

IRON CROWS MC

GHOST



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By

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People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf. ~ George Orwell

CHAPTER 1

Jessie

What the hell? I looked at my new boyfriend with horror. No... FUCKING... way!

Leo leaned back against the car door, bouncing his head and giving me that pouty look – the same look I always fell for: the bad boy look that promised so much and never delivered. His eyebrow twitched.

That's what had alerted me.

It twitched again and his eyes blinked shut as if someone had just flashed a brilliant light in his eyes.

He tilted his head at me. "Come on, babe. Just run it on up there. We'll go buy a dress afterwards."

I knew that was a lie; Leo struggled for money. I sat there in the passenger seat, mouth open, and watched his face tweak out. You're high. You said you didn't touch drugs.

He sniffed, hitching his shoulders up and wiping a finger under his nose. He looked out the window at a passing van. Cars were coming and going, a little at a time, to this two-story house in a faltering neighborhood. He said, "Hurry up; simple trade."

"Trade one backpack for another? Do you think I'm stupid? You want me to make a drug run?"

He leaned over, his eyelids convulsing as he tweaked. "Listen, cunt." His fist grabbed into my hair. "Get the fucking backpack and go make the trade. I can't be seen."

Why the fuck do I always get mixed up with the losers? I dug my claws into his wrist. "Get your fucking hand off me or I'll have Ronnie saw off your dick."

Ronnie was my uncle. Well, he really wasn't my uncle, I had just grown up calling him that. My father had traded me to his best friend to pay off a debt. I had been fourteen. Ronnie fucked me until I was eighteen. I wasn't sure if that was better than living with my father or not since dad was that bad.

Ronnie had introduced me to Leo and called him a good kid. If my uncle had a change of heart - or what, I don't know – he no longer used me. In a way, he seemed more protective of me. He taught me carpentry and I helped him out in his shop on certain kinds of jobs. I had been a carpenter for seven years – making no money, but being fed and housed.

I didn't think it was a bad trade off.

But, fuck if I didn't keep meeting the same kind of assholes.

Leo let go of my hair. He jerked a thumb to the backseat. "Hurry up. Mention Corvey. They should have a separate backpack ready."

I exhaled as loud as I could. Fuck, just get it over with and end this shitty "date." I growled, "Take me home afterward."

"Sure thing, babe." His eyes were twitching all over the place.

Groaning, I got out and opened the back door. Lying on the seat was a dirty backpack. Looked like someone had dragged it through four miles of grease and mud. It smelled like it, too. I found a slimy strap and lifted.

More cars were pulling up.

I guess this guy deals a lot. I scowled at men and women getting out of their cars. They all looked like dirtbags. I walked over the lawn and neared the front door.

I was caught, illuminated by something brighter than the sun. I froze. What the fuck?

Footsteps raced towards me. Someone whispered, "Drop the bag and get down

on the ground."

I turned towards the whisper, shielding my eyes against the blinding light. Oh god, am I being busted? I don't do drugs!

There was a big hole at the business end of a gun pointing at the bridge of my nose.

I whimpered, tremors running down my body. The backpack fell to the ground at my feet.

There was a very sharp crack from inside the house – loud.

The gun in my face lifted as the female squatted.

A male voice next to her reported quickly, "Shots fired! Shots fired!"

Radios squawked to life all around the front yard.

Female gunner – plainclothes detective? – pointed at me. "Get down and stay there." She rushed the door, kicking it open.

The man with her followed, his eyes sharp and searching.

I didn't drop down; I leapt almost straight into the air. I came down running. One foot came down on the stupid backpack and I went into a headlong tumble.

Leo was already leaving, car revving and tearing up the road.

That was fine by me – I didn't want to have anything more to do with the asshole. I got up off the lawn and began sprinting. I was a small girl, even at twenty-seven. Bad nutrition? Lack of food? Whatever, I wasn't packing around any flab.

I knew by the looks people gave me that I looked pale, emaciated, and unhealthy. I couldn't help it; no matter what I ate, it just went through me.

The wind was in my hair and the breeze caressing my bare legs as I ran across several lawns to get away. I leaped over a hedge and found myself sprawling in juniper. Ouch, that hurt.

Scraped, stinging, and scared, I got up and ran again.

A cop car blazed past, sirens flashing. I expected to hear a squeal of brakes, but nothing.

I turned the corner and crossed the street, finally running out of steam.

The walk home was filled with fear. Had I been identified? I don't do drugs! Was I a criminal for not staying? Party to murder? Drugs? Rock and Roll?

With shaking hands that wouldn't stop trembling, I unlocked the house. Were cops waiting inside? Guns drawn?

Ronnie's drunk voice called out, "Jessie?"

My name was Jessica, but I hated that name. My father had always called me Jessica and I hated it. Mom had called me Jessie before she disappeared. I don't know where she went but probably to be with a more connected drug dealer.

"Yeah..." There was panic in my voice.

I heard him groan just before I saw him. Sprawled on the couch, he was rolling over to get up. He grumbled, "Something happen?" He scrubbed at his face with an unsteady hand. He was drunk.

"Leo got me involved in a drug deal." I was still shaking, glancing at the door and windows and expecting to see flashlights and guns.

He gave me a pained look of non-comprehension. "He fucking what?"

"He told me to go trade a backpack. Mention Corvey. He was sitting in the car tweaking!"

"Fuck!" He shook his head and swayed. "Leo?"

"Yes, Leo."

"Fuck. Shit."

I think he exhausted his entire vocabulary. I was desperate, still scared. "I need to get away." It was true; I felt the weight of everything in my past tumble over

me. If I didn't get away, I was going to be consumed. Used up in drug pedaling or murdered by someone tweaking without realization my life mattered. "I need to get out of this..."

Uncle Ronnie swayed on the couch, peering at me as if he had bad eyesight and didn't have his glasses. For all that had happened before I turned legal, he had left me alone after I turned eighteen. I had often wondered if adults didn't do it for him. I didn't know; he had no other little girls that I had seen.

Maybe he had grown guilty and satisfied at the same time. But he respected me now.

He grumbled and swiped at his face. "Yeah... I understand." He looked lost – his head swinging one way, and then the next. He looked at me with pleading eyes. "I felt bad for you..."

I didn't want to hear anything; I needed to get out. I went to my room.

He followed, falling first over the cheap coffee table that was just pressboard and laminate – exactly the kind of cheap a druggie would have. Except Ronnie wasn't a druggie. He didn't even do pot. My father had done pot and the stench was forever burned into my brain.

Sometimes I wondered if my uncle had gotten the coffee table from my father. It was an itch – an intuition – that intrigued me with useless thoughts when I had little else upon which to think.

He staggered against my doorway. He never entered – not since I turned eighteen. Despite his failings, I appreciated his respect. He said, "I'm sorry..."

I dragged out a backpack – so clean compared to the one earlier – and began stuffing clothes. "About Leo? Who cares—"

"No!" He swayed, holding himself up. "About all of it. Your father and... what we did. I'm... so sorry."

A flare of anger and regret heated me from the inside. "Did you get religion or something?"

His eyes glassed over. "God could never forgive me..."

I crammed clothes into my backpack with vicious thrusts. Anger had taken hold – one that I had not realized lurked within me. "So you taught me carpentry."

His eyes widened, lighting up behind the glassy intoxication that marred his face and slurred his words. "Yes. Exactly. Precise--" He belched. "Excuse me. Yes, I taught you. To help you."

"Why didn't you teach me when I was fourteen?" I glared at him.

His face crumpled and began to shake side to side. "I'm... I didn't..." His sniff was loud. "I'm so sorry."

I had an office trash container in the room. I pulled out the bag and used the plastic thing to stuff the rest of my best and most treasured belongings into. It wasn't much. Mostly things like toiletries.

I had always tried to avoid the drugs and alcohol that had destroyed my family. I needed to get away. One bad boyfriend after another had scarred me beyond hope. Why do I always fall for the bad guy?

He was crying silently.

I turned on him, determined. "I need to get out. Out of town. I need to... leave. Far away from..." My voice broke. "Far from all of this... shit."

"God help you, girl..." His voice was a croak.

Did you get religion, Ronnie? While I was off dating or in the shop working alone? Did some televangelist get you on the TV?

He wiped his nose. "Take the Vega. The keys—"

"The rust-bucket?"

A loud banging at the front door made me jump.

A voice boomed out. "Open up!"

Cops! Oh shit! Panic pierced me and adrenaline flooded my veins. I pleaded, "Where are the keys?" The car was out back in the side lot.

Ronnie looked with irritation to the door. His words were faltering. "In the glass bowl on the counter..."

The banging boomed loud again. "Where's my money?" The shout was insistent and demanding. "Open up, you fucking cunt!"

I froze. "Leo..."

Ronnie grunted. "Fuck... You go... I'll handle him..."

I grabbed up the trashcan and my backpack. I left very little behind, but only because I didn't have much. I stopped in the doorway, looking at my uncle. Much went unsaid: pain at being given as a sex toy to an older man; respect for finally receiving dignified treatment at eighteen; gratitude for saving me from my druggie father; and much else. I croaked, "Thank you..."

He blinked, trying to focus on me. He said nothing.

I brushed past him and into the kitchen. The green glass bowl was decorated with flowers – something left over from when he had been married. Long before I had come along. Keys of all sorts were in it but mostly padlock keys. There was a cheap, plastic teardrop tag that held a longer key with a round head. I snatched it and ran out the back door.

CHAPTER 2

Ghost

Ghost glanced around the parking lot of the Keystone Motel. Motorcycles dominated the place for the most part. He heard the door open behind him from the adjacent unit. He didn't look, but he did stretch and yawn.

The intense voice beside him spoke of regret. "I really miss Grannie's breakfasts."

Ghost glanced at Twenty. The serious man with the wild eyes was the club's Sergeant at Arms. Though he might never have admitted it, Ghost felt a deep affinity for Twenty. Many people thought both of them were intense – angry, maybe even crazy. He said, "You and me both."

"I want to beat the shit out of some gangbangers." The threat wasn't idle – not coming from Twenty.

"We all do and I'm sure we'll be mixing it up again with them."

There had been a meet between the Iron Crows and the Surenos. Both sides knew it was all an ambush. The dead had littered the abandoned gas station. The Iron Crows had come out on top, losing only two patchers. With a second group of Surenos burning down the Iron Crows clubhouse, everyone knew the Surenos members had known of the ambush planned by their leader Do'. That he hadn't come back...

The Iron Crows had made the scene look like an inter-gang rivalry gone bad. Surenos shooting Surenos. Evidence had been cleaned up as best as possible and the sheriff had stepped in to announce a small matter of gang violence.

The news media had swallowed it. A small article in the paper, a bare mention on TV. No one cared about gang members shooting themselves. But if it had

been announced there was a shootout between the gang and a motorcycle club, the news would've made national headlines.

No one cared about gang members killing each other. But if an outsider kills one – or more – then it's a matter of vigilante justice. The news media would have swarmed on that with fabricated hysteria. Hate and racism as motivators. Bad whites picking on poor immigrant Mexicans. Forget the fact the Surenos killed people and dealt drugs.

Keystone could not afford that kind of publicity. It was all they could do to keep the town safe and free of drugs.

Gunner joined them, standing and stretching beside Twenty.

Ghost scowled at him and nodded. "Chaplain."

The man had shaved all his hair off, but it was growing back. He grunted indifferently. He was the club's foul-mouthed chaplain, full of the Spirit of God and the grace of Jesus. His club name was Gunner. He said, "I really hate Marla's cooking." He was referring to the café the club used now that their clubhouse was burned to the ground.

Twenty agreed, "She's got nothing on Grannie. Maybe your old lady can get a part-time job there and cook us eggs."

Gunner wheezed. "Fuck that..."

Ghost said nothing, but he supported Twenty. The clubhouse was being rebuilt. The plans called for a two-story version of the old whore house they had converted. Insurance was paying for much of it. The rest...

Twenty griped, "You really know how to ruin a man's day."

Gunner stuck an unlit cigar in his mouth. It was one of those thin things and he used it more as a pointer than anything else. He didn't light it. "Fuck you." A slight pause. "But I'll pass on the sentiments. Grannie'll love it." He looked past Twenty to Ghost. "You're meeting Cotton today?"

Ghost grunted.

"Seems like getting the construction moving is taking forever."

It was, Ghost knew. The slab had been poured over a small basement. They hadn't had a basement before. "The cement had to cure."

Growls from the other two men were filled with testosterone and impatience.

He sympathized with them, surely. But as club treasurer, he felt a duty to Keystone – using local labor instead of bringing in outsiders who had full crews and could hustle faster.

Twenty offered, "We could threaten to break his kneecaps."

Ghost didn't react; he knew the threat was just Twenty speaking his frustration. Ken Cotton was a good man, but didn't have a crew. The contractor had immediately posted ads to hire on, but no one had stepped up. With things as bad as they were in the country, people should've been hungry for work. Their most recent patch had come looking for work – hungry and willing. Ghost thoughts drifted to the man's wife, but he shook himself to clear those ideas out of his head.

Some memories are best left unused.

CHAPTER 3

Jessie

I drove until the Vega ran out of gas; I was exactly two blocks from the gas station up ahead.

No matter, I had a dollar, anyway and I'm sure begging for gas wasn't going to work. I should have stopped in the big town back there.

I had instead raced up the highway, having missed the interstate, and felt the car buck and stutter. I had pulled off at some little town up near the treeline. The forest beckoned but little else. Small towns like these held absolutely no promise.

I sat at the side of the road, parked conveniently at the curb. "What am I going to do?"

My backpack did not answer me. Neither did the plastic trash can nor the car. Nope, definitely not the car – it was done for. Without gas, it was nothing but a metal shell. At least I can sleep in it.

I got out and began walking.

There were so few cars on the roads that I wondered if I had walked into some zombie movie. Would they burst around the corner growling and groaning for my brains? Or were the inhabitants all weird robots? Maybe aliens that would slowly surround me with strange looks and sinister intentions of breeding me for their brood?

I was still in my shorts from my so-called date. My shirt was wrinkled. I had driven all night. And here I am. Fuck you Leo. Fuck you, dad. And thank you, Ronnie, for the car.

I saw a café down the first intersection. There were newspaper stands out front. Fingering the quarters through my shorts, I headed that way.

A cop passed me and I looked at him as suspiciously as he looked at me. Fear fell down my back and made me realize I needed to use the bathroom. I walked faster.

Café, newspaper, and public restroom. Perfect.

The parking lot was stuffed with trucks, cars and motorcycles. I didn't like the motorcycles; bikers were bad guys. I had lived through enough of them to know I was done.

I inserted my last bit of money – all four quarters. I didn't even have a penny left. I stuck the newspaper under my arm and walked into the café penniless.

The comfortable warmth was a blanket of security on my skin. The murmur and clinking of plates wrapped me in welcome. I saw the restroom sign to the left. As I turned towards it, a waitress in a uniform out of the fifties stuck a fist on her hip and bounced, giving me a puckered lip look that told me she knew I was only using the restroom.

Hey, back off, bitch. I'm not some vagrant... Oh, wait. I am. Burning with heat in my face, I rushed into the bathroom and away from her knowing eyes.

The women's restroom door had only a skirt figure on it. Sighing with relief I wouldn't have my privacy invaded by some freak man claiming to be a woman or some stupid trans-monstrosity, I entered the clean bathroom.

It was spotless.

I closed the stall door and hurriedly dropped my shorts; I felt the imminence of water so insistent that my hands were shaking. I sighed with relief as I sat and grabbed up the paper from the floor.

I read the title. Keystone Gazette – how quaint.

I immediately dove into the classifieds.

Accountant, fuck. Babysitter, fuck. Bookkeeper, fuck. Sighing in frustration, my

eyes skipped right to... Carpentry. Nothing. Fuck. I kept going until I reached an ad that jolted my heart and made me want to pee some more: Framer.

I can frame! I can frame!

I finished and cleaned up excitedly. I ran fingers through my frizzy hair and tried to look presentable. Newspaper tucked under my arm, I left the restroom, trying to hide a hopeful smile.

I realized in the entry that I had no idea where Magnolia Street was. At a total loss and unable to buy a map, I needed directions. No way was I going to ask that waitress. But she was at the other end of the counter, bent over doing something.

The man closest to me had just finished his coffee and was fishing for his wallet.

I chose him. "Hi, uh..." I took the paper from under my arm and gestured with it. "Do you know where Magnolia Street is?"

He froze and eyed me, looking me up and down. "Uh huh."

Are you going to tell me? I thought maybe he was suspicious. "I need to apply for a job there. Ken Cotton Construction..." I trailed off as he squinted and peered at me harder.

He said, "You?"

I tried to stand tall. "I'm... looking for work."

His eyebrow lifted. "Aren't you more suited to waitressing?"

I glanced at the waitress; she was glaring at me and coming closer.

Flushed with panic, I said, "I'm a carpenter. Could you just tell me—"

He smirked. "Right here."

"Huh?"

The waitress put both fists on hips this time. "Is this... waif... giving you trouble?"

The man chuckled. "Don't think so, Rita. Unless she's lying to me."

I paled. I blanched. I shook. How did he know? Thing is, I had a thing about lying; I couldn't help it. When you live around lowlifes, lying becomes second nature. I opened my mouth, eyes wide, and said, "Carpenter for seven years—"

"What company?" He was still squinting at me.

"Ronnie Miller."

"Never heard of him." He said it accusingly.

"Not here, out of Spokane."

The man grunted and pushed some money at Rita. "Thanks." To me, he said, "Let's go outside."

I held up my hand in question. "I just wanted directions—"

"You found me. I'm Ken Cotton. Let's go."

Stunned, I looked at Rita.

She grimaced at me as if pushing a toothpick to the side of her mouth.

A tiny and pretty blonde was twisted in the first booth watching. She looked as emaciated as me. The woman smiled such a sweet and genuine smile that I was compelled to return it. Next to her was another pretty blonde, but she wasn't smiling – just watching.

What got me moving and very suddenly was the man sitting across from them. He was big and wearing a vest. His bald head sported an ugly scar that ran over his right ear.

Biker, oh shit. Run! I scurried after Ken Cotton.

I followed him to his truck.

He gave me one suspicious look before dropping open the side tool door. "You know what a ball-peen hammer is?"

I rolled my eyes. Then I realized he was testing me. I cleared my throat. "Sure, that one."

"What's it used for?"

"In carpentry? Not much. Smoothing over rough metal..."

"What would you use to drive nails?"

"That claw hammer." I peered to the right. "Or that pneumatic if there was air."

He gave a satisfied grunt. "What's a stud?"

"A wood or metal frame for a wall."

"Hmm, so you do know something. Why are you running?"

That caught me off guard. "Running?"

"You got circles under your eyes, your blouse is wrinkled and you aren't dressed for carpentry. You're a hundred and fifty miles from Spokane in a backwater small town."

I lied; it was the easiest thing to do. "I have wealthy parents. They wanted me to marry this fat and ugly man—"

His left eyebrow rose so languidly and with such sarcasm that I stopped. He mumbled, "Uh huh."

"Please, I really need this job. Carpentry is all I know. I can't waitress. I can't cook—"

He crooked a finger and led me to the back of the truck. In the bed were some boxes. "Say I want to attach a ceiling joist to a wall stud. What do I use?"

My eyes immediately found the open box. "One of those steel braces."

He hung his head a little, looking square at me. "Well, can you carry two-by-fours?"

"Four at a time."

He looked shocked. "You?"

I gave a resolute nod.

He sighed heavily. "All right, never let it be said I wouldn't give a woman a chance, but you seem to know what you're talking about. Follow me to the job-site—"

"I'm..." I looked down. "Sorry, but can I ride with you? I'm out of gas."

He growled and bit off a rueful laugh. "What's your name, girl?"

"Jessie. Jessie Windham."

He stuck out his hand to shake. "Rich parents, huh?"

I blushed and looked at my tennis shoes.

After he let go of my hand, he said, "I'm sure you forgot to pack your wealthy carpenter work clothes, too, huh?"

My face flamed.

CHAPTER 4

Ghost

The foreman was leaning against the door of the construction trailer when Ghost approached. He was a portly and burly man, deep red on his arms, neck and face from working in the sun.

He adjusted his Iron Crows colors as he approached. "Cotton here, yet?"

A headshake – not unfriendly, just how Cal worked.

Ghost blew out his frustration.

"It's still early yet."

He checked his watch. "What does it take to get people here on time, Cal?"

The big man straightened and shrugged. "You know Keystone. We get to it when we get to it."

A truck pulled into the side yard.

Cal lifted his chin. "There he is."

Ghost sighed slower and deeper, satisfied the carpenter was only a few minutes late. He watched the man get out and hustle to the side. He was talking to someone and pointing to the stack of studs delivered the previous day.

From around the other side, a girl walked.

Ghost squinted, scowling. Thinking the man had brought his daughter to work, he began walking over to him.

The girl turned out to be a little older than he thought. She was a short thing, skinny like the club whore Angela, and prettier than...

He shifted those thoughts out of his mind. Stiff's wife was no longer an option.

The woman put on a tool belt from one of the truck's metal tool cabinets. She adjusted it as if she thought she knew what she was doing.

Ken noticed him. "Oh, hey, Art."

Ghost stopped, slightly put off as always whenever anyone used his real name. Going by Ghost had become so natural that he sometimes expected everyone to know it – even outsiders. As it was, his club name was up on his left breast, but civilians rarely had the courage to use it. Which is just as well – they hadn't earned the privilege.

The girl was at the stack of lumber. She pulled a clipper and cut the straps.

Ghost watched her. "What's with the girl?"

Ken scratched nervously. "Trying her out. She begged for a job. Said she had learned carpentry."

"Is it that tough to get workers?"

The man's voice dropped softly. "She's been the only one to answer the ad."

A small wriggle of suspicion slithered through his gut. "She say where she's from?"

"Spokane, I think."

"That's a long way to go looking for a carpentry job."

"Said she was running from wealthy parents." His look said he didn't believe it.

Neither did Ghost. "Uh huh." He was still watching her.

She had hefted four two-by-fours up onto her shoulder, but not very easily. Still, she balanced them perfectly and made quite a face of effort.

Then she saw Ghost.

The studs went tumbling to the ground and the girl squeaked. She dashed for the truck and hid behind it.

Ken saw that she had dropped the lumber and frowned.

The girl's hair appeared over the tool cabinet at the back of the truck. Slowly, wide eyes rose over it. They popped open further when she saw both of them looking and then her head dropped. There was a scramble and the sound of wood scraping.

Jonesy barked. Their yard dog was still kept at the back workshop.

Ghost didn't admonish the dog; he was too busy wondering if the girl was an informant. He clasped his hands behind his back and paced. He didn't like new faces. New faces smelled like government. Spies. Snitches. Detectives. The Iron Crows had dealt with some of those before – and buried them.

CHAPTER 5

Jessie

I stacked the two-by-fours again as fast as I could; I didn't want to get fired on my first day. I squatted down with them at my side and tilted the stack. Getting my fingers underneath, I lifted using my legs. My back straight, I hefted the stack up, shifting sideways to get my shoulder underneath.

I blew a breath of effort. I used to be able to carry four. I feel so weak...

I used the truck as a shield and moved with my stack to where Ken had indicated. He had a partially finished stud wall lying on the cement from the previous day. He had a square set off close to where he left off and there were bracings already nailed in below. A window frame. He would need headers for it, and I saw none.

