

ENEMY IN BLUE

DEREK BLASS

SWAT



ENEMY IN BLUE

ROGUE BOOKS

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ENEMY IN BLUE

Derek Blass

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Foremost, to my beautiful wife, Meranda, who put up with various drafts and several years of writing. To my readers, Richard Blass, Mitch Geller, and Dr. Ramon del Castillo.

To all individuals and families subjected to discrimination and brutality by police. To the police that cross the blue line to do what's right.

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PART ONE

THEREASON

Max fingered at the pain in his stomach. It was the ulcer, same damn one since he was fourteen. His raven-black, coarse hair bounced listlessly as the armored rescue vehicle pounded through the city streets. A knot grew in his chest. All signs of weakness, nerves, stress. He looked around him at the true examples of men—at least it seemed that way.

Six years ago he had graduated from New York University, around the middle of his class in film school. He quickly learned that the middle meant “unemployable.” It was a brutal industry as the big picture companies barely scraped the cream off the top of each class. One of his buddies got a job shooting a reality show and turned him onto a lead with the ubiquitous show *Police*. Working for a show like that, and not even directing, made his ulcer bleed. But, sleeping on his buddy's apartment floor and eating microwaveable noodles for nine months catalyzed him to get an interview and take the job.

Max was nestled between two men like a boy between his uncle and father—Martinez on his left and Williams on his right. It wasn't that they were older or wiser. It was that they were much bigger than Max. Martinez was probably five-foot-ten to Max's five-foot-five. He had a chiseled face, with terrain markers like defined cheekbones, a nose that had seen its share of right hooks, a thick, black eyebrows. In contrast, Max had a dumpy chin—egged on in size by his affinity for jelly stuffed donuts—pale skin rarely let out into the sun, and a physique that looked like a mason slopped wet mortar onto the ground. Williams was even bigger, stronger and better looking than Martinez. His black skin looked like battle armor, akin to breastplates worn by ancient Grecian commanders.

Williams matched his size with an enormous personality—brash, quick-witted and full of humor. He was the loose one in the group, cracking jokes that doubled Max over sometimes. The weird thing he noticed in these first few months with the group though was that despite how good Williams' jokes were, not all of the other guys laughed. Specifically, Lindsey and Tomko would not laugh when Shaver did, and he rarely did.

Those three sat on the other side of the rumbling vehicle, conversing amongst themselves as usual. It wasn't hard to notice the dividing line.

Max's gear rested between his feet on the floor of the vehicle. He stared blankly across from himself with the sound of gunfire, being armed, gear refitted and equipment rattling, lulling him into his trance-like state. This job had some semblance of direction. Max thought to himself. It was a half-hearted effort at self reassurance.

There was no need to check any of the gear as he'd already done that several times before meeting up with the team. He was meticulous by nature—a characteristic derived from anxiety...which sprung from years of getting bullied in school...which, he concluded, was his parents' fault. That over-protective mother and the typical, worrisome Jewish father. The faint squeal of brakes shook Max from his ruminations. He instinctively turned his head to Sergeant Shaver for a final briefing.

Shaver was frightening on multiple levels. For one thing, he bristled with muscles. He always sported a skin-tight shave on his head, and looked at people with unblinking, unwavering eyes. There was a violence to Shaver—certainly built and compounded by the rumors surrounding him—that left Max entirely fearful of him at all times. When you had your back to Shaver, it felt as if there was a long, cold knife pressed to the nape of your neck, waiting to slide into your body. He was like a dark pool of water under a stone which was storied to exist something horrible.

“All right,” Shaver started, “we've supposedly got a guy in this house holding his wife and his father-in-law hostage. Could have a gun, so consider him armed and dangerous. I want Martinez, Lindsey and Williams around the back. Tomko and I will take the front. When you hear our flashbangs go off, take out the back door. Max, you go with Martinez's group.”

That pleased Max. It was better to film the group going in from the unexpected entrance. They would usually catch people sprinting in their direction, vision blurred and ears ringing from the flashbangs. The people's faces were priceless when they ran into a group of Special Weapons and Tactics officers. An intensely human moment as criminals, who considered themselves hard-core, rebellious and above the law, surrendered on the ground shaking. Society's bullies cut at their Achilles. This is what Max liked to catch on film.

He followed alongside Martinez. They both moved fluidly, silently. How to move was actually a part of Max's training. He had almost tripped, once, but Martinez caught him by the shirt collar before his second knee hit the ground. There could be no surprise a clumsy cameraman made noise.

When they reached the back porch Martinez raised his right hand and they all came to a stop. Martinez and Lindsey straddled the door while Williams crouched at the top of the porch steps. Max steadied the camera on his shoulder. They all tensed, waiting to hear the flashbangs explode. Glass shattered and then two deafening bangs sounded.

Williams rushed forward and planted his foot on the back door. It burst open and Lindsey rushed into the house screaming “Police!” Williams curled around the door and then Martinez slipped into the house. Max fell into line behind Martinez who was scanning rooms with his gun.

The house appeared to be well-kept, was warm and smelled like recently cooked food. There was colorful, Spanish pottery on the two rooms Max saw. Lindsey yelled out his identification again. This time a frightened cry echoed him.

“*Estamos aquí!*”

Martinez and Max approached a hallway that ran adjacent to the main living area. Shaver got there first. The six of them lined the hall and waited for Shaver's order.

“Martinez, translate,” Shaver barked.

“What, just 'cause my name is Martinez? I don't speak Spanish.”

“No podemos ver! Ayudamos!”

“So you don't speak illegal.” Martinez and the Sergeant stood on either side of the door, not yet in the room. “Martinez, these wetbacks to put their hands up.”

“Man, screw you.” Max cringed at the exchange.

“All right then.” The Sergeant directed his voice into the room. “Put your hands up right now! This is the police!”

“No hablamos Inglés! No podemos ver nada!”

“Forget this, let's go,” Martinez said.

Shaver turned into the room and fixed his weapon on a woman lying on her side. Martinez followed while Max filmed through the door. Max saw a young woman crying on the floor and guessed she was probably in her twenties. A trail of tears marred her face. An older man was rigid on a couch next to her. His eyes were open, but his gaze was not fixed on anything definite. A blanket covered his body up to his neck.

