

The Messenger



a novel
by

NICHOLAS BLACK

and

JIMMY DASAINT

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Written by NICHOLAS BLACK AND JIMMY DASAINT

Edited by NICHOLAS BLACK

Copyright information:

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For More information contact:

Jimmy DaSaint

DASAINTE ENTERTAINMENT

Email: info@dasaintent.com

Website: www.dasaintentertainment.com

Myspace: www.myspace.com/dasaintent
www.myspace.com/1urban_author

Nicholas Black

Website: www.Nicholasblackbooks.com

The Messenger

“The most violent book in America. And I loved every minute of it!”

—*FREEWAY RICKY ROSS, from BET's American Gangster Series.*

“The Messenger is a modern day western that will be talked about for many years to come. If you are a person that enjoys non-stop action and constant drama, then this is the perfect book.”

—*UrbanCelebrityMag.com*

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There's no way that this book would have been finished without the constant support and assistance of "Freeway" Ricky Ross. From start to finish he was behind us.

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And finally, to our man Hank Day, who helped us get this thing off the ground, proofread, edited, and turned into something that I think will become a classic.

Prologue

MANHATTAN, NEW YORK
2:18 pm . . .

HE TOOK SEVERAL breaths, going through the routine that he had gone through so many times before. After a while, it just becomes habit. The sky was filled with dark clouds that seemed low enough to touch. As he relaxed his body he took five breaths, nice and slow. He had to lower his heart rate way below one beat per second.

The best trained snipers in the world could lower their heart rate to the same speed as a person who was asleep. Ty Jacobs—Voodoo, as he was called by the few people who actually knew him—could lower his heart rate to 42 beats per minute. Only, he wasn't sleeping . . . he was waiting.

Watching.

He was a messenger.

And the message that he delivered was a mercury-tipped bullet delivered as several thousand feet-per-second.

He was several stories up, watching the small pieces of string he had tied up hours earlier, to see if the wind would affect his

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shot. The streamers were barely moving, so there was no reason to readjust the scope for windage.

He settled his body flat on the piece of black plastic. It was all about trigger control, now. No reason to rush. He did his homework, so there was no need to cut corners.

Then came the eyes. He blinked, in succession, 10 or 15 times to coat his eyes with liquid. That way, once he settled into the scope, he wouldn't have to blink as often. On either side of the sheet of black plastic were several small bags of rice, wrapped in socks. These would steady his rifle, a *Remington 700*, in .308 caliber.

This rifle was not designed for anything other than killing humans. Just a messenger.

He spread his legs, keeping them straight, his toes facing outwards as his heels dug into the edges of the plastic. His knees, thighs, stomach, and chest were flat on the ground. His right arm was bent, his palm and fingers holding the rifle tight to his right shoulder.

His left hand was folded under the stock of the gun, with one of the rice bags in his hand. With just the slightest pressure from his left hand the back of the rifle would lift, bringing the scope down on his target.

His eyes instantly picked-up the limousine making its way down the street below. Beside his rifle were six gray canisters that looked like coke cans, with key rings hanging from the tops—flash and smoke grenades.

Even the busy New Yorkers took a second to glance at the stretched, white Lincoln Limo. The kind of ride that makes a statement. His right eye was looking through a 4 ½ by 14 scope that could see well past 1000 yards. But this was going to be a

relatively easy shot. From this distance he could put out Washington's eyes out on a quarter.

As the shiny white limo came to a stop, the doors popped open and several well-armed men in high-dollar suits jumped out of the front and back, clearing the area from the edge of the street to the entrance to the *Tiffany's* Jewelers. People that rode around in limos like that, with bodyguards that sharp, were usually very important, or very powerful.

Voodoo didn't care which.

His finger tightened down on the trigger delicately as the tiny cross-hairs found a beautiful, dark-complected latin woman with shoulder-length black hair. She took her time stepping from the limo. She was wearing tinted *Gucci* sunglasses. She had on a brown leather coat that probably cost as much as most people's cars. She was model thin, with long legs, and wore black pants that might have been sprayed on they were so tight.

Voodoo took several breaths, then slowly let the air escape from his lungs. He released all of the tension in his body. Perfectly in focus, the latin woman turned and reached a hand out to a small boy, probably five or six-years-old.

She led him, with his curly black hair, out to the sidewalk where they were immediately flanked by several bodyguards on each side. Each of the bodyguards had their arms floating near their jackets, where pistols and small machine guns were waiting to be put to use.

Voodoo took one final breath, and then he slowly exhaled half of the air and waited. This was where a sniper was most deadly . . . the half-breath pause.

No movement.

No shaking.

No anxiety.

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Nothing other than mathematics. The cross-hairs sat near the woman's head until the child with his mangle of hair and his blue sweater turned to look at something in the street.

Without hesitation his left hand tensed ever so slightly, bringing the cross-hairs down to the child, the tiny dot in the middle of the cross-hairs floating near his upper lip. Without guilt or remorse, he added just the slightest extra pull on the trigger.

And then, as he watched through the scope . . . everything seemed to slow down.

The mother started to say something to the little boy.

. . . the bullet racing down!

She blinked between words.

. . . the bullet racing down!

He turned the side of his mouth into something that might have been a smile.

. . . Thump!

The mercury-tipped slug entered just above the small boy's top lip, folding the upper teeth, and everything else in his mouth into the shock wave that folded the bullet through his brain.

Instantaneous kill shot!

And because of the speed of the travelling bullet, his head exploded before anyone on the ground even heard the shot. One second he was a smiling, happy child. The next . . . he was an inanimate piece of flesh and bone, no more alive than the mailbox or a street sign.

The mother, several of the bodyguards, and most of the sidewalk below was painted in a red and gray splatter with bits of white bone and curly black hair. The bodyguards immediately

tackled the mother, protecting her, and what was left of the child, gun barrels pointing in every direction.

Voodoo turned away. Still, there was no nervousness, no apprehension. He was as relaxed as if he had just finished watching the weather report. As disinterested as if he's just read the ingredients on the back of a cereal box.

He was just an anonymous guy delivering a message.

With a quick but controlled cadence, he began to strip down the rifle like he had done it a thousand times before. He broke it into several smaller parts that were then wrapped inside of the plastic sheet he had been laying on.

Below him there were screams and horns and alarms echoing between the buildings, but none of that was his concern. His first job was finished. 28 seconds later, the rifle was wrapped in plastic, unrecognizable.