I walked back to the truck to get a skillsaw.

I heard that demon talking. "I'm telling you, I don't like it."

Ken said, "I can't help it. She's been the only one—"

"I don't like new faces."

"If you want me to fire her, the job will take twice as long."

I felt a panic at the thought of losing my job.

Demon-guy snarled, "Why couldn't you find a local? Instead you hire from... Spokane?"

"That's what she said. I believe her, except for the silly wealthy parents part."

There was a grunt from bad boy.

I reached over and snatched the skillsaw I had seen.

Two pairs of eyes instantly tracked me and stared.

My throat made a gurgling sound as I yanked and fled. Why are they staring at me? And why is bad boy so pissed? Tremors ran through my limbs, but not from fear – no, even if I was panicked, the tremors weren't fear. I felt... excited. I cursed myself. It's just another bad boy who is so mad at life he never smiles.

I realized the skillsaw wasn't going to reach the utility pole for the construction site. I snuck back to the truck to look for an extension cord. I opened the metal doors on the opposite side of them.

Demon-guy was talking. "How long, do you think?"

"Couple weeks, with her, for the whole frame, including the roof."

I couldn't find any electrical cables on the passenger side. I fumed and moved around the truck to their side.

Eyes were instantly on me again. My face flamed with heat and I snatched open cabinet doors.

Ken grumbled, "What are you looking for?"

"Extension cord for the skillsaw."

"What do you need that for?"

I straightened, determined to face them grimace for grimace. I planted both fists on hips. "I saw you were framing a window. I was going to cut your header pieces."

Ken nodded in recognition. "Yeah, you'll find the measurements—"

I rolled my eyes. "I can measure."

My boss gave me a funny look, then pointed to the cabinet behind demon-guy.

I heaved a breath and looked up at him. He was very attractive, in that bad boy way. But I wasn't putting up with any of that any longer.

He scowled down at me.

I scowled back at him. I dragged out sarcastically, "Excuse me..."

The bad boy stiffened, his scowl deepening, then shifted away from the truck. But I caught something shifting in his face. The barest quirk of his lips on one side might have struggled to hide a smile.

I did a double-take, looking back at him. His black denim vest had a nametag on it that said, "Ghost." I snorted to myself. Ghost of a smile?

I heaved at the thick coil of extension cord. Meant to provide amps for heavier tools, the coil wasn't just thick, but also heavy. I shrugged it onto my shoulder and shut the container. I made sure to cast another glare at Ghost.

I almost tripped; there was amusement in his eyes. Oh no you don't. You're not pulling that bad boy shit on me. Nuh uh.

I walked on shaking legs away from the truck.

I heard Ghost say, "Awesome work outfit. I might like this."

I wanted to scream.

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I penciled at the measurement and let the tape snap back into the metal holder. I pocketed the pencil and shifted the two-by-four up onto my tennis shoe. I clamped down with my other foot, lifting the edge of the board with the marking. I thumbed the speed setting and tested the button. The skillsaw whined to life. I let go and let it stop. Bending over, I moved the tool plate over my

marking and aligned it. With a press, the blade spun to life and I gently pushed along the pencil mark.

I felt eyes on me. They tickled up my back and raised the hairs on my neck. I finished the cut before looking around: power tools weren't toys.

Behind me, I caught sight of bad-ass Ghost leaning against the super's trailer. He was staring at me with a thin grin.

I put my back to him and made the next cut. I looked back; he was still there. I wanted to throw the skillsaw at him. Why do I attract them? Why can't I get a nice guy? Is it my frizzy hair? Despite having it back in a ponytail and wearing a hardhat, the edges peeked out everywhere.

Ken took the one cut and settled it perfectly against the frame. He muttered, "Excellent."

I was feeling a little woozy. "It was simple enough." I was still agitated over Ghost. "Who's the scowling bad-ass, anyway?"

Ken chuckled. "Missy, you—"

"Jessie."

He cleared his throat and rested his hammer head down. "Listen, Jessie. I don't know how they do things in Spokane, but out here we treat each other with respect."

Am I really going to get a lecture? "Sorry, just wanted to know."

He hefted a breath. "Well, the scowling bad-ass is our boss."

I looked around not comprehending. "He owns this? We're building for him?"

His look was serious and he just hummed his affirmation. He took up the hammer and finished nailing the header. "Other one ready?"

I squeezed the trigger and sliced off the second piece. I handed it to him.

He was watching me cut using my feet for lift and leverage. "You do that like

you know what you're doing..." He laughed to himself. "Yes, I guess you know what you're doing."

"Isn't he a biker? How can he own anything? Bikers are poor."

"Ah, yes. He's representing the club. There was an old cat house here that got burned down. Insurance is paying for the rebuild."

I knew he couldn't have had any money. "Insurance. That makes sense."

"He's the club treasurer as I understand it."

"What was the name of this town again?" I had forgotten.

"Keystone." He stretched out his tape measure. "Can you give me three cuts, eleven and three quarter inches?"

I tossed the piece I had been cutting on; it was too short. I leaned over a new piece and stretched my tape measure. Well, it was his tape measure. Everything I was using was his. I penciled off the cuts. In less than a minute, I had handed him the three pieces.

"You work fast, I like that." He sank a dozen nails and indicated the top of the frame. "Nail that end and let's get this one up."

A few minutes later, we had added a twelve foot section of frame.

Ken didn't like to take breaks and he worked us until he looked at his watch and said, "Lunchtime."

I had no money to buy anything and my stomach growled loud enough to startle the dog nearby. I twisted my fingers together. "At the end of the day..."

He straightened, leaned back a little, then regarded me with expectation.

"Just today, could I get paid for my work? I have no money and nothing to eat."

He tightened his lips, considered my face for a few seconds, then gave a quick nod. "Can't have ya starving."

I almost jumped when a voice interrupted us. "I think she's already starving."

I spun, heart skipping to the adrenaline rush. It was Ghost. I snapped the first thing that came to mind. "I'm not fat, am I? Funny how women are too fat, too skinny, too tall, too short—" I stopped, awed by the smile.

"You just look hungry to me."

Ken was trudging off to his truck.

I looked around, lost. "Where's the roach-coach?"

"Huh?"

"You know, the lunch vehicle." I asked it just to say something; I had not a single cent to buy anything. My stomach betrayed me and growled in a drawn out twisting, churning gurgle of need.

His arms came up suddenly, crossed, one hand scratching at his upper lip. Obviously hiding another smile. "You don't look like a fed."

Great. This guy's a drug dealer for sure. "No, I'm not. But I'm married to a cop." There. Fuck you, too, bad boy. Now go scamper off like a frightened puppy.

He looked down at my finger – his eyes losing that jovial light. "Not even a liar's ring." He looked back up into my eyes but the smile was gone. "I don't know why people think they need to lie..."

I wanted to kick him. But, he was technically my boss. I pouted instead.

His mouth twitched to the side, his eyes steady on me. "You want lunch? We can go grab some."

"No, I'm fine." My damned stomach picked exactly that time to roar.

One eyebrow slowly lifted. "Let's go get something to eat." He turned without waiting.

I followed after him, not even taking off my tool belt or hard hat. "I'm fine, really."

He turned back to me. "You're about to fall over. I've seen you get dizzy over the

past two hours. I don't want to be paying out for accidents on our site."

I snapped my mouth shut. I better keep it shut, too. This guy can fire me.

A faint trace of that smile returned.

Damn he looks good. Why is he taking an interest in me?

He stopped next to a motorcycle.

I froze. Part of me was saying, "Oh no." Another part was awed by the look of the thing. His machine was clean, shining, and so very sleek-looking. Wow... I stood there like a dumb-ass looking at all the black and chrome.

He mumbled, "Your hardhat should pass for the police here, even if it's not street-legal." He got on and settled a helmet on his head. He motioned to his left side. "Get on – over here."

I really didn't want to. Really. Everything inside screamed not to. Bad boy! Alert! Warning! And I found myself getting on, even if reluctantly, without hesitation. I just had no control. I settled behind him with a thrill of surrender.

He leaned slightly, straightened, then the Harley gave a metallic whir and rumbled to life – smooth as silk. I marveled at how quiet, yet how deep the throbbing of the engine permeated my being. I gripped him around the waist.

As if let free on the wind, I experienced my first motorcycle ride.

CHAPTER 6

Ghost

He let off the handle and slowed. He had never ridden with a passenger before, and the motorcycle turned heavier – requiring just a touch more effort. He didn't know what it was about this girl, but she drew him like a moth to a flame.

This was far different than Kristy – those stolen couplings when her husband was off doing something. No, this was very different.

An unsettled sensation drifted through his stomach, exciting and cautioning him. This was something dangerous and irrevocable. Yet, as careful as he was, he eagerly walked that path of possible doom.

What was it about the girl? Her frizzy hair? Her hazel eyes? Her abrasive self-confidence? Her determination? Jessie was affecting him far more than an available Kristy had.

He braked and began walking the bike back to the curb. She loosened her grip and already he looked forward to riding her back to the construction site.

Was she a plant? An agent? An informer? A private detective? No one would presume such a slight girl would be a snoop. But was she?

He set the kickstand and said, "Climb off." He pointed left. Her trembling translated through his back. He ignored it in favor of not embarrassing the girl. He climbed off after her and removed his key. He motioned to the restaurant. "Not great food, but good. Steaks are edible. Whatever you want here."

Her return look was neutral and attentive – filled with questions unasked. She removed her hardhat and held it under her arm, like he did with his helmet.

He led her into the restaurant.

Seated and looking at menus, Ghost already knew what he wanted. He looked at her, studying her features. He decided she didn't have that hard look of a cop. No, it was something less cop-gritty and more fear-wary. Something defensive.

The smooth voice sounded accusatory – perhaps even jealous. "Well hello, Ghost..."

The waitress was Evangeline. A pretty enough woman, but not someone he was interested in pursuing. But she had personal dibs on him, apparently.

Still, he gave her a neutral look – almost as good as a bright smile coming from him. "Hello."

Evangeline's dark eyes flared as she looked over Jessie. "What have we here? A niece?"

To Ghost's surprise, Jessie jerked violently and began searching the dining area with panicked eyes.

He frowned, wanting to think about the reaction but unable. "A worker from our jobsite."

Evangeline waited expectantly – even impatiently.

He didn't care to enlighten her; it did not appeal to him to do so. "Give us a few more minutes."

With a twist approaching savage, the waitress spun and left.

He hovered over the table. "Something wrong with relatives?"

She jerked and looked at him. "Of course not."

He felt the lie as she was speaking it. He settled back and threw an arm over the backrest. He said nothing, simply gave her a raised eyebrow of disapproval.

She visibly swallowed and pretended to look at the menu.

He ventured, "I suppose your cop husband would be very mad that you went to lunch without him?"

She looked furtively at him and away. "Yeah, well..."

He wasn't one to pontificate; Gunner was good for that. The club's chaplain had something to say for every situation – if required. Even the president, Dealer, could be pithy, though he left most wisdom to the chaplain.

Smiley? Sonar? They were more practical.

So he let her have her way. He looked at her finger again, the fever to expose the infection ravaging his control. "Why the story about being married? And why to a cop?"

Her eyes began rapidly scanning the menu. No way could she read that fast. She opened her mouth.

He interrupted her. "The truth."

Anger rippled across her face and she glared at him with accusation. Several deep breaths brought forth a rush of words. "All I ever meet are the wrong guys. The bad boys." She looked at him from his face to his colors and back again. Accusing.

He watched her, not answering. He gauged her facial expression, evaluated her eyes, and considered her posture. There was something fierce there and he didn't detect any falsity in her words.

Was that her problem? Or was she still an informant? The alphabet soup agencies often used informants – those they could bribe or extort. An imperfect vessel often made the most efficient informant. He ventured, "What do you know about our club?"

Her response held some snap in it. "Nothing. I found out I was working for you after I was hired. Your cat house burned down? Cat house like whore house?"

He considered the pointed question but deflected the accusation contained therein. "Mm hmm. We bought it some years ago and shut it down. Don't care much for prostitution."

Her eyes squeezed to thin lines and she turned her head half away. "Oh sure, I really believe that."

"We don't, though we do care for one prostitute—"

"Ha. I knew it."

Ghost moved his chin in a slow, sideways wag. "It's not what you think—"

She dropped her menu. "Oh? How is it? She cooks or something? Or does she perform... other services?"

He took a deep breath.

Evangeline interrupted them. "Ready to order?"

Ghost growled, took a breath and said, "Rib eye, medium."

She barely scratched on her pad. With the slightest of twists, she was turned to Jessie, "And you?"

The girl was trying to fix her frizz; it wasn't working. "Hot pastrami sandwich. No fries, please, and no other sides."

There was a sniff of disapproval, but the waitress noted it. She snatched up the menus and whirled again.

Ghost drew his hand down over his face and looked after her. He would have to set her straight someday.

Jessie gave him a knowing look. "So you have a club whore—"

He shifted forward so as to keep his voice low between them. "Let me tell you a story."

His look had silenced her. He knew he often wore a face that made people think he was mad. She watched him, eyes large.

He said, "Angela was married to a man, lived in a great two-story house in the nice part of Keystone. Her husband was a soldier. Lost his life in Iraq. Suddenly Angela has no income to support a house payment and loan on her Range Rover. Successful housewife, now widow, is out on the street in a matter of months. Everything gone. Repossessed. Her life in tatters. With no income, she begins to

starve. Do you blame her for turning to the only thing she could find that gave her something to eat?"

Jessie swallowed, shock on her face. "Oh... I didn't know—"

"That's the problems with assumptions. You don't know. Being wrong is as bad as not being truthful. I'm sure Gunner could put it better than me, but we value truth in our club. Without honesty, there's no trust."

She frowned, her eyebrows lowering in thought. Her mouth opened to speak.

He forestalled her. "I don't like living on assumptions. They're often wrong. I can tell you're not some wealthy kid. You're also not married. Are you really from Spokane?"

She was trembling, her eyes shifting left and right. But finally they settled on him. She gave a quick nod.

"So tell me, Jessie. The truth. Why are you here? Why are you afraid of relatives?"

Her eyes went large, but not with surprise. There was a slight eyeroll with them and she blew out her cheeks. A tall order.

He settled back, waiting.

It was her turn to lean forward to keep her voice low.

CHAPTER 7

Jessie

He was infuriating. I couldn't have imagined a smarter man than a cop to wriggle the truth out of looks, lies, and eyes. But I was scared. "I need this job..."

He waited, that scowl ghosting across his face.

"I don't have money. I need to work. I don't want to be fired."

"Tell me, and I'll make sure you won't."

Something about him screamed trust. But his vest right below that face told me all I needed to know: seriously bad news. On the other hand, the scowl didn't reach his eyes. Despite being hard, there was something soft there, possibly sincere, and maybe even sympathetic.

I gripped my waterglass in both hands, momentarily distracted by how thin my fingers looked. I was beyond rope on which to cling. I was falling. I had nothing left. I looked up at him. "I'm on the run."

Nothing changed in his expression, though his eyes flicked over my face, searching for that truth I was giving. "Why?"

"I went out on a date with someone who was supposed to be clean. He told me to run a backpack up to a house and trade it for another—"

"Drugs." There was derision in his voice.

I wilted a little, feeling his disgust for me. "I wasn't stupid. I didn't want to, but he grabbed my hair—"

His hand came down on mine. "I understand. Go on."

The warmth on my boney fingers startled me. I jerked my hand back: fearing he wouldn't like the feel of my fingers; and just plain scared of being touched.

I clasped my hands in my lap, hunched forward. "I decided to take the backpack and just get the so-called date over with. I told him to take me home after. I just wanted the night over with."

His nod was encouraging.

"So I took it. On the way to the door, cops exploded from everywhere. They were trying to be quiet, but I think there was a gunshot from inside the house."

I studied his face for a second; he was listening, face neutral.

I continued. "The cops were all rushing the door. I ran."

"You took the backpack?"

"No, I dropped it. Leo was already flooring it up the street and I ran the other way."

"You did the right thing."

I stared at him without comprehending. Someone actually agrees with me?

"Though you really should have just jumped out of the car and ran. Even running that backpack up to the door is an act of dealing. Courier or no, you'd be in jail. What was in the backpack? Drugs? Money?"

I shrugged. "Heck if I know. But Leo never had much money—"

"His first big score – whatever was in it."

"I don't know. I just know I've had too many of his kind in my life – going all the way back to my parents."

"Tell me."

And I wanted to. Something felt right. "My mother took off when I was eight. Probably chasing better drugs. My father smoked pot all the time. He was always making deals but never seemed to have enough to get the pot he wanted.

I..." My story faltered under his gaze. What will he think of me?

His patience was peaceful.

I felt reassured. "I was traded at fourteen to my uncle."

His face scrunched together in anger. "Traded? Explain."

"Well, he wasn't really my uncle. He was my father's best friend. Dad owed him money so he traded me—"

There was complete annoyance on his face and in his posture. "What the fuck?"

"I became his sex-toy..." My voice trailed off.

Ghost's hands clenched into fists. "How long did this go on?"

"Until I was eighteen."

"You were with him for four years?"

"Longer. Until last night, really."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Holy fuck." His face radiated rage.

"He left me alone after I turned eighteen."

That didn't seem to matter to him. His lips were drawn in a thin, severe line, and his hands were still fisted and white-knuckled.

I went on, little left to conceal. "He taught me carpentry."

His chest heaved a few times as he looked away. His fists relaxed, but his fingers still looked clawed and tense. "So you really are a carpenter."

"Yes."

"Why did you never run away? Go back to your father?"

"I don't know... I always sort of did what I was told to just go along without being yelled at or punched."

His eyes glassed over and his jaw clenched. He stared at me.

"I'm sorry..."

"There's nothing to be sorry for." His words were filled with cold fury. "Others are to blame for what they did to you. And it's probably best you didn't go back to your father."

"Uncle Ronnie never mentioned him after that."

"He's not your uncle." He shook his head as if hearing something horrifying. He rubbed at his brow with one hand. With a heavy sigh, he said, "So here you are. Where are you staying now?"

I lifted my shoulders and let them fall, ashamed of the truth.

"Tell me."

"In my car, I guess."

"Fuck."

Tears built in my eyes. The man was totally disgusted with me. "I'm sorry."

"No, it's not your fault. You just remind me of Angela, in a way."

My mouth dropped open. "I would never sell my body—"

His hand stopped me – a traffic hand in the air to stop. "I didn't mean it that way. Angela has her way. You have carpentry...." His eyes were watery, too.

I noticed it with an amount of awe. Someone cares?

He said, "You're doing the right thing and the only way you know how. You should be proud of yourself – not apologetic."

Evangeline had approached slowly, as if to listen. She put down our plates and looked back and forth. "Can I get you anything—"

Ghost's growl was soft, if still threatening. "Just leave us alone for now."

I didn't want to reach for my sandwich, but suddenly I couldn't contain it. I grabbed it frantically and took as big a bite as I could. I was almost drooling with anticipation.

Ghost looked away and scrubbed at his face and eyes.

I have never tasted a better pastrami sandwich in my life.

CHAPTER 8

Ghost

He could barely watch the girl eat for fear of losing it. Where did things go so wrong with people that they found themselves so destitute? Where did God fit into such despair? Gunner would claim He led her to them.

Was God responsible for her condition? Or her deliverance into their hands? Ghost didn't know. Gunner would know. Maybe he would ask him later.

He had been on the razor's edge of tears. Only after she had finished half her sandwich had he been able to make eye contact again. He had expected her to lie, but...

No, she had told the truth. There was no tension about her eyes as she had told him. No suspicion that he was seeing through it. Her face had been relaxed, relating facts as she remembered them. He could see it. He felt her hidden pain, carefully covered over with her matter-of-fact attitude. She was used to pain. She was used to the abuse. But something unwilted inside her refused to endure any more of it.

She startled him. "So... I can keep my job?"

His open gaze at her was stupefied. He sat, looking into her eyes, seeing, sensing, and senseless. He was at a total loss with this girl – so naïve and yet so wise. He shook his head out of his reverie.

She took it for rejection and her face fell to her sandwich. Her hands slipped from the table.

Panicked, he reached out, but there was nothing to touch. He put his palm down. "Of course you can keep your job."

Her eyes shot up to him, suspicious and searching. "Just like that? Will I be expected to..."

With horror, he realized to what she was alluding. "No." His scowl returned. "Of course not. We're not like that."

"But Angela—"

"You're not Angela. You're a carpenter."

Her next question almost knocked him out of his seat. "Does your club deal drugs?"

He looked at her, open-mouthed, knowing his answer was going to be something upon which she would be basing a decision. He knew what it was, too. If the Iron Crows had dealt drugs, she would pack up and move on. Her determination amazed him into silence.

She was insistent. "Well? You do, don't you?"

He remembered to answer. He laughed and she jerked suddenly. He said, "No, we don't..." But he knew he couldn't tell her everything.

Suspicion spread through her eyes. "You do."

He sliced savagely at his steak and looked around. Then to her. "No, we don't. We keep drugs out of Keystone."

Her eyes searched his and scanned his face. Whatever she saw confused her. "You keep them out?"

"We keep them out." He looked around again.

She poked at her sandwich. "So... you have your own secrets."

He tilted his head at her in wonderment over her deduction. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to scoff. He wanted to reach across the table, grab a fistful of her hair and pull her in for a kiss... He cleared his throat and forked some steak. He mumbled, "Yes, we have our secrets." He quickly looked around. "Not for talking about in public."

"Illegal things." Challenge was in her voice.

Ghost resorted to the tried and true. "Club business. Not for outsiders."

Unfortunately that only caused her face to go stony. She finished her sandwich without another word. Her face composed, she stared out the window.

Ghost could feel the wall. Where there had been connection and understanding, now there was resistance and silence.

What had he done? Honesty had hurt him? Or had the truth hurt her? Something moving on a collision course of... a sense of the intangible to him. A measure of excitement and expectation. An unknown of thrill and promise.

Suddenly all stopped. No collision – just an icy emptiness blocking the intersection of... two souls.

He finished his steak, and for all his confidence and self-certainty, he was at a loss as to how to proceed.

He sensed that ignition was caused by his answer - club business. For the first time since gaining his patch, he cursed the necessity of silence. He could no more explain to her how they did things than why – and why he had to be silent about it all.

Civilians could never understand. People outside the club were ignorant, unbelieving, misunderstanding. Jumping to conclusions and making assumptions. It was how it was.

Gunner would definitely have something to say about it. But dare he ask?

He looked at the girl – so beautiful in her determination to be steadfast about her standards. Just a step from the gutter, she was the one who looked down on him.

And he felt ashamed.

CHAPTER 9

Jessie

I hung on, but didn't feel the ride. I was numb. He had looked at me in the restaurant with something desperate in his eyes – something unsaid.

Well, he could've said it. Instead he had given me the silent treatment – just like the lowlife scumbags would. Why do I always attract the bad ones? How stupid do I look in a hard hat riding on a motorcycle? Wearing a tool belt? Do I look like the bad boy's latest conquest?

I felt deeply ashamed and angry: embarrassed I appeared so weak to the world that I was clinging to this criminal; mad that I had almost fallen again for the handsome man who was just like all the others.

I've been burned enough. Time to stop the flaming inferno merry-go-round and get the fuck off.

Was it that easy?

Was life going to allow me to step away from the profile it had given me? I imagined myself holding up a police chart, my name and number printed on it. The word "convicted" stamped over my forehead. It was what God had thrust onto me. Who was I to deny it?

