

Hollyweed

JORGE CORRAL

- UNEDITED EDITION -



*Raw. Real. Unedited.
Just as the author intended.*

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CHAPTER ONE

“**Y**ou high, man?” Leo said, keeping it in, passing it to Javier.

Javier thought about it, looking over at Moses posing in front of a long mirror leaning against a wall in Leo’s garage, near the only window in there, Javier shaking his head back at Leo, saying, “Nah, man. You high?”

Leo said hell no, checking out his cousin Moses working on competition poses in the mirror, saying to him, “Hey Arnold - you high?”

Moses was inspecting his calf muscles, making a face like he was disgusted with normal calves on an amateur body-

builder's body, then walked over to the iron plates stacked behind the bench press in the middle of the garage.

"Where'd you idiots say you bought this shit weed?" Moses liked catching a little buzz when he worked out.

He started smoking weed when he was fourteen. His downstairs neighbors, five pee wee gangsters from Rockwood Street Locos, would make him take hits when they'd be smoking out in the stairwell.

So Moses would come home from school, then had to mess with these fools. He'd go upstairs high as a kite to his mother who'd be getting dinner ready in their one-bedroom apartment.

Too paranoid to sit in front of the TV in the living room and too fucked up to do homework, he'd do sit-ups and push-ups as if the sweat might flush the marihuana out of his system.

After a while, after a few hits a few summers ago, a few million pushups later, Moses liked getting high and he liked working out.

Both things were better together. He'd be buzzed, all pumped up, endorphins flying around like crazy in his head. But lately, he'd only get high for workouts. Moses Estrella was serious about bodybuilding.

He was almost nineteen, about 4% body fat, huge and ripped, and he liked rich white girls. But time was running out. Moses couldn't turn twenty and still have his mom in that nasty apartment on Ninth and Normandie. What was all the lifting and dieting for then? Shit had to happen real soon for him.

Moses and his mom lived in the hood since his stepfather bailed on them when Moses was eight. It'd been ten long years in Los Angeles -- called the Eastside

because it was east of the nice homes in Hancock Park; or Central L.A. because Ninth and Normandie was right in the middle of everything.

He was a few blocks from Downtown, a half-hour to the beach, you could see the Hollywood sign; Koreans called it Koreatown, Salvadoreans called it Salvitown, and sometimes Ninth and Normandie felt like South Central L.A., it was south enough and rough enough.

"Hollywood," Leo said. "In the alley behind Javi's house."

"The fuck you doin' in the alley?" Moses said.

"He's afraid of Joker," Javier said. "Leo grabbed Joker's sister's ass."

"Yeah, right," Leo said, "I grabbed Angie's ass with my knuckles. Please. We were in line at the cafeteria, it was crowded, I got pushed into her."

“Joker’s a crazy dude,” Javier said, “his mom used to beat him a lot back in the day. He ain’t right in the head, you know. He’s got a lot of anger, man.”

“I ain’t sweatin’ Joker, I can take that fool,” Leo said, “but you know how it is with those fuckin’ cholos, man. You mess with one of them and it’s your ass twenty-four-seven ‘til they got tired of fucking with you.”

“Joker’s about five-ten, one-eighty, maybe one-ninety,” Javier said, “and you about five-seven, a buck thirty, right?”

“You seen Joker play ball?” Leo said. “Slow. No coordination, no equilibrium, smokes at least a pack a day and probably couldn’t run a mile if you gave ‘em fifteen minutes.”

“From who?” Moses said.

“From who what?” Leo said.

“Who sold you this bullshit?!” Moses said, opening up the last of three joints Leo’d rolled from the dime bag of weed.

“A black dude,” Leo said. “He was in the alley.”

“A black dude in the alley,” Moses said, looking over at Javier, who was working on curls with twenty pounds in each hand. He looked back at Moses like he never saw this dopeman in the alley Leo was talking about. Moses rubbed the light-green weed between his fingers, watching it get dark and sticky.

He sniffed it again, saying, “Man, this ain’t weed ... this shit’s oregano!” looking at Leo as he separated his thumb and index finger. The sticky grass was sticking to his fingertips. “This black guy in the alley, that’s his spot or what?”

“Never seen ‘em before,” Leo said, now in the mirror up close, zapping zits. He stressed about all the redness and

greasiness, thinking he couldn't wait for pimples to be a thing of the past.

"The alley behind my crib ain't a spot," Javier said. "We got cholos, taggers, and bums, but far as I know, no pushers yet."

"Remember a long time ago over by your house at the corner in front of the motel there were hookers for a while?" Leo said, "And you used to wanna go to the market all the time so you could cross Vine Street so the hookers'd ask if you wanted a date."

"Yeah, man, that was cool," Javier said. "Hookers on Vine."

"And you'd always say the same thing to 'em, no thanks. Like them bitches were offering free samples at Pavilion's."

"That was cool too, how back in the day hookers asked if you wanted a date," Javier said.

"How's that cool?" Moses said.

"I don't know, it just seemed ... friendly, at the time," Javier said. "Maybe it's 'cause I was a kid and they were just fucking with me, being all friendly and shit."

"You never know, maybe they liked you and wanted to fuck you for the dollar-fifty milk money you had," Moses said, getting under the weight bar, eye-level with it. He gripped it, his game-face coming on. "Are you gonna spot me or what?"

"Let's do this, Fabio!" Javier said, dropping the dumbbells and moving behind the bench press, leaning over Moses. He bent his knees and extended his arms under the weight bar, ready to help out with the four forty-five pound plates.

"The best part," Leo said, watching his cousin throw up all that crazy weight, "was when you and your mom and your

little brother went to church every morning. Motherfuckin' crack of dawn 'cause you and your little bro Sammy were first-team all-star altar boys back in the day. And at that hour hookers be tumblin' out the fuckin' motel, bitches holdin' their pumps, fixin' their wigs, checkin' their paper -- man, that shit was funny."

Moses was grunting, getting louder with every rep. He finished a quick set of ten, putting it back up on the press before Javier could make himself useful.

"What'd the guy say to you?" Moses said, coming off the bench and removing plates off the bar. "How'd you know he was sellin'?"

"I don't know," Leo said, "he was looking in some trash bins then came up to me asking for a light and if I wanted to buy some good herb."

“You bought weed from a bum?”
Moses said.

“You know what, you may be right. I’m still not high,” Leo said. “Man, we should go find that bum and fuck his shit up.”

“Dude, you’re getting huge,” Javier said, watching Moses take off the red Gold’s Gym tank top. He was back in front of the mirror again, pushing Leo out of the way with a big pumped forearm.

“I’m serious, man! We should go find that fuckin’ cockroach,” Leo said.

“And get your ten dollars back,” Moses said.

“I only had five,” Leo said. “He took it.”

“Hey, you got a dime bag of oregano and chewed up gum for five bucks – what else you want?” Moses said, hitting poses. He flexed ripped pectorals, shaking his head again at calves that were

barely above-average. "So how long you been hiding from Joker?"

"You serious?" Leo said. "Man, I told you, I ain't sweatin' some dude that drinks a six-pack a day. He smokes like a chimney, never worked out a day in his life."

Moses said, "I seen Joker get down back when we were in continuation school. One time he took one of them big desks and dropped it on some black dude that was talking shit about Joker's little sister having a hot little body for a fourteen-year old. Joker broke the guy's arms, then beat him with that stick that holds the flag 'til he got tired of hitting that fool."

"Yeah, but see, if that was me -- I dance for a moment, ya know, let him feel the weight of that fuckin' desk. I stay just beyond where I think he can throw it, and I'm bouncing, moving," Leo said,

crouching, bobbing and feinting in the mirror.

“And when he shifts how he’s carrying the desk or looks like he really wants to throw it, that’s when I know he’s getting tired. So, I’d get an angle on ‘em, ya know what I’m sayin’,” he said, now skipping back a little, his left up, a tight lean bicep popping crisp jabs, “and I’m looking for a sweet spot, a nice shot just below the ribs. When he sees I’m getting’ close he’ll wanna throw the desk. So while he recovers,” Leo now dropping his right hand, letting it hang low like Floyd Mayweather.

Then he put together a nice combination, a couple of hard left jabs, a short right hook, and a big left uppercut, saying, “I give that homeboy some Antonio Barrera to the body, an Erik Morales hook to the liver, then a

devastating Manny Paquiao to the chin. Lights out, baby!"

"I'll talk to him for you," Moses said.

"Dude, who you think you are? Tony Soprano!" Leo said. "These fuckin' gang-bangers don't care you beat up James. Some black dude thinks he's white."

"Hey, you and Taylor still got that date tonight?" Javier said.

"Yo, that's the shit makes me laugh," Leo said. "You sorry mothafuckers ain't boxers, setting dates and locations for fights! Man, street fights are for gettin' dirty right then and there."

Moses was on the bench press again, this time under about one hundred eighty-five pounds, waving off Javier coming over to spot him.

"I don't get you, cousin," Leo said, watching Moses pull his legs up close to his body, while going through quick reps, "what's the deal with all these beefs? First

Gary 'cause he gave your girl a ride to work, then James 'cause he said you're probably on the juice, and now Taylor because ... man, I don't even know why you're fighting Taylor."

"Taylor said James won the fight," Javier said.

"Oh yeah," Leo said, bouncing and jabbing his way closer to the mirror. He threw combinations at all angles, finally a flurry of short body punches. He moved close enough to the mirror to start examining his acne. "That fight was a draw, homie, straight up."

Moses squeezed out a few more reps, growling, letting the weight bar crash down against the press. He got up and moved toward his cousin, saying to him, "Fuck you, little bitch."

Moses looked serious, all pumped and huge. That made Leo laugh, telling his

cousin, "C'mon dude, we're primos, man. We blood, cuzz!"

Leo moved toward him, doing his Roy Jones that sometimes looked like Ali, bouncing, giving him a side-view. He snapped jabs while Moses worked on poses, Leo going on about last week's fight with James in the alley behind Canter's Restaurant.

"I ain't gonna lie to you, dude, it was a close fight."

"Fuck you," Moses said.

"Ask Javi," Leo said.

Javier was still with the dumbbells, saying, "I can't believe we smoked two and a half joints of oregano and gum."

"I can't believe Leo grabbed Joker's sister's ass," Moses said. "You ready to die for that little hood rat?"