Now he had to affect his escape from the area. That's where the grenades came in. He grabbed the smoke grenades, one after the next, pulling the pins, and throwing them over the right, front, and left sides of the building. They would quickly blanket the area in a thick grey smoke that people would instantly take notice of.

The flash grenades came next, in the same pattern, following the smoke grenades down to the ground where the ear-shattering explosions would surely startle the crowd of unknowing onlookers.

With the buildings being as tightly packed as they were, the ensuing echoes and explosions that they would make would startle most people into a panic. He was, of course, playing off of the hysteria that 9/11 had created.

You even mention bomb in New York and you have yourself a stampede.

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And so he pulled the pins and tossed all of the grenades as he counted in his head the seconds until chaos would ensue.

5 . . . 4 . . .

He got to his feet.

3 . . . 2 . . .

He started towards the stairwell.

Boom!

Ba-boom! Boom!

Voodoo wasted no time in making his way into the stairwell and entering the building as the explosions from the flash-bangs were still rattling the air around him. There were already people evacuating, running and screaming, thinking the worst.

With his glasses on, his black leather jacket hanging loosely over a clean white t-shirt, he could have been anybody. Just another scared New Yorker, hoping that jets weren't crashing into the buildings again. With his dark skin and chiseled features, he was just another worried guy, trying to get to safety . . . wherever that might be.

An elderly woman wearing a white jogging suit and tennis shoes bumped into him, causing the rifle parts in the plastic bag to rattle together awkwardly.

"What's going on?" she said, her face twisted with fear.

He shrugged, glancing back over his shoulder, "Al Qaeda, maybe."

The woman's face flushed white as she turned back to the crowd of people going in every direction.

He toggled the cell phone in his jacket pocket that called a pre-programmed set of numbers. Each number was to a different cell phone in the surrounding buildings. And each of those cell phones was wired to the fire alarms in those buildings. With each

call a new alarm would go off. Another building thrown into chaos and panic. Thousands of people would be pouring into the smoke- and blood-filled streets.

Confusion and disorder . . . the perfect cover.

He would be hidden in plain sight.

Hearing the words "Al Qaeda" come out of his mouth the woman's eyes grew three times larger as she fought her way down the stairs, pulling and clawing past her neighbors. Like a log caught in a rushing river, Voodoo flowed among the terrified mothers and frightened children as they descended to the street. In a situation like this, there was no *right* way to run. So he went left.

He found the alley, and made his way to the third blue dumpster. Without missing a beat he pushed the dumpster aside to reveal an open manhole. He dropped the plastic bag, and all of its parts down into the darkness below, not waiting for a noise.

He then slid the heavily rusted cover back over the manhole and re-positioned the dumpster back over the hole. He began to fast walk down the alley, to another dumpster, where he took off a pair of silicon surgical gloves, wadding them up in a ball, and placing them in an unfinished carton of Sweet-n-sour pork. He tossed the carton back into the dumpster.

Time to play scared, he thought to himself as he exited the alley. New York's finest were skidding around, jumping curbs, and flashing sirens. Firetrucks and ambulances were appearing from every direction. He was three blocks away from the site of the shooting, figuring that in the next few minutes they would send somebody up to the roofs of every building in the area. They would do their dusting and printing, and look for trace evidence.

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But there wouldn't be any of that. They would look for a bullet casing, like the one he had dropped down into the manhole. *Good luck with that*, he thought.

As he descended the stairs that led to the subway he looked for a public phone. At the bottom of the stairs, about 10 feet from the turnstile, there was a pay phone. He slid some quarters in and dialed the number that he had committed to memory.

And he waited.

A voice with a thick Russian accent answered, "Hyello?"

"Excuse me," Voodoo said, ". . . may I speak to Ari?"

"No Ari live here," the voice growled.

"My mistake," Voodoo apologized, "I must have miss-dialed."

"Yeah . . . may-bee so," the voice replied. *Click*. And then the line went dead.

Voodoo placed the phone back on the metal hook and headed for a subway car. As he was walking a few policemen had made their way down into the subway station, and they were asking if anyone had seen anything strange in the last few minutes. One of them glanced over at Voodoo and lifted his hands as if to stop him.

"Foreigners," Voodoo snorted to the cop, shaking his head as he walked by. The officer nodded and then turned back to the gathering crowd of frightened onlookers.

37 minutes later he was walking out of an elevator with a large bag full of Chinese food, making his way to the front door of his loft apartment. As he reached forward with the key, his neighbor, Antonio Ferretti—a New York Police officer—backed out of the next door down the hall. He seemed to be in a hurry . . . more so than normal.

Antonio was dressed in his cop's uniform, with a bullet-proof vest half on, dangling from his left arm as he locked the door. He noticed Voodoo.

"Ty!" he said, surprised to see his neighbor. "Total mess out there. Did you hear?"

Voodoo furled his eyebrows curiously, shaking his head.

"Total fuckin' nightmare," Antonio said. "Somebody shot a kid in front of *Tiffany's*. Kid was the son of some El Salvadorian mob boss," he explained, his voice thick with a Brooklyn accent.

"Geez," Voodoo said, his face looking shocked.

"I gotta go do an extra shift. People think it's the end of the world or some shit. Total fuckin' nightmare. I gotta go!" And with that he raced down the hall towards the elevator.

"Hope you catch 'em," Voodoo said as he turned to his door and inserted the key. But it was all a facade.

Voodoo took no pleasure in his work. He felt no pain or sorrow. He didn't get happy or sad or depressed or elated. He was a tool . . . an instrument like any surgeon might use. There was no emotion in how he made his living.

He was just the messenger.

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ONE

BRONX, NEW YORK

LATER THAT NIGHT . . .

AFTER RETURNING HOME from the medical examiner's office, Juan-Carlos walked over to the sofa and sat sadly down as if he was made of lead, his entire body sinking as he did so. An empty look seemed etched into his face.

He still couldn't believe that his only child—six-year-old Juan-Carlos Jr.—had been murdered in broad daylight. What had made it even worse was that it had happened in the heart of downtown Manhattan, in front of a group of well-trained bodyguards and thousands of onlookers. This loss felt even worse than when his wife Maria had died from cancer two-and-a-half years ago.

That was pain.

This was something indescribably worse. There were not words sufficient to describe the torment he was suffering. Juan-Carlos sat back, his head hanging down as four of his top men stood near him in silence.

Sitting in a chair right across from him was his beautiful, 22-year-old bride, Carmen. Her eyes were bloodshot red from crying

all day. And the slightest noise made her shake. After seeing Carlos Jr. die right in front of her, she had been a nervous wreck.