All of the officers lowered their weapons and Lindsey muttered, “What the hell are we here for?”

The young woman's body convulsed as she sobbed on the ground. There was no sign of any son-in-law.

“Hey, old man, get your hands out from under the blanket,” Shaver said.

“No hablamos Inglés,” came a moan from the woman on the floor.

“Shut up,” Shaver said. He took a step toward the man, who still appeared disoriented.

“Old man, get your hands out from under that blanket!”

Max panned back to the old man and zoomed in on his face. His eyes were expressionless. Max wondered if the man was dead. At a minimum, he obviously had no idea what was going on.

Shaver turned around and gave Tomko a look of disgust. “Today's learning lesson Tomko. They come to your country, and don't speak your language.” Sergeant jabbed the old man on his shoulder with the muzzle of his gun. Still no response.

“El no te entiende!” the woman shrieked from the floor. She started to prop herself up to say something to Shaver but he mocked her language with a barrage of “chinks” and “chongs” as he loomed over her.

“Get back on the floor.”

“Sergeant, let's just cuff 'em and get out of here. They don't understand a thing,” Martinez said.

“Best idea I've heard yet,” Williams added.

“Forget that, these wetbacks are gonna learn a lesson.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Martinez responded.

“Just watch me.” Tomko and Lindsey turned their heads and pretended to adjust their weapons.

“You're kidding, right?” Martinez said.

Shaver stepped forward and pressed the muzzle of his rifle against the old man's temple. “Move your hands old man.” No response. Max pulled his shot back to capture the Sergeant. Somehow, the camera's shift in focus caught his attention.

“Scrub, shut that camera off.”

“Why?”

“Just do what I fucking say!” Max set his camera down on the ground. “That better be off scrub.”

“It is,” Max lied.

“All right old man, you wanna fuck with me? Watch what I do to this beautiful broad you got over here.”

“Sergeant, I'm not gonna let you do this to these people. They haven't done a damn thing wrong and you know it!”

The Sergeant looked at Martinez calmly. “You know what they've done wrong.” Shaver sneered. His cheeks bunched up into a clown-like mask. “What you gonna do anyway, big bad Martinez? What you think Tomko and Lindsey will say? These are my boys. You think this scrub Jew with the camera has the balls to stand up to me?” Shaver knelt down and pressed up to the young girl's face. He grabbed her long black hair and pulled back slightly. Her chest heaved.

“No, por favor, no lo dejas hacer esto! Por favor! Este hombre me va a hacer daño! Papa! Papa! Ayudame!”

The old man stirred in his bed. The Sergeant was entirely focused on the young woman. “Ohh, speak that language to me, you filthy spic.”

Shaver tilted her head back more and licked the underside of her chin. The young woman screamed.

“That's it,” Martinez said while lunging at Shaver. As Shaver dodged him, the old man stirred and started to bring his hands out from under the blanket. Shaver pivoted and swung his submachine gun toward the old man. Tomko jabbed the butt of his gun into Martinez's face and landed a heavy blow. Williams came to his defense and locked into a grasp with Tomko.

Max watched like a figure inside of a shaken snow globe as bullets from Shaver's machine gun tore through plaster, then bullet covers, and finally the old man's chest. In all of his time filming cops, Max had never seen someone shot. The bullet holes in the ceiling

man's chest immediately ran dark with blood. The old man gasped and then sprayed his life force out of his mouth. His eyes moved and locked on Max. Then he shuddered and his eyes lost focus. Two cold marbles.

Max stood frozen. In front of him was a chaotic picture, frozen as well. The young woman tore at Shaver's left calf with her hands. He stared down at her, emotionless. Martinez lay prone on the floor. Max felt himself gasp for air. Shaver came to life and shook the young woman off his leg. He turned towards Max and said something which was indecipherable. He stepped closer and Max could make something out. "Give me the tape." Max didn't, couldn't respond.

"Okay, how about I do this." Sergeant Shaver fired some shots into Max's camera. "All right, let's get out of here."

"What about her?" Tomko asked.

"Screw her. She ain't even legal."

"What about him?" Tomko asked pointing to Martinez.

"Forget him too. He caused this. Let's go." With that Sergeant Shaver turned and walked to the front door of the house. Tomko and Lindsey followed him out. Max slouched down to the floor and looked at the old man. Williams swore at the other officers as they left the house.

The old man's body had started to slip off the couch. Max crawled over and used his shoulder to push the old man back up. The young woman's sobs rose and fell like the lapping of waves on a beach. She intermittently let out agonizing groans, as if her soul was being wrenched from her body. Black hair matted her face. Max moved closer.

"Hey...hey there," he said while reaching out with his hand.

"*No me tocas!*" she screamed as she yanked her head back. "*Mira que hiciste a mi papa! Pinche culo Americano! Salgate aqui!*" She stood up, staggered over to her father's broken body, and then wailed and threw herself on him. Max caught Martinez twitching on the ground. He rolled over onto his back and slowly opened his eyes.

"What the..."

"Martinez, we gotta do something." Martinez let his head fall towards Max. His right eye was cut badly and his forehead was already swelling.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Martinez...what the shit...it's Max. Shaver just shot this guy. The woman doesn't speak English. We gotta get them out of here."

Martinez groaned as he sat up. He turned around and looked at the woman laying on her father's body. "There's nothing we can do."

"What the hell are you talking about?" This caught Martinez's full attention—and made a knot grow in Max's chest. "Look, we gotta do something."

"Like what, Max? Call the cops? Get out of here." Martinez stood up with another groan.

"I filmed everything!" he blurted out.

Martinez looked down at Max's camera. "You've gotta be kiddin' me, right? Your camera looks like it turned inside out."

"Look at this." Max pulled a USB drive out of the wreck that was his camera and held it up to Martinez.

“*Que paso?*” Cruz said, answering his phone. He sat reclined at his desk with a white Bic pen in his hand. His desk was in the back of his office, the room a shade of brown. That 1970s type of dirty. The ceiling was low, probably not to code, and peppered with water-stained tiles. This was what he chose six years ago.

