

CHAPTER TWO

*America. Land of the free and home of the brave.
What a bunch of shit.*

Scott Wilson stared down across the lecture hall at the words in gold, typed across the base of the American flag poster that hung behind and to the left of the podium. His long legs stretched out into the aisle, waiting for his turn to speak while the fat Mexican kid with glasses and a lisp, who sat in the front row, droned on in a speech about racial profiling and judicial inequality for minorities standing in front of an image projected on the screen of Ruben “Hurricane” Carter.

No one in this country is really free. Not anymore. We're all prisoners of political correctness. Self deprecating cowards of cultural guilt and self loathing, replacing the ignorant culture of racism and slavery with the more socially palatable guise of classism and the minimum wage. I never owned any slaves. I never exploited farm workers. Why am I the bad guy around here because of the color of my skin. Why the fuck am I supposed to feel guilty

about being white? Being poor is the new nigger no matter what your color.

Nobody really wants to be brave anymore. Why the fuck would you? Why would anyone want to put their life on the line every day to uphold the Constitution, only to have some fat kid call them racist for doing their job? They're protecting us from assholes you stupid shit. It's a shitty job. Gimme a fuckin' break. How can you expect cops to do their jobs, shackled by the legal abuse of our own stagnant Constitution, while defense attorneys and the ACLU twist the law in their favor, giving the criminals all the rights and stripping the victims of theirs. Meanwhile these social parasites are freed by bureaucracy and legal loopholes, twisting and manipulating the laws designed to protect the innocent in order to free the guilty. Is that what they died for? Is that why Stephen...

Applause shook Scott from his gaze, interrupting his thoughts. He stood tall, towering over his classmates in the black wide stretched RAMONES t-shirt. He descended the staircase, looking around the lecture hall with a half-cocked smirk of contempt. The applause ceased when he reached the floor. His eyes fell across the faces of the disapproving crowd.

Scott hated Ethnic Studies 125. It was his toughest class. He was only one of six white students who had enrolled in the predominantly Hispanic class of eighty-five, but he needed to pass it to transfer and there were no other alternatives. It was a new state university admissions requirement for underclass students and Dr. Alvarado was the gatekeeper. Two out of the six had already dropped. A Freshman kid

named Christian who used to play hacky sack before class until Alvarado confiscated the foot bag in September and some blonde girl who bailed the first day of orientation after Alvarado brought her to tears by berated her about not knowing who Che Guevera was when he asked her who the guy on her t-shirt was.

Luis Alvarado was a supreme prick. A self promoting political activist in the Latino community who had cut his teeth in the 1970's protesting in the fields with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers movement. He was head of the ethnic studies department at Hartnell Junior College and a tenured professor, protected by his position and the liberal nature of the academic system. He openly used his classroom as a platform for his own politics, denigrating the culture of white America while he touted La Raza. He exercised his first amendment rights of free speech weekly, spouting political dissention and open hostility towards what he termed the "white establishment". He once called President James Polk a thief and a murderer, suggesting that illegal immigrants from Mexico were performing a civic duty for the Mexican government by reclaiming their stolen ancestral land one immigrant at a time. He didn't play by the rules. He knew he had the power to hold students from transfer and it was no secret that held nothing but contempt for his white students.

Scott held his notes tight, clearing his throat with a quick cough. Looming over the podium. He bent down to rest his heavy hands on the pressed oak for comfort, gripping the edge with sweaty palms. His face solemn. He tongued at his lip piercing. Flick-

ing the ring left and right. A couple of deep breaths before looking up into the crowd.

“Our prison system is an epidemic failure.” His voiced boomed through the amphitheater. An aerial photo of San Quentin State Prison appeared behind him on the screen from the overhead projector. He stood tall, looking down at his notes as he gained confidence. He took a deep breath and switched the index card with a smile. He looked back up at the crowd, scanning just above their faces. He avoided eye contact. The words flowed from him. Well rehearsed.