Juan-Carlos was the 42-year-old boss of the El Salvadorian gang known as the 'Matas'. *Killers*. They were a violent gang of men that had migrated from the poorest slums in Central America, to the poor ghettos along the east coast of America. Besides New York, the Matas were in Philadelphia, parts of New Jersey, Baltimore, and Washington DC.

The Matas were involved in everything from selling drugs, to extortion, kidnapping, prostitution, and murder. The mayor of New York had proclaimed them the most violent gang in the city after several murders involving machetes took place out in public. It was the kind of thing that *CNN* and *MSNBC* couldn't even air without blurring the images.

In the past three years the Matas were responsible for the murder of rival drug dealers, three police officers, an assistant District Attorney, and a member of the city council. And that wasn't even the entire list.

Juan-Carlos ran his organization with an iron fist. Either you followed his rules, or you found yourself getting chopped to pieces by one of his enforcers and scattered in the Hudson River. See, the Matas didn't want to hide the bodies of their victims. Every murder was a warning. A statement.

No exceptions.

No gray area.

At just over 5 ½ feet tall he was short compared to all of the people he ruled over. Even his beautiful wife Carmen was a couple inches taller than he was. But what Juan-Carlos lacked in height, he made up for in power and influence. At the snap of a finger someone's life could be snatched away from them.

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He had men in his organization that were devoted soldiers. Men who would not hesitate to put their life on the line to save his and to enforce his will on others. If he told them, they would kill someone for no reason at all. Without so much as a curious breath.

They only needed his direction. And the one's who were caught by law enforcement all stood by a code, not only of silence, but of disdain.

Death before dishonor. They'd spit in a detectives face before they would answer a single question. They didn't even have a word for cooperation.

He didn't have snitches in his organization. You worked with the cops, you die. Your family dies. Your kids, your friends, and everything else you ever loved would die.

If you turned on the Matas . . . they would come for you with their sharpened machetes. No words. No expressions on their faces. Just blood in their eyes. And it wouldn't be fast. Death would be measures in hours, not in minutes or seconds.

Juan-Carlos looked up at his best friend and confidant, Caesar. He was a tall, brown-skinned man with a handsome face and short dark hair. At 33-years-old, Caesar was Juan's right hand man. The violent under boss that many considered more dangerous than Juan-Carlos, himself. Caesar was a man that rarely talked. Instead, he chose to let his pistol or machete fill in all the blanks.

"I don't care how long it takes!" Juan-Carlos yelled angrily as he spat, "I want every last one of those niggers dead!" He used his hand to wipe his face. "Dead!"

Caesar approached his hurting friend and said, "Don't worry, Juan, I'm already on it. The Black Royals will get everything that's

coming. Those pinches pendejos van a saber!" His words were solid and reassuring. And the message was clear: Those *fucking idiots are going to find out!*

Juan-Carlos stood up from the sofa and looked up into Caesar's dark eyes. "Ellos han matado mi hijo!"

They have killed my son.

" . . . and now, I have to bury him next to his mother. What kind of father has to bury his son . . . next to his wife? Today . . . part of me has died along with him, and the only way for me to feel any relief is to know that every last Black Royal has been killed. Caesar, you're going to make that happen."

"I will. No te molestes. I will," Caesar said without hesitation.

Juan-Carlos leaned forward and kissed Caesar on both sides of his face, a customary gesture of deep respect. Juan-Carlos then stood up and walked over to his sobbing young wife. He placed his hand delicately on her shoulder, "Carmen, are you . . . are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," she said, using her hands to wipe away the tears. Juan-Carlos watched as Carmen stood up slowly and turned to him. "I need some air. Today has been one of the worst days of my life. I just . . . I can't breathe."

Juan-Carlos reached out and took Carmen's trembling hands. "Don't worry, my love. The people responsible will pay."

Carmen stared into her husband's eyes, "I know they will. But that still won't bring back my step-son." She reached down on the chair and grabbed her car keys and purse. "I really need some air, and time to gather my thoughts. Today has been," she wiped her eyes again as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

She swallowed, "I'm going for a drive."

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Juan-Carlos looked nervous, "I don't know if that's a good idea with everything that happened. Do you want some of my men to follow you?"

"No," Carmen said, "I'll be fine. If those monsters had wanted to kill me, they would have already. I just need to go and clear my head. I'll meet you back at the house in a few hours."

"I won't be here," Juan-Carlos said. "Caesar and I have to make a trip down to Philadelphia. I won't be back home until tomorrow afternoon."

Carmen leaned forward and kissed the mob boss softly on the lips, and as she backed away her hands gently stroked his cheek. "When you return from Philly, I'll be at home waiting for you. And don't worry, I'll be just fine."

Juan-Carlos watched as Carmen turned and walked away. When she had left the house, he looked over at a couple of his men and nodded, "Follow her and make sure she is safe."

"Si, Jeffe," the two men said as they turned and walked out the front door with purpose in their steps.

From a window Juan-Carlos watched the two soldiers climb inside a black *Cadillac Escalade*. As they rolled off, Carmen was already halfway down the street.

Inside her all-white *Mercedes Benz*, she glanced in the rearview mirror before making a sharp left turn at the corner. She knew that Juan-Carlos would always send a few of his men to watch and follow her. He was over-protective and extremely jealous. Even though Carmen had never given him any reason to feel that way . . . he was only human.

Seeing the black truck following her, she stepped on the gas pedal and maneuvered the *Mercedes* quickly through the slower moving traffic. Putting more and more cars between them, she fi-

nally glanced back, in the rearview mirror. Pretty soon the *Escalade* was nowhere to be found.

Tonight, Carmen didn't want to be followed, she needed a break and some time to clear her mind.

SOUTH BRONX, NEW YORK

INSIDE A HOUSE ON 138TH AND WILLIS AVENUE . . .

Reggie King looked over at his younger brother, Ronnie, and smiled. They were the two bosses of the Black Royals drug organization. And the number one enemy of the Matas. For three years both sides had been killing each other over drugs, prostitution, and territory. Both King brothers were tall, with athletic physiques, and dark complexions.

Reggie was 32-years-old, four years older than his brother Ronnie. The Black Royals had over 75 made members in their organization. Reggie was considered the brains, and Ronnie was the muscle and heart. Each month the Black Royals were bringing in million of dollars from all of their illegal activities.

But with the sudden rise of the Matas, they had seen their money and territory slowly dwindling. With each lost inch, their war with the Matas had escalated.

