

# **Mexican Mafia: The Gang of Gangs**

## **The Life of Ramon “Mundo” Mendoza**

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## **Dedication**

To my beloved mother, who prayed without cessation for her wayward Son. Mom's request was simple: Bring her happiness in her twilight years. My sincerest gratitude is extended to those stalwarts who tenaciously believed that this once coldblooded killer would become a productive and law-abiding citizen.

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## FOREWORD

In 1975 I executed two members of a rival prison gang in Bakersfield, California. Three years later, following my capture in Los Angeles, I was sentenced to concurrent terms of five-years-to-life and was surreptitiously transferred to the Correctional Institution at Tehachapi.

A much welcomed respite from the Big Yards of San Quentin and Folsom prisons, the heavily fortified protective housing unit became my refuge until my release in 1982. I found myself a world apart from the "gladiator schools" of the California Department of Corrections. The life of constant turmoil, preying on fellow convicts and living the daily survival in the concrete jungles was a chapter in my life that was miraculously closed. In a nineteen-year span, I succeeded in wasting seventeen of those behind bars.

For the most part, this book was written in a sparsely-lit maximum security cell. The solitude of my lengthy incarceration afforded me the quiet time to reflect upon a past painfully wrought with violent flashbacks. Like a reoccurring nightmare, I reassemble segments of a dark journey I once elected to undertake.

Once a Catholic altar boy, the process of climbing the criminal "corporate ladder" officially begins when I join an L.A. street gang. In prison I took a death oath which bonded me to the Mexican Mafia - the "gang of gangs" - for life. I evolved into a loyal hit man and as a member of the "inner circle" I became one of the EME "shot callers."

Everyone possesses the God-given gift of free volition. With the decisions we make in life, there are consequences for those choices. With the luxury of hindsight I have turned my life around. Today I can humbly thank my Lord for the opportunity to share with you "*mi vida loca*" - my crazy life - in the hope that you will understand where people like me can go astray. It is my fervent desire to tell my story in the hope that it will stimulate vital insight into the criminal mind for crime fighters embroiled in the ongoing crime-prevention struggle as well as for those who feel compelled to walk that gangster walk and experience this dubious lifestyle.

The events in this book are accurate and the reality of my experiences can stand on its own merits. Indeed, I resisted the temptation of embellishing portions for the sake of dramatization. For legal purposes, some of the names - very few - were deliberately changed to protect the guilty. It is not my intent to generate sympathy, nor exoneration for anyone's criminal conduct, including mine. What I do request is that you keep an open mind to one stark fact: No one is born a criminal.

## **PART ONE: THE BEGINNING YEARS**

### **Gang of Gangs**

The Golden State Freeway was like an enormous octopus extending its winding tentacles into every direction. As we approached the heart of the city the heavy cover of toxic matter hovered around us engulfing the valley better known as Greater Los Angeles.

My reputation as a loyal *soldado* and member of the Mexican Mafia's inner circle was widespread. Having done time in most of California's heaviest prisons I was well known by the convict population.

In the barrios of Los Angeles, Mundo from V.N.E. (aka: Varrio Nuevo Estrada) was a very recognizable moniker. I generated fear, admiration, respect and awe from my neighborhood peers. On the flip side were my hated detractors. This fan club included rival crime groups, the organized crime intelligence community and, of course, the family members of my victims.

That nefarious world seemed light years and a lifetime away as I squirmed in the back seat of the car en route to the courthouse. My prison blues had been shed at the Tehachapi high-security protective housing unit for a pair of black slacks and a powder blue long-sleeved silk shirt which effectively covered my tattooed arms. I was complete in street clothes with my cordovan Florsheims. I was to be the State's key witness in a murder-for-hire trial and the full significance of coming up front and rolling against my former confederates had not fully sunk in.

La Ciudad de Nuestra Reina de Los Angeles (the City of Our Queen of the Angels) is L.A.'s original Spanish handle. If one stood atop the Hollywood Hills on a clear day overlooking the city you could easily appreciate why the founding fathers were inspired to christen her with such a magnificent name. The panoramic sight could really take your breath away. But today it was simply smoggy Los Angeles. It was late-September, 1979. As we neared the Main Street off ramp I enjoyed a great view of the baby blue-colored ball park on the hill widely known as Chavez Ravine. Constructed in 1962, Dodger Stadium brought back many fond memories from my younger days. I reminisced of a happier past, like the city's love affair with the newly arrived Dodgers in 1958. Their franchise move from Brooklyn had shocked the baseball world. Pulling up stakes from their eastern roots to migrate west was a mortal sin to Brooklyn fans. It was in 1959 that I became an eternally hope-to-die Dodger Blue aficionado.

