

# NO ANGEL

**My Undercover Journey to the Dark Heart  
of the Hells Angels**

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CANONGATE

*Edinburgh • London • New York • Melbourne*

PART I

***THE END***



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**TIMMY LEANED CASUALLY** against the rear fender of my black Mercury Cougar, a cell phone on his ear and a smile on his face. The bastard was typically calm. Twelve months I'd been his partner, in and out of harm's way, both together and alone, and the guy never looked stressed. He was as self-possessed as a rooster in a hen house—my polar opposite.

I paced in front of him, rehearsing what I was going to tell our Hells Angels brothers. I shook the last smoke out of a pack of Newports. "Shit." I lit the cigarette, crumpled the pack, and threw it to the ground. It was 10:00 a.m. and I'd already emptied the first pack of the carton I'd bought that morning.

Timmy said into his phone, "I love you too honey cake. I should be home soon." He'd been saying things like that going on five minutes.

I stared at him and said, "The fuck, stud? Come on."

Timmy put a finger in the air and continued on the phone. "OK. Gotta run. Love you guys. OK. See you tonight." He snapped his phone closed. "What's the drama, Bird? We got this."

"Oh, you know. Nothing really." I pointed at the guy lying facedown at our feet. "Just that if they don't buy it, then we'll end up like this asshole."

There, in a shallow desert ditch, was a gray-haired Caucasian male, his head split to the white meat. A pile of brains had oozed to the ground where Timmy had put Joby's .380. Blood droplets, sprayed into the sand and dirt, made small, dark constellations. His blue jeans were splattered with purple, quarter-sized splotches. His wrists and ankles were bound with duct tape, his hands were limp. It was already over 100 degrees and the promise of coagulated blood and exposed matter had begun to attract flies.

He wore a black leather jacket whose top rocker, that curved cloth patch that spanned the shoulder blades, read MONGOLS.

I asked, "You think he's dead?"

Timmy said, "Dude looks deader'n disco. Shit, those look like his brains in the dirt." Timmy leaned in closer. "Yeah, I'd say he's pretty dead." He spat a stream of phlegm into the brush beyond the grave.

"Dude, no fucking around here. We go home and show the boys we killed a Mongol, then we better be dead-nuts sure it doesn't look like he's coming back."

Timmy smiled. "Relax, Bird, we got this. Like Lionel Richie said, we're easy like Sunday mornin'." And then he started to sing. Badly:

*Why in the world  
would anybody put chains on me?  
I've paid my dues to make it.  
Everybody wants me to be  
what they want me to be.  
I'm not happy when I try to fake it!  
Ooh,  
That's why I'm easy. Yeah.  
I'm easy like Sunday mornin'.*

I smiled and said, "You're right, you're right. And even if you aren't, I don't see how it matters. We've come too far."

He thought about that for a second. "Yeah, we have."

We threw a couple shovels of dirt on our corpse and took some pictures. We relieved him of his Mongol jacket, stuffing it in a FedEx box. We got in the car and headed home, to Phoenix.

. . .

**TIMMY DROVE.** I made some phone calls.

I lit a cigarette and waited for someone to pick up at the clubhouse.

Inhale. Hold it in. Click.

The voice said, "Skull Valley."

I said, "Bobby, it's Bird."

"Bird. What the fuck?"

"Teddy there?"

"Not now, no." Bobby Reinstra's voice was humorless and empty.

"We're on our way back."

"'We' who?"

Inhale. Hold it in.

I said, "Me and Timmy."

"No Pops?"

"No Pops. He stayed down in Mexico."

"So Pops is gone." I heard him light a cigarette—he'd only started smoking again since he'd met me.

"Yeah, dude."

"Wow." Bobby smoked. Inhaled. Held it in.

I said, "We should probably talk about this later, don't you think?"

He snapped out of it. "Yeah. Yeah, of course. When'll you be back?"

"Soon. I'll call when we're back in the valley."

"OK. Get home safe."

"We will. Don't worry. I'll see you tomorrow."

"OK. Later."

"Later."

I flipped my cell shut and turned to Timmy. I said, "He bit it. Pops's death should work to our advantage."

Timmy barely nodded. He was probably thinking about his wife and kids. Above all else, Timmy was decent. I looked past him. The asphalt and brown California pines, the late-afternoon grid of Phoenix, Arizona, moved beyond him like a sunset movie backdrop.

**THE NEXT AFTERNOON,** JJ, Timmy, and I chowed at a Pizza Hut. We hadn't seen Bobby or any of the other boys yet. We wanted their tension to build.

JJ's phone rang. She looked at the ID, then at me. I shrugged, stuffed a pepperoni slice in my mouth, and nodded.

She flipped open. “Hello?” She grinned. “Hi, Bobby. No, I haven’t heard from him. You have? When? What’d he say? He said *what?! Bobby, what the fuck do you mean? Pops is—Pops is dead?*” She lowered her voice and choked out the words with a frightened stutter. “Bobby, you’re scaring me! I don’t *know* what the fuck’s going on. All I know is a FedEx box came to the house this morning. It was sent from Nogales, Mexico.” She pulled the phone away from her ear and placed a slice of roasted green pepper in her mouth. She sipped more iced tea. “No way, Bobby! I’m not opening shit. No. Forget it. Not until Bird gets back.”