"Hey man, don't call her that," Leo said.

"Leo likes Angie," Javier said.

Moses was back on the bench press, legs in the air, grunting and gripping.

He said, "Leo needs to go out and get us some real smoke for tonight."

He got into his set of twenty with one eighty-five.

"What're we doing tonight?" Javier said.

Leo was now on the speedbag in a dark corner of the garage, getting into a good rhythm. He went to his right hand, turning to shrug at Javier, saying, "Ask Tyson."

Javier went behind the bench to spot Moses. He was pressing the weight in short quick thrusts, looking like he needed no help.

When he was done Moses said to them, "First, we hang at my girl's place. Elise got some of her girls coming over, fine white girls that get horny when they smoke. I hear when the shit's chronic,

plus a few tequila shots, forget about it. All they wanna fuck are short Peruvian-Guatemalans with bad acne and skinny Mexican dudes with sweaty palms. So you retards better get your shit together. Then later we go take care of business with bigmouth Taylor.”

“Then what?” Javier said.

“Then we’re all supposed to go up to Sunset,” Leo said, rolling his eyes. “The Improv.”

“For what?” Javier said.

“Mo’s a comedian now,” Leo said. “You didn’t know?”

Javier watched Moses take off twenty-five pound plates, moving quickly. He went back on the bench, gripping the weight bar with his hands almost touching. He threw it up with grunts and growls. The growling was new. The guys didn’t mess with him about it because Moses was looking really ripped now,

and big; a rock-solid one-ninety at only five-eight.

“For real?” Javier said, shaking his head at Moses. “Dude, you lookin’ more and more like a fuckin’ knot.”

“Yeah, Javi,” Leo said, laughing, getting out of the nice rhythm he had with the speedbag. “Man, that’s exactly what he looks like, a human knot!”

Leo came over to Javier and made a face at him like, *Go ahead and ask him*, tapping the inside of his arm like he was getting ready to shoot up. Javier frowned, like he wasn’t going to ask Moses a damn thing about that. Leo looked back at him like, *You fuckin’ chickenshit*.

“Dude, what’s up with all them pimples on your back?” Leo said, watching Moses stacking plates, getting ready to take off.

"I don't know," Moses said, putting his little Gold's Gym tank top on. "Must be all the extra caloric intake from this Weider protein mix I'm taking three times a day."

"Yeah?" Leo said. "It's also making your jaw grow."

"If you have something to say, just say it." Moses said.

"Hey man, I only break your balls 'cause I care," Leo said. "You're fuckin' turning into a monster right in front of us. Three months ago you weighed less than me, all of a sudden you throw on forty pounds of muscle."

"I eat good," Moses said, pulling out a ziplock bag from his backpack, taking a bite of a hardboiled egg.

That was lunch, a dozen hardboiled eggs, no salt, and two cans of tuna, no lemon.

“All right dude, if you say so,” Leo said, “but you know what happens to your balls when you’re juicin’, right?”

“Don’t worry about my nuts, you fuckin’ puto maricon,” Moses said.

“Of course I’m worried about your nuts, man,” Leo said, not able to keep from laughing. “You my cousin, dude. I wanna make sure my kids get to play with your kids when we retire and go back to Peru in twenty years.”

Moses took a long drink from a half-gallon bottle of water.

“All right, this is the last thing I’m gonna say about this.” Leo said, looking at Javier to see if he was getting involved in this intervention. Javier was already at the door ready to go.

“If you take steroids your balls will shrink ... and look at your thighs, man! They’re fuckin’ tree stumps, dude! Now I haven’t seen your pecker since we were

kids, taking baths at Grandma's but I'm gonna assume your shit is normal-sized--so what I'm saying is that in proportion to your massive thighs your dick's gonna look like a worm, man, then with your balls shrinking, well ... what's really the point then?"

The first few eggs were gone in two bites each. Then Moses settled down, rocking sideways as he chewed, looking out the garage door at traffic on La Brea Avenue.

"Let's go already, we'll get some weed from the Salvatruchas on Eighth," Moses said. "Elise rented movies and she's making a garlic pasta for me."

"Yo, it's Wednesday, man," Javier said, shaking his head. "We're gettin' high during the middle of the week now. Shit ain't right."

"Elise's girls lesbians, too?" Leo asked.

Moses looked at his cousin like Leo'd reached Mo's limit on tolerating his bullshit.

"What're we gonna watch?" Javier said.

"Who cares," Moses said.

"What do these girls look like?" Leo said.

"Who cares," Moses said.

CHAPTER TWO

“Taylor is your friend,” Elise said, passing the joint to her girl Sondra.

“Acquaintance,” Moses said, looking at Sondra like he was next.

He watched her pass it to Jasmine.

“You were in first grade together,” Elise said, making a face at Jasmine while she took a long hit. Jasmine smiled back, holding it in like a pro and handing it back to Sondra.

“We’ve been acquaintances for twelve years, okay?” Moses said, watching the joint shrink and go back to Elise, who blew ashes off and gave it to him. Moses thought about it and passed it over to Sondra.

Leo had rolled the joint, lit it, hit it once and hadn’t touched it since. The

weed was good, one hit shit. Leo was feeling fine, checking out Elise's friends, two young skinny white girls dressed in black. They were all right. Leo was taking it easy on the weed so he could talk shit to one of Elise's girls. Javier didn't like smoking out with strangers, especially girls. He just hung out and did what he usually did when the guys got high with girls, just be cool and not say anything stupid.

"So you tell Taylor, I wanna kick your ass, meet me at the parking lot at Fairfax tonight at eight sharp. And Taylor says something like, American Idol's on at eight, can I meet you at nine-thirty instead?" Elise said.

"Yeah, that's exactly what he said, Elise," Moses said. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Elise says you're trying out at the Improv tonight," Sondra said.

"I never met a comic in person," Jasmine said. "Are you funny?"

"Do your routine for us," Leo said. "You do have a routine, don't you?"

"Don't worry about it," Moses said, "you'll see my act tonight."

"What's it about?" Jasmine said.

"It's about nothing," Elise said, rolling her big beautiful bloodshot brown eyes at her girls, "like Seinfeld."

"So you're just going up there and talk about your day?" Sondra said, "Your life?"

"You gonna talk about your fight with Taylor?" Leo said, reaching out for the joint that was now a roach and about to get tossed. "I guess it depends on how that goes, huh?" inhaling deeply, burning the tips of his fingers, looking for a place to dump the dead roach.

"This your first time going up?" Javier said.

Moses nodded like, *No big deal*. Javier made a face like, *Sure, why not*.

Sondra and Jasmine stared at Mo's two square friends. Leo couldn't stop smiling if he'd wanted to. This Mara Salvatrucha weed was all right. Jasmine puckered and put her thumb and index finger to her mouth, telling Leo to roll a fat one.

"C'mon, show us whatcha' got," Sondra said.

"Nah," Moses said.

"You go up there with nothing to say, you gonna be sorry," Leo said, rolling and smiling. "Dude, you can't get up there making the shit up as you go ... you do know that, right?"

Leo lit it, hit it, and passed it to Elise. Moses had said he wasn't getting high before the fight but was taking in smoke from Elise's mouth. Jasmine stared. Javier and Leo were used to these lust shows.

Sondra put a finger in her mouth like she was about to vomit.

“I gotta see this fuckin’ guy go up on stage, man. I’m more worried about this than the fight. I can’t even imagine what the fuck he’s gonna say on stage in front of all those people,” Leo said. “What do you think, Elise?”

“I think he should talk about what he knows,” she said, running her fingers through her man’s long black hair. “He should talk about you guys, his cousin Leo the born-again Mormon that talks religion when he’s high and wants to join the Marines to kill in the name of God or his buddy Javier that got accepted to a bunch of UC schools but wants to go to culinary school instead...”

“Hey, I ain’t killing nobody,” Leo said. “Them Taliban motherfuckers can worship whatever the fuck they want. I’m getting me some computer skills before I

go down there. I'ma kick it nice and cozy at some headquarters far from the bombs and bullets and shit. I'll come back here, honorably discharged, a little money in the bank, then wait 'til I'm twenty-one and go to Vegas and break the casinos."

"Hey, maybe it's 'cause I'm high but that doesn't sound bad at all," Sondra said. Her eyes were red and closing, a dumb grin on her thin lips.

She looked over at Javier, saying, "So how come you applied to all those colleges if you didn't wanna go?"

"I don't know," Javier said, feeling a little buzzed from watching these girls get so fucked up. "Just curious, I guess."

Sondra got comfortable on the couch, resting her head on Jasmine's lap, smiling at Javier, saying, "We have something in common. I wanna get in the restaurant business, too."

"Cooking?" Javier said.

“No, man,” Sondra said, watching Moses and Elise get into it again. “Hostess at Louise’s on Melrose, or the one on Larchmont, down the street from Paramount Studios. That’s where all the big time directors and producers hang out.”

“Oh, you’re an actress,” Leo said.

“Yeah, why not?” Sondra said, looking up at Jasmine who was trying to cover Sondra’s mouth with her hands. Jasmine let her long brown hair cover Sondra’s face, getting closer to her friend. Both of them were lost for a few moments in Jasmine’s curtain of hair.

Leo looked at Javier, raising his eyebrows, nodding toward the front door.

CHAPTER THREE

The parking lot at Fairfax High School was empty. The gates remained unlocked Monday through Thursday because of the ESL adult classes.

It was a few minutes past ten, the ESL people were gone and Moses and the guys seemed to be the only ones on campus. They stood around two cars. Mike had a clean red Mustang with black racing stripes and Alex's white Jeep had fat wheels and nice rims. Still waiting for Taylor and his friends, everyone was listening to Moses talk shit while he stretched.

He wore baggy sweat pants and a tiny grey wife beater, same thing he'd worn in his fights with Gary and James. Leo, Javier, Joni, and Bernie worked on thirty-two ounce Corona bottles and Alex, Mike and Vache were abstemious.

"It's ten-fifteen already," Alex said. "They're not coming, let's go."

"Chill, homie," Bernie said, taking a drink, checking how much he had left. "We kickin' it."

"What are we doing after this?" Mike said.

"We're gonna check out Moses," Leo said. "He's gonna perform at the Improv on Sunset."

