

IRON CROWS MC

BOOK 4

Bonded
Couple

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BONDED COUPLE

By

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EPILOGUE

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God...

Romans 14:1-10

CHAPTER 1

I struggled, not wanting the diggers to find the body. The shovels stabbed down, over and over, digging at the soil in the graveyard, determined to find the truth. Deeper they dug, destined to discover my secret.

People were always digging, always finding. Always knowing that justice would solve all crimes.

I hoped they didn't dig deep enough, but there was a back-hoe there, ready. Its metallic scoop went into action and uncovered more and more, until bones were found. Bones turned in the dirt.

Those around stood, watching, as the body of Thomas Green was at last uncovered. I felt eyes turn on me, accusing, asking, "Why? Why would you do such a thing? He was a good man."

I knew I had to run. Flee.

I jerked harshly to turn to run, and woke myself from my troubled sleep. I was sweating.

Kristy leaned over me, her touch light. "Are you okay?"

Already, much of the dream was gone. Remaining behind was the sense of unease at a grave being discovered. But that was unlikely, for certain. Who dug up graves and dug beneath them? Unless someone told...

I scrubbed a hand down over my face. My beard was getting longer and I gripped it for a second. "Yeah... I'm... okay. Bad dream."

Her eyes softened in the morning light. "You've been having quite a few recently. Ever since—"

"Don't ask." I felt it in my bones – the reluctance to say anything. She was my wife, but the Iron Crows expected secrets to remain secrets. There was no way I could tell her I killed a man. For the club. For Keystone.

I turned over, away from her. I felt her settle back down and heard her sigh. I didn't want to lock her out like this; I had to. I loved her, even if I felt she was drifting away from me. Our lives had been intersected, right after the altar, by the Iron Crows. The impact had sent us spinning in different directions, though we sought the same thing. We hungered for inclusion. Me, in my way. Kristy in her way. But they were different ways.

I don't know if her need was greater than mine, or more fragile, but her relationship with the Iron Crows turned sexual. I just didn't know any more

how many cocks she'd taken. And even if I got turned on over this slutty side of her, I still recognized that something was wrong.

~ ~ ~

I pulled my Harley up to the clubhouse with Kristy clinging to me. Something normal such as this restored a sense of normalcy about our lives. Her grip reminded me she was mine and I was hers. But when she let go, the feeling evaporated. She would be going inside – going in to likely be alone with Ghost. She was always alone with him in the mornings.

In the evenings, when not working at the Lucky 7, she might be with one of the other patchers. She didn't open her legs for all of them, just a certain few. But I never knew until I saw her off with Gripper, or Viking, or Big Pizza.

Dealer, the president, kept his distance. It had been weeks since he had fucked my wife one last time at our trailer. He had walked out and kept his word. It was over. I saw the pain in his eyes, the tense set of his mouth, but he led us as if nothing was wrong. I could see it there, lingering, but also growing weaker. His lust for my wife was being put behind him. Like a junkie craving drugs, his withdrawals surged and spiked, then waned. Slowly, he was getting over her.

I hadn't even dismounted yet when Ghost came out with Flats. The treasurer pointed at me. "Stay on and follow me." He got onto his Harley and started it.

I reaffixed my helmet and started my bike back up. Flats was on his.

When Ghost saw us ready, he pulled out and accelerated towards the commercial area of town where Kristy and I rented the trailer. I followed behind Flats for a few streets, then pulled into a yard behind them. I thumbed off my Harley and got off when they did.

Ghost flipped a set of keys. We were in what looked like an old gas station from the 1960s or 70s. A separate warehouse that had probably been a different piece of property had been added within an enclosed gate sometime in the last thirty years. He said to us, "We considered this place first for the club. But the brothel won out."

I watched him unlock a dirty glass door and push it open. I went in after Flats.

The place smelled like old oil with a hint of waterless hand cleaner.

Ghost said, "It's ours, now. For a chop shop."

Flats mumbled, "We stealin' cars now?"

"No, buying them cheap and chopping them. Jimmy's idea."

Flats grunted, happy.

"You'll be doing the chopping. I'll need to see if I can lure Jacks away from his job to help."

Flats nodded thoughtfully.

Ghost waved the keys at me. "You're going to hustle the parts. Sell to mechanics, advertise in newspapers, online, wherever you can push it."

Wow, cool. I can do this. "Sure thing."

"Cable company is coming to wire you in. We'll move in a desk. Run out to the city and get the kind of computer you'll need. Can you credit card it?"

"Sure. Just need a laptop."

"Get it done by tomorrow. I have an order in at the Print Shop for business cards. When those come in, hit every garage you can find."

I was nodding. "Yep. No problem."

"I also have a run of flyers that should be done by noon. Pick them up in the meantime and start placing them wherever you can." He indicated the phone on an otherwise empty old shelf. "That's going to get turned on today." He pulled a slip of paper from his vest. "That's the number. Voice mail included. Set up a proper recording until you're here full time."

"Understood." I was smiling. It almost felt like my own business.

"Leave off the toilets. This is your new focus. It's also going to be your new job."

"No more bouncing?"

"We don't make money off of bouncers." His scowl and squint drilled into me. "The club is putting money into getting this off the ground, Jimmy. Don't disappoint us."

I stopped smiling. "I won't."

"Don't worry about the bars; we got guys who can take over. You've a lot to do here." He looked around at the dirt and dust. "If you need supplies and material, give me a list."

"Will do."

My days as a bouncer were over.

CHAPTER 2

I was wore out by the end of the day. But it was a good feeling. I had arranged signage. Procured a business license. Picked up and passed out fliers. Biked into the city and picked up a decent laptop that would serve the purpose, and a backpack for it. I haggled with a contractor about security lights and an alarm. I bought a heavy chain and a new lock for the fence. And I gave a long list to Ghost by email: office supplies; receipt books; cleaning supplies, and a wish list for a yard dog.

Flats was working a list for equipment; that was the real money. He kept mumbling about buying some old tow truck to bring cars to us.

I backed in near the front door of the clubhouse next to the other Harleys.

Wallet and Viking were outside the front door, leaning against the wall and drinking beers. Tall, blonde Viking raised his beer to me. "Hey, Jimmy." *Fuck, I hate that name.* I gave him a grin. "Hey. Hey, Wallet."

Wallet was a shorty but young and muscular. He had taken punches from some of the Sons of Aggression posers at the Daily when I was bouncing. He made a wry face. "Some of your friends are in there."

"Oh? You still grudging them for that—"

He belched. "Nah. Just got nothing to say to them. Not until I see more."

I nodded slowly. That sounded like Wallet. Hell, that sounded like the whole club. I waved and went in. I slung my laptop backpack and helmet on the table. At the bar, I sighed.

Donna was behind the counter. "Hey, handsome."

"What are you doing back there?"

"Grannie wanted a break. Said maybe this was a good chore for me."

"Instead of cleaning the kitchen?"

"It doesn't get all that dirty very often."

"Mm."

"So, what will it be? Scotch, beer, whiskey, or me?"

I chuckled. "Beer. Your husband still being a dick?"

She reached into the cooler under the counter and brought up a Miller Genuine Draft. She popped the top and slid it to me. "The skies did not open up today delivering an angel to set him straight."

"Well, I don't imagine we could accomplish much out here." I looked around. "Kristy...?"

"In with Ghost, of course."

"What's new?" I took a long pull on the cold beer.

"Actually, she turned down Big Pizza and Gripper."

I looked at her funny. "Are you shitting me?"

She leaned on both forearms and gave me a fantastic view of cleavage.

"Now why would I want to do that?"

"No, you wouldn't."

She straightened. "Go have some fun. I'm stuck behind the counter here, anyway. Maybe tomorrow, huh?"

I winked. "I'll see if I can squeeze in some time."

She pursed her lips. "The chop shop thing, huh?"

I nodded.

"Don't forget about me."

I walked around the counter to where she stood. I kissed her ear.

"Never."

She gave me a pursed-lipped smile and looked down.

I circulated. I knew Donna was lonely. I knew she identified with me because she was so like me. So like Kristy. Some of us needed to be included. Some of us wanted to know we were needed – valued. It was why Kristy and I had married: we were two loners who found happiness being alone together. But now my wife was finding inclusion in the club and opening herself in ways that might have excited me at first. I felt my excitement was now coalescing into worrying clumps of concern.

Meatgrinder and Slaughter from the disbanded Sons of Aggression were playing pool.

I went over to them. "Hey, you two."

Meatgrinder's face broke into a broader smile than he had been wearing.

"Hey Jim."

At least the posers don't call me Jimmy.

Slaughter said, "Hey, Jimmy."

I slapped my hand to my face and drew it down.

Slaughter, though, was no slow cookie. "You don't like that name?"

I looked around quickly, then lowered my voice. "Fuck no, I hate it. I'm Jim."

"Sorry, Jim. It's just that I've heard others use it."

I placated him with my hand. "No, no, it's all right. Don't say anything about it." I took a deep swig. "I'm just scared shitless if I ever get patched it'll be my nickname."

Meatgrinder laughed. "Could have a worse one."

Big Pizza wandered into us. "Mind if I break in here and challenge Meatgrinder to a game?"

I held up my beer. "Have at it."

Slaughter ducked his head. "Go ahead. I'll just chat with your prospect here."

I moved over to the counter with Slaughter. I tossed my empty into the recycle can and said, "Another beer, please?"

Slaughter said, "Me, too."

Donna popped two bottles. "Hey, would you like to do me a favor?"

I said, "Sure, Donna."

"Could you run back to the walk-in and grab me another case? We're getting low."

"Miller?"

"Please."

"Sure thing." I winked at her. I motioned to Slaughter to follow me. We walked back toward the left hall.

He said, "So this place used to be a whore house?"

I grunted. "Yep, they bought it and shut it down."

"I would've figured they'd keep it. Take over and—"

"Iron Crows are different." I stopped and faced him, a world of want in me to say why, but I said, "Very different. They're more concerned about the community than you can imagine."

He raised an eyebrow. "I remember Brett – I mean Ace - talking to Massacre about the Iron Crows having an in with the sheriff—"

My hand on his chest stopped him. We were right outside the kitchen and I heard voices inside. I leaned close and said very low, "Best keep that to yourself. For the time being."

His mouth was open but I could see both question and understanding in his eyes. "Sure. No problem."

I motioned and we went into the government-green kitchen. Grannie was there, huddled with Smoke and Tequila.

Grannie was saying, "...never seen such a thing—" She straightened. "Oh, hi, Jimmy."

I acted normal. I kissed her cheek and patted Smoke on the shoulder. I gave Tequila a wet kiss on the lips. "Hi, ladies. Just grabbing a case." I didn't wait for an answer. I handed Slaughter my beer and opened the heavy metal walk-in door. Along the right on the floor were cases of beer. I hefted two and used my foot to hook the door and push it closed.

The women looked like they were deliberately waiting for us to be gone.

I grinned at them and left with Slaughter.

He said, "Sometimes I don't know what to say."

I stopped and leaned my head towards him. "At those times, it's best to say nothing."

"Are you making it here? As a prospect?"

I laughed, feeling a tickle somewhere deep inside. "Shit if I know."

He was giving me a curious look.

I said, "Look, Bob – it was Bob, right?"

He nodded.

"I was a loner. I had shit until Kristy. The Iron Crows made me feel at home, even if I was just a hang-around. That meant a lot to me. And to Kristy, too. And Donna is the same. Fuck, for all I know, every biker in here was a loner before—"

A hand clapped down on my shoulder. Gunner's gravelly voice spoke around his unlit cigar. "You got that fucking right, Jimmy. Abso-fucking-lutely."

Slaughter chuckled. "You really don't sound like a chaplain."

Gunner wheezed – that old Chrysler sound. "Shit, boy, you ever read the old testament?"

"Well..."

"You should, though you get all you need from the new. But all those prophets God sent? Nasty, iron-ass bunch. Yanking beards, cursing and cussing." He whipped his cigar from his mouth and stabbed Slaughter in the chest with it. "Those are my kind of men. You throw some mealy-mouthed wimp at me who looked like he just sucked a green persimmon and I'm more likely to shove my boot up his ass."

Slaughter look amused to the point of shocked laughter. "Okay... should I grow a beard so you can yank it?"

Gunner wheezed as if he was going to die. He clapped Slaughter on the shoulder. "Stick around, asshole." He walked out of the hall.

Slaughter looked at me as if he just couldn't believe what he had heard. I said, "He's a very strong believer."

"Him?" He sounded incredulous.

We were at the end of the hall. "See that love seat near the pool table?"

"Yeah?"

"Few months back, he took me down to my knees and I accepted Jesus in front of the entire club."

He looked at me with wonder in his expression. "In front of..."

I gave him a dry look. "Don't ever presume to think he's a phony."

"I won't."

"Let's go deliver these beers."

CHAPTER 3

I stopped in at the clubhouse with Kristy for breakfast; she had taken to riding with me on my Harley and walking to the Lucky 7 for her shift. We entered the kitchen to familiar smells of bacon and coffee.