“With seven million Americans in some phase of the penal correction system, whether on probation, parole or the two point two million behind bars, the answer clearly is not a need for more jails. That’s one in thirty-one Americans in some phase of the penal system.” He clicked the controller, turning back toward the screen as the next slide flashed across the wall. The photo showed a group of blacks dressed in prison denims standing behind a chain-link fence topped with two rows of razor wire.

“Even China has fewer prisoners than us, with only one point five million prisoners and yet a population that is five times larger.” He looked out in the crowd for a friendly face. Disappointed. He clicked the controller again. A dockside view of Alcatraz. He brushed back a long black strand of hair with his index finger that had fallen loose from his pony tail down to his chin, stuffing it behind his pierced ear. He had dyed it black at the end of summer. The brown roots had grown slowly but were now clearly visible in contrast with the black, exposed on the

sides up to his temples where he had shaved the Mohawk underneath and let it grow out.

“The key problem with our prison system is the very nature of the incarceration itself as it has evolved over the past five decades. In the thirties and forties, prison was a place of fear and despair.” A long row of double tier green cell doors flashed behind him, fading out of focus with a loud click.

“Stone fortresses of madness and isolation. Work farms where convicts toiled away as legal slaves, paying for their crimes with blood, sweat and tears. Institutions of brutality, degradation and true punishment.” A photo of a mounted Alabama prison guard holding a shotgun while three black inmates in white jumpsuits dug with shovels in a red soil field, their ankles shackled together in heavy chains.

“Unholy places of restraint for those who were truly evil among our society until their timely day of execution.” Scott clicked the next photo. The grey bearded face of a white man stared with blank eyes from the shadows of darkness behind a small opening in a steel door.

“The horror of these places drove the onset of American prison reform in the late sixties and early seventies. But they also had another effect. They successfully deterred the average American from committing violent crimes.”

The screen changed, separated into four images of execution. In the upper left hand corner a man dressed in white hung from the gallows in a faded black and white photo surrounded by a crowd of on-lookers. Beneath it was a color image of an old wooden electric chair in the corner of a darkened

room. The upper right corner of the slide showed the pale lime green paint of San Quentin's gas chamber above the stark sterile picture of a medical execution gurney in front of a viewing window.

"In the first half of the twentieth century you could be executed for violent crimes like rape, robbery and criminal assault. The methods varied over the decades, but included hanging, the electric chair, the gas chamber and now lethal injection. In nineteen seventy-two the death penalty was deemed unconstitutional by the California Supreme Court then five years later it was voted back on the books. Now you can only be put to death for treason and murder in the first degree. Since nineteen seventy-eight our state has only executed four prisoners and the average time on death row is thirteen years. So how is that supposed to be a deterrent? How will anyone fear a death penalty they are certain will never come?"

The image switched. A group of five Hispanic men stood posing in bravado for a photo with their shirts off, dressed in prison denims. Their heads shaved. Arms and chest covered in tattoos. The man in the center had the word Sureño across his stomach in thick old English, stretching from the top of his belly button to beneath his nipples. A solid Black Hand print over his heart with the letter M centered in negative, the image created with the absence of ink. On his neck the letter X and the number three.

"Pinche puto scraps." Erupted from the back of the classroom.

Scott looked up to the top tier of the auditorium. Three seats from the edge. Leaned up against the

far wall. David “Chavo” Vasquez sat back with a cocky smile. Decker out in brown Ben Davis pants and a number 36 Merton Hanks 49ers jersey. Red and black Nike Air Jordan ‘s propped up on the seat in front, the XIV in the soles exposed. He peered down from beneath the blood red “N” Nebraska baseball cap, folded down around his eyes. Hector Perez sat next to him in a white cotton t-shirt and khaki pants, accented by the red canvas belt that dangled between his legs. His mouth framed by a thick black goatee.