"Perform?" Vache said. "Moses ain't funny. Say something funny, man."

"Okay, your apartment smells like ass, I saw your dad coming out of Drake's with gay porno videos, and I was at your crib this morning and your mom and

your sister gave me your food stamps for the week to have a threesome with them," Moses said, pulling out a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and offering it to Vache. "Here's the change, homie."

"That shit ain't funny, man," Vache said, watching Moses laugh at his own joke.

"What're you gonna go up there and insult people?" Alex said. "That ain't comedy."

"You wanna know what's comedy?" Moses said. "Your hair, dude. Man, I know you since the fifth grade and you have the same wet Vaseline-look, parted to the side, still don't got no facial hair, pulling down them same three strands of hair to make those tired weak-ass half-inch sideburns, make your big ears pop out like antlers looking like Forrest Gump on crack. And I still haven't figured out

how a jerk-off like you hooks up with a hottie like Jenny -"

"Don't talk about Jenny!" Alex said.

"So this is your new career move?" Mike said. "I thought you were gonna be a professional bodybuilder or WWE wrestler or some kind of shit like that."

Moses said, "And I thought you were gonna buy yourself a new shirt to go out, you no-smoking, no-drinking, same Nikes for two years, plaid shirt wearing virgin."

"I'm not a virgin," Mike said.

"Your obese cousin Rachel doesn't count," Moses said, turning to the guys, laughing, making a face at them like the shit was funny and they should be laughing too.

"Fuck you," Mike said.

"Guys don't count either," Moses said, "you fuckin' homo."

“Dude, your whole act can’t be insulting your crowd,” Joni said, finishing his Corona, opening a king size bag of Doritos.

“Homeboy, open your eyes, man,” Moses said. “Your fuckin’ Jap eyes are tight as fuck to begin with, then you smoke out they get smaller, and when you start drinking you look like you’re walking in your sleep and shit.” He turned to the guys, looking surprised they weren’t laughing at that one either.

“I don’t know, man,” Bernie said, “you’re gonna have a bunch of strangers in the crowd ... you think you’ll be able to diss people on the spot, just like that? I don’t think people that go to comedy clubs go to laugh at cruel jokes about other people’s ... problems. Know what I mean?”

“Did you pluck your eyebrows again?” Moses said.

"Fuck you," Bernie said.

"Fuckin' Filipinos, man," Moses said, "you all are some no facial hair, smooth skin, straight teeth, pretty eyebrow having motherfuckers, huh?"

"Fuck you," Bernie said.

"Man, Javier and Leo just kick it drinking their beer not getting any shit," Alex said.

"Hey, you guys heard Leo grabbed Angie's ass in the cafeteria and now vato loco Joker wants to kick his ass," Moses said. He turned to watch a dark Nissan and a white Toyota pick-up enter the parking lot and roll toward the guys. It was Taylor and James and their friends.

The traffic on Fairfax was still heavy, leading to and away from Melrose Avenue. Taylor was driving the Nissan, stopping several feet away from Moses and the guys. James was driving the Toyota, stopping next to Taylor. Both

cars were facing Mo's crew, engines still running. The headlights were on the guys standing in the middle of the parking lot.

"What the fuck are they waiting for?" Bernie said, staring down the guys in the two cars.

"Let's go bitches!" Moses said. "You fools makin' me late for some business I got."

Nobody came out of the cars, Taylor's crew just sitting there.

"Something ain't right," Bernie said, putting his Corona down, shielding his eyes from the glare of the headlights. He got closer, to see what was going on with these guys.

Leo and Javier followed Moses and Bernie toward the cars. They stepped up to the drivers' sides. All of the windows were tinted and rolled up. Rage Against the Machine was pounding from the Nissan and some old Guns 'n Roses in the

Toyota. Mike and Alex stayed near their cars. Vache and Joni moved closer to Moses and the guys. Everyone was waiting for something to happen.

Moses tapped on the Nissan's window. Taylor seemed to be looking straight ahead, at the gymnasium building next to the basketball courts. Then he flashed his high beams a few times. Bernie waved at Taylor, leaning on the hood of the red Sentra.

Shouts that sounded like chants came out of the darkness. The guys turned back toward the gym. Several black guys were walking into the parking lot from the basketball courts.

The black guys were really young, with oversized t-shirts, big jeans and khakis sagging low, baseball caps cocked sideways. Most of them were throwing up hand signs and yelling out gang stuff.

They were coming over, in no hurry, making a show out of it. More came through the gates, some with bats. There were blue handkerchiefs everywhere, hanging in back pockets, around necks, covering faces, and tied around caps.

Moses and the guys knew what all the blue was about. These black dudes were Crips, probably Playboys, the dominant black gang at Fairfax. As they got closer, Moses recognized a few of them from continuation school.

They stood and watched these black gang dudes, some of them from Fairfax, coming on like they were in a movie, whooping it up, hand signs up, claiming this and that, gangster limps and blue handkerchiefs.

A little guy ahead of the rest approached Mike, this tall white Jewish kid holding his car keys and moving

closer to his new red Mustang, the black kid telling him, "Wassup, blood!"

Mike looked back at his buddies, then to this little guy who was getting closer, right under Mike's nose. Mike smiled, saying, "Um, excuse me?"

He looked over the young gangster's head at more black guys entering the parking lot.

Another skinny black kid, a guy they all recognized from Fairfax, walked up to Alex and put up a series of hand signs in Alex's face, shouting, "PBG Westside Playboy gangsters! It's Cuzz up in this mothafucka'!"

Alex crossed his arms and stepped back, saying, "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

The skinny gangster got back in Alex's face, hand signs going up, screaming, "What up, blood!"

A big black dude with gold teeth and a new Dodgers cap moved closer. He was a guy everyone knew as Baby J, used to be the quarterback at Fairfax until he was kicked out for fighting. He moved toward Moses with an aluminum bat.

"Dude, you came to play ball in the dark?" Moses said, watching his crew begin to move back.

"Break yo self, nigga!" Baby J said. "Westside PBG mobsters, foo'!"

"I know, I heard," Moses said, watching Baby J come over in an exaggerated limp. "You using that bat as a cane or is that your macdaddy pimp stroll?"

A fat dude in an over-sized Gucci sweat suit, a gangbanger that Javier had tutored last year in Biology, reached out for Vache's chain and the shit was on.

The PBG's, maybe twenty of them, closed in on the guys, some pulling the

blue handkerchiefs over their faces like outlaws from the old days. The guys with the bats were asking for space. Baby J swung the bat at Moses but Moses was already moving toward his midsection. He knocked Baby J to the ground and reached over to pick up the bat.

The little guy close to Mike threw a wild overhand right that missed. He then tripped over Mike, trying to reach a gold chain on his neck. Mike was already in a full sprint out of the parking lot, going south on Fairfax.

Alex and Vache were right behind Mike. They didn't get much of a head start, half the black dudes already on their tails down Fairfax. Leo, Bernie, Javier, and Joni backpedaled, taking blows, dodging bats, all of them yelling at Moses to drop the bat and get the fuck out of there.

Moses was swinging, Baby J and ten more PBG's around him, none of them ready to be a hero. Moses raised the bat over his head, letting out a tribal scream, looking like he was going in for a mad charge, then threw the bat at them and ran out of the parking lot.

He ran up toward Melrose with Playboys on his ass. The northbound traffic was coming up behind them, cars honking and headlights flashing at them. Moses felt a bat on his shoulder. These dudes were fast. He jumped over the concrete median onto oncoming traffic. More car horns and tires screeching and the black guys still all over him.

Ahead on Melrose, he saw the light turning yellow and an old white pick-up truck crossing the intersection. Moses pushed himself into a final dead sprint, feeling his tank top being pulled and his gold chain ripped off. The PBG's weren't

even breaking a sweat, and didn't seem to care about oncoming vehicles barely missing Moses.

A white guy wearing a cowboy hat in a little Dodge pick-up with out-of-state plates was going across the intersection on yellow. The guy was looking up at neon signs advertising twenty-four tanning beds and going as slow as he wanted. The bed of this guy's truck was full of boxes and luggage so Moses dove into the back.

CHAPTER FOUR

The guys were looking out for Moses. Leo, Javier, Bernie and Joni waited in front of the Improv on Sunset. Mike and Alex had dropped them off there, but these two guys and Vache had had enough action that night.

"Where the hell could he be?" Leo said, checking out the women in line for the comedy club. "It ain't like these Playboy mothafuckers kidnapped 'em."

"We shoulda' waited for him at Canter's," Javier said.

"We waited, man," Bernie said. "We waited at Canter's. We waited outside of Canter's. We went back to Fairfax ... wait ... is that?" he pointed down Sunset. "Check this fool out."

Everyone watched Moses walk this way with white bandages wrapped around his head.

“Where you been, man?” Leo said, coming up to his cousin to examine the bandages. “Dude, you’re bleeding!”

“Yeah, I was bleeding a lot when they were sewing me up,” Moses said, touching the side of his head, checking if the blood had dried, “then they wanted to change the head wrap but I told them I was in a hurry and to get me the fuck out of there.”

“How much did all that shit cost?” Javier said.

“Free, dude,” Moses said. “I made up some social security number and gave them your name, address, date of birth,” punching Javier in the shoulder. “Man, you all are some speedy fuckers when you wanna be. You punk ass bitches were gone!”

“Fifty Crips with bats, probably strapped, too?” Leo said. “Shit, damn straight I’m gone.”

“What the fuck were they doing there?” Moses said. “Who in James’ crew is gang-related? Bunch of white washed black dudes, two white boys, a Pakistani dude, an Armenian, a Russian and a chino. What the fuck!”

The guys watched the Improv crowd part as Moses in his bloody head bandages excused and pardoned himself up to the front of the line.

Moses was on early, coming out with his big arms up, shielding his face from the glare of the house lights. His sweat-pants were ripped and his tank top was stretched far enough for the crowd to see the young Latino comic was ripped.

“Yeah, so the promoter dude sees me and thinks this bloody head wrap is a prop and puts me at the top of the list—I came straight from Cedars Sinai, some redneck couple from Iowa or Wyoming or some shit took me in their old fucked up pick-up truck.