Grannie leaned over the counter. "You want bacon with your pancakes?"

I chuckled. I knew there was no menu here except for what she felt like making. She and Smoke worked the kitchen like pros, but they only made one breakfast.

"Sure, please, Grannie." I grinned.

Kristy said, "Me, too."

Grannie waved at us as if we were flies that had gotten too close. It was a familiar gesture and not delivered with any distaste.

We poured coffee while we waited.

My normal spot next to Donna was taken by Celia. The two women were huddled.

Kristy barked a short and derisive laugh just low enough for me to hear. She didn't like me being around Donna, at all.

I grabbed up my plate from the counter where Grannie had dropped it. "Thanks, Grannie."

"Shut up." The old woman smiled wearily as she said it.

I took my two pancakes and bacon to the table and sat next to crazy-eyed Twenty. I studied the bottles of syrup on the table and reached for the organic. My hand collided with Viking's.

The big man and I fought over the bottle. He guffawed deep. "Ho there, use the Log Cabin."

"I don't want that crap."

We were in a tug of war with the organic.

"Neither do I. So you use it. Look, it's unopened."

Suddenly, a metal spatula was raining slaps down on our hands. A defiant and incensed Grannie stood over us. "What's wrong with the Log Cabin?"

Viking pleaded, "It's not organic."

She fumed and picked up the Log Cabin syrup. She made a face. "It's six years out of date anyway." She tossed it expertly into the trash. Then her

spatula launched out fast and slapped both of our hands. "Take turns."

Gunner was wheezing.

Grannie shook the spatula at him. "Don't tempt me."

Gunner grated with joviality, "Yes, oh wise master of the mighty kitchen —"

There was a resounding clang – almost like a bell – as Grannie whacked Gunner up the side of the head.

He almost fell over laughing.

Viking and I ducked our heads.

Kristy snaked the organic syrup and giggled like a schoolgirl.

~ ~ ~

I collected the receipts I had and slid them under Ghost's door. I heard Kristy in there with him, talking. I didn't bother knocking.

In the common room, I grabbed up my backpack and helmet.

Donna stood next to me, fiddling with her gloves. "Got some time?" Her voice was hopeful, if unsure.

I knew I had time. Much at the chop shop was still getting set up. "I sure do."

"Wanna follow me home?"

I gave her a steady smile. "Lead on."

Her eyes lit up and she bit her lower lip. "Great."

I climbed onto my Harley and started it. I sat watching her swing her leg over hers and settle down. I firmed watching it, thinking about her pussy sliding down my cock. *Her home, huh? Kinky.*

She looked back, then pulled out. I followed. She rode like any of the guys and even though she had a long ponytail, you wouldn't know she was a woman unless you got a look from the side or front.

We crossed town.

Past C Street I saw one of the deputies standing outside a car, half a block up on a side street to the right, talking to the driver. The car was filled with people. I frowned, trying to see as much as possible. Unfortunately, all I could tell was that the car was old. My oh-shit alarm started ringing.

I had to hit the brakes drastically to avoid plowing into Donna at the stop sign. She was looking at me in her tiny rear view mirror. I shrugged.

Her home was a one story brick-job from the 70s with a low roof. It looked solid. I parked beside her in the driveway and took off my helmet.

"Your neighbors...?"

She waved a hand. "I don't think the ones that are home can see that far."

My dick thickened as she got off her SuperLow. Her moves were raw and feminine and spoke of sexual tension. I followed her inside and dropped my helmet next to hers.

Her house was stunningly clean and very sparsely decorated.

She pointed down. "Remove your boots?"

"Sure." I could see the carpet looked pristine. It was a deep cardinal red shag set off with crème-colored furniture and brass lamps. "Nice place."

She made a face. "It's just a house."

"You keep it so clean."

"When I have nothing else to do."

I followed her into the bedroom. "Not much incentive for you here?"

"When my husband thinks everything I do is stupid?" She turned and crossed her arms at me, her brow furrowed and her face troubled.

"I'm sorry."

"Someday I'm hoping something will change."

"Divorce your husband."

"For what? For you? Like you'd ever leave Kristy?"

I took her in a hug and she melted to me, but her arms were stiff with tension.

She said, "There isn't anyone for me."

"Your husband—"

"I don't want to talk about him. I have to endure him as much as I do and I'd rather not have him on my mind when I feel you in me."

My dick apparently thought she was addressing it, so it hardened fully in response. I let her go and began undressing. "You really want to do it in your bed?"

She coughed in outrage. "Yeah, why not?"

"If I leave any chest hair or—"

She slapped her hand down through the air. "I'll DustBuster the bed."

"All right." I stood naked and toyed with my shaft.

Her eyes lit on it and she smiled. She removed the last of her clothing and stood curvy before me. She wasn't as thick as Tequila, but she had a wide set of hips. Normal up top, she looked like a typical soccer mom or average housewife – not some bad-ass bitch who rode a Harley.

I grabbed her into a naked hug and held her close. My dick throbbed happily, nudging down against her clit. I felt the swell of her boobs as they pressed against my chest. I moved her back to the bed and settled next to her. My fingers found her pussy and slid along the moist lips. I moved them back and forth and around her clit.

Her hips responded instantly, moving against the motion of my hand to increase the sensation. We kissed. Donna was a great kisser. Her tongue and mouth felt open and accepting. Kissing Kristy felt like more work than pleasure.

I had her shivering under my fingers.

She whispered, "Get on. I want to feel you in me."

I chuckled. "Not yet."

"Why?"

I scooted down.

She said, "No, no teasing."

"I'm not going to tease you; I'm going to finish you."

"Me first? But why?"

I looked at her over her pubic mound. "Because when I get inside, I'm going to pound your pussy senseless until I cum." I applied my tongue to her clit and began moving it around.

She groaned breathily and shuddered.

I moved my fingers around in her folds, teasing the sensitive skin there. She warmed to the ministrations like an iron heating on the ironing board. Her build was slow, even and insistent. She groaned with more tension until she seemed unable to catch her breath. Her thighs trembled on the sides of my head. It was time.

I jammed three fingers deep into her pussy and curled the fingers up. I flicked my tongue across her bud and her head came up off the bed. Her face was scrunched up and she was squishing her own boobs with her fingers. Her mouth was open and began emitting a high pitched whine. Her eyes popped open and she flopped back, thrusting her hips up with grunts. Her pussy clamped on my fingers and squeezed.

I pulled my tongue away from her engorged clit and smiled as she thrashed through her orgasm. I kept my fingers moving in her until she panted with exhaustion. I took them out.

She felt clammy everywhere but her pussy – it was radiating heat.

I moved up between her legs and lifted them up to my shoulders. I scooted up farther until her pussy was facing up beneath my dick. I gripped it and pushed it down. The head popped into her wet hole and she moaned for more. I gave a savage thrust and pushed my entire dick into her pussy until I was straining at the base of my shaft to get even deeper.

The pressure on her outer pussy pulled forth a purr of pleasure.

I wasn't looking for something slow and sensual. I pulled back and began hammering her, cramming my cock in so hard and deep that I grunted with effort. The slide of my skin inside hers was fast and fantastic. She panted with each thrust until it sounded like she would hyper-ventilate. Her eyes lost focus.

Her pussy felt great and I was compelled to say so. "You feel awesome."

She groaned as if about to cry.

I worked her pussy like I was pissed at it. I punished it with my cock. I thrust harder, and grunted louder. "You like that?"

She let out a long, "Ohhh..."

My hips slammed down onto hers. My balls slapped against her ass. And I drove my excited cock as deep as I could get into her married pussy. If her husband wasn't going to do his duty, I was going to fuck her senseless – give her what she needed. What she wanted.

Maybe I couldn't give her what she really wanted – a man like me – but I could give her what was building deep inside. That force that made me clench up with tension made me fuck her harder. A gasp escaped my mouth that turned into a yell of effort. My cock was a blur in her pussy and everything started to get tight. I slammed down hard, burying my cock as far as it would go, right there on her marriage bed. I felt my shaft swell up fast and then begin squirting. I grunted feverishly, jerking my hips down onto her, but I was already as deep as I could go.

I filled her pussy with strong squirts until I felt drained. Then I fell over beside her.

CHAPTER 4

I gave her a kiss in the driveway, feeling very relaxed and relieved. Her sultry look of satisfaction overcame her plain looks and I felt good for having fucked her. I said, "I'll see you again."

She pursed her lips, much going unsaid. "I hope so."

I rode off and away from her house. Back towards the other side of town.

A truck went roaring through the intersection up ahead, the back sporting a handful of men leaning out and looking forward. White t-shirts obvious, a flash of blue caught my eye: a ball cap.

Surenos. Yeah? No? I twisted the throttle and sped towards the intersection. I braked hard and came to a stop in the intersection. The truck was turning, leaning heavily as it raced around a corner. *Chasing someone? Or getting away from something?*

I didn't feel like trying to chase them down. I rode to the Daily and parked out front. Three Harleys were outside. I went inside, carrying my helmet.

Gripper was inside talking to Slaughter and Pulverizer, two of the decent guys from the disbanded Sons of Aggression. The enforcer nodded at me.

I thumbed over my shoulder. "Keep an eye out. Saw a truck flying around with what might have been Surenos in it."

Gripper straightened immediately. "You alert the club?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled my phone. "Not yet. Rode here as quick as I could." I tapped out a message and sent it to Sonar.

Slaughter looked angry. "Those were the guys the sheriff suspects—"

I looked at him with a nod, but I knew I couldn't tell him the truth. I knew he wouldn't be able to handle it – not at this juncture. The Iron Crows had made Ace disappear. Was he buried at Morningside? Or disposed of somewhere else? I didn't know. "They want to control drugs, both in the city and establish a ring out here." I held up my fingers and rubbed them together. "Untapped potential."

Slaughter's eyes drew down.

Pulverizer said, "We should fuck them up. Kick them out of town."

I looked out the door. Gripper was outside. I said to them, "Stick around with the Iron Crows; you won't be disappointed. In the meantime, stick with Gripper. Watch your bikes."

The two grumbled and headed outside.

Tequila leaned over the counter and grinned at me. "I think that was all an excuse."

"Huh?"

She motioned with her finger for me to come nearer. "I bet you wanted them out of here so you could talk to me."

"I did see a truck-full of—"

She frowned. "Well, shit. Way to spoil a lady's fantasy."

I chuckled and walked around the bar to stand next to her. "I don't know, maybe I should come by more often."

She gripped my crotch and squeezed. "Now you're talking."

I gave her a wet kiss. "I need to check on Flats at the yard; make sure he's all right. Maybe I'll sneak in here tomorrow when the place opens."

She smiled, lifted her eyebrows, and let them fall in promise. "Kristy says I can get you as much as I want."

My mood wilted, though I didn't let it show on my face. *What am I going to do with Kristy?*

Tequila misread my silence. Her pout under all that mascara was comical. "Aw, shoot, are you still giving some to Donna?"

I nodded just so slightly. "She's a lot like me. Like Kristy."

"I can ride a Harley."

"I bet you can. But it's not just that." I hooked my hand up and pressed upward at the crotch of her jeans. "You're a dirty woman, Tequila. I look forward to making you cum again."

Her smile spread wide. "We're on the same page."

"Oh, don't you ever doubt it." I released her and walked out.

Gripper was leaning, arms crossed. He grunted at me.

I said, "I'm going to check on Flats. Poor guy is all alone."

Slaughter and Pulverizer waved.

I got on my Harley and started her up. Comforted by the powerful vibration, I scanned the streets. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. The ride to the shop revealed no mad Surenos flashing gang sign and bouncing their heads.

Flats met me near the door. "Couple calls for you to hear on voice mail. Two of the garages had questions."

I filed that away in my mind. "Think I saw some Surenos around. Not sure. I'm going to close the gate to hide the bikes."

He spat and nodded.

We were safe, but someone else wasn't.

~ ~ ~

I got off my Harley Sportster in front of the clubhouse just as a sheriff's SUV stopped across the street. A large black cop got out and came across the street. He had to be six inches taller than me, at least.

I waited, wondering if he was coming for me. My hand gripped the bar of the door until my knuckles whitened. *Does he know about Thomas Green? Can he see the blood on my hands? Or can he see the headshot replaying out clearly in my eyes?*

He put his hands on his Sam Browne gear belt. "Dealer in?" His rich baritone and searching eyes left no doubt this was the sheriff. His nametag said, "Jefferson."

I opened my mouth, stunned by the cop not asking me about the agent. "I... Come in and I'll check."

He gave a curt nod. He followed me in.

I strode to the back, as much to get away from him as to tell Dealer.

I didn't have to. Dealer and Sonar were coming out. Sonar had a small bank of monitors viewing the cameras placed around outside the building. He had seen the sheriff coming.

Jefferson said, "You seen Martin Mitchell?"

Dealer frowned, "Firehose?"

"We found his Harley lying over on its side in front of Gordon's Tire. No one saw anything."

Sonar's eyes flicked to me.

I growled, "Surenos."

Everyone went silent.