To my left stood city hall, the towering landmark from which all else seemed to emanate, challenging the smog for air rights. I felt the nostalgic excitement churning in the pit of my stomach as I savored the familiar hometown sights. It was always good to be in L.A. I snapped out of my reverie as the car decreased its speed. We took the freeway off ramp to be swallowed into the bowels of commuting Angelenos. The driver, a special agent from the Department of Corrections, raised his walkie-talkie and barked out instructions to the chase car. They had tenaciously shadowed us for the entire 200-mile drive from the Tehachapi Correctional Center. Suddenly they passed us and forged ahead.

Without my testimony there was no case. The elaborate security precautions, mapped out with the precision of a sensitive military operation, made the chances of running into an assassin's bullet extremely remote. Nevertheless, I was acutely aware of my potential danger. I checked out every pedestrian with suspicion while trying to appear cool and calm. After all, it wasn't long ago that I feared nothing and no one. I entertained no second thoughts nor felt any compunction about what I had to do. The psychological hurdle of turning against Joe Morgan and my former criminal associates had already been overcome. No longer was I the bad ass who walked the San Quentin yard with total contempt and disdain for the general convict population. There was no regard for human life in those days, not even my own, which had made me doubly dangerous. Somehow, I succeeded in forsaking my inevitable rendezvous with death and turned my life around. On the streets I was hated by the barrio underworld and my former associates. Word about my informant status circulated swiftly. In criminal circles I was the lowest form of slime – a “rat” - preparing to squeal like a greased pig. Although I possessed the intestinal fortitude to carry out this mission, I was experiencing a slight case of the dreaded butterflies. It was now a different type of courage I had to summon. The prospect of confronting the Mexican Mafia's number one man in open court was more than just a case of a contrite citizen performing a civic duty. I thought about a favorite Mexican Mafia proverb concerning the topic of our victims' fates: it was nothing personal - strictly business. That was precisely how I would look at it.

The Criminal Courts Building was on Temple Street between Broadway and Hill. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the gated entrance as we sped into the underground parking complex. Tires squealed and we came to a sudden stop. I was immediately surrounded by armed plainclothesmen. A uniformed security guard hastily waved us into a building. The alert look on his face made it apparent that he was fully briefed as to who I was. The occupants of the chase car had already left their vehicle and were surveying the immediate vicinity. We parked alongside their car. I was quickly ushered into a well guarded corridor where more armed undercover agents appeared. Two of them held automatic shotguns pointed upward and everyone appeared to be strategically positioned. The procession continued to the elevator and up to the sixteenth floor. Someone had surely choreographed this scene, I mused. My escorting cortege consisted of federal, state and county agents. Our next stop was the D.A.'s office. There I noticed the name emblazoned on a large door in silver lettering:

## **ORGANIZED CRIME AND NARCOTICS DIVISION**

Andy Mucino, one of the investigators who rode shotgun on the ride from Tehachapi, rapped on the door and led me into the office. We were greeted by a short stocky man wearing a striped suit. He extended his arm as he walked towards us from behind his desk.

Hello Ramon. I'm Dennis Choate. How was your trip?"

I looked to see if he was joking. He wasn't.

"Fine, I guess, considering the special circumstances".

I was referring to the handcuffs I had worn for the entire three-hour drive. It was awkward shaking hands while manacled. By his frown I could see he was sympathetic.

"Andy, could you please remove Ramon's cuffs?"

The investigator removed the stainless steel bracelets. While I slowly flexed the stiffness out of my wrists, Choate produced a manila folder from a file cabinet and motioned to a large brown upholstered chair. "Have a seat, Ramon. Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure. Thanks. I'll take it black with no sugar, please."

He nodded and carefully poured two cups and handed me mine.

"This is only the preliminary hearing, Ramon. Do I call you Ramon or can I call you Mundo?"

"It doesn't matter. Whatever you prefer."

"Alright. Then I'll call you Mundo and you can call me Dennis. As I was saying, at the preliminary hearing, everything that you testify to will be covered again at the trial. The trial may not take place for another year or so. Today I'd like to cover a few areas we will likely get into at the prelim and again at the trial."