They were sightseeing on Melrose and I jumped into the back of their truck ‘cause, at the time, I was being chased by about twenty or thirty black guys with bats. Gangbangers. Crips. Playboy gangsters. PBG’s? What? None of you ever been chased down Melrose with Crips on your ass? Well, then you ain’t really experienced L.A.”

There was polite laughter. Moses moved closer to the edge of the stage, still trying to locate his crew in the darkness.

“So Inez and Jacob from Kentucky are cruising Melrose and here I go landing in their truck, and they slow down like it’s a

fuckin' bus stop. They let these black dudes with bats on. So I'm kickin' Crips off the little Dodge pick-up, Inez and Jacob are looking back like it's some street show on Hollywood Boulevard and I'm yelling, 'Let's get the fuck outta here!' Long story short, I don't know where these fuckin' black guys came from."

Moses saw his buddies at a table in a corner of the room.

"Seriously, me and my homies," pointing to the guys, "we're over at the parking lot at Fairfax High School, minding our own business, waiting for this asshole, this other guy we go to school with, black guy named Taylor. 'Cause me and Taylor are supposed to have a fight tonight. One-on-one, right? And out of nowhere these Crip dudes show up and ruin our fight." Less laughter now.

Moses walked closer to the guys, looking at them for affirmation, saying, "See, this Taylor guy is black but thinks he's white. You know, listens to Metallica, surfs, wears tight jeans, has a Vietnamese girlfriend, you know what I'm talking about, right?"

And the only other black guy in his crew is worse – golf team, talks like Bryant Gumbel, Jewish girlfriend, you know... so I'm thinkin' about that as I'm running for my life down Fairfax. And when I'm lying in Inez and Jacob's pick-up and these black dudes are swinging on me with bats, when I'm getting sewn up at Cedar's, on the way up here, the whole time I'm thinking, how does rocker dude Taylor get the Crips to show up." He pointed at the guys, "My buddies over here, they had my back tonight, up until the Crips showed. Then they were gone like your paycheck at a titty bar..."

Moses looked offstage to some producer woman with headphones and a clipboard telling him he was dying, that he had another minute.

CHAPTER FIVE

"**F**irst of all, you don't wanna catch Joker when he's with his homeboys," Javier said, "cause everyone knows you grabbed Angie's ass. Joker's gonna feel obligated to beat you down right there."

Leo looked down the hallway. It was 7:45. Kids were entering school now, making it harder to check for Joker and the guys from 18th Street.

"And second," Javier said, "this ain't the time to ask Joker if it's okay if you call Angie ... I mean, you gotta talk to Angie first, don't you?"

"Nah, man, you gotta go old school with these Mexican cholo mothafuckers," Leo said. "No offense, Javi."

Javier saw a group of young cholos coming in, going straight to the attendance office. All five of them were bald, some with dark shades across their foreheads, but none of the guys was Joker. Javier pushed Leo toward the lockers, saying, "Dude, take off, you're making me nervous."

"I told you, man, I'm staying," Leo said, looking back at kids being loud, acting high school. He wanted to make sure Joker and his crew didn't sneak up on him.

"Look, I'll talk to him about last night, tell 'em we got jumped by PBG dudes that go here, see what he says," Javier said, "then if I get a chance, I'll tell 'em your thing was an accident, that you'd never do something crazy like mess with his sister."

"Yeah, while I hide in my locker," Leo said, "you ask for protection for our sorry

asses and get me a date with Angie ... you crazy? Don't you see I gotta do this myself?"

He rubbed the acne on his forehead with the back of his hand, stressing, feeling like he was breaking out. "So you pretty tight with Joker ..."

Joker was Lil' Joker back when there was a Mister Joker in 18th Street. Joker was fifteen then, a couple of years back. He'd tell his cousins, Big Red and Danny Boy, both veteranos, that Mister Joker was doing back-to-back life sentences up north. He asked how come he had to be Lil' Joker, that he'd rather be called Lil' Herc. Big Red always told him Mister Joker was busted on a defective search warrant, that the vato was going to win on appeal. And that anyway, Danny Boy'd say, Lil' Herc was a black gangster name. Sometimes Joker wanted to tell them Hercules was always a white dude

in movies and cartoons, that the guy was probably Greek or something. But he didn't want to sound stupid.

Lil' Joker became Joker sometime after Mister Joker was killed at a correctional facility for taking too long on a payphone.

Joker did okay in school. He was there everyday. Angie wished he'd ditch once in a while like everybody else. She knew Leo liked her. It was obvious. That day at the cafeteria, she'd explained to her brother that it was an accident. People were pushing, being stupid, and Leo happened to be behind her. Joker said Leo always seemed to be behind her, that one way or another he was going to talk to Leo about that shit.

"Hey Tony," Javier said. They'd played on the same little league team way back in the day, the Hollywood Dodgers. Joker played third base. Javier was on first. And they knew each other from

kindergarten at Vine Street, lived on the same block since they were kids. Javier never called him Joker and Joker let it slide.

“Orale loco, where you been?” Joker said, giving Javier a slight head tilt.

“Hey Joker, how you doin’?” Leo said.

“Pinche chavala,” Joker said, looking down at Leo without turning to him.

“Lemme ask you something real quick,” Javier said.

Joker gave him another head tilt, meaning, *Go ahead*.

So Javier told him they got jumped last night by some Crips, that some of them went to Fairfax. Pookie on the basketball team, Baby J, Ty Ty, that big dude they called Mr. Insane, and some guy Javier knew from Biology. And that Moses was supposed to fight Taylor but out of nowhere Playboy dudes showed up.

"I guarantee the pinche mayates already forgot about it," Joker said. "It was just a night out for them. Jack some fools for their chains and that's it. It's over. You guys don't mean nothing to them to make that shit personal. Don't even sweat that shit, loco."

"It's weird though," Javier said, "we still can't figure out why they were there."

"You didn't know?" Joker said. "Taylor's brother's an OG. Rollin 30's Crips. Doing life at Pelican Bay."

"No shit," Javier said.

"Fuckin' Taylor," Leo said. "That's the last guy you'd think was connected."

"Little man," Joker said, turning to Leo, "I see you near my sister again and it's on."

"Yeah, man," Leo said, "I wanted to talk to you about that, the incident ... that misunderstanding."

“Just be careful, little man,” Joker said,
“Don’t make me take off my belt.”

Javier nodded at Joker, watching the young cholos go down the hallway without books or back packs, moving slowly as the 7:55 bell rang. The vatos looked even slower in the mad hustle of Fairfax students trying to get to class on time.

“Told you,” Javier said.

“Fuck him and fuck you,” Leo said, walking slow and cool toward the lockers, imitating Joker’s stroll. “Did that mothafucker just say he’s beating me with his belt?”

“You didn’t tell him?” Moses said.

“Tell him what?” Javier said.

“I didn’t get a chance,” Leo said. “The fucker said two things to me, fuck you, chavala and stay away from Angie.”

“Tell him what?” Javier said.

“What’s a chavala?” Moses said.

“Guess it means girl in Mexican,” Leo said.

Moses and Leo were leaning against the lockers, waiting for Javier to drop off his books and get his stuff for third period. He had English after Nutrition, his favorite class because of all the comedy that went on in there and he hated missing it. But sometimes ditching first or second period with the guys meant being gone the whole day. Javier’s locker was on the second floor, near the big glass windows facing south. Below them was the cafeteria and part of the quad. In the distance, you could see the baseball field.

Javier was taking forever. It was like he was re-decorating in there. Moses and Leo looked around for PBG’s, a little anxious every time they saw a black guy come up the stairwells. They felt

exposed, standing there in an empty hallway during second period.

Javier slammed shut his locker. He checked out both stairwells, the one on the left led to the quad area, the other to the cafeteria.

Leo and Moses were doing the same, trying to figure out which way was safer: before getting to the quad they'd have to pass the snack bar and sometimes you'd see black gangsters hanging out there and to get past the cafeteria to the track field, you had to go through a dark covered area with rows of benches where PBG's liked to smoke and take care of business.

"What're we waiting for?" Moses said, going toward the stairwell leading to the quad area.

"Lead the way, Rambo," Leo said, shaking his head at Javier like, *Can you believe this shit?*

Javier nodded back and sighed, looking at Leo, agreeing it was crazy. Weeks before graduation and they were sneaking around school hoping not to get jumped by the Crips.

Going down the stairwell first, Moses asked them, "You told Joker to meet us at Canter's, right?"

"Yeah, but he ain't coming," Javier said. "What was Leo supposed to tell Joker?"

"When have you ever seen a cholo at Canter's?" Leo said. "You guys seen Angie today?"

"That I want my gold chain back," Moses said.

"That chain is gone, homie," Javier said.

"Our grandmother gave 'em that chain when he was baptized in Peru," Leo said.

"Look man, Joker's gonna be cool with walking the halls or the quad with us,

him and his homeboys," Javier said, "but they ain't about to start a race riot for your chain, dude."

"I don't need any favors," Moses said, "I got cash."

"Joker ain't no hitman," Leo said, "and 18th Street ain't throwin' down with the PBG's for your dumb ass!"

"Idiota pendejo come-mierda," Moses said. "You ever play poker?"

"Poke her?" Leo said. "I barely even knew her."

"Mo wants to bluff at the PBG's with a joker," Javier said. "Get it? A joker ..."

"You two fuckers are hilarious," Moses said, walking out to the crowd of kids hanging around the snack store. He lost Leo and Javier somewhere between the Psycho-Billies and the Emos.

It was mostly Jewish seniors at Canter's at that hour. Fairfax kids came in all day for coffee and bagels. The guys always had the same thing, Coke and fries, except for Moses: tuna salad, no salt, no mayo, ice water with lemon. It pissed off the old waitresses, Moses always asking if the tuna was fresh.

"What kind of cholo doesn't ditch?" Moses said.

"I don't know," Javier said.

"So what, Joker gets good grades and shit?" Moses said.

"How come we never get a menu in here?" Leo said.

"I think I'm gonna have the pastrami Reuben," Javier said, watching a few suits come in, probably CBS executives from down the street. "We're gonna look back on these days, five, ten years from now and we're gonna laugh at ourselves and say this was the best time of our lives."

"You wanna split the Reuben," Leo said. "Who's got cash?"

"My good old days haven't even started yet," Moses said. "When I don't have to fuck with Rockwood dudes back home, buy dope from Mara Salvatrucha, go to school with Crips and cholos ... Man, when I'm not fuckin' walking everywhere, those'll be the good old days for me."

