

## Collateral Damage

by

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### Chapter 1

Last Wednesday was "hump day" so I went out looking for some. Maybe it was the full moon or the recent arrival of spring. Or, maybe it had been too long since I'd last gotten any. I checked out a couple of places but it was still too early for any action to speak of so I took a walk down by the water. Sometimes you can find some pretty women trying to be mysterious, but usually they're drunk and don't know what they're doing. It's easy to get them out of their clothes; they're mostly hanging out of them anyway.

Instead of somebody sexy and willing, I found the body of a girl washed up on the beach. Finding her hit me in a place that I thought was dead. It was the first time I'd seen anybody D.O.A. in the L.A. Basin. With the way gangs like to shoot each other up, you'd expect streets lined with corpses. Don't believe that crap about the dead looking like they're sleeping. They look dead, just like a dog that's been run over and made into street pizza.

I had my little automatic camera so I took pictures. That's my job, taking pictures of weird people and awful things and then writing about them for the preeminent rag of Los Angeles, *The Weekly Purge*. When we finally published the photos, along with the story I wrote about the dead girl, in the black and white of newsprint the flash makes her look even paler. She has seaweed in her hair and her eyes are open.

She still had her clothes on; the daily newspapers would report that morning that she fell off a luxury yacht by Catalina Island. I didn't believe it from the get-go. If that was true, the current would have taken her north to Santa Barbara. It doesn't make sense she would float due east.

This is how I found her. I was standing on the Santa Monica Pier looking down on the beach at a gang of Crips kicking the shit out of some old wino. They were having so much fun I had to laugh. One of them looked up at me and called me *loco en la cabeza*, "crazy in the head." It's just like a punk to call you

crazy when he's the one doing the weird stuff.

All those greaseballs killed a "civilian," that is, a non-gang member, to be in that gang. Brave stuff, killing someone. Sneak up behind a guy sitting on a park bench. Put a gun to his head. Pull the trigger, and you're in. Easy as pie. If they really wanted to show how tough they are, they would find some other gang banger with a gun and shoot it out in the streets. The rest of us would get some entertainment out of it, at least. Sort of like the opening credits to *Gunsmoke*. Meanwhile, they continue to show how tough they are by beating up winos.

I don't believe all that sociology bull shit about disadvantaged minorities. They know white people are afraid of them and all that keeps people of color in their place is knowing the cops will come down on them like the end of the world if they step out of line. So, when they need to whale on someone, they find a wino to destroy because they know there isn't anyone who'll complain.

Remember the L.A. riots? Did you see any cops risking their lives to protect the property of the Koreans? No, of course not. The police beat feet out of Jungletown as quick as shit sucked down a toilet. "Let the monkeys burn down their tree," was the viewpoint.

I did a story on this. The next day every white man in the city flashed down to their local pawn shop to buy shotguns and membership into the NRA. "Gotta protect my famb'ly from them

fuckin' coons," said one citizen exercising his second amendment constitutional rights.

Did you see the scene on TV where the Korean store owners have AK-47s and are shooting it out with the rioters? That made a big impression on the people I interviewed. None of them made the connection the police made. The "fuckin' coons" had enough smarts to stay in their own neighborhoods. Had they ventured into Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades or Santa Monica there would have been the biggest pig riot since the Chicago Convention. The only people with a chance of being safe would have been blond.

Given half the chance, the people living in my town, Santa Monica, would thank the Crips. The cops coddle the homeless people too much is the way they see it. The "People's Republic of Santa Monica," is what everyone calls it. Somehow, the conservatives in the town elected liberals for the city government. Now they have to stew in their own juices. That's what comes from being a bleeding heart.

Beyond being a state of mind, it's hard for outsiders to understand that "Los Angeles" is a generic term as well as a real place. Within, without, surrounded by, and surrounding L.A. are dozens of little cities like Santa Monica. The term, "Los Angeles," refers to an area the size of Rhode Island; room enough for a small state or a large city. I can hardly wait for the big earthquake to come and take out all the freeways. Then, people down here can learn, first hand, how big the place really is.

Anyway, when the wino stopped crying out and begging them to leave him alone I figured it was time to go. These gangs are like sharks; give them a taste of blood and they go out of control. They weren't old enough to tire out by hauling on a defenseless old fart; they might think I was just frisky enough for them. I've had people think that because I don't have any hair on my head I must be lacking in testosterone. Thanks, Samson.

So I went to the south end of the pier and walked down the steps to where the old guy and his buddies sleep at night. During the day it's upscale restaurants, but the moment they close up the fellows with the cheap bottles of wine come out of the woodwork and take over. It beats me why someone would want to pay fifty bucks for a dinner when they have to wade through last night's vomit to get at it.

Further along the strand you reach Venice; L.A. jurisdiction and not Santa Monica; and a row of bars where the really rich yuppies like to go when they're slumming. It'll cost you four bucks for a draft and the guy serving it makes you feel like he's doing you a favor taking your money.

Sometimes the women get ditched by their boyfriends or lose their way to the toilet and end up on the beach. Usually they think it's funny and try to pretend they're MM in some movie and you're Yves Lauren or some other French guy. It doesn't bother me; they can call me anything as long as I get their panties past their knees and their heels up in the air.

That's what I was looking for when I found the girl. From the place where the light of the bars end I walked down to the beach. She was just above the surf line. The tide must have planted her there and then ran out.

In the moonlight you could see she had a pretty face and the kind of body men would kill for to run their hands over. Someone must have poured her into her clothes like jello into a mold. Too bad she was dead was my first thought. She had on somebody's idea of what you're supposed to wear on a boat; white duck pants, a blue navy shirt with little stars on the piping, and sperry topsiders. No socks.