"The hit on Juan's son was exactly what we needed," Reggie said as he nodded. "The message is pretty fucking clear. Now he knows this shit ain't no game!"

He took a few steps, peering at his brother, "There's no rules in war, and kids are not excluded. Being five don't give you a pass. We'll turn this bitch into Bagdad on their punk asses!"

"Fuck all them fake-ass Mexicans!" Ronnie added. "That was payback for what they did to Leroy with that machete." He was

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breathing hard, his fists clenched as his jaw tightened. He took some time to regain his composure.

Ronnie then sighed and looked down at his gold Rolex watch, "I have to make a run somewhere."

Reggie smiled and said, "Take one of the men with you. From now on, there are no rules. We have to be extra safe. You know they'll be gunning for us."

"I'm not worried about them. They should be worried about me!"

"They're not stupid," Reggie warned. "They'll put this together in no time. They might be planning right now."

Just as Ronnie was about to say something his cell phone started ringing. He quickly answered it, listening to the muffled voice. He nodded a couple times and said, "I'll be there shortly."

He closed the phone and turned to his brother, "I don't need nobody to watch me tonight, I'll be fine." And a large grin crept across Ronnie's statuesque face.

"I'll see you later?" Reggie asked.

"Probably not. Tonight is kinda special," Ronnie said, grabbing his jacket and heading towards the front door. "Don't wait up," he yelled back as he shut the door behind him.

TWO

VOODOO'S APARTMENT

LATER THAT NIGHT . . .

VOODOO STEPPED OUT of the shower, his feet leaving wet prints on the granite tiles as he walked. He studied his face in the mirror as the steam circled around the bathroom behind him.

His face that nobody knew.

His eyes and nose and chin that looked as if they were cut from the same granite that the floor tiles were. His body was a machine; a finely honed device. He splashed some cold water on his face, and raised his head as his eyes slowly opened. As the droplets of water fell from his eyebrows and rolled off of his nose, he took a deep breath, wondering if this was normal.

Why didn't it bother him that he could do the things he could do?

Why didn't it hurt him to kill people?

Why didn't he feel a single, tiny, echo of emotion? His mind was like a copy of a copy, too far removed to feel anything real. There was no substance, to his emotions. No flavor.

The money was nice . . . but that wasn't it, either.

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He raised a dark blue towel and blotted his face, then wrapped the towel around his waist as he turned away from the mirror. There were no answers in his reflection. There were no solutions to be found by staring at himself. He just . . . was.

He left the bathroom wearing only the dark blue towel around his waist. He walked quietly across the thick gray carpet in the bedroom. He could hear some anchorman's words as he broke down the catastrophe that had occurred in Manhattan.

“ . . . I'm saying, simply, that there are no more rules in a gang war,” the voice said caustically. *“No matter who you are, if you get in between these types of people, you're dead. They don't care about the value of life. They might as well be extremist terrorists. They don't care about . . .”*

He walked through his bedroom, and then out into the living room where the flat screen plasma television was fixed to the wall like a painting. He walked past a white leather couch, grabbing the television's remote, and stood in the center of the living room.

With the remote hanging at his wrist, he muted the screen, standing there in the middle of silence, the images of the killing repeated over and over. They had some grainy footage from a security camera that captured the little boy's head exploding.

Over and over.

There was only so much footage that the news agencies had of the event, so they would run it over and over, until every New Yorker could dream about it in real-time.

A copy of a copy of a copy.

On the couch behind him, something moved. Voodoo didn't turn around. He knew she was sitting there. Waiting for him.

“If you turn the sound down, you can't hear what they're saying,” the soft voice said. She unfolded her legs and stood, slowly

approaching him from behind. He still didn't answer her. He might have been a statue for all she knew.

Angie was just over five feet tall, with smooth light skin, and a perfectly proportioned body. "There's a lot to be learned from the news," she said as she closed to within inches of his back."

He turned his head sideways, not enough to see her, really, just to catch her in his peripheral vision. And right at the point where he was about to say something, he turned back to the television, lifted the remote, and the screen went black. He tossed the remote over onto the sofa as he turned around to look at her.

Her eyes were a light hazel color, wide and liquidy. She didn't wear a lot of makeup because she had a natural beauty that left little room for improvement. And, barely hidden beneath the *Victoria's Secret* nightgown, her breasts were full and perky.

His eyes studied the black fabric that was barely covering her body, raised near her nipples. She had her belly button pierced with a small green stone fit in silver.

Her lips were slightly open as she studied him, trying to figure out what was going on in there. "What are you thinking about?"

He stared at her, his eyes resting on a part of her body, then slowly moving on to another, and another.

Slowly, she placed her hands on his shoulders, quietly tracing the muscles in his chest. Inch by inch, they continued making their way across his washboard stomach, until they were just above the towel.

With a slow, delicate touch she ran her fingers around his waist, feeling both his skin and the soft towel beneath her fingertips. "Sometimes," she whispered, "I think you're a robot."

He didn't answer with words, but she could tell that he was listening to her . . . feeling her touch.

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Her hand slowly crept down beneath the towel, stroking the inside of his thigh, purposely torturing him. Her hand climbed higher as she pressed her chest against his. "You're a mute," she said as she kissed him on the neck. "That's it. You can't talk because you're a mute."

The towel dropped to the floor between them.

He used his fingers to slide off the thin strings of black silk that held her nightgown on. Seconds later, the black fabric fell between their bodies, gathering at their feet on top of the towel.

He reached down to her waist, spinning her around so that he was behind her.

She turned her head to the side not really looking *at* him, but in the general direction. "Oh, so now you want to fuck me? Not a word, huh?" She smiled, waiting for a response.

"You shouldn't talk so much," he said as his hands reached slowly around her waist, stroking her wetness gently.

She swallowed, feeling him hard behind her as her heart rate soared. "You . . . you can talk," she said as she swallowed. Her eyes closed as his fingers rubbed her into a state of near frenzy.

Her body started to writhe in anticipation. "Why do you like me?"

He didn't answer as he continued to stimulate her, causing her to twist and arch.

"Of all the girls you could call, you keep calling me," she said, her words sporadic and slurred as she started to feel the electricity pulse through her body. She knew she would be moaning soon.

"I like you," he said, as he picked her up and carried her towards the bedroom, ". . . because you don't talk too much."

THE HILTON HOTEL, MANHATTAN

45 MINUTES LATER . . .

Carmen stepped off of the elevator on the eighth floor, then nervously looked around as the door swept closed behind her. The hallway was completely empty, but still, she knew that it was better to be safe than sorry. She walked slowly down the hall and stopped at room #805.