Jefferson looked me up and down, his mouth working behind closed lips. He looked at Dealer. "This Jimmy?"

The president nodded.

The sheriff stuck out his hand to me. "Dwayne Jefferson, sheriff. Welcome to Keystone; I've heard good things about you."

I shook his hand, though mine was already shaking on its own.

Jefferson straightened. "The fine upstanding Christian citizens of Keystone desire safety for the community. For their clean community." He left a lot else unsaid. He faced Dealer again. "I know Martin wouldn't dump his bike over and not pick it up. I think we have a situation here, and it's about to get a lot uglier."

Sonar stroked his black beard. "We've kept things quiet." His eyes darted around, taking stock of who was listening. We were all having this discussion right out in the middle of the common room.

Slicer was at the pool table, holding a chalk to his pool stick. He was paying close attention. Smoke was lying on one of the couches, feet up and reading a book. Grannie was behind the bar, stock still. Jacks came out of the back and slowed. He joined Slicer at the pool table and picked up a leaning pool stick.

Jefferson missed none of it. He slowly shook his head. "I think we're crossing a line here, gentleman. There's a major push happening and if Keystone doesn't respond, this town's going to fall to the gangs. I'm sure the citizens wouldn't want that – and sometimes... you have to use force to keep the peace."

There was silence.

Jefferson dipped his head as if to make his departure. He said, "We'll do what we can to look for him, but... you might want to start your own search as well. You all have a nice day." He left the building.

I started breathing again, not realizing I had been holding my breath.

Dealer was immediate action. "Sonar, send the call out. When people start arriving, arrange patrols of no less than four bikers."

Sonar glanced at me.

The president said with extreme disappointment, "I know."

I blinked. *What did I do? All I did was bring in the sheriff...*

Sonar shook his head. "Bad."

Fuck... My shoulders slumped and I didn't even know what the fuck I had done wrong.

Dealer said to me, "Get a drink, Jimmy. A stiff one. You sure as shit going to fucking need it." He stomped back to his office.

CHAPTER 5

I looked at Grannie with loss.

She looked at me sadly. "Well, what's your last drink going to be, Prospect?"

I felt a lump in my throat that I choked back. "Scotch."

She set the tumbler down hard and began pouring. Amber liquid gurgled out of the bottle, splashing deeply into the glass. Her expression never changed. She scooted the glass towards me. "I'm sorry, Jimmy."

I grabbed up the glass and took a huge gulp. *What the fuck had happened? What did I do? Where did I go wrong? Did Tequila rat me out that I wasn't busting my balls on only the second day of getting the chop shop going? Had Donna? What am I going to do?* I stalked back into the left hall and into the first room – the same room I had been chained down. I slammed the door. I felt the wet in my eyes that threatened.

I squeezed my hand on the heavy chain bolted to the wall by the bathroom. The chain had bound me firmly as captive months ago. Its weight was an accusation to me now as it was then. Worth nothing as a captive, I had embraced my captors when it was found I wasn't some secret government agent. Their bond was something I so desperately desired in my life – much like my bond to my wife.

I had left Keystone, glad to be freed from captivity, but knowing something here had temporarily filled a hole in my soul. I needed that and I came back asking for a job. Their welcome had been a salve on the oozing wound of my sanity. They had given me like a gift the very thing I needed: inclusion.

Always the odd one out, never having friends, never part of a clique or group, I had been a loner until I met Kristy. And she had been a loner, too. Immediately we knew we were meant for each other. That was how drastic the depth of need was to be something, someone.

I squeezed harder on the chain. *Jesus? Any insight? Any... thing?* I listened for a voice but heard nothing. I felt Him there, though, hidden somewhere in my heart or mind – I couldn't tell. I felt like I was being watched. Watched over, even.

Whatever happens to me, I will move on and be a stronger person. And I felt better for feeling it. But at the same time, the weight of disappointment at the sudden change in the club towards me made me angry.

I went into the bathroom and slammed the door. I peed into the ultra-clean toilet. *All this work, for nothing? Was I out of a job? Being kicked out of the trailer?*

I opened the door to the bathroom and picked up my Scotch. I sat on the damned table they had tied me to and considered the wrist bindings. They were lying precisely where they had rested after they had been removed. I fingered one, wondering if I could go back what I might have done differently.

But I could come up with nothing. I was who I was. I squeezed the glass and finished off half of it. Fire burned down my throat. I sighed. "Fuck it." I slid off the table and went out.

~ ~ ~

I was sitting sullenly, unresponsive and on my second Scotch. I was sitting on the damned loveseat sitting right over the spot I had fought Gripper in view of the whole club. I might have landed a few hits, but I had been beat down.

The clubhouse was filling.

Sonar poked his head out a few times. The mood looked somber.

The room quieted and I saw boots in front of me. Dealer's voice was loud. "You've drunk enough. Get that fucking vest off."

I was a prospect in these last seconds. I'd leave knowing I had been one. At least I could claim that. At least outside of this club, I could think back to when I had worn it and... almost been. I set my tumbler down and stood. I removed the vest with leaden arms.

Sonar ripped it from my hand in the silence.

Dealer hit me square in the chest and I sat down hard on the loveseat - so hard it rocked backward. "Wear that, Stiff."

Voices erupted around me, laughing.

I was confused. My hand clutched my chest where he had hit me and something else. *Why did he call me stiff?*

The laughter prodded at me.

I looked at what was in my hand, and unfolded it. It was a vest. Emblazoned on a nametag was the name "Stiff." I looked up at Dealer, slow to comprehend.

The bastard was grinning. So was Sonar. So was everyone else.

I turned the vest around and gawked stupidly at the three patches. The top one said Iron Crows. Beneath that was the black crow detailed in silver. Beneath that was the bottom rocker that said Keystone. I blinked.

Dealer boomed out, "Stand up, Stiff."

Everyone in the room laughed.

"Put it on and greet your brothers."

I sat there, stupefied, maybe even a little drunk. That's when I felt two things. *Fuck it all*. I felt the wet on my cheeks and the smile threatening to split my face in two.

Dealer growled, "Let's help him up..."

I was lifted to my feet and felt several backslaps. I gasped, "Me?"

Sonar said, "You earned it."

I half sobbed and half giggled. Chills were all up and down the skin on my body as I slipped the vest on.

Gunner stabbed his cigar at me. "You did a bang-up job of cleaning toilets, but you never want to wash your colors."

Dealer stuck his hand out. "Welcome to the Iron Crows, Stiff."

I started laughing, turning red. "Stiff?" I shook his hand.

He laughed with me, but it was subdued. "Yeah, you earned that, too. Wear it with pride."

Sonar called out. "We have some business to attend. Congratulations to our new member can wait. Firehose has gone missing. The sheriff talked to his wife and she hasn't seen him either. His Harley was found on its side in the street."

Mutters sped through the people in the room.

I felt like I was going to bust open and gush tears, blood and pride. But I kept it in check and listened.

Kristy came up to my side, beaming. She kissed my lips.

"Congratulations. They look great on you."

Sonar called off names, separating us into groups. I was to ride with Twenty, Ghost, and Flats. Our group was to go first. Others would follow and also be on call if we found anything.

Dealer said, "Find the Surenos. Beat the living shit out of them. They need to know we won't just let them roll in without a fight."

I picked up my tumbler of Scotch and handed it to Grannie. "I'll be back for that."

She winked at me.

Kristy tugged at me at the door. "Be careful."

I kissed her quickly. "Don't worry about me. I'll be back." I was the first of the group out the door, but I knew I'd be riding in back. No big deal; the fact I was wearing colors had me lit up like a Christmas tree inside.

I thumbed the starter and waited.

The other three were out just seconds after me and they mounted. Twenty twirled his finger up in the air as the other two started their bikes. He made a forward motion and we took off.

I swear, the wind felt alive in my beard. Even dulled by a little too much Scotch, I felt alive as never before.

Twenty took us along the main streets at the outskirts. Our heads swiveled this way and that, checking side streets. It wasn't until we started checking the center streets that our search paid off. I snatched my phone and thumbed, then held it to my ear. "Surenos, Keystone Café."

Two low-rider cars were parked a couple of doors down, but the gang members were leaning against the wall outside the café. They heard the rumble of engines. They straightened, looking. There were eight of them. Seeing only four Harleys, they began strutting.

Twenty twisted his throttle and shot forward.

CHAPTER 6

I was eager for what was coming.

Twenty skidded his bike to a stop and hopped off. Ghost and Flats were right with him. Ghost produced a crowbar from somewhere.

The Mexicans were in white t-shirts and either blue ball caps or bandanas. I had been right. Gang sign flashed and lips were puckered out. They came out onto the street to meet us.

But not all of them. Two approached the back of one of the cars. The trunk went up.

Twenty, Ghost, and Flats raced forward past their bikes. The sergeant, Twenty, produced brass knuckles. Ghost hefted his crowbar.

One of the hefty Mexicans pulled a shotgun out of the trunk and stepped forward. He pursed his lips and racked the slide.

I twisted the throttle and shot forward fast on my bike. About twenty feet from shotgun, I deliberately laid it down, sending my Harley sliding towards him on its side. I skipped off, stumbling forward.

Shotgun started to level towards me, but my Sportster took him down in a tumble. The guy next to him danced out of the way.

I grabbed up the fallen shotgun and brought the butt down on the fallen Mexican's head as hard as I could. I spun and used the shotgun as a baseball bat, holding it by the barrel. I swung for a homerun, slamming the shoulder stock into the stomach of the dancing gangster. I lifted him three feet off the ground and he went down.

I twisted fast, feeling adrenaline rip coarsely through my limbs.

Ghost sent teeth flying with his crowbar. Flats took the same man down and stomped his face with his boot. Twenty ducked and punched, blood spraying wherever the hard brass knuckles impacted.

I chose the closest Mexican and swung the shotgun overhead like an axe. The man went down like a sack of rocks. Knowing he was down, I spun back to the second guy I had hit. He was trying to get up. Using the shotgun like a golf club, I swung the flat of the stock against his head. He flopped down, totally out and limp.

I saw faces, briefly, pressed against the window of the café. I spared no time for them. I advanced on the guy who was originally holding the

shotgun. He was still out cold, but I wanted the bastard to remember me. I smashed the butt down over and over on his hand, hearing bones crack and break.

I heard panting behind me.

"Shit, Stiff. Let up."

A distant rumble grew.

The Mexicans were scrambling to get away.

I looked over to the dancer – the guy I had golfed into unconsciousness.

"Grab him!"

Twenty considered me. He turned to Flats. "Let's do it."

A van came rushing up. Bikers poured out of it. Harleys swarmed as the Mexicans picked up what they could and dove into the cars.

Ghost was shouting after them, waving his crowbar. "This is Keystone! This is our town! Tell it to your gang!"

We let them go. But we held dancer in our arms.

I almost passed out as the adrenaline left me and the Scotch reasserted itself.

Dancer was roughly thrown into the van as sirens sounded, distant.

By the time the cops had arrived, the Mexicans were gone and we were picking up our bikes.

~ ~ ~

I was in the clubhouse, circling the table. The same table I had been chained to. Dancer was on it, groaning.

Twenty kept slapping him to wake him up.

Finally the dancer said, "*Chingado...*"

The sergeant leaned over. "Fuck you, too."

Dealer and Sonar were standing back, arms crossed.

I moved to his head and put my mouth almost up his nose. "Hey, fucker. Where's our buddy?"

He spat at me.

I brought my fist down on his pants – onto his dick.

He groaned loudly and started coughing.

I leaned down to the side of his head and whispered, "Like that? Asshole?"

He chingado'ed and puta'ed me several times.

I paced, feeling angry. Feeling very angry.

Twenty said, "Where's Firehose?"

Dancer lifted his head and shut his eyes. His head sank back down.

"Who?"

"The biker."

"Fuck you—"

My fist crashed into the side of his mouth. I leaned over him. "No, fuck you!"

Sonar said, "Take it easy, Stiff."

I was livid. "Get me a knife. Get me a fucking knife! I want to carve his balls off! See if he remembers then!"

Dancer cringed away from me. "Hey, fuck you."

I gripped his face like Gripper had gripped mine months ago. "No, you listen to me, you sick fuck. You talk or I'm going to carve."

He was silent, focusing on me for the first time. Fear crossed his features. "Hey, I have a daughter—"

My fist ended his speech. "Our buddy has two daughters and a son in college!"

Dancer spit out blood. "Hey, man. Hey, man." He struggled against the bonds, realizing he couldn't act all macho.

I leaned down again. "I'm going to go get a butcher knife." I grabbed his face and turned it towards me. "Understand? I'm going to start carving your fucking balls off. Unless you have something to say about where our buddy is. Got it?" I left the room, slamming the door behind me.

Honestly, I didn't know if Dealer and Sonar were going to allow me to do shit to the guy, but I was pissed. My anger drove me beyond all restraint.

The ladies of the club were gathered outside the door, looking shocked. They parted for me.

