

**Title:** More Than Meets The Eye

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**Summary:** With the longed-for Prospect cut on his back at last, Kozik has twelve months to prove he's got what it takes to be Samcro. When a protection run that was supposed to be easy goes wrong, he gets the chance to show the club what he can bring to the table.

## **More Than Meets The Eye By Scribblesinink**

### **Chapter 1**

"Hey, dude, Mom wants to see you."

On his back under a truck, all Kozik could see of the speaker were a pair of white sneakers and jean cuffs. Lack of visuals didn't stop him from recognizing it was Jax, though. He rolled out from under the truck, squinting up at the kid in the bright sun.

"In the office." Jax gave him a brash grin. "Better not keep her waiting."

Kozik grimaced, clambering to his feet and wiping his hands on an already greasy towel. During his very first week at T-M, he'd learned Gemma wasn't merely Clay's wife; she also ran the garage office with an iron fist. And, as he'd discovered once he'd gotten his Prospect cut, that included the club house for everything not directly club related. She could allocate jobs and work details like a pro football coach, herd mechanics and croweaters alike, and took no shit from anyone. He'd found out, too, that she played favorites when assigning tasks; it'd do him no favors to ignore her and end up on her shit list.

Knocking on the door frame, he poked his head into the office. "Jax says you were lookin' for me?"

Gemma looked up from the work sheets she was sorting. "I did. Could use your help this weekend."

"Sure." Kozik walked further into the office, grateful for the brief respite it offered from the relentless late summer sun that was baking the oil-stained concrete outside. "What'cha need?"

"Someone to do some heavy lifting."

He bunched his muscles to show them off. "Got the right man for that." After he'd gotten clean from the H, time spent hiking the hills with Missy and pumping iron in the club house had quickly put him back in shape. Next, he planned on resurrecting his boxing skills. His right cross had gone weak, and his left hook was practically non-existent these days. Tig had said to ask Chibs for advice. Apparently the Scotsman had boxed back in Ireland, before some kinda drama—which Kozik was still trying to figure out the details for—had made him up sticks for California.

Gemma curled a lip. "Yeah, you're a genuine Rambo." She turned around to root through her purse. "It's charity, so you won't get paid. We do this every year to raise money for the high school." She handed him a sheet of paper. "Address is on there. Be there at eight. Grounds open at noon, and we gotta lot of prep to do to get everyone's booths up and running."

Kozik glanced down at the flyer. "*Charming Dairy, Look Like Elvis, Family Egg Toss, Sam Crow Chili...*?" He raised his head, unable to keep a smile from twitching his mouth, though he probably shouldn't make fun of a project Gemma seemed to care about. The way her brows drew together at his grin told him he was right, and he struggled to wipe it away.

"It's called *Taste of Charming*." Gemma jutted out a hip and planted a hand on it. "You got a problem with that?"

"No ma'am." Kozik shook his head, biting the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning again. Then his eye caught something else on the flyer, and his amusement melted away for real. "Um... This says here it lasts until ten in the evening. You need me to stick around till then?"

"And afterwards," Gemma confirmed. "Who d'you think is gonna take everything down? The do-good fairies?"

"No, but—," Kozik combed his fingers through his hair, "I got this... uh, thing for the club in the evening." Clay had signed him up for the Saturday run, escorting one of Unser's trucks taking expensive electronics from Hayward to Stockton. Gemma's request placed him for a serious dilemma. He didn't want to end up on Gemma's bad side, but he also needed to stay on Clay's good side. Plus those runs paid good money, and Gemma's charity event didn't. He wasn't as strapped for cash as he had been, but cash in hand still wasn't something he'd

turn down for no good reason.

"The thing for Wayne?" At Kozik's blank look, Gemma clarified, "Unser."

"Uh, yeah, it is." Kozik dipped his head to cover his surprise that she knew about it.

Gemma heaved a breath. "Dammit, Clay. Taking all my manpower. Well, okay, I'll ask him to gimme some of the regular mechanics for clean-up. Ope and Jax, too. We'll make sure you and that other kid—," She must be talking about Boots, Kozik's fellow Prospect, "—get done in time to go on this damned run. But—," Whatever sympathy had been in her face disappeared entirely, "I still expect you at 8 am sharp."

He tapped his temple with a two-fingered salute. "Yes, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes. "And don't call me ma'am."

oOo

"Dude, you and Hap and Mouse get to have all the fun." Jax let out an exaggerated sigh. "While I gotta spend the day with my *mother*." He and Kozik had been set to erecting the booths for *Taste of Charming*, and he grunted as he helped Kozik push a tent pole upright so they could connect it with the cross bar. "Only for another year, though. Then I'll be Samcro and she can find someone else to boss around."