JJ’s fear was convincing and effective. Our plan seemed to be working.

I leaned into the leather banquette. We weren’t your average-looking cops—we weren’t even your average-looking undercover cops—and we painted quite a picture. Timmy and I were bald, muscular, and covered in tattoos. JJ was cute, buxom, and focused. My eyes were blue and always lit up, Timmy’s brown and wise, JJ’s green and eager. Each of my long, bony fingers was armored with silver rings depicting things like skulls and talons and lightning bolts. My long, straggly goatee was haphazardly twisted into a ragged braid. JJ and I wore white wife-beater tank tops and Timmy wore a black, sleeveless T-shirt that said SKULL VALLEY—GRAVEYARD CREW over the heart. I wore green camo cargo pants and flip-flops, and they wore jeans and riding boots. We each openly carried at least one firearm. Arizona’s open-carry, so there you go.

JJ continued. “No way, Bobby. I’m not coming over there with the box. I’m waiting till Bird gets home. All right. All right. Bye.”

She hung up. She turned back to us and asked sarcastically, “So, honey, when can I expect you?”

I grinned and said, “Any time, now. Any time.”

“OK! Can’t wait!”

We laughed and finished our lunch. We’d been running ragged for months and were in the homestretch. With any luck, Timmy and I were about to become full-patch Hells Angels, and JJ was about to become a real-life HA old lady.

With any luck.

PART II

# ***THE BEGINNING***

## 2

## MY SUCKING CHEST WOUND

NOVEMBER 19, 1987

**I DIDN'T COME** from a line of cops. I wasn't raised in the projects, and an alcoholic father didn't beat me. I grew up in white, middle-class America with a bike and a baseball glove and family vacations. I played football and played it well. I went to college as a wide receiver for the Arizona Wildcats. In that first year, 1982, I showed up at fall camp for two-a-days in a 100-degree hellhole in Douglas, Arizona. The practice field was smack in the middle of the desert. Turf, sidelines, one or two feet of desert scrabble, and then cactus.

Most wide outs want to outrun the defense for game-winning passes, catch the ball over their shoulder, and screw the prom queen. I wouldn't have minded the prom queen, but I wasn't that kind of receiver. The coaches knew this, and they'd put me at number six on the depth chart. That had to change.

I jumped in the play rotation whenever a slant over the middle was called or a crack on a linebacker was needed. I got the dog snot beat out of me, down after down. One play I got an out-route and the ball was overthrown. I ran out of bounds, into the desert, and dove, grabbing the ball but landing in a patch of cholla cactus, which are the nastiest of

all cacti. I spent the rest of practice with the trainers pulling needles out of my face and arms with pliers. The other players laughed at me because what fool chases an overthrow into a cholla?

I checked the depth chart the next day. I'd taken the first spot, and for the rest of my college career, I wouldn't give it up to anyone, no matter how fast he was.

By the time I graduated, I was All Pac-10. I was lightly scouted and I went to the NFL Combine, but from the minute I walked onto the field I realized that my chances were slim to none. One scout put it perfectly. He said, "I can coach these guys to catch like you, but I can't teach you how to run faster." Next to the guys coming up that year, I looked like molasses poured into cement. Guys like Vance Johnson, Al Toon, Andre Reed, Eddie Brown, and Jerry Rice. Maybe you've heard of some of them.

I knew I could cobble together a career of two or three years, but every year I'd have to re-prove myself in camp, and at best I'd be a third- or fourth-string option. My dreams were crushed and I didn't know what to do. I'd gotten too used to crowds screaming for me, too addicted to adrenaline, to just let it go.

Eventually I turned to law enforcement. I was young and I bought into the Hollywood vision of being a cop. I considered the FBI and the Secret Service, but ultimately I ended up at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms—ATF. This was where I'd transform from star college athlete to hardened undercover cop.

It happened on one of my first training missions, and it went down like this:

We'd gotten a warrant for one Brent Provestgaard, who'd just gotten out of prison and was rumored to be in possession of a used .38 Rossi. We were going to bust him on ATF's bread-and-butter violation: felon in possession of a firearm, 18 USC section 922(g)(1).

I was assigned outside perimeter cover with my training officer, Lee Mellor. We rode in a crappy 1983 Monte Carlo. We interviewed Provestgaard's mom at her house south of the Tucson airport, at the intersection of Creeger Road and Old Nogales Highway. She said he wasn't in and he'd be back sooner or later. We left and staked out the place.

What Mrs. Provestgaard declined to tell us was that her son had sworn he'd never go back to prison, and that he was out in the Tucson scrub shooting his .38.

He came home on his motorcycle. We swarmed and he bolted on foot. I took off, passing everyone and disobeying orders to stay back. While a 4.6 in the NFL is nothing special, it's sick speed for a cop. It was a full-blown foot chase, but he knew the area and I lost him. I reassembled with my team and they ribbed me about how I was supposed to be some sort of star athlete, but I couldn't catch a 150-pound junkie in motorcycle boots? No wonder I was in ATF and not the NFL, that kind of thing.