I stomped into the kitchen, flicking on the lights. I ripped open the metal drawer, too hard. The drawer came out and knives went clattering. I selected the longest, biggest one I could find from off the floor. I threw open the door and hefted the knife, grinning wickedly. "Here's Jimmy!"

Dancer squirmed on the table. "He's fucking psycho, man!"

Twenty eyed me, but said to dancer, "Maybe you better tell him what he wants."

"What?"

Twenty grunted. "You might remember once you see him cut your balls from you and stuff them in your mouth..."

Dancer wailed in fright.

I waved the knife like a wild fool. "Get his pants off."

Both Twenty and Gripper moved to do so.

Dancer went frantic. "Fuck you! Do you know who you're messing with, puto?"

I screamed at the top of my lungs into his ugly face. "Like I fucking care?" I reached down and grabbed his hairy balls and bunched them into my fist. I pulled.

Dancer was struggling. "Fuck you! We'll kill you! We'll kill your family!"

I took the knife and put the edge against the stretched base of his ballsack.

Dancer's eyes went wide, bugging out.

I waited.

He said nothing.

I drew the knife back, with pressure, cutting deep into his ballsack.

His scream was blood-curdling, followed by frantic yelling. "All right! All right! I'll tell!"

I let go and brought the knife up to his face. "See that? That's your ball blood. What you have to say better be the truth because I can easily cut the rest off of you."

Dancer was frantic. "Fuck! Fuck! Okay! Okay! Fuck! Ahhh!" He growled in pain.

I whispered into his ear. "Talk. Now."

"Okay! We took him. We took him."

Twenty leaned over. "Where?"

Dancer was shaking his head. "Nah, man. It's too late."

Gripper grabbed the man's face – just like he had mine months ago. "Where?"

"He's dead, man. Dead."

Dealer stepped forward, twisting dancer's face from Gripper. "I want a location or I'm going to let Stiff slice your balls off. Understand?"

I grabbed his sweaty, hairy balls again and squeezed.

Dancer shouted in terror. "Okay! Okay! It was a road behind the fire department..." Sonar scribbled down the directions as dancer squealed.

CHAPTER 7

I paced next to dancer. The bloody knife jerked upwards in my hand. The Mexican gang had abducted one of ours – one of mine. New to the brotherhood, I felt an immense anger that my inclusion was marred by the cavity left by Firehose's abduction. The man had been solid, fun, and friendly. That I didn't get to shake his hand as a brother – a fully patched member – drove me mad.

I turned to Dealer. "Are we done with him? Can I bleed him out right here?"

The president's eyes knew pain. He had lost a brother, too. His jaw firmed and he looked with hatred down at the gang member. "No, not here." He looked back to me. "Get on your bike. Go to the location. See if what this asshole says is true." He looked to Twenty. "Go with him. Take as many as you want to go."

The sergeant nodded. "Gripper, you're with us."

The large enforcer growled.

Dealer said to Sonar, "Grab Big Pizza and let's get rid of this guy."

I walked out to dancer's howls of protest.

Kristy was big-eyed, staring at me.

I moved past her and grabbed my helmet from the table, dropping the knife in its place. I stormed out of the building with Twenty and Gripper following. It was dusk as we mounted our Harleys. I thumbed the ignition and twisted the throttle. My Sportster roared with response. I didn't wait for Twenty to lead, I took off.

The directions weren't difficult, but there were some turns involved. I eventually let Twenty take the lead. He knew the town better than me and knew the roads. He led us up and out of town, but in a different direction than the cabin where I had killed Thomas.

The location was not as far out as the cabin. It was a semi-settled district that was plotted residential but at best held a few trailers on small parcels of land.

Twenty motioned for us, fingers to eyes, to look left.

It was Gripper who spotted it and hit his horn – a flat blast that caused Twenty to slow and stop. Gripper pulled alongside him and pointed.

The two bikes turned, led by Twenty. There was a trail to the left with a stump set back close enough to the road to be visible.

Twenty moved his Harley up the path. I followed behind Gripper. We topped a rise and Twenty slowed. He came to a stop and just sat on his bike. Gripper stopped beside him and slowly got off.

I pulled up beside Gripper so we were three in a row. None of that mattered to me when I saw the chains. The lights of our headlamps spotlighted a gruesome scene that I will never forget.

A body, wrapped in chicken wire, was held down by three large chains spiked out and wide.

I got off my Sportster and ran to the thing on the ground. The chains and chicken wire were blackened. The smell was atrocious. Firehose had been burned alive. Parts of his face were melted or cooked and the wire had settled into the flesh. The mouth was open in a silent scream.

I clenched my fists.

Twenty gritted out, "I'll call the sheriff."

Despite the soft rumble of our Harleys, his voice seemed to dominate the forest around us.

~ ~ ~

I kept quiet.

Sheriff Jefferson calmly accepted that we had received the location via an anonymous tip.

I regretted one thing: I hadn't finished cutting the Mexican's balls off.

The sheriff was grim-faced and angry. He kept muttering as he paced, "Shit like this can't happen here!"

Us three Iron Crows remained silent. I didn't need to be told to keep my mouth shut; I wasn't an officer and an officer was present: Twenty, the club's sergeant at arms. It was up to him to speak for us.

Sheriff Jefferson seemed to know the custom very well; he only addressed Twenty. At the moment, he was just muttering. "When word of this gets out..." He shook his head. "Shit! This is supposed to be a clean town." He glanced at Twenty with perhaps a small amount of accusation.

The sergeant's crazy eyes blazed. "We blocked a CIA attempt to establish a drug ring here. Very quietly."

Jefferson straightened to his full height. "God damned government. Sending us child molesters and now the God-damned CIA? Are you certain

of this?"

Twenty said, "One hundred percent."

The cop's eyes blazed like Twenty's. Behind him, deputies were combing the ground all around Firehose's burned body. He lowered his voice, his eyes darting as if to look at them. "We can't go down without a fight. I won't give up my town that easily. I know I've pushed you to keep things neat and tidy, but this isn't neat and tidy anymore."

Twenty remained silent, but I could see a shift in his posture.

Jefferson shook his head as if to clear it of bad visions. "We can't play nice with this now or we'll lose." He pointed over his shoulder. "This is just the beginning of this shit. I know it. The gloves have to come off, Sammy."

I guessed Sammy was Twenty's real name.

"They have to come off and Lord knows I'll do all I can to help. But I can only do so much. The state police will get involved and I have little pull there. I won't be able to cover much when things get ugly, so you'll have to be exceptionally good at whatever you do."

The female deputy came up holding a paper envelope. She said, "Plastic lighter."

Jefferson nodded. "Get it to the lab." He looked briefly at Twenty. "Go on, get out of here. Make sure Randall gets the message."

Randall McCloskey was Dealer.

We mounted up and left the scene.

~ ~ ~

I kept a sharp eye for vehicles on the way back, but other than an Iron Crows motorcycle patrol cruising around, I saw nothing.

Twenty left us in the clubhouse and went to talk to Dealer.

Faces were somber and angry. Of the former Sons of Aggression, only Slicer was present. He and Kristy approached me at the same time. He said, "Is it true? Burned alive?"

I nodded, feeling tired. Numb.

My wife hugged my arm and I could feel her hands trembling. She laid her face against my shoulder.

Slicer shook his head. "This is bad news, Jim."

I tapped my nametag. "Stiff."

He ran a hand through his unruly hair. "Right, sorry."

Kristy squeezed my arm. "Can we go home?" Something in her voice sounded very serious.

I focused on her and her concerned eyes. "I think... we're done here for the night. I don't see why not."

She pulled me to the table for our helmets. Something was up with her and I knew she wasn't going to wait.

I ended a day that should have been the happiest of my life, aside from my marriage to Kristy, with something less than happiness, for certain. The pain of finding out a brother was dead felt like a living force in me, draining me of energy and that happiness I should have had from earning my colors.

I told Grannie we were leaving and my phone would be on. Kristy clung to me as I started the Harley. I heard the flat zipper sound of the starter kick the Sportster to life. I felt the weight of my colors and the responsibility that went with them. I wanted to hold my head high in pride, but I couldn't; the anger made me hunch over.

I pulled out and rode us home.

CHAPTER 8

I didn't know what to expect from Kristy, but it certainly wasn't what developed. I sat on the couch and leaned my head back.

She sat next to me and gripped my arm. "I'm scared, Jim."

Out of anyone who frequented the club, I was sure she was okay to call me Jim in my off time. I felt amusement at my nickname, but it was brief. Given because of my stiff erection when seeing Dealer take my wife while I was chained down. Stiff for my knife wound in my calf. And stiff for drinks? I wanted to snort, but it wasn't the time.

She said, "I feel like we're losing something."

I swiveled my eyes to her in that look of, "Like duh?"

She firmed her lips. "I feel like we're losing us."

Anger over Firehose fed my frustration. "Well, lucky for you you're gaining Ghost."

"Stop that." Her lips formed a pout.

"What? The truth uncomfortable?"

"I want to talk about us."

"I've been here. I'm always here. We go to the club and you're gone the whole day in his office."

"That's not true."

"Oh? Sure..."

"He's been nice to me—"

I bit off, "How many times has his cock been in you?"

"But you like it."

I looked at her for a long second. "Maybe I don't anymore."

She sat back a little in confusion.

I pursued the point. "Maybe I realized weeks ago that you were growing away from us."

Her lower lip quivered. "I just wanted to be liked."

"You don't have to open your legs for every dick that swings in your face—"

Her slap on my cheek echoed in the trailer. I blinked away stars and sighed.

"I wasn't doing everybody."

"Fine, so your point is, you're scared because you're growing away from us—"

"That's not what I said."

"But that's what you meant, because that's how everything is."

She went quiet, looking at me, searching my face. "I'm sorry I slapped you."

I chuckled. "It was probably deserved. It's been a hell of a day." Rising in me was a wellspring of darkness: the murder; the beating; the knife-work; finding Firehose.

"Are you sure?"

"It's been..." *Great, despite the murder. What would you think of me? What does God think of me? Am I justified in what I did? Or no?* "It's been quite a time."

She hugged me, burying her nose in my neck. "I don't want to lose you, Jim."

"You never have."

"I stopped doing things with Viking and the others."

"But not Ghost."

"He's been nice to me."

"Anyone can be nice to you."

"I mean, since Dealer dumped me."

I shifted against her. "Dumped? Like you two were going steady? This isn't high school."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, I do, and I don't think you do. Both of them, and the others too, were just using you. Like I used Angela, and Donna, and Tequila."

"That's a mean thing to say."

"It's the truth, Kristy. Those guys might like you, but you were a fun time; that's all."

"I wanted to be included..."

"You are already. Do you see Smoke or Celia throwing their legs open?"

"Smoke is Sonar's girl."

I twisted, turning to her. "And you're my girl. You're my wife."

She settled back a bit. "Of course—"

"Then maybe start acting like one."

"But Tequila does things..."

I sighed. "Yeah, I know. And it seems fine for her and them. I don't know."

"You disapprove of her?"

I shrugged. "No, but it seems like she's the only one who manages it fine."

She frowned, knowing I was accusing her of being the one that wasn't. "I like her."

"Maybe you should talk to her. Find out how she handles it before you go trying to mimic her. All I know is, it grates on me every day I see that closed door and you behind it. It's like the door to our marriage."

She had tears. "I don't want that for us."

I was curious. "What do you want?"

"For us to be happy. Like we were when we got married and before that. When you and I were happy to be with just each other."

"Funny, that's what I want, too."

Her mouth was open, holding her breath, looking at me with watery eyes. "I'll stop with Ghost."

I didn't believe it and my tone said so. "Oh, really...?"

"Don't patronize me."

"I think you have a lot to think about."

"What about us?"

I held up my hand. "Here I am; I'm waiting for you. I have been all along."

~ ~ ~

I expected some new thing in the morning with Kristy. We rode to the clubhouse in silence, but I could tell she was deep in thought. I expected some new thing at the clubhouse, but people there were subdued.

I took a plate of eggs from a dour-looking Grannie. The cafeteria was eerily quiet, with only the sound of forks hitting plates. I sat next to Gunner. "You got a few minutes after breakfast?"

He looked at me a second, his eyes drawing down and considering my face. "Sure thing."

"Thanks." I ate quietly, my first full day as a member.

After breakfast, Gunner met me in the common room. "What's eatin' ya?"

"Can we talk outside?"

One eyebrow drew down. "Guess so."

I led him out. I propped a boot on the peg of my Harley. "I've been real troubled."

The chaplain said nothing, just waited.

"I'm having nightmares of the body being dug—"

"Enough of that. Best to never mention it even when you think we're alone. Ever."

I sighed. "Does God approve?"

He coughed. "Sheeit. I knew it was going to be same old thing."

"Huh?"

"Every member who gets in deep with what we do asks me the same thing."

"So all you say is 'sheeit'?"

He wheezed for a second in laughter. "No. Listen here, do you think God approves if you save an innocent life?"

"I would imagine—"

"There's no imagining about it. Do you think He approves if you kill an evil man?"

