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Opening extract from

Angels on Sunset Boulevard

Written by

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SATURDAY NIGHT AT THE IN-N-OUT AND A STEADY parade of drunken rockers, skater kids, Chicano families, frat boys, Beverly Hills princesses, East L.A. gangbangers, Hollywood hippies, artists, and stoners walked through the swinging glass doors, a microcosm of Los Angeles itself.

Nick Huntington sat alone in the front booth, listlessly watching the local citizenry and unconsciously eavesdropping on two hyperactive film types—boneheads, in his humble opinion—honing a movie pitch at the next table, dreams of Hollywood the backbone of every conversation within a ten-mile radius of the studios.

He was holding a fry in midair when he spotted the boy. Nick froze, and the fry dangled on his mouth,

the ketchup dripping from the tip and burning the edge of his tongue.

The boy was shaking visibly, his entire body vibrating from an uncontrollable compulsion—knees knocking against each other, teeth chattering, head twitching from side to side. His long hair was matted against his forehead and the back of his neck, and his jeans were torn and holey. After midnight at the In-N-Out Burger on the corner of Orange Drive and Sunset Boulevard and no one paid much attention as he shuffled up to the front of the line, dirt-black fingers trembling as they dug into his pants pockets for grimy dollar bills and change.

"The number one," he mumbled, so softly that the cashier had to repeat it. A flat chemical scent emanated from his pores as if he were sweating aluminum.

"Number one?" she asked again helpfully, breathing through her mouth so she wouldn't smell him but trying not to show it—they got all kinds there.

The boy nodded. His hair was so dirty it looked brown, except for the roots, which were startlingly, shockingly silver, like a halo. He was so skinny his wrist bones protruded from his skin, poking out painfully. His skin was sallow, a drained, sickly, yellow color—junkie yellow—but otherwise it was clear, free of the acne scars and hollowed craters that typically accompanied a drug-induced complexion. He

scratched at his three-day-old stubble, then picked at a cuticle on his thumb, watching as the cashier punched in his order.

He accepted his food and turned to look for a seat.

His eyes met Nick's, and a chill went down Nick's spine. It was like looking into the eyes of a ghost. Nick became conscious that his jaw was hanging open and made a deliberate effort to close it. He never did eat that french fry. He'd lost his appetite.

"Aren't you Johnny Silver?" he finally asked.

Nick couldn't believe it. Johnny Silver was supposed to be onstage at the Hollywood Bowl at that very moment, in a comeback concert that was already being heralded as the most important music event of the year—if not the decade, if not the century.

Yet there he was, standing right in front of him. Johnny Silver, his violet eyes boring into Nick's skull, that otherworldly masculine beauty—like David Bowie during his Ziggy Stardust phase—haughty and feral. Dirty and delirious, but alive. The famous Johnny Silver, the boy who would rock the world, standing underneath the fluorescent lights of a fast-food restaurant, looking as if the universe had just run him over.

For the longest time Johnny simply stood there. His eyes glazed, then focused. Tears sprung to his

eyes, and they coursed silently down his cheeks, a river of white against the grime.

Nick stood up and approached him cautiously, as a lion tamer would approach his lion. "Johnny, man, what the hell happened to you?"

"I . . . I don't know," Johnny replied, and the shaking intensified. He looked around the fast-food restaurant as if he had no idea how he'd gotten there. "I don't remember anything, except that moment when I came out and strummed my guitar, and I looked out at the audience, at the lights . . . so many people—they'd all come to see me—roaring my name. I blinked, then in a flash everything was gone—the club, the band, the stage, the hotels, Sunset Strip, palm trees, cars, everything disappeared. And I woke up, alone in the desert, as if none of this"—he waved his hand to indicate the whole place and everything beyond it—"had ever existed."

SIX WEEKS EARLIER

A Star Is Born

"Here we are now going to the Westside,
weapons in hand as we go for a ride."

—MOBY (WITH GWEN STEFANI), "*SOUTH SIDE*"

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DV844: homeslice is one hot girl! Taj the mastermind . . . good luck tomorrow!