I had carried the bag. I could've run. But I went along. How many times in my life do I go along and just fail? Could I start afresh here in Keystone as a carpenter and avoid Ghost?

Art was his name. What did he prefer? Ghost obviously was his club name – his criminal name. I was sure he preferred that.

But what about me? Was I going to try, but fail again? Was my lot in life to run

from criminal to criminal and forever be on the run? Was trying futile?

Whatever, I was going to try. And yet, I had run from one criminal determined to get away from all of it and had been employed by another. The problem was, I needed the money. At least the work was honest. The police couldn't arrest me for carpentry, could they? Accessory to the club?

I climbed off his ride after him. "Thank you for the lunch."

I did not wait for an answer, I walked away.

~ ~ ~

I thought I had heard enough from bad-ass. Ken and I worked together, hammering out frames so fast that I relished the thought of the shade it would all be providing.

Ghost made an appearance, and he wasn't being chased by paranormal investigators. He was leaning against the super's trailer again, watching. I felt his eyes on me, but I ignored him.

I did. Really. Okay fine, I tried. But I really did try. Thing was, my eyes kept meeting his brooding stare.

I'm not carrying no bags for you, just get that out of your fucking head. I hammered harder than necessary, bending a sinker. Growling under my breath in frustration, I clawed it and sunk one straight.

Ken noticed. "First bender I've seen out of ya. Feeling okay?"

My response was terse. "Fine." Despite my hardhat, my hair was everywhere. I straightened and wiped some out of my eyes. "Does the boss always watch?" I waved my hammer Ghost's way.

Ken's look was a little like a naughty Santa. He said, "Well, not as much as this, but yes, he is constantly around that I've seen."

I groaned.

He shrugged. "They want their clubhouse back."

"Why'd it burn? Faulty wiring or something?"

"Gang burned it down."

There were gangs everywhere. "How many gangs does Keystone have?"

"None."

We lifted another finished frame.

"If Keystone has no gangs—"

Ken flipped his hammer, looking at me critically. "Don't ask too many questions."

I wasn't going to be deterred. "Some gang drops out of the sky by magic—"

"Listen, Missy—"

"Jessie."

He growled and grumped, "Fine. Listen Jessie, the Iron Crows are rumored to keep gangs from getting a foothold here. Never seen them do anything bad or wrong. If they're keeping out the gangs, then more power to them." He checked his watch. "Let's get started; we might bang out one more before quitting time."

I chewed over what he'd said. But Ghost had clammed up tight about how the club went about doing what it does. I shot a look over to bad-ass.

He was gone.

Strangely, a hollow canyon opened up in my chest. Danger, so well known, had been absent the entire day. Now it returned. Because he was gone? Where was he?

I hustled two-by-fours and quickly shuffled board to where I would need it. Ken was slower than me, but his work was sure. His grin for me was not in the least salacious; I think he was pleased with my effort. But, truth, I was bone-tired. Sleeping in the Vega sounded positively wonderful right now.

We had framed half the bottom floor and every joint in my body felt it.

Ken was almost bubbling. "Fantastic. Nothing like progress."

I knew we would slow down, though. Stairs took extra time. The subfloor called for on the plans for the second floor I had scanned would take more. I didn't look forward to the roof. Last and hottest, it required extreme care. Balance and caution was critical. Leaning out over a yawning drop to use the pneumatic for those hard to reach places that needed fastening wasn't something I looked forward to. Not only that, the rafters were heavy sons of bitches. That's what Uncle Ronnie had always said.

My thoughts broke off, glad that I was away, glad my uncle had stopped using me, glad I had been taught carpentry, but most of all glad I was no longer part of any of that.

Ken looked beyond me.

I turned. Ghost was back, standing straight, hands thrust into his black jean pockets.

Ken called out, "You need anything from me?" He was putting away his tools.

Ghost came over to us, looking at both of us and the framing. "She's a good worker, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. That she is. We'll make the two weeks, easy." He looked satisfied. I knew he'd pocket the bid as profit with the time saved.

For myself, I didn't care what bad-ass had to say. I ignored him.

He wasn't ignoring me. "Jessie."

I straightened, my back protesting. I stuck both fists near the back of my hips and leaned – stretching everything out. I just gave him a look and waited.

"I got you a room at the motel. You'll have to share it—"

"I'm not sharing a room with a man."

"No, no. I made sure of that. I'll ride you to your car and you can follow me."

A shower sounded spectacular. I didn't say no. I secured my hardhat in the truck and also the toolbelt. Now I felt naked.

Ken made a concentrating face. "Can you make it here early? Say seven?"

Without hesitation, I said, "I will."

He fished out several bills and handed them to me.

I counted. "A hundred and sixty dollars?"

"Eight at twenty. You earned it. I know we pay a little lower than a bigger city, but—"

I bubbled over. "No, this is great, thanks."

"Keep up the good work." It was delivered as an admonishment and I heard every syllable of the warning.

"I won't disappoint you."

He gave that single dip of his chin in acknowledgment and climbed into his truck.

Ghost was waiting. I stuffed the bills into my shorts pocket and walked over to him. "My car ran out of gas..."

He glanced towards the yard dog. "We can handle that." He strode off towards the building in the back.

I followed, figuring he was going to get a gas can for the gas station.

The big Rottweiler growled at me with vicious eyes and bared fangs.

Ghost muttered, "She's all right, Jonesy."

Immediately, the monster stopped growling. It advanced on me and stiffly thrust its nose forward to smell me. It made some quick kind of cut-off growl and then turned away.

The interior of the building was a shop. Motorcycle parts were everywhere. Tires, seats, exhaust pipes, and cables were neatly stocked. The wheeled tool chests were expensive. The rolling carts held clean and shiny tools that were top-end.

I said, "Wow, you guys must have stolen from dozens of garages—"

He whirled on me, finger shooting out. That scowl was there, and meaner. "Every single one bought and paid for. Every. Single. One."

I recoiled from his ferocity.

He turned away abruptly, cursing under his breath. He snatched a small plastic gas can from a shelf and unscrewed the cap. His look towards me was from the side, steaming with offense, and searing with intensity. "We steal nothing!"

He slammed the cap down on a barrel and inserted a short hose into the can. Cranking a handle, he filled the container.

Not wanting to aggravate him further, and curious about his vehemence, I changed the subject. "That's gas?"

"Yes." He capped it and said, "This will get you to the gas station." He thrust it at me. "Carry it."

I clutched it.

He looked very upset. "We're not common criminals here, Jessie."

"What kind of criminals are you?"

He stormed to the door and held it open for me.

At his bike, I saw an extra helmet attached to one of the rear bags. He got that for me? "You bought me a helmet?"

I saw him bite back a sneer. "It's a loan – from the person you're staying with. Maybe she'll give it to you; I doubt she needs it anymore."

"With gas for my car—"

"Just get on." He was already on and adjusting his helmet strap.

In that instant, I felt very bad. I had questioned everything he had done – even the nice stuff. I was exhausted. I was wary. I was hopeful about starting over. I was glad to be away from Spokane. I dropped my head and motioned with the gas. "I'm... I'm sorry. You've been very nice."

He blew out a frustrated breath and looked away.

I got on.

~ ~ ~

I was dropped at my car without a word. I emptied the plastic can into my tank while he waited – his motorcycle rumbling low with power.

That was no cheap motorcycle and somehow I deduced that it hadn't been stolen, either. I didn't ask. I think I knew better by now. It seems like everything I had assumed about the man and his club was wrong. But there was still that knowledge that the club was doing something illegal. But what?

The Vega stuttered, coughed, belched and started. It settled into a burring hum and I put it into gear.

I watched him follow me in the mirror. At the gas station, he pulled in near the front of the car and waited. I went inside and put enough cash on the counter to fill the tank. The cashier had immediately bored holes into me with suspicion when I entered, but the cash erased all of that. Suddenly she was wishing me to have a nice day.

Cash did that, didn't it? No checks that were suspect. No credit card at its limit. Cash had none of that. Slide it across, no hassle.

I followed bad-ass to a motel. It was a very clean white looking thing that was long and L-shaped.

He reached out a gloved hand and pointed to a spot. His motorcycle rumbled away.

I got out, but he was already coming over, removing his helmet. His scowl was there, but perhaps less than it was earlier.

He pointed. "Room 8." He didn't wait; he went to it and knocked.

The curtains moved.

I was immediately suspicious. What was this woman being so worried over?

The woman answered, eyes on Ghost, then flicking to me. There was immense pain in that look – a tightening at the eyes that hinted at untold hours crying.

What am I getting into?

She regarded me, then looked back to Ghost. "All right."

Bad-ass turned to me. "This is Te—" He stopped, lowering his head. "Sorry. This is Ramona." He made a motion to her. "Ramona, Jessie."

The woman seemed pleasant enough. She tilted her head at me. "Come in. You have any bags?"

I hefted my backpack. "Just a can in the car."

She was instantly out the door and fetching it.

Ghost said to me, low, "She's suffered a lot recently. I thought maybe you two would be good for each other."

"What happened?"

"I'll let her handle that." He walked to another door and left me. He knocked on

that and went in.

Ramona was carrying my trash can. "This is all?"

I nodded.

"Come on in and pick a bed."

I had to ask. The pain on the woman's face demanded it.

CHAPTER 10

Jessie

"What happened? Ghost said you suffered—" Her look stopped me.

"My husband died." Her eyes watered, but didn't shed.

I settled on the bed. "I'm sorry to hear that. Was it an illness?"

Her mouth puckered at that and she shifted shimmering eyes away from me. "No. He died for the club. For me. For you. For all—"

"For me?"

Her eyes snapped back to me, just shimmering in the light as her tears welled there. Still, they didn't fall. She was a plain woman, wrinkling and thick in that middle aged way where her feminine curves got a little more curvy. Her hair was dyed black, but the grey roots were showing. She also wore no make-up.

I got the sense she was letting herself go – giving up on appearances when they no longer mattered.

She finally said, "He died for Keystone and every day I ask if it was worth it."

"Was he a cop? Or a fireman?"

Her headshake was slow and slight. "No, he was the club's captain."

"The leader?"

Another headshake. "The captain. Dealer is our leader."

Oh no. Dealer. Drugs. Shit. "How could he die for Keystone if he wasn't a—"

"You don't understand."

Not wanting to sound offensive, I made my voice as small as possible. "No, I don't."

"I think—"

There was a knock at the door.

She rose. "I think that's your answer." She answered the door.

An intimidating man with buzzed hair and stubble was chewing a thin cigar. His eyes fixed on me. He wheezed and muttered, "Where does Ghost..." He plucked the cigar out. His voice was a mixture of gravel, grit, and growl. "Come here, girlie; let's talk outside. If I come in with this cigar, the manager will shit a half ton of bricks."

Mesmerized by his grandfatherly magnetism, I got up and went out.

Ramona asked, "Can I be in on it?"

"Sure thing, Tequila. Sure thing. Might be good for ya."

"Thanks, chaplain."

I said, "You're a priest?"

He grunted. "Not in so many words, no. But I carry the message of God for those in the club that want or need to hear it."

"I don't want God."

"Maybe not, but I also help people understand things."

"Oh... okay."

He leaned against a car and crossed his feet over. He fiddled with the cigar. "Ghost says you're having trouble digesting the Iron Crows."

For a moment, I thought he was talking about what I had for lunch. Then I realized he meant the club. The man's name patch said "Gunner." I gave a half-

hearted gesture, but said, "Well, he hinted the club does illegal things."

His eyes squinted, glittering.

In the silence, I said, "You guys deal drugs? Or something?"

The chaplain's burst was bitter. "Fuck no. We keep them out. We do whatever it takes to keep them out."

"But your leader is named Dealer."

He coughed, wheezed, and squeezed his eyes shut. "That's his nickname. He picked it up because he learned card-dealing in Vegas before forming the Iron Crows. That was a long time ago."

"Car-dealing?"

"Card dealing."

"Oh, sorry."

"Like blackjack."

"Right, sorry."

He twisted that cigar around. "Some of the ways we keep drugs and gangs out of town might be on the shady side of the law."

"Then it's wrong."

His face cracked into a smile. "Is that so?"

I nodded resolutely.

"Let's say you see a baby stroller rolling out into the street – baby crying and all. Mother nowhere in sight. Cars coming. Would you jaywalk to save that baby?"

"Of course."

"But you're breaking the law."

"But it's to save a baby."

"You're still breaking the law."

I coughed. "No cop would arrest me for that."

His eyes sparkled. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it depends on the cop. Maybe it depends on the town."

I glared at him, in thought.

He didn't let me chew too far. "Do you think breaking the law crossing that street is worth it?"

"Of course."

"Do you think God would approve?"

"Definitely."

He grunted. "What if they arrest you?"

"That's unfair; I saved a life."

"Maybe. What does that say about the law?"

"What do you mean?"

He stabbed the cigar towards me. "What if there was a local law that made it illegal to touch another woman's stroller."

"That would be silly."

"But what if there was? Would that be a good law?"

"It'd be a stupid law."

"Who are you to decide?" His gravelly voice had me cornered.

I stood there, mouth open.

He asked, "If there was a law against saving that baby, would you obey it?"

I scratched. It's a life. "I don't think so."

He grunted, smile returning to his face. "So, criminal you are..."

I coughed, slumped to the side, and made a face of confusion at him.

"My point is, sometimes the law gets in the way. Sometimes the law only comes in after it's too late. Sometimes all the law does is come in and tag, bag, and cart out the bodies. It's too late at that point. But what if decent men and women stepped up to the responsibility of protecting themselves and others?"

"What are you talking about?"

His gritty voice held all the certainty of being there. "I'm talking about the club and what we do."

"So you guys run around saving people and breaking the law while you're doing it?"

He wheezed like an old car. "No. We ride our motorcycles. But every once in a while, we see the need to step in and do something before the law comes in and finds a bigger mess."

"So you guys don't do drugs?"

"Nope. Kick those fuckers right out."

"You don't deal?"

"Fuck no."

"You don't steal?"

He grunted savagely. "No need to."

"How do you guys get your money?"

He stabbed that cigar at me again. I tried to dodge it. "We operate legitimate businesses."

"Legitimate?"

"Couple of bars, a casino, a pawn shop, a strip joint, and a chop shop."

"Chop shops are illegal."

"No they ain't. We buy the cars we chop."

I blinked for several seconds and then looked at Ramona. "And your husband died—"

Gunner growled sadly, "Fighting the good fight. For us. For all of us."

That's when I determined that the club might not deal drugs, but they were most definitely dangerous. "Who lets you decide—"

That cigar stabbed. I had a brown smudge on my blouse. His look was serious. "It's called personal responsibility, and the struggle to do the right thing."

"So you're like Batman riding around being vigilantes?"

"We don't go looking for it. We're normal people. But we do look out for it. This is our town. Tell me," he stabbed that cigar at me, "were you right in running away from what you left behind?"

"Ghost told you—"

"Never mind that. Yes, he did. But was what you did right?"

"It felt like the right thing to do."

"Was it legal?"

"I don't know..."

"No, it wasn't. You disobeyed an order to be detained. You were carrying drugs. Or drug money."

I pleaded, "But I don't do drugs!"

"Doesn't matter. In your self-interest to get away from committing more and

greater crimes, you committed a crime in doing so."

I let out an exhale of frustration. Can't I win? Just once?

He stood straight. "In all our eyes, you did the right thing. What if your boyfriend had come back and involved you? What if you slipped back into it all with someone worse?"

I felt some excitement that someone agreed. "Right."

"You made the decision, you acted, you avoided more crime, and did the right thing. But you still broke the law. If you save that baby by touching the stroller, you've saved a life and did the right thing, but you still broke the law. Same thing, girlie."

"Jessie." Despite my flash of annoyance, I realized what the old man was getting at. "What we do is what matters."

His hand came down on my shoulder. "For good or bad. Choice is yours. Police love to say life is all about choices. Good choices and bad choices. Often, the choice is simple and easy to make. Sometimes we find ourselves able to prevent something the law can't. Often the law reacts to crime – coming in and taking reports. Crime is already done. People dead. Lives shattered. No report is going to fix that. But sometimes normal people could stop it. That's a choice they have and sometimes it breaks a law doing it."

"You sound like you've given this speech a few times before."

He wheezed like an old car seizing up. "Yeah, Jessie, I have. That's for damned sure. To everyone currently in the club at one time or another."

"But I'm not in the club—"

He grumped, "Ghost put me up to it. Seems mighty taken with you."

Chills of excitement raced down my back. Was I heading into something strange? A world of criminal do-gooders? Was my framing job an introduction to something else altogether? So many small things lead to other things... How many things had I missed? How many chances at a better life?

If I was falling, maybe this time I'd end up somewhere better than where I had been.

And yet, on my run from trouble, I was going to run right into it.

CHAPTER 11

Ghost

Gunner had given her a good talking to. For that, he was thankful. But Ghost thought deeply about what she had said and her accusations. Even if the club did good in the end, some people might never accept the breaking of a law to accomplish a greater good.

Instead, those very people would allow the suffering of many more. Killing one man to save the lives of twenty others was no excuse. The one law protecting that murderer meant more than twenty victims. Many people thought that way and many innocents died because of it.

Was Jessie like that? Ghost pondered the girl as he walked up to his parent's place. They were gone to Europe on some tour of the French coastline. He unlocked the front door and went in. It was an enormous house, set back in the pines with lush surrounding lawns.

He had grown up in wealth but he had been unimpressed with money as a status symbol. Where his friends had wondered what kind of sports car he would get, he had chosen a motorcycle. His father had put an end to that dream – but only until Arthur was out on his own at eighteen. His first purchase had been a Victory motorcycle to replace his father-bought BMW.

Later he had bought a Harley – and again to get his current Harley Davidson Softtail Slim. His father couldn't control that and neither could he withhold money that was directed by a trust. Arthur didn't use much of it, though, and never moved his records from his office – old room – to his small home.

He certainly didn't want Jessie to know about any of this, but it wasn't like he was extremely wealthy. He just didn't like money for money's sake. So many people were about getting money. Forget earning it, they wanted to get it.

Lottery tickets, get-rich-quick schemes, work from home... He was surprised someone hadn't come up with some book titled "Eat Ice Cream and Get Rich."

No, he and his parents were not wealthy by any stretch of the word. The trust delivered set amounts of money that was comfortable. He could afford a new car or motorcycle every few years – if he wanted. He could've afforded a much nicer and bigger home – if he wanted.

Instead, he let it all pile up. Not interested in it, he sluiced all the excess money into energy stocks. Stable, with almost no capital appreciation, the dividends paid and paid and paid. He didn't care.

Except that now he did. With the clubhouse burned down, insurance wasn't going to replace the building with what they wanted. He was using his funds to cover the betterment. It was a dent in his funds, but worth it. What else was he going to do with it?

He sat at his desk in his old bedroom. Everything from his childhood had been removed; his father was disappointed in him. But he allowed Arthur to maintain his office there, hoping that one day the money bug would bite him.

His father called him Arthur. He didn't like it and he had his friends call him Art – which his father hated.

He switched on the brass desk lamp and booted up the computer. He pulled his ledger from the desk and set down two months of statements. He dutifully entered his trust income and his dividends. Even if he hated the pursuit of money, he carefully recorded what he had.

It was for times like these. Insurance was only going to cover a little less than half what they had wanted. Replacement was okay, but they really could use a larger place. So they added on and the cost was coming out of his pocket.

Dealer didn't know it. He didn't need to know. and Dealer trusted Ghost as treasurer. He sincerely doubted the club would support him coming out of pocket with so much. But he didn't want to argue. He didn't want the disapproval. He applied the club funds with precision. So what if he was adding his own to make the clubhouse bigger and better?

As always, money made his face cramp up in a scowl. He finished entering the

amounts in the ledger and slid it back into the drawer. Then he logged into his stock account. He didn't bother checking if the stock prices on the utilities were up or down: he didn't care. Utilities were good for only one thing: dividends. You parked your money and they paid you five or six percent a year. The better ones did, anyway.

He entered an order to sell some shares. He would need to transfer the proceeds to his bank account later. The order was enough to cover about half the additional new additions to the rebuilding. His latest entries into his ledger – basically his bank account – almost made up a quarter of the order.

In not wanting to get money, he was getting more than he knew what to do with. But he was not in pursuit of doing anything with money – except living. He might have easily blown through his monthly trust income with ease as a playboy. Not Arthur. Two months of income was enough to pay his bills for a year. Most of the rest went into utilities.

His family had been big in mining and still retained mineral rights at several big ongoing operations and at many others left abandoned. The trust income wasn't going to dry up in his lifetime, though several abandoned mines had been scooped up as national monuments. That blocked his family from ever receiving anything for their mineral rights.

It wasn't fair, but he didn't care.

He never gave thought to what he would do without the income. He simply accepted it for what it was and left it alone.

Would someone like Jessie understand? Would she comprehend his hatred for getting money? Would she grasp that he wanted to avoid following in his father's footsteps to acquire more? Would she even fathom his avoidance of spending money?

Someone like Evangeline would come in with plans to spend it all. Not that he hated the idea of spending it all, but rather that her focus would be on the money. What plans she could make with it all to make their lives better! But it was just money. He didn't need it – except to live as he did being treasurer for the Iron Crows. Even at that, he could subsist off the money handed out by the club to those who worked within. The two bars and casinos were very profitable.

He rested back in his chair, looking at the lit computer screen without focusing on it. The casino was their biggest moneymaker. The strip joint sometimes surpassed the casino. The two bars were steady. The pawn shop was low, but steady. The chop shop had yet to turn a profit, but had almost immediately pulled in money. Stiff was doing a bang-up job of moving parts on the internet. The chop shop had some promise once the local garages began using them, but it required a build in inventory. That meant more cars chopped and that required more time.

Arthur thought the chop shop would be making money for the club within the next four months.

He tapped the pencil against his lips. He also had his eye on a liquor store in town. Ricky was getting old and had no family. He would be selling soon and the store would be an incredible addition to boost club finances. However, the purchase price wasn't something the club had on hand and Ricky was going to close out long before they could scrape a quarter million to buy it.

No, the Iron Crows only ran a couple thousand surplus every month. Getting the money for the store wasn't going to happen. But if he could use his money...

Unfortunately, that necessitated telling Dealer. That would involve the club voting on it and he just couldn't see the hardheads of the club allowing their pride to get a gift. He tapped his lips harder. Of course, if he bought it and gifted the store to the club with the condition of payback...

He nodded to himself. The club would easily vote to accept the store and pay him back out of the proceeds. What did he care if it took five years? He didn't need the money anyway. He straightened and picked up the landline. He tapped in Ricky's Liquor.

"Ricky's Liquor."

"Ricky? This is Art Marinetti."

"Art? Oh... Pietro's son?"

"That's me."

"What can I do for you?"

"About your store..."

CHAPTER 12

Jessie

I was dubious about the whole sharing a room thing, but as the days passed, Ramona was like a sister I had never had. She showed me around town – where to buy food and clothing. She talked endlessly about the club and about her husband, Big Pizza. I had laughed at the name until I saw the tears well up in her eyes.

I didn't laugh anymore.

After she related how he had gotten the nickname, I felt like a total bitch. I even apologized to her. Secretly ordering special pizzas to be so huge that people couldn't eat a single slice? Bringing them to the club as a joke? I felt that I wanted to know such an easy-going man. Someone funny and not tweaking.