"Yo man, I ain't comin' here with Moses no more," Leo said. "See these old waitresses walking right past us? Can't get no love from them 'cause Mo's always gotta fuck with them. Get their blood pressure up."

"What're you talking about?" Moses said. "They love the attention."

"That's your problem, dude! And the problem with your comedy," Leo said. "You think people like you when you fuck with them. People don't like

assholes, man. Seems like the bigger you get, the more you're a fuckin' asshole. For real, primo. I only say it 'cause I care. Maybe it's the steroids, you know, making you super aggressive. You're getting into these fights, the pimples on your back, your big-ass jaw..."

"I don't need to do that shit," Moses said.

"Yeah, I know, I know," Leo said. "Deny. Deny. Deny. Bonds. Clemens. If they can't prove it, it ain't perjury."

"Yo, all they gotta do to convict is show cap sizes," Javier said. "Somewhere someone's got team supply logs with their cap sizes when they were rookies, compare head sizes. You know if Johnnie Cochran was in Congress homeboy woulda' been out there with a measuring tape around the Rocket's head, asking 'em why his head grew three sizes in his forties."

Moses said, "With or without steroids, those dudes are superstars anyway."

"Uh-oh," Leo said, "that's about as close as we're ever gonna get to a confession from this dude."

"You guys are just like them fake-ass Congress people," Moses said. "All you fools need to focus on your own fucked up lives first."

Canter's was packed for a Thursday morning. The guys were watching a group of firemen coming in off their fire truck, double-parked on Fairfax. Leo saw his favorite waitress Margie, the old woman chatting with her regulars. She was probably briefing everyone about a grandchild's recital or family here from Russia or the long hours on her feet and the tips around here lately. Then she'd get into her daughter in New York that never called, her arthritis, the migraines, oh, forget about it.

Leo knew how to smooth-talk Margie, putting his arm around her and getting her to agree on two pastrami Reubens and his cousin's goddamn tuna salad and lemon water.

"What's Joker got second period he can't ditch?" Moses said.

"I gotta make it to English for sure," Javier said.

"Man, Angie's lookin' good today," Leo said. "Y'all seen her?"

"So what'd you guys really think about my act?" Moses said.

"You think they'll deliver flowers to a classroom?" Leo said. "Angie's got French fifth period. Don't you think French class would be the best class to send flowers?"

"Cholas don't like flowers, dude," Moses said. "Send the bitch a pizza with chorizo and jalapenos."

From their table in the middle of the cafeteria, Leo and Angie could see all the doors. Angie's homegirls sat on the table, setting a screen for her in case Joker came in.

"How come a schoolboy like you ain't scared of my brother?" Angie said.

"I already talked to your brother," he said. "This morning. We cool now."

Angie looked over at Javier, who was sitting at the end of the table, watching the door for Leo.

"Hey holmes, you can stop checking out the door," Angie said. "My carnal's way the hell over in the parking lot fixing some vato's ride."

"Wow," Leo said, frowning, watching Angie apply more eyeliner.

"What," she said.

"I never heard you talk outside of Algebra," Leo said, getting a close look at

her, staring at Angie's eyebrows. They were plucked away, gone. Like she'd erased her eyebrows and drawn a black line where she thought they should be.

"It's cool, I understand," he said.

"Understand what!"

"That you're still at school," he said, "that you gotta keep up that image, you know ... gangsta'."

"Fuck you," she said, giggling, then laughing more as she thought about it. "I ain't no gangster, you stupid ass!"

"Then what's with all the ..." Leo said, drawing a circle in the air around his face with his hand.

"It's called make-up. I look good, don't I?"

"Yeah, but it ain't 'cause of the ... never mind. How come you take off your whole entire eyebrows?"

"Is that why you came over here? To ask me about my pinche eyebrows."

"Can I call you tonight?"

"You got my digits, you can call. You ain't got my digits, you gotta ask my brother."

"You got a boyfriend?"

"Nah, dog. If I did have a man, he'd be a dead vato 'cause my carnal don't play that shit."

"I think I like talking to you in class better. You sound so sweet when you breakin' down fractions and shit."

"Joker's gonna fraction your skinny ass if he sees you talkin' to me. He told me he talked to you and told you to kick back or he was gonna slice you up."

Leo said, "That what he said?"

"Straight neta, homie."

"What's neta?"

"You ain't Mexican?"

"Half Peru, half Guatemala."

Angie said, "Get the fuck out! For real, ese?"

"Yeah, also got a little Indian and some Japanese in there. Me and you can make some beautiful babies."

"Daaang! Slow your roll, vato loco!"

"I'm joking."

"That's the kind of joke gets you shanked -- hablando a lo puro pinche pendejo."

"What's that mean?"

"Means you talkin' out your ass," she said, zipping her make-up bag, looking around the cafeteria to see if she'd been seen by anyone from her cliqua.

She got up, gave a head tilt to Leo, saying, "Nos estamos watchando," and walked away.

"I think she likes me," he said, watching Javier slide over, looking relieved Joker didn't show.

"You playin' with fire," Javier said.

"Can't wait to get burned."

"You ain't getting burned. Like Angie said, Joker's gonna cut you."

Leo said, "Don't be listening to my private conversations with my lady, vato loco!"

"Dude, please -- don't get gangster on me."

"Why can't I be a cholo? It looks just like a college fraternity except they don't smile."

"You're from Peru," Javier said.

"And?"

"That's it."

"That's it!" Leo said, getting up like he was out of there. "That shit is racial then!"

CHAPTER SIX

Alex and Vache were playing two-on-two against Mike and Joni. Bernie and Leo had just been knocked-out by Alex and Vache. Moses and Javier had next. They'd all gone to John Burroughs Junior High, except for Moses who'd attended a continuation school in Downtown and Javier who'd done his time in private Catholic schools.

JB's fences were short, easy to jump, and there were a lot of basketball courts. Koreans ran full-court games every day after school, smoking cigarettes and playing ball, ignoring anyone who wasn't Korean.

Sitting on the grass at the edge of the baseball field, Leo was saying, "Yeah, me and Javi saw Taylor and James today.

Fuckers said what up like we didn't just get jumped by the Crips last night."

Vache and Alex could pick and roll all day against Mike and Joni. Vache cut to the basket, another lob from Alex, then a sweet finger roll lay-up.

Alex was waiting at half-court, ready to pass it in but Vache was heading to his pack of cigarettes, saying, "Shoot it from there! Tired of beatin' these sorry-ass fools."

Alex had a weird jump-shot. It looked ugly but went in a lot. He shot from mid-court, getting all net. Game over; Mike and Joni were shut out again.

"We got next, bitches," Moses said, walking on the court with his arms up, asking for the ball.

Alex went over to Vache and the cigarettes. He lit up, watching Leo dribble around Moses and take a shot from the top of the key.

“Hey, today me and Bernie are kickin’ it with Mr. Cardoza,” Alex said. “You know, hiding out from the Crips and shit. Then big ass Pookie comes in. Doesn’t even recognize us. We’re right up there hangin’ by Mr. C’s desk, right? Me an’ B are pissin’ on ourselves and Pookie looks right at us and he’s like whatever. What the fuck!”

“Did you ask ‘em for my gold chain?” Moses said, his big arms still up, waiting for someone to throw him the ball. “Taylor knows I’m dropping that fool on sight, right?”

“What,” Bernie said, intercepting the pass from Leo to Moses and driving in for an uncontested lay-up. “You ain’t scheduling no more fights?”

“I’m going out with Angie today,” Leo said. “Where should I take her?”

“Johnny Rocket’s,” Bernie said. “It’s like dinner and a show.”

Javier said, "You guys ever notice that all the Johnny Rockets have the same set-up? They got them young clean-cut blonde servers at the counter, and they're always from like middle America. And then they always got the two little brown dudes in hairnets flipping burgers. What's up with that?"

"That's their theme, dude," Alex said. "Just like it was in the fifties. Rock n' Roll, man."

Javier said, "Yeah, but that shit ain't right."

"How about a movie?" Leo said. "What's good?"

"So fuckin' Taylor didn't say shit about last night?" Moses said.

"Try sushi," Javier said. "She'll always remember you ... as the first guy she ever ate sushi with."

Leo winked at him like, *Good lookin' out, Javi.*

“You guys think I should go back to the Improv?” Moses said.

“Yo, is sushi strictly fish?” Leo said. “Or do they have like teriyaki chicken sushi?”

“I went on too early,” Moses said. “The crowd was still sober. What’d you retards think?”

“We got any weed left from yesterday?” Leo said, fighting with Bernie and Javier for position under the basket.

“That’s it, man,” Javier said, coming up with the ball, dribbling along the baseline out to the three point area. “We’ve officially become stoners! First it was once in a while, then every weekend, now almost every day.”

“I don’t know about you losers,” Moses said, “but I’m a highly functional addict. I get shit done when I’m high.”

"I thought you were gonna get a job, Mo," Alex said. "I mean, you don't even go to your classes anymore. You just show up at Nutrition and Lunch to talk shit and we don't see you for the rest of the day 'til we ball or work out."

"What do you do all day?" Leo said. "Elise's?"

"I'm definitely going back up, maybe tonight," Moses said. "You guys wanna hear my new material?"

"Hell no," Leo said. "You shoot at whatever's in front of you."

"I'm gonna talk politics," Moses said.

Alex and Vache came back on the court with their cigarettes. Alex inhaled deeply, shaking his head at Moses, telling him, "Get a job, dude."

A long rebound went over everyone and bounced into Mo's hands. Moses dribbled, backing up to the three point line, saying, "What the fuck is wrong

with you guys bringing all that second-hand smoke on the court?"

Vache said, "How's a pothead like you gonna worry about smoke."

"Weed is natural," Moses said. "Like a tomato."

Moses kept dribbling, watching the guys fight under the basket for position until they got tired of waiting for him to shoot.

Moses said, "All right, if I miss from here I'll get a job ... and if I make it then it's my destiny to make it at the Improv, get signed by a hot producer chick, and make action comedy porn movies."

He launched the ball like a shot put, hitting the backboard, no rim. The ball went off toward the baseball field.