After inserting her card-key into the door, it clicked open and she stepped quickly inside. The large elegant suite was dimly lit, and the smooth, soulful voice of Jill Scott was filling the air.

Carmen laid her purse down on a small glass table near the entrance. Then, with a big smile of anticipation forming on her face, she walked back towards the master bedroom.

After turning the knob, the door opened to the exquisitely furnished bedroom. Everything was first-class.

She paused to admire the tall, dark, ruggedly handsome man that was laying across the bed, completely naked. Every muscle in his body was cut and defined as if he'd been created by a sculptor.

"What took you so long?" Ronnie said, folding his arms behind his head, the gentle flutter of a candle reflecting off of his glistening body.

She approached him slowly, "I had to lose the guys that were following me. And the traffic was a little more heavy than normal."

Ronnie nodded his head and watched as Carmen started to undress. After kicking off her \$400 *Gucci* heels, she started to take off the matching black *Gucci* dress. Her skin was honey brown, and flawless.

Ronnie watched with pleasure as Carmen slid the dress down her curvaceous body. And just like all of the times they had secretly met before, Carmen wasn't wearing any underwear.

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Her body was a work of Spanish art. She could fill the cover of any magazine and not look out of place. She had the type of body that made men look twice. Carmen stepped out of her dress and joined her black lover in bed.

She cuddled up beside him and looked deep into his brown eyes. "They couldn't wait until I got into the store before they shot that spoiled little brat? His blood splattered all over my new jacket." She almost hissed. "You know . . . all of those clothes are ruined."

Ronnie had a wry smile on his face as he spoke, "I told you before that I have no say in any of that. Just trust me, you'll never be harmed."

Carmen studied him for a moment, her eyes narrow and skeptical. Slowly she leaned forward, her face softening. She kissed him on the lips, backing just inches away, "I trust you. Just don't fuck with me . . . *fuck* me."

As Ronnie started to rub his hand along her hips, he said, "Still not ready to give me the scoop?"

Carmen sat up on the bed and looked deep into Ronnie's eyes, "I told you before . . . what goes on between you and my husband is between you two, only. I will not tell you any of his secrets. Not that he ever tells me anything, anyway."

She shook her head slowly, "I'm not your spy. And even though I enjoy being with you, the Matas are still my people."

Carmen took a deep breath, studying Ronnie's eyes, "Please, don't ask me questions that you know I won't ever answer. Leave me out of your little war." Her tone was serious.

Ronnie grinned as he sat up on the bed next to her, "You're right. Let us men handle things the way we do." Delicately he laid her back on the bed and climbed his dark naked body on top

of her. They started passionately kissing, tongues twisting inside each other's mouths like slithering snakes.

As he kissed and sucked around her neck, he used his legs to spread hers apart. Everything was smooth, as if he'd done it so many times before. They had their own cadence. This could be a well rehearsed dance between them.

"You ready?" he whispered softly into her ear as he kissed the side of her neck and shoulder.

"Yes, Papi," she said, positioning herself and wrapping her arms around his muscular body. "I'm ready."

After sucking on her erect nipples he raised his body, his hips coming close to hers. Both of their eyes were filled with wanting lust.

Ronnie placed both of Carmen's legs on top of his broad shoulders. Then he looked into her beautiful face and just smiled. In one smooth motion, he slid his hard black dick deep into her hot, wet pussy. As he started stroking, in and out, he watched as Carmen began to moan out in ecstasy.

With every thrust he pushed harder inside of her, and each time he did so Carmen dug her manicured nails deeper into his back.

"Yes, Papi! Oooohh! Yessss, Papi!" she cried out in explosions of pure bliss, her body shaking with each thrust of his hips.

For the last six months, Ronnie had been giving Carmen the best sex she had ever experienced. Enough to keep her sneaking off, two and sometimes three times a week. She was sexually hooked, as if what he gave her was a forbidden drug . . . but then, so was he.

Ronnie was determined to one day break her, and get Carmen to tell him all about her husband's organization. But all in good time.

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The best things in life come to those who wait.

In the tranquility of their private hotel suite, Carmen was pinned down on the bed, moaning out in pleasure as her body quivered. She was receiving the fucking of her life, from her husband's number one enemy, and loving every single moment of it.

And even though she knew she was risking her life . . . she had no choice. She needed what only Ronnie could give her. And she needed it a lot.

THREE

178th STREET

TWO DAYS LATER, 5:43 AM . . .

ON THE CORNER of 178th Street the tinted black van was parked, and two of the Matas' most violent street enforcers were patiently waiting inside. Their names were Pepe and Felipe, and violence was all that they knew. They had an advanced education in torture.

Both men had dark black curly hair and darkish brown complexions that looked as if they had been living on beaches for their entire lives.

Pepe was the shorter of the two, standing just an inch over five feet. His partner in crime, murder, and torture was Felipe; standing taller at nearly six feet. It was their job to protect all the drug territories owned by the Matas.

They were also involved with kidnapping, extortion, and murder. Tattooed across both of their chests in bold black letters, were the words,

Matadores Por Vida

The Messenger

Killers for life.

And the men both swore and lived by those words.

Pepe and Felipe sat back in their seats, patiently waiting. They had been there for over an hour. Loaded 9mm pistols were resting in their hands. But the pistols weren't their weapons of choice. Not for the type of pain that these two liked to inflict. Guns were more of a convenience.

Instead, they preferred the two sharpened machetes that were inside of a long black leather bag, waiting inches below Pepe's seat.

They watched as the front door of an apartment building suddenly opened and a tall, light-skinned man walked out of the house. Standing right behind him was an attractive Spanish woman. The man and woman kissed passionately before she turned and walked back into the apartment, closing the door behind her.

The man stood on the porch for a moment, looking up and down the street. It was in his nature to be skeptical and paranoid. Not only was this mainly a Spanish section ruled by the Matas, but an assassination had just taken place.

He stepped down and made his way across the walkway towards his parked red, *Dodge Magnum*. The man's name was Calvin King. He was the younger cousin of Reggie and Ronnie King, and one of their top street lieutenants. He knew his way around the game . . . or so he thought.

Calvin had just finished enjoying a wonderful night of sex with a woman named Maria, who he had met a few days earlier at a bar in Harlem. Now he was on his way back home, at the Forest Projects, to take a shower and get some sleep.

The sky was dark and the street was completely empty and calm. When Calvin reached his car he noticed the tinted black van

parked right behind it. Before he could reach the handle, the doors of the tinted van flew open.