The twenty something gangsters were part of an affirmative action enrollment program conceived by Alvarado for at risk Latinos. Sponsored by the US Department of Education and funded by federal financial aid, the agenda was to enroll transitional students into an integrated system to promote education in the community. The result was a militant influx of street hardened foot soldiers for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán. Impressionable fanatics with Alvarado as their Messiah.

Scott read from the note card, trying to ignore the distractions.

“The liberal atmosphere of our California courts, combined with a shift in a society focused on rehabilitation and human rights for prisoners in the prevention of cruel and unusual punishment has transformed our prison system into a criminal institute of higher learning. A finishing school for street criminals where convicts earn both honor and respect from a generation of gang bangers whose prison family tree reads like William the Conquerer’s *Domesday Book*.”

“Tissss.” Hector hissed from his seat. Covering his mouth

Fucking assholes.

A black and white photo of Hispanic men changed behind Scott. In the center was a white banner with the words Nuestra Familia painted in black. A group of six men stood against the wall, three to each side of the flag, some dressed in prison denim while others wore dark sweatshirts. Beneath them knelt four others. A man with short black hair and a thin goatee was seated in the center out in front of them dressed in a denim jacket with legs crossed.

Hector whistled in support.

Scott looked at Alvarado in protest, waiting for some kind of response to the outburst.

Come on you prick. Do something.

The professor stared back with a vacant expression. Ignoring the incident.

What the fuck?

Scott shook his head in disgust.

Racist asshole. If I pulled that shit I'd be fuckin' outta here.

He reached for his left arm, the skin still tender and itching from his newest tattoo. A black Celtic Wyvern on the outside of his shoulder. The knotted tail ending just at the base of his elbow.

Just do your speech. Relax. Get the fuck out of this class and never look back.

He rubbed it with a gentle motion. Soothing the discomfort.

Breathe.

He took a deep breath and switched note cards.

A new photo shows eight Hispanics in front of a chain link fence wearing white uniforms with dark denim jackets. Four stand in the back row with four kneeling in front. Four of them wear white Pachuco style hats with a dark band above the brim.

“The ghettos are full of generation after generation of hardened criminals who have inherited their family legacy of violence and social anarchy, spreading their violent control throughout the state as their family grows.”

Chavo and Hector chatted in the upper deck, the murmur growing in volume.

Scott paused, looking over again at Alvarado. The glance ignored. Alvarado stared off disinterested.

You're such a dick.

Scott continued. His face red in disgust.

Be cool.

His voice boomed. Challenging their volume.

“The cycle of criminality continues as sons become fathers and fathers become grandfathers of violent offenders, spilling out into our streets, terrorizing our communities while most of our citizens, the silent majority live in fear of these outlaws.”

The noise continued, drawing the attention of the students in the front row.

“This cultural experience in the Barrio breeds no fear of imprisonment, but rather rewards and embraces it as a badge of honor.”

Three Hispanic teens kneel on the ground dressed in red hats and red flannel shirts with their hands behind their heads while a Salinas Police Officer grips one by the fingers during a search.

“Pudrete en el infierno. Pinche pigs.” Hector smirked.

A Hispanic girl turned back in embarrassment, looking at Alvarado.

“Pay attention.” Chavo motioned for her to turn around with fierce gesture.

Shut the fuck up.

Scott looked up. Jaw clinched. His face couldn't disguise his anger. Eyes locked with Chavo.

Chavo spread his arms out in challenge. Flashing a fierce glare.

Punk ass gangster.

He looked down and shook his head.

Why do they have to start shit with me? Just be cool. Breathe. Breathe.

“For the gang banger, prison is a sanctuary to increase rank and authority while these domestic terrorists orchestrate their criminal organizations from the safety of solitary confinement.”

Chavo and Hector stared at Scott. Leaning forward. Trying to intimidate him. Talking among themselves.

They're coming for me.