He had graduated in the top ten of his law school class, either ninth or tenth depending on who told the story. Wilmer Lopez was ninth, if you asked him. A final class, Juvenile Law, had been the equalizing factor between the two. Cruz got an “A” in the class, raising his cumulative grade point average to three-six-four. Wilmer got an A- in the class, the product of a biased teacher according to Wilmer, which lowered his average to three-six-four. Cruz argued that he had gotten the last, highest grade, and was therefore ninth in the class. Wilmer forwarded the simple argument that he was the champion, who had to be defeated and not tied. The registrar grew so sick of the beef that she finally forbade them from coming into her office.

“Hello, hello. Who's there?”

“Cruz, *es yo*. It's me man. You ain't gonna believe what just happened *hombre!*”

Cruz didn't know half of the people that called. He didn't know this caller either, despite the man claiming some mutual familiarity. It wasn't all that important anyway—the community knew him.

That was his marketing approach right out of law school. A lawyer for the community. Four of the biggest firms in the city initially courted him, but enough of his friends keyed him into the true life behind those big salaries. No recognition. No responsibility. A cog in a billing machine that was expected to spend the first six years of its career silent, researching. Cruz knew that wasn't for him.

He started his own law firm instead. It was terrifying at the beginning—the beginning being the first five years of practice. There were no clients, no money, and correspondingly no food, clothes, car (bus was a straight shot) or life. Then, the clients started to come. He would call his father every time he got a new client. The flow was slow at first, and it was enjoyable to get new clients. The word of his good work spread, that flow became an overwhelming torrent. He lived on the verge of malpractice as he struggled to learn the law, pretended he knew the law, and brought in more and more clients.

At this point he was comfortable enough to say, “Spill it bro.”

“Man, *los cochinos* just murdered an old Chicano—Livan Rodriguez man. Freakin' Livan and I rallied together in the 60's. We did some militant shit together. A good brother...”

“What do you mean they murdered him?”

“Murdered him, bro! Stormed into his house on some bullshit domestic violence call and shot his ass!”

“No way.”

“Hell yes, man. We gotta do something *carnal*.”

“Hold on. Was anyone else there?”

“I don't know man. Livan was pretty old and beat up. I know he lived with his daughter and her husband. That *culo* was a punk-ass-wannabe-banger, but whatever. They might have been there.”

Now the identity of the caller mattered. This man had information he may need. “You've got my attention, but who are you and what do you want me to do?”

“Damn man. You kidding me? Start *la Guerra* over this!” the voice exclaimed, sidestepping a part of the question. “Too much of this happens and *los cochinos no se cambian*. They never change—it's time to change them.”

“Well...”

“You're the lawyer *hombre!* Bring the law down on law enforcement. Don't hesitate bro. Get your *chones* together and let me bring it.”

With that, the voice stopped and the line went dead. The caller's urgency, passion and then abrupt hang-up left Cruz in limbo, his mind swirling like the wind before a heavy storm.

T H R E E

“All right then, give it here,” Martinez said. He flicked a look at Williams, who shrugged his shoulders.

Max responded, “You kidding me? This tape is the story of the year. It’s worth millions.”

Martinez’s coal black eyes narrowed, focused. “This man just died, and that’s what you care about? How ‘bout this.” Martinez pulled his gun out of its holster and held its cold barrel to Max’s temple. “How about I blow your brains out onto this wall and I just take it from you?”

Max laughed nervously. “But, you...no you wouldn’t, couldn’t do...”

“The hell I can’t. You think I give a shit right now? Give me the drive.”

“Look, the drive is password protected anyway. I need to get to a computer to unlock it, so let’s go to my station and work out there, okay?”

Martinez stood still in Max’s face. He relieved the gun’s pressure from Max’s temple.

“Ain’t gonna open it without the password,” Williams said softly to Martinez.

“We can do that. I’m just a little messed up right now,” Martinez said as he shook his head.

“I understand,” Max said warily.

“Get your stuff together and we’ll go back to your station. Call one of your news trucks to pick us up.”

* * * *

Cruz stepped out of his office and felt a chill wisp around his face. He stood just outside the door to his office for a moment enjoying the exchange of stale, musty inside air to the outside breeze. Cruz was tall for a Mexican—around five-foot eleven. He had a slender nose and delicate lips, which were significant traits in a culture where those of Spanish descent normally tried to separate themselves from *los indigenos*. Brown eyes and dark, coarse hair stood out from his relatively pale skin. The mix of his light-skinned father and rich, cocoa bean mother were apparent in all his physical aspects.

The moment passed, and he hopped into his car while dialing a phone number.

“Sandra, you know what’s going on with this police shooting? Someone just called me, and ...”

“Of course I know Cruz. It’s going to be all over the news. I’m about to go down there and tape a segment.”

“What the hell happened?”

“Cruz, I gotta go. In a nutshell, some cops shot an old Latino in front of his daughter.”

“How many cops were there?”

“Just come down to 11253 East Charlighsen Street and we’ll do some investigating together, okay?”

“Yeah, see you there.”

After a while, a news van from Max's station showed up. The driver tried to get Max to stay and call a reporter for a piece, but Martinez quickly dispelled that possibility. He leaned back in his seat in the van and groaned. "I'm watching you. Don't do a crazy shit with that drive."

Max could faintly feel it in his shirt pocket. He had to find a way to sell its contents. After a while of silent riding, the van pulled up to the news station.

"All right, get out." Max stumbled out of the van. Williams motioned that he was going to stay put.

"My office is right this way. It's really a cubicle, not an office. I don't think they'd give me an office," Max laughed nervously.

"I don't need a tour, I just need that drive."

"Like I said, I need to unlock the drive for you to even be able to watch it."

Martinez trailed Max through the cells of news groups. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. The adrenaline had faded and now he was exhausted.

"My cubicle is up here." Martinez followed Max through a seemingly unending maze of human-sized cages. "Here we go." Max plopped down into a worn, gray office chair. His cubicle walls were plastered with pictures of what looked like destination resorts. The desktop was covered with a rainbow of Post-Its, newspaper clippings and discarded plastic wrappers. "Gonna fire the beast up," Max said as he turned his computer on. Martinez looked around the office and stared down several people that were being a bit too nosy.

"How long is this gonna take?"

"No more than five minutes." Martinez looked over Max's shoulder and tried to figure out what he was doing. It was all a flurry of clicks and typing, though, nothing he could follow.