Pepe and Felipe rushed out suddenly, pointing their weapons at Calvin's head. He was caught completely off guard, and all that he could do was throw up his hands as he ducked his head. You know when you're outnumbered.

"Get in the van or die where you stand!" Pepe told him in his Spanish-accented English.

"Fuck!" Calvin muttered to himself. He knew that he had no other choice but to obey the man's order. As he looked at the two gunmen, the thing that stuck with him was their eyes. They were cold and vacant. It didn't take a genius to realize that doing anything other than what they said would get him ventilated.

Maybe it's just a robbery-kidnapping, he thought to himself. Perhaps they just wanted a nice ransom before letting him go? *Maybe?* That's what he kept telling himself as they led him to the van.

It had happened many times before. Low-life street thugs robbing and kidnapping drug dealers for some cash. This was probably just a quick score. *No worries*, he kept telling himself. *Just be cool. Do what they say.*

As the doors to the van slid closed, Felipe glanced back with a sinister smile and then started the engine. The van made its way down the dark street, disappearing into the night.

Calvin was handcuffed and sitting on the back seat. Pepe was sitting across from him, leaning against the wall of the van, his eyes barely open. The 9mm in his right hand was laying across his lap, pointing at Calvin's stomach. Any attempt to escape would be bloody and futile.

Calvin watched nervously as Pepe placed the pistol inside his belt, behind his back, and reached for the black leather bag.

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Pepe's face slowly became more animated as if some button had been pressed. His eyes became vibrant and alive, a devilish grin starting to form.

Something inside of Calvin, that voice that had been telling him to relax, was now quiet and nervous. This wasn't a simple robbery-kidnapping. These weren't simple street thugs looking for a come-up. In this van of total silence, Calvin closed his eyes and began to pray. He began to see all of the things in his life that he truly cared about. All of those precious memories that might soon disappear.



VOODOO'S APARTMENT . . .

“Here,” Voodoo said as he tossed Angie her clothes. She had been milling around for a couple of minutes, barely awake, and still worn out.

“Is that your way of telling a lady she needs to leave?” she said sarcastically as she used her fingers to comb her hair behind her ears.

Voodoo walked out of the bedroom, already wearing a pair of faded jeans and a black, hooded sweatshirt.

Angie watched him from the bed as she unfolded her clothes and found \$300 in crisp 20-dollar bills. She looked around the bedroom at all of the artwork—various black and white sketches of different buildings. She watched as he walked back and forth from the living room to the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly.

With no answer, she started to slip back-on the *Victoria's Secret* nightgown, and then her dark green blouse and skirt. Her eyes glanced around for her heels, which were still out by the white couch in the living room.

As she made her way quietly across the threshold, he surprised her with a glass of cold orange juice and a banana. She just couldn't figure him out.

"Is this . . . breakfast?" She laughed, "Who eats bananas?"

"Potassium and vitamin C," he said as he picked up his cell phone and dialed a number, ". . . it's good for you."

"Are *you* good for me?" she said as she sat at the couch, drinking her juice as she wiggled her toes into her black heels.

He smiled briefly, kind of laughing to himself, as he placed the cell phone to his ear.

The phone rang twice before the familiar Russian voice picked-up.

"Da?"

"It's me," Voodoo said.

"We need to . . . ah . . . talk, ti pani-mayish?" the voice said.

"Yeah," Voodoo said glancing across the room at a small clock. "Where?"

"You know my favorite place to eat," the Russian said.

"Yeah."

"Sorak-pyat minuti," the voice instructed.

45 minutes.

"Okay," Voodoo answered as the line went dead.

He glanced over at Angie, watching her place the large glass of orange juice to her mouth like a small child. So simple. So full of innocence.

"Tell me, again, why you like me," Angie said as she lowered the glass, still not having eaten even a bit of the banana.

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"I like you because you don't eat too much," he said, making her giggle.

She walked forward until they were just inches apart. She was looking up into his dark eyes. He was looking down at her.

"... now burn off," he said as he reached around and slapped her on the ass.

She narrowed her eyes playfully at him, took about half a step, and then leaned in quickly, giving him a kiss on the cheek. He tilted his head to the side like a curious dog, trying to figure her out.

"I'm going to understand you, one of these days," Angie said as she headed towards the door. On her way she left the empty glass and untouched banana on his kitchen counter.

"You'll see . . ." her voice trailed off as the door opened and closed.

And again, there was silence in the apartment.

He sat there for a moment, as the wetness from her kiss slowly evaporated from his cheek. *Odd girl*, he thought as he grabbed the banana for himself.

He then gathered up his wallet and two *Spyderco* knives, placing one in his pants, and the other on the inside of his left boot. Glancing around the apartment one last time he nodded, and then headed out the front door.

It was time to go and see his old friend, Victor.



VICE AVENUE

2 HOURS LATER . . .

Inside a house on Vice Avenue, Pepe, Felipe, and their victim Calvin were all down inside the large humid basement. Calvin's naked body was completely covered in a thick red mat of liquid, tied down to a long wooden table that was stained brown and black from the half-dried blood.

His mouth was gagged with thick silver duct tape, and blood and mucus had stained both the tape, and his face and neck. He looked like he had gotten into a car accident.

For two long hours, Calvin had been systematically beaten and tortured. Dark red and bluish bruises were all over his swollen face. He looked more like the elephant man, than the man on his driver's license.

Blood was dripping slowly from his flattened nose and busted lips that were swollen to the size of hotdogs they were so puffed out. Calvin stared out, in a daze, way past fear. Pepe and Felipe stood over him. Both of them were holding long machetes, hand-sharpened on both sides of the blade.

"Nigger," Pepe said, placing the blade of the machete against Calvin's neck, "we know who you are. And you're gonna get it just like your friend . . . Lee-roy." His eyebrows fluttered up and down, "You remember Lee-roy, don't you?"

"Hold on!" a voice ordered from behind.

When Pepe and Felipe turned, they saw Maria standing at the bottom of the steps with a big smile on her face. Clutched tightly inside her right hand was a sharp, 12-inch kitchen knife. She walked over towards them, and when Calvin's eyes focused through his swollen cheeks and eye sockets he recognized her.

Trying to swallow the blood that continued to gather in his throat he mumbled some unrecognizable words as a tear managed to roll down his boulder of a face.

He had been set-up.

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Played like the fool of fools.

Maria looked into Calvin's trembling eyes and said, "Your dick has gotten you in a whole lot of trouble, tonight."