Kozik made a non-committal noise. Four months as a Prospect wasn't long enough to figure out every single one of the club's unwritten rules, but he doubted there was a force in the universe able to keep Gemma from trying to push people around. And that included Clay, much as the president would protest if anyone said so. Kozik didn't think her son was going to be any match for her, with or without a Reaper on his back. "You gonna patch in?"

"Uh huh. Me and Ope both. Destiny, you know." Jax pointed across the field to where Piney's kid was helping Unser and a couple of deputies install the police department's grill. Kozik couldn't help let out another wry chuckle at the banner: *Grilling suspects for forty years*. Who the fuck came up with these crazy slogans?

"So, why in another year? You got a ride, ain't you?"

"Clay won't let us patch in until we're eighteen. *No highschoolers at the table*," Jax mimicked Clay's gruff voice, while rolling his eyes to let Kozik know what he thought about that. In his normal voice he added, "School sucks, anyway."

Kozik snorted a laugh. Hadn't he felt the same way at seventeen? "Stick with it, kid. You never know when you'll need that education."

"That's what everybody says." Jax puffed up his chest. "What good is trig or social science, when all I want is a cut and a Harley, huh?"

"Like I said, you never know." Kozik shook the booth frame, testing its sturdiness, and nodded with satisfaction.

"But—Oh, hey, baby."

Realizing that last bit wasn't meant for him, Kozik looked up. A slim, dark-haired girl had molded herself against Jax, offering up her face for a kiss. Kozik had seen her around the club house a few times, but he didn't think she was one of the club girls.

Jax kissed her, deeply, and then pulled back. "Tara, this is Kozik. Koz, this is Tara." He smiled down at her and added, "My old lady."

"Hi." Tara gave Kozik a reserved nod as she twined her arm through Jax's.

"Hey." Kozik returned the greeting while he bent to grab the corner of the canvas that would cover the booth frame. "Old lady, huh?" He swallowed down the *Aren't you two a little young?* that was forming itself on his lips. No need to let on how ancient they made him feel, even though he only had about fifteen years or so on them. It seemed like a lifetime.

"Uh huh." Jax nudged Tara toward Kozik. "Show him."

She smiled shyly and turned her back, hitching up her T-shirt far enough for Kozik to see a tattoo peeking over the edge of her jeans. The skin around it was still a little red and puffy.

"It's a crow," Jax explained, unnecessarily. Kozik could see that. "For Samcro."

"Neat."

"All the old ladies got one." Jax grimaced and lowered his voice. "But don't tell my mom. She—."

"Jackson?" Gemma's voice cut across the grounds. Tara let out a nervous chuckle and quickly stuffed her shirt back into her jeans.

Jax groaned. "Damn, I swear she's psychic sometimes." He shrugged. "Gotta go."

Boss lady calls." With a jerk of his head at the half-done tent, he asked, "You okay with this?"

"Yup." Kozik waved him off. "Go. Don't keep your mother waiting."

Jax laughed. "Yeah, she might spike my chili with extra pepper or something." He kissed Tara again and then trotted off toward where Gemma was tapping her foot impatiently. Tara remained behind. Kozik glanced at her, and she gave him a half-shrug.

"Gemma doesn't like me very much."

Kozik grinned. "Not many people she likes, I think." Clay's wife was a very formidable woman, but not an easy one to deal with.

Tara hiccuped a quick laugh of her own and gestured at the canvas. "Need some help with that?"

"Nah, I'm good." He was almost done, anyway.

"Oh, okay." She hesitated another moment, before she wandered off, looking lost enough to make him feel sorry for turning her down. He watched her go, her Old Lady tattoo hidden under her shirt. He hoped she wasn't gonna regret it.

Without thinking about it, his hand touched the name etched into his own neck. He hadn't been much older than Tara and Jax when he'd hooked up with Jenn and believed what they had was true love that would last forever. Getting the tat in his neck had hurt like hell, if not nearly as much as discovering a few years later that he'd meant far less to her than she had to him.

Shaking his head, locking the thoughts of his cheating ex away in the deeper recesses of his mind, Kozik turned back to finishing the booth before Gemma called him over to set him yet another task.

oOo

Gemma kept Kozik busy and on his toes the whole day. After he'd finished putting up the stalls, she had him lug heavy boxes, roll in and connect the gas cylinder for the chili stove, set up folding chairs and rickety tables, and run and fetch anything else she needed. He barely had a spare minute to even grab himself something to eat from the food available at the fair.