The guys watched the ball bounce away, nobody in a hurry to get it. Everyone was observing a dark blue Monte Carlo on white walls entering the

parking lot. It was followed by an emerald green Chevy Impala low rider, both cars packed with young cholos. The cars parked near the fence, facing the basketball courts. But no one got out.

"Oh hell no," Alex said. "Not two days in a row."

"Who's that?" Mike said.

"That's Joker's Monte Carlo," Bernie said.

"What's he want?" Alex said.

Moses said, "Leo grabbed his little sister's ass."

"Man, we didn't do shit to the Crips and they almost killed us," Mike said.

"We can go through JB, jump over one of these fences into someone's back yard," Joni said.

"And leave our cars again?" Alex said.

"These fuckin' Mexicans'll strip down our cars before we make it out of here. No offense, Javi."

"Javier should go talk to them," Mike said. "At least he speaks Mexican."

"For real," Moses said. "Half the time I don't know what the fuck Joker says. Always talkin' about how's my hyna, my ruca. Then whenever I ask him something, it's always simon, nel pastel, chale. What the fuck does chale mean?"

"Yeah, but Javier isn't that kind of Mexican, right?" Mike asked. "I mean I been to his house and they always got that circus music going on."

"Banda," Javier said.

"I don't know about these Mexicans, man," Moses said. "Javier over here gets dressed like a cowboy for weddings. There's horses at the dances he goes to. Then these fuckin' cholos with their fuckin' oldies all the time. Dude, you like oldies?"

"I like Sinatra," Javier said. "When I cook I like to listen to Frank."

The guys checked out Javier for a moment. Then they heard car doors slamming. The guys from 18th Street were getting out of their cars. Joker was in his black loc shades, leaning against the wire fence. Joker waved them over. None of the guys moved, they were waiting for Javier to go see what Joker wanted.

Javier took the ball with him, jogging, dribbling over to the cholos. He talked to Joker for a minute, nodding. Joker showed him something then put it back in his shirt pocket. Javier walked back, slowly, not bouncing the ball. He kept his head down like he was thinking.

"Joker has your gold chain," Javier said.

"And?" Moses said.

"A hunnerd bucks," Javier said.

Moses smiled, watching his buddies looking sick, none of them sure where these negotiations would lead.

“He says he had to trade favors,”
Javier said. “That it wasn’t free.”

“Look at it as a finder’s fee,” Alex said.

“Like retroactive insurance coverage,”
Mike said.

They all looked at Mike like, What the
fuck?

Then Mike said, “Did he say anything
about us getting jumped if Mo doesn’t
pay?”

“Fuck Joker,” Moses said.

“Who’s got cash?” Leo said, looking at
Alex and Mike. “You two fools always
have money.”

“We work,” Alex said.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”
Leo said. “How much you got?”

Bernie showed a ten-dollar bill. Joni
had twenty. Vache had change. Javier
was broke. Leo had a few wrinkled ones.
Alex and Mike opened their wallets but
kept quiet, and Moses crossed his arms

and stared back at the homeboys sitting on their cars in the parking lot. Joker leaned against the fence with his vato shades, staring back at Moses.

“I ain’t buying back my own chain that my grandma gave me for my baptism,” Moses said. “Looks like I’m gonna have to get it back same way everybody else is gettin’ it – the thug way.”

“I thought you were tight with Joker,” Alex said.

Javier said, “When I see him around, you know, I say what’s up Tony and when he’s with the hardcore homeboys I don’t say shit.”

“The man did perform a service,” Leo said, shrugging his shoulders at his cousin, “so he should probably be compensated somehow, especially for something you might even consider priceless. Don’t you think?”

“Don’t be embarrassed for being such a pussy, primo,” Moses said. “I’m already embarrassed for you.”

“You wanna fight these guys?” Alex said. “Are you high?”

“I only see nine of ‘em,” Moses said, still looking across the field at Joker, “and there’s eight of us. And check ‘em out, some of those guys look like crackheads. All bony and shit. And you guys are supposed to be bad-ass ballers, right?”

“Fuck that,” Alex said. “Bad idea.”

“I’ll buy you a new gold chain,” Mike said.

The guys turned to Mike, who’d never bought anything for anyone, and started laughing. Moses, too. Joker heard them laughing and got off the fence, twirling the gold chain on his finger. Then he motioned to the homeboys it was time to go.

"There goes my chain," Moses said.

Javier said, "Maybe I can work something out with Joker."

"This did not help my date situation with Angie," Leo said.

At Johnny Rocket's on Melrose, Leo and Angie sat in a booth by the window, watching kids still walking home. It was almost five P.M.

"... I just think it's very one-dimensional of you," Leo said, talking about the way she dressed like a chola every day.

Angie gave him another strange look, like he wasn't all there. She watched their happy blonde food server skip by, the way they skipped in Grease. Mandy from Ohio sang to Aretha's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T". The other food servers also

performed as they passed out menus and checked on food orders.

"You like it here?" she said, watching her fries and hamburger coming this way. Mandy smiled, bobbing her head to the funky beat.

Food's good," Leo said. "Ignore the weirdos."

"Why they all into it?" she said, throwing a fake smile back at Mandy as she served the food. She spun around with her arms in the air, going back for Angie's strawberry milk shake.

"It's Hollywood," Leo said. "Everyone's a star."

Mandy came back with the shake. She grabbed an old-fashioned glass jar with straws, popped it open and spun it. Then she held it out for Angie to take one.

"I feel like I'm in a dream," Angie said, checking out Mandy getting really excited about the next song, Little

Richard's "Tutti Frutti". "And I don't mean that in a good way."

"It's cool that you forgot about talking like a chola," he said. "That's why I brought you here."

Angie held on to her French fry as Mandy flew over with a ketchup bottle and drew a happy face for Angie on a little paper plate. Angie stared at the perfect ketchup happy face as she reached for the Tabasco.

"You ever been to a comedy show?" he said.

She shook her head, mixing the Tabasco with the mustard and ketchup.

"Wanna go to the Improv over here on Melrose?" he said. "Go check out my cousin."

"You said we'd go eat and that's it," she said. "So I told my brother I was gonna come down to Melrose to fill out job applications."

“You promise that when we get back to school you’ll keep talking this way to me?”

“What way?”

“Like this,” he said. “No gangster shit.”

“Whatever, dude.” Angie smiled, hearing “I’m your Puppet” begin to play. It was an oldie she always heard at parties. The OG’s played it and everybody got all feelings.

“Orale pues pinche Angie, tu si le sabes, cabrona,” Flaca said, coming in with two cholitas. “I like this place already. I didn’t know pinche Johnny Rocket’s was down with the stone cold oldies. That’s firme, homegirl.”

Flaca was tall and skinny, crazy eyebrows and wings for bangs. She elbowed Sleepy next to her, a shy girl that laughed whenever Flaca said something stupid and elbowed her.

“We should come here for my sister’s baby shower,” Flaca said, doing the dance with the forearms up in front, trying to go old-school, the way she’d seen cholos dance at Quinceaneras.

“That your vato?” Gata said, a pretty chola with hazel eyes, no make-up, a nice body. She had a history of beef with Angie.

“Aguas con estos culeros de Peru,” Gata said, going around Flaca to get a better look at this square Angie was with, “o sepa la chingada de donde es este dude, all I know is that luego luego quieren que te moches con las nachas – disque por que asi son todas las Mexicanas. Shiit.”

“Nah, dog! Neta?” Flaca said, sitting next to Leo, making him move over, pulling Sleepy into the booth with her.

“I speak Spanish, you know,” Leo said, looking up at Gata. “Don’t know what

the fuck you just said right now, but I do speak Spanish ... just so you know."

"Simon, homie," Gata said, looking out the window at the traffic and people on Melrose Avenue, still standing, avoiding Angie.

"Sit down, pinche kitty cat," Angie said.

"Fuck you, Angie," Gata said, moving into the booth, sitting next to her.

"Girl, you are crazy," Flaca said. "Lil' Man told Chuco that him and Silent and Joker beat down these fools that Javier rolls with because one of those fools was the one that grabbed your ass in the cafeteria last week."

"Nobody got beat down," Leo said. "And nobody grabbed Angie's ass in the cafeteria."

"Lil' Man exaggerates," Angie said.

"You sayin' Joker won't beat this fool down right here if he sees you two here?" Gata said.

"My name's Leo," he said.

"Well, check this out, ese," Flaca said, "aquí nosotras con Angie somos como la pinche placa, entiendes Mendes o te lo explico Federico? Si crees que vas a darle un lleguesito a nuestra homegirl right here, pues estas pendejo, carnal. Chale con ese jale, loco. Nel pastel, dude. Ni madres, guey. Te vas a quedar como las pinches novias de rancho, vestido y alborotado. Valiendo cacahuates, cabron. You understand?"

"A little bit," he said.

"You locas gonna chow down or what?" Angie said, watching Mandy coming over with menus.

"You bitches got feria?" Flaca said to her girls.

Sleepy and Gata shook their heads, taking the menus from Mandy.

"I got it," Leo said. "Para que vean, that's how we do in Peru."

The girls from 18th Street laughed, checking out the one page menu. Mandy looked at them, doing the twist to Chubby Checkers, bobbing her head like white girls from Ohio did. The cholas laughed at Mandy, and Mandy laughed along, enjoying her job as food server at the Johnny Rocket's in Hollywood.

"Three Originals with fries and three Cokes," Mandy said, on her toes like a cheerleader. "All rightie?"

"A'ight then, guerita," Flaca said.

"Sobres, hija," Gata said, handing back the menus. "Pero dale gas."

Mandy smiled, pretty sure the girls with the interesting eyebrows were speaking Spanish.

“Anyways Angie, you ain’t scared of Joker seeing you in here with Leo?” Gata said.

Flaca watched him take small bites of his burger, his fries undisturbed, saying to him, “You ain’t gonna eat your fries, ese?”

Leo pushed the fries at her.

“Even if your carnal doesn’t see you here with Leo,” Flaca said, reaching for the Tabasco, “you know how it is. He always finds out and by the time he hears it the pinche cuento’s out of control. They’ll be saying they saw you having sex in homeboy’s car on Melrose. Tu sabes, mija.”

Gata said, “Damn Angie, girl you got some balls! It’s like you’re doing it on purpose, huh? Hangin’ out where anyone can see you. We were just walking home, not even looking for your stupid ass, and

there you are sitting in the fuckin' window at pinche Johnny Rocket's."