Then Calvin watched as Maria grabbed a handful of her long, black hair and lifted it up. As she slowly turned her body around he saw the small tattoo on the back of her neck.

Matadores Por Vida.

Killers For Life.

Pepe tapped the frightened man on the chest with the tip of his machete, each time leaving a small slice in his dark skin that started to bleed.

"Hey, puta," he said with ice in his words, "you need to tell me who the fuck killed Juan-Carlos' kid."

He took a step back and smiled, "I'm hoping that you don't answer me at first. See, all of this," Pepe said as he sliced across Calvin's stomach, ". . . all of this is for me, mother-fucker. We haven't even begun the questions, yet, because this is like . . . our little fun. So when I finally *do* ask you a question, you need to know that I'm gonna skin you for each wrong answer."

Then Pepe leaned in and spit on Calvin's stomach, where the fresh cut was starting to bleed. "And like I said, I hope you hold out for a little while longer."

Felipe shrugged, as if he had no control over Pepe. "Hey, seriously man, he's not fucking kidding. He pulls this shit all the time. Like he's fucked-up in the head or something. Make it easy on yourself. You saw what he did to Leroy? That shit was like nothing compared to this."

Pepe smiled, "This ain't about how long you're going to live, it's about how slowly you're going to die. And I really don't have shit to do for the next couple of days."

Pepe turned to Felipe, “You have somewhere to be?”

Felipe shrugged, “No . . . nothing comes to mind.”

Pepe nodded, “You see, you have our undivided attentions, puta.”

And with that Pepe began cutting as Felipe and Maria headed back up the stairs. What Pepe was about to do was too disgusting for even them to watch.

And he was just getting started.

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FOUR

ROSIE'S DINER, BRIGHTON BEACH

LATER THAT MORNING . . .

VOODOO WAS WEARING red-tinted, small, circular glasses as he entered the small diner. It didn't take him more than a second to spot Victor Pavlovich, sitting quietly in the back corner, a cigarette hanging off of his lip while he studied the paper for scores from last night's games. Victor booked bets on the side when business was slow.

The Russian looked up as Voodoo approached, a smile sending curls of bluish-grey smoke swirling upwards. The diner had that *burnt-everything* smell. Eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and cancer.

The Russian liked smoking European cigarettes that would probably kill the average man in one puff. But, despite the cigarettes and coffee, Victor's teeth were pearly white, and miraculously straight. On the sides of his mouth, the teeth got sharper and more jagged, like a shark.

His eyes were a cold baby blue, with snow around the edges, and he glanced around every few seconds to see who was watching him. You wouldn't call him *paranoid*, well . . . not to his face, any-

way. His skin was so pale that you would think he would burst into flames if he touched sunlight for even a second.

“Kak dila, moy druk?” Victor said through the smoke.

How's it going, my friend?

He was wearing a blue *Adidas* Track suit, with gold chains dangling from his thin neck. He was the stereotypical gangster. He liked the image. He wanted people to know what he was, even if they didn't know exactly who.

One of Victor's mottos was, 'Anything from bullets to battleships . . . if the money's right, I'll get it for you.'

And he wasn't kidding.

Voodoo slid into the other side of the booth, wafting the smoke out of his face.

“Ti hochesh cafe?” Victor asked as he pushed his plate of eggs to the side.

You want coffee?

“Money, Victor,” Voodoo said behind his glasses.

“You look like . . . rock-star,” Victor said as he pulled out his *iPhone* and typed in some numbers on the screen. Satisfied, glancing up at Voodoo and back to the phone several times, he turned the phone around and slid it across the green plastic table top.

Voodoo took the phone and entered a series of numbers and passwords to access his account information at *Atlantic International Bank of Belize*. He waited a couple of seconds before his account information came up.

True to his word, there was a recent deposit of \$150,000 in non-traceable US Dollars. Satisfied, Voodoo exited the screen and slid the phone back to Victor.

“Rock-star is happy?” Victor said, each word a struggle. He had lived in the United States for over 20 years and he still hated

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speaking English. He thought the language was ugly and uncultured.

Voodoo's mouth curved on the edges, almost a smile. Victor had been like an uncle to him. And even though they never said it, they loved each other like family. "Rockstars make more money than this."

Victor leaned back, laughing, "Yeah, but . . . rock-star must be work lot longer hours than you. Your job much better, trust me."

Voodoo rolled his eyes as a waitress came over to their table. She looked like her skin had been replaced with old dried-out leather, her eyes changed for glass marbles.

"Can I get you fellas something?"

Before Voodoo could answer, Victor spoke, "Get coffee and slice of . . . ah . . . ap-ple pie."

She looked down at Voodoo for approval. He nodded, and she turned and stalked off as if she has somewhere better to be.

Victor stared at Voodoo for a moment and then leaned forward. "I got a rush job for you." He let the words linger for a moment.

". . . what you think?"

Voodoo crossed his arms, "When?"

"Zaftra, na zaftra," Victor answered quietly.

Tomorrow, in the morning.

"Tools?"

"Da, pyat-dyesit," the Russian said with a wink.

Yes, fifty-caliber.

Voodoo sat back, considering the task. He knew, just from hearing the weapon, that this was an important job. Slowly he nodded.

Victor reached into his shiny blue sweat top and grabbed a large envelope. He placed it on the table, under his newspaper and slid it forward, as if this was some kind of ritual they had shared before.

Victor watched as Voodoo slid the paper off the table, his eyes and emotions still hidden behind the red lenses, and placed the envelope inside his jacket without giving it so much as a glance.

“Don't you want to know who is target?” Victor asked as he stubbed out what was left of his cigarette.

Voodoo shrugged, “Makes no difference to me. I just deliver messages.”

“Better than Fe-de-ral Express,” Victor said as he laughed to himself.



ONE DAY LATER . . .

The clouds were thick and low in the sky over the cemetery. The line of black limousines, *Cadillacs*, and *Mercedes* stretched so far into the mist and fog that you couldn't see the end.

Gathered around the burial site were Juan-Carlos, his wife Carmen, and several other members of their immediate family. All of them were standing in a circle around the dark wet hole that the small casket would soon be lowered into.

The rain had stopped an hour earlier, allowing the hundreds of people in attendance to lower their umbrellas and mourn together in relative silence. All the women were dressed in black, with wide-brimmed hats and dark netting over their faces.

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The men were dressed in black suits with white ties—a trademark of the Matas. Among the *family* members were Caesar, the second-in-command; Hector, Caesar's closest lieutenant; and several other of the Matas' high-ranking members.