Our motel room was small and felt even smaller with the two beds in it. Ghost was covering the extra-person expense and the manager seemed just fine with it.

I was lying on the bed on my stomach, feet in the air and watching TV, but not really watching it.

She was on the other bed, filing her fingernails, telling me about the club. "I don't know what I'm going to do now. They're family, but..."

"Why would you want to leave?" I had never had a family – not a loving one.

"Every time I see Gunner and Gripper and Stiff... Every time I see any of them, I remember my husband." She wasn't controlling the tears this time. "He was mine." Her clawed hand tapped her chest. "I didn't even get to see him die—"

I twisted towards her, interested. "You said he was killed defending you—"

"No, I—" She wiped at her eyes. "I was there, just after the fact. Seconds after..."

"How did he die?"

"He was shot."

"By who?" Is she going to tell me? "The cops?"

She blurted out a laugh and a sob. "No, some Mexican gang. The cops here would never have shot my husband."

"Why would a Mexican gang shoot him?"

She tilted her head at me with weariness and shook her head. "They had killed Firehose – one of our members – chained him down and burned him alive."

I felt horror creep over my arms with crawly tingles of revulsion. "Burned alive?"

She nodded, wiping away the last burst of tears. Dry eyed, but red, she blinked and nodded again. "He was a good man. They abducted him. He left behind three kids and a widow... like me."

I sat up with several urgent shifts. I wanted to understand. "But why?"

She held up a hand, palm up, fingers curled as if suggesting something in the air. "They wanted to send a message. To tell us to stay out of their way. They wanted to establish a drug ring here."

"A drug ring? Why didn't you call the police?"

This time, her laugh was not tainted by a sob. "The police couldn't have done anything until they catch one actually selling drugs. That comes after a long investigation – months, years. How many lives would've been destroyed by that time? How many kids overdosed? As it was, we called the police after we found Firehose..."

"And they didn't do anything?"

She looked at the door and window before turning back to me. "They unleashed us..." It was said with such finality that I stayed quiet.

Unleashed you? How?

She looked down at her nail file. "Dealer had a plan and we followed it. It worked, but..."

"But?"

"My husband was killed." Her face crinkled up. "Why him? He was a good man..." She put her palm to her eyes and pressed. "I don't want to live without him."

"Was it worth this plan of your leader's?"

She gave a teary squawk of indignation. Her hands were out. "How can you ask that? For Keystone, sure. But for me?" She got up.

I watched her.

She crossed to the closet and pulled a small box from the floor. She put it gently on my bed and opened it. Lifting reverently, she pulled up a denim vest. "This is all I have left of him..."

The vest had a large dark stain on one side.

I recoiled, suddenly wondering if spirits were attracted to old blood.

She clutched it to her face and inhaled. "I don't want to live without him."

I wanted to tell her she'd get over him, but that would have sounded really bad at this point. Her grief was something she'd have to overcome on her own. Fact was, no woman would want to get over their dead husband. Not until it happened naturally. Healing took a long time. I had absolutely not a speck of identification with her plight; I had never lost anyone to death. But I recognized the futility of trying to comfort her.

Ramona was a wreck. I'm not sure who kept who sane between us. For whatever reason Ghost had selected her room as a good match for me, he was right on the

money.

~ ~ ~

I stood outside to get away from Ramona. It's not that I didn't like the woman, but she was so intense and sad that I needed air. As it was, several of the bikers would meet outside in the morning.

I was into my second week working and comfortable with the routine. I had a half hour until I needed to get in the car and go to work.

A man with gray stubble and sparse silver in his buzzed hair approached me. "You're Jessie?"

I turned to him and put my foot on the bumper of the Vega. "I am."

"How's Tequila?"

I was lost for a second. "Oh, Ramona?" I shrugged dramatically. "Sad..."

Something grim came over the set of his mouth. His vest had several patches on it, but his nametag was what caught my eye: Dealer.

I was talking to the club president. Though not exactly my type, I was still stunned that he was a handsome man. I had expected some pot-bellied old crotch who had more wrinkles than hair.

He considered me for a couple of seconds in silence. There was a weight of judgment in his eyes. "The club thanks you."

"For Ramona?"

"No. Yes. I mean we thank you for working so hard with Cotton. He's a great guy but he can be slow. I think you help him spur himself."

I'd never known the man so I just made a gesture with my head.

He said, "The framing is really coming along."

"We should be starting on the roof late today."

"It's going to be fantastic, once it's done."

"Sure looks big."

Ghost approached us. My chest did a couple of thumps and my stomach flipped over. His eyes switched between us without jealousy. He said, "Dealer."

"Ghost."

"We calling a meeting?"

"Tonight, the chop shop warehouse."

Ghost looked pleased.

Dealer clapped a hand down on his shoulder. "Don't worry, I think the idea will be unanimous."

"I hope so; it's a great addition to the club."

"I agree." He shifted his eyes to me. "Your girl here says they're starting on the roof today."

Ghost gazed at me with something close to loss. "Yeah... they'll be done soon."

I didn't know what I'd be doing next for work; I hadn't asked Ken.

Dealer nudged Ghost. "What are you going to do?"

Ghost simply stared at me. I became very uncomfortable. I said, "Guess I should go get ready."

Before I shut the door, I heard dealer mutter, "Coward."

I didn't know if that was meant for me or for Ghost.

~ ~ ~

I stood beside Ken and looked up. It was time to get the ridge beams up. The two-by-twelves were heavy and required great care in lifting.

Ken was practical in an odd way. He was going to have me brace the beam as it was raised, but instead of shouldering it up a ladder, he would be up top and using a come-along. Fist to hips, I shook my head as he set it up.

He muttered down at me, "Don't shake your head at me. You gotta do what you gotta do when you work alone."

That sounded simple. "I guess so."

"I know so."

We attracted an audience. Not just Jonesy the yard dog in his fenced off area, but Ghost watching from the shade of the super's trailer. His casual crossed arms and kicked over foot – toe to the ground – was sexy as all sin. I swallowed and concentrated on my work.

What is it about him? I no longer thought of him as bad-ass; he hadn't exhibited any of that over the long term. Almost two weeks in, he hadn't pressured me with the expected arrogance and command.

Though he certainly was arrogant and confident, he didn't display it other than his scowl. I noticed he scowled at me less. But whereas he had smiled the first week, now he was tight-lipped.

Had he grown weary of smiling at me? Had I done something wrong? Had Ramona tattled on me to him about some disgusting habit I had? How loud I brushed my teeth? How little I ate? That I chomped my teeth on my forks? Slurped my coffee too loud?

Fuck me, I didn't know.

Or had I asked her too many questions? Had that gotten back to him? He seemed very tight about the club and the exclusion was like a raw patch of sandpaper between us.

However, I liked him watching; it made me warm inside even if it was already warm on the outside. Sometimes I had the sensation I was stuffed with cotton. I had felt that once before, in sixth grade when a boy had held my hand. It had only happened once, though, and never again because I was one of the trash-girls shunned by everyone. Word of my family spread like a virus, no matter where I went.

I seemed to be responsible for my mother and father. I came from that druggie family and it made me a bad person. I will admit that when my uncle had taken me at fourteen, I might have been scared at first, but I had looked forward to it. I just couldn't help feeling satisfied that someone actually wanted me.

Looking back now, though, my Uncle Ronnie was a fucking pervert.

Since my arrival in Keystone, something that I had harbored for Ronnie wilted – even worse than it had become years before. Prior to running, I had at least an arm's length distance of acceptance or respect for him. Now? That respect was turning to resentment. The worst part was that I had left him allowing him to think I was indifferent. It burned in me to tell him otherwise. To shame him for what he had done.

Do I have that kind of backbone? I do, don't I? I knew then I would call him and for a brief moment set my past straight. I might have liked him fucking me at fourteen, but it wasn't what I had needed. No, not by a long shot. He needed to know that his toy viewed that past with disgust. He needed the condemnation for what he had done. No way was I going to let him go to the grave thinking he had scored on an underage girl and it was all good because she - I - liked it.

Fuck that.

My decision straightened my spine and lifted my chin. I was going to be me – not some reflection of other people's failures.

The ridge beam went up without a hitch. So did all the rest. The building was

huge and getting all the ridge beams in place was a fantastic accomplishment for two people in less than two weeks. But the days had been hard and long. I knew Ken had a set bid based likely on four weeks' time. Finishing early paid the bid amount and he would pocket the extra time saved as a bonus.

I didn't know if he would share a percentage with me; I didn't care. That I got paid so well was good enough for me.

Ghost watched everything.

I sort of felt like he could hear my thoughts and approved on my determination. That made me feel better about everything.

Except for him.

Was all that scowling a disapproval of me as a person? Would he like me better if I made positive steps to put my past behind me? I was done with the drug culture. FUCK THAT! I slammed down the brace in anger. Weed, snort, pills, meth... I had never touched them, but was always sickened to be around it. No more. No more.

The fucking losers could bounce their heads like it was so cool all they wanted. Not for me. My uncle – no! I will not call him that anymore – had been a drunk. Fuck that, too. Fuck them all.

I turned my own brand of scowl towards the man who watched me. Think I'm a loser? Are you laughing at me? Well, fuck you, too. I kicked the base of the brace and scooted it as the beam rose.

CHAPTER 13

Ghost

He watched the beautiful girl maneuver a brace underneath a beam. She kept looking at him, face mean with anger.

His stomach churned, fluttering wildly as he caressed with his eyes the frizzy curls of her light brown hair. Those frizzes would escape the hardhat and hang in her eyes. She would tilt her head up, trying to look under them. It was adorable and he wanted to brush them to the side so he could see her hazel eyes.

He wanted to go to her and tell her... But he was Ghost. Rejected by his family, ostracized and pushed away, few people could stand to be around him. The only woman that had was Kristy – but she was married to another patcher. He had known it would come to an end as it had to; he couldn't go on taking from their marriage what he was lacking. It wasn't fair to Stiff. Neither was it fair to take advantage of Kristy's desire to be included to the point of sharing herself. That had been selfish of him and it had ended.

No, he didn't want to be selfish with Jessie. Something inside melted when he saw her. Something yearned to hug the girl and hold her close. Kiss her forehead, her face... her lips.

A swell of sweat wet the back of his neck. A force of fervor fell from his neck to his groin. He opened his lips, breathing through them as he imagined walking up to her and taking her into a hug – possessing her.

But he couldn't do that. She had been distant, and keeping a distance between them. She would walk away after just a moment or two, visibly shaking as she escaped.

Was it fear of him? Disgust?

A lump formed in his throat, constricting his breathing, and his head swam slightly. Everything in him screamed to go to her, right now, and force her to... To what? He was not someone to take.

He wanted to give. Give to the club, give to his brothers – those wearing the colors of the club – and give to... her. His inclusion of her in that list frightened him. He had been a loner, hiding his secrets, and safe within the confines of the Iron Crows. They didn't ask; he didn't tell. He performed the duties of his office with all his ability. He kept his mouth shut about everything else.

Content to let Dealer and Sonar make all the decisions, he stayed back in the shadows, listening, weighing, judging. He wholeheartedly backed the function of the club. More than just riding motorcycles – though all would love to do only that – the club as a whole pushed the idea of responsibility to a social level.

In a day when no one cared about their neighbors, no one talked, no one greeted, no one gave a fuck... In the breakdown of society, the club had stepped in. A strange alliance of Keystone pastors and city officials, including the sheriff, had an understanding with the club. The Iron Crows would take that extraordinary step of being the bulwark of the town's safety.

The sheriff was bound by law and those at the state level who might look over his shoulder. He must appear clean. The civilian city government could not declare war on crime outside the boundaries of the law. State attorney generals salivated at prosecuting even minor excesses. The arrangement with the Iron Crows was not minor – it was deadly.

The media could not know. The public could not know. Several pastors knew and that's why the Iron Crows were never picketed or faced demonstrations of church-whipped hate. The Iron Crows took that extra step to keep the town safe.

He stared at Jessie. She had made it clear that she couldn't abide criminality. Gunner had talked to her, but the chaplain had met his first defeat. She had been unswayed, only begrudgingly admitting she might break the law to save a life.

There was no question for the club or him; laws would be broken to avoid the town degenerating into a cesspool of shattered lives and crime. No one wanted crime lords and gang members to rule a town – but few were willing to take the proactive step to stop them. Laws prohibited it.

The law had to let them in and only stepped in after the law was broken.

Ghost wasn't going to play that victim game. Neither was the club.

Jessie wasn't ever going to accept him for it; he knew that.

Yet still, he wanted to feel that woman in his arms. It was a terrible torture to stay in the shadows. And soon she would be moving on. Would Ken keep her on with so little work in a small town? Would she more likely get in her Vega and vanish?

His fists clenched. He knew the outcome and it provided no promise. He was going to lose her. She would be gone and probably be grateful to be away from him. He couldn't change who he was, but he was willing to...

His throat clamped further and he growled, scowled and stomped his boot-toe into the pavement.

She took that moment to look over at him with her own grimace of distaste. It deepened when she saw his face.

He wondered why he was even standing there watching someone he couldn't have. Someone who wouldn't accept him. His chest squeezed up knowing he saw something so wonderful that was denied to him.

But he was Ghost. He was confident and sometimes wielded a crowbar or lead pipe to protect people like her. No, it didn't matter. None of it did, with her. He was just Art Marinetti – did she even know his last name? Not even Art... he was his father's disappointment: Arthur.

He twisted in rage and slammed his fist onto the trailer.

CHAPTER 14

Jessie

I heard the bang and looked over at Ghost. His face was a mask of madness.

What? Am I soiling your building with my presence? I snarled at him but he wouldn't have heard it from that distance.

His dignity, confidence, and masculinity disapproved of me. I was some waif – some trashy chick – who was dirtying up his existence. I couldn't wait to have this job finished.

At the same time, a lingering pall of loss gathered.

I had spent time with Ramona and she had exposed some of the secrets of the club that she was probably not supposed to tell. She had appeared very conscious of anyone else listening as she had told me. Somehow, I had come to understand. I digested in my soul her reason behind the club. Was it because she was a woman and could relate better?

I desired security as much as any other woman – maybe even more so.

I had been introduced to Angela the first week – the club's prostitute. She had sounded so strangled by life and I realized I was but one half-step away from what she was. The fright was so sudden that reality slammed me in the face. And then I saw the other side – her side. She did what she had to do and the club... protected her. It was a revelation so brilliant that I was blindsided with instant sympathy.

I liked Angela. And... I liked the club for what they did.

Ghost was a part of that. He and his brothers protected her, paid for my stay in the motel room, and cared for Ramona even after the death of her husband. What

more did they do I didn't know about? What other wonderful and humane things did the club support that my ignorance didn't allow me to see?

I had judged him and his club stupidly. I hadn't listened. I hadn't understood.

It was the end of the day, and we were done getting all the ridge beams up.

Ken wiped at his brow and lifted his hard hat to let in some air. He said, "You know, I wasn't sure about you..."

"I know."

"But you've been a tremendous help."

"Thank you for giving me a chance."

His eyes shot over my shoulder.

I looked quickly. On a construction site, you never know when something might collide with you: a board; a brick; a cement truck...

It was Ghost. Coming straight at me.

Ken muttered, "We should talk. Maybe tomorrow." He turned away. "See you in the morning, kid."

"Jessie..." I corrected him distractedly.

Ghost stomped to me - all ire, fire and frowns accompanying. He lifted his finger as if to accuse and just... stopped. His eyes, still on fire, blinked twice.

My heart hammered in my chest and I was aware my hair was in my eyes. I ignored it and put both fists to hips. "What?"

He shook his head. "I come over here to talk and I find myself speechless around you."

I gave him a dose of eyebrows and scowls. "Am I that disappointing?"

Something bit his inner confidence and his face turned annoyed. "What? No—"

"Am I some trashy little nobody—"

"Jessie."

"What?" I fumed up at him, waiting. At the same time, my knees shook with such fright I thought I might fall. I felt clammy from a day's worth of heavy work and my hair was no longer tamed by my ponytail. I took the hardhat off and tossed it aside.

He said nothing, just stared down at me.

I brought my finger up, pointing at him. "All I've ever had is disapproval. Not good enough to keep a mom. Not good enough to be a daughter to my father."

Something deep shifted in his eyes and his face went slack.

"I was never anything but a piece of meat. Useless, good only for—" I spun, feeling the wealth of unwept weariness in my life overcome me. I stomped away. I had to get away.

I was roughly grabbed by the arm and spun around. His face was fierce above mine. "Jessie."

My face twisted through so many emotions and failures. My lips quivered and I shook my head. "What? What?" Tears mocked me as they tore down my hot cheeks and left clean tracks through the grime.

His eyes flashed with determination. "I was going to say..." But he couldn't.

I yanked my arm out of his grasp.

His words followed softly as I began to turn away again. "I was going to say that I'd do anything for you."

I couldn't move. As surely as if my legs were stuck in concrete, I was frozen. What did I hear? Insanity and hysteria flittered around like so many insects inside my head. A cold so icy it raised goose bumps chilled me to the bone. I turned my head to him, snapping it hard. I was about to ask what kind of game he was playing, but I knew he wasn't.

There was sincerity there, in his eyes.

I trembled, beginning to lose control over my body. "What?"

"Before you left Keystone, I wanted you to know."

I was in an awkward stance – half twisted and leaning. But I couldn't move.
"What?"

"I wanted you to know no other woman has ever had an effect on me like you have. I would have done anything for you. Laugh at me all you want—"

"Laugh?"

"I know I'm the kind of man you hate—"

"I don't hate you."

"You told me at the restaurant that first day..."

My knee buckled and I stumbled.

He reached out instantly, holding me up.

I clutched onto him, and just as fast, the embrace turned instantly – naturally – into a hug so deep and stunning that my ears buzzed. My arms gripped him around his waist, tightening as my panting breath sounded loud in my ears.

His strength was a bastion of protection. His arms were straps of safety and serenity.

I breathed faster against him, my mind overcome with the paralysis of passion. If the world spun around me, I didn't know it. I hugged him tight and he held me back closer. My body melded to his, drinking in his strength and borrowing it for my own. Or stealing it like a vampire. The shared warmth at contact spread through me, slowly chasing away that chilling cold.

I felt the air on my skin, gently caressing my worn out limbs. My feet trembled in my new work boots and a lump the size of my Vega formed in my throat. Realizing the security settling on me, I gripped him tighter – not wanting to let

go. Not ever wanting to let go.

There was movement on my back: his hand slid up until it tangled in my hair.

I don't know if we swayed. I don't think so. I think he was the only thing holding me upright and the joy it brought inside me was new and not something to be let go of so easily. I wasn't aware of time passing: I don't even know if he said anything. All I knew was that I wanted to sink into him – become a part of him and just give up my horrid past.

I knew right then that I could die right there in that instant – and be happy. Never had I experienced anything like this in my life.

He was petting my hair and I shivered. No one had ever touched my hair like that. No one had ever petted me. No one had ever cared.

I looked up at him.

His mouth came down on mine so swift that I was swept away. His soft lips mashed down to mine and I whimpered with exultation as our tongues met, wet and hot.

I wanted him to kiss me. I wanted to kiss him. And that's what we did right there on the cement slab with framing all around us.

His hand held my head – for all I knew, he was holding me up. I couldn't feel my feet and I didn't want to. I might have been floating or I might have been lifted a few inches off the floor. But he wasn't holding me tight, taking. He was sharing with me something deep and personal – gently. I gave everything back to him I felt.

Accepted and wanted for who I was, my life changed course right there and then.

CHAPTER 15

Sweet

He puffed out a breath and checked his watch. He ran a sweaty hand over his bald head.

The fucking dirtbag had been telling the truth. Even with his guts spilling out, he had told the truth. There was no backpack or cash in the house.

The girl had fled and he didn't know where.

Bull Ruby wasn't going to be happy. But that's why he hired Sweet. Fifty thousand in cash gone missing. The fucking wannabe dealer had claimed some cunt had taken it. Bull Ruby calls Sweet. Sweet cleans up and retrieves.

He kicked a liquor bottle out of the way. It didn't matter; he had torn the house apart. In this part of town, it would look like just another home invasion. Owner dead – guts displayed all over his filthy couch.

Sweet had some information though – told in panting and pleading breaths: the girl had driven away in an orange Chevrolet Vega. Frizzy brown hair, skinny. Somewhere around five foot four. Maybe five-five.

But where? Where to? That money could take her across the country.

He was about to turn to her room again for another round of thorough searching. Something had to be in there indicating a connection. A family relative. Somewhere she would run.

He was interrupted by the cute musical tone of the phone. He picked it up in his gloved hand and thumbed the button. He held it to his ear and grunted, saying nothing else. He listened.

"Ronnie? Hello? It's Jessie."

Bingo and lottery ran through his mind.

"Hello? Are you drunk?"

Sweet was patient.

"You know what? I just called to say, fuck you. For all that you did to me. Can you even hear me?"

The phone went dead and Sweet grimaced. No information except the caller ID.

Keystone Motel and the area code.

He had a destination. He flung the phone into Ronnie's intestines and walked out.

CHAPTER 16

Ghost

He was due to pick up Jessie at the motel. Dinner for two. He didn't feel his Harley beneath him, he didn't feel the wind on his face. He felt elation and something dangerous.

This was all new to him. A thrill had permeated his bones, providing a boundless source of tingles that ran from his arms and shoulders down to his feet. Even his mouth had a strange sensation – something stretched. It was unusual and created a tension in his cheeks.

He knocked on her door.

Tequila answered and that was okay; he was not disappointed.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug. "How you getting along?"

A shrug and a drop of her eyes told him the same as before: sad, missing the man known as Dean Knox and called Big Pizza for his outrageous pizza stunts. Big Pizza had been their Road Captain. He had organized runs and events. It was his hand that directed the flow of the club as the mass of motorcycles navigated streets and freeways.

No more.

She sniffed without tears. "Does it get any better?"

He squeezed her tight in a hug. "They say it does."

"But I don't want it to. I don't want to forget him."

Jessie was there, watching. Ready for the date.

He didn't want to push Tequila away; she was a valuable member of the old ladies. He might have invited her to dinner with them, but there was only room for one on his ride. He said to her, "We're here for you."

They were. They paid the motel room. Technically, she worked for it bartending at the Triple Shot – one of their two bars. But they didn't take her motel cost out of her pay.

She sighed with a weariness that transcended work. "I know." She stepped back and away.

Jessie came forward, dressed in beige canvas slacks and a white blouse that wasn't for work. He had never seen her wear anything but white blouses. Her eyes stood out magnificently against her outfit.

He instantly wanted to take her in his arms again and his shoulders twitched as if having a brain of their own. He turned it into a twist to indicate the outside. "Shall we go?"

Her smile was radiant.

The warmth touched him so deeply that he lost all cohesive thought. The stupid smile on his face felt all wrong - but so right.

He got on first, handing her the helmet he had bought for her - and only her. If such a time came that she no longer rode on his Harley with him, he would throw it away. Or retire it to a shelf of honor wherever he set his bed.

Her arms reached around him and the world settled into its proper place. Together, serene, and complete, he thumbed the Harley's ignition. The high-pitched whir spun only three times before the deep engine rumbled to life. Tingles ran up his arms from the almost non-existent vibration.

Jessie, he, and the bike were one.