"Asi tan seguro como manana salga el sol," Flaca said, dragging a long fry through a blend of ketchup, mustard, and Tabasco, "your carnal's gonna find out and beat Leo's ass. Then he's gonna jump all his friends. He'll take your cell phone and put you on lockdown."

"I wish I had a brother," Sleepy said.

The Improv comedy club on Melrose Avenue was a few blocks from Fairfax High. It was late and there were mostly shoppers and tourists cruising Melrose. Javier met Leo at Johnny Rocket's. Then they walked with Angie and the girls, checking out the shops on Melrose, all of them confident that the homeboys from 18th would be easy to spot in this crowd.

Leo tried walking ahead with Angie but Javier kept asking her questions.

"You sure your brother knows you're here?" Javier said, insisting with Angie.

"Dude, go talk to Gata," Leo said. "Angie says she's from Guadalajara – you see them beautiful hazel eyes?"

"Yeah, she's okay," Javier said, turning back to check out Gata. "But she doesn't have any eyebrows."

"Ese mi Javi," Angie said, "por que no vas a ver si ya puso la marrana."

Javier slowed, finally getting it, giving Leo and Angie space to maneuver.

"Hola," Javier said, moving over next to Gata who was walking closest to the street.

"Whatchu' doin, ese?" Gata said.

"Umm, walking right here," he said, pointing to the edge of the curb. "Guys are supposed to walk on the outside."

“That’s old-school,” Flaca said. “Shit’s played out.”

“That’s fuckin’ ranchero,” Sleepy said.

“It’s sweet,” Gata said, smiling, killing Javier with those crazy kitty cat eyes.

Angie, Flaca, Gata and Sleepy were all born in Hollywood but it had never occurred to any of them to come down and hang out on Melrose.

The girls went mostly where the guys from the cliqua went, barbecues at parks, cruising Whittier, and parties.

The best part was that nobody on Melrose was even looking at the girls from 18th Street. Shit, the cholitas said to each other, most of these Melrose people looked more fucked up than them.

Moses came on stage, his huge arms up, squinting from the glare of the stage lights, reaching for the fresh bandages on his head, saying, “What? This? Got

jumped by the Crips last night down the street from here. Don't worry they're gone. They took the bus down here just to kick my ass."

No laughs.

He pointed to Leo and Javier at a table up front with Angie and some cholas he'd seen at school.

"What the fuck? My cousin Leo over here, this fool when he falls for a chick he don't give a shit about what he's gotta do or the consequences. Right, homie?"

He watched Leo shake his head, a look of panic telling his cousin to have mercy.

"What?" Moses said. "You don't want me to talk about the time you and Rhonda went to the Fairfax Theatre for eight hours? Next day Rhonda was living in Utah. So next morning Leo's gone. Drives ten hours to Salt Lake City, drops off a letter, and drives back. Shit,

you drive ten hours, you better stay and get you some. Am I right?"

Some clapping, still no laughs. To the side of the stage, Moses could see some producer motioning that he should wrap it up.

"Now look at this guy. Yesterday we get jumped by Crips and today Leo's got four little cholas backing him up."

He smiled at Angie, waving hello to her, saying, "And one of 'em's gonna get us all killed. I don't know how these gangs are set up but it seems like Angie's brother Joker is a captain or chief or something. And this morning Joker talked to Leo and told him to stay away from his little sister and now here's Leo with four of 'em! Yo, my cousin's the true Playboy gangster, not them fifty black dudes with bats chasing us last night."

Only Angie and the homegirls laughed at that one.

“There’s Javier, never saying shit. He’s quiet around the ladies. Probably already hooked up with the hottest cholita,” pointing over at Gata, “What’s your name?”

She hesitated, thinking of what to say, Christina or Gata, finally saying, “Gata.”

“Is it ‘cause of your eyes? That’s why they call you gata? You got pretty eyes. That ain’t a bad gang name if you gotta have one. What about you two?” he said, looking at Flaca and Sleepy.

“La Sleepy and Miss Eastside Killa’!” Angie said, laughing, having a good time at the Improv on Melrose.

Moses fell back with the information, saying, “Sleepy and Killer? Who’s who?” staring at the Mexican girls from Fairfax High.

“Duh! Should be easy, huh? Figuring out who’s Sleepy and who’s Killer. Let’s see, we know why Gata’s Gata, this

sleepy one must be Sleepy and the one with the black and pink Hello Kitty backpack must be Miss Eastside Killer, right? Miss? You got the Miss from a gangster beauty pageant or what?"

He watched Flaca smile a little, nodding at him like he was gonna get his later.

"Yeah, I love Mexicans. I'm from Peru. That's in South America. Practically Europe. Them fuckin' Argentinians are right next to us and they think they're all European and shit. What's crazy about the Mexicans is that they never assimilate. People come here from all over the world, they have kids, then a generation later you got hyphenated Americans, right? Not Mexicans. Some of them motherfuckers are born here and still don't speak English! You guys been to East L.A. lately? I thought the cops were gonna ask me for my passport!

Mexican restaurants, Mexican stores, paleteros pushing ice cream carts down Whittier Boulevard. I got me a fuckin' corn on the cob at this park, Mexican lady wanted to put butter, cream, cheese, lemon, chile, and salt. I said, 'What the fuck are you doing to my corn!' She didn't know what I was saying. Maybe she thought I wanted more of that red fuckin' fire in a bottle. Peruvian-hyphen-Americans don't eat insanely spicy foods. I threw that shit away and some old dog ate it up. Didn't give a damn about the hot sauce. Must've been a fuckin' Mexican dog."

The producer was signaling to Moses that he was done, the guy making like he was slashing his throat with his pen.

Moses kept going, "So how come Mexicans hang tiny saddles on their rear view mirrors? They got the name of their little cow-shit town all over their back

windows. Who cares where the fuck you came from? Just wash your hands before you cook my food, man! Can you see me driving around in my mom's Ford Escort with Koreatown written all over my back window?"

"And what about these bad-ass low riders, million dollar paint jobs but none of 'em got a job. Then they paint the Virgin Mary on their hood and go out and jack fools for their rims. Remember when back in the day cholos were cholos and Mexican cowboy dudes were just Mexicans fresh off the border? Now, you got like baldheaded cholo dudes in cowboy hats, all tilted of course, and they're sagging their Wranglers. You know, they still got the limp, walking like they're drunk and got shot in the leg. And you got Mexican dudes born in L.A. doing music videos singing sitting on horses, throwing up gang signs like

they're about to do a drive-by on their horse and shit ... Hey, I wanna know why Angie over there doesn't have a gang name, or how do you guys call it?"

"What? A placa? Like a license plate? Okay, so how come Angie doesn't have a placa? Huh? Joker won't let her have one? I have a gang name for Angie. She will now be known as Joker's-sister-so-don't-mess-with-her-'cause-Joker'll-fuck-you-up. How's that for a placa? That work for you? Huh? Joker's gonna kick my what? Shiiit..."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elise Glickman lived at the Park La Brea Apartments, near Third and Fairfax, in front of Farmer's Market and The Grove. She used to say she lived in Beverly Hills, then dropped it to Hancock Park when Moses and the guys started coming over. Now that she was into yoga, she called it West L.A. She lived alone in a two-bedroom apartment with a great view of the Westside. Her father was a Federal judge in San Francisco. They communicated via internet. Her mom lived in New York and paid for everything, fifteen hundred dollar rent and money to party.

Moses never stayed overnight because Elise's mom would cut her off if she discovered that a Mexican-looking guy was seen coming out of her daughter's apartment under dubious circumstances.

"... Okay, so it's not enough that Joker wants to kick my ass and you don't wanna pay him for getting your chain back," Leo said. "On top of all that you wanna go insult his cousin's girlfriend's sister's best friend."

"Sleepy?" Moses said, leaning back, resting his head on Elise's lap.

"Flaca," Leo said.

"What did you say about Flaca, sweetheart?" Elise said, running her fingers through his hair.

"I don't even remember," Moses said. "I was in the zone."

"I'll get you a new gold chain, my love," she said.

"Mike's buying me one," Moses said.

“Hey, where’s your roaches?” Leo said, checking the Mayan clay ashtray from Cancun where Elise kept her roaches, seeds, and stems. “And let me scrape your bong for resin.”

“Damn! Kick back, you fuckin’ junkie,” Javier said.

“Yo, I ain’t goin’ to school tomorrow,” Leo said, rolling a joint from the stash of scraps. “Crips to my left, Bloods to my right, muthafuckin’ cholos got my ass in they sights.”

“Oh my God,” Elise said, “you are so gangster.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

There was a semi-circle of cholos around Leo. It was between third and fourth period so students didn't have much time to wait and see if there'd be a fight in the hallway in the middle of their Friday. Kids that didn't care about being late looked on, watching Joker with his arms down, taunting Leo, saying he'd heard Leo thought he could box, that Leo thought he could take anyone in the lightweight division. It was true, that's what he believed. Leo just didn't want to go through the many years of amateur fighting to get to a championship bout. Still, it stung because yesterday Leo had confided in Angie about his dreams of boxing professionally.

"Let's go, ese," Joker said, getting up in Leo's face. "You be Mayweather, I'll be Tyson."

"I'm not gonna fight you, man," Leo said. "I respect you too much ... as Angie's big brother."

"Fuck you," Joker said. "C'mon, hit me."

Joker had his hands behind his back, sticking his chin out, looking pretty confident Leo had nothing for him.

"All right, man," Leo said, taking off his Swiss Army watch and giving it to Javier. "I'll fight you."

"I thought you respected me too much, fucker."

Leo saw several people had formed behind him, all of them quiet as the bell rang and classroom doors closed. Still no security in sight.

"I don't wanna fight you," Leo said, bouncing, rotating his shoulders and

neck, "but maybe it's best this way. Prove myself as a man to you."

"Orale vato! That sounded gay," Joker said, laughing like he was going to turn to laugh with the homeboys – but instead threw a big overhand right. It was meant to end the fight but Leo saw it coming the moment Joker bent his knees to pivot.

Leo moved back, still bouncing, his hands up and elbows tight, waiting for Joker to go again. Joker cocked his arm but Leo was on the move again. So Joker tried reaching him with a low kick, then a couple of jabs, another big right, a sloppy one-two combo. Nothing came close.