"Okay, so I've unlocked the password protection. Now, you—or someone that knows what they're doing—can just plug the drive into a USB drive and access its contents."

"All right."

Max turned around and handed the drive to Martinez. He lowered his voice and said, "You sure you don't want to share in the proceeds of selling this with me?" Max asked. "We could get mountains of cash."

"It's evidence. I've already broken so many rules letting you come here. Now just give it to me."

Max reluctantly handed over the drive. How did he stumble across the rare instance in humanity where ethics trumped capitalistic tendencies? "If you change your mind ..."

"I won't." With that Max watched as Martinez walked away from him, unaware that a slew of trouble was headed his direction.

* * * *

Shaver sat with his back pressed against a closed locker. He flexed his chest muscle which responded with a ripple. Tomko was changing into his civilian's clothes and Lindsey was sitting quietly, watching the other two interplay. It was characteristic of the damn mute, Shaver thought to himself.

"Hey Sarge, you know that crap's gonna be all over the news?"

Shaver remained focused on the bandage he was wrapping around his calf. It was an old achy injury by now. The kind that didn't bother you enough to go to the doctor because usually a good wrap and some Aspirin did the trick. He had plenty of the aches.

"Sarge, don't forget that little Jew photographer was there filming," Tomko insisted. Lindsey looked away from them, pissed. Shaver couldn't respect the guy. There he was, a freaking Jew himself, and he wouldn't even say a word to either of them. If he'd just stand up for himself once, maybe they'd change, or at least not fling around the crap in front of him.

"I told him to turn that camera off."

"And you'd trust him at his word?"

This gave Shaver reason to pause. "Fuck me. You're right."

"I think he works at Channel Four News. I can go chat with him if you want."

"Go ahead and do that. I need to have my own conversation with Martinez. That bastard. I knew I could never trust a spic on my team."

Cruz pulled up to an older row home and put the car into park. The place buzzed like a beehive. Cops roamed the perimeter of the house with menacing, come-close-and-I'll-kick-your-ass looks on their faces. A horde of reporters and their cameramen stood on the sidewalk out front. Cruz stepped out of his car and scanned the tumult for Sandra.

“Cruz, Cruz! Over here!”

Cruz spun to his left and saw Sandra waving. He walked towards her, ricocheting off of two fast moving cameramen in the process.

“This place is a madhouse,” Cruz said.

“This is really crazy Cruz. Apparently the police were called to this house on a domestic violence complaint. They arrive, the husband is gone, but the wife is home with her father. Cops enter, and the next thing you know they’ve shot the old man.”

“You know his name?”

“Yeah, Livan Rodriguez. Fifty-five-year-old, Mexican male. From what I’ve been able to gather, Mr. Rodriguez was a Mexican citizen who lived here from time to time.”

“Someone I know told me he was active in the U.S. during the Chicano Movement. Seems strange that a Mexican citizen would be up here doing that.”

“That is weird,” Sandra mulled before moving on. “His daughter is a twenty-three-year-old. Also a Mexican citizen. Nowhere to be found now.”

“The cops are going to interrogate the hell out of her when they find her.”

“Yep. Hey Cruz, rumor is that a cameraman from Channel Four News was filming when this happened.”

“During the shooting?”

“That's the word. Name is Max Silverman. He's a cameraman for that show, *Police*. Channel Four produces it then licenses it out.”

“Talked to him?”

“Haven't gotten there yet. Feel like taking a drive?”

“Sure.”

Cruz met Sandra when he was seven. Their families lived right across the street from one another. It defied odds that two kids from a poor Latino neighborhood, with the parents they had, could make it to where they were. Cruz, a relatively successful lawyer and Sandra, an anchor on late-night news. He remembered that Sandra had always been a wickedly smart kid. Smart to the point of trouble. Add to that her stunning beauty, the kind that still made his tongue play stranger, and the reasons underlying her success started to emerge.

Cruz remembered that they became friends through other friends. He didn't hang out with her much until they were teens. Once he got that chance though, it was readily apparent that she was vibrant, funny to the point of tears, and had a depth to her soul that made her seem like an eighty-year-old woman trapped in a thirty-year-old's body. She had a glowing smile and a laugh that played in his ears. Black hair slipped down to the middle of her back until later in her life when she cut it short to the collective gasps of the women in her family. Her face was soft but well-shaped and she had a freckle under her left eye that somehow made Cruz want to protect everything pure about her.

They both came from families of fanatical activists. This created obstacles in life. Not only were they minorities, but they couldn't keep their heads down and fly under the radar. It wasn't allowed. Their fathers frequently pointed a rough, brown finger at their faces and growled, “I made this opportunity for you, go fight for it!” This common background helped them develop a strong bond. Besides, she appreciated his quirks and intelligence, and he admired her passion for life and all its folds.

When Cruz shipped off to college, things started to change in him. Like most boys, he began to fill out. His voice grew deeper. His confidence grew as he interacted with more and more women. One fall break he came home and Sandra fell in love with him. Their parallel backgrounds had brought them together, and it was also what eventually tore them apart.

They drove to the news station while catching up on each other's lives. It had been about a year since Cruz law saw her.

“So, you've been busy, huh?”

“News never stops. Neither does this type of junk.”

“What junk?”

“Discrimination. Police brutality. We could run a strong discrimination story on a weekly basis.” Cruz was glad to see this or that thing hadn't changed. Sandra was imbued with a strong sense of justice, of a requirement to fight in defense of her community and her principles. She refused to accept any stifling of life.

“Maybe keeping it in the news would help.”

“No, you know what’s really going to help?”

“What’s that?”

“A fundamental change. Not turning our collective cheek when we get slapped.” He smiled at her unabated passion.

“You mean fighting back against the cops? That’s a difficult position to take.”

“What reason is there for change when you can kill a defenseless person and all you get is suspended? For an action like that there should be an equally violent reaction.”

He sighed, as they fell back into a routine as familiar as the pillow he slept on every night. “You know I don’t believe in that philosophy.”

“I know, I know. You are from the Ghandi-esque school of peaceful civil disobedience and kumbaya. I’m not. But, I think the wisdom is in knowing when one approach may work over another. And what has the civil disobedience approach changed? All it has done is forced discrimination to become more cunning, and generally moved it behind doors.” Sandra pulled up into a visitor spot at the news station. Her perspective flowed naturally from her upbringing, much like his flowed from his own.