At last, the time came for him to head for the club house. He didn't waste a second's thought, fleeing the charity grounds as quickly as he could. Even so, he was the last to arrive for the pre-run brief.

"Sorry," he muttered to the men already gathered in the chapel as he trotted inside and shut the doors. "Gemma, you know."

Clay uttered a soft grunt and unfolded a map on the redwood table. "Ok, boys, this is the plan."

They gathered around: Mouse, who'd gotten his nickname after Tig'd told him to "stop trippin' about like a goddamn rodent"; Boots, ten years Kozik's junior; and Happy, in charge of their merry little band.

Mouse, Boots and Kozik leaned over the map, but Happy remained standing a bit off to the side. Probably didn't need to look. Since Kozik's knowledge of the area wasn't as extensive as Happy's, and he couldn't afford to fuck this up, he was gonna pay close attention.

"Pickup's in Hayward." Clay jabbed a finger to point out the town. "You're meeting the truck at Unser's yard, here in Charming, and you're to follow it from there." Hap grunted something and Clay shot him a smirk. "Yeah, doubt anyone would wanna mess with an empty truck, but Unser asked for it, so there you have it." He tapped the map again. "Wait for them to load the goods, then on to Stockton for delivery. Unser says to take Route 4, not the 205."

Kozik estimated the distances and travel times, and added waiting time while the truck was loaded. Run shouldn't take more than five, six hours, even if they took the smaller road the chief had suggested.

"Why?" Mouse asked, frowning at the map.

"Less mileage. Less visibility," Happy grunted.

"Highway's a lot faster." Mouse wasn't about to concede the point. "I'd say—." Both Hap and Clay fixed Mouse with a stare. Several inches shorter than either of them, he seemed to shrink even further and snapped his mouth shut so fast his teeth clicked. Kozik clenched his teeth as not to grin.

"You have any idea how many trucks get hijacked along the interstate every year?" Clay's tone was deceptively mild.

Mouse colored. "Um, no. But—."

"Then shut your fuckin' trap." Done with the argument, Clay turned to the rest of them. "Any more questions? No? Good." He folded the map and held it out to Happy. Hap sneered and walked off without taking it. Clay chuckled and shoved the map at Kozik instead. "Ya never know."

Stuffing the folded map inside his cut, Kozik scurried after the others.

Thirty minutes later, they were riding west on 580, just ahead of a truck whose driver had blinked at their appearance and grumbled he didn't need no damn escort. Happy had ignored the man, as he did anything he had no patience for, and simply told him what route he wanted the truck to take, then waited for the driver to nod resignedly and put his rig in gear. At a nod and a grunt from Hap, they'd settled into rolling in tight formation: Hap in the lead, Mouse off to Hap's right and half a bike behind, Kozik and Boots following side by side.

Miracle was rumbling contentedly under Kozik, eating up the miles as she faithfully carried him toward Hayward. She might not be as sleek as Happy's spanking-new Dyna Super Glide, but she was his and she was serving him well enough. With a few more runs like this, he could seriously start thinking about a Dyna of his own, but Kozik doubted he'd give Miracle up any time soon. He'd poured too much of his soul into her restoration to trade her in so easily for a newer model.

He glanced to the side, watching the passing landscape through his night goggles. It was a good night for riding: the sky was clear, stars glittered above them and the moon was a fat half-disk. A soft breeze coming in from the west carried the smell of something blooming in the dark. Kozik didn't even care that they had to putter along at the same pace as a lumbering truck doing the speed limit rather than going full out; he was enjoying the ride far too much to let the lack of pace get on his nerves.

They reached Hayward in just under an uneventful hour. At the town line, they shifted places, allowing the truck to lead after the driver said he knew exactly how to get to the warehouse. Pulling up to a gate in a man-high chainlink fence surrounding an industrial complex, the driver lowered his window and stuck his head out. "You guys wait out here. Don't wanna make people nervous with you lot around."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mouse puffed himself up, ready to be offended. Happy held up a hand to silence his objections and waved an acknowledgement to the driver. Then he back-walked his bike to the curb across the street, killed the engine and waiting for Kozik and the others to follow his example.

"Why—?" Mouse began again as the noise of the engines faded.

"Don't you get it?" Kozik mentally added a *you moron*. Mouse was always rubbing him the wrong way, and from the murderous glare Kozik got in return, the feeling was mutual. "They don't want us to see what they're loading."

