



CHAPTER 1

THE INITIATION

The sky over Phoenix, Arizona was as black as gunpowder. It glittered with a trillion stars, dazzling and close. A full moon sprayed the desert with a pale white glow. A fire snapped and crackled, sending a shower of sparks flying wildly into the dry brush. Red embers landed perilously close to the brown desert grass. A coyote howled over the next ridge. A group of twenty-seven boys sat cross-legged on the ground around the fire. Restless shadows wove eerie patterns over their faces.



Spencer Lawrence watched the glowing embers slowly die out. He felt tense and nervous and told himself he was an idiot to be here. But there was no escape for him now: he knew too much. Frowning and troubled, he pulled up his knees, propped an elbow on them and rested his chin in his hand. Did he dare to make a comment? Clearing his throat he croaked, 'I... um... guess you know we could start a whopping big wildfire here?'



Nick Morrison snickered. Nick was the self-appointed leader of the group. Tall, square-shouldered, with snapping black eyes and straight slick-backed black hair, he wore self-confidence like others wore their shirts, with careless ease. He was nineteen years old and acted like thirty.





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He was always emphasizing that theirs was not a gang; it was merely a group, a group with a mission.

Turning slowly with a disgusting sneer, he faced Spencer.

'So what else is new? I guess you've forgotten the fire we started last spring in that Asian community that took out a dozen of their houses.'

Spencer ground his teeth together and swallowed. He hadn't forgotten! That troubled him to this day. Not that he had had anything to do with that fire. Not directly anyway. But he had known the fire was planned and they had done nothing about it.

When the huge blaze lit the night skies, he had run home in horror, dove into his room and hid under the covers.

Now he ducked his head and wrapped his arms tightly about his knees. Just how had he ever become involved with these kids anyhow? Still it was exciting. And Nick ruled them completely. Mastered them through guilt, fear and threats.

Thinking back, Spencer puffed air into his cheeks and held it there.

It had happened on a Wednesday night. His entire family had gone to the midweek service at church. Protesting bitterly, Spencer had been dragged along (at least that's how he saw it). On arrival his mother and father had sat in their usual seat near the front with his little sister Tracy but Spencer and his brother were allowed to sit near





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the back with one or two other young people. However, the minute the service started Spencer had whispered to his brother, 'Ben, tell Mom and Dad I had a headache and went home.' With that he had ducked out of the service.

He had not gone home. He had escaped into a dark and lonely night. He had walked the streets aimlessly, his head down, shoulders hunched, hands driven deep into the pockets of his jeans.

When a couple of strange kids sauntered up to him and started a conversation, he had welcomed the change. With great enthusiasm, they had told Spencer about a great new leader named Nick. He was a sort of a teacher, who was challenging a group of kids to do amazing things. Not only were they learning about themselves, Nick was showing them wonderful and incredible things about other people.

'Of course,' one of the boys pointed out with a sly look, 'Nick's not in the market for wimps. Uh-uh. He wants the cream of the crop, if you know what I mean. Kids who are brave and like a challenge. Kids he can trust.'

Spencer couldn't help it; he felt a spark of interest. His chest puffed out a little. His head lifted. He was no wimp and that was for sure! Curiosity had him by the throat now, and he said staunchly, 'I wouldn't give away a secret if they put burning coals on the bottoms of my feet.'

A battered old van had pulled up about then and the boys walked toward it.



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'Come on then, if you're really sure about this.'

Since then, every Wednesday night Spencer had slipped out of church on some excuse or other, and was whisked away to some secret meeting place in the desert. There, for an hour, Nick taught them on the importance of being white. White people, he said, were the only people worthy of life and happiness. Asians, blacks and Jews were to be looked down on and, even more, they needed to be done away with. It was Nick's followers' sworn duty to drive the minorities from the city. This duty had been sealed with a blood oath.

'Yo, Spencer!' a voice boomed. 'Are you deaf, dead or asleep?'

Spencer lifted his head sharply. A wash of guilt swept over him, sending shock waves through his body. He was terrified of Nick. At the same time he respected and looked up to him.

'No, I'm wide awake. Come on Nick, you know I always tune in when you are teaching.'

Nick's piercing black eyes narrowed to the slitted eyes of a serpent. 'Then if you really intend to become one of us, get yourself over here.'

Spencer's throat went dry. He knew what was going to happen. He was going to be initiated into the gang – group, that is. And it was going to hurt! From this night on he would be a marked boy. And he would have to be careful. When he swam. When he and his brother undressed for bed. He would have to be on guard all the time. Of course, the small tattoo would be just above his waist





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on the back. It shouldn't be too much trouble. However, the authorities were onto anyone who wore the tattoo of a dragon, no matter how little it was. He would have to be careful!

To Nick, the dragon meant power and authority. Since his tattoo was bigger, it meant leadership.

Spencer stumbled to his feet and went to sit on a stool in front of Nick. He knew that Nick was a pro where tattoos were concerned, for he worked at *Georgio's Tattoo Parlor* in downtown Phoenix.

Gritting his teeth, Spencer submitted to the stinging needles that would forever mark him as being a member of the feared *Dragons*.

When the tattoo was finished and the other members were cheering, Spencer would have gone back to his place by the fire. Nick placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and pushed him back onto the stool. 'Not so fast, little dragon,' Nick grinned. 'The real test is just ahead of you.' His grin turned cunning. 'Every new member has to be tested.'

A quick, curious frown darted onto Spencer's forehead. Strangely he felt threatened. He knew Nick must have obedience and faithfulness, but Spencer had given him those things. He knew, too, that when a red-haired kid named Mike had tried to leave the group, he had been caught, badly beaten and left in a cold, dark, lonely alley.