The casket was covered in red and black roses, with a large crucifix on the top bearing the depiction of Jesus on the cross. It was so quiet they could hear the rain drops drip off of the casket and fall to the mud below.

Nobody spoke.

Not a word.

The catholic priests were there, but had been told to make their blessings in silence. The only person who was going to speak was going to be Juan-Carlos.

Beyond the immediate family and Matas members, there were more than 25 gang members spread throughout the cemetery just hoping that some of the Black Royals would make a move. Through the white mist, that floated eerily around them, they only had about 20 yards of visibility.

But nobody was insane enough to try anything on a day like this. There were over 40 heavily armed Matas members driving around the streets outside the cemetery. In all, the count was well over 70 men. A small army was protecting a general as he buried his fallen son.

Needless to say, there were a lot of itching trigger fingers in every direction, as far as the eye could see . . . farther, even.

Already, they were on the verge of an all out war. And even though Juan-Carlos didn't have any proof that the King brothers were responsible . . . he knew. He felt it in every ounce of his heart. He knew it in the way that animals *know* when they're being hunted.

The Black Royals will all have to pay for the death of his son. Nobody will be spared.

But he needed evidence in order to issue the green light. One of the policemen on his payroll was a New York Homicide Detective. When they had finally pieced all of this together, Juan-Carlos would know exactly where the killing should start.

Juan-Carlos took a step forward on the damp grass, beads of water slowly rolling down his face. He cleared his throat as he took a moment to look at each and every face in the crowd. He wanted to connect with them. To let them know he felt their pain, and to share his.

The tears in his eyes mixed with the humidity and rain drops as they fell down his neck, and along his body. In his wounded soul, those cold, salty drops were like blood draining from his heart, trickling slowly down his chest.

He leaned forward, bringing his right hand to his mouth, kissing his fingers, and then gently placing his hand on the casket. And with his eyes closed firmly, his hand still on the casket, he started to speak.

“Mi hijo. My child of God. You have left me, now . . . forever. But it is I who have failed you. I did not protect you from the monsters that call this city their home.”

He stood slowly, backing away from the brushed silver box that would be the eternal resting place for his child's shattered body.

He took a deep breath as he turned towards the gathering of crying grief-stricken family members. He swallowed difficultly, forcing down the pain and sorrow like jagged pieces of metal.

“ . . . I want to promise you all that I will give the proper response for this horrible act.”

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He locked eyes with Caesar, who nodded through clenched teeth, quietly assuring his boss that blood would be spilt for this.

Juan-Carlos turned back, facing the casket as he raised his voice, "I give you my word that I will . . ." he lowered his head, his eyes lifting to see the catholic priests as he spoke, ". . . that I will avenge the death of my son! I will unleash upon those who did this a fury that they cannot imagine!"

His voice was growing steadily louder and stronger, thundering through the cemetery so that all could hear his warning.

" . . . I swear to God, and may He strike me down if—"

And in the space between two words, Juan-Carlos lurched suddenly forward, falling face-first onto his son's coffin as a fine mist of red liquid covered everyone nearby.

Caesar started to take a step forward when he heard the thunderous noise!

Ka-boooooom!

Everyone started to scream and scatter as Caesar dove forward only to find a hole the size of a basketball in Juan-Carlos' chest! The bullet-proof vest he had been wearing had done nothing to protect him.

Caesar already had his pistol out, looking through the gaps in the fog and low clouds where somebody might have taken the shot. He quickly yelled orders to Hector to get the family members back to their vehicles, and away from the cemetery as fast as possible.

Looking back down at Juan-Carlos' body, or what was left of it, he realized that he was covered in blood and fragments of bone, and organs, and death. His right hand was holding a pistol as he crouched. His left hand was pressed against bits of human matter mixed with mud and grass.

One second his boss had been vowing for revenge . . . and a split-second later, Caesar was looking at a corpse laying across the casket of another corpse.

A dead father laying atop his dead son.

A copy of a copy.

It was no longer just a cemetery, where people come to grieve their lost loved ones . . . it was now a graveyard, where death and ghosts and horror are lurking with their every step.



2 MINUTES EARLIER . . .

Voodoo sat behind the scope of the *Barret Light* .50 caliber sniper rifle. It could take down targets at a range of over a mile-and-a-half. Some trained soldiers had claimed to use it accurately at over 2 miles. But Voodoo was barely a mile away, on top of a parked 18-wheeler. This was an easy shot for him.

Little more than well-paid target practice.

Again he slowed his breathing as his eyes fought for a picture between the thick sheets of fog that seemed to intermittently roll by. The air was dense so he compensated accordingly, knowing that with as many bodyguards as there were he would only get one clean shot.

The thick mist worked against him, and also for him. It would make his shot slightly more difficult to calculate, but also mask his location. Nature's camouflage.

He had only one target, and he could only see him ever few seconds as the puffs of white and grey moisture crossed by.

His cheek pressed against the stock of the rifle, steadying it even more. He realized that his window for taking the shot was

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narrow. His finger delicately hung on the end of the trigger, waiting for the perfect moment. The bullet he was using was composed of depleted Uranium—a highly dangerous military round.

The effect would be . . . dramatic.

His eyes began to settle into the cross-hairs as the fog thinned for a moment.

His finger tightened.

This was it.

He steadied his body as all of the people circled around the burial site came into focus. It was time to deliver the message.

His scope was so powerful that he could count the beads of sweat on the back of the target's neck. One might ask what a person feels when he is looking through the scope at a man, surrounded by his family, as they all cry, mourning the loss of a small innocent child?

What did Voodoo feel at a time like this?

Recoil!

The bullet exploded out of the barrel at several thousand feet per second, creating a perfect line between sniper and target.

And after watching the body spill forward, a large cavity of emptiness opening where the man's torso used to be, Voodoo quickly began the process of stripping the weapon down, rolling it up in an old blanket, and making his way off of the 18-wheeler.

He was too far away to hear the screaming and crying and panic that must have ensued. He was too far away to see the looks of fear and utter terror that his single shot had created.

And in his mind, he was too far away to care.

The rifle, a one-time-use item, was quickly deposited in the dumpster of a small hotel a block away. It would be carried off to

a dump, or discovered by police. Either way it didn't matter. The rifle had been sprayed down with ammonia to destroy any trace evidence or DNA that might have been left there.

And like a ghost that suddenly disappears when the lights are turned on . . . he was gone.

Just a messenger.

An echo in the wind.