Made sense, too. A late load on a Saturday evening wouldn't be entirely legit. Kozik had been around long enough to work out the club's income came from an odd mixture of legal and not-so-legal activities. And Chief Unser wasn't a by-the-book kinda cop, either. Best for everyone if the club knew as little as possible about what they were escorting.

Straddling his bike, Kozik lit up a cigarette and tilted his head back. The night was cool, but not unpleasantly so, and he didn't mind being outside. From where they sat, they could hear male voices shouting commands and the whine of machinery. Otherwise, everything was quiet, except for the occasional car passing by, most of the drivers speeding up a fraction as they caught sight of the four men sitting on their bikes.

"Hey, Hap? How's Mrs L?" Kozik hadn't seen Hap's mom since she'd looked after him ten months before, but he made a point of asking Happy about her once in a while.

Happy glanced over at him. "Good."

"And her car?" Kozik fixed a rattle for her she hadn't wanted to ask her son about, and her recommendation, through Happy, had been partly why Kozik had gotten a job as a mechanic at T-M.

Another glance, markedly less patient this time. "Still runnin'. Now shut up."

Kozik chuckled. Making idle talk wasn't among Happy's strong points.

He took another drag from his cigarette and glanced sideways. Boots had brought a pack of cards and was playing solitaire on the saddle. Kid hadn't said a word all night. At least, not that Kozik had noticed. Then again, one of the nice things about riding was that it offered very little opportunity for chitchat.

Beyond him, Mouse, living up to his nickname, was fidgeting restlessly on his bike, his jitteriness getting on Kozik's nerves and making him anxious in return. He warned himself stay quiet, to not let Mouse get to him, and tried to let the night breeze soothe him.

"Yo! Kozik, go see what's the hold-up." Mouse jerked his head toward the lot as he snapped out the order. "Tell 'em to step it up. We ain't got all night, and I got my eye on one of them new sweetbutts." He rubbed his hands together as if in anticipation.

Kozik tightened his jaw: though the order was reasonable, something in Mouse's tone put his back up. He barely managed to bite back the retort that sprung to

his lips, aware Happy was watching them with those dark, unreadable eyes. Something in Happy's expression told Kozik he was very aware Kozik was thinking about smacking Mouse over the head and telling him to go fuck himself, and was waiting to see what Kozik would do.

Taking a deep breath, Kozik swallowed his annoyance and forced himself to calm down. The guys all took turns trying to rile him or Boots up, ordering them around and giving them the shittiest jobs they could think of. Sucked being a Prospect. Not quite as bad as boot camp, but a close second. And dammit, he'd paid his dues.

Mouse was the worst, though, carrying a genuine mean streak a mile wide. He seemed to take particular pleasure in lording his full-patch over the Prospects and letting them know they were considered the lowest of the low on the totem pole. Rationally, Kozik understood the bastard was compensating for his own miserable time, but that didn't mean he liked it any better. Yet he had to suck it up if he ever wanted to get his own top rocker, so he shrugged off his frustration, dropped his cigarette into the pavement and ground it out, and then jogged off, making his way through the still-open gate fencing off the warehouse lot.

He rounded the corner of the building. The truck was parked about thirty yards further on and the driver just climbing back into his cab. He froze for a moment as he saw Kozik. Then he gave a small wave in acknowledgement—*on my way*—and slammed the door. Reassured, Kozik turned back to warn the others to get ready.

Abruptly, he stopped in his tracks. The truck was facing the wrong way, pointed toward another exit at the far end of the lot. What the hell was guy thinking? If Kozik hadn't come take a peek, they might never have known the truck had left the compound. Was the idiot *trying* to lose them?

Sprinting back through the gate toward where the bikes were, he waved frantically. "He's going out the other side!"

Mouse looked confused. "What?"

Boots reacted faster. He scooped up his cards and stuffed them into an inner pocket. Happy, of course, had already fired up his engine at the first sign of trouble and was clipping on his goggles. An instant later they rolled off, Kozik catching up as they turned the corner. The truck's tail lights, far, far ahead of them, were barely visible. They opened up their throttles, quickly closing the distance.

As they pulled up behind the truck, Happy waved for Kozik and Boots to hang back while he and Mouse swerved out to pass. Kozik steered to his left, riding as

close as he dared to the middle of the road, until he could peer past the truck. Mouse was already out of sight, but Happy was riding in the wrong lane, using hand gestures to ask the driver a wordless "What the fuck?".

In the reflection of the side mirror, Kozik saw the driver shrug and wave an apology. Happy glanced back and, catching sight of Kozik, pointed back at him, indicating he and Boots should stay behind the truck, before speeding up and disappearing from sight.