~ ~ ~

He ate his steak even if he wasn't feeling that dinner-hunger. He had something new in his life that commanded his attention and there was no room for stomach-cravings. No, in fact, he would go without food for the rest of his life just to be with Jessie.

The girl's eyes were alight with some inner fire – something he thought was in his own. His cheeks were hurting and he didn't know why.

All he knew was that being here with her right now was one of the best times in his life.

CHAPTER 17

Jessie

I was feeling charged as if someone had stuck a cable to my spine and turned on the juice. I could feel the tingle-tension in my shoulders. The joy of this experience was plastered on my face.

Maybe that's why he's smiling. I had never seen him more than quirk a half-smile to anything. But his face displayed an amazing show of white teeth and pleasure.

Is he laughing at me? I didn't know and I think my face didn't care. I smiled back at him or he smiled back at me. There was a tangible sense of togetherness that was so alien it tickled me. Maybe it did him, too? Maybe he really was feeling the elation I was? Maybe this was something so new that both of us were pulled along in a match of mutual satisfaction?

I hope so. I think I like him. Thrills more dangerous than I had ever experienced thrummed through my body. I felt pumped and alive.

Like the burning of the sun needing no introduction, we talked very little. We only reflected the brilliance inside through our uncontrolled smiles. Much of our dinner was that way and not at all uncomfortable. Much the opposite, our connection was warm and close, despite the few words.

It was he that broke the minimal talking. He asked, "What will you do after the framing? Has Ken said he'll employ you?"

The question was tossed into the air like salad. Where would it come down? Would it fill the bowl neatly? Or would it land outside? I didn't know. "I'm not really sure; he hasn't said." I didn't want to throw a dampener on this blazing evening of bliss.

His fingers twitched and his eyes shifted left and right and back to me. "We have

businesses..."

"I don't know anything besides carpentry."

His eyes shifted faster, searching for something within. They didn't appear to find anything. That was reflected in the most minute shift in his facial expressions - but I caught it.

Something wet and cold came between us, but not from him and not from me.

He said, "I don't want to lose you. I just found you..."

My body went stiff with sudden solace. It was what I wanted, but his hanging doubt made me anxious. "Maybe Ken will keep me on."

It looked like he didn't care. As if dismissing the subject, he leaned over his plate. His eyes dug into mine. "I want to know you."

I jerked in a convulsion so violent that I blinked my eyes. I want to know you, too. No one had ever wanted to know me. Not a one. I lowered my eyes from his. If he knew that he was the first to ever be interested, would that make him disinterested? I couldn't fathom anything – my mind was muddled. I opened my mouth, then shut it. I had almost made something up on the spot. But telling him I had wealthy parents or was a princess from a faraway land wasn't going to make it past him.

No, lying wasn't going to do me any good here. But lying was all I knew. Would he hate the truth? Would this magical moment free-fall into disaster? Dooming what I thought was something special?

His eyes sparkled with interest. "Who are you, Jessie?"

As if he were a cop leaning over an interrogation table, I trembled underneath his gaze. I didn't want to tell the truth, but... I didn't want to lie, either. Not to him. Not ever. I swallowed hard. "A child of bad parents."

His eyes drew down, studying and scrutinizing my eyes. "You turned out beautiful."

"My past..."

"Are you a bad person?"

"I don't want to be."

"How bad was your past?" He sat back and tilted his head at me.

"I met the wrong people, endlessly. My druggie father traded me to his friend. I was used... from the age of fourteen."

His jaw clenched. "Sounds like the kind of men we..."

We what? I searched his expression.

He flicked his finger in agitation and changed the subject. "Ever do anything illegal?"

"No, except for running away from the police. Before I came here."

His face was soft. "I don't blame you."

Relief rolled through me and bolstered my courage to tell the truth. "My family hasn't any money. They're not wealthy."

"Druggies never are."

"My mother ran off to find better drugs when I was young. My father laid around and smoked pot all day."

"What's wrong with pot?"

Alarm bells rang inside my head and a slice of me died. "You're into pot?"

He coughed incredulously. "No."

The slice that died revived. "Then why ask—"

"All I hear is how great pot is and how it doesn't effect—"

My mouth went taut. "I can tell you exactly how it affects you. I witnessed it firsthand. The stupidity, the fog, the clumsiness, the laziness. My father – the last I saw him – could not be motivated to do anything. He was paranoid and

wouldn't work. He traded me to Ronnie for cash so he could keep his pot habit going."

"Sounds like I'd be wasting my time and money to try it."

I was certain. "You don't want to try it."

His glint of teeth and wink startled me. "I was testing you."

"What?"

"We keep even pot out of Keystone – except for what might be grown by the residents."

"You keep pot out, too?"

"Oh, I'm sure there's some in town. People have their vices. But we keep gangs from coming in and dealing. We don't need that element here."

I let a long breath escape. "I feel good about that. Maybe Keystone would be a nice place for me."

His look was steady, as if hiding something additional behind his words. "None better."

Again, my courage charged ahead. "What are you hiding?" It wasn't said with accusation. I still felt overwhelmed with joy sitting with him.

His chest rose and fell, once. "What we do to keep that shit off the streets. Pardon my language."

I snorted and put a napkin up to my face. "Um, your language doesn't offend me."

"Does anything?"

I might have said bad boys before. I might have said breaking the law. But I embraced that nuance now as a necessary distinction between doing the right thing to help others and doing wrong to hurt others. "Men so quiet they don't tell me about themselves."

The corner of his lips twitched. "I'm Arthur Marinetti to my father. I'm Art to everyone else. I'm Ghost in the club."

"You don't like Arthur?"

"I don't like my father. He expected me to be something he wanted, not what I wanted. He wanted me to go to Harvard or Yale and learn banking, probably."

"Did you go?"

"I graduated high school and left home."

"Right into the workforce?"

Pain crossed his face like a sudden cramp. "No..."

"What did you do?"

"Bought a motorcycle."

"With no job?"

He shifted, searching my eyes. His mouth twisted in distaste. "I had money. I have an income. Family trust. Goes back a long ways."

I understood. "Rich family must be nice. Mine spent everything on drugs."

He hesitated.

I asked, "So you joined the club right away?"

He relaxed. "I rode a lot. Just to be free. I met Dealer at a gas station. He was with the Outlaws at the time, but he wanted to come back home to Keystone. Start a club here with sanction."

"Sanction?"

"That's where the dominant club in the region allows you to form with a set of colors. Three patches."

"Why do you need sanction? Can't you just form a club—"

"It's a little different. The dominant club earned their patches. It would be like you or me putting on a Marine Corps uniform without earning it. Three patches is a symbol of a member that earned it the hard way. So we were sanctioned. We have an understanding with the Outlaws for certain things."

"And you love the club?"

"It's not a matter of love for the club as it is love of riding, respect for the patch-brothers, and the trust that comes with it. Any one of us would fight with or for another. It's a unit that runs deep inside."

"I wish I could know people like that..."

"You do." His eyes sparkled. He paid the bill in cash. "My parents are vacationing, but they have a killer rock garden I'd love to show you. Wanna see?"

"I'd love to."

CHAPTER 18

Ghost

He didn't take her to the home of his childhood to impress her with money. He just couldn't imagine a more beautiful place to take her so they could walk and be alone together.

He was also pleased to see that her eyes didn't take on a calculating look when she saw the house. But she hadn't had that look either when he had told her about his trust income. It was as if she didn't care.

A silent segment inside his soul clicked into place.

He moved around the lawns to the iron gate on the side. His parent's home sat on twenty acres and they used every inch of it. Vines grew up on the iron fence, creating a private yard. He unlocked the gate and led her in. "Let me get the lights."

He stepped over to the garden shed and went in. He began flipping breakers.

He heard her gasp.

Coming out, he found her staring wide-eyed at the lush greenery and lights spreading out before her. He held out his hand. Here was the test. Would she take it? Willingly? "Come on."

She took his hand without hesitation.

He felt her skin become slightly clammy. Or maybe his did. Or both. Heat flared at their contact.

He led her along the paths around the garden. Around the ferns, long grasses, flowers and cobbled bench areas.

She breathed, "This is beautiful."

He stopped and turned to her. "It's peaceful. It's not as beautiful as you."

She didn't answer him, she just gulped and turned her head away quickly.

With a head motion, he led her deeper. His father had spent a goodly amount on the centerpiece: an eighteen foot tall hill of rocks, covered with ferns, and creating a waterfall. Trees surrounded it and a large pond rippled happily at the base.

She whispered, "I've never seen anything like this."

He pulled her down to sit on the stone bench at the edge of the pond.

"Is this natural?"

He shook his head. "All built. Took a year."

"It looks so real."

"Sometimes I come here... when things are bad. Just to sit and listen to the water."

"Bad?"

"When things happen in Keystone. Recently I've spent a lot of time here."

"The clubhouse burning down?"

He pursed his lips and dipped his chin twice. "And two of our members getting killed."

"Tell me about it."

His throat clenched. "I can't..."

"I can handle it. I know you do what is right and sometimes that means breaking the law. I understand it."

He sighed deeply. "It's not just that. It's club business. It's not meant for

civilians."

She looked disappointed. "Is that all I am?"

He gripped both her shoulders. "No."

"Then let me in."

Could he trust her? Could he reveal things the club didn't want revealed? Her look held an air of expectancy, or... testing. He wanted to trust her with much more than just the club; he wanted to trust her with himself. He wanted to explore all they could become together – and everything was a test of that, was it not? He released her shoulders. "Two men died. We let a gang think they were ambushing us, but we sprang our own ambush. We killed them all – all their leaders. Another slice of the gang had been sent to burn down our clubhouse, but we were all at the ambush."

Her expression didn't change.

"There's more, Jessie. There's more. We make bad people disappear. The government likes to move child molesters from prison into Keystone – right across from the elementary school."

"They do? Whatever for?"

"To create problems. It's an age-old trick. Create problems, pitch the public against each other, and tax them blind for the cure. But it's never cured."

"Wait, you're telling me the government wants people molesting kids?"

He grunted. "Oh, not their kids, for sure. But it's racist and mean to punish a molester by keeping him away from kids."

"That sounds stupid."

"That's what the government does."

"And you make these people disappear?"

"And others. Government agents."

She stiffened. "Why government agents?"

He shifted towards her. "Some are good people. Some are just employees for an agency that doesn't care about laws or decency. The CIA will run drug operations here in America—"

"They do?"

"They do. America has the money. The CIA helps bring the drugs in or allows gangs to use the national forest to grow it. They establish the drug rings and take a cut from the top to fund intelligence activities."

"That sounds sick."

"Maybe it is. Maybe I can understand what they're thinking."

"What?" Her face contorted in outrage.

He placated her with a hand. "Look at it from their shoes. If Americans are going to use drugs, then why shouldn't the agency profit from it instead of some foreign drug lord? They then put the money to good use."

She shook her head. "That sounds sick."

"It is. I just said I think I understand their thinking. I don't agree with it. We make sure people working for a few bad agencies disappear, also. And we keep Keystone clean."

"That sounds like a losing battle. A dangerous one."

"It is. Yes, it is dangerous. And it might be a losing battle." He let out a long sigh. "It might indeed."

"But if you don't fight it..."

"We all lose without ever having a chance."

"You say you come here when things get bad."

"Mm."

Her eyes were large and questioning. "Am I a bad thing?"

CHAPTER 19

Jessie

I was unprepared for his kiss. But boy was I ready to give it back. Instead of pawing at me like some clumsy animal, Art was treating me... like a woman. It was something I'd never felt from a man before.

The bubbling of the waterfall and the low swish of the moving water took my mind floating with it as his kiss removed all sense from my body. I wasn't aware of any of my aches and pains from four days of work. I would go back tomorrow – Friday – and rest all weekend. Would Art want to spend time with me?

But those were the most peripheral thoughts. His tongue and mine moved wetly together, petting and stroking. I was locked in place with no desire to go anywhere. My hand found his forearm and I gripped it, feeling his strength underneath the sleeve.

When he stopped the kiss, I felt as if my lifeline to living had been removed. The experience was so wonderful that the cessation was a shock. I wavered there on the bench, trying to regain my balance and identity. I leaned against him, clutching his arm.

He breathed, "Peaceful, isn't it?"

"Mm," I purred. "You don't live here, do you?"

"No."

"Is this where you grew up?"

"Yep."

"So you lived her once. Was all this here back then?"

"Nope."

The house was a huge Tudor-style estate. "I'd love to see your room."

"I turned it into my office. It's not a bedroom anymore."

"An office?"

He lifted one shoulder and let it drop. "I handle my finances there. There's not much, really."

"Show me."

Both shoulders rose and fell. "Okay."

He led me back along a different path to a covered entry not far from the garden shed. He inserted a key and twisted. The lock was a shiny brass thing that looked expensive. A soft series of solid clicks spoke of top quality door hardware. He pushed inside.

The house was enormous. Wide and spacious white-walled halls ran for quite some distance this way and that. The floors were dark wood but covered over with runners and rugs.

I was able to walk beside him through the halls. Four people abreast could walk in them.

He opened a paneled door and snapped a switch. His old room was the size of a standard living room. Other than shelves, only a desk was in the room. He yanked the chain on a desk lamp and light illuminated a clean desk top with a leather blotter. A computer screen rested to the side with the cables neatly gathered and disappearing through the top of the desk into a hole.

He stood beside me and pushed his hand at the piece of furniture. "My desk. Not very thrilling."

"I'm thrilled. This is a part of you."

He looked somewhat stunned.

"Do you have any pictures? Any hanging around from when you were a kid?"

"My father took them all down. But I have a photo album at my place."

"I'd love to see them." I dropped my eyes and admitted, "No one took my pictures."

His arms slid around me and tightened. I laid my head against his chest and listened to his murmur. "That's a shame."

~ ~ ~

I was sitting at his place, on a brown leather couch in a room almost as spare as the one at his parent's. He had little and didn't seem bothered by it. But I knew that feeling well – I had also never had much.

Ronnie, on the other hand, had a house full of stuff. But me? No, never really had anything. I had what I needed and that was it.

His home was a neat and tidy little brick house laid out in a small square. One bedroom, one bath, a kitchen and a den that served as the living room. Wooden shutters covered the windows and the floor was much like his parent's home: wood floors with rugs.

The entire house smelled of leather and coffee. There was no dog or cat odor inside at all.

I turned the stiff, bordered pages, looking at his pictures. He had many from his younger years as a toddler, but as he grew the pictures became fewer. "Why so few of you older?"

He flipped a finger towards it. "My father's disapproval. I wasn't fitting in with what he demanded in a son."

"What did he demand?"

"Oh, you know: the college thing. He wanted me in finances—"

"Aren't you treasurer?"

He laughed, loud and clean. "I suppose you're right, but not the kind he was thinking. Director of one of the Federal Reserve branches maybe. Who knows. Someone to carry the Marinetti name proudly."

"I think you do."

"He didn't. I wasn't sporty enough for him. I liked to roller skate as a kid; he didn't approve. I liked to swim; he didn't like that, either. I was supposed to be a football or basketball star. Then go on to Yale. Become an international financier or some bullshit."

I could tell he was reciting reality. "He never asked you what you wanted to do?"

He gave me an odd look of curiosity as if to question my seriousness. "My father? Are you kidding? He told me what to do. Told me what he expected and how I was going to accomplish it all. He had my life planned out before he finished putting me in mom."

"What did your mother think?"

His shoulders lifted, but sort of stayed up instead of falling. "She was mom. She'd hug me and say things like, 'You should listen to your father.' But otherwise, she never disapproved of me directly." He pointed. "That's her, there."

"She looks nice."

"She is nice. But probably too nice. She doesn't have her own spine."

"Do I have spine?"

His smirk was sexy. "Yes, it's showing."

I glanced around nervously for just a half second and grasped he was talking figuratively. "Oh. Is that good?"

His eyes held heat for me and his mouth moved with mystery. "Better than you know."

Tremors twisted in me and tearing my eyes away from his was an enormous effort.

And then came the question that carried me into what might have been the best part of the day – even better than the kiss. I think.

He asked, "What are you doing this weekend?"

Not Friday night. No, that might mean another tester-date. Not Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning for a quick brunch and even quicker goodbye. The question encompassed much and left room for everything. An ache I hadn't recognized or admitted intensified inside. It forced a flutter of butterflies in my stomach – causing the contrasting sensation of sickness to set off my happiness. My eyelids twitched and my mouth hung open for a second. My breathing was stopped. Blood pounded in my temples as the butterflies rampaged about my stomach. I shook my head so slightly, but said, "I'm all yours."

That heat in his eyes jumped dramatically and caused a corresponding inferno inside me. The butterflies subsided, but only a little.

CHAPTER 20

Ghost

He moved through Friday in a fog. He wanted to be around her, watching, drinking in her form as she moved – but it was too much. The ache in his bones was full of iron and agony.

He shared a room with Twenty, the club's Sargeant-at-Arms. Even though he didn't need to, he did to be around the club. Without a clubhouse, the only interaction was in the mornings outside the motel and in the evenings as they hung around. Or in the shop behind the construction site.

On that Friday morning, he couldn't stand to be around the others: too much on his mind. He rode the streets early, just riding to ride. His Softail Slim soothed him somewhat – at least far better than the usual chatting in the morning with his brothers.

That agitated him endlessly. He loved his brothers. He loved the old ladies. Even if he didn't talk much, just being around them was satisfying. But not this morning. No, not this morning.

He had not wanted to come on too strong with Jessie, so he had left his invitation to the weekend. She had looked happy. Willing. Would his dominating need turn her off? He knew what he wanted: he wanted that girl in his arms and under his body. Everything ached for it. He wanted her lips under his, pressing and moving. He wanted the touch of her tongue, teasing and tantalizing.

And that was why he couldn't stand to be around his brothers at the moment – not because he no longer wanted them, but that something new was impending. Much hung in the balance. Would he drive her away with his dominance? Would she suffer under the verity of their vigilante nature and back off? Leave? Flee?

He wanted her and so much was in question that he couldn't abide by the routine.

His fists clenched on the handlebars as he rode – endless cruising, turning, accelerating... He was passing the time by doing something different. He was anxious and anticipating the weekend. What would be the result? A dire decision? Or the advancement of his dream.

What was her dream? What did Jessie want? She seemed very much receptive to his intense interest. Did she want a man? Would she be smothered if he claimed her as his and bonded...

His dick hardened.

His thoughts drifted to memories of her moving about in her shorts – her tiny little upside down heart-shaped ass. Her frail-looking figure carried surprising strength: all iron wiry and lithe. He began breathing heavier, his cock firming rapidly. He wanted her. He needed her.

Would she want him that way?

He pulled up to his house. She hadn't said anything negative about it. Not that it was too small, too square, or too spare. She had looked so comfortable in it.

He threw open the front door and slammed it. Stomping to the bedroom, he undid his jeans. His breath came raggedly and his inner thoughts were in so much turmoil he couldn't think: he only acted. Gripping his dick with his fist, he tugged on it, letting it fill completely. He closed his eyes, one foot on the floor and his other knee up on the bed. He stroked, visualizing the woman who had so captivated his recent life.

No woman before had ever done it.

Tension swelled in his cock as he jacked it, moving his hand faster and breathing in panting gasps.

He had to make her his. He had to make her understand. There was no question.

But would she? Would her hazel eyes look at him from under her curls and question his sanity? Demand to know what he had expected – what he was thinking to be so insane?

His hand felt good. His memories felt better. He wanted to pick her up and jack

her frail little body onto his dick – over and over...

His legs trembled and he groaned, twisting tight with tension. Cum erupted from his cock, releasing his aggravation with draining relief. He growled through every pulse, pushing and squeezing until his torment lay spattered on the bed cover. He heaved in breaths and tried to focus his eyes – blinking away the bliss.

Drained of his delusions, he slumped over onto the bed beside his wetness. He wanted and needed her, but would she return that sentiment? Was he destined to only have Angela as a relief valve?

It wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be Jessie.

CHAPTER 21

Sweet

The bald man was wearing a ball cap. People didn't look too closely at others except to see incidentals. A bald man always stood out. A ball cap was the perfect tool to blend in.

He drove a gold rental Dodge SUV. Such vehicles were a dime a dozen and never stood out, either. Gold being the key. White said cop or official. Black said FBI or official. Red was a little memorable. Blue was on the outs and so was green. He parked across the street from the Keystone Motel.

He checked his text messages from Bull Ruby. The man was an incessant prick who demanded to know every single detail of progress. Sweet thumbed through them, scanning for anything other than petulant demands.

He was not required to respond; he was required to deliver. Failing delivery, he was required to exact vengeance. He was a patient man – a skilled operator. Even when killing, he took his time, waited for the right moment to instill maximum terror – and got off on it.

Yes, killing was a bonus of his trade. A so very satisfying bonus. He did not resent successful deliveries. If he could acquire the contents of the backpack, he would return and move on to the next assignment – or wait for one to develop. Doing so helped his business. But when delivery was impossible, killing became such a sweet bonus.

He suppressed a belch: fast food was always a last resort, but drive-throughs were faster than going into a grocery store and buying fruit. He didn't fear anyone would hear him in the Dodge as he sat there, but suppressed it out of habit. Silence was supreme.

Even tossing a house was done as quietly as possible. Who knows what a

neighbor might hear. Some people were noseys.

Fuckers. Everyone needed to mind their own business.

His eyes scanned the parking lot, not finding the orange Vega. He looked away, disinterested. She might come and go for work or something else. He would have to be patient.

Finding her had been lucky, but the goal wasn't to find her: the goal was to recover the money. He had to wait for that. This was what Bull Ruby didn't understand. Observation led to success. His employer would want to know why he wasn't charging in, busting down the door and killing everyone inside.

That's why Bull lent money, because it didn't require much thought. That's why Sweet was so successful: because recovery did. The parking lot was packed – meaning, the rooms were full. People were lounging outside, meaning there were witnesses. He also had not seen the girl. He was fairly certain he could identify her. Emaciated-looking – like a typical meth bitch – with frizzy hair. So had said Leo before his throat was laid open by Sweet's knife.

That had been a somewhat satisfying killing. The kid had bounced his head like everything was cool. He had acted as if losing fifty grand was no big deal. He would just tell everything he knew and it was all cool, right?

Wrong.

Sweet had swelled with satisfaction when he had sliced the arrogant little prick's jugular.

The cops hadn't cared. Another drug-related death. Close the case – they had more important murders to solve.

He carried his weapons with him. The best was his least-favorite: a leather strap. Choking was silent and clean. No mess on himself, no blood to bleach.

His favorite was his knife - always concealed – an eight inch combat blade with knuckles for a sure grip. Killing with that was a sensational rush of victory and glee. Sometimes he almost felt guilty enough to offer a refund of his fee. Almost. He kept those feelings tightly in check. Bad for business.

He also carried a gun: a Glock 19 in 9mm. Light and accurate, the 9mm bullet was cheap, offered little recoil, and universally used. He had once preferred a revolver as there were no spent casings. But he had learned to carefully clean each round and load them gloved.

Cops find a spent casing? So what? It's not like there aren't a billion rounds sold every year. Just another drug-related death. Move along.

That's what made his business so simple. So safe. His targets were people constantly killing each other off, anyway. Disputes over a twenty dollar meth purchase. Spats over who had badder tats. And revenge killings because some guy made another guy's bitch suck his dick for some snow.