As we restaged, a neighbor yelled from her window that she'd just seen Provestgaard. We took off.

First rookie mistake: no matter how out of breath you are from chasing a perp, never, ever take off your ballistics vest when there's a lull in the action.

Which is exactly what I'd done.

The team split up. I walked behind our much-loved boss, Larry Thomason, through an overgrown tract between a development and the road. Tall grass and low trees were everywhere. We crept past the hidden Provestgaard. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye but before I could react he was up with his gun on me.

"Drop it, motherfucker!"

I knew better. I held my gun, a .357 Smith & Wesson revolver, at the ready position: pointed to the ground at a 45-degree angle. He cocked the Rossi's hammer, yelling, "Motherfucker, I will kill you where you stand! Drop the fucking gun!"

I holstered my revolver and put my hands in the air. Thomason cocked his hammer. He had Provestgaard in his sights, but he was toting a two-inch-barrel revolver and he was thirty feet away. Thomason knew that if he fired there was a good chance he'd hit me. He held. It was the right decision, but one that gravely altered his psyche: He was a committed leader in charge of showing a young man the ropes of a dangerous profession, and he never forgave himself for not taking that shot. I've always told him that the blame was mine, but he never accepted that.

The others, searching an adjacent area, responded. When Provestgaard saw the empty Monte Carlo, his eyes—intense, bottomless specks—lit up. He was going to get out of there.

Provestgaard's gun was thrust out in front of him. When he got close enough, I planned on pulling his arm and using it as leverage to disarm

him. That plan died when he tucked the gun to his side. Before I knew it he had me in front of him, his arm around my neck, the cold barrel of the Rossi at my temple.

I didn't like that. I suddenly realized that it had rained earlier and the desert brush smelled like a clean backyard, which is what I imagine heaven must smell like. I hoped I wasn't about to find out if my imagining was correct.

We moved to the car. Provestgaard shoved me into the driver's seat and squeezed into the back, keeping the gun on my head. ATF agents surrounded us, their weapons drawn and their mouths running.

Provestgaard said, "Close the door and drive, motherfucker!"

I didn't. The car wasn't running. The keys were in the ignition. He shoved the barrel into the hollow of my neck. I wondered: Should I drive, put the seat belt on, and run into a telephone pole? Or get shot here and let my partners waste him? Or hope one of them gets a clean line on him *right this second*? Or lie down and try to stay out of the way of everyone's bullets that were sure to puncture the Monte Carlo any second? Or, or, or . . . drop the keys? Yes, drop the keys. If I was going to die, then he was going to die too. I pulled the keys out of the ignition and let them fall into the footwell.

I said, "I dropped the keys."

"Motherfucker—"

I leaned forward and Provestgaard did too. Mellor, who was closest to the passenger's side of the car, stuck his revolver in the rear window gap and emptied it. Others fired. Provestgaard, his body shocked from the bullets cleaning out his heart and lungs, reflexively squeezed the Rossi's trigger. The bullet went in between my shoulder blades, just missed my spine, punctured the top of my left lung, and exited under my collarbone.

Provestgaard had the death rattle.

I had a hole in my chest.

They call it a sucking chest wound because when you inhale, air is sucked through the wound directly into the void of a collapsing lung. Blood gushed out of the hole like water from a garden spigot.

We were dragged out of the car. Provestgaard was cuffed (you have to love police procedure in times like this), and laid in the dirt faceup. I was shoved into the backseat, in pools of Provestgaard's blood and bile and tears, and Thomason jumped into the front seat and took off. I was

in and out of consciousness as Thomason channeled Dale Earnhardt Jr. through the Tucson dusk.

I said the Lord's Prayer and apologized to my parents for not being a good enough cop to make them proud. Then I took a little nap.

I came to at the hospital. I was on a gurney, the ceiling rushed by in blue and white streaks, the soft but anxious pitter-patter of nurses' and orderlies' feet on linoleum filled my ears. There were two black nostrils above me, and above them a tuft of brown hair, and around that a half-moon of white paper. A hat. My nurse. Her gaze was locked on the horizon.

I asked, "I'm—I—am I going to die?"

She looked down. She was pretty. Her left hand pushed into my chest. "You're hurt bad. We're not sure yet."

I passed back out.

I woke back up to a screaming pain in my chest. A boyish resident was inserting a clear tube into a hole he'd scalped through my rib cage to prevent me from drowning in my own blood. The tube would also be used to clear blood clots before I went into the operating room. I'd never felt such pain and discomfort. Having an inch-wide tube inserted into a raw hole of flesh was like, well, it was just like that. I was not anesthetized—there hadn't been time. I was dying. I looked at the tube, which was attached to a pump. Stewed tomatoes—aka my blood and guts—pulsed through it. When he was done with that, the resident directed me to a video screen. He said proudly that they'd put a shunt in my femoral artery that helped guide a medical camera through my torso. He said they were looking for heart and arterial damage caused by bullet frag. I thought, Far out.