Even as he did so, the driver shifted gear and the truck's exhaust vomited a cloud of black smoke. Kozik groused under his breath: thanks to that dickhead in front, he and Boots were gonna be inhaling half-processed diesel fumes for the next hour and a half, instead of freely rolling through the clean night.

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## Chapter 2

The experience of riding behind the truck proved even worse than Kozik had feared. On the highway, with the driver shifting gear less often and picking up speed, the level of the fumes they had to breathe had dropped. But as soon as they turned off the interstate and began winding through the hills, the truck started barfing like a sick dog. And if that wasn't bad enough, he and Boots were practically riding blind.

*Think about the money*, Kozik recited over and over to himself. The thick envelope Clay would press into his hand after they got home to the club house was the only thing making the trip bearable. Even working for Gemma at the fair would've been preferable.

*You guys have all the fun*. Jax's words echoed in Kozik's mind and he barked a harsh laugh, loud enough for Boots to hear. The other Prospect shot him a strange look. Sure, maybe *Happy* was having fun, out in front, but Kozik doubted Jax would consider it good times if he were in Kozik's place.

The truck coughed another burst of thick, black smoke as it started up the next hill. Kozik resisted the urge to wave a hand in front of his face; that'd only make it worse.

*Think of the money...*

The truck belched again and almost as if by unspoken agreement, he and Boots fell back a handful of yards—screw Hap and his orders to stay on the truck's tail. The money was good, but not good enough to risk dying of lung cancer or some such shit. With more space between them and the truck, the air became a little

more breathable but they still couldn't see a damn thing apart from the truck's bulk outlined against the star-studded sky.

*Think of the money....*

Unexpectedly, the truck's brake lights went on, blindingly bright in the dark night. Kozik cursed, narrowing his eyes to slits to not lose his night vision. Fuckin' driver. What the fuck was he thinking, hitting the brakes here? They were on a flat stretch of straight road. But the truck's brake lights kept burning and it quickly became obvious the truck was gonna come to a full stop—smack in the middle of nowhere. Kozik exchanged a look with Boots. What the hell...?

"I'll go see—," Kozik shouted, straining to be heard over the growl of their engines and their own speed snatching the words from his mouth. The *rattatat* of a burst of automatic gun fire cut his words short. Acting on instinct, he braked fully, slammed down the kickstand, and jumped off the bike while yanking Boots off his own saddle and shoving him to the ground all in a single move. Kid apparently hadn't recognized the sound for what it was.

"Jesus, dude, what—?" Boots' voice was muffled as he fought Kozik off.

"That's gunfire, you idiot," Kozik snarled. He ignored Boots' shocked intake of breath as he rolled away from him and scrambled for shelter behind one of the truck's rear wheels. Where the fuck was the gunfire coming from? And who the fuck was shooting at who?

After a moment, he determined the shots were coming from straight ahead. Made sense, too. He'd bet good money someone had laid a roadblock to ambush them. So—. Shit, what was up with the guys riding in front? Even as the thought crossed his mind, another gun joined the racket, firing off multiple shots. A handgun, by the sound of it. Thank fuck. If Happy and Mouse were able to return fire, maybe they could all get out of this jam.

He snatched a glance in Boots' direction. The kid was pressing himself so tightly to the pavement it looked as if he were trying to burrow into the ground. No help there. Shaking his head, Kozik started to crawl forward alongside the truck, keeping himself as close as possible to the frame. He groped for his own gun in its shoulder holster, silently thanking Tig for providing it. Another round of shots made him duck his head instinctively.

Mouse shrieked, "They shot me! Oh my God, I'm gonna die!"

Kozik crept on and found Mouse slouched against the truck's front wheel, clutching his left arm with his right hand, a trickle of blood seeping through his fingers. Kozik couldn't tell much in the dark, and he didn't want to take the time

to check more closely, but considering the amount of noise Mouse was making, he wasn't nearly as close to death as he seemed to think.

"Shut up, you damn fool!" Kozik hissed as he found a spot behind the next tire. "Or d'you want to let 'em know exactly where to aim next?"

Mouse's eyes were round, the whites showing. "N-no. But they shot me," he complained in a softer voice that still held a note of outrage.

Dismissing Mouse from his thoughts, Kozik snaked under the truck until he could squint up at the mirror on the other side, trying get a glimpse of the driver's reflection. He couldn't make out a thing. The guy'd probably ducked under the dash soon as the shooting started. They could check for him— after they'd neutralized the threat.