He didn't know whether he would have to kill the Jessie bitch. He did not cross that line if recovery could be made and he did not regret the delivery. It was business. But he was going to have to go in for a look-around when he could; she probably wasn't going to be toting around a backpack full of money everywhere she went. Nope, it would be in her motel room, hidden. Almost always things like these were under a pile of clothes in the closet. There just wasn't anywhere else to hide things in a motel except under the bed.

In all the recoveries in motels he had made, the items were never under the bed. Not once and that counted some... hundred and fifty recoveries from motels – he guessed. Jobs blurred one into another. Faces came and went – always the same: afraid, pleading, cooperative. None of that mattered if the job could be completed. Money or blood were the only two objectives.

One or the other.

No other options.

CHAPTER 22

Jessie

I wanted to bubble with enthusiasm all day at work. Rafters went up, not as heavy as ridge beams. Steel braces did the trick and made the job easy. A strong roof took shape.

The enthusiasm, however, waned with the day. Art did not show up as he usually did. There was no leaning and scowling from the super's trailer. His absence there was like a hole sucking all my hopes into it, and pulling out my despair.

Ken still had said nothing about keeping me on. Was there enough work in Keystone? Would I have to move again? The pay was great, but I would be getting my second cash payout today. If Art hadn't helped with my motel room, I'd barely have enough left over to gas up the Vega and hit the road.

I would be penniless. Again.

Not seeing Art standing there and scowling at me made me wonder if I would meet many Arts as I drifted around the country from job to job.

I was tired again at the end of the day. It was a good tired from an over-worked body. But the mental weariness was still building. I lacked hope, direction, and purpose.

Ken handed me an envelope. I had insisted on cash. He said, "We should be finished next week: Tuesday or Wednesday."

"I know."

His look was sympathetic, but honest and painful. "I won't be able to keep you."

My shoulders fell. "I know."

"Not full time, anyway."

I snapped a look up at him, hopefully.

He pursed his lips. "Construction like this doesn't happen in Keystone. But there's always some renovations or deck work and the like. If you can handle an every other week kind of thing..."

It was all I had. Even the little he offered meant I had an anchor around which to center my life. "I'll take it."

One nod was what he gave me – about as much as he was able to offer in work. But it was something. "If I can ever offer you full time, we'll need to do this straight. Federal tax forms and a paper trail. Checks only. Insurance. The penalties for getting caught are too great—"

"I know, and thank you. Thank you so much for taking the chance on me."

He rumbled a belly laugh. "You proved yourself the first day."

"But you gave me the chance—"

"I saw someone in need. People here don't like to look the other way when someone is hurting."

"Thank you."

I got into my Vega and drove to the motel for a soothing shower.

The parking lot was still crowded, but people didn't use the spaces that weren't in front of their unit. Tequila's truck was parked out on the street. I got out and stretched.

One of the Iron Crows was smiling at me. Big teeth. Wide grin. Sharp eyes. His name patch said "Smiley." I had seen him around, but he had always been incredibly stone-faced with me – smiling with the other members. Another patch on his vest said "Secretary."

He was aimed at me, blocking my path to the motel room door.

Ramona stood in the doorway, shoulder against the frame. Her look was marginal. Almost as flat as Smiley's previous looks had been.

The biker looked me over. "Ghost says you're quite the worker."

I rested my hip against the fender of the Vega. "Just doing what I have to do."

"We all do." His eyes shifted for a second, his smile faltering. It returned. "You're all he talks about."

That contrasted so completely with today's lack of his presence that I almost questioned him. Ramona had warned me in one of her maudlin tearless melancholies to never question a patch's word. I barely refrained from clarifying. "Where's he been all day?"

Smiley's eyes shifted again – away. Evasive. "Who knows? Club business, maybe." The last three words dropped his smile and his eyes shifted around as if searching. He focused back on me, grin gone but sincerity in his eyes. "No one's ever gotten to Ghost before, but I think you're under his skin."

I think that made me feel good.

Other club members were in pairs, talking and none bothering to look my way or listen in. Still, I felt like it was some kind of promise – a special moment that eased the anxiety of the day.

He shook his head and put hands into his jean pockets. "This motel-living is for the shit. Can't wait to get back into the club house."

One big old man-cave, huh? "I'm just doing the framing. Almost done. Don't know if Ken is doing the finish carpentry."

"Do you do that, too?"

I nodded.

His eyebrows shifted then he jerked his head. "Come over here."

He led me to two bikers. One was a pot-bellied graying man with a long ponytail, gnarly hands, and grease under his fingernails. His nametag said

"Flats." The other was the scarred man that had scared me in the café that first morning. His nametag was "Stiff."

Smiley said, "This little one might be what you're looking for."

Both frowned at me and looked between the three of them.

Stiff looked me over. "You're the framer, right?"

"Yes. Until Wednesday or so."

"Can you build shelves?"

"Depends on how fancy you want them."

He guffawed. He was tall, large-framed, and had no gut. Just one, big man. The scar was angry and ugly and gave his demeanor a demonic look. "I'm not looking for fancy—"

"What are you using them for?"

His mouth twitched in thought and amusement. "Greasy-ass motor parts."

I laughed. "So nothing for your home." Easy.

"Nah, for the shop. Got a bunch of tire racks I can't use. Need a place to store bits and pieces. Something easy to use. Using boxes, right now."

"How much room you have?"

"Fuck, I could just take you to see it. It's a few blocks."

I wanted a shower, but not that bad. "Okay."

He motioned, "I'll give ya a ride."

Me? On the bike with the Scarred Creature from the Black Motel? I shrieked with fright in my mind. But something about the man was calming. There was a steadiness there that didn't scream insanity at me. "Okay."

Stiff called out. "Kristy, going for a ride. Borrowing your helmet."

The pretty blonde woman stuck her head out of the motel door. She looked at him, then looked at me.

He said, "See if I can get some shelves built." It was delivered without apprehension.

She did not change expressions, just gave a nod. "Be careful."

He leaned into the door and grabbed something. Handed me a helmet. "You know how to put that on?"

"Yes. Ghost showed me."

He grunted. He nodded at Flats. "Interested, huh?"

"Yep." The older biker was getting on his Harley.

Stiff clapped his hands with a grin. "Progress."

CHAPTER 23

Sweet

His patience had paid off, as it usually did. The Vega was obvious. The girl was as described; she hadn't even bothered changing her hair.

Unfortunately, she was leaving again and hadn't made any particular move to indicate her room. He sighed. More patience was required. But in the meantime, he could follow the girl on the bike to scout the places she frequented. All of it helped connect the dots on the picture of recovery.

The motel room was the biggest key. But the other places might provide an opportunity to confront her – and kill her, if necessary.

He put the SUV into gear and followed at a lazy distance.

CHAPTER 24

Jessie

I looked around the warehouse. The German Shepard sniffed at me and I tensed, ready for a bite. But Flats had told him I was okay.

The dog apparently accepted that after much furious barking and teeth gnashing.

Stiff waved at the metal shelves. "Can't use these. One at the most, but not all of these."

I shook my head. "You don't want shelves that high..."

"Fuck no. Pardon my French."

Flats cackled.

I said, "Your shitty language is fucking atrocious."

Flats almost fell over howling. Stiff laughed loud and long.

They didn't know my past. Maybe I didn't use a ton of colorful language, but that didn't mean I hadn't heard it. I figured it best to get that out of the way than to have the poor fools trying to find clean words to use. "So how high?"

Stiff wiped his cheek as if to rub away the smile. "Shit, this place could be two-story. Even with ten-foot shelves."

"I could do that."

Silence fell on the warehouse as the two men shared a look.

Flat's mouth worked as if he were chewing a toothpick. Stiff was frowning at

him with intense eyes.

I looked at them, waiting. What?

Flats said, "Can you make it livable?"

"What, like bathroom and kitchen and all that?"

He nodded once.

"No. I'm not a plumber or electrician. But I can cut all of it to be ready for it."

Stiff mumbled, "I'd have to run this by Ghost and Dealer..."

Flats shook his head. "Beats putting one of them dinky-ass trailers on the lot."

The dog sniffed my pant leg and looked up at me. I wanted to pet it, but...

Stiff said, "What, you don't want to sleep in a trailer?"

"Fuck no. I was going to make Jacks sleep in it."

"Jacks isn't going to want to."

"So the fuck what? I ain't. You sleep in it."

I covered my mouth, hiding a grin that threatened a giggle.

We were at the motorcycles a few minutes later. Feeling at ease with them, I asked Stiff, "How'd you get that scar?"

Both went silent and their eyes went flat. Just like that, the warm atmosphere turned chilly. Stiff mumbled, "Club business."

Instantly, I recalled Ghost saying much the same – when asked about the illegal things... I put on the helmet. "Sorry, none of my business."

It didn't restore the light mood and I felt bad for ruining it. But was it dead, or just hidden beneath the surface? Were these two normally so jovial and jocular? Had I been given a glimpse of their real selves? Was the entire club like that? So insular that outsiders never saw the real people underneath?

And where did Art – Ghost – fit into that? Just as easily as the last puzzle piece? Had he been hiding from me all that he was because I wasn't in the club? No way was I going to ride a motorcycle – I was too small. But not all the women in the club rode. I had only seen two female motorcycle riders riding Harleys. One looked deadly mean and the other wasn't anything great to look at. Both carried more muscle than I did. Did the other women who didn't ride see the secret side?

I determined to ask Ramona.

The ride back to the motel was different than the ride away. Scared of Stiff at first, though oddly put at ease by his mannerism, I sensed less tension in him than at first. Though I wasn't interested or attracted to him in any way, I didn't feel so awkward riding back.

Because of why? I didn't know.

I handed him back his wife's helmet. "Let me know about it. I'll have to find something to do and I'm not sure what Keystone can offer for a carpenter."

He accepted that with an air of dismissal. Something about the man was just so different. He grunted, "I'll let you know."

I went into the motel room past Ramona. She'd know I wanted a shower; she had seen me do it every day. Two showers a day, except for weekends.

She said, "You going out with Ghost tonight?"

I stopped. "I don't know; I haven't seen him all day."

She actually laughed, just slightly. "I think you're bothering him."

Alarmed, I turned back to her. "Bothering him? How?"

"I think he's obsessed with you. He hasn't been like this since Kristy, and even then, not like this. Not like this at all."

"Kristy?" I sniffed the air.

"Stiff's wife."

I was appalled. "He had a thing with her?"

"For a short time."

"Stiff didn't kill him?"

Her laugh came a little cleaner. "Some of us aren't so uptight..."

Anger wriggled in my bones. "How long ago..."

"Oh, he ended it a few months back. Or Kristy did, I don't know. But he wasn't acting all that weird. Not like he is now."

"Did they love each other or something?" I couldn't keep the bite out of my question. My breathing was hot and rapid.

Ramona came into the room and shut the door. "Heavens, no. Don't get all up in a fuss over it. He hasn't looked back. It was just sex."

I fumed. Why did she get to experience him? What was so special about her? And married! I wanted to wring my hands on her neck.

I think the woman recognized my look. She put a hand on my shoulder. "Don't blame him for his past. He obviously doesn't blame you for yours. Did you tell him about your uncle?"

"Ronnie? Yes. He's not my uncle."

She pressed her lips together. "All right. But was he mad?"

"At Ronnie, yes."

"But he's not looking at you any different. He accepts exactly what and who you are - what and who you were. He's accepting all of you."

Her words made sense, but I was still a bit burned over it. On the pretense of a shower, I turned away. If Art could accept me for my past, shouldn't I accept him for his? But I don't have mine following me around!

CHAPTER 25

Sweet

He waited until late when most were inside, then he took a stroll. He held a newspaper in his hand, as if just purchased. It was a prop, nothing else. Better than a clipboard because those meant sales or something official.

A newspaper was dull. Who read the newspapers anymore?

It could be dropped without thought and weapons grabbed.

Easy. Simple.

The newspaper also afforded a point of contact. Ball cap and newspaper – if anyone cared to describe him. Slightly heavysset? Nothing the police could really use. The ball cap was first contact. The newspaper second. People by then were more curious about the newspaper – focused on it to the exclusion of much else: such as height; weight; features; eye color and other necessary details the police would use to identify a suspect.

He didn't make any beelines, either. Not from his vehicle to the motel. He took a walk away from his SUV and came back on the other side of the street. Just passing through. His eyes scanned the motel parking lot, taking in only two bikers outside.

One was as big as he was and glanced his way. Just a glance – followed by an easy dismissal.

Sweet smirked.

The bitch might have been connected somehow with the local gang; she had ridden away on one of the bikes. He had followed her to some kind of tow yard. The dog kept him away. However, that was no loss; he was certain the backpack

wasn't there. The visit looked like they were showing her something.

Peripheral. Circumstantial. Inconsequential.

He moved along the walkway of the motel, head down just enough to hide the movement of his eyes under the bill of the ball cap. First priority: car. He could see nothing in the front passenger. Turning swiftly, he moved along its side, increasing his pace as if he wasn't interested in lingering... looking. The glimpse of the backseat and rear area showed it was empty.

He moved with his head craned up, as if looking at a passing car. It carried him away from the bikers without comment.

His next and primary objective would be the motel room. This required more patience.

CHAPTER 26

Ghost

He picked up the phone Saturday morning and punched in Jessie's motel number.

"Hello?"

"Tequila?"

An air of obvious not-so-obvious surprise came into her voice. "Oh... is that you, Ghost?" Drawn out real slow, louder, enunciated perfectly.

He rolled his eyes. Women. "How are you two getting along?"

"Like two peas in a pod."

"You... feeling better?"

"In ways." She sniffed and sighed, surrounded once again by her apparent solitude as a widow.

"I'm thinking of taking Jessie away for the day. Can I get your permission?"

Tequila laughed. It wasn't a full pre-funeral laugh, but close. "I'm not her mother."

"Put her on." He was starting to itch. He needed to hear her voice. How much he needed became apparent.

"Hello?" That heavenly voice. Pure and clean, innocent and trusting.

Everything tensed up all at once, and his stomach twisted in a knot of nerves.

"Hi..." His hands shook and his palms broke out in a sweat.

"I wondered if you were ever going to call."

He squeezed the receiver in his hand. He hadn't wanted to come on too strong – even though he wanted to pick her up and crush her to him and never – ever – let her go. "I'm free all weekend. You?"

Her response was instant and insistent. "I'm yours."

His stomach knot twisted further, sending out contradictory signals of victory and pain. He fought to keep things light – he didn't want to upset her delicacy. He didn't want to turn her away. But her words froze his throat. He so wanted to hear those words in another context. He forced out, "What time will you be ready?"

"I'm ready now."

He counted himself fortunate he had not waited any longer to call her: it sounded as if she had plans to do something. "I'll be there in a few."

She rushed, "Okay, see you then."

He listened to the phone click off. He didn't know what he was going to do with her: he just needed to be near her. He wanted to smell her hair and see her eyes. He wanted to trace her eyebrows and her ears.

In a flash, he knew where to take her; a lookout point used by high schoolers to look out over Keystone and talk of things beyond their age. It was a grand view and worth showing her.

He left his house and climbed onto his Harley. Normally comforted by its sound, the chirping whir of the starter didn't just start the engine, it started his doubts. Today he would know. He had to know. He would make her his or... And that's where his doubts came marching out.

She doesn't like bad boys, and he was one of the baddest. Not drugs. Not booze. Not women. No, not the typical silliness some women call bad boy behavior. His was murder. Killing with a crowbar. Smashing heads in of wounded people with a lead pipe. Not a blink of his eye while doing it. All to protect people like her.

He revved the bike and backed out. His determination drove those thoughts

away. She would accept him or not. He would find out today. Better to end it now before he became a total mess.

Jaw set, he tapped it into first and twisted the throttle. He sped forward into his future.

CHAPTER 27

Jessie

I tried to hold back the tears. He's coming over, I can't be crying!

Ramona held me around the shoulders. "Aww, girl, what's the matter?"

"What if I'm too stupid for him? Or too little. I've seen Kristy—"

"Oh, hush now. That's all nonsense."

"What did he see in her?"

"Pussy is what he saw."

I jerked, wondering if I had angered her.

She continued, "She was a timid thing – nothing like you."

"And what am I? What does he see?"

Ramona's eyes became pained, remembering things about which she didn't elaborate. "What we all see: determination. Your will to go on when things are bleak. Weaker people give up."

"What should I do?"

Her hand came up into my hair. "Life is a ride, hon. Get on, get a good grip, and let it take you where it's going."

I nodded against her shoulder. "I need to wash my face..."

"That's a girl."

I got up and splashed water over my eyes and carefully patted them. Hopefully they wouldn't look like I'd just done meth when he arrived.

She called after me, "I sure am glad Ghost persuaded me to share my room with you. You give me hope, in a way."

"Hope?"

"That life still has a ride for me."

I knew better than to say she'd find someone else. Instead, I said, "Your husband would have wanted that for you."

Head lowered, she nodded it; acknowledging me and him and life.

I heard the rumble. "Guess I gotta go."

A barely audible mumble came from her as she fought her own tears. "He's a good man, dear. A good man. Don't judge him otherwise."

I didn't know what to think of that. I was the one in the balance here. Would I be found wanting? Lacking? My past too dirtied for the likes of him? And here I had overcome the fact that he was a biker: I had never stopped to think I might not match up to his expectations.

Is Ghost bad? If he is, why is he so different than all the other bad boys I hated?

I opened the door to see him slowing his bike along the outer parking area. No scowl today. No frown this morning. He sat, one hand on the handlebar – the other in his lap – and smiled.

I closed the door behind me.

He handed me my helmet and flashed happy teeth. "Get on."

Thrilled to finally be near him – with him – I did so silently. My tears were forgotten, but not my fears. It was as if I needed to be near him but when I was, everything went stiff. Too afraid to move, too afraid to speak – too afraid of the unknown. Would the next thing I did be the thing that drove him away? I tiptoed around him with all the care of someone carrying drugs around a cop.

The comforting rumble of his Harley and its subtle soothing vibration caused me to lean my head forward and rest the side of my chin against his back. I wanted to meld into him, become one with him. Heat blossomed in my pussy, giving me an achy sensation of hunger low and deep.

He rode us out of town, up into the twisting turns of the mountain. Up into the treeline. At first, I was on the edge of queasing out, but the sunlight flashing through the pine needles and branches had a calming effect that chased away the queasy feeling. The air was fresh up here, even cleaner than Keystone. The pine aroma was strong.

He stopped on what appeared to be a small pullout. "We're here."

I got off, removing my helmet. The air hit my head and lifted my frizz with tiny gusts of breeze. There was a hollow sound to the air up here – something distant and peaceful. I realized it was the winds caressing the pine needles. From all over the mountain, the air swished through them sounding like a far-off river.

Tension drained from me so fast I almost fell – as if it had been all that held me up.

He gripped my arm protectively. "Careful. A little gravelly here."

I didn't want to tell him how suddenly weak I felt. I just let him lead me. There was a short guardrail and he stepped over it. I followed, hoping he didn't get too close to the cliff.

But it wasn't really a cliff. A very broad rock outcropping bigger than the motel spread out below the road above. He settled down onto his butt and looked up at me.

I sank slowly, marveling at the view. Crisp and clear was Keystone below us. Clarity so sharp it almost hurt my eyes caused me to gasp. The grandeur of the view with the brilliant greens, reds and occasional yellows was breathtaking. I whispered, "It's beautiful."

He turned to me, touching my arm. "It's not... as beautiful as you."

I began to tremble.

CHAPTER 28

Sweet

He had followed the motorcycle at a considerable distance until he lost them going up and out of town. He didn't care for some morning joyride in the mountains. She didn't have the backpack so if they wanted to ride in the forest, he had other things to do.

They would be back. He could continue watching then.

If he needed to.

Simple peek. That's all he needed.

He drove back down to the motel. He parked next to a real estate office and adjusted his ball cap. He picked up the newspaper. If all went well, he would see neither of them again.

Getting out, he crossed the street.

This time of the morning was fairly quiet. No one was hanging around outside. Half the motorcycles and cars were gone. Jessie's Vega was there, but it didn't matter. She was gone and he just had to talk his way past the other woman in their room.

A quick look under his brim showed the ease of his approach. No one looked out, wondered, or watched.

Adjusting his windbreaker, he knocked lightly on the door. Not too loud. Didn't want someone else to think it was meant for them and be opening doors.

A woman answered, wrinkled around the eyes and wary. She might have been pretty at one time, but something in her face had that weariness of having seen

too much.

She squinted. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Jessie's father. Is she in?"

The woman relaxed, straightening. She opened the door a little further.

Perfect.

The woman said, "No, she just left—"

He let out a sigh tinged with disappointment. "Wouldn't you know it... Mind if I come in and leave a message?" He was already stepping inside.

She moved back as most did. Leave a message? Sure. They only thought of their own convenience. Leaving a message meant he would be leaving. Get him in get it over with.

He stepped in and looked around. Two beds. Small table. Typical motel room.

She left the door ajar.

It didn't matter.

She said, "I'll get you a pen and some paper." She moved between the beds to the little lamp desk between them – the kind that held the TV remote, a phone and phonebook neatly underneath, and a drawer with a Gideon Bible, a pad of paper, and a pen.

Too easy. He stepped up behind her and flicked the leather strap over her head. He pulled back twisting.

The woman's fingers scrambled at her throat as all the others he had choked had done. But something was different about this one. She didn't struggle. She didn't fight or kick. She didn't try clawing back over her head or shoving her elbow back. She just choked to death. Something in her had already given up before he had slipped the strap around her throat. He jerked, hauling back, making sure she was fully choked off from the air. Her hair jerked with his yanks and her head slowly went from stiff to limp.

He glanced at the door. He dropped the body between the two beds and rolled the strap back up. He moved over and gently shut the door.

With an expectant look at the closet, he moved to it. Within seconds, he should be discovering and recovering Bull's money.

He stared with grim determination at the... nothing. The backpack wasn't here. Not even under the beds. He launched a savage kick at the dead woman's foot.

He closed the door behind him and waved the newspaper as he walked away. Back in his SUV, he moved far enough up the street to be out of immediate visible range – but close enough to see a motorcycle with two people on it.

Leo had said she'd had the backpack; he could see the truth of it in the kid's eyes. Ronnie was certain she had left with a backpack.

There had been a backpack in the motel room. Had it been the woman's? Jessie's? But there was no cash.

Either the bitch had hidden it somewhere or the money was lost. More time was required, but he would have to move more directly now. A body was going to raise alarms all over the place that wouldn't die down for a while. He would have to move faster.

No, patience at this point was a liability.

Starting the SUV, he sped up the road towards the part of town he had last seen them. Would they be done so soon with their ride? He thought not. Rides up into the mountains were leisurely things meant to evoke peace and serenity. They would take their time at whatever they were doing up there.

He was surprised to see a motorcycle coming at him. Was it them?

It growled by, a woman hanging on the back. Frizzy hair whipping under the helmet.

He watched in his rearview mirror and turned right at the next intersection. He stomped the gas, and sped the short distance to an alley. Turning right into it, he floored the vehicle. Dust flew as he blew past the backs of houses. A stray trashcan lid went spinning up into the air lazily behind his speeding vehicle. He

braked hard at the end and turned right.

Within seconds, he turned left and was back on the road following them. He saw them turn left far ahead. The Dodge jerked in response to his pedal mashing, the engine winding high and vibrating. Still, it was smooth. He loved Dodge products.