“How about we continue the conversation over lunch after we talk to this cameraman?”

“Sure. But you know I’m right.”

Cruz smiled. “I didn’t say that.”

Tomko pulled up to the Channel Four news station and went to the front desk. He was slighter than the other guys in the tea and probably a reason he hitched onto Shaver so tightly. Scruffy, brown hair topped his rectangular face. His steps were hurried and jumpy. “You know where I can find a cameraman named Max?” He flashed his badge to move the process along.

A young, blond receptionist looked up at him and studied his badge. “Man, he’s sure been popular today,” she murmured.

The answer piqued Tomko’s interest. “Oh yeah? Who else’s been here to see him?” When she hesitated he added, “Off the record.”

“Well, no one really,” she said in a low whisper. “Just that he’s been getting calls from a bunch of tabloids and other news agencies.”

“That it?”

The young girl paused again but then said, “He came back to work earlier with another cop.”

“What’d he look like?”

“I dunno...Mexican?”

“Fucking Martinez,” Tomko muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing, show me where Max is.”

“I can’t show you, but I can tell you. Go down the long hall there and make your first right after the water fountain. Max’s cubicle is the third on the left.”

Tomko started walking towards Max’s cubicle while wondering why in the hell Martinez would have come back here. As Tomko turned the corner to Max’s cubicle, he noticed Max standing there talking on a cell phone. All he could catch was the tail end of a sentence, “...get you one.”

“Hey, Max!” Tomko called out. Max spun around.

“Tomko?” he squeezed out. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk to you about today.” He looked around, noticed an empty office to the right and yanked Max into it. He shut the door and crouched down in front of it.

“Calm down! What’s your problem.”

“Like I said, I want to talk to you about today.”

“You and every other freak in the world,” Max said as he readjusted his collared shirt. “You realize what you dumbasses have gotten me into? A million phone calls from reporters and journalists wanting to know what I saw.”

“And what did you tell them?”

“What did I tell them?! Nothing! You think I’m an idiot? I saw what you guys did to that old Mexican!”

“Hey—lower your damn voice. Keep doing the right thing and keep your mouth shut, Max. This will be a department thing. We’ll take care of it.”

Max laughed. “Yeah, I’m sure you guys have an interest in helping me out.”

Tomko glared at Max, but let the comment go. “Listen, I want to see the camera you had today.”

“Why, it was off while all this crap went down.”

“Cause I said!”

“Right there, on my desk,” Max said with a flick of his wrist.

Tomko grabbed the camera and turned it around in his hands. He furrowed his eyebrows and analyzed the mangled piece of electronics.

“How does this thing store what you record?”

“A removable drive, but Martinez took it with him.”

Tomko looked at him in disbelief. “Were you gonna tell me that?” Shit, Tomko thought, that’s why Martinez was here.

* * * *

“Martinez, whatchu gonna do with that drive?” Williams said, his usual baritone voice tinged with a bit of nerves. They were driving in the general vicinity of the police station, but Williams noted that Martinez was taking a meandering route.

The two of them met in high school. Martinez was a scrawny sophomore when Williams exploded onto the scene. He was six inches taller than Martinez and already six-foot-five when he got to the school. They were on the high school football team, Williams playing both quarterback and linebacker while Martinez used his speed as a safety.

They both came from the 'hood, different ones though. Martinez grew up in a house of mothers, the youngest of four children. His father passed away when he was five and that left him, his mom, one aunt, and three older sisters. The overdose of estrogen ma

him an overly sensitive kid, slightly whiny, and definitely a mama's boy. Despite the lack of a male figure, and despite the fact not of his family played or even enjoyed sports, he always had physical ability.

Williams rode on the other side of the tracks. He ran with his brothers and male cousins all the time. He was lifting by twelve years old, already on a god-given path to play sports at the collegiate level. That was the 'hood dream—a ticket out for him and whoever else he could fit on the bus. Two games into his junior season, some jack-off rolled into his planted leg and ended the dream. His family had seen it before. Dreams shattered easily in a glass world.

There wasn't enough room for both of their egos on the team. They constantly butted heads until one day Martinez called Williams out to fight. The fight took place behind an abandoned building adjacent to the high school in a ring of cheering kids. Punches were traded until Williams landed a devastating blow that knocked one of Martinez's teeth out of his mouth. Martinez sat on his rear, stunned and slightly more humble. Williams felt so bad that he leaned down to see Martinez's mouth and that's when Martinez clocked him right back. After a few days of cooling off, the fight left them with a mutual respect. That slowly grew into a strong friendship as the wounds healed. Over time, they rubbed off on each other—Martinez developing more tenacity and Williams more temperance.

“What do you mean? It's going into evidence man. You ain't thinkin' about money like that camera guy, are you?” Martinez hoped he wasn't, because he needed some affirmation that the right thing to do was turning the drive in. Ten, twenty thousand dollars could do him just fine.

“Nah man. I'm thinking beyond that shit. What you've got there is powerful.”

“What you talking about?”

“Man, don't you remember what they did to Rodney King in L.A.? You think that would have had the same impact if it wasn't taped? That's a little ball of power you got there, and if you check it into evidence, it'll never be seen again.”

Martinez stared ahead as he drove the SUV they had commandeered from the news station. What Williams said made sense, but he wasn't one to break protocol. The color of his skin dictated that he play by all the rules, all the time.

“I'm not used to playin' with fire, Williams.”

“I know brother. But you know how this game will go.”

“They'll suppress it.”

“You're damn right they will. One lonely spot on the local news. One follow-up story. Then that old man will be gone forever.”

Martinez thought about Williams' pitch. The cautious side of him rebelled against the idea. The other side of him, and he didn't even have a name for it because it was so foreign, liked the proposition.

SEVEN

Cruz and Sandra arrived at the news station and on their way in a single, white cop pushed through them going the other direction.

“Watch yourselves,” he snarled.

Cruz turned to Sandra, “Must be something going on.” They went to the front desk receptionist and asked for the cameraman. Perhaps put off because they weren’t cops, or they didn’t know the cameraman’s name, or just the sheer number of callers she had addressed that day for Max, the receptionist was unwilling to help.