"O.K. No problem."

"Mundo. If you don't mind, I'd like to get some background information about yourself. I want to know how you got involved in gang activity in general and then, specifically, how you became a member of the Mexican Mafia. I also need to know what role each defendant played in the contract murder of Bob Mrazek. Hell, you know what I need to hear."

Like many other law enforcement and prison officials before him, Dennis was surprised at my demeanor. I do not speak in one-syllable words and am very articulate. I always got a kick out of their reactions to me.

"Do you want to hear about this case first or do you want to know how my gang involvement began?" Dennis studied me intently. He said he wanted to hear how my personal madness started.

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The Church of Our Lady of Resurrection was near 8th and Lorena. It served the predominately Chicano community in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles. It was also the site of my First Holy Communion nearly thirty years prior to this interview.

The graffiti-strewn walls of the surrounding business establishments boldly displayed the "*placazos*" of the controlling street gang in that region. I always referred to it as the newspaper of

the streets because it accurately advertised the neighborhood players, their age and clique, status, author and other vital information understood only by the trained eye.

A good example was: "BUCKY X V N E T's". This homeboy (Bucky) was proudly announcing to all passersby that you had now entered the territory of the Varrio Nuevo Estrada Courts gang. He was a member of the Tiny's clique whose members were my age. It had not been crossed out or written upon which meant that he remained a member in good standing.

As I drove up Lorena Street, the nostalgia knotted my stomach with a familiar excitement. Simulating a typical drive through the barrio, as in the old days, there was a six-pack of Budweiser at my disposal on the floorboard. Turning down Hunter Street you were greeted by colorful murals that adorned the rows of walls of the Estrada Courts housing projects.

Along the sidewalk I noticed three younger homeboys clad in standard street attire - white t-shirts and baggy khaki pants. They were in their very early teens. Arms swinging like pendulums as they strolled in that defiant manner, they reminded me of myself some twenty years ago - tattooed arms, same cholo dress, same glare, same rebellious and antagonistic spirit, and the same arrogant attitude. Each was mad dogging me as they directed a challenging gaze my way, their chins upward. It was a demanding look that conveyed so much. I was a suspicious-looking outsider who attracted their attention because I was driving slowly. A slow-moving vehicle displayed ominous possibilities to the seasoned street person. It could be a prelude to a drive-by shooting with the rivals casing out their intended target, or, maybe an undercover cop conducting surveillance. Neither was a welcomed sight and such trespassers were quickly spotted and viewed with extreme suspicion and contempt. I too raised my chin in that familiar neighborhood Indian-like greeting. I also elevated a can of Bud in a toasting gesture. Their coiled bodies noticeably relaxed as they nodded back in unison, acknowledging me. We communicated to each other that all was cool and everyone went along with their line of business. I pulled over and opened a can as I studied the familiar terrain.

After downing half of the first can, I gazed up at one of the murals. There were two large brown hands holding up the block letters V N E. Above the gang initials it read: In Memory Of A Home Boy. It was a memorial to a slain homeboy who had died in the line of barrio duty. Holding up the neighborhood flag was a source of fierce pride for a street gang member. Our soldiers died young - from street combat, shootouts, drug overdoses, and other methods. Each had surrendered his life for the 'hood.

In those rare occasions that bring me back to Los Angeles, I am inevitably drawn to the Projects where an invisible magnet pulls me back to my gangster beginnings. I was more than just a survivor of that world. I was the product of a dysfunctional attitude, which found more honor in killing for the neighborhood than giving up one's life for it. Rejected by mainstream society, I evolved into a gladiator and predator.

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David from White Fence was an older gangster - a *veterano*. Five years my senior, he was held in high esteem in his neighborhood. David Mungia and his family were especially close to me

and our mothers had been close friends. On a sunny California summer afternoon in 1963 I was across the street painting Don Simon's house. I was a decent kid in those days. Suddenly, I remember seeing David as he literally came crashing through his back door. Like a wild injured boar he scampered frantically, hurdling the chain link fence that bordered our houses. From atop the ladder I saw the streaming tears cascading down his panicked face as he pounded on our front door. My mom quickly let him in to use the telephone. His mother Celia had suffered a massive heart attack and was already dead when the paramedics arrived. To this day I can still feel David's anguish.