He followed their turn, several seconds behind. He had gained slightly on them and was at a comfortable distance for following. He removed his cap and ran a hand over his bald head. A sense of foreboding crawled over his skin. He had been in town too long.

He needed to wrap this up. He needed to make his move.

CHAPTER 29

Jessie

I got off the bike. "I love the waterfall."

"I thought you might like to see it again."

It was where we had kissed. I most definitely wanted to be here. Even if it was no longer his home, it had been a part of him – his youth.

We walked through the garden to the waterfall.

After telling me he thought I was beautiful, he had become quieter.

With hands on my shoulders, he looked down into my eyes. I could see something powerful warring in them. Distaste? Distrust? Disgust? But flavors of desire and driving dominance swam maddeningly through his eyes. He searched my face, looking, judging, wanting...

I took a shaky breath. "What do you see?" I had felt we were close on the rock. But it was as if having told me I was beautiful, he held the rest back. What was he holding back? More? Or letting me down?

His eyes moved faster and that scowl of old returned – but different. "The woman I want."

The words, now that they had come, clicked into place in my heart. Yes, this was what he had been going to say all along, wasn't it? Wasn't it? Doubt didn't have much of a toehold anymore. I threw myself at him, gripping him fiercely.

I had dreamed of holding him and not letting go. I was going to make that a reality right now. Right here.

His arms came around me, just as desperate.

I ventured, whispering, "I'm yours, Art..."

He shook himself and looked around. Prying himself from my grip, he said, "Come on."

I didn't know what was going on. Something steely had come into his voice. Something raw and needing. Something tempered through with metal and strength. His grip on my wrist was almost painful.

He took me into the house and through the hallways. Across from his room, he entered another and shut the door behind us. It was a bedroom, neat and orderly. He spun me around and said, "I need you." His mouth crushed mine before I could say anything.

Here was the strength I had seen. Here was the Ghost I had known for two weeks. Here was the motorcycle man taking what he wanted. His power and presence overshadowed all other thoughts. He was going to take, and I was going to give. Willingly, gladly.

My fingers clawed at his vest and shirt. I felt a growl in my throat in my response to his aggressiveness.

He barely pushed away, his eyes lit with the fire of desire. There was no sense there, only strength. The power of his passion pulsed between us and I pressed forward into it.

Muscles tense and teeth gritted, he spun me towards the bed.

I panted heavily, feeling like a cornered cat.

He was on me faster than I could move.

I met his rush with chin lifted. Fingers mashed, intersected, and collided as we fought to remove our clothing. I had a heat inside and it was burning me up.

We both stopped attacking each other and removed our jeans.

For a second, I thought he didn't like what he saw. His jawline clenched hard and

his eyes blazed.

I shrieked – was lifted so suddenly the room spun. I flopped down onto the bed and was yanked back towards the edge by my legs.

He was quivering, his cock pulsing at full erection. I caught a glimpse of it and it was beautiful. I expected him to ram it into me.

I whispered in harsh syllables, "Go slow; it's been—" I cried out as his tongue hit my clit in a shocking mash of wet and hot. My eyes bulged open and I clawed frantically at the bed as his mouth almost devoured my sensitive clit. I don't know if he was good at it. I don't know if he was unskilled. I had never been licked before and his tongue teased me into terrifying orbits of tension – the heights of which promised a long fall.

My fingers clawed his short hair. My legs quivered as his tongue tortured my pussy. He was pushing something in me with each move of his mouth. Luscious waves of lust and pleasure rolled and swelled in me. His tongue is doing that! Never had I felt anything so intense. So... satisfying.

Things became clear: sound; sight; sensation. My body thrummed like a guitar chord plucked. With his mouth, he drove me over the edge of an eternity I hadn't known existed.

CHAPTER 30

Ghost

He felt her shake and let loose. Her orgasm rocked the bed. Her thighs clamped on his head and squeezed. Her body arched up, every wiry muscle tense and trembling.

He ran his hands over her skin – up her thighs and over her abdomen. Her skin was smooth and warm to the touch. His cock throbbed angrily where it was, anxious to... His fever spiraled out of control.

He lifted, wedging himself into her legs.

She looked down, eyes wide with fright as he positioned himself.

There was no stopping him; he was going to have her. He pushed. He was going to possess her. His cock parted her lips and slid in. He was going to make her his.

Right now.

His shaft forced its way into her hole, stretching it wide. He panted and pushed, eager to send his cock so far in that no other would ever be able to claim her again. She was his!

Her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth opened with some concern of pain. But she relaxed very suddenly as he reached his limit. She let out a soft huff of breath and then smiled. The facial gesture turned into a bubbling giggle that ended in a sigh as he felt her pussy clamp onto his cock.

As if a horse and spurred, he jumped into a gallop, thrusting into her with heaving motions – ramming his cock into her with a delirium driven by desire. Her wet pussy was the perfect glove for his cock and he marveled at the

spectacular sensation of her most intimate part.

It wasn't just everything he had dreamed of, it was more. Their union offered something deeper than the act. No, this was not what he had expected – wanted. It was far, far more. Curling into him was the foundation of something so much deeper than just finally getting his way with her.

Her gasps erupted up at him and her eyes were filled with wonder. Her face was flushed, shining with an inner glow that gave her beauty a radiant light.

He moved slower, realizing the trap into which he had thrown himself. Willingly thrown himself. He knew it now, too late. But he accepted it. In fact, he embraced it. And he said it, "I'm yours."

Her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth worked to smile and hold back the tears. She was mostly successful.

He hadn't meant to hurt her. He stopped moving, concerned. "I didn't hurt you... did I?"

She shook her head violently, definitely. A very definite "no." She closed the trap on him and he refused to struggle. She said, "You're everything I wanted, and more."

Caught as he was, his body surrendered. He moved again, feeling the building tension and tickle. He thrust with it, coaxing it forward until it needed no more encouragement. His body tensed and went rigid. His hips moved with jerks, pushing in, forcing in, to offer her his lust.

He hadn't claimed her. He shot his seed deep into her not as a marking of territory, but a surrender of himself to her femininity.

She had claimed him.

CHAPTER 31

Jessie

I held him and drifted in a peace I had never before felt. I had found something so special that serenity was a new experience.

I listened to his breathing, wondering what my future allowed. Not held – allowed. Would my circumstances allow me to stay? I was certain I possibly could. Would Ken's offer be enough? Could I float from check to check with nothing to do in between? Would I be able to register the car here? I hoped the title was in the glove box, but I didn't know.

Will he be mine?

I stroked my fingers over his chest.

He stiffened, his muscles clenching under my fingers. But his reaction wasn't from my touch.

My heart jumped and I lifted my head. "What is it?"

He held a finger to his lips. Slowly, he slid out of bed. He reached down and pulled on his jeans. Then he slid into his vest. Reaching to an interior pocket, he pulled out a snub-nosed revolver.

My eyes went wide.

He raised his finger again to his lips. Quiet.

I followed him to the door, still naked, but clutching my blouse. I struggled into it without noise.

He was paused at the door, listening. Then he opened it and looked out into the

hall, gun up and finger on the trigger.

I asked nothing. If there was something he wanted me to know, he'd tell me. My questions would just get another finger to the lips. No, now was not the time for questions.

The door across from us was ajar – the door to his office. His former room.

It had been closed.

He padded silently across the hall, looking left and right. He moved to the side and slowly pushed open the door with his gun hand. He took a quick peek into the crack of the door to see if anyone was hidden behind it.

Light streamed through a crack in the drapes and they moved from a breeze. Someone had opened a window.

I entered behind him as he crossed to it and parted the drapes. The window was slid up and open. Did they go out or come in? I looked at the door. In the gloominess of the room, the partial light from the parted curtains revealed emptiness. Except for his desk, of course. I peeked under the foot well. It was empty.

Art whispered to me, "Stay in here. If you hear anything, go out the window."

"But my clothes..."

He pursed his lips. "All right, back in the other room. But stay put. I don't want you wandering around and getting shot accidentally. Understand?"

I nodded.

He kissed me, quick.

I followed him out and crossed to the other room as he moved along the hallway. Grabbing up my jeans, I slid them on.

Something shifted in the air as I fastened my pants. I looked at the door and turned right into the impression of something extremely sharp. Pain lanced along my neck and a hand clamped over my mouth.

A low growl in my ear explained something simple to me. "Noise can get your throat cut, you know?" It was said as if telling me that not having car insurance could be costly.

I felt a trickle of blood down my neck.

His words were so neat and nice. "I'm going to take the knife off your skin and allow you to nod. Nod if you understand that noise gets your throat cut."

I nodded.

The pressure on my mouth lessened.

He spun me with a strong grip. The knife came up under my chin and the point teased my skin.

I was looking into a friendly face. Jovial, maybe. A little thick around the jaw and neck. A tall man wearing a ball cap. But despite his amiable features, something in his smile just didn't reach those cold, cold eyes.

He whispered, "Where's the backpack? Fifty grand inside. Where is it? Tell me and you live."

I didn't believe him, but I had no choice. "Backpack?"

The knife nicked upwards and drew another painful prick of blood from my skin. "The backpack you and Leo had. Where is it?"

I began to shake now, overcome by adrenaline and fear. "I don't know; I dropped it—"

I was yanked and held in the crook of his arm – his hand over my mouth. He slid to the door and looked out. Then he moved us across the hall to Art's office.

He pushed the door almost closed and hauled me to the desk. Sliding open the drawer, he pulled out a ledger. It had a large rubber band around the cover flap and it opened right to the latest page.

His finger stabbed down. "Forty-five thousand dollars in deposits last week. Is that where it is?"

"What? No..."

The knife was laid sideways across my throat. "You see, it's real simple. I either return with the money, or I kill you and return with your head. Bull won't accept nothing."

"Bull? Bull Ruby?"

"That's right, you remember now, don't you? That's a good girl."

"I didn't get any money from him. But you're telling me Bull Ruby was stupid enough to lend Leo money?"

A line of fire bit into my neck and I gurgled to keep from crying out.

He whispered, "I don't tell him how to run his business; I just run mine. And my job is to get that money back or kill you. Makes it real easy on me."

I realized I couldn't tell him the truth or I'd be dead.

He said, low, enough in his voice to be heard. "What will it be? Money? Or your life?"

"Th-that's not my account. I have to ask him."

I heard footsteps.

So did he. The knife went away. His words were fast and low. "I'm watching. Get the money. By Monday." He moved back, drawing a gun. He slid behind the edge of the curtain.

I heard from across the hall, "Jessie?"

I moved to the door and opened it.

He spun, gun pointing up. He came to me in the doorway. "Are you all right? Did you hear something?"

I tried to move past him wondering how the hell I was going to ask for fifty grand.

He must have seen the blood. He turned with me and spun me around. His back was to his office.

The tall man stepped out and raised his pistol right at Art's back.

I had only an instant. I could try to move to the side and avoid being hit. I could call out, but that would just get him shot.

I only had a split second.

It was life or death.

I did the only thing I could.

CHAPTER 32

Ghost

She dove into his arms, gripping him fiercely. Her whimpers turned to sobs and she squeezed as if to crush the breath from him – or as if she were cowering.

He knew something was wrong. Deadly wrong. He thought he had seen blood. He tried to disentangle himself. "Jessie..."

She looked up and past him.

Instinctively, he turned fast, gun flicking out.

The room was empty.

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He cleaned the blood from her neck. "Sorry if this stings." He was using a washcloth soaked in Vodka.

He had rechecked the room and behind the curtains, but whoever it was had slipped out. He had heard running footsteps out in the garden.

He gritted his teeth at the marring cuts to her perfect skin. His hands itched to strangle. To kill.

She looked like she was six and her kitten had just been run over.

It made his heart... clench with rage. Barely suppressed. Barely contained. It wouldn't remain so for long.

Someone had hurt his woman.

And they were going to pay.

"Tell me."

Her eyes were bloodshot and haunted.

"Tell me now before I kill every fucking man in Keystone."

She flinched and looked down. Away. "He said he'll kill me."

"Why? Tell me."

Her shoulders slumped and she brought her trembling hand to her face.

It broke his heart to see her like this.

She whispered, "That damned backpack."

"What? More. Spill."

"He's working for Bull Ruby. I guess Leo got his money from Bull."

"He's a loanshark?"

"Sort of. More like he takes interest in people's dealings. But he'd never stoop as low as Leo—"

"Well, apparently he did. Maybe times were tough. Or he thought the score was a sure thing."

She heaved a sigh. "I didn't know."

"No one's blaming you. So I take it this guy wants the money back?"

She nodded.

"Look at me."

She glanced.

"No, look at me. Look me in the eyes, by God, and tell me: do you have the money?"

Her look turned desperate and sincere. "No..." Her hands made pleading claws, palms up.

He knew she was telling the truth.

She whispered, "But he thinks you deposited it."

"I what?"

"He showed me a ledger from your desk. Forty-five thousand dollar deposit or something like that. He thinks that's the money."

"You didn't tell him otherwise?"

She was silent, with mouth open for a second. "No, he would've killed me. He doesn't care about the money or my life. It's just one or the other. If he can't recover it by Monday, he kills me."

Ghost leaned his head down and rested his forehead against her knee. He was kneeling down and she was sitting on a chair in the kitchen. "Fifty grand makes this guy go away?" His mind was whirling.

"That's what he said." She sounded doubtful.

"Does this Bull play fair?"

"I'm not sure. I've only really heard of him."

"You ever seen this guy before? His cleaner?"

"No."

He stood. There was no way he could trust either Bull or the cleaner. "How are you supposed to contact him?"

"He said he'd be watching."

His eyes flicked left and right. "So we set up a meeting and pay him."

"We do?" She sounded incredulous.

His mouth went into a grim line. "Fastest way to get beyond this, right?"

She looked at him in wonder. "You'd give this guy your own money—"

His words were tight with rage. "I'd do anything. For you."

CHAPTER 33

Sweet

He followed the biker and Jessie. They rode back into town and he stayed far back. He knew where they were going: the motel.

He parked way down the street and pulled the binocular case from his satchel. Sports binoculars. Very light. Very compact. Small enough not to be obvious if someone saw him using them. Small enough to fit under the brim of his ball cap.

He put them up to his eyes and adjusted the eye ring and zoom. Satisfied, he waited.

The girl got off the motorcycle and went inside the motel room.

How long would she be? Five seconds? Or ten seconds? Sweet dispassionately counted the seconds. Five seconds was how long it would take to see the dead woman and flee. Ten or longer was suspicious in that the girl might be seeing what she could steal before alerting the police. He didn't care which, but it was amusing to count.

She came stumbling out at seven seconds – terror on her face.

The biker was off his motorcycle in a flash, gun pulled from his vest.

Interesting location. Interior pocket of some kind instead of a waist holster. He filed that away for future reference – if he needed it.

Doors opened along the motel. Men and women came out. Not a lot. Women rushed the room. The men clenched fists and raised arms.

None of it mattered to him.

He was on the fine edge of success or needing to skip. Very possibly, Monday was success. They would take the money back out and hand it off. Possible that things might go bad – that was a factor he had to deal with. But he hadn't lost one of those encounters yet.

That he might have to go back to Bull empty-handed was disappointing, but his confidence in this situation was riding higher than average. The girl had been pliant and a willing target made his job a lot easier- so experience told him. She would get the goods, most likely.

If she didn't, he would kill her and enjoy it. He wouldn't really bring back her head – a photo was good enough. Simple thumb push on his phone was all that was required. Bloody head pic? Mostly happy Ruby. Not as happy as if he got the cash back, but satisfied those responsible could no longer enjoy their theft of his money.

Sweet was fairly confident he had read the girl right. She would ask for her cash back and hand it over. Life or cash? Pretty easy.

Sweet liked things easy. And this had all the marks of being easy – even after a long chase.

CHAPTER 34

Jessie

I hadn't seen death before. Whatever God in heaven looked down on me had spared me that horror.

I had thought Ramona was sleeping – even on the floor.

I had called her name and bent down. Had I known she was dead, I would have fled immediately. But something in me wasn't registering her position and the lack of response.

Maybe I didn't want her dead. Maybe I had grown to like the woman and her sadness. Maybe I understood her. Losing the only man you ever loved must have been quite the calamity.

But why her? Art clued me in on the answer: it must have been the man after the money.

And then it made sense. Perfect sense.

The man who was pursuing me was not just serious, but deadly efficient. No one had seen anything except for Grannie. She had looked out the window and seen a man in a ball cap. No other description for the police except a blue windbreaker.

The club was in an uproar. Motorcycles revved and went out, looking. Grim-faced bikers scoured the town and... turned up nothing.

The sheriff interviewed me, took notes. He was an imposing black man with a drill instructor hat and a fierce face. He talked a lot with the members of the

club.

But nothing was accomplished.

Except that my guilt was pressed down, shaken vigorously, and running over with shame. I had brought this to Keystone. I had brought this to Ramona. I had caused her death.

Ramona – Tequila – lay dead because I had run from a drug-bust gone bad in Spokane. She would be alive today if the Vega had less gas in it. Or more.

But it was ultimately because of me.

I could not stop crying.

I didn't want to stop – it was my only way of paying tribute to a hurting woman I had wronged. Already having lost so much in life with the death of her husband, I had visited upon her the ultimate insult.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't right.

It should have been me dead in that motel room.

Instead, I had been rutting like a pig and enjoying it.

I felt cold, even with a blanket on me in Art's little house. I was curled up on his leather couch trying to find comfort, both inside and outside, and not finding it.

Why did I go out with Leo? Because Ronnie said he was a good kid? Why did I trust Ronnie? Because he taught me carpentry? Was I paying him back for that knowledge? Or had he paid me back with that apprenticeship because he had wronged me at fourteen?

I didn't know where to begin. Or where to end.

I stared blankly at Art's wall while he checked on me and gave me sips of soup.

Mostly I cried.

For her. For me. For what might have been if I hadn't taken that fucking backpack out of Leo's car.

But then... I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have run. I would have broken it off with Leo eventually, and then what?

I wouldn't have met Ramona. Gunner. Stiff. Ken Cotton.

Most of all, I wouldn't have met Art. Arthur Marinetti. Ghost. My Ghost. Mine!

Why did it all have to come to this?

"Jessie..."

I realized I was staring at Art's shins. I lifted my eyes.

"Let's go to bed."

I didn't want sex. Not after...

But I knew he wasn't implying that. It was late and I had intermittently cried since arriving at his little home.

He helped me up.

He helped me undress and get into his bed. He did not join me.

I looked up at him as he tucked me in. "Why aren't you..."

"I need to meet with the club. We call it church. It's about these developments."

My eyes went large. "But—"

"He won't hurt you as long as he thinks you'll get him the money. I'm talking to the club about all that tonight. He'll wait until Monday before making a serious move."

He slid open a drawer on the nightstand. "There's a thirty-eight in here. But you won't need it with him. I know his type. He's after the money. Until Monday, you're safe."

I looked up at him, wanting to be near him.

His voice was soft. "Know this, Jessie Windham, I—" he swallowed, "I love you. I love you and I will keep you safe. We'll have his money for him Monday at noon. Here. He'll come here tonight and ask, probably. Tell him. Tell him we'll have it."

"We will?"

"We will. I'll see to it Monday morning. Trust me and this will all be behind us."

"But Ramona—"

"We'll grieve for her together. After we send this guy back with his money."

Water welled up in my eyes. "You'd really do this? For me?"

His eyes were intense, burning his message into me. "I'd do anything for you."

I latched onto his arm. Shame constricted my throat. "I love you, too."

~ ~ ~

The wrenching scrape of the window near me was loud. It slid up. Panicked, I rolled toward the nightstand.

The ball-cap head poked in. "Alone, I see."

Art promised me the man wouldn't hurt me. "Yes."

He climbed in.

I was still afraid. This man had killed Ramona.

He squatted next to the bed – a father talking to a young child in need of learning

something crucial. He said, "I assume Monday...?"

"We'll have your money by noon. Here."

He gave a slow and suspicious nod of his head. One dip. His eyes locked to mine.

I said, "I swear."

He nodded again, twice. A little faster. "Very good. I always like to see reasonable people. Good for business, if you catch my drift. Monday I'll be on my way if the money is delivered—"

"It will be. He just has to withdraw it."

"And you'll never see me again." He stood.

I watched him.

He added, "As long as you never cross Bull Ruby again." There was no threat in his words. It was delivered conversational, as if he was telling me how to avoid buying out of date canned veggies.

"I'm never going back to Spokane."

He grinned. Something natural but not reaching his eyes. "Lock the window after me." He left the way he'd come in.

~ ~ ~

I was awakened by the key in the door.

Art called out, "Jessie?" He came rushing into the room. He stripped out of his vest and knelt near me. "Did he come?"

I nodded.

That grim stone-face came back, setting his features into a rictus of anger and determination. "You told him about Monday?"

"Yes."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"No, I didn't think he would."

I sat up. "You knew he would come?"

"I was counting on it, but I knew he wouldn't hurt you."

"Why—"

"He needed to know if we'd pay him. Now that he has the message, we'll meet him Monday and clear the debt. Then we'll never have to worry about him again."

"Are you sure about this?" Am I really worth it to you?

"Never more sure in all my life. You're worth every effort."

CHAPTER 35

Ghost

He had always made choices. Against his father. Against his mother. Against the law. For the club. For Keystone.

Some choices are bad choices. People suffered making bad ones all the time. In trouble with the law, their lives forever tainted, they continued to make really... bad choices.

Ghost wasn't one of them. But that razor thin line between subjective judgment and error was a dangerous one. Fortunately he had the club. The Iron Crows had helped him make many choices – many of them questionable: all of them right. Some were against the law.

Sheriff Jefferson looked the other way. It had not been a happy relationship at first – with the sheriff. Dealer, Sonar, and Gunner had split off from the Outlaws to start up in Keystone.

There was an understanding there. The dominant club sanctioned the start up with certain conditions. One being performing hit contracts the Outlaws could not afford to be known doing. Contracts against government agents.

Those were always against the CIA. Their agents were looking for ways to take over the drug trade in the area. The Outlaws controlled it – pot, nothing harder. The Surenos were moving in. The CIA supported the Surenos off and on, trying to crack the Outlaw's stranglehold.

Not all the Outlaws were drug pushers. Most weren't. But a subsection was and they struggled to control the flow. Keep the gang out. The CIA out. Both the Surenos and the CIA wanted to not just control the pot trade, but introduce a more efficient meth ring.

The local Outlaws wanted nothing to do with meth. Members who got into it were kicked out. Simple as that. Same for the Iron Crows. But the Iron Crows even kept out the pot – except for what few citizens grew their own on the sly.

Keystone was a fairly clean town and Ghost and the Iron Crows wanted to keep it that way. The Outlaws didn't try bringing in pot and left the town alone in exchange for those contract killings.

Choices had to be made.

He didn't like using Jessie as bait; he loved her. But to bring this killer out into the open, she was the only one able to accomplish it without more dying. He hated that choice. Everything in him screamed to protect her, but to do so required exposing her. Clenching his jaw had produced a headache. But what was in his heart hurt worse.

The club had helped him see the proper course. Many details were discussed. Many objections calmly and logically ironed out. A choice had to be made.

It was the right one.

He prayed it was the right one for him. For Jessie.

And he knew he was alone in this. The final act would be played out between him, Jessie, and the man.

It wasn't that the club wouldn't help. The choice had to be made that they shouldn't. This part was on him.