“I’m sorry but it’s too busy for me to help you,” she said while typing on her computer. Sandra flashed her own news station badge to no avail. Cruz tried a charismatic smile which was greeted with the same outcome.

“Well, will you at least tell me where your bathroom is?” Sandra asked. The receptionist pointed Sandra down a hall. Sandra took a leisurely walk toward the bathroom while taking in what she could. She saw a row of cubicles and noticed that the first two were empty, but someone was in the third. As Sandra moved closer, the person wheeled around and let out a nervous, “Hello?”

“Just looking for the bathroom.” Sandra kept walking toward the cubicle, hoping to engage him. He appeared to be a man in his mid-thirties, with curly black hair and a face of stubble that looked generations old. Sandra stopped behind him and struck his most enticing pose.

“Hey, who the hell are you? The bathroom is back that way,” the man said pointing behind her.

Undaunted and certainly hardened by the thousands of similar rebukes she had received as a reporter, Sandra asked, “Hey, do you now the cameraman at this station that shoots for *Police*?”

“No, I don’t,” he said quickly. Sandra looked at the man’s cubicle and saw pictures of him with all sorts of cops at different locations. She looked back at the man with a knowing smile.

“Okay,” Sandra started. She pulled a business card out of her pocket. “If you do see that guy, give him this and let him know that a couple of people want to help.” The man looked relieved that it was going to end there.

“All right, will do.”

Sandra turned around and went back to the front desk. “I found him,” she whispered to Cruz.

* * * *

Tomko got back to the police station and went straight to Shaver’s office. Shaver was sitting behind his desk talking to Lindsey but stopped and asked, “Get something good?”

“Max gave the camera’s drive to Martinez. I think everything was recorded.”

“So, it was fucking recorded!”

“He didn’t say what was on the drive, just that Martinez took it.”

“We know what’s on the drive.”

“Yeah, Sarge. Did you get a hold of Martinez?”

“No, for all I know he could be across the border by now—and with that damn drive.”

“Nah, he wouldn’t do that,” Tomko said.

“What do you mean?”

“Martinez isn’t like that. Too by the book. If anything, I bet he’s struggling with coming back here or giving it to someone else.”

“Well, since you’ve apparently mind-fucked him so much, why don’t you give him a call? And speaking of our color guard friends, where the hell is Williams?”

“I assume with Martinez. Those two are inseparable.”

“Do this for me,” Shaver started. “I’m pretty sure those two roaches have families. Let them know as delicately as you can that we don’t want to have to get the families involved in the search for this drive.”

Tomko smiled. “Perfect.”

* * * *

Martinez and Williams circled the precinct headquarters for thirty minutes when Williams butted in, “How many times we gonna do this Martinez?”

“What’s that?”

“Circle the damn station! It’s getting boring, not to mention that this ain’t the best place for us to be chillin’ right now. You know what’s inside.”

Martinez pulled the car over and said, “Made my decision.”

“Oh yeah? Made the right one?” Williams asked.

“Yeah man, I’m gonna keep this tape. I think you’re right.”

“Damn straight. Hold on.” Williams pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Hello...aww shit—Sarge.”

“You gotta be freaking kidding me,” Martinez grumbled.

“Nope, Martinez and I are just cruising around...nope, not planning on coming to the station for a while...we ain’t gonna meet you *anywhere*, Sarge.”

“What the fuck is he saying man?” Williams didn’t answer.

“Nah, we’ll tell you where we are when we’re damn well ready. Til then, you and your Nazi posse can chill at the station.” Williams hung up his phone.

“Shit Williams—now he’s completely keyed into us.”

“Man, you know Sarge was already onto us. He’s no fool. I bet one of his punks visited Max by now.”

“You coulda seen if he was willing to talk.”

“You trippin’? That freak is gonna put a bullet through both of our heads if we don’t give him the goods. Shit. Even giving him the drive ain’t gonna solve it. We saw what happened, Martinez. It’s on now—drive or not.”

Cruz was back at his office watching the day come to a close through the picture window in front of him. He zoned out a while he did, a formative moment of his early life leaped into his consciousness. The murder sucked it out from the recesses of repressed memories.

Harassment was normal for Cruz and his friends. The cops didn't owe him or his friends anything, but one night the usual harassment crossed well-defined lines. He and two of his friends were sitting on the porch in front of Cruz's house. It was a typical teen moment. Cruz's father, the discipline in his life, was gone to God knows where. His mother was at their church attending a community meeting about workplace discrimination. It was only natural for the three teenage boys to seek out a little trouble.

Eduardo, who had connections that Cruz didn't even ask about, brought over three bottles of Old English. Cruz remembered thinking the beer tasted like piss, but it was no time to puss out. He was already the lily-white member of their circle. Drinking was a rare event, he didn't smoke—cigarettes or pot—and he refused to bang. Eduardo called him a bookworm, but at school they called him “pendeja” or “maricon.”

All of a sudden, the boys could hear whistles from about two blocks away. The whistles grew closer and closer.

“*Es la pinche policía, güey,*” Eduardo said.

Sure enough, a slow-moving black police interceptor was taking its time down the middle of the street.

“Put the beers away,” Cruz warned.

“*Que se chingan,*” Eduardo said defiantly.

“No way man, don't screw with them,” Cruz said. The cop car moved forward onto their block. The windows were tinted, but Cruz could tell the cops' eyes were on them.

“Look man, we gotta ditch this shit,” Tony, the other member of their trio, said with a slight tremor in his voice.

“Too late bro,” Eduardo responded. Just as he did, the interceptor slowed to a stop in front of them. The driver's side window rolled down. Cruz saw the cop's face. Young and angry. Burnt red face. Shaved head. A scowl that looked entrenched around his eyes and mouth.

“What's that you got? *Que tienes allí?*” The Spanish from a white cop wasn't a surprise where Cruz lived. The department trained them to “know their enemies.”

“We ain't doing nothin',” Eduardo answered.

“Did I ask you what you were doing, boy?” The cop started to open his door and Eduardo took off without second thought. Cruz hesitated but when he saw the cop start to run, instincts kicked in. He remembered thinking it made no sense to run—he was really in that big of trouble.

Nevertheless, he found himself directly behind Eduardo. They ran tightly bunched together, each life sparing stride falling into rhythm. Cruz had no idea where Tony went. He probably kept his cool and walked home.

