

## Hit and Run

I was used to getting the thick brown envelopes from Sunny, the sheaf of photos, contact details and a summary of typical movements of the next hit, but I wasn't used to seeing someone I knew. Tony González stared back at me, balding, thin and haggard, but unmistakably Tony.

Tony had been one of the street kings when I was growing up, someone you didn't mess with and who generally wouldn't mess with you unless you gave him good cause. He and I had got on fine and we even ran a short sharp tourist scam one summer, made a few bucks and toasted our shared talents at the Inn on top of Sunset Cliffs. Tony had faded out of the local scene a long time ago and I had pretty much forgotten about him, but someone else obviously hadn't. I called him, he deserved that at least, Sunny might have had a hold on me but, like I said, Tony and me went way back.

The drive from Tecate to the hills above Ensenada was its usual breathtaking self, the rough desert scrub giving way to thick clumps of cacti and giant milkweed dotted between groups of huddled together coyol palms. The height took the edge off the heat of the valley and the expanse of Pacific in the distance seemed to make it cooler still. *Can Cortes* was a group of villas spread out from an eponymous restaurant and an ancient *Almacén General*, the shabby façade in sharp contrast to the local clientele and the Merc SK3 parked outside. Tony's place was easily visible as I came down the hill. Set in two acres, the centrepiece was a large villa fronted by

a pool with a large white awning off to the side covering some recliners and a large dining table. There were some smaller villas spread around the grounds. Life had obviously been good since I last saw him.

The heavy wooden gates eased open after I pressed the buzzer and he eyeballed me through the fisheye remote. Standing beside the pool, glass in hand, he waved over.

'Hey, Ed, come on in. Just you and me, relax.'

He was older and painfully thin.

'Lookin good, I don't see no scars or a paunch.' he shook hands firmly then patted my midriff, motioning me to follow him over to the poolside and a large drinks trolley. He shuffled painfully in front, a roughly hewn walking stick leading the way. I waved my hand towards the expanse of land around the villa as I walked.

'Looks like you've found some easy livin for yourself up here too, ripping off the mob works I guess.'

'Don't let them kid you Ed. I ain't ripped no one off. Here,' he passed the glass, 'gin and soda with a dash of rum, right? Never did get that one.' He motioned over to the deck area and the seats, 'Salud.'

'Salud.' I winked through my Oakleys and raised my glass towards him.

He took a sip from the thick plastic tumbler, 'So why you here, Ed?'

'You've upset someone Paul.'

'Yeah? Don't tell me. That asswipe Sunny, she's hated me for years,' he shook his head slowly and stared into the middle distance.

'Maybe, maybe not. Doesn't matter.'

'So why you Ed?' his eyes narrowed as he looked over at me.

'You know that old story about making the best of what you've got? Well here I am.'

'And a cleaner for Sunny, that qualifies?'

'You do what you do Paul.' I shrugged, taking a sip from the glass.

Paul struggled up from his chair and walked over to the drinks trolley, pouring himself a noisy refill. 'You'll be doin me a favour anyhow. Liver cancer. Diagnosed 6 months ago. I'm supposed to be off the juice but, hey, who gives a damn at this stage, right?'

'Sorry to hear that,' I shook my head, 'Alma know?'

'Screw Alma, Screw all of 'em.'

He eased himself back into the chair and swilled the ice in the tumbler. The sun was still warm but another hour at this time of year and it would have faded behind the scrub covered hills and it would be cold quickly.

'I heard you wanted out, Ed.'

'Hmmm.' I wasn't going to give anything away, I knew Paul was well connected.

'The way I heard it, you were fed up being Sunny's lapdog. That you had your eyes on a little *bar en la playa* over in Espana.' He emphasised each of the syllables, swirled the ice around the glass

and drained the contents, leaving the statement hanging like a ripe fruit for me to pick.

'You get older, your priorities change.' I shrugged.

'Hey, tell me about it.'

We took in the view until Tony broke the silence again.

'Matter of fact I might be able to help.' he made a show of smacking his lips before continuing. 'Remember the Marino Brothers out of Chula Vista, your old patch?'

'Sure. Fat Jerry was killed in a flash-flight last year. Mob hit and run was what I heard.'

'Yeah well, you heard wrong. It was one of Sunny's gigs. She and Jerry had a big fall out over a blackjack game in Vegas. Story is he owed her big so he ran. Sunny downed him a month later. I reckon you and the other two Marino's have something in common. This could be your ticket out Ed.'

I looked straight at him, 'and you can square this?'