However, decisions had been passed about the future. The club knew what had to be done. Inquiries had been made with the sheriff. Plans were already in motion. Moving. There wasn't much time.

It was the only way.

CHAPTER 36

Twenty

Sammy Reed was the Iron Crows' Sergeant at Arms. Many thought him crazy. Insane. His wild eyes saw everything and conveyed danger.

He liked it that way.

His normal name patch said "Twenty." If this were any other time, he would be wearing a special vest. All the other patches would be identical to his regular club colors – except on the back. Instead of the bottom rocker identifying his territory, his back-up vest would read "Nomad." Tonight, he wore neither. Instead, he wore a plain black leather jacket.

He hunched down on his black 2009 Road King Classic and roared through the night. Caffeine tablets would keep him awake – and make him look even crazier than he was. That suited him just fine.

The club had made choices. This one was a stretch, but it had to be done. Sheriff Jefferson had not approved. That was okay with Twenty, also. Sometimes the law wasn't going to back the club. But the right thing still had to be done.

When it came to enforcing the club's territory, Twenty was the man. Also Gripper. Gripper rode beside him, just back some. Gripper was a big man, and usually wore "Enforcer" on his vest. He also had a "Nomad" version, but tonight wore a brown leather jacket.

But Gripper was just an escort.

Blackness surrounded them.

Darkness followed them.

CHAPTER 37

Jessie

Sunday should have been a special day for me, something to be treasured. Waking up next to the man I had so wanted and now gotten, the day started with unease.

I couldn't help but blame myself for all that had happened. I felt guilty – as if I should be punished.

But I was being punished. Instead of fulfillment, I harbored fear. Would Art turn away from me now that I had requested money? I didn't want his money; I wanted him. And it wasn't fair that I owed money to Bull Ruby that I didn't have and had only carried. What had happened to the damned backpack? Caught up in the police investigation? Counted with all the other seized assets? Picked up by someone else? A dirty cop who could now afford that new Mustang?

It wasn't my responsibility, but here I was paying it and being forced to accept responsibility for my choices. A woman lay dead because of it.

Was my life on such a morning turning course for failure? Another failure in a lifetime of failures? Was this my destiny? To forever be a loser?

Having found the man of my dreams and been swept off my feet, I had dragged all this shit onto him and his club. Onto an innocent woman grieving for her dead husband.

Was that fair to them?

Why did all this have to come from me?

And yet, Art wanted to help me. The club wanted to help me, though he said that the club had voted to stay hands-off on the exchange on Monday.

It was up to me and Art – to give away his money he didn't owe to satisfy some idiot money-lender loan shark in Spokane.

Why me?

My only bad choice in this was taking the fucking backpack. I hadn't wanted it. Drug money? I wanted to be as far away from it as possible. But if I had taken it, I would've been able to hand it back to ball cap and been done with it.

Would Ramona still have died? The man had talked to me the same day. Had he killed her before? Or after? I didn't know.

We stayed inside all day Sunday.

I wasn't hungry; he forced me to eat.

Agitation built in my shoulders, easily overshadowing all the joy and peace I had experienced the day before.

It was afternoon when I broke. After rubbing my arms in his living room, standing and pacing, I dropped my hands. They were claws. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

He had been watching me, sitting in his recliner like a king on his throne. Hands grasping the ends of the arms on the chair, his eyes moved with my pacing. His scowl was back, but his posture was erect, if relaxed.

How can you be so calm?

He stared at me for a second. "Too late to stop it now. He expects payment tomorrow. If we don't give it to him, you die."

"We could run—"

"He'd likely find us."

"Am I worth all—"

"Every penny. Every effort. Everything."

I tensed up my lower lip to keep it from trembling.

"You are. Sit down."

"I can't sit."

His expression didn't change. "Then pace some more."

"It isn't accomplishing anything."

That ghost of a smile graced his lips – twisting it into something of a grin. "It should all be over tomorrow. Hopefully."

"How can you look at me the same? My debts aren't yours—"

"But your heart is. Deal with it."

I wanted to laugh, cry, and rant. "Is it really that easy?"

"For me it is." He got up and took me into a hug.

I was tense, but I wanted it. And yet I didn't. I didn't think I deserved it.

I had come so far. Left my past behind, started a new life, found someone I loved. Something new. And then my past caught up to me. Like a demon following a possessed person, my past pursued me into the future. Will I ever be free? What will come next? There will be a next, won't there? Can I ever be free?

I relaxed in his hug, though my arms were still bent up between us in a position of tension. His embrace was an emotional salve on the anger and hurt that punctured my soul.

I tried to take a nap later.

I heard him moving around his living room.

Pacing? Worrying?

I slid open the nightstand. The revolver was still there. I pushed it shut.

~ ~ ~

Monday morning was even more nerve-wracking than the day before. I shook in the shower. I trembled on the toilet. My stomach bubbled with anxiety over breakfast. All I could eat was toast, and I couldn't taste it.

I didn't want to, anyway.

Art shook his head at my tennis shoes. "Put on your work boots."

"Why?"

"In case things go bad. In case he grabs you. Since we're both going to be meeting him, he may want to treat you like a hostage. If things get bad, you'll be stomping on his foot."

"Stomp on his foot?"

A quirk of a smile. "Lemme show you." He moved to me and put his back to me. "Grab me around the neck."

I tried; he was taller than me.

"Good enough. Now watch what I do." He leaned forward and stomped down hard beside my foot. "If that had been your foot, it might be broken. At the minimum, he's in a lot of pain. That's how you get away."

"You think this isn't going to go easy?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. I just want you wearing boots in case it does."

"All right." I put them on.

He checked his watch. "Bank's open, let's go." He handed me the empty briefcase.

His motorcycle tried to calm us with its low throb. It wasn't doing it for me

today. The ride with the wind in my hair that was not constrained by the helmet was not peaceful. Anxiety was in all my joints, and nerves tingled with illness on my skin. I felt sickness in the center of my chest, radiating its promise that this was all going to go wrong.

He killed the engine in the bank's parking lot. "Wait here."

"Why?"

"In case he's following. I want him to see you. Besides, you don't need to go in."

Disappointment drifted through my daze. "Okay."

He walked into the bank, his colors prominently displayed: Iron Crows, Keystone. The black and silver crow looked majestic. The door shut behind him.

I waited on the bike, patiently, wondering if he expected me to karate-master the killer if he came up to me. But why would the man? Unless he was insane. Everything about the man had been matter-of-fact.

Maybe this will go well after all.

CHAPTER 38

Twenty

He waited on the Harley patiently. Still, he checked his watch.

Gripper watched people around him – not with obvious staring, but with flicks of his eyes.

Twenty growled, "It's after ten. Open the fuck up." The text message had directed him to Fast Cash. He glared at the storefront.

They were parked in an alley, facing East 2nd Street.

Gripper said, "Hats."

"I know." He reached into his saddlebag and pulled out his tropics hat. It was a wide-brimmed floppy thing with a flap in back to cover the neck. With both wearing them, they would look like yuppie tourists or grungy golfers. Either better than what they were.

The lights went on inside the store.

Twenty said, "We're up."

They dismounted and walked across the street. They didn't blend perfectly with the Spokane crowd, but they blended well. Hoodies were everywhere, ball caps, and a few floppy hats like theirs without the flaps.

Their hats were low.

Twenty went in first with the papers in his hand.

The man behind the pexiglass booth lazily eyed them. He was pudgy with

glasses and a scraggly beard. His black t-shirt sported a faded Batman symbol.

He displayed the papers so the guy could see them. "I'm looking for something a little heavier than a payday loan. I have the titles to two bars here."

"What are you looking for?" The guy didn't seem surprised or wary.

"Seventy-five grand. Know where I might make that kind of deal? These are worth over a quarter mill."

Batman pushed up his glasses and lifted the phone. He hit speed dial. "Hey, it's Dean. Have a couple here with some titles... Yeah... Seventy five grand... Two bars..." His eyes flicked to the papers. "Yeah, both signed... Okay." He hung up and fingered a single card from a stack. He slid it out. "Go to that address. He'll take care of you there."

Twenty snatched up the card and held it up in front of his face as if in salute. "Thanks."

Outside, Gripper said, "Cameras?"

"I think so. I kept my head down."

"So did I."

Twenty tapped in the address to his phone and brought up a map. "Let's go."

Harleys whirred to life and the double rumble preceded the low, staccato roar as they moved up the alley away from the store front.

CHAPTER 39

Jessie

I looked all around, but didn't see any men lurking around.

Art finally came back out of the bank, grinning. He handed me the briefcase and got on.

The case was heavier now. Sandwiching it between us, I gripped him at the side.

He called back, "Make sure it doesn't fall."

"Okay."

The ride back was less stressful than the ride to the bank. For once these past two days, I began to wonder if I might actually be seeing the end of the tunnel. If the pay-off went smoothly, would this be the beginning of a new life? Or would my past somehow find another way to fuck me again? Was I worth fifty grand? Was this a fresh start or just another rest stop on the way to a life of failure?

We pulled into his driveway. I had seen no other bikes – no Iron Crows. Art had said they would not be stepping in to help. This had to be a deal between us and the killer.

Art said, "Gimme that."

I handed him the briefcase.

He lifted it up into the air as if to heave it. Waving it in signal. "I hope he's watching." He turned to the house. He left the front door wide open – the screen propped open with a rock.

Once inside, he set the case on the coffee table. He motioned to me. "Sit, if you

like. I'm going to stand." He stood at the side of the couch and folded his arms.

We began to wait.

CHAPTER 40

Twenty

He knocked on the door, Gripper behind him.

A burly guy, more fat than anything, answered. His arms held muscle, though, and his face showed a passionless assessment as he looked them up and down. "Yeah?"

Twenty waved the card and titles. "Appointment?"

The thick sneer on the man's face didn't change. His eyes flicked over them again. "Yeah." He opened the screen. "You're getting searched."

"Sure thing." Twenty had been expecting this. He entered, and opened his jacket out wide and up. Gripper did the same.

The slug frisked them, but he could see they weren't carrying.

Twenty caught Gripper shaking his head when the man wasn't looking.

Still, the slug got down and patted around their ankles. It was thorough, but not up to a good police pat-down. He stood. "This way."

Gripper winked at Twenty behind slug's back.

The house was a sprawling single story, smelling of beer, farts, and unwashed dishes. The living room had a sunken floor and they stepped down to meet the loan shark.

The man was in a dirty brown terrycloth bathrobe. He had a silver tray on the coffee table in front of him and was sipping orange juice while reading the newspaper. His hair was unwashed, still sticking up with bed-head. He was a

rotund man, top heavy rather than bottom heavy. When he rose, he was leaned forward from the waist up. Bull-like. He spread his arms. "Well, my first customers of the day." He pointed to chairs across the coffee table. He extended a puffy hand. "I'm Bull."

Twenty shook the man's hand. "Sam. This is Ben." He slid the titles onto the coffee table and sat.

Bull sat and looked at the papers. "Where the fuck is Keystone?" He looked up at slug and laughed like it was a joke.

Twenty did all the talking. "Out of state. Stapled on the back there you'll see a copy of my driver's license and the owner – his instructions and signature. All legit."

"And these are worth?" Bull appeared disinterested, but his grip was tight on the titles as he waved them like so much trash.

"Conservative quarter mill."

The man huffed, laughing. "Well, you have some collateral." He lifted the lid on the silver tray. "Coke?" A bag of white powder, a couple straws and a razor sat there.

Twenty waved his hands. "Too early for us. But... some orange juice sounds good." He shared a wicked grin with Gripper.

Bull shrugged. "Peter, orange juice for our... friends."

Slug – Peter – scowled and left the room through a swinging door.

Gripper stiffened.

Twenty smiled that crazy smile of his.

CHAPTER 41

Ghost

They didn't have to wait long and he knew they wouldn't have to. Business people – even business scumbags – liked to get things over with.

The shuffling of grass outside as someone crossed the lawn preceded the shadow of the killer in the door. He stood framed in it for a second, surveying the living room.

Ghost motioned to the briefcase. "There you go. We had a bargain."

The man grunted. He shifted his chin to Jessie. "You. Open it."

Ghost had expected something like this. He tensed.

Jessie got up and killer moved up right behind her. He leaned into her ear. "Nice and slow, girl." He produced a knife and teased her cheek. "Nice and slow."

He noticed the killer was talking to her but looking at him. The man was sharp.

Jessie leaned over and grasped the briefcase.

Killer said, "Just pop the top and let's see what we have."

Ghost had secured the living room while she had slept the previous evening. His hand gripped the crowbar wedged in between the back of the couch and the lampstand.

The lid came up.

Stuffed inside were old bank brochures and stacks of copy paper – all Ghost could bribe out of the staff with a twenty dollar bill.

He was already moving as the killer's face turned to stone. The crowbar was up and swinging. "Jessie, foot!"

She shrieked and stomped.

Killer growled in pain and flung her away from him.

That was a mistake Ghost meant to exploit. He charged.

However, the man was fast. His arm came up to ward off the blow to his head and absorbed much of the impact. Shaking his head from the hit, he twisted his arm expertly around the crowbar – snake-like.

Ghost felt it twisted out of his hand. He kept moving towards the front door, ripping the snub-nose from his inner pocket. He extended his hand to fire.

Killer spun with him, knife flashing out.

A burst of pain seared his fingers as the knife impacted his gun hand. His gun went spinning.

He had no choice; he pivoted and bowled into the man, knocking him backwards over the coffee table. The briefcase thumped to the floor, papers spreading out on the rug. He raised a fist and brought it down hard into the man's face. Killer's nose collapsed in a wet crack.

Ghost was a brawler – used to fighting gang members. Lowlifes. Killer knew what he was doing. His knife hand came up and over, smashing the knuckle guard into the side of his head.

Ears ringing and head spinning, Ghost tumbled over.

Jessie was whimpering, not knowing what to do.

Killer kicked the coffee table away and twisted away, getting to his feet. His hand reached into his windbreaker and pulled a Glock.

Ghost had been outplayed. Outmaneuvered. His plan tossed on its head. His confidence in overcoming the killer now faced a far different reality. He couldn't even focus on the gun; his eyes were crossing and uncrossing out of control. He

needed to move, to act, to... He groaned, knowing he couldn't.

Gunshots rang out, over and over.

Ghost gasped, clenching in expectation of one of the shots blowing his head apart. He cried out, growling with all the ferocity he had left – defiance in the face of death.

Killer jerked and spun.

Jessie was screaming and pulling the trigger on empty chambers. His snub-nose.

The big man fell over. His gun clattered to the floor. His legs moved with effort and determination, but slowly. Then stopped.

CHAPTER 42

Jessie

I pulled and pulled the trigger. I have to stop him!

I was sobbing hysterically, barely able to see. The gun wasn't working anymore. It was only clicking. The killer was down on the floor, moving weakly.

Did I hit him? I recognized holes in the wall behind where he had stood. Misses – but also some blood spray.

But the crushing failure of not moving fast enough bowled me over and down onto my knees. I dropped Art's revolver and crawled to him.

He lay unmoving.

I was too late!

I grabbed him, blubbering my apologies. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I gripped his vest and hauled on him, shaking him up and down. "I'm sorry!"

He groaned, eyes fluttering.

Shocked with panic and happiness at him being alive, I shook him harder. "Don't die!"

His head banged against the wooden floor and he groaned louder. "Stop... please."

I let go of him, spreading my hands over his chest and arms to find wounds. "Are you hurt? Did he shoot you?" I didn't know; all I had heard were gunshots. Were they all mine? Other than the blood on his hand from cut fingers, he appeared unwounded.

Art gripped my arm. "Agh... my head..."

I realized I had banged it against the floor in my effort to hang onto him. "I'm so sorry!" I smothered his face with kisses. "Please don't die."

"Fuckin' A, woman, let me up."

I settled back onto my knees. My eyes were watered with desperation.

He groaned again in pain and rolled over to sit.

He's alive! I clutched his arm and shoulder – squeezing to make sure. "I'm so sorry—"

He chuckled.

What? This isn't funny!

He growled, "I didn't know you were going to try killing me..."

"What?"

He rubbed the back of his head, then across his temples. "Between you and him..." He was focusing on the killer lying on the other side of the living room. He leaned over and slid the crowbar back into his hand.

I watched him slowly get to his feet.

Swaying unsteadily on his feet, he said to me, "Turn your head."

"What?"

"You don't want to see this." He moved over to the killer's body and raised the crowbar high.

I squeezed my eyes shut and heard a loud, dull thudding crack.

Then I heard him panting. "I think he was dead anyway. Well, he definitely is, now."

I opened my eyes.

Art dropped the blood-smearred crowbar and kicked the Killer's gun away.

The reality hit me. "I... I killed him?"

"And saved my life. And yours, too." He chuckled again, but stopped abruptly.

"Ow, laughing hurts."

I was up in a rush and diving into his embrace. "Is it over?"

"We'll see."

"What do you mean?"

He hugged me back, tight. "This wasn't the only game being played out today."

I didn't know if that was good or bad. All I knew was that we were alive and the killer was dead. And I still had my man.

CHAPTER 43

Twenty

Twenty stood with Gripper. His friend went around the coffee table – behind the sofa.

Bull looked confused.

Twenty reached in and pulled the two revolvers stashed in the inner jacket pockets. Peter had missed them when they had held out their jackets. Common mistake for amateurs. He aimed both as Bull's eyes grew large. His mouth opened to yell for help.

It wouldn't have mattered. Twenty fired eight shots, all of them striking the big man. The dirty robe twitched and jerked. The body beneath it flinched in spasms.

The kitchen door burst open, and Peter emerged with a sawed off shotgun. He never had a chance to fire.

Gripper emptied his revolver and the bodyguard dropped... like a slug.

The acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air of the living room and the faint smoke swirled slowly.

Twenty put his guns away. He pulled a pair of gloves from his outer pocket. He slipped them on and picked up the two titles.

Gripper, also gloved, knocked over the silver tray. He pinched the bag of coke up and upended it all over Bull's body.

"Did we touch anything?"

Gripper said, "No."

"Just another drug deal gone bad? Rival drug lord? Pissed off his pusher? Let's get out of here."

"Right behind ya, boss."

CHAPTER 44

Jessie

I was questioned by a sheriff's deputy. I told the exact truth until it came to the shooting. Art had told me to say it was he who had shot the killer. That's the way I told it.

Truthfully, it was all a blur of panic, adrenaline, and terror, anyway. What could I really remember? The fight had only taken... what? Ten? Fifteen seconds?

I was nervous at first, having been involved in a shooting. A cop was questioning me. Didn't the TV always show that jail was next? A quick jury? Life in prison?

But the cops were treating us like heroes.

Shaking at the shock of my good luck, I understood we were not to be arrested. Something so dramatic and deadly had turned into something good. We had apparently stopped a murderer from killing again. The cops didn't ask very many other questions – as if they didn't want to know.

The sheriff made a statement outside Art's house to a single TV crew with a light and camera: Keystone's only news outlet.

It was over.

Art took me aside later, after the coroner had removed the killer's body and we were allowed back inside the house. "Bull Ruby is dead."

I looked in amazement at him. "He is? How do you know?"

His eyes searched mine and his mouth chewed on an answer.

I felt like I was being weighed, judged.

He finally said, "Couple of our guys sought him out. Paid him back for Tequila's death."

My mouth was dropped open. It seemed... right. "Good..."

His eyes softened and his ghost of a smile returned. "I'm glad you think so. That also removes the last link between you and anyone from Spokane wanting to seek you out."

"Except maybe my father."

His eyes colored with curiosity and concern. "Would you want to see him?"

The idea was so revolting I jerked. "No!" Then quieter, "Never..."

"Then it looks like Keystone has added a new carpenter."

I looked around at the mess. "Who cleans all this blood?"

He laughed. "Restoration company. They clean up messy things like suicides."

"Who pays for that?"

"We do."

I looked around at all the paper and brochures. "You never meant to pay him off?"

His face went from soft to hard. "I always meant to kill him."

But that, too, sounded right.

EPILOGUE

Ghost

He had what he wanted.

This girl had stepped into his life, looking up at him from under her frizzy curls, and stolen his heart. He should spank her for the audacity. Instead, he loved her.

Naked in bed, moving inside her, he remembered back to the events of the previous month. The shock had worn off and their love had bloomed forth brighter than before.

She gave herself to him, surrendering to his need.

But that wasn't exactly true, was it? Even underneath him, looking up adoringly, it wasn't her who had given up. It was he who had surrendered to her.

The doom of it rattled him. Treasurer of the Iron Crows, known for scowling at everyone, was smitten like a weak kitten over a woman who worked with wood.

The wonderful ecstasy of their lovemaking was a spike driven into his freedom. But he wanted that spike.

Thrusting into her, looking down at her, he knew what he had to do.

Something in her eyes told him she was holding back. A secret that only pushed him faster toward his fateful decision.

One last night of making love before he ended it?

He whispered to her sadly, "I love you, Jessie Windham. I always will..."

~ ~ ~

Ghost knew today was the day. This day, he would end the relationship.

She was at the chop shop, putting up frames. Building them a living space inside and a bunch of shelves for parts.

Why not there?

He got onto his Harley as if a dead man walking to his execution. He didn't want to end it; he had to.

The rumble of his machine reminded him of his freedom he had given up with her. But today, he was setting that straight. He roared through town, mindless of the speed limit.

He had a mission.

People looked as he passed – the scowling biker bad boy, on his way to do something... bad. His vest proudly displayed, he wanted to be wearing it when he told her. Not so much as a shield, but a reminder to her of just what he was. Or maybe it was a shield. Hiding what? His insecurity?

He gritted his teeth. He was not insecure. He was going to show her what a dominant alpha male did when he was forced.

The chop shop had a few cars in it: Stiff making good on his idea of bringing outside money into Keystone. He rode slowly to the back of the yard – to the warehouse.

Lumber was stacked outside.

Would she continue working after he told her? She better – despite her feelings.

He dismounted and strode in, all scowls, growls, and clouded looks. He saw her, leaning over a frame on the floor. He shook his head, dismissing the distraction of her sexy figure. No, today was going to be different. "Jessie!" he barked.

She looked around with that dizzy look of "What?"

Her curls and her face... so beautiful.

He stood over her, looking down. This was it. Time for the end. The end of everything.

She tilted her head at him, a little smile playing at her pretty lips.

He knelt, pulling from his pocket the ring. "I love you Jessie, and I don't ever want to live without you. Marry me. Please."

Her smile grew, something secret flashing in her eyes.

"Please..." he begged.

She fell on him in a hug, burying her nose into his neck. "Yes, I will."

Ghost was dumbfounded. "You will?"

"Of course I will..." She trailed off.

He felt the hesitation. "But what?"

"It's good you asked. I'm fairly certain I'm pregnant."

He began laughing in disbelief. "What?"

Flats came into the warehouse and stopped, his hands wrapped in a shop rag.

She said, "Yep."

Ghost leaned his head back and laughed louder, and then louder, and finally turning into a whoop of joy. "I'm going to teach him to scowl."

She kissed him. "I'm going to teach her to pout."

Their embrace was just beginning.

Thank you for reading GHOST. All reviews are greatly appreciated.

This is a standalone story in the Iron Crows MC world. To read more about the Iron Crows, check out *Captive Couple*, *Working Couple*, *Learning Couple* and *Bonded Couple* by Laran Mithras. While these aren't strict romances, the four-book series might give insight into some of the characters and events leading up to *Ghost*.

Enjoy!