" 'Thou shalt not kill.' "

"Aye, there's that, but there's also, 'a time to kill.' "

"What makes what I did right?"

"Imagine this, if you will. Some pusher slips some bad stuff to kids at the school. It makes its way around. Some little boy or girl overdoses on the stuff and dies." His finger poked my chest. "You stopped that."

I sighed again.

He said, "You also saved innocent lives that were being targeted by the agent. You think that guy gave a shit about who was good and who was bad? He was under contract."

He made sense, but still...

"God's laws aren't man's laws. When you and I stand at Judgment for all that has happened, we'll be blameless, in all things. As to the here and now, God knows what's in here." He thumped his finger against my chest. "Even if the law thinks you did a bad thing, God knows you did the right thing."

"But murder—"

He tapped my chest harder. "Good men who let evil destroy good are not really men. This town is friendly, clean, and safe." He wheezed. "Just not safe for the ones who would destroy it. We're in a war, Stiff. It's us

against the forces of those who would see our kids dead, our streets filled with crime, our citizens scared to go outside. What do you think God wants? You think He wants that?"

"No."

"Then fight the good fight, even if it means breaking the law. Because the law won't stop all that shit from coming in. The law just picks up the pieces."

I felt it, too. The cops kept traffic safety, but the rest was showing up to take pictures of the crime scene, grab evidence, and bag the bodies. Police were reactive, not proactive.

Gunner growled, "What's going on in that pea-brain of yours?"

I chuckled. "I was just thinking how the police were reactive, and we're proactive."

He wheezed. "Good way of lookin' at it. You keep that in mind and those nightmares will turn to something else. Don't let fear rule you. Live by faith."

I nodded. "Thanks, chaplain."

He grunted and left me to my thoughts.

CHAPTER 9

An emergency session of church was called for the following day.

I checked in with Flats. He was in the yard circling a tow truck that looked as old as Keystone. I thumbed off my Sportster and said, "What the hell is that?"

Flats looked at me like I was daffy. "71 Ford tow truck. What else does it look like?"

"Does it work?"

He grunted. "Needs a bit of work, but not much. Leaks oil like a busted supertanker."

"Cheap?"

His face lit up. "Seven fifty."

"Is that good?"

He cackled.

I sat at my desk. It was another metal thing that looked like what the club used. I checked messages: only one voicemail, an inquiry about a part we couldn't possibly have yet.

Flats leaned in the doorway and wiped his hands on a rag.

I said, "When are your cutting tools and torches supposed to be here?"

He shrugged. "A week, maybe. Can't do much until then. I'm going to run this over to the clubhouse and see if the guys in the shop will fix her up."

I nodded. There was little point to being here if there was no work to be done yet. I phoned the caller back and informed him the business hadn't opened yet, but to keep us in mind the next month.

I looked into the bay. Flats had managed some spare shelves and bits and pieces of product and supplies were on them. Then I took a walk over to the building at the side and back. It was a goodly sized warehouse with broken windows at the top in four places. I wasn't sure if we could use all of the steel shelving. Much of it looked like it was made for tires.

I returned to my desk and plugged in my laptop. I scanned a couple of sites for used auto parts and made a list of the things we would want to chop from a vehicle. I jotted the same list on another piece and went and taped it to the shelving in the bay. Flats would see it and understand.

I checked my schedule: alarms and lights going in tomorrow. With nothing else to be accomplished, I mounted up and rode out. I kept an eye out for Surenos, but I didn't expect them to be back for a while. The last time we had roughed them up, it had been a couple months before we saw them again. Although I felt we had another reprieve, I didn't think they were going to take the hint – not with having gone so far as to take Firehose and send their own message.

I stopped in at the Daily Dollar. No Harleys were out front. My watch showed just a little past open. I walked in.

Tequila grinned from behind the bar. "I thought I heard your limp."

"My what?" I was incensed.

"Really."

"Is it that bad?" I tried not to limp.

She rolled her eyes with a playful smile. "It could only be worse if you had a peg-leg."

I made a goofy face at her and gave my best pirate imitation. "Arr..."

She laughed.

"So where's Gripper?"

She shifted her head to the side as if the answer didn't matter. "Some closed-door meetings going on amongst the officers. He'll be here later." She looked at the door. "Why don't you come on over to this side? I don't think anyone will be here anytime soon."

I gave her a suspicious look.

"Stand by me."

I went behind the bar and leaned my back against it. "What do you want?" I drew it out sarcastically, but my smile told her I didn't mean it.

She gripped my jeans and rubbed. "I don't know. I don't have a bouncer to check you out. What are you packing in here? Something fun?"

I chuckled. "I better never find Gripper in your position."

She laughed, short and sharp. Her fingers worked at my zipper then slid inside.

I wondered if I should stop her, but the graze of her fingers across my dick felt fun.

"Oh... no underwear, huh?"

"I don't like the way it bunches up and pinches when I ride."

"Most don't." She got her hand in and gripped me. She tugged slowly, drawing it out of my jeans. She was smiling up at me, her heavy mascara

accentuating her gothic sexiness.

"So how did you get your name, anyway? I imagine it's not Tequila?"

She giggled. "Nope. Ramona. Ramona Knox. Dean kept telling me—"

"Dean? Big Pizza?"

She nodded. "He kept telling me not to ask for tequila when I started hanging around with him at the clubhouse. I guess the guys in the Iron Crows don't like it. But that was my favorite drink. So I asked, and kept asking. I figured, why not?"

"Oh? Did you finally get some?"

She made a regretful face at me. "Sure wish I hadn't. They finally handed me off a drink one night and said it was tequila. It was, but mixed with vodka. I puked so bad I thought my stomach came out." Her hand had me hard and was stroking slowly, tugging on me in a wonderful way.

My cock was fully stretched and straining, flexing in her hand. I leaned back a little more and felt the sweet tension in my thighs complimenting her hand motions. I sighed happily.

She murmured, "You sure have a nice one. I'll have to kiss Kristy for this."

"Huh?"

"Remember, she told me I could be with you whenever..."

I scrunched my lips to the side. "I don't know; we had a talk last night."

She moved her hand faster, pulling at my shaft and my excitement.

"Oh?"

"I think she regrets all the extra-curriculars."

Her hand stopped instantly. "Aw..." Her hand moved again. "Then I guess I'll have to apologize to her instead."

I closed my eyes. Her hand felt fantastic. Each pull drew on my desire and my shaft responded with throbs. I might not have ever thought getting a handjob behind a bar was anything to add to my mental wish list, but what was happening right here held me as surely as chains. I arched my back a little more, feeling the tension increase.

"You're liking this?"

"Mm yep." After I said it, I began to pant. My shaft felt so swollen and full. Each pull yanked on me in a way I felt all the way down to my feet. I began groaning.

She moved and I opened my eyes. She had grabbed a small towel.

"Come on, Stiff. Give it to me." Her eyes had that smoky look to them and I

could tell she was turned on, too.

Cum? In a bar? The door's open. Her tugs yanked away my fears. She was going to make me cum no matter what I thought. And sure enough, I felt the tickle down in my feet. Tingles and tension raced up my legs and back. My cock swelled in her hand and tightened. My mouth opened and I growled that final tipping point of release.

Her other hand held the towel to the helmet of my shaft and she milked my orgasm into the cloth.

I trembled, jerking, and felt the burn in my thighs of the muscles being taut too long. I sagged against the bar as my knees buckled.

A rumble outside alerted us.

She smiled wickedly at me. "Just in time, I guess." She squeezed me off and put the towel in the sink. "You better put that away."

I moved quickly for the bathroom with my dick sticking straight out. But I made it in plenty of time. I washed my face and hands and then stuffed my cock back inside my jeans.

I came out, wiping my wet hands on my pants.

Gripper was out there, hands on the bar and leaning. He looked over at me. "Dealer's got something special for you and me."

"Oh?"

"We're going to be taking a run into the city tomorrow."

"Don't we have church—"

"We'll be back by then, hopefully. It all revolves around what we find out."

I stuck my elbow on the bar and looked at the big man. "What's he going to have us do?"

"Ask for a meet with the Surenos."

I stood, stunned. "A... meet?"

He grunted. "Some shit, huh? But I'm betting it's not what you think."

"What do you think it is?"

He grinned at me and his arms flexed. "Our opportunity to strike at their leader."

I nodded. "Cut them off at the head?"

"Yeah, it might work. Depends how organized they are. By all accounts from the Bandidos, not very."

I asked, "Are we big enough to handle this?"

Gripper nodded, very slow, very slight.

CHAPTER 10

I followed Gripper into the clubhouse.

Sonar came out of the right hall and approached us. "Grab a drink and come back to my office."

Gripper got a beer.

I said, "Scotch, please."

Donna winked at me. "Double? Triple?"

"Double is plenty, thanks."

She slid the glass to me. "Grats on your patches."

I nodded, smiling at her. "I'm sure you'll get there, soon."

"Know something I don't?"

"Nope. Haven't been in a single meeting yet, but I'm about to." I leaned over, quickly. "You're good for the club. But just make sure you're willing to do things you might consider... difficult."

She considered me in curiosity, but said nothing.

I hurried after Gripper. I shut Sonar's door behind me and leaned against the wall.

Sonar was sitting, looking over notes on his desk. "Before I get to the mission we have for you, I wanted to alert you, Stiff, about your new pay. Same pay rate, but you'll be cut in on ten percent of the sales from your shop."

My shop. I liked the sound of that.

"Flats and Jacks will split ten. You'll be doing the selling and pushing. Make it good."

"Thank you."

He pushed a legal pad to the side and bent forward to rest on his elbows. "The officers are assigning you two a critical, very critical mission."

Gripper flexed.

I waited: an officer was talking.

Sonar looked back and forth to both of us, but mainly at me. "I'm not being rude, Stiff, but you're the new blood. Bottom of the rungs. We're handing this to you because of it. Gripper will escort you to see the Bandidos. Sixgun will send a patch or few along to lead the way. Show you where the Surenos are located."

Gripper hadn't moved – as if none of it sounded off.

What am I going to do? Stroll in and shoot the bad guy?

Sonar continued. "You and Gripper will approach the gang. Hold out your hands and start talking fast. You're going to want to ask for their Shot Caller. Many gangs call their leader that. Or just ask for their leader. Tell them you're a go-between to arrange a meet and truce between them and us. Their leader and our leader."

I said, "All right."

"You'll be taken in and searched, I'm sure. Don't go in packing. Don't even take a phone."

I nodded.

"We want you to meet him, but most of all, we want you to be able to identify him."

"Okay."

He fingered a map and slid it over. "There's a closed gas station on Constitution Road. Here." He tapped the map. There was a red circle on it. "Tell them our leader wants to meet their leader, limit four bodyguards each. No weapons. Today is Friday. The meet will be Sunday at 10am."

I nodded again. *So far so easy.*

"Our meet is to arrange a truce and talk about avoiding a worsening war that will involve the government." He appeared to finish and waited.

I frowned. "What's to stop them from turning that into an ambush?"

His smile said volumes. "We're counting on it." He settled back in his squeaky chair. "They're going to assume ambush. They'll come loaded. That's what we want. You will be one of those who goes to the meet with Dealer. Unarmed."

I spat a laugh. "They're going to be armed but we're not?"

He rubbed at his black beard. "Don't worry, there'll be a gun or two lying around for you to pick up."

I blinked at him, then swallowed.

"Gripper, Viking, and Big Pizza will round out the meet-team with Dealer. But we'll have more on that when you return with what you find out tomorrow. Do you think you can handle this?"

I didn't think he was really asking. "Of course."

"Leave after breakfast tomorrow. Until then, check with Twenty to see what patrol you're on for today." He motioned to the door.

I went out. To the right, Dealer's door was closed. I heard Sheriff Jefferson talking inside. I found Twenty in the common room, staring out the front window by the helmet table. "Got anything for me?"

His crazy eyes were even more intense. "Ride with me. In about twenty-five minutes."

"All right." With nothing further from him, I sat down on the couch next to Kristy.

She said, "Big things are happening." It was half question and half statement.

"Yes."

"I hear you're playing a part?"

"Big part, I guess."

"Do you have to?" She sounded afraid.

"Yeah, I have to."

She chewed on her lip. "Be careful?"

I twisted towards her and put my arm over the back of the couch.

"Yeah."

She touched the placket of my vest and let her fingers trail down. Her whisper was just loud enough for me to hear. "I don't want to lose you."

I knew I couldn't tell her the scary stuff. Not just because it was club business, but that I knew she wasn't of stern enough material to handle it. I squeezed her hand. "It'll be all right."

"Promise?"

I nodded.

"Did we do the right thing?"

I knew what she meant. A whole world of what ifs and possibilities swirled around that one question. We could have stayed in the city, living off her dead end book keeping job. We could have moved across the country. We could have taken up street singing – anything more legitimate than killing people to keep Keystone safe. I considered that in less time than it took to take two breaths. I answered her, "We definitely did the right thing."

Water rimmed her eyes. "Okay."

I felt her trust.

She said, "Grannie says I'm to be ready early Sunday morning, no breakfast is being served."

