

THE FIRST PAGE OF AN UNTITLED CRIME NOVEL
by David Knuckles

There would be no more running water in the town of Hendersonville, not to mention the hearing in my left ear, which had slowly disintegrated into a soft radio static. The woman behind the counter said *ice tea* when I thought she so boldly asked if I needed to pee. I was still so vulnerable, I needed to be at least a hundred more miles west before I could feel comfortable with my surroundings. Confident no one would walk through the door and say *I'm gonna blow your brains out on the count of three*, when all I'd hear him say was *I'm gonna grow more grains out from under that tree*. I would question his unnecessary sternness and wonder why he was coming to *me* – perhaps he was asking for my help, or demanding it. I couldn't afford to be in those situations any longer. I'd be on the run, sure, there was no avoiding that, but I had to be smart about it.

The man at the table next to me was on his second refill of coffee and skimming the local newspaper. I couldn't help but notice the headline plastered on the front reading *BALD MAN IN DISTRESS TAKES WATER AND RUNS*. I didn't think anyone had noticed. Maybe those close enough could, but the public I had not yet considered. I mean, I had been wearing a baseball cap, for more reasons than one, and still had plenty of hair left on the sides. *And distressed? Where do they get off?* I had reasons for what I did. I would not include emotional anguish. Money. That's pretty much it. But so far all I had gotten from it was a busted eardrum. Now I had to meet a guy named Chaz in Bullhead City. This job was only partially complete, getting there would be half the work.

Roxy had claimed to be just 42, but she was at least 50 – or it had been a rough 48 hours. However, no one would be the judge of that for a while. She had tired out and stopped banging on the trunk of her souped up Pontiac. It was her idea to take the car in the first place, though she probably would have liked to have been the one driving. With the car idle, she's probably grown weary by now, terrified of what may come next and how long it would take to get there.

I had never met Chaz before. Only heard of him. Heard about the time he robbed a Walmart by paying off the employees that were working that night. Now those employees do jobs like that for him. I never worked at Walmart but I was now executing Chaz's ideas. I don't know how he heard of me, really. I started getting more work after the San Pedro deal that left four dead and had me and my partner seventy-five thousand richer. I remember at the time thinking how my life would never be the same because of this. How I could lay low, settle down, and start my own quiet life without always having to look over my shoulder. I'd worry about money somewhere down the road. But after that job, I started getting offers that were too good to pass up; although in the end they were never as sweet as they initially sounded. Time passed and the jobs had dried up, for the most part. Until I got the call from Chaz.

"Chaz means *free man*", his voice smokey, direct, sounding both young and old at the same time.

"I'm sorry?" I was a bit caught off guard. Didn't really hear what he said, just heard the name, and realized who I was talking to.

"You wouldn't want to have to explain to my mother why I changed my name, would you?"

I was caught up. This was about the water. I heard a rumor from Diego a while back – said Chaz was cooking something up, that I should stay available. This was bound to be pretty big, with Chaz being in charge. I had made my decision before the phone rang.

"No sir. I wouldn't."