Cruz remembered hearing the lumbering footsteps of the cops behind him. Between slow, steady breaths, Eduardo said, “Cruz, we got these pigs.” Just as he did, the two turned a corner into the waiting muzzle of another cop's gun.

“Get down you motherfuckers!” he screamed. Cruz and Eduardo went down so fast they nearly slid into the cop's feet. The other cop came up behind them. Cruz looked around and noticed that they were in the alley behind the local grocery store.

“What's up you dumb bangers? Why'd you run, *putas?*”

Cruz curled into a fetal position on the ground. Eduardo was face down, sprawled out next to him. Dust blew up from Eduardo's breath.

“Look man, we give up, we give up,” Eduardo belted out.

Cruz turned his head slightly to the right and saw the two cops standing over them. One of them was the cop from the interceptor—a burly man of medium height. He sported a thick, orange-blond mustache and looked down at the boys with cold blue eyes. He knelt down next to Eduardo and took off a black glove. “The time for giving up is over, *holmes*. Now, it's time for daddy to teach you a lesson.” The cop stood up and stepped onto the side of Eduardo's head. He laughed as Eduardo started to squirm.

“Yo, what the hell you doing?” Eduardo screamed. His sentence trailed off as the cop put more of his weight onto Eduardo's face. The cop was lifting himself onto that one foot.

Eduardo's voice changed from its cool self to the high pitched scream of a teenage boy, “Get off me! You gonna break my face!”

Cruz watched in terror as he lay there, face to face with Eduardo. Eduardo's face was turning purple-red as tears welled up in his bulging eyes. Then he started to sob uncontrollably.

“No, no, no...Cruz...help me man...” The cop was standing with all of his weight on Eduardo's face. Cruz heard something snap and Eduardo scream. Cruz closed his eyes and began to yell.

“Look at these two pussy cholos,” the cop said as he turned his head to look at Cruz. “So fucking tough, you filth of t

streets.” He lifted his foot from Eduardo's face. Cruz looked at Eduardo and it seemed like his jaw wasn't attached anymore. Eduardo's cries were guttural, muddled.

The cop moved to Eduardo's back and started kicking him in the kidneys. Cruz couldn't take anymore of it and he yelled out, “Stop it please! He isn't doing anything!”

The cop didn't even pause. Between kicks he said, “You spics are here, that's enough.”

Cruz looked back at Eduardo whose eyes were rolling back into his head. He had vomited all over the ground in front of him. Cruz could smell that Eduardo had shit and pissed his pants.

“You're killing him!” The tears streamed down Cruz's face. He desperately wanted to get up and rip the cop apart. He sobbed on the ground and started to claw his way over to Eduardo.

“Get the hell away unless you want to be next, shithead.” Cruz ignored him and threw his body over Eduardo as best as possible. He felt kicks start to rain down on his side. A rib cracked. But he wasn't going to move.

Cruz heard the voice of the other cop, “Fuck, that's enough.”

The cop who had been beating the boys stopped. “You think these *putas* learned their lesson?”

“Yeah man, enough's enough.”

Cruz's head dropped on Eduardo's shoulder. Short, strained breaths came from Eduardo's broken mouth. He had stopped crying and seemed to be unconscious. Cruz closed his eyes again and passed out.

It was two days since the incident and Max was living like *he* was the criminal. Every loud noise made him jump. Every crooked stare had him questioning what that person may know. He avoided contact with everyone.

Max went to his living room window and contemplated who he could contact for help, for support. Anyone who could listen really. He was still very close with his father, seemingly more so as he got older and his father's wisdom became apparent. However, this wasn't the situation to drag friends and family into. Max knew they may be in danger even without him voluntarily getting them involved.

As he absentmindedly perused the mail and other junk on his kitchen table, he flipped over a business card that read:

Sandra Gutierrez

Broadcast Journalist, Channel 9 News

He remembered this woman. She was the striking woman who was supposedly hunting for a bathroom. Max flipped the business card around in his hand while he thought about how he could use her. She could be exactly the help he needed.

* * * *

Martinez and Williams pulled up to Martinez's house. He saw his wife standing at the front door.

"Oh shit, what's this about?" Martinez groaned.

"Looks like you done something wrong *ese*," Williams sneered. It always irritated Martinez when Williams used Spanish slang against him.

Martinez got out of the car and screamed out to his wife, "*Que paso mujer?*" His wife kept staring him down, hands on hips and eyebrows on fire.

"What happened? How about that *loco* racist sergeant of yours calling to ask how I was doing? And his equally racist *cabron* Tomko called your wife, Williams. What the hell did you two bastards do now?"

Martinez felt a ball of fury rise from his gut. He turned to look at Williams who seemed unaffected, like he was expecting this.

"What'd you think man?" Williams asked. "You had to know those punks would pull out all the stops to get that drive back."

"Man, they're threatening our families! Screw them! We don't even know what's on the drive."

"Doesn't matter what's on there. Perception trumps reality," Williams said. "They ain't gonna stop until you give them the drive or you do something with it."

"Look, let's go check out your house, just to make sure," Martinez said.

"All right, man."

"Hey *mujer*, you remember where the gun is and how to use it?" Martinez asked his wife.

"You know it."

* * * *

Tomko and Lindsey walked up the driveway to Williams' home. The sun was just falling behind the horizon, making them cast long shadows that ran up the side of the house. Lindsey stood on Tomko's right side, pressed up against the house while Tomko rang the doorbell. Tomko heard footsteps coming from the back of the house.

"Hello?"

"Alicia? It's Tomko. I got some bad news."

"Well, tell me through the door."

"Alicia, something's happened to your husband. Let me in, I don't want to tell you this through a door."

"Bullshit you pig. I just talked to him. He's on his way over."

Tomko laughed at her posturing. He looked at Lindsey and gave him a signal to go behind the home.

"I didn't say he was dead, Alicia. Look, he's got something we need and we don't want anything to happen to him. So, let me in and I'll tell you what's going on."

"Forget that!" Williams' wife screamed. "You can go to ..." A scream cut off her sentence. Tomko could hear her cry out. "What the hell are you doing in here?" Tomko heard more screaming and the sound of glass breaking. He took a step back and lunged through the front door. Lindsey was behind Williams' wife with one hand over her mouth and another wrapped around her chest.