RickDeckard45: never forget the little people.

JohnnyS11: you asked me to leave you a comment. here it is. COMMENT



FROM ABOVE THEY LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE A MASS OF buzzing locusts, swelling in a faceless, amorphous, intolerable hunger, growing louder and larger every minute. Taj continued to peek out of the curtains of the topmost penthouse of the Chateau Marmont to get a better look. She bit the top of her thumb anxiously. This was totally out of control. They were chanting his name. Screaming it, even.

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!

"Johnny! Johnny! Johnny!"

There must have been hundreds of them—maybe even thousands. Taj wasn't sure. Some were holding up signs. JOHNNY SILVER IS MY IDOL!!! WE LOVE YOU JOHNNY!!! WILL YOU MARRY ME JOHNNY?? JOHNNY SILVER ROCKS!!!!!

Waving bouquets of white lilies. (His favorite flower, according to his TAP profile.) Pointing their cell-phone cameras to the sky. Crying into their glitter press-on Johnny Silver T-shirts.

She noticed that traffic on Sunset Boulevard was backed up in all directions, and there were even policemen on horseback trying to manage the crowd. It was absolute mayhem, madness, total insanity. This was the Beatles landing in New York, this was Michael Jackson dangling Prince Michael III off the balcony in Berlin, this was Gwen Stefani in the middle of Tokyo.

Taj pulled the curtains firmly shut, and her tiny gesture sent a ripple through the crowd down below—the roar intensified. She raked a hand through her long, blunt-cut bob of shiny black hair. The severe cut could have been disastrous, but it only served to highlight the exquisite proportions of her beautiful face: large, slightly slanted green eyes, an adorable button nose, that sharp, Keira Knightley chin. She was model-slim and stunning in her striped French sailor's top layered underneath a shrunken antique denim jacket, tight cutoff leggings, and incongruous red patent Doc Martens. Taj didn't dress like anyone else in Los Angeles, where the female population tended toward midriff-baring sweats or

plunging jersey V-neck tops. Instead she always looked like she'd stepped out of a funky avant-garde European photo shoot. Edie Sedgwick for a new generation.

She stepped away from the window and took a deep breath. She was not prepared for this. She was not prepared for any of it.

For a moment Taj wondered if it was all a dream. The lavish penthouse suite, the screaming fans, the *Rolling Stone* cover shoot that was underway in the next room.

Tonight Johnny was headlining at the Viper Room, to launch his new album. It was meant to be a small, intimate concert, VIPs and industry insiders only, but demand was so intense, they opened it up to the public. When tickets went at record-breaking levels—two and then four more dates were added. Now his label was talking world tour, even before he had sold one copy. Stadiums in Germany, airfields in France, the Staples Center. They were talking laser light shows, digital projection screens, adding a twenty-piece string orchestra and a gospel choir. It was going to be a production, an event, bigger than Woodstock, bigger than Lollapalooza, bigger than anything the world had ever seen.

And it had all started on TAP.

With a simple TAP request.

JohnnyS11 wants to be your friend. Approve? Deny?

Taj had checked out his page—noted the moody, black-and-white photo of Johnny bent over a guitar, his white-blond bangs covering half his face. Made a note of his interests: taxidermy, ukelele, the Church of the Sub-Genius. Usually Taj never approved requests from boys she didn't know. So many of them were simply collectors, posting up pictures of half-naked women on their sites like baseball cards. The collectors always wanted to know if she had a webcam (she didn't). Her TAP icon was like a magnet for the crazies and the weirdos. But JohnnyS11's friend list was a normal array of slacker boys and nerdy-chic girls. His quote was the usual Andy Warhol one about fame, except in reverse: "In fifteen minutes, everybody will be famous." Taj was intrigued. She'd clicked Approve.

A few days later there was an e-mail message.

Check out my new show. Johnny Silver's Manic Hour.

It was on a college radio station Taj sometimes listened to late at night. Most of the time it was utter

crap—just a bunch of pretentious college kids playing their jazz records and thinking they were cool. The kind of kids who turned up their noses at Franz Ferdinand when the band hit the mainstream.