I nodded slowly, still not wanting to tell her why. "Do what they tell you. Exactly what they tell you. Don't go off and do anything on your own."

"It's not the funeral for Firehose?"

I shook my head.

"It's because of him, isn't it?"

I pursed my lips. "Dealer has a plan. Just follow directions."

She looked down, her hands clasped in her lap.

~ ~ ~

I mounted my Harley and thumbed the ignition. The comforting thrum of the engine coughing to life and then purring at idle calmed my nerves. My bike vibrated ready underneath me and I closed my eyes for a second to enjoy the sensation.

I heard Twenty's Harley start. And Dragon's. The three of us were on patrol for the next two hours.

I followed them out, away from the old brothel.

The streets were typically quiet, a car or SUV here or there driving along towards mundane destinations. Families passed. Children looked out at us. Adults did, too. The older they were the more they looked with suspicion. The younger they were the more they looked with awe.

Was age responsible for the jaded opinions? Or was it the constant negative media drumbeat of drugs and death? The media lumped us all in together with gangs, which was as close to the truth as the Kiwanis Club or 4-H Club being gangs. Motorcyclists loved to ride. We were charitable and respectful when given respect. That some bad apples dealt drugs shouldn't have been cause to paint all of us as drug-dealing serial killers.

Men and women, single and together, went about their lives in Keystone insulated from the horror of what was going on behind the scenes. They didn't see the struggle of those who would push drugs trying to find a foothold in town. They didn't see the Iron Crows and Sheriff Jefferson standing against them. They couldn't; to see it would mean the struggle was common knowledge.

Common Knowledge was not something the leaders and elders of Keystone wanted. If Jefferson's department looked the other way, the state police would not. The FBI would not. While the Drug Enforcement Agency might silently applaud the efforts of the town, the government could not officially allow vigilante justice to work or prevail.

The Iron Crows, and now me, were in a position of having to work beneath notice. Selected killings, disappearances, and misdirection were tools in the kit for those in the club. Soldiers would say war is a dirty business: bloody and gruesome. Ours was no less so. But soldiers had the backing of government and politicians who could justify the killing. The Iron Crows had support at only the most local, confined level.

That we didn't have the local churches organizing protests against us in front of our clubhouse was testament to the knowledge amongst the elders of the town, including the pastors, of what we did. We didn't prey on the populace, we preyed on the predators. But it wasn't going to be common knowledge or we'd face government retribution for being vigilantes – and even worse in the media.

The news whores would paint us as loose cannons, dangerous and deadly. Newscasters on TV would leverage pitiful pictures of death with questions like, "Do we want this in our neighborhood?" The news media didn't want peace and safety. Their business was sensational news and anything that supplied it – drugs, crime, death – was their business. Vigilantes? Shut them down. Another drug-related shooting? See the gruesome footage at eleven. The media thrived on crime. They could not thrive where we succeeded.

We were a threat to everyone in the establishment, except for the innocent.

The Keystone innocents were careful not to look at us. Eyes were averted. Children were tugged and faces turned away. Even here, where we kept things clean, the media held sway. We received no appreciation from those we protected, though we did from a select few leaders. It had to be enough.

I looked at the innocents, knowing I would be putting my life on the line for them. The entire club would and they wouldn't know it. We didn't necessarily do it for them, no; we did it for ourselves because we lived here. That we stood our ground and they benefitted was as good for them as it was for us, even if in secret.

Keystone was quiet this night. We were going to do our damndest to keep it that way.

CHAPTER 11

I woke early Saturday. After showering and shaving my head, I wiped down my ride.

"Nervous?" Kristy leaned in the door, arms crossed.

"Yeah." I stood from where I was squatted. "I guess so."

"What exactly are you doing today?"

"Just delivering an invitation."

"That's all?"

I tossed the rag to hang over the stair rail. "That's all."

"We going to eat breakfast?"

"Whenever you're ready." I felt calm. Numb, maybe.

"You didn't put on your gun."

I stood in front of her, looking down into her eyes. "Not where I'm going today."

"The TV station is airing interviews about the murdered fire-fighter. Firehose. But they're leaving out the part that he was a biker."

I shook my head. "And probably trying to portray that crime is finally here to stay in Keystone."

"Yeah, did you see some of it?"

"No." But it was the way of the media. Paint it bad because that's good for business.

We rode to the clubhouse, feeling the warmth in the morning promising heat to come later. Saturday, not much moving. But movement caught my eye passing A Street. I turned the bike around and turned up A. Parked on the side was a woman, her child locked to her knee as they looked down at a flat tire. She had her phone up to her ear.

I stopped behind their car and got off. "Need help with that?"

Her eyes grew wide. "No, that's okay."

"I can get it changed for you in a couple minutes. Spare in the trunk?"

She looked at her phone as if disappointed that whoever was supposed to answer wasn't answering. Then she noticed Kristy. "Well, yeah. I'm just not sure how—"

"Pop it open, I can do it."

"Are you sure?"

I chuckled. "Yeah." I looked down at a blond boy peering up at me. "Hey there, little one. What's your name?"

His eyes were large and he couldn't have been more than six. "Tyler."

His mother popped the trunk. "I think it's under here."

I moved to her side and reached for the lid latch at the bottom of the trunk. It lifted and showed a full-sized tire and jack. "Piece of cake." I worked fast.

Tyler said, "Is he going to fix our tire, mommy?"

"Um, I think so."

I ignored them; I was hungry. I maneuvered the jack and cranked it up under the rear frame, but just so it was touching. I loosened lugs and spun the lug wrench. Then I jacked the car higher. The tire came off and I set it aside. I slipped the spare on and finger-screwed the lugs. I let the car down and tightened everything up.

Tyler said, "Wow, it's done?"

I settled the flat in the trunk and replaced the jack and wrench. "There you go."

The woman was smiling with uncertainty. "Do I owe you anything?"

I chuckled. "Nah, just get to where you were going."

"Are you sure?"

I held up my hands. "I'm sure. I don't need nothing for that."

A grateful smile broke over her features and she glanced at me and Kristy. "Well... thank you."

I waved at the little tyke and got back on my bike. Kristy climbed on behind me. Strapping our helmets, I gave them a wave as we pulled past. The little boy waved out the window.

Maybe I didn't have to do it. But being selfish when I was going to be laying a lot more on the line didn't seem right. I hoped the woman remembered to get her flat fixed. Or replaced.

Breakfast at the clubhouse was as unusual as the day before. Filled with an expectant tension, everyone was quiet. It felt like a library. Eyes followed me as I got my plate and ate. They weren't accusing or questioning, just recognizing that I had something to do.

When I was finished, Dealer and Sonar were waiting for me in the common room.

The president said, "Ready to do the deed, Stiff?"

I grinned slightly at the nickname. *Thank God it wasn't Jimmy. Or Fat Boy.* But I had lost all that weight. I gave a Dealer-type curt nod. "I'm ready."

Gripper came up beside me and clapped me around the shoulder. "And I'll be watching your back and bike." The enforcer sounded very certain.

Sonar handed me the map. "It's all there with a note on the date and time. Tomorrow."

Dealer said, "Let Gripper handle the Bandidos."

I knew it was time. I walked out the door and got onto my Harley. I affixed my helmet and looked over to Gripper.

He grinned at me and twirled his finger.

I thumbed the ignition and pulled out behind him. The ride to the highway felt heavy, somehow. I didn't want to go back to the city; I had to go back. This felt different than when I had ridden down for clothing or the laptop. I briefly wondered how Flats was doing getting the tow truck fixed up.

The highway let us open up. Gripper pumped his fist and then pointed to his right. I accelerated, imagining the lane was split into two. I was nervous about coming up on his side, but he flashed a grin at me. And it was actually easy. I stayed on my side; he stayed on his.

We rode down out of the mountain valley that held Keystone. The trees gave way to low hills with cattle, to flatter farmlands ahead. On any other ride, I might have thought it was a beautiful day. I hunched down in my seat and let the wind whip through my beard.

Near the off-ramp, Gripper pulled ahead and motioned for me to slow down: staggered formation. I understood right away. City riding was riskier and we both had to have room to maneuver if a car started to change lanes into us without seeing us.

I kept close behind and to his right. He knew his way and that was just as well, with all his turns I probably would have tangled up with him.

The Bandidos clubhouse was impressive. A big gated yard surrounded what looked like an old two-story steak house. Cameras pointed everywhere and a couple of bikers noted us as we rode in.

We parked and dismounted, removing our helmets. Two Bandidos came up to us, and got a look at our vests.

One of them, a broad man with even crazier eyes than Twenty said, "How's it going?" He stuck his arm out to Gripper.

"Riding easy. We can come in?" He fingered his colors.

The man nodded. He motioned with his head and we followed. The interior was remade into the snazziest-looking clubhouse I would never have imagined. Complimentary black and blue color schemes throughout put our old brothel to shame.

I let out, "Nice..."

The other guy grinned. "You should come party with us some time."

"With my colors?"

"Sure, just call ahead so we know."

I didn't know if I ever would, but they seemed friendly.

I recognized Sixgun. A little shorter than me, his beard was gray and impressive. His gray hair was long, in a ponytail. His eyes focused on me immediately, sweeping over my vest. He addressed Gripper. "Ben Gleason, you old mountain. Quite a plan you got there."

"Needs to be done."

"I ain't arguing." He held out his hand and they shook. Then he turned to me and offered his hand. "Good to see ya."

I was surprised, but shook his hand gladly. His grip was strong and certain. I felt honored to be recognized by their president. "Likewise." I left it at that; Gripper was the enforcer and the one talking for the club.

Gripper said, "We got a burning message to deliver."

Sixgun gave a Dealer-like nod. "Got some boys to escort ya." He paused a second. "Might have some there tomorrow, too." He winked.

The big man smiled next to me and winked back.

Sixgun turned. "Bigfoot! You're up."

A man as tall as Gripper came from deeper inside. He was almost as hairy as Chewbacca.

I guess I know how he got his name...

He was followed by five Bandidos.

Sixgun looked at us under his eyebrows. "Good luck, boys."

~ ~ ~

Outside, Bigfoot said to us, "Follow behind. They have runners out most times; they're getting established. The runners will call ahead on us; they'll know we're coming. We'll leave you just up the street from their headquarters."

I mounted as they did and followed them out of the yard. I briefly wondered why we couldn't just combine the clubs and ride in, blowing them all away, but I knew we couldn't work that way. A lot of people would die and more would go to prison. We had to work quieter. Unseen.

Even having lived here within the last year, I recognized only one street in passing. It's amazing what I didn't know was down side streets less traveled.

I saw the first Surenos on a corner – white t-shirt, blue bandana, and bad attitude. He flashed gang sign at us: his middle finger on one hand and three fingers from his other. Then he pulled his phone.

It was like that on the next block, too. By the third block, a parked car on the side pulled out and followed us. Inside were four men, sitting low.

Bigfoot pulled to a stop and pointed to us, then motioned down a street. He raised his voice, "Left side."

Gripper raised his hand and pulled away. I followed.

The Bandidos behind us turned about and rode back the way they had come. The car followed us.

Gripper motioned to the left and pointed at an empty parking space. I stopped, letting him park first. A few doors up, Mexicans were pouring out of a building. I backed in after his rear tire came to a rest against the curb. He remained sitting on his bike.

A group of six Surenos came towards us. The car blocked us in.

I got off my Harley and held out my hands, low to the side. I even made peace signs.

A wide Mexican with bandana low over his eyes and tattoos crawling up his neck and face said, "You're in the wrong neighborhood, gringos." His fists tightened.

I said, "I've come to talk to your Shot Caller. Your leader. Our president wants to arrange a meet. A truce."

They were converging on me the whole time. But tattoo stopped. He looked me over as if ready to spit in my face. His eyes were intelligent and very sharp. He just stood there and breathed for a moment.

I'm not a small guy, but I did not pose back at him. I stood there, chin down slightly, kept eye contact, and waited.

Several of the Mexicans looked to him to see what they should do.

He finally pursed his lips and pulled up his phone. He spoke rapid Spanish, then waited for a few seconds. He put the phone away. "*Andale*,

gringo, you got your meeting."

Gripper waved at me with a grin. "Have fun." He hadn't moved or said anything. Just sat there with his hands crossed over his knee. Relaxed like it was no big deal.

Tattoo said, "Let's go."

Someone behind me pushed.

I tensed, but didn't think getting into a fight in the street was a good idea. I followed.

CHAPTER 12

It looked like an old two-story bar. The stench of marijuana made me gag as I stepped inside. Mexicans were lying around on sofas, chairs – leaning against walls. Not many, but more than I could handle, even counting the ones so doped out they couldn't get up. *This is what they have in store for little Tyler.*

I was spun suddenly and pushed to the wall. Hands expertly frisked me all the way down.

"Turn around, bitch." I was yanked.

I turned as best I could.

Another tattooed Mexican with ink up over his bald head ran a knife-hand down my chest. Then he ran his hands down my side and behind my belt. My cards and keys were pulled from my pants and tossed aside. The map was lifted from my inner vest pocket.