"Now," Tomko started, "can we please talk?"

* * * *

Williams was driving this time as he and Martinez headed to his house.

"So, you talked to your wife?" Martinez asked.

"Yeah, yeah, man. She's doing all right."

Almost before Williams could finish the sentence, they came around a street corner and saw Tomko's car parked in the driveway.

"No way... that's Tomko's cruiser." As they drew closer, Martinez could see that the front door was open. Williams slowed the car to a stop and pulled his handgun from its holster. Martinez did the same.

Williams leaned over before they got out of the car, "Listen Martinez, I want you to go in through the front. I'm gonna go in the back of the house and see if I can't catch them by surprise."

"Why surprise? What do you think they're doing?"

"What the fuck does it matter? They're in my house with my wife!" Williams shouted.

"All right bro, just don't get crazy. Don't forget they're cops."

"Martinez, I'm blood red, just got kicked in the nuts crazy now. Just do what the fuck I tell you."

Martinez moved toward the front door while Williams crouched for cover and followed the perimeter of the house around to the back. Martinez heard faint, muffled sobs as he neared the door.

"What's that I smell?" came a voice from inside. It was Tomko. "Martinez, how's a spic like you ever gonna creep up on anyone? I can smell your ass from a hundred feet away."

Martinez stepped through the front door and said, "Fuck you Tomko. What the hell you think you're doing?"

"It's easy," Tomko started. "Give me the drive and we're done."

"You ain't gonna do shit, Tomko. You're crazy to get Williams' wife involved."

"No, Martinez! You're crazy for keeping that fucking drive! Hand it over or this bitch gets a cold one in her dome." He pulled her hair back and held the barrel of his gun to her temple. Martinez stood there for seconds that felt like an eternity. He saw Williams' head slip past a window in the back of the house. It was almost like Lindsey sensed Williams because he wheeled around and aimed his gun at the back door.

"Tomko," he started, "where do you suppose Williams is? These two don't travel solo."

"Damn good question Lindsey." Tomko turned to Martinez. "Where's your ass-buddy, Martinez? I doubt you're on a solo charity mission here."

"Listen you shit, here's the drive. Just let his wife go." Martinez held the drive out toward Tomko. Lindsey turned around to look at the drive. Right as he did, Martinez saw Williams come out from behind the back door. He held his pistol with two hands locked directly on Lindsey.

"Williams, don't do it!" Martinez screamed. The roar of Williams' gun drowned Martinez out. Martinez heard at least four shots bellow from the gun, and every one connected with Lindsey. The first two pierced Lindsey's torso, the third his neck and the fourth tore the top of his head off. Lindsey crumpled to the ground without even getting a shot off.

Tomko twisted his body around to aim at Williams. Martinez went to fire at Tomko but it was too late. The sound of Tomko unloading his gun shook the room. Martinez could see bullets rip through Williams' body. He stumbled forward and collapsed. Tomko coldly took aim and shot Williams in the head.

"You motherfucker!" Martinez screamed. "Put your fucking gun down!" Martinez yelled. Martinez felt his hand shake with adrenaline, rage and fear coursed through him. Tomko turned back to Martinez and aimed his gun at Williams' wife.

"Listen Martinez. Calm yourself." Tomko took a step toward the back door and pulled Williams' wife with him. "I'm gonna walk out this back door or she gets smoked." He took another couple of steps back.

"Fuck you Tomko—don't fucking move!"

Tomko kept moving in the direction of the back door. Martinez took aim at Tomko's right arm and fired. The bullet screamed through Tomko's bicep and his gun dropped to the ground.

"Fuccck!" Tomko screamed. He ducked behind Williams' wife then ran the last couple of steps to the back door and out of the house. Martinez ran over to Williams' wife who was passed out cold. He grabbed her in his arms and looked over at Williams. Her eyes were open and flooded with blood.

* * * *

Max sat in his cubicle and watched his phone ring. He had dealt with so many calls in the last day that he couldn't stomach any more.

"Max!" came a voice from an adjacent cubicle. "Pick up your damn phone!"

He grabbed the phone and slowly lifted the receiver to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Maxie, how you been?"

"Who the hell is this?"

"Your old pal Max, Sergeant Shaver."

The hairs on the back of Max's neck bristled. "Oh yeah? What do you want?"

"You know what I want Max."

"Martinez has the drive—go bother him."

“You haven't heard?” Shaver asked.

“Heard what?”

“Oh man. Martinez is on the run, Max. He and Williams killed a cop. They killed Lindsey.”

“No way. I don't believe you Shaver. You can go to hell for all I care.”

“Listen, you Jew prick. I'm gonna personally gut you if you don't cooperate. Let's try this again—*has Martinez contacted you*

Max felt his chest tighten as he tried to deal with Shaver. “No way. Why would he?” Max answered.

“Have you spoken to any newspapers about what you saw? 'Cause you understand my problem, right Max? You're a witness and I don't need anyone talking but me.”

“I haven't spoken to a damn soul. Believe me, my life is more important than some payout for this story.”

“See, my problem's bigger than that. What if you just tell one friend...”

“I don't have any.”

“...or one family member? What if you get drunk one night and try to tell some girl you want to impress? I don't trust you to be quiet, Max. There's only one way that I know for sure.”

“Goddammit, Sergeant. I'm not going to say a thing to anyone.” The person in the cubicle next to him popped her head over the wall. She gave him an are-you-okay expression and he waved her away.

“We'll see, Max.”

“We done, Sergeant?”

“One more thing. I want the copy of the drive that you made.”

“What copy?”

“This is one of those trust-building moments, Max. Don't fail me now.”

“But I didn't make a copy. Martinez took the drive right when we got back to the station.”

“Why did you have to go back to the station then?” Shaver asked. “Why didn't you just give Martinez the drive at the old man's house?”

“The drive is password protected! That's the truth!”

“That's weak Maxie. Pretty weak story. I don't feel the trust so I'm gonna have to think of how to deal with you.”

“Listen! Fuck you Sergeant,” Max screamed but the line had gone dead before Max finished his sentence. The woman looked over the cubicle wall again.

“You fine?”

Max just stared back at her, the color in his face drained away.

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