Five years later, I sought to renew my childhood friendship with him. The decades-old rivalry between Varrio Nuevo and White Fence was the furthest thing from my mind that afternoon. The fact I was alone and unarmed should have been sufficient evidence of my peaceful intentions. Instead, fate intervened when I entered the teen post center. I wore the typical East L.A. cholo attire. My khaki pants were one size too large around the waist, with starched creases and flared at the bottom; an unbuttoned brown and white patterned Pendleton long-sleeved shirt, a brand new Towncraft t-shirt underneath (no Fruit-Of-The-Loom for me); my dark cordovan Stacy Adams shoes were immaculate and painstakingly spit-shined. From the upper floor the familiar clamor of a neighborhood party was evident. Oldies-but-goodies music blared loudly. The White Fence dudes and their *chavalas* - their ladies - were indulging in a "members only" weekend Budweiser bash.

Upon entering the teen center, I was confronted by a group of *chavalones* - about five younger White Fence members in their early teens. They were stone drunk, talking big time shit, and were obviously in no mood for civil conversation, especially from one of their most hated rivals. As I quickly assessed my predicament, I silently cursed myself for making such a dumb move. It was one thing to meet socially with a member of a rival gang in a neutral location. But to wade into hostile territory on a weekend party night and not expose oneself to hostilities was just unrealistic not to mention quite ignorant. Choosing my words carefully and displaying no fear, I matter-of-factly explained my presence. I was seeking out one of their homeboys - my old friend David. Two of them were quickly in my face and the overwhelming stench of alcohol was on their breaths as they began the interrogation. From my peripheral view, I detected the presence of another person entering the room. Cowboy from White Fence appeared and assumed the role of spokesman. He demanded to know what neighborhood I represented. Unwavering, I announced I was from Varrio Nuevo.

From upstairs the familiar lyrics from "In The Still Of The Night" could be heard as a sudden hush descended among my soon-to-be assailants, like that silent lull before a storm. They checked me out coldly and Cowboy slowly turned his back to me. I detected a slight nod in the direction of his homies. Then the rout was on. Hit from all directions, I was punched, dropped, kicked, stomped upon, whacked with a two-by-four, and I heard and felt beer bottles breaking over my head. The intermingling taste of beer and blood was nearly as bitter as the helpless feeling of despair. I tried in vain to shield my body against the onslaught by curling up in a fetal position but the assault was furious and unrelenting. In the midst of the whirlwind of confusion, the only concern I had - even more than dying - was how this was going to be one fucked up way to go. I had surely let the neighborhood down, I recall thinking bitterly. It was apparent that I was destined to become but another passing stat in the following day's obituary column.

Then, like magic, I heard the voice of an angel. She was screaming almost in my ear and pleading on my behalf as my assailants strove to finish me off. "Leave him alone! He knows David!" She pleaded.

She had saved my ass. The beating stopped and almost at once they began to express their drunken apologies. The frenzy-filled and unmerciful mob which had moments ago been seriously intent on meting out their justice to an unwelcomed intruder, had miraculously been transformed into sorrowful intoxicated creatures of repentance.

"Sorry homes", I heard one of them stammering.

One of them actually extended his hand. I knew better than to antagonize them again by refusing their peaceful gestures but I couldn't bring myself to shake any of their hands and instead covered my bleeding head wounds.

"That's alright, man. Don't worry about it."

Stumbling toward the entrance, I made it outside to my car. I had survived. As I made my escape, I had to will myself to stay within the legal speed limit. I did not need a cop to pull me over and see the blood. That would only interfere and delay my plans for immediate retribution. Someone would pay dearly this night, I vowed to myself! As I drove toward the neighborhood I felt a fiery rage coupled with uncontrollable excitement. I was anticipating my first major street gang confrontation. Not only had they humiliated me personally, but more grievous was the disrespect directed at the 'hood. An attack by our longtime mortal enemy (the VNE-White Fence rivalry went back to the late-1940s) was an infraction that required swift and sweet retaliation.

"Respond with violence;" "Retaliate immediately;" "Whatever you do in life, do it right." These excerpts of sagacious advice, previously passed on to me from my stepfather and a former street gang buddy, replayed itself in my mind as I weaved my way through the evening traffic en route to the Projects. I was nineteen years into my existence and flirting with death. I was also venting my rage against everybody who had ever gotten in my face in my lifetime. Arriving at the Projects, I spotted the homeboys kicking back on the grass at the Circle, a favorite gathering spot. It was our weekend custom to socialize by downing some Bud, exchange banter, rehash old war stories, and concoct new criminal schemes.