I passed back out.

I woke back up naked and freezing. A nurse leaned over my midsection, holding a thin tube, giggling. I asked her what was so funny? I knew she was laughing at a shriveled dick whose size would have embarrassed a twelve-year-old boy. I gathered all my strength and said, "You could have a little respect for a guy who should be dead, and what exactly is your name?" She straightened up and stuck the catheter in. She covered me up and put her hand on my forehead. I passed back out.

I woke back up. I was in a bed. The bed was in a recovery room. There were all the usual machines going beep-beep. There were IV bags

and fresh flowers and foil balloons. There was an oversized teddy bear. My feet were elevated. And there was the tube, inserted cleanly into my chest, surrounded by white gauze and tape. A beep-beep went off, unlike the beep-beeps monitoring my heart and respiratory rates. A sound like a small servo followed. Not ten seconds later I was as high and happy as I could be. I passed back out.

I woke up, I passed out, I woke up. Nurses changed my bedpan and sponged me down. I recovered some strength, I got up and walked around, dragging my setup—the IV, the morphine drip, the chest tube detached from its pump—around with me. After a few days I could walk up and down the hall once. After a week I could walk around the recovery unit. Being so weakened was a new experience and a definite low point. It's truly humbling to be reminded that ultimately we're just a body. The mind gets a lot of attention, but it is housed, for better or worse, in such a fragile thing. The body goes and, well, who knows? This is why I believe in God.

I prayed. I've always been an imperfect Christian. I prayed for my family and for myself. I prayed I'd get to go back to the streets, to go back to work.

As I improved, I began to spend equal amounts of time awake and asleep. I befriended Dr. Richard Carmona, the surgeon who'd operated on me. He was a high-school dropout who'd enlisted in the Army, joined the Special Forces, became a decorated Vietnam vet, and then returned to civilian life, where he took up a career in medicine. He was the head of trauma services in Tucson and moonlighted as a SWAT operator with the Pima County sheriff's office. Not ten days after I came in, he was shot himself while executing a warrant. He made a full recovery and eventually went on to become the seventeenth U.S. surgeon general. Gaining Dr. Carmona as a friend was one of the best things that came from my getting shot.

People visited, they stayed too long, my mother cried. My dad, shocked and pale, said he was proud of me, even though I pointed out that I'd been a fool. We agreed that I'd been lucky. Other people came: college buddies, cops, my first wife, whom I'd married out of college. The pump attached to my chest tube ran nonstop. It cleared my wound of clots and errant blood, emptying the stuff into an otherwise white bucket by my bedside. When people stayed too long, I wiggled until the suction caught something, expelling it into the bucket like a tiny abortion. That usually sent them packing.

I got deathly bored. You can watch only so much TV, and the flowers die if they're not watered. I didn't do a good job of watering them. The balloons deflated. It's as if these things are brought to give their meager life-forces to your recovery, dying along the way. I was being reanimated by withering roses and expiring helium. Hell, morphine makes you think funny things. I'd developed quite a taste. No doubt, I was in excruciating pain, especially the first week, but after that it was more recreational than essential. My morphine bump was self-administered but limited by a timer—I couldn't hit myself more than once over a three-hour period. So I secured the switch with some medical tape from my IV and I'd get a narc bump whenever the timer went off, awake or asleep. I had some wild dreams. It was heaven.

The director of ATF called. He called me his golden boy. I didn't like being called a boy, I was twenty-six. He said he'd heard good things about me, and that if I played my cards right I could have his job one day. He told me to get well soon and get back on the job, that they needed more guys like me in ATF. I thanked him and hung up.

At night I'd wake up from time to time. I had a funny feeling. The lights were low, the machines beep-beeped. As I got better, there were fewer and fewer of them in the room. A good sign. The feeling I got was a new one. It was a rush I'd never known. On the football field, I'd been hit a thousand times by hundreds of guys my size or bigger. I'd taken some real kill shots and always tried to get back up right away. It was a pride thing. When they dragged me out of the car, my chest spurting and gurgling, I actually pulled myself into a sitting position. It was the best I could do. The new feeling was this: I couldn't be stopped. After being shot, I began to feel the first pangs of invincibility. The rush of near-death did something dangerous to me, though I couldn't see it at the time. I didn't want to get shot ever again, but I wanted to get as close to that flying bullet as I possibly could. Getting cheered by eighty thousand football fans was an incredible feeling, but it didn't even register when compared with the rush of walking the line between life and death when no one was watching.

I'd taken the prescribed amount of painkillers, but that didn't change the fact that when I left the hospital I felt like a full-blown junkie. I had black circles under my eyes and puked brown tar for a week. No appetite for anything but the smack I couldn't have. I cleaned up: shakes, sweats, tears, the whole thing.

My wife at the time wanted to know if that was it for me. She

wanted me to get out. I couldn't blame her. I said this was why I was in it. She asked, "To get shot?" I said, "No, to go toe-to-toe with these guys. I lost this time, but I won't lose again." Not long after that, we got divorced.

