option our last big homicide case for a movie. I hang up. It's a con job. Ever since we cracked the Familyland murders and got our minute and a half of fame, every cop we know has been busting our balls.

The guy calls back. He swears he's Halsey Bates,

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the director. 'Sure, you are,' I say, as I Google him.

'Where'd you go to college?'

'Penn,' he says.

'Wrong,' I say and hang up.

Next day Halsey Bates shows up at the station house, in the flesh. 'You might have solved a big murder case, Detective Lomax,' he says, 'but you don't have a clue where I went to school.' He holds up his college diploma. '*Universitas Pennsylvaniensis*. Penn.'

'Hollywood Online says Penn State,' I tell him.

'They also say Clay Aiken's dating a supermodel. Let's talk.'

Two weeks later, Halsey hands us each a check for twenty-five big ones. 'And that's just your first taste,' he says. 'This movie catches fire, and you boys will be building yourselves swimming pools.'

'I already have a swimming pool,' Terry told him.

'This one would be for your money.'

'What if I just drained the pool I have?' Terry said. 'How long would it take you to refill it with cash?'

'Depends on how long it takes me to find someone with sixty million bucks to bankroll us.'

'I got three daughters. The twins are starting college in September.'

'It took ten years to find the money to make

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Forrest Gump,' Halsey said. 'How were you planning on paying for college if I didn't option your story?'

'Mike and I were going to stick up the Wal-Mart over on Crenshaw. My other choice was to sell a kidney, but Mike refuses to part with one.'

'Well, if you're in a hurry, we could sell our souls to the devil,' Halsey said. 'I have his home number.'

The devil, in this case, was Barry Gerber, a legendary industry prick. Over the years he made dozens of films, zillions of dollars, and zero friends.

'I hear he's a real Hollywood asshole,' Terry said.

'That's redundant,' Halsey said. He gave us both a big toothy smile and ran his hand through his thick, straight, dirty-blond hair. The hair is the only thing straight about him.

I've met a lot of schmucks in the movie business. Halsey Bates isn't one of them. He's a decent guy, with an ugly past.

Seven years ago he was directing a movie and met Kirk Jacoby, a struggling young actor who had the three basic ingredients guaranteed to make him a star. He was talented, great looking, and bisexual. Kirk would sleep with anyone if he thought it could help him get ahead in the business.

They spent the day shooting at an LA country club, first on the tennis court, then the locker room,

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and finally the showers. Halsey was so hot for Kirk he wrapped early, and they drove to Halsey's house, which was well stocked with booze, dope, and condoms.

Jacoby had one agenda. He wanted a bigger part. Halsey offered him a few more scenes, but Kirk wasn't stupid. He knew they'd wind up on the cutting room floor, so he said goodnight and staggered toward his car. He was not only too drunk to drive; he was too drunk to walk. He cut across the lawn and fell into the koi pond. Halsey offered to put him up for the night, but Jacoby insisted on leaving. *Absolut* logic prevailed, and they decided that Halsey should be the designated driver. Jacoby flopped into the director's Saab convertible and immediately fell asleep in the passenger seat.

He never woke up. They weren't the only drunks on the road that night. Heading east on Beverly Boulevard they were T-boned by a young couple in a pickup running a light at Highland. Jacoby, unbelted, was thrown 120 feet and killed instantly. The driver of the pickup had his chest crushed and his girlfriend's head was severed when she went through the windshield.

Even with the best lawyers money could buy, Halsey spent the next four and a half years in

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prison. But it was time well spent. From his jail cell he used his clout, his talent, and his ingenuity to raise enough money to open a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in downtown LA.

By the time he got out he had added a rescue mission and a battered-women's shelter, and his charity, One Brick At A Time, had become as popular among the rich and famous as Japanese hybrids. Hollywood is nothing if not forgiving.

The day he got out was a media gangbang of O.J. proportions. TV crews from around the world were camped outside the gates. The first one to welcome him back was Barry Gerber. He announced that he was hiring Halsey to direct his first post-prison film. He then whipped out a contract and a pen, offered up his back, and the cameras rolled while Halsey signed on the dotted line. It was a great stunt, and the media gobbled it up.

'What's the movie about?' half the reporters yelled at once.

Gerber just smiled. 'I can't say.'

It was an old Hollywood ruse. Tell them what you're trying to pimp, and you're lucky if they print a word of it. Don't tell them, and they'll invoke the First Amendment.

'Come on, Barry,' a woman from *People* demanded. 'Give us something.'

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Gerber held his hands up and shook his head. The man was a master at getting millions of dollars' worth of publicity without spending a dime.

The press refused to take no for an answer.

Finally, Gerber acquiesced. 'Alright, just a taste. It's about a good-looking, charming, successful man who makes a terrible mistake,' he said, putting his arm around the good-looking, charming, successful man, who had spent four and half years paying for his own terrible mistake.

'What kind of mistake?' came the inevitable response.

Gerber grinned. 'He kills his boyfriend.'