Johnny had started out as a break-staff DJ, one of the high school kids who ran the radio station over the summer and holidays when the college kids went home for break. Johnny's show was different. It was obvious he loved music, and not just what was obscure or hard to find; he was as liable to play a Dylan classic as he was an unknown garage band. His energy was infectious and his playlist eclectic.

On a whim Taj had called the station to request a song, and soon the two of them were talking well into the night, Johnny's voice low and slow over the wires—he had such a radio voice, the kind that melted in your ear and made you want to never turn off the dial. And unlike most DJs, he actually looked like he sounded—sexy. Justin Timberlake might have brought sexy back, but Johnny Silver had never lost it.

That was a year ago. Now Johnny wasn't just playing the records. He was making them. And those songs—those songs he had played for her in her bedroom, those songs he'd sworn were hers alone—had made him a star. It had all happened so fast: He'd posted a few of them on his TAP page, and before you

knew it, the kids were downloading them, trading them, begging for more. Then the TAP parties happened. He'd played a beach house in Malibu, a birthday party for some celebrity at Hyde, then to a standing-room-only crowd in Palm Springs. More and more kids began coming to the gigs, and the legend of Johnny Silver grew . . .

And now here he was, at the top of the Chateau Marmont, the famed Hollywood hotel known for the numerous celebrity scandals it had weathered inside its fortresslike walls. John Belushi overdosed in Bungalow 2. Jim Morrison hurt his back jumping off the balcony. Greta Garbo repaired to its premises when she "vanted to be alone."

The penthouse had been Johnny's de facto address for the past several months now. They had become regulars at the pool, grown accustomed to the sight of Sting playing the piano in the lounge or a glimpse of the celebrity couple du jour in the paneled dining room. Taj was half appalled and half amused by the whole thing. Not too long ago she and Johnny had made do with standing in line on La Brea for a cheap Pink's hot dog. Now caviar was being sent to his room by the bucketload.

She walked over to the next room, where a large white seamless background screen had been set up

and a large silver umbrella kept the lighting at the optimum angle.

Johnny was sitting on a stool, his guitar on his lap, while the photographer—one of the most famous ones in the business; Taj recognized him from his *Vanity Fair* contributor profile and numerous appearances on VH1's lifestyle shows—was behind the camera, clicking away.

The reporter girl, one of those women who were thirty-five going on fifteen—"ironic" butterfly barrettes in her hair, obligatory Marc Jacobs jacket, clodhopper boots, the zippy personality of a seasoned celebrity ass-kisser—stood to the side, cooing over each shot.

She turned to Taj. "Doesn't he look sooo hot?" Taj shrugged in reply, and the reporter looked nervous. Taj noticed that women who wanted to look like teenagers always seemed to be intimidated when they were in the company of real teenagers. The ersatz meeting the authentic and it wasn't pretty.

"Great shoes!" the reporter said as a friendly gesture, pointing down at Taj's feet. "Where'd you get them?"

"Oh," Taj said, trying to remember. She was a superb bargain-hunter and found most of her treasures in flea markets and designer clearance bins. She also

made a lot of her clothing herself, or ripped up vintage items and refashioned them to her own tastes. "Some secondhand store in Pasadena, I think?"

Johnny looked up, moved his bowl-cut bangs off his face, and noticed Taj.

"Where are you going?"

"Out." She shrugged. "My uncle's worried. I haven't been home in a week. Wants to make sure I'm still alive," she joked. Mama Fay was a permissive parent, but even drag queens had their limits. *Come home,* Mama Fay had ordered. *I miss your pretty face.*

He frowned slightly. "Stay."

"Can't."

Johnny sighed, as if she had wounded him deeply.

Once upon a time those limpid violet eyes of his could have induced her to do anything—she had let him *in*, damn it. Had let that voice, and that hair (fine, platinum blond, and soft as a baby duck's feathers), and those eyes do the trick—had let him talk her into doing so many things (like taking off her clothes, like sleeping with him on the first date, like putting up with the other girls—and with Johnny there were always other girls; it was part of the territory, part of the lifestyle, as he liked to call it, and she would have to be "cool" about it if she wanted to be with him, he'd explained).