The director's words rang in my ears: *I could have his job*. His job involved a large slab of wood and an executive-style telephone with lots of buttons and lights. Shoot, in that year, 1987, he probably even had his own computer. It didn't appeal to me. The bullet put the rush of the streets in me and through me. It guaranteed I'd never direct anything but myself, and convinced me that large desks were for castrated dummies. I thought, Fuck that, I'm gonna be an undercover.

**“YOU’RE LOOKING AT THE  
LOVES OF MY LIFE IS  
WHAT YOU’RE LOOKING AT.”**

**AUGUST 2001—JANUARY 2002**

**IF ANYTHING, THE** shooting proved that my job, and therefore my life, was not glamorous in any way. Pathetically, I’d imagined that undercover life would be like *Miami Vice*—full of cigarette boats, fast cars, expensive clothes, and perfect tens in bikinis sitting in my lap while I negotiated with drug kingpins. Instead, I confronted toothless strippers and disgruntled Vietnam vets, and did deals with jonesing tweakers in trailer parks while getting shot by a broke-dick ex-con who lived with his mom.

Still, I loved the job. After the shooting, I went back to the academy to complete my training. Upon graduation, they sent me to Chicago, where I learned my new job with another young agent, Chris Bayless, a dynamic and intelligent undercover operative who remains one of my best friends.

And what a job! In the years between the shooting and the summer of 2001, I’d done and seen things that citizens simply don’t do or see. I’d been in another shoot-out, I’d had an inhuman number of guns shoved in my face, I’d bought and sold tons of drugs, and I’d made hundreds of solid collars. I’d worked African-American gangbangers and

Italian mobsters with Chris; the Aryan Brotherhood with Special Agent Louis Quiñonez; and bikers from Georgia to Colorado with a bunch of different partners, including one of my ATF mentors, Vincent Cefalu. By 2001, I thought I'd seen it all.

Yet, after nearly fifteen years on the job, I still had something to prove. I still had more to see.

**IN THE SUMMER** of that year a young, ambitious case agent named Greg "Sugarbear" Cowan called about running some game up in Bullhead City, Arizona.

Sugarbear said that Bullhead was ripe for the picking, and that getting evidence up there would be like shooting fish in a barrel. He said we could take a lot of guns off the street. I agreed to have a look. One morning I got up, ate breakfast, rustled the hair of my son, Jack, kissed my daughter, Dale, grabbed a plate of cookies that my wife, Gwen, had baked, and hit the road.

Bullhead City is near the southern tip of Nevada, ten hours from where I lived in Tucson. It's a broken-down town full of semi-employed mechanics who've shacked up with women who are—or were—"dancers." It's a meth capital teeming with high-school dropouts, and it's all set down in a brown and tan valley that looks more like Mars than Earth. Across the brown Colorado River is Laughlin, Nevada, Bullhead's dusty twin sister, with her twinkling strip and brand-name outfits: Flamingo, Golden Nugget, Harrah's.

I met Sugarbear at the Black Bear Diner on Route 95. We sat in a window booth in the refrigerated air while the desert sweltered outside at 115 degrees. He slurped coffee and nibbled at dry toast while I crammed a bacon double cheeseburger into my mouth.

He talked about a local gun shop called Mohave Firearms. The owner, Robert Abraham, dealt with a band of regulars who were all gun strokes. Most of the deals were off the books and there were significant numbers of modified machine guns going in and out of the shop. A guy named Scott Varvil, a former Marine sniper and ace bike mechanic, did the machine-gun mods in his garage.

We drove around town after lunch. I watched the dusty roads and subdivisions skim by from the comfort of our car's air-conditioning. Sugarbear said I'd go undercover as a biker. I said fine, in spite of the

heat and the fact that I wasn't a biker expert. He said he knew I'd be fine, that I looked the part and that bikers were respected in Bullhead. I said I imagined they were. He said that all the guys, especially Abraham and Varvil, were Hells Angels groupies. He said the Angels were around but not everywhere. I didn't think much of it either way. I agreed to come on board.

We got started in late August. Cowan continued to run an informant while I staged-up in Tucson. I got my bike tuned and checked out an ATF car—a black Mercury Cougar. I took target practice at the field office. I helped Gwen get the kids off to another year at school, making trips to the mall. Jack, a good athlete, got cleats and gym socks and a book bag. With saved allowance he bought a box of Fleer football cards. He was on the hunt for Drew Brees rookies. He got three from that batch. I bought Dale a used guitar, with the promise that if she applied herself I would get her a brand-new one down the road.

In the early morning of September 11, I was at home getting ready to leave when Chris Bayless called. He said turn on the TV.

The ride to Bullhead was off. Gwen and the kids and I sat mesmerized in front of the TV, like everyone else. Jack, who was seven at the time, is a fun-loving kid who's always smiling. Dale, then eleven, is a little moodier, endearingly righteous, and occasionally indignant. Gwen and I sensed fear and confusion in them. We sensed fear and confusion in each other. We watched the gray explosions over and over and over. I told my kids, "Be brave. That's what this is, a chance for you to be brave. Set a good example for other kids who might be scared. And be proud that you're an American because we're about to kick some ass."

