It all began with the fists.

He was little, in a dark place, and bad people wanted to beat him—maybe kill him, he didn't know. There was only one chance to get out: Fight. And that was only a chance. ¶ Dorchester, MA, 1971. He came awake in a black world angry at the slaying of its spiritual leader, Martin Luther King Jr., a white world enraged by the murder of its native son John F. Kennedy, a war-torn world where children went off to fight 10,000 miles away, in a place that could not be taken...and all that anger spilled into the streets. His mother was screaming—every day, at anyone, about anything; his father was working two jobs driving trucks and buses; and his five brothers and three sisters were scattered, fighting for their own piece of the world. ¶ Roxbury, 1978. Trotter Elementary School, also known as "gladiator school." The proposition was simple: You either fought or you went down. Why? He didn't know. There was so much he didn't know in the Roxbury slum of Boston, where things moved too fast for you to stop and think. Pull tight and push hard. Stick and move. Fight your way out. Use your fists.

But there had to be something else, too. How did he survive before he was old enough to use those fists? Simple: He smiled. As a child, he had a charisma that could even quell his mother's blind rages. A laugh as quick as his fists would become. And he learned to use that weapon with as much effect as a blow to the face.

Then, in those long, exhausting days when even the smile wouldn't disarm the enemy—gang members, drug dealers, police officers were all around—and the fists weren't strong enough, there was one last bastion for the ninth of nine children in an Irish-Catholic family against the cruelty of that working-class world: the sanctuary. The church itself, where God is always watching. You don't have to put on a face with God—neither the smile nor the fists work—because He sees inside you. He sees all, and no one can strike you there. In church the air is still, the nave and narthex silent, and, unlike the streets, it smells of incense and candles. And when it's not silent, the walls echo with hymns. Yes, you could go to church for some relief, and even your sins were a kind of currency there, because you could confess and be forgiven. You could say your prayers and walk out clean again, into the dirty world, to live and fight another day. Even now, he begins each day with a visit to church—a few prayers, if not a full Mass.

He described going from 165 pounds in *Broken City* to 212 for *Pain & Gain*—and then back down to 185 in 30 days for *2 Guns*.

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BY THE TIME I MET MARK ROBERT MICHAEL Wahlberg last fall, he was a long way from the darkness of his youth. Through violence and charm, the 42-year-old had battered and bruised his way to the light at the top. We were inspecting the penthouse apartment in Trump Tower in downtown Chicago, an unfinished space 89 floors above the banks of the river, surrounded by 18-foot-tall windows. The light was so bright that it burned the white walls and the raw white concrete until it shimmered.

He came stepping across the bare floor with that odd walk of his: torso thrusting left and right like a man walking chest-deep in water. He wore jeans, a tight white T-shirt, and working man's brogans. His hands were square and his arms angular, as if he'd just recently been roughed out in stone for a sculpture to be completed later on. I held out my right hand to greet him, and he took hold of it with his left, saying, "Excuse

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