My keys were tossed around amidst laughter. "Anyone want a motorcycle?"

Tattoo Number Two turned. He said something short in Spanish.

An old Mexican came from the gloom by the stairs in the back. The gray in his scraggly beard said it all. He was bald, like me. He had close-set beady eyes that saw everything.

A switchblade flicked open.

His eyes didn't move.

Neither did mine.

His lips pursed and he looked me up and down. "What do you know?" It was said with derision.

I figured that was invitation enough. "Our president wants to meet. Arrange a truce."

His eyes sharpened and his face hardened.

I waited.

It looked like he was waiting, too.

I didn't know what he was waiting for. I broke my silence and pointed. "That map there has a time and place marked. Out of the way, neutral ground. Tomorrow at ten in the morning."

His one word was an accusation. "Why?"

"Because people are beginning to die. We can come to an arrangement and avoid it."

He thrust his chin at me. "Seems like we're winning."

"Sure, maybe. Until the DEA and FBI start hammering everything to shit. Our president doesn't want it and he doesn't think you do, either."

His sneer wasn't friendly. "What does he know of me?"

I shrugged in honesty. "Nothing. That's why he wants to meet. He wants to know who he's dealing with." I was guessing; I didn't know shit.

Five very tattooed and very hard looking Mexicans were behind him. One of them, who looked like he was afraid of nothing, said, "Do'."

Short for Domingo? Nickname?

The old one in front of me answered. "Si." He turned his back to me and all six of them walked to the back. I heard a muted conversation in Spanish. Hands moved, gesticulating points. One raised his voice but was silenced. The old one was talking, pointing his finger at each. Heads began to nod. Eyes darted my way.

This was it. I felt my knees go weak. This was the crux of the whole encounter. Would they accept? Or would they reject? Even worse, were they going to kill the messenger as a message? That was why I was sent. Not as an insult to my patch, but because I was the lowest on the rung. If the brothers had to lose one, even if reluctantly, it was going to be me.

The six approached. All of them wore suspicion on their faces. I saw murder in their eyes. I clenched my jaw and swallowed, hard.

Do' said, "Tell your president we will meet."

I nodded, letting out a long quiet breath. "His name is Dealer. He offers to meet unarmed with four bodyguards each."

The five behind him shifted their eyes amongst themselves.

The old one said, "Sure." The truth didn't reach his eyes. He snapped his fingers. "*Dame el mapa.*"

A younger Mexican snatched up the map and handed it to Do'.

The old man opened it and saw the circle. The post-it note showed time and place. "What is this place?"

"A gas station. It's closed. Abandoned when a bigger one opened on the interstate."

He passed the map back to one of the hard tattoos. "Tell your boss we have a meet." He looked around the room. "Give this gringo back his shit."

Mexicans came forward. My cards were tossed in my direction. Someone threw my keys; they hit my chest and dropped at my feet.

Do' said, "Now get the fuck out."

I stooped and picked up my cards and keys under very hard eyes. I pocketed them and was shoved by a younger Mexican. I stumbled on my stiff leg, but turned and got the fuck out of there.

Outside, Mexicans were standing, waiting. The younger ones appeared surprised to see me. Lips were pursed instantly. Gang sign flashed.

I didn't have to be told: I was in their territory. Well, I didn't want to be there, either. I walked quickly to where we had parked our bikes. Gripper still sat in what appeared to be a position of ease but I could see the tension in his form. I knew him well enough now that it was obvious. He gave me a curious look.

I said, "We have a meet."

The Mexicans surrounding the bikes backed away enough for us to get by.

We started our bikes and affixed our helmets. Gripper gave the signal and pulled out. I followed, feeling as if my life had ended and was now some different person. The morning had a surreal quality to it that only left when we hit the end of the street.

Gripper stopped and took out his phone. "They agreed." He put it away and nodded to me. Gripper gunned the throttle and took off in a staccato roar. I did the same.

I did it. I somehow survived. I felt chilled and shook because of it, but I knew it wasn't cold.

~ ~ ~

Doubts plagued me on the way back to Keystone. *What the fuck is Dealer doing? He can't negotiate with them.* I felt as if the Iron Crows were getting way in over their heads. Sure, we had tough guys, but these Surenos were out and out criminals. The old man's lieutenants were tatted up like prison gang members, and likely were. Those in their leadership weren't some ignorant younger gangbangers cruising around in a Chevy. They weren't bouncing their heads trying to look hard; they were hard.

We climbed back up towards the mountain valley that was home. Could we really keep them out? Were we arrogant enough to think so? Or naïve?

When we got off onto A Street, I felt as if the town couldn't possibly withstand the invasion. What were three sheriff's deputies on duty at any one time going to do to stop the promise of destruction? The peaceful people of Keystone were ripe for plucking.

We parked in front of the old brothel. Jonesy's ears were up behind the gate to the side, watching us. Big Pizza and Slicer were leaning up against the wall out front.

I saw the captain smile.

I had barely laid my helmet on the table when Sonar summoned me from the back. "Stiff, office."

I hustled back under the eyes of the rest of the club sitting and lounging around. Kristy and I looked longingly at each other, but I had no time to talk. Dealer's door was open and I went in.

The president was at his desk, phone at the ready. "Twenty, leave the door open, but make sure we don't have unnecessary ears."

The sergeant nodded and stood outside.

Dealer looked at me. "Give me your impressions."

I wasn't sure where to start, but blurted out, "I don't think they're coming unarmed. It's going to be a trap."

His smile was devious. "Of course. Anything else? Who was the leader?"

"I'm pretty sure his name is Do' and he's older. Bald, gray scraggly beard. His lieutenants all look like prison gang members, tatted all—"

"They probably are."

"He seemed to think a meet was beneath them, but one of his guys pulled him and the rest back for a huddle."

"Do you think this other one was the real leader?"

I shook my head. "No, but definitely high up in their leadership."

"You're going to be with me so you can identify him for me."

"You have to know they're going to bring way more than him and four guys."

"We're counting on it."

Someone came into the office wearing regular clothes I didn't recognize. Bald and clean shaven, he squinted at me. Even his eyebrows were shaved off.

Dealer said, "You're ready."

"Fuck yes, I'm ready." Gunner's voice came out of that man. "Every bullet wiped down. 'Ought six laser-scoped and ready to go."

I blinked twice. "Gunner?"

He growled at me. "Shut the fuck up, Stiff. And don't take any pictures, either."

I marveled that the removal of gray hair and beard could have such an effect on appearance.

Dealer said, "Send Grannie in."

Gunner grunted and shouldered past me.

Sonar checked his phone. "That's all of them. Full club."

Dealer nodded. "Nine millimeter and three fifty-seven only. If they don't have it, they don't bring it."

"Right." He started tapping on his phone.

I said, "So we're not going for a real meet, either, are we?"

The president said, "Not with this type, Stiff. Not in a million years."

Grannie came in.

He said, "Organize the women for driving. Vans and trucks, SUVs."

She was nodding. "Line 'em with plastic?"

"Yep. The usual body carry. But we need every vehicle possible for it. Including Kristy, four won't do it. Do you trust Celia?"

"No." Grannie's voice was plain.

"Scratch her then. Donna?"

"Sure."

"Get her than, and tell your sister we need her."

She blew out a breath.

"We'll have to do with six. It should be enough. All right, all of you out, except Sonar. Go get yourselves some drinks. And well done, Stiff. Very well done."

CHAPTER 13

I walked into the common room more confused than when I had left.

Viking was behind the bar and handed me a Scotch. His grin was big and wicked. "You done good."

"Thanks." I looked around for the women, but they weren't in sight – except for Dragon.

Slicer came up to me. I noticed for the first time that he was wearing a prospect vest. He said, "What's all the secrecy?"

I clapped a hand down on his shoulder. "I can't say. Don't take it personally. I was left out of a lot when I was a prospect, too. But we're getting ready to do the right thing."

"I thought so."

Gunner appeared, walking towards the front door. He held a satchel under one arm and a long case in the other.

I said, "That a rifle?"

The chaplain nodded.

"You know how to shoot those, too?"

Another nod, and a gritty grin. He set the case and satchel down on the sofa. He popped the clasps and opened the case. Inside was a long military-looking rifle with a scope.

I said, "Wow."

Slicer's eyes were wide.

Gunner grunted, "Noreen BN36. A little touchy, but great long range. Takes 30-06. Don't touch, I got 'em all polished." He indicated the several loaded mags set in foam around the gun. He snapped the case shut. "Gotta find a good spot. See ya tomorrow."

I blinked at him as he headed out the door.

Slicer blew out a breath. "Uh, don't ask?"

My words came out slow. "Yeah... don't ask. I'm not sure I know." I gulped at my Scotch.

Donna came over to us and looked after Gunner. She was also wearing her prospect vest. "Interesting times."

Kristy joined us, looking worried. She hugged me and I hugged her back. She said, "You're okay?"

"It went fine."

She breathed against me. "Are you sure about tomorrow?"

Donna glanced at her, eyes holding strength to do what had to be done.

I squeezed. "Dealer is, right? That's what counts."

Slicer swore. "Wish I was a part of this."

Still holding my wife, I said to him, "Don't wish it too soon, or you might not be able to handle it. Trust me."

He nodded.

Grannie came out from the right hall. "Slicer."

"Yes?"

"Come here. You're going to help tomorrow."

His face lit up.

I shook my head. *Is he ready? Even if he just drives for cleanup?*

~ ~ ~

Sunday wasn't sunny; it was windy. Breakfast was fruit – bananas and apples. Coffee was the only familiar smell in the cafeteria.

Dealer threw a peel into the trash. "We're riding today to deliver a blow to the Surenos. You all know that."

Silence fell over the room. Only the coffee machine made any noise – the drip-drip-drip of the hot liquid into the glass pots punctuated the president's point.

Sonar was sipping coffee, watching.

Dealer's voice became stone. "Some of us might not come back today. Go out and give your best. And know that your brothers and sisters are with you. You've all been briefed by Twenty on your functions. Work fast, both in taking them down, and what comes after. Sheriff Jefferson will be waiting with the deputies."

I wasn't sure what all that was about, but I wasn't slow. We were going to ambush the ambush. Or something like that. Gunner must have gone to find a suitable spot for sniping. Twenty had only told me that I was to bodyguard Dealer unarmed and that I could pick up and use whatever they dropped. He also told me to carry a shop rag from the stack on the helmet table.

I didn't know what anyone else's function was as I wasn't in on Twenty's briefing of them. I just knew I and the others with Dealer, including Dealer, were bait.

The president brushed his hands. "Time to move."

Kristy had told me she would be driving the Suburban, and had been prepped to provide body removal. She hadn't said whether they were to be theirs or ours.

I followed Dealer out. *Only a couple of days in colors? Am I to die today?* I looked back at the battered-looking brothel. Something in me said I wouldn't be seeing it again. A lump formed in my throat but I climbed onto my Harley anyway.

A moment later, Dealer twirled his finger in the air. Harleys coughed and rumbled to life. He gave a motion and pulled out. Big Pizza immediately followed after, then Gripper, Viking, and me. Behind us, the rest of the club scrambled for their bikes and vehicles. We had an hour to get there and it was only a half hour ride. I wondered if Dealer was feeling what I was: let's get this over with.

The enormity of what we were doing seemed insurmountable. Insane. We passed a sheriff's SUV sitting near the onramp. I saw a wave, but not who it was. It was a black hand, so either the sheriff or Deputy Davies. The other deputies, the rotating six or seven I'd seen, were all white.

Was the county sheriff enough to cover for us? Were we riding like pawns into a game bigger than we should be playing? It was one thing to earn my colors and the pride was strong, but was our brotherhood strong enough to face a gang? The rest seemed to think so.

We were on the highway heading northwest only until the next exit. While the highway led down into the city, we needed to be headed towards the interstate. Exit 89 was a long road winding north through the upper foothills. We would eventually meet the East Frontage intersection where the road went west down into the city.

A few ranches dotted the way to our left while the treeline wound above us to our right. Ahead, the interstate could be seen in the deep distance. A ranch was ahead with fallow fields and broken fences. The house was boarded up and the barn looked open and empty. It was on the corner of East Frontage.

We turned left. Dealer was looking at the old ranch. Then he made a motion: tighten up. At the same time, he accelerated. We twisted our throttles and produced a staccato roar of road thunder. I tightened up to the left behind them all. Ahead was the gas station.

A large pylon that had once held the Conoco sign stood like a finger pointing to the sky – the sign long since removed and sent somewhere. Heaven or hell for signs, I did not know. The pumping machines were gone, the pavement to the side all dirt where the tanks had been dug up and removed. The building was a large minimart type that had featured a large store, restrooms, and a small café. Plywood covered all the gaping holes of what had once been the building's windows. The front door was padlocked with a heavy chain.

The single realty sign hung at an angle, one of the nails having come off or been removed. No one was going to buy the place. To our right in the distance, the new gas station right off the interstate could be seen. Big diesels swarmed around it.