I spoke with Sugarbear later that day. We were pretty sure the Bullhead case would be deep-sixed or at least put on hold, but to our relief this didn't happen. I looked forward to work. I didn't want to sit around and think about how America had just been attacked.

By the end of the following week I was holed up in Bullhead at Gretchen's Inn, a contemptible riverside hideaway off Route 95. From the outside it looked harmless, but from the inside it was something else. A fleabag meth flophouse, busted locks on the doors and windows that wouldn't close, people screwing all day and night. I slept with my arms folded over my chest and one of my beloved Glock 19s in my hand.

On the night of October 22, 2001, as I listened to method-out tweakers bang away above and below my room, I lay down for the last time as 100 percent Jay Dobyns. The next day our case, code-named Operation Riverside, would go into full swing. Sugarbear's informant, Chuck, would take me to Mohave Firearms for some introductions. Chuck would say, "This is Jay Davis. Good guy to know. Good guy to be known by."

**HERE'S WHAT I SAID:**

What's up? This's a nice place you got here, looks like you know your business. Yeah, Jay's my name, but everyone calls me Bird. Here's my card. *Imperial Financial*. I do collection work. Yeah, that kind. You know, a John Doe fucks up at the Bellagio and goes back to Omaha with a line of unpaid credit, they can't send a security detail to beat the gold out of him on his front lawn. Bad publicity. That's where I come in. Yeah, I guess it's pretty cool, if I stop to think about it, which I don't. Pays the bills, keeps the lawn green, and doesn't take up too much of my time. Yeah, I ride. You see a patch on my back? Well, then I'm not a One Percenter, so quit asking. Yep, that's my bike, the one with the baseball bat strapped to the sissy bars. What's it for? I'm a huge D-Backs fan, Luis Gonzalez is my boy. Naw, man. Whaddaya think? That's right, dude, the collections. Baseball bat can come in handy in my line. But, listen, I got another business, maybe you can help me out? I need guns. Small ones, big ones, fast ones, slow ones. No papers. Hit-and-run deals I can throw in the river, you know what I'm saying? I appreciate your discretion, dude, you're a class businessman. Yeah, so what if I already got a couple pieces? My Glocks are my babies and they're for me and me alone. Right now I'm looking for .45s. Also, know anyone who can work on my bike? You do? Thanks, dude, I owe you one. Anytime you wanna go down to the Inferno for beers, you let me know. Next night out is on the Birdman.

Bob Abraham, the owner of the gun shop, filled in the blanks. He was forty-seven, short, portly, strong, and knowledgeable about every

gun under the sun. The intro went well—Abraham ate every scrap and crumb.

The next day he sold me two .45s, no papers, no forms. All cash. It was too easy.

Through the years I was often amused by how quickly suspects decided to trust me. Criminality is a brutal, sometimes comical, game of one-upmanship. Bad guys are constantly trying to prove to one another—and themselves—that they're badder and harder than the next guy. This is one reason Abraham wanted to know if I was a "One Percenter."

This phrase originated when rogue bikers ran roughshod over a 1947 motorcycle rally in Hollister, California. These troublemakers were described as "the one percent of the American motorcycle riding public that is criminal" by the American Motorcyclist Association. The name stuck, and was proudly worn by those riders who considered themselves to be "outlaws." Since law-abiding bike enthusiasts—"Ninety-nine Percenters"—had ostracized these outlaw riders, and since they were usually societal outcasts to begin with, they formed clubs. These riders were easily identified by their motorcycle vests—leather or denim jackets, usually with the sleeves cut off and therefore known as "cuts"—which were adorned with the "three-piece patch" of the outlaw biker. This patch was really three separate patches found on the back of the vest; it consisted of a large center patch depicting the club's logo (the infamous laughing winged skull, or "Death Head," in the case of the Hells Angels); a curved, rocker-shaped "top rocker" containing the club's name; and a "bottom rocker" containing the vest-wearer's charter affiliation, usually the name of a city, state, or, in the case of international clubs, country. The four major American outlaw clubs are the Pagans in the east, the Outlaws in the Midwest, the Banditos in Texas, and the Hells Angels, who are found throughout the country in at least twenty states. The other three clubs may beg to differ, but the Hells Angels are the *premier* outlaw club in the United States—and the world.

Abraham wanted to know if I was a One Percenter because if I was, I would've had instant credibility. It didn't matter that I wasn't a One Percenter, though, because for small-time guys like Abraham, credibility was cheap.

After a couple more sales, Abraham intro'd me to Scott Varvil, John Core, and Sean McManama, who intro'd me to Tim Holt, a machinist

who ended up making me a bunch of silencers. Each of these men had four things in common: They loved guns, they were white, they were not rich, and they all told me they knew Smitty, the local Hells Angels brass.

Smitty belonged to the Arizona Nomad charter of the Hells Angels. Most large One Percenter clubs have Nomad charters. They're divisions within the club that belong to a state but don't have a fixed location. At the time, the Arizona Hells Angels had fixed charters in Tucson, Mesa, Phoenix, Cave Creek, and Skull Valley, while their Nomad charter kept a small clubhouse in Flagstaff. They had the state covered.