Kozik shifted his gaze forward, peering around the truck's fender. Happy, gun in hand, was crouched between his own bike and Mouse's. Both hogs were standing upright, which meant the guys had had time to properly put down the stands before the shit hit the fan. The slight angle they were parked at also said that someone—Hap, would be Kozik's guess—had been wary enough to make sure the bikes could offer some cover when they pulled up. The reason for Hap's caution was obvious enough: a dozen or so yards beyond the bikes, a couple busted up cars were blocking the road, jammed tight bumper to bumper, warning lights flashing crazily.

Taking a chance, Kozik sprinted over to join Happy, dropping behind Mouse's Harley. He winced involuntarily as a bullet *twanged* against its frame. "Staged accident?"

Happy grunted in agreement, throwing Kozik a quick glance before once more turning his attention forward and pulling the trigger again. His shots were calm, measured, and, judging by a cry of pain drifting up from behind the cars, well-aimed.

"Shit." Kozik blew out a breath. Shoulda seen that coming. One of the oldest tricks in the book. On the other hand, there'd been no real indication anyone was gonna try and hijack Unser's truck, in spite of the chief's insistence on a protection squad. Wasn't the first run Unser had hired the club for, either, and from what Tig had said, usually the Sons' presence was enough on its own to discourage anyone from entertaining wrong ideas about who the cargo should belong to.

"Give us truck," a heavily accented voice shouted from beyond the cars. "Then you can go free."

Kozik attempted to place the accent, but he couldn't quite manage it. Sounded European, he reckoned. German, maybe, or Eastern bloc. He tilted his head slightly in Happy's direction. "How d'you wanna play it?" Spotting movement near one of the cars, he fired a few shots from his own gun. The form disappeared, but he wasn't sure if he'd scored a hit or just scared off whoever it was.

Happy glanced around to take in their surroundings, and then looked back over his shoulder. "Where's the Prospect?"

Kozik chuckled wryly. "Pissin' his pants, probably."

Happy showed his teeth in a humorless grin. "Mouse!" he snarled. "Get over here."

"What?" Mouse squeaked. "I'm wounded."

Happy twisted around and aimed his gun at Mouse. "Gonna be dead soon if you don't get your ass movin'."

Grumbling to himself, Mouse crabbed over on hands and knees, confirming Kozik's impression his injury wasn't as bad as he was making it out to be.

"Got your gun?" When Mouse nodded, Happy pointed at the fake wreckage. "Aim and shoot. And fuckin' keep shootin'." He turned to Kozik. "Gotta flank 'em. Drive 'em out. You go right. I take left."

Kozik cracked a grin and raised his gun. "Gotcha. Let's get the motherfuckers."

Happy counted to three, and they both ducked out from between the bikes. Behind them, Mouse started up a barrage of shots as Kozik made for the ditch running alongside his side of the road and dived into it head first. Righting himself, he made sure he had a clear path around the cars, before raising his eyes an inch over the edge of the ditch to check in with Happy. From the far side of the road, Hap dipped his head once; he'd found a route through the shrub too. Kozik returned the nod and then, bending low, jogged along the ditch, doing what he could to stay out of sight until he was level with the cars. Praying everyone was too busy with the intermittent gun fire Mouse was laying down to watch their flanks, he snaked out of the ditch on his belly.

A burst of fresh shots erupted on the far side of the road. Kozik immediately added his own fire to the clamor, despite having no clear target as yet. The result of the counter-attack was very satisfying: the hijackers started screaming and shouting something Kozik couldn't make out but which must've been a string of commands, because, almost immediately, several shapes popped up into

Kozik's view. They dashed away into the night before he could take proper aim and he held his fire, unsure where Hap had gotten to and not wanting to risk hitting him. Hidden in the darkness in the direction the figures had fled, a pickup roared to life. Its tires squealed on the pavement as it sped into the distance, lights off.

"Hap?" Kozik called into the silence that descended.

"Yeah." Happy materialized out of the darkness like a ghost, startling Kozik enough that he reflexively shifted his gun to take aim before he caught himself.

"Think they're all gone?"

"Better make sure." Hap's teeth glinted in the abandoned cars' emergency lights.

Together, they wound their way through the wreckage. The first two bodies they found weren't moving, but the third groaned when Kozik nudged it with his boot. Happy hauled the injured guy up by his shirt and shoved him at Kozik. "Take him to the truck."

"You okay alone?"

Happy awarded him a glare and faded back into the night without a word, presumably to check for any other survivors.

"Course you are," Kozik muttered under his breath. He dragged the wounded man past the car wrecks and dumped him on the shoulder of the road near the truck. The man moaned again and the glow from the truck's headlamps revealed a bright red stain rapidly spreading out from a wound close to his groin. The light also showed that the guy was white, with closely cropped dark hair and pasty skin. Probably in his late twenties or early thirties, Kozik guessed.