A white man with a shaved head and thick glasses looked out from between the dime size holes in the door to his cell. The AB tattoo on his chest pressed against door.

Don't back down. Keep going.

“The generals operate in the SHU, safe behind the stone walls of San Quentin, Pelican Bay and Salinas Valley State Prison, while the foot soldiers on the outside leave a bloody wake of death and terror on the streets of our community. We afford them phone calls and conjugal visits, mail and outside correspondence, aiding them in their criminal ventures all at the expense of our tax dollars. To the

criminal organizations, those who control the inside control the outside. If crime leads to incarceration, then the faction that controls the strength of numbers, distribution of contraband and security of its members has nothing to fear from the outside world. The illusion of law enforcement is shattered.

Fuck it.

The image changed with a loud click behind him. A crime scene photo he had taken from his father's private files of two Norteños laid out in a pool of blood on East Market Street. Their faces torn open from the shotgun wounds. Their dead eyes staring up blankly in the sky.

"How can you dissuade the most violent element of society without the use of physical violence?"

"What the fuck, eh?" Chavo muttered, pointing at the screen.

The black and white still of Rodney King's beating with a time and date stamp 00:26:25 over 03:49:18 with MAR 3, 1991 to the right flickered.

"To those who will use violence to get what they want there is no compromise other than a swift and immediate use of violence in return."

The crowd began to chatter.

The image of a wailing Hispanic woman holding a small lifeless child to her chest covered in blood in front of an East Salinas home.

"These criminals kill without reproach, while we cower helplessly in fear of losing what we have, what we have earned. To lose what we cherish."

The noise increased. Rising in protest. Heartbroken by the image.

A three quarter shot of a US Army soldiers in urban fatigues holding an M-16 looked out across the lecture hall with a click of the controller.

“In the real world violence is power. The man with the gun in his hand controls his own destiny. A society that fails to meet violence with violence as a mechanism to control its populace will quickly deteriorate into anarchy. We authorize soldiers to kill in war against foreign nations yet we shackle our own domestic authorities. We are all prisoners of violence.”

Scott looked up at Chavo and Hector.

The gangsters fumed.

You wanna fuck with me?

Scott grinned.

“In conclusion, it is time for both California and the United States to come to terms with the fact that we are at war with an army of criminal organizations.”

Scott clicked through to a Norteño sprawled naked on a bathroom floor face down in a pool of blood wedged between the toilet and the bathtub. NORTE tattooed across his back above a sprawling image of an Aztec Eagle.

My gang's dressed in blue.

His face stern.

“As the violence of street gangs spills out from within the prison system into the community like tribes of modern primitives battling for new territory, we are reminded of the ugly truth of urban warfare.”

The crowd became restless.

A black lowered El Camino with the windshield shot out sat askew against the curb. A Hispanic

man dressed in a bloodied white t-shirt and red Nebraska hat laid slumped out the driver side door. Face down in the street. The passenger dressed in a San Francisco 49ers jersey laid hunched down with his head cocked back. Mouth agape.

Chavo ran his finger beneath his chin like the blade of a knife.

Scott stared back at the two gangsters. Unemotional.

Don't fuck with a cop's kid.

"This epidemic will continue to spread from the inner cities to the suburbs, from the suburbs to rural farmlands."

His gaze unrelenting.

Don't fuck with me.

An up carted red tricycle rested next to the body of a small black haired boy, face down on the sidewalk. His blood soaked shirt torn open. Blood pooled beneath his tiny body. His little arms sprawled out. White Reebok shoes peeked out from under his twisted legs.

The crowd gasped. Shocked by the image. Incensed. Tears filled the eyes of many in crowd. Reliving the pain that had moved through the Latino community weeks before.

Hector's face flushed. Recognizing his nephew.

Scott looked back at his notes.

"If we don't find a solution to our broken correctional system and stop this new wave of violent offenders then these will soon be the new faces of America. Thank you."