I'd seen Smitty around. He looked like a hippie granddad—a swirling black and white beard, big old-man eyeglasses, a bald crown that topped a curtain of long, stiff hair. When he smiled, which I'd learn was often for a Hells Angel, he looked like a lovable goofball.

Varvil loved Smitty the most. Varvil maintained that the Angels wanted to recruit him, but that they couldn't because of his job, which he refused to give up. He was a school nurse, which was simply not badass enough.

Varvil was the most interesting of the Mohave Firearms bunch. I first got with him on November 7, three short weeks after having met Abraham, when along with Abraham and the informant, Chuck, we paid Varvil a visit. I wanted to drop off my '63 Panhead to see if Varvil could fix it. He said he could. We admired his Harley Road King for a while, and as Varvil gloated over it, Chuck said, "Well, we've seen your scooter, now where's the guns?" Varvil asked Abraham if he trusted us, and Abraham said, "They know about my toys, so if we're going down, I guess we're all going down together—yeah, I trust them. I trust them with my life."

Varvil proceeded to let us into his gun vault, a fifteen-by-twenty-foot room off the cluttered garage. Every wall of the room was lined with guns of every kind from damn near every decade of the twentieth century and probably two dozen countries. Varvil handed me an AR-15 with a three-position switch and said, "Yep. Fully auto. Did the work myself." He stuck a thumb in the direction of a hulking machine mill. "Man, I can trick out these ARs all day."

Good for him. After a while, we left.

Weeks passed and we worked. The guys were flush. I did a ruse deal with John Core. I told him I was selling guns to some Mexican gang-

sters at a body shop, and I asked him to come along as backup. Before we went to the shop, we stopped at a 7-Eleven for gas and Big Gulps. After the Cougar filled up, I dumped my soda on the pavement and filled the Big Gulp cup with gasoline. I said, "Look, these are bad fuckers. We're gonna go in there and take care of business, but if shit goes bad, I'm gonna throw this on the main dude and flick my cigarette at him, send him up in flames, got it? Then we run like hell." The guys we were "dealing" with were all cops, and this was never going to happen, but Core thought it was as real as daylight. He was so nervous during the deal that he ashed his cigarettes into the tops of his shoes so as not to offend the buyers by littering on their floor.

After that I set up some deals with Core and Sean McManama, and, with McManama's help, had Tim Holt custom-manufacture the silencers. McManama also asked me to kill his wife's ex-husband and gave me the gun to do it.

This "murder-for-hire" scenario was one I was familiar with. My MO in these situations was to slow-play the request, demanding that if I were to undertake such a serious crime, it had to be on my own terms. Often, in the interim, suspects would come to their senses and I'd be called off. Murders-for-hire were usually beneficial—I could gain credibility for being willing to kill for money, and the prosecutors would have a good conspiracy charge to level against a suspect when his or her day came in court.

I accepted McManama's request according to my guidelines, and sure enough, a few weeks down the line, he called me off, while I cultivated the reputation of being a hit man.

I stayed on Varvil, but he only danced around deals. I went to pick up my bike and found him fiddling at his workbench, wearing baby-blue nurse's scrubs. When he saw me he got up and took a Sig Sauer pistol from the table, stuffing it into his waistband, the grip hanging over the lip of his drawstring pants. We shook hands and he walked me over to my bike. He straddled it, started it up, and rode the throttle in neutral.

He yelled over the engine, "That Spectre pistol Core's selling you? How much he want?"

I yelled back, "A grand."

"Mommy. That's too much for a pistol, Bird. It was me I'd charge you three hundy."

"That's cool of you, dude, but he ain't budging. All the same to me,

just have to work extra hard”—he turned off the engine and in the sudden silence I was still yelling—“on the next collection.”

He shrugged, said, “Hey, it’s your money.”

I stuck my chin at the bike. “Sounds good.”

“Like a motherfucker.” He cut the engine and swung his leg over the seat in a fluid motion, the pistol still in his waist. It defied gravity, with so little baggy cotton medical nonsense holding it in place. “Hey, come with me. Wanna show you something.”

He led me to the gun room. It was the same as before: gun after gun after gun. Varvil opened a large drawer and started rummaging through it, pulling out rags and rifle butts and holsters and bulletproof vests, throwing everything in a heap. He spoke in a stream of words. He sounded like he was tweaking on meth: “Abraham and those guys want me to trick out everything they got. Fuck that. I don’t need more automatic shit sitting around to incriminate my ass. These guys don’t understand the risk I take doing all their fucking mods. Shit, I already got a PVC garden out back that would make Ted Nugent cream his pants.” I assumed this referred to his backyard, where he’d buried his excess firearms in sealed PVC piping. He stopped going through the drawers and put his hands on his hips. “There you are.”

Varvil removed an MP-40 from the drawer. “This’s a German Schmeisser. The Nazis used it during the invasion of Poland. It’s an open-bolt, blowback, slow-cycle machine gun. And this”—he pulled out another gun—“is British. Sten gun. Come by these once in a while.”

“Cool. Can you get me any of those?”