"That one of them?" Mouse came swaggering over, keeping his left arm pressed tightly against his ribs. "Goddamned sonofabitch!" He raised his gun with his right hand and took aim at the man's head.

"Whoa!" Kozik swatted Mouse's arm away and the bullet *thunked* into the dirt at the wounded man's feet. "Are you out of your damn mind?"

Mouse's face was twisted with anger. "They fucking shot me!"

Kozik snorted a laugh. "Yeah, you mentioned that."

The next instant, he was staring down the barrel of Mouse's gun. *Fuck*. He tried to recall how many shots Mouse had fired, but he'd hardly been in a position to

count. "Look, you can't shoot the guy, yet," he pointed out. He fought to keep his words calm and reasonable, since he didn't want to startle the fool into accidentally pulling the trigger. Not while he was aiming at Kozik's head. "We need answers. Who. Why. *How*."

Mouse blinked, some of his fury turning into uncertainty.

"He's right, dude." Boots peered around the truck's front fender. "We're off the main track. How could anyone know the route we'd be taking?" As he stepped out from his cover, Kozik saw his earlier guess had been right on the money: Boots had pissed his pants. He held his tongue. Best not draw attention to it.

Mouse lowered his gun, slowly. "Well, yeah, okay, I guess."

Puffing out a breath, Kozik turned his back on Mouse and Boots and crouched in front of the wounded guy. With the amount of blood still pumping from the wound, the man wasn't gonna last much longer, so they had to hurry if they wanted answers.

Leaning forward, Kozik lightly slapped the man's face until his bleary eyes slowly focused on him. "Hey. How ya doin'? Not so good, huh? See this guy?" Kozik gestured behind him to where he could sense Mouse hovering impatiently. "He's kinda pissed at ya. Would rather put another bullet in you and finish it. Me? I'm a nice guy. I just wanna ask you a few questions. Answer them, and I'll see you get to a doctor. Understand?"

The man's vision cleared a little and, with a sneer, he spat in the dirt.

Without a second thought, Kozik grabbed his injured thigh and squeezed. Throwing his head back, the man screamed. Behind Kozik, someone gagged. Boots, Kozik reckoned.

"Okay, okay!" the man managed to force out around a moan.

Kozik let go of him. He should probably feel more guilty about torturing an already wounded man. Then again, Mouse was right about one thing: this fucker had *shot* at them. "So, start talking."

oOo

Tig's jaw was tight as he rode beside Clay through the dark night. He'd hardly believed his ears when Hap's call had come in twenty minutes ago. Someone had dared attack a truck protected by Samcro? On their own turf, even? An act like that wouldn't go unanswered. But first they had to deal with the immediate fall-out. Shit, this was so not the night he'd planned.

A pale yellow aura bloomed against the black sky ahead—the glow from the truck's headlamps at the ambush site. Another half-mile and someone was waving them down with a flashlight. Kozik; Tig recognized him easily, though he wasn't wearing his cut, something else that added to Tig's unease. Clay held up a warning hand for the Sons riding behind and pulled to a stop.

"What's the latest?" Clay demanded, raising his voice to be heard over the rumble of a half dozen Harley engines idling.

"Three dead bad guys. Mouse got clipped." Kozik wiped his free hand down the front of his shirt. There were suspicious-looking dark streaks around the cuff of the sleeve. "He'll live, though."

Chibs rolled up from his position in the rear. "I'll take a peek a 'im." Clay nodded, and Chibs rode on to where the truck was parked a hundred yards further along the road.

Tig turned his attention back to Kozik, bopping on the balls of his feet, which made the flashlight's beam dance crazily. Tig frowned deepened. "So what you doin' all the way out here?"

"Turning back traffic." Kozik gestured with the flashlight. "Happy's got Boots on the other end doin' the same. Ain't many people on the road, but we reckoned, the less eyeballs, the better."

"Good thinking." Clay's fingers curled more tightly on his handlebars, readying to get going again. "Unser's on his way. When he gets here, let him through." Kozik dipped his head in acknowledgment, and Clay rode forward, the rest of the club following in his wake.

Tig hung back and let them pass. "You okay?" he asked, once the sound of the Harleys had faded enough he could make himself understood without shouting.

Kozik huffed a laugh. "Not a scratch." Then, as if he realized what Tig was really asking, he hitched up his jeans, ducked his head, and repeated, "Yeah, I'm good. Don't mean nothing, huh?"