'Sure. Micky, Vern and me go back since before when. Used to run dollar and dime scams down La Jolla beach. This is legit, Ed. You'll be doing us all a favour. Speak to Micky, we've already talked about it.'

'Gee, that's great Paul. I'm the last man to find out what's going on in my life.' I shook my head.

He laughed before it subsided into a rattling cough. We sat shooting the breeze for a bit then Paul made the call and I spent twenty minutes on the phone with Micky Marino, offering my

condolences for Jerry and re-playing some of the stuff we had done together years ago. I reckoned this was the real deal.

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I hit the fast dial number on the cell. One of her stooges answered after a few rings. 'Get me Sunny, it's Ed.'

'Screw you.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'Ed?' that chocolate silk voice, unchanged over all these years.

'It's done.'

'Here was me thinking you'd have second thoughts.'

I could feel the wry smile, 'Yeah, well.'

'Better come over and see me then.'

I pressed end call and slipped the phone back into my pocket.

Sunny's place was a mid-sized beachside condo just south of Del Mar. It was rumoured she had a million dollar pad in LA but, like a lot of rumours about Sunny, you were never really sure what was real and what she pushed out to help build her image. The beach is home to me so I took advantage of the location, parked in town and walked the mile or so along it towards her condo.

It was the first weekend of the season at the Racetrack and the wind was carrying the excited loudspeaker noise from the busy track a few miles away. A few surfers were half-heartedly trying to catch the swell and a pile of surfboards lay at the top of the beach loosely covered in a tarpaulin. Green flags were dotted along the beach and the lifeguard was sitting at the bottom of the station steps in animated conversation with a petite blonde, oblivious to

everything else around him. A couple of fat joggers ended their run at the hot dog stand in the car park to re-stock.

She was lying poolside, a wheeled silver reflector capturing the sun and magnifying its warmth over her length, saw me coming through the trellised driveway doors and shouted to security to let me in. It was the same guy I had spoken to earlier so we continued our exchange of pleasantries as I passed. It looked like he was the only one here; my lucky day.

She smiled as she pushed her Dior sunglasses up onto the black headband that was holding her hair back, 'what you drinking Ed?'

'I'll skip it thanks.'

'Suit yourself,' she said, lowering herself back onto the lounge and putting the sunglasses back into place. I moved one of the chairs into the shade offered by the awning reeled out from the front of the house and kicked off my loafers.

'Where'd you put him?'

'An old well behind his villa. Weighted down and gone forever.'

'Huh, uh.'

'He was a mess Sunny. The guy had six months left in him, so what's the point of whacking him, uh?'

'His time was up Ed, he upset someone that's all you need to know. Don't go soft on me.'

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both of us cooling down from the exchange.

'Where's the men's room?'

She lifted her hand drowsily, and pointed towards the house, 'Through the kitchen, second left down the hall. The González cash is on the counter, help yourself.'

I could hear the TV further down the hall and followed the sound to a room where the door was part open and I could see stooge sprawled on the couch, back towards me, picking his finger nails and watching an old black and white movie. I had already fixed the stubby silencer to the Hauser and the noise from both shots was muted to a light hiss.

Sunny had fallen asleep and was snoring lightly, the dwindling sun throwing long shadows across her face, and I had a fleeting moment of regret as I looked down. I had known her for a long time, most of the money I had stashed away was down to her, and some of the memories were good. But she'd been holding me hostage for years and had upset too many people for too long. The Marino's were the tip of a deeply submerged iceberg and if it wasn't me and them now, it would be somebody else soon. Like Paul said, this was my ticket out. I left the gun holstered, it didn't seem right to leave her bloodied rags of flesh splattered across the pool tiles, leant over the recliner, put a knee gently on one edge and gripped her thin neck, pressing quickly, quietly and firmly. She woke with a start, hands rushing to her neck, clawing desperately as she looked up at me. I stared her out and watched her eyes fade and hands go limp and fall to the sides of the chair.

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The bar is closed, the terrace furniture stacked up inside, but the owner has found us a table and chairs and we sip *café solo* between talking. The Med stretches for uninterrupted miles and if I squint hard enough I can imagine I see Marseille but in reality it's a mirage-like shimmer. There's a distant tut-tut announcing the return of the small fleet of fishing boats, the smaller ones veer towards the port, the larger ones continue to Roses where their wriggling cargo will hold centre stage in the evening market, a temporary stopping off point before being driven south to the busy Barcelona restaurants. The town is quiet but in a month or so will start to fill with tourists and the port will be busy with yachts and speedboats ferrying the wealthy from north and south. There's a battered sign – *En Venda* - affixed to the side of the terrace and a sheaf of papers in front of me, the last page freshly inked with my signature.