"Am I gonna have to chase you around, bitch?" Joker said.

"I'm right here, dude," Leo said.

The adrenaline was pumping, Joker bouncing now, measuring Leo. Then Angie and Flaca flew into the circle, Angie screaming, pulling on her brother's

shirt and Flaca in the mix flailing her skinny arms.

“Way I seen it, Joker won on points,” Javier said, sitting up on the top of his desk, looking out the window at the baseball field.

Leo was ditching fourth period in Mr. Cardoza’s class, AP Spanish. Mr. C was cool, good at giving advice about a lot of things. But right now he wasn’t sure what to say about Leo’s situation with Angie.

“Joker threw all kinds of punches, missed every time,” Leo said. “Dude was like oh-for-twenty.”

“So you really like her?” Mr. Cardoza said, sitting at his desk, working on final grades and end of the year bullshit.

“Angie’s cool,” Leo said.

“How do you think this incident with Joker will affect your relationship with Angie?” Mr. Cardoza said, never looking

up from his paperwork. That's what Mr. C did, talk to the kids, those in his classes and others that ditched to hang in his class.

"Damn Mr. C, I don't know," Leo said. "That's why I'm tellin' you -- so you can tell me what to do!"

Mr. C said, "My concern is that you compromise much more of yourself than you have to."

"Compromise?"

"That your commitment to being with her becomes so absolute and resolute that you lose yourself in the process."

Leo looked to Javier for help, saying, "What is Mr. C smokin'?"

Javier said, "He means last time with Rhonda you were so whipped you became a Mormon."

"A change of faith to get laid is not healthy," Mr Cardoza said, finally looking up from his stack of essay exams

and grade sheets. "I hope you're not thinking about joining 18th Street."

Leo and Javier laughed, looking at Mr. C's straight face, watching some AP Spanish kids look up at them from their timed practice exams.

"You think I was trying to get into 18th Street when I fought Joker," Leo said. "Mr. C, this ain't the fifties where you had to fight someone to get in. Nowadays you get jumped in, all of them crazy cholos beat your ass – besides, I'm from Peru."

The bell rang for lunch.

Moses sat on a lunch table, facing the cafeteria doors. He was looking out for Joker, wanting to talk to him about the gold chain. It was Friday and Moses was sure it would become a gift to some chick over the weekend.

Leo and Javier had red chile burritos and Cokes. Moses had about six bananas.

"This is garbage," Javier said. "It's like they put the beef, beans, rice, and vegetables in a blender. Like a burrito puree for babies. It's so frozen it doesn't even have an odor."

"You know who you sound like," Leo said. "The little chef rat from Ratatouille."

"Soon as you school girls are done with your fifth period, we go work out at Leo's," Moses said, "then hang at Elise's, take her car and go to Joker's birthday party."

"What party?" Javier said.

"Leo said Angie said they're giving him a surprise party at that little park on Beverly and Bronson," Moses said.

"We're gonna crash an 18th Street party," Javier said.

"It's a park, what're they gonna do?" Moses said. "And it's Hancock Park.

What can happen to you in Hancock Park?"

It was two packed buses to Leo's house, down Fairfax to Wilshire, then Wilshire to La Brea. Javier was out of History early and Leo didn't care about getting a D in typing, missing his fifth period four times that week. Traffic congestion all the way. The guys got off near Bob's Big Boy. Javier and Leo got their Coke and fries. Moses had his ziplock bag of hard boiled eggs. They walked up Mansfield to Bernie's house.

Bernie Santos had his own place in his parents' garage, a cool loft along the back wall. The guys went through the driveway, trying to avoid Bernie's dad. Mr. Santos never accused them of smoking weed, never asked why incense burned whenever Moses and Leo visited. He'd just gave them that look and asked

strange questions, trivia to test their sharpness.

Bernie was knocked out, with the door wide open and his stereo on. Moses climbed up to his bed, opening cabinets and feeling around on shelves. He reached for a small metal bowl near Bernie's miniature TV, making the loft creak, then sounds of wood cracking. The guys yelled 'Oh shit' and Bernie landed a hard kick to Mo's side. M&Ms fell all over the bed from the metal bowl in his hand.

"Why would I leave my shit way out in the open?" Bernie said, rubbing sleep from his eyes, then pointing to the row of cabinets behind his bed. "I got all these places to hide my shit."

"I leave my shit out in the open," Moses said, jumping down from the loft. "Cops pull me over in my girl's car all the time. Pipe's always sitting there, right in

front of them. Cops never see it 'cause they're looking for something that's concealed."

"You already high?" Bernie said, jumping off the loft. He pulled a piece of aluminum foil from under his mattress and handing it to Moses.

"That's it? That's all you have?" Moses said, seeing a single fat bud in the foil paper.

"Check it, dude. It's got like a purple shade," Bernie said. "Hydroponic. Smells like Maui Wauai."

"Dude, are you high? This is Compton home-grown," Moses said. "You hear about Leo buying a dime bag of oregano and gum?"

"Yeah, that shit happened to me once," Bernie said. "I was fifteen, though."

Leo always rolled because he rolled the tightest joints, careful with the seeds and stems, making smooth fat ones every

time. "You know, in about a month, we're gonna be sitting around here gettin' high and we ain't gonna be high school kids gettin' high in a garage talkin' shit ... Man, we're gonna be grown-ass adults with no jobs gettin' high."

"Are you depressed, dude?" Bernie said, watching Leo light up and pass it. "Lately you talk about the end of high school like it all didn't suck. What's wrong with you?"

"Angie," Moses said.

"You asking her to the prom?" Bernie questioned.

"I don't know, maybe," Leo said, hitting it again. He kept it in, looking like he was thinking about Angie in a prom dress. "Guess it depends on what happens at Joker's party. She's sixteen, you know how them Mexicans are. She's gonna have to bring someone with her."

"Gata," Javier said, watching Moses with his arms crossed in the middle of a cloud of smoke. He inhaled deeply, refusing to take a hit, trying to get a contact high.

"No fuckin' way," Moses said, taking the joint from Javier. "I need a hit, man. You two fools at prom," hitting it good, exhaling and filling the small garage with smoke, "with some tenth-grade hoochie gangsters from 18th."

"You going?" Bernie said.

"To laugh," Moses said.

"Laugh at what?" Javier said.

"All the idiots making such a big deal out of this," Moses said. "Getting all dressed up. Limos and shit."

"You're going," Bernie said.

"To laugh," Moses said, looking at Bernie like, *Duh*.

The incense was burning. Javier looked through the door crack for Mr.

Santos. Moses did chin-ups on Bernie's loft, causing stress to the structure. Bernie looked for his lifting belt so they could all get the hell out of there and go work out at Leo's garage.

"Speaking of laughing," Bernie said, "or not laughing, how was your act last night?"

"It was good. I got political like Javi suggested," Moses said. "I discussed race relations."

Leo rolled his eyes, saying, "He made fun of Mexicans."

Bernie looked over at Javier, who was still on lookout at the door.

"Is that true?" Bernie said.

"I guess," Javier said, leaving his post for another hit. "It was funny."

"Yeah, them fancy fuckers were diggin' the Mexican shit," Moses said. "Yo, you gotta help me with my material."

“You want me to help you make fun of us,” Javier said.

“Us? What us you talkin’ about?” Moses said. “You’re not them. I’m talking about the cholos, the shit-kickers, you know, the low-life immigrants and shit. You’re a chef, dude.”

“You’re an idiot,” Javier said.

“C’mon Javi, this is business,” Moses said. “If there was some way I could help you exploit Peruanos in the food industry, I’d help you!”

“Yeah, but how come just Mexicans?” Javier said.

“You guys are fuckin’ funny,” Moses said, watching Leo and Bernie pass the roach back and forth to each other, neither caring about burnt finger tips. “And you can’t fuck with Jews or Blacks. They’re always in the audience and they’re, you know, too sensitive. Who’s left? Arabs? Makes people think about

the war and that shit ain't funny. Chinos? I don't really know any Chinos and I never been to a Chino's house – but I been to your house. How come you guys wear cowboy hats and boots at clubs? Just tell me that, I really wanna know. I mean, you're indoors, at night, right? The whole purpose of the big brim on the hat is to block the sun, right? The Woody costume goes with the circus music or ..."

Mr. Santos appeared at the door. Javier was inattentive, spacing out. Mr. Santos came in holding a finger to his nose, with the same finger pointing at Moses.

"Who killed JFK?"

"Who killed Tupac?" Moses said.

Then Mr. Santos pointed at Leo, saying, "Julio Cesar Chavez or Manny Pacquiao?"

"Well, you got your divisions mixed up there, Mr. Santos," Leo said. "But

assuming Chavez came down in weight and Manny came up, Chavez in eight. TKO. By the eighth round Pacquiao breaks both hands hitting Chavez in the head."

Mr. Santos turned to Javier, studying him. He usually didn't mess with Javier because he often came over to tutor Bernie in Geometry.

"Who killed Pancho Villa?" Mr. Santos said.

Javier said, "The CIA."

Mr. Santos smiled and walked out.

"I think your dad likes to come in here and catch our second-hand smoke," Moses said.

"He doesn't know," Bernie said.

"How can he not know?" Moses said.
"Then how come he comes in here and tries to fuck with our heads whenever we're high?"

“He probably just got done watching Jeopardy,” Bernie said, finding his belt and turning off the incense. “My dad likes to show off his trivia knowledge.”

“Your dad’s cool people,” Moses said. “One of these days I’m gonna smoke him out.”

“Dude, in front of my dad I wouldn’t even smoke a cigarette, or have a beer,” Bernie said. “Respect, man. It’s a Filipino thing.”

“Mexican, too,” Javier said.

“Well, I don’t care if it’s a Peru thing or not,” Moses said, finishing another set and swinging himself toward the door. “If I ever see my father again, or my step-father, I’m definitely breaking out the Jack Daniels and some chronic – ask these two motherfuckers where they been.”

(to be continued ...)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author Jorge Corral was born & raised in Hollywood, California. Like so many other first-generation Chicanos, he considers himself bilingual and bicultural. Jorge attended Loyola Marymount University, then went to Loyola Law School. He practices law in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Nevada.

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