"No, it doesn't." Tig slapped a gloved palm against Kozik's shoulder in acknowledgement and rode on. Guy seemed as okay as could be expected under the circumstances.

A few minutes later, he joined Clay who, along with Bobby, was talking to Happy. "Kozik got a few answers outta him 'fore he died," Hap was saying, jerking a thumb toward a blood-covered corpse. "Bunch of Eastern Europeans,

come over couple years ago. Said they got hired on for the job."

Tig's brows shot up. A hit for hire? That changed the field. "He say who?"

Happy shook his head. "Bitch croaked on us before we could get it outta him."

"How'd they know where to be? This ain't exactly the usual route to Stockton," Tig pointed out.

"Shit." Clay scrubbed a hand across his face. "Unser picked it."

Tig whipped around to stare at Clay. *Unser* set them up? But why?

"Wanna ask Jerry 'bout that." Happy pulled back his lips, smiling without smiling. Another jerk of his thumb, and only now did Tig see another man huddled on the ground between the bikes. Mouse was standing over him, gun drawn, while Chibs fussed at Mouse's left arm with a bandage. A frayed ball cap was drawn low over the stranger's eyes, and he was dressed in jeans and flannel, with the flabby gut common to a lot of professional truckers.

Bobby raised his eyebrows. "That the driver?"

"Yup. Fessed up he called 'em from Hayward. They knew exactly where we'd be, and when we'd get here."

"Goddammit! He tell you if Unser knows about this?" Clay's thinking must've been running along the same lines as Tig's. If Unser had sold them out, that'd be bad. Real bad.

"Says no. I believe him." Hap offered another smirk. "Guy saw the way Kozik talked to the other guy."

"Huh." Clay made a noise. "Kozik, eh?"

"Yep." Happy's gaze slid to Tig's, before he turned back to Clay. "Dude did good. More 'n I can say 'bout the other two."

Glancing at Clay, Tig couldn't help the slight smile tugging at his mouth. Hearing words of praise for his old buddy gave him a kick; and coming from Hap, they'd mean a lot to Clay and the rest of the club. Not that Tig was surprised. Boots was a college drop-out, and Mouse some kinda small-time crook, while Kozik was an ex-Marine. They didn't exactly pussy around in the Corps. God knows, Tig should know.

The dull yellow glow of the truck's headlamps were joined by flashes of red and

blue: an approaching patrol car. Tig turned, squinting against the glare, and relaxed when he recognized Unser's stocky form behind the wheel.

"What the hell happened?" the chief demanded as soon as he'd hoisted out of the car.

Clay ambled over. "You tell me."

Unser blinked. "What's that mean?"

"Well," Clay slung an arm around Unser's shoulders as if they were the best of buddies. Judging by the concerned glance Unser darted sideways at Clay, he was very aware how fake the gesture was. Wheeling Unser around, Clay continued, "I got an injured brother. Three dead guys from Eastern Europe. And an attempted truck hijack. All on a route you *specifically* asked us to take...." Clay let his voice trail off meaningfully.

"Goddammit, you think *I* did this?" Unser ducked out from under Clay's arm. "I suggested this route to *throw off* any potential trouble."

"You knew something was up? " Clay's eyebrows jumped to his hairline. "And you didn't tell me? Shit, Wayne, I wouldn'ta sent the damned Prospects along if I'd known."

"Kozik'll keep his mouth shut," Tig interjected. He had no doubts about that. "Boots—."

"Boots damn well better!" Clay snarled.

Tig pressed his lips together. "He will." He'd tell Bobby, the kid's sponsor, to have a word with him. If that didn't help—. His hand touched the gun in his holster.

"See what you did?" Clay turned on Unser.

Unser sighed and threw up his hands. "I didn't *know*, alright. I... suspected. And you know you'd have demanded 'hazard pay' if I told ya. Then, if nothing happened, I'd be out another thousand bucks for no good reason."

"Goddammit." Clay sniffed. "Should make you pay anyway, for all the headache this is gonna cause me."

"Yeah, well," Unser hitched his belt, "shouldn't be too hard to keep shit under wraps. We're still inside Charming, so I'll handle it, okay?"

Tig stepped forward. "What made you think there might be trouble?"

Unser rolled his shoulders. "Underbid a competitor from Modesto on a contract a few weeks back. He didn't much like it." He scratched his balding head. "Not for this particular cargo, but—," he paused, sighing again, "I guess he reckoned I wouldn't make too much of a stink if he snatched it."

"This guy got a name?" Tig asked.

"Markoski. Markoski Truck Lines."

Clay met Tig