We turned into the former gas station.

Dealer pointed. A glimpse of something Red was around back.

The Surenos were already here.

We rode slowly to the left of the building and passed it. Behind the building, to our right, was a parked car, cherry red and shining. Doors opened.

Dealer made a motion to turn around. We swung the bikes around and parked, the building just shielding our bikes.

I knew what he was doing – he was using the building to block gunfire from hitting our rides. A sick and heavy feeling coursed through my bones, turning them all to water. I almost stumbled setting the kickstand. Off came my helmet.

The cool wind that washed over the top of my head did nothing to settle my sudden jump of nerves.

Dealer and the others were off, walking around the corner.

I followed quickly, taking my spot to the left of Dealer.

He glanced at me quickly. "Which one?"

Do' was easy to see. Short and squat and old. I said, "The short one with the gray beard."

Big Pizza chuckled and stroked his belly length beard. "He calls that a beard?"

Dealer moved so he was directly in line with the Surenos leader. He held out his hands as he approached and so did we.

The Mexicans, for their part, watched us with all the disdain of Dobermans considering Dacshunds.

Gripper muttered, "Fat one has a long gun. In his jacket."

Dealer said, "Play it cool."

We were twenty feet from them.

Time seemed to slow.

Dealer spread his vest and turned, showing he was unarmed. We did also.

I heard, "*Gringos estupidos.*"

One of the four behind Do' raised a phone.

Gripper said, "Here it comes..."

All hell broke loose.

CHAPTER 14

Several things happened all at once. Dust rose further down East Frontage. I heard the roar of engines.

Do' dodged behind the cherry red classic Chevy.

Big Jacket was pulling out a shotgun.

Dealer and Gripper lunged ahead to use our side of the car as a shield.

Big Jacket racked the shotgun and his upper chest blossomed with blood and gore. The report of a gun followed just after. The shotgun went flying forward and slid spinning on the cracked pavement.

I dove for it. Not a good idea. I felt my elbows impact painfully and the knees of my jeans tear. I grabbed it and came up kneeling.

A bad-ass tattoo was aiming a gun at my head from less than fifteen feet away. He was holding it sideways, fist over like thugs like to do. I flinched and jerked over just as the gunshot went off.

A burning numbness ripped across my head. I don't know if I was dead or not, but I jerked the shotgun up and blew a hole in his stomach.

Squealing tires tore into the gas station.

A distant and growing thunder told me the rest of the Iron Crows were coming.

But the Mexicans were already here.

I rolled towards the car and scrambled to the other side.

Behind us, a rollup door at the back of the gas station went flying up. Bandidos poured out.

Surenos began running from the front to the back of the gas station.

I put the car between me and them.

Big Pizza dove for the handgun that had shot me.

A gunshot sounded and he flopped down.

I racked the shotgun and rounded the car.

One of Do's lieutenants was aiming a pistol at me. His side erupted in blood and he flew against the car.

Huddled beneath him and holding a shiny revolver was Do'. He looked at me and his eyes widened in shock.

I bought the barrel up to his face and pulled the trigger. What had been a surprised old man turned into an explosion of flesh, bone, and brain.

The thunder had stopped.

But the gunshots hadn't.

Dealer scooped up Do's gun beside me and began firing.

I saw Sixgun, holding two revolvers, firing at anything in the clear.

Bandidos were mixing it up with double their number of Surenos until I saw Iron Crows wade in from behind.

Pain lanced my head and then began pulsing heavily. I lifted my hand and touched the area. It was slick with blood. I leaned against the back of the car and tried to get some air in my lungs.

From around the other side, where our Harleys were parked, came our chase vehicles. Trucks and vans stopped. I saw our SUV.

The fight was a melee of screaming, cursing men. What few that had brought guns were down or dead. I saw Jacks in a frenzy with a crowbar, his teeth showing and blood flying wherever he hit. Dragon was bleeding from a wound on her left arm but was swinging her chain with the right. Ghost and Sonar swung lead pipes overhand and down into heads.

What had taken an eternity to round the car and find Do' had turned into an instant.

I fell to my knees as all the sound of fighting died away.

Not a single Surenos escaped.

Dealer shouted, "Let's move! Clean up! Grannie, here! We have two down!"

Women were rushing with plastic. The Iron Crows, wounded or not, began lifting bodies onto the plastic and carrying them to the vehicles.

Dealer leaned over Big Pizza and froze. "Shit..." He moved over to Viking who looked like he was resting on his side. The president's fists clenched.

Gripper appeared in front of me, grabbing my chin and turning my head. "Fuck, head wounds always look so bad."

I felt chills all through me and I was shaking. "Am I going to live? Are my brains okay?"

He shook his head. "Lucky son of a bitch. Grazed you to the bone." He sighed. "Give me your gun."

I handed him the shotgun.

He said, "Use your rag on your head." He sighed and yanked the rag from my back pocket. He placed it in my hand and pressed it to my wound. "Hold that there."

He wiped down the shotgun and then pressed Fat Jacket's dead hands all over it.

Bodies were being moved, arranged. Most were being wrapped in plastic and carried to the vehicles.

A few times I saw Sonar raise his pipe and bash someone's head in that was still alive.

A cop SUV pulled around the front of the gas station in view of the car and stopped.

I wanted to shout warning, but I couldn't seem to muster the energy.

The cop that got out was Sheriff Jefferson.

I was knocked over. Kristy was all over me. "Oh my god, are you okay? Are you..." Tears were in her eyes.

Donna called, "Kristy, Gripper said he'll make it. We need you."

She touched my face as if afraid to break it. Then she backed away hesitantly and ran to help.

Sixgun faced Dealer and I heard them both sigh. The Bandido said, "Well done. But it's hard to lose brothers."

They hugged, patting each other's backs.

Dealer said, "Yours came out okay?"

Sixgun nodded, looking ashamed. "I'm sorry about your losses."

"I'm glad you lost none, brother."

Sheriff Jefferson looked over the scene.

I blinked and blinked again. There were four bodies near the front of the car, including Do'. There were four more bodies arranged near the gas station where the Bandidos had crashed into the reinforcements.

The sheriff said, "Outstanding job."

Doors on vans and trucks were shutting.

Gripper came to me and squatted down. "Stiff, can you hear me?"

I nodded.

"Can you stand?"

"I... don't know."

Gripper stood. "Grannie! Truck up Stiff's Harley."

Jefferson said, "You'll handle the rest of the bodies?"

Dealer said, "Yep."

"I won't ask. All right then, looks like there was an intergang rivalry that went bad." He thumbed the mic attached to his epaulet and walked towards

his vehicle. "Three-four and three-six, come on in. Dispatch, I need the coroner at..."

Gripper hauled me up.

Trotting in from the west was a shaggy creature from the swamp bog. A rifle was slung over its back. It swept back its head and revealed Gunner's face. He was looking me over. "I hope that wasn't one of my shots." He cackled. Then he was running past towards the vehicles.

I dimly thought, *ghillie suit*.

Gripper led me to my SUV. I was stuffed into the passenger seat.

Kristy was looking at me with horror in her eyes.

I said, "I think we did it." I saw four Iron Crows hustle my Harley up into the back of Smoke's pick-up. Then I closed my eyes.

THE AFTERMATH

I was roused from dozing in a cool place. I saw sunlight through slat and broken boards. I was in a barn.

Grannie was looking at me. "Good, you're awake. I'm going to stitch you up. If you don't like the job you can go get plastic surgery later; they're pretty good at removing scars or making them very faint. Here, take a big swig of this."

It was a bottle of Whiskey.

Her eyebrows drew down. "I have to start. Now, drink."

I nodded and pulled the bottle up to my lips. I chugged back as much as I could and coughed at the end.

She gave a nod of approval and said, "Lay over on your side. Kristy, hold the flashlight right here. At this angle."

Light moved around me. I noticed others in the barn. Gunner was stripping out of his suit. Sonar was talking to him.

A wash of cold liquid poured onto my head – into the hurt that was so numb.

I saw Donna rush by, carrying another bottle of alcohol. Going the other way was Slicer and Smiley, carrying a wounded Flats.

Fire erupted along a wide swath of the side of my head. I growled out and scrunched my eyes shut.

Grannie muttered, "Just to disinfect everything." A thin stabbing seared my skin. Then again, and again. I felt something odd and tugging.

Kristy said, "Oh god, I think I'm going to be sick."

Grannie said angrily, "None of that now. I need you to hold the light. These are stitches and stitches are good. These mean your husband isn't wrapped in plastic to be delivered to the coroner."

I heard my wife gulp sickly. Her word was breathy, "Okay."

"That's a good girl." She made an appreciative noise. "Stiff here is going to have quite the scar. He might want to let his hair grow."

The strange tugging and stinging pain settled down to a throbbing numbness. My skin was being stitched closed.

I heard Dragon hiss and groan.

Grannie called, still stitching my head, "She about ready?"

Donna said, "Yes."

"I'm almost done here."

It seemed to take forever.

She sighed. "Thirty-five stitches." She raised her voice. "Here I come."

Dealer squatted down by me. "You all right, Stiff?"

I felt like I needed to answer. I slowly moved, leveraging myself up. I was on a bale of hay. "I think so."

His hand clamped down on my knee. "You did fine today."

"We lost two? Did I hear that..."

He nodded. "Big Pizza and Viking."

I felt tears in my eyes. "We're not going to bury them in some grave are we?"

His mouth firmed. "No. The coroner is my uncle. He'll prep the bodies and they'll have a normal funeral." His eyes grew distant in memory. "And we'll be there for them."

~ ~ ~

We were on the road out from the abandoned ranch within an hour. Kristy informed me on the way back how the plan had been to make it all look like eight Surenos got together and things went bad. That way, the media had nothing to report except that gangbangers shot each other – probably over a drug feud, or money.

I felt the rightness of what she said. The media didn't care if gangbangers shot each other; they did all the time. But if the news was that a biker gang and the Surenos clashed, the media would hype racism, warfare, vigilante murder and all sorts of hysterical claims to make good ratings.

But eight dead gang members? Who cared? No one, not even the media. The media only cared when the public fought back. Then it was bad. We carried several plastic wrapped bodies away from the gas station. There had been seven vehicles driven by the Surenos. Who would question that? Their families, surely, but again, who cared about gang members? They died and disappeared all the time.

By the time we reached Keystone, I felt a lot better, if stiff could be called better. My head hurt like a son of a bitch, but the pain was merely a

reminder that I was alive. It was a double shock when we turned onto our clubhouse street and got out.

Tequila's face was awash with mascara. And our clubhouse was ringed with fire trucks and personnel.

I hugged Tequila to me as she rushed into my arms, sobbing heavily. But she wasn't crying for the clubhouse, I knew. Kristy hugged her with me.

I stared at the blackened hull of what had been the clubhouse. Firefighters held hoses, spraying down what remained. But really, nothing remained.

Jonesy occasionally could be heard barking forlornly beyond the cordon.

Dealer was near, shaking his head. "Must have been a second gang group."

Gripper said, "For sure. We didn't face all of them today. But we took out their leaders."

They saw me standing, holding Tequila, and both came over.

I said, "What are we going to do?"

Dealer sighed. "Rebuild. We had insurance. We'll rebuild bigger. And better."

The smoke rose like the remains of so many dreams, twisting upward as if all the life of the club was passing upwards before our eyes. Somewhere in there, I hoped to see my brothers. I hoped to see an indication of their new journey. Anything. But all I saw was smoke. All I felt were Tequila's tears.

EPILOGUE

I stabbed the pick down, loosening the ground in the bottom of the grave. Donna stood above, keeping a watch out and carefully arranging the dirt onto the existing mound dug earlier in the day. Behind me, Jacks shoveled dirt.

Donna said, "What if the guy wakes up?"

I said, "Billy Nickles drinks himself to sleep every night."

"This is morbid."

"Would you rather we wrapped them in chicken wire and burned them? Like they did Firehose?"

Her voice quieted, lowering in determination. "No."

Jacks cursed behind me. "Fuck, there's already a body down here."

I lurched sideways, panic knocking me over. "What?"

He began laughing. "Just kidding."

I heaved in breaths, shaking so suddenly that it left me speechless for a few seconds. Finally I said, "You asshole."

He laughed harder.

I shook my head. "Come on, get back to work. We have two bodies to put down here."

In the dim light of the Coleman lantern, we scooped out a deep enough hollow. Shovels tossed up on the side, we hauled the two plastic-covered bodies down into our depression.

Jacks said, "You sorry sons of bitches. I hope you rot in Hell."

I coughed. "What are you doing?"

His expression was innocent. "Saying something for the dead."

The rest of the work was silent as we covered over the evidence of our efforts for the town. The next morning, some poor soul would be laid to rest, the coffin lowered down to forever cover bad men gone missing. Keystone wouldn't know the sacrifices we made on its behalf. But maybe for a while, the people could sleep. Safe.

Even as safe as the dead.

Thank you for reading Bonded Couple. All reviews are greatly appreciated.

A list of books by Laran Mithras can be found on GoodReads.