"I told you, I can't do this anymore," Taj said. "I'm leaving."

Johnny stood up and put his guitar down. "Hold on a sec," he told his entourage.

He followed her to the hallway, grabbed her hands, and stroked them softly, his touch like the tremor of butterfly wings.

"You know it's just a game," he said, smiling. "It's not real."

"It's not that," Taj shrugged. "I just . . . well, you know."

"But I need you, Taj. It doesn't mean anything without you."

Taj sighed. She could never say no to him; that was the problem. "I'll be back. Before the show."

Johnny drew her close and hugged her tightly. He kissed her forehead, her nose, and leaned down to kiss her lips gently, pressing upon her until she closed her eyes and kissed him back. She inhaled his scent—cigarettes and leather and lighter fluid and a trace of something sweet and expensive: cologne that came in crystal bottles from fancy department stores. She had found it in his medicine cabinet one evening and had teased him. It was gone the next day, but the smell remained.

"It's going to be all right," Johnny said, smiling with his eyes half-lidded. "You'll see."

"I hope so."

Taj watched him walk—no, strut—back to the photo shoot. The reporter girl was watching them from the doorway.

"Johnny—can we do the interview now? Okay? Tell me, where do you get your inspiration? What made you write 'Bright Eyes'?"

Johnny looked at Taj before answering to see what she would say. Taj remained silent.

"Actually, Haven—it is Haven, isn't it?" Johnny asked, putting an arm around the reporter's shoulders. "I wrote the song for you."

The woman giggled.

Johnny's honeyed voice continued its slow seduction.

Taj rolled her eyes. *Walk out, walk away. You don't have to put up with this anymore. You don't have to be part of this charade.* The whole media maelstrom, the whole star treatment. It was all bullshit. She fetched her skateboard, exited the hotel suite, grabbed the Sunday *Times* from the doorway. She noted another missing-kids headline and while taking the elevator down to the lobby checked to see if she knew anyone they were looking for.

Kids were disappearing all over Los Angeles. It had started a few months back, when a sixteen-year-

old Westlake Village girl was reported missing by her parents over Labor Day weekend. She'd never made it home from a beach bonfire. Taj remembered that party. It was a TAP event. The newspaper said that foul play was not suspected at this time; the police suspected the girl had simply run away. Runaways hardly made the news anymore, except that these were private school kids—rich kids with parents who owned summer homes in Malibu. What would they be running away from, exactly? Taj knew there were missing kids from her neighborhood too, but no one seemed to care about kids who disappeared from Echo Park and Hollywood. She folded the paper under her arm and walked out of the elevator to the hotel patio.

It was noon, and the SoCal sun flattened everything in sight, making everything look two-dimensional, as if drawn on a postcard—the guests lounging in bikinis by the David Hockney–blue swimming pool, the pool boys in their crisp white linens. At the Chateau, time seemed to stop in a cocoon of decadent luxury.

She carried her board on her left hip and walked past the valet stand, where a Bentley convertible was parked. Johnny's new car. Another gift from the record label.

Taj lay down her skateboard and pushed off

with her back foot—mongo style, they called it, because it was a bit more awkward and harder to pull off—balancing down the hill, cruising all the way. Johnny owned a different set of wheels now, but she still preferred to skate.

The crowd gathered in front of the hotel suddenly went berserk, screaming and hooting. Taj looked up. Johnny had finally come out to the balcony; he was blowing kisses and waving. He caught her eye and smiled, gave her the thumbs-up. Taj nodded but didn't return the smile. She weaved her way through the crying fans.

To them, Johnny Silver was a hero. A rebel. An icon. A god.

But to Taj, he was just the boy she loved who had broken her heart.

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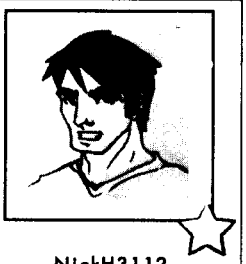
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