“Sure. I’ll keep my ear to the ground. This! This is an STG-44, Russian, precursor to the AK-47. You can switch this shit on the fly. Better have your clips handy. And this. This is a snowplow. A flat-top AR-15, but the sighting mechanism is for clearing brush.”

He lined the machine guns along the blank wall next to the door-jamb. He handed me the Sten. I placed it alongside the MP-40 and we stepped back. Varvil looked down on his collection, his arms folded. He gave his head a slow, prideful, almost disbelieving shake. He took a deep breath through his nose, filling his lungs, and made a little stab with a short exhale from the back of his throat. He was in awe.

“Bird? You’re looking at the loves of my life is what you’re looking at.”

**WE RAN AND** ran and ran, and I cracked the whip. Sugarbear had trouble keeping up. Within twelve weeks I'd purchased a grab-bag of guns: a Czechoslovakian .32-caliber semiauto pistol; a Rohm .22-caliber revolver; an FIE model A27 .25-caliber pistol; an Intratec Tec-22, 9 mm pistol with compatible silencer; a Sites Spectre HC 9 mm semiauto pistol; a Ruger .22-caliber model 1022 rifle with a sawed-off thirteen-inch barrel; and a Colt AR-15 .223-caliber machine gun. I bought forty-odd silencers from Holt, with McManama acting as a middleman. The silencers, the machine gun, the sawed-off, and the Tec-22 with the silencer were all banned weapons. I was never asked to fill out any paperwork, as I'd always implied to them that I was using them for kills or that I was running them south to Mexico to sell at a markup. The guys didn't ask questions. They made quick tabulations with the criminal calculus and nodded to me like I was their dear old brother. I danced around four murder solicitations, delaying or bluffing, never actually killing anyone for money. They all kept me very busy.

During that fall and winter my son, Jack, kept me busy too.

I made sure to drive down to Tucson twice a week to coach a rabid gang of seven- and eight-year-olds in a T-ball league. During the whole Riverside case I never missed a single game, even if I had to drive through the night, showing up as the boys took the field. I did this because I felt guilty for not being there, but I also did it because it was a pleasure. For a couple of hours a week I was around innocence. I could encourage kids to succeed and hug them after they did something fun. It was the highlight of my week.

One Saturday in mid-January, Jack reminded me that we didn't have a T-ball game on Tuesday.

I asked, "Why not?"

"I dunno. Martin Luther King Day's on Monday, so for some reason they canceled the game on Tuesday."

"Right, then next Saturday it is."

On Sunday I went back to Bullhead with a trunkful of food made by Gwen. As I left the house, my family stood in the front yard, waving. I thought, Jay, you're a lucky man.

That night I hung out at the Inferno Lounge with Abraham and Varvil. The Inferno was the place to be and be seen in Bullhead City. It was a dark, bland bar in an unremarkable two-story concrete building, with bikini-clad bartenders keeping the customers coming back.

Regular citizens and small-time crooks were the main clientele, but it also attracted a fair number of outlaw bikers. Smitty came through two or three times a week.

Varvil and I sat at the bar, talking about the Florence Prison Run. Everyone knew about the Florence Run. All the Arizona clubs saddled up and rode out to the Florence prisons to pay tribute to their incarcerated brothers. I said I'd never been, and Varvil said it was a sight to behold. I told him I thought I'd go, even if I had to go alone. It sounded too damn cool.

Abraham emerged from the john, walked over to us, and climbed onto his stool. He wrapped his hands around his beer and stared at the TV, which showed a Colin Powell interview intercut with images of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Abraham said longingly, "Man, talk about a fucking market." Neither Varvil nor I said anything. We weren't sure what he meant. Abraham said, "Man, if I could, I'd build a fucking bridge from Afghanistan to the front door of my store . . ."

Varvil was shocked. "Bob, what are you talking about?"

"I'd sell those Arab boys some guns, is what I'm talking about!" He pointed the glistening top of his beer bottle at a group of bearded Taliban.

Varvil nearly choked. "So they could kill Americans with them?!"

"Hell, yeah! I don't give a shit. Money is money, and if a mother-fucker needs a gun, I want to be his guy."

I said, "Dude, you're fucked up."

Varvil, the ex-Marine, looked at Abraham like he was a leper and went back to drinking.

Abraham changed the subject. "Say, Bird, you doing anything tomorrow?"

"Not that I know of."

"I'm going shooting, out in the desert. Wanna come?"

"What's the occasion?"

He took a long swig of beer and said, "It's Nigger Monday. I know those lazy feds always take their holidays to drink beer and sit around, therefore I know I won't get caught with any of my really fun toys out in the bush." He tapped his temple, indicating his brains, which, had it been acceptable, I would have enjoyed bashing.

I said I didn't think I'd make it, finished my drink, and left.

I didn't take Martin Luther King Day off. I did paperwork, concen-

trating on Abraham, and visited Holt at the machine shop to pick up another batch of silencers. The whole time I thought, Abraham, you fat fuck, here is one fed who's working the long weekend, and one day you are going to go to jail for just a little bit longer because I decided to work on "Nigger Monday," 2002.