I had their immediate attention when I swerved into the parking lot in front of the rental office. I wasn't a pretty sight and they must have seen the devil himself in my frenzy-filled eyes. No one asked questions. Little Robert volunteered to collect whatever weapons were needed.

Big Art Ramos, a homeboy whose handgun collection was always available for our excursions, was out partying. I was not in a waiting mood. We reverted to our only immediate recourse. Stashed beneath the artificial grass in the Circle were five pipes with taped handles and a machete.

One by one we piled into my '53 Chevy. There was Black Peter Medina, Little Robert Rios, his brother Sammy, Bobby from the Tiny's and Ralph from the PeeWee's. Eager to avenge the

neighborhood's honor they shouted drunken encouragements and promises of retribution as I drove off to the teen center. I was ready to prove my macho for the barrio. It was in May of 1969 that I fought the ultimate battle in defense of the neighborhood's honor. Six of us were crammed inside my '53 Chevy as I drove with reckless abandon from the Projects up Whittier Boulevard.

The blood was still streaming down my face from the ass-kicking I had received at the hands of our adversaries. My avenging homeboys and I were praying silently that our rivals would still be partying at the Euclid Teen Center.

It was already dark when we arrived at the intersection of Whittier Boulevard and Euclid. The headlights were extinguished as I drove slowly into a side street. From the limited selection of weapons available this night, I had instantly chosen to brandish the machete. I groped on the floorboard until I reassuringly felt the taped handle. Although no activity could be detected - no more music was playing - we were certain many of them remained in the building from the identity of the familiar cars parked outside the center. Also, the lights were still on inside.

I do not remember bringing my car to a braking halt. I yelled, "Go!" and was the first to exit the vehicle. I headed toward the entrance and the door was ajar. I kicked it open and came face to face with one of my nemeses. Fuzzy from White Fence was heavy-set and wore a black-and-white long-sleeved Pendleton shirt. He also wore a universal expression that precedes your worst nightmare. The predator met the prey as our eyes met for an instant.

His eyes widened as he reached for a beer bottle in a feeble attempt to defend himself. I swung head high and the machete shattered the bottle, which successfully deflected the blow that may have otherwise detached his head from the rest of him. Fuzzy cowered against the wall pleading for mercy as I approached him. Because of the crowded confines at the bottom of the staircase landing area, I was unable to properly finish him off. I did not want to risk hitting one of my homeboys with a slicing backswing as they rushed past me. Instead, I proceeded to stab Fuzzy in the chest and stomach as he screamed in protest.

From the second floor I could hear the rumble of the fierce struggle that was underway. I decided to leave my wounded victim and raced upstairs to join the bigger battle. "*Que viva Varrio Nuevo!*" I yelled.

We were outnumbered by at least two to one but when the guys from White Fence saw me emerge with the machete, they ran for the stairwell.

An eyewitness later testified in court that she saw a tall "white guy" swinging a machete wildly. She pointed me out at the preliminary hearing. Possessed by demons, I became temporarily insane that night and was totally unconcerned for my personal safety. But the rage and hostility I felt inside had suddenly transformed into a combination of controlled anger and an unusually vivid awareness of my immediate hostile surroundings. I felt complete disregard for life or limb as well as disdain for the consequences of my violent actions. I was making my bones for the barrio.

As our antagonists scurried for cover via a rear stairway, I caught up with one who was wielding a pipe and battling with my homeboy Ralph. I swung the machete and caught him flush on the forehead. His body slumped to the ground like a heavy sack. I remember swinging until I felt he was no longer a threat to us. While he was down I slashed at his prone body again...and again...and again. The L.A. medical examiner later testified that his head had been nearly detached from his body. He would never again be a threat to anyone. Robert "Bobby Loco" Lopez expired at the scene.

As I retreated toward the staircase I felt compelled to look back. I shot a parting glance toward the crumpled body and became transfixed. His body was twitching involuntarily on the second floor. Time stood still, frozen momentarily, and the sight of my victim going through his death throes held me spellbound. It is an indelible snapshot, which will forever be etched in my mind. To this day, the morbid recollection is not a pleasant one to dwell upon.

There was a victory party that night at Tutie's home in Pico Rivera. We were congratulated by the homeboys for holding up the flag and swiftly retaliating against our adversaries. That was in 1969 and my head was as big as a watermelon as I had proven myself for the hood.