'Nick,' Spencer protested, 'I'm with you all the way, you know that!'

Nick's smile softened. 'Then you won't mind a little test to prove it.'



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Spencer did not dare to look away from those piercing black eyes, though he desperately wanted to. In a voice with an embarrassing crack in it he asked, 'What do I have to do?'

In a low, confidential voice Nick replied, 'We have to make our presence felt – I mean really *felt* – in this city. We have to let the minority groups go to bed at night in terror.' His voice began to thunder now as he gathered steam. 'They have to understand that we're a force to be reckoned with. We'll hit them so many times that they'll leave town with their tails tucked between their legs like a scared puppy!'

The air was electric. Still the fire crackled. Shadows danced. The cold desert breeze rattled the branches of a lonely mesquite tree. An enchanting night. A terrifying night.

For a long time no one spoke. Then Spencer mumbled timidly, 'I don't understand what that has to do with me.'

He waited, his smooth tanned face knotted into a fierce frown. His gentle brown eyes were filled with some unknown dread. Nervously he ruffled his hair with shaking fingers.

Nick leaned forward until his face was inches from Spencer's. 'We're gonna get us a black boy, and you're gonna help.' He watched, sneering, as Spencer swallowed again and again.

This will be the real test that you're one of us. After that, man, the sky's the limit. We'll paint black swastikas on Jewish synagogues. We'll strike every minority group in the city.'





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He paused to spit on the ground.

'You hear what I'm saying? We'll burn crosses in the front yards of black houses.'

Spencer could feel the blood drain from his head. He was stunned. His mouth was as dry as the desert around him. 'B-but you don't mean...'

Nick's sharp black eyes could have peeled the paint off the walls. His lips tightened. When he felt that Spencer was properly cowed and snickers were running around the group like water, he snarled, 'Oh yeah.' He turned to a pimply-faced boy named Tiny. 'Why don't you tell him, Tiny?'

Tiny was second in command to the gang. He had spiked blond hair and cunning green eyes. The tattoo of a snake coiled around his arm as though it were alive. Tiny was almost six feet tall and built like a bulldozer. He wore a size twelve sneaker and was proud of his size. You didn't mess with Tiny.

'What Nick means,' Tiny said witheringly, 'is that you and me are going to find us a black boy and show him how serious we are about his kind.'

Spencer's throat was too dry to swallow. When he could choke out a few words, they seemed to come from very far away.

'I still don't know what you mean.'

Tiny sneered and cast a quick look at Nick. Nick shook his head just a fraction. Tiny gritted his teeth and cast a dark glare at his leader. Spencer shivered. He was scared of Nick but in a funny way he was even more scared of Tiny.



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Nick, for now, had Tiny under his control. Nick was cunning and cruel but he also had his head screwed firmly on his shoulders. Spencer got the feeling that if you met Tiny in a dark alley you might not come out alive, but if Nick was there you'd maybe lose consciousness, be in hospital for a month but you'd survive. This was because Nick knew the difference between a prison sentence and death row. He knew he had to keep hold of the reins where Tiny was concerned. Tiny was completely ruthless and just itching for some real action.

'You've got lots to learn Kid,' Tiny smirked at Spencer. He sucked deeply on a cigarette, blew smoke in Spencer's face and carelessly tossed the glowing stub into the dry desert grass. Tiny looked at Spencer and growled, 'We ain't gonna kill the black kid -' Tiny's eyes darkened, just a fraction, 'but he's gonna understand that he and his family should definitely find another place to live.'

Through lips that suddenly felt thick and unmanageable, Spencer mumbled, 'Why? Just because he's a different color than us?'

Nick lifted a haughty head. 'You learn fast, Spence.' The firelight snapped in his black eyes. He stood up, proud and confident. 'White is what we're all about, or haven't I made myself clear? This city has to get the message that we don't tolerate minority groups. And remember this: everywhere we strike we leave our calling card.'





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The Dragons. Nick was as good at sketching as he was in tattooing. He had made their own calling cards with the sketch of a dragon and had hundreds of them printed. Every time they committed some crime they left behind one of the cards.

Spencer shivered, even though he was warm from the crackling fire.

But Nick was speaking again. 'Yo, Spencer! Are you getting the picture here? You will go with Tiny on this little mission.'

An evil grin split his face. 'You do real good and obey orders and who knows, next time you may be the one to handle the ball bat.'

Everything inside of Spencer recoiled. Waves of sickness seized him. He had to somehow get away from these people; Nick; the darkness and evil; the gang. Yet if he told anyone Nick could make him pay in ways that were worse than his most awful nightmare.

'Tomorrow night,' Nick said. 'Tiny gets his driver's license tomorrow, so it's a perfect plan. He'll pick you up at Elm and 4th, as usual. Seven o'clock tomorrow night,' he said again. 'See, I'm still not one hundred per cent sure about you, and I have to be sure of my followers. I can't afford to have a Judas in the group.'

'I'm no Judas!' Spencer yelled.

Nick went on smoothly. 'Oh,' he said as if he had just now thought about it, 'and don't forget you have a family. You know, just in case you ever try to leave the group. And always remember



that pretty little sister of yours.' Nick sucked in a long, hard, breath. 'She's such a cute little kid. And never forget that I know where you live. So, Spencer, don't ever think you can get away from me. Just remember Mike, and don't forget that it could have been worse. Much worse.' His eyes were black slits. 'And, Spencer, never, ever, even think of telling anyone what you know about us.'