I dragged her up the sand a bit just in case I was wrong about the tide. I must have looked at her for an hour trying to decide what to do. No need to hurry. Finally, I got the camera out of my backpack. I like to take pictures at night. There's something pure about night scenes in Southern California. The smog is gone and there aren't any crowds. The lights only illuminate what someone thinks is important; their house number, the name of a business, street corners so the drunks don't get lost and the sidewalks in front of the banks so the cops can spot the robbers.

The *Purge* lets me write about anything I want as long as I give them a thousand words every week and a sufficiently "arty" photograph to go along with it. In return, they give me enough dollars to pay rent and eat dinner on alternate days at Tom's #5

on Pico and Ocean Park. The fries are greasy and the chili dogs remind me of what I hate to step in but it cleans out the gut and I read someplace that's important.

I don't know why I did it but I told the cops about the photo. Because of my journalistic credentials they didn't confiscate the film, but I could tell they wanted to. The Sergeant in charge looked at me like I was some sort of pervert and said I shouldn't have even moved her, much less taken her picture. Maybe they were angry because I waited until 4 a.m. to call them. Maybe they thought because my last name's Garcia, I'm a Crip. Maybe they just like to push people around.

They didn't want to hear how I'd found her or that I fell asleep waiting before I called them. They weren't interested in knowing my family arrived in the Golden State in 1814 and that I was more American than any of them with relatives who came across the Atlantic in cattle boats after the war to end all wars. They were interested in acting tough so I let them have that. If a man wants to feel big and strong then there isn't anything I can do except stand out of the way.

After the L.A. swine from City Hall were done hassling me, I left the West Side Pig Pen and went straight to the *Purge* office in Santa Monica. I wanted to make some phone calls to see what would happen next. I've seen enough movies to have a good idea but this was the first time it was important enough for me to know if it was true. I needed to get this dead girl out from

under my skin. You don't know the meaning of life until you see it disappear.

An old drinking buddy of mine is a big corporate lawyer specializing in gypping people out of everything they've got. He works for an outfit called SIMCOE. Maybe you've heard of it. They're a real "new economy" kind of place, diversified into every kind of greedy business swindle imaginable. He and his buddies ought to be disbarred and told to make a real living for once. But he answers my questions without charging a fee so that makes him useful to me. For that reason I don't think he should be stood against a wall and shot, like the people he cheats believe.

He's a real techno-weenie. There isn't any kind of electronic gizmo Robert Collier won't buy. Bob's one of those suckers that gets born every minute. He'd buy a pink elephant if it had a wire sticking out of it.

I never call him by his name; my little way of showing the proper amount of disrespect for the profession we all love to hate. "Perry, Perry Mason? Is that you?" I shouted into the mouthpiece loud enough for his fish to hear.

"What do you want, dog-breath?" was how he replied to my early morning greetings. "Have you grown any hair yet?" That was an obvious insult to the Yul Brynner look my genetic framework had forced upon me at an early age. Insensitive people always like to call attention to what they perceive as your

shortcomings. "You know, some people like to sleep in this city."

"Did I get you before your wake up call?"

"Yeah. I like to sleep until at least eight on Thursdays."

"You're telling me it's too early, right? It's light, ain't it?"

He let that one pass. "What do you want? This isn't going to cost me money is it? My law professors in Washington always said I'd meet leeches like you."

"Why do you think every time I call it's because I want something?"

"Because, every time you call, you want something."

"I would be offended if it was anyone but you."

"Thank you," he replied, the sarcasm dripping like motor oil off a diesel engine's dip stick.

"Only real lawyers know how to insult me. Shysters like you are too close to being actual human beings. You're more like a real estate agent. I got something you want so you're forced to be nice to me even if you hate my guts."

"Which I do."

"And you should."

There was the sound of muffled talking in the background before he spoke again. "What do you want this time, Garcia?"

"Who's that in bed with you, my wife?"

"You don't have a wife. No woman is stupid enough to let you marry her."

"Well, if she isn't my wife, it's someone else's. What's her name?"

"None of your business. Good-bye!"

"Wait, wait, wait. Don't hang up."

"Then tell me what you want so I can go back to sleep."

"Sleep? Right." I quickly reviewed my evening, from my hump day yearnings to the soccer game the Crips were playing out on the beach, and my discovery of the blond.

"It's a wonder they didn't arrest you and throw you in jail with the other degenerates. Why did you wait so long before you called?"

"I don't know, Perry; it didn't seem she cared one way or the other. I was thinking."

I heard a snort on the other end of the line like someone inhaling a pound of coke and regretting it.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. That bit about wanting to think caught me off guard, I guess. So what do I owe the pleasure of this shared information?"

"I want to know what happens next."

"Next?"

"Yeah. Is there going to be an investigation?"

"I suppose. What did you say this bimbo's name was?"

"Suppose? Suppose, what?"

"There will be an investigation. Her name..?" he insisted.

"The cops are still working on the I.D."

"So what do you want from me?" he sounded relieved. People get that way when they think they're about through with my questions.

"What are they going to do?"

"Probably, nothing," he replied impatiently. Like reading a statement from one of Reagan's 3 X 5 cards, Collier continued. "They'll determine the cause of death and if anything is fishy they'll look into it. Can I go to sleep now?"

"What makes you think anything's fishy?"

"You're the one who found her. Don't you think there's something odd about a pretty girl washing up on the beach in Venice?"

"You mean it doesn't happen all the time?"

"Goodbye, Garcia." He hung up.

Next, I called the L.A. police station. They wouldn't give me the time of day, which Perry had done so well, until I told them I was a writer with the *Weekly Purge*, and then they told me to piss up a stiff rope and hung up. That's what happens when you write for the most prestigious alternative press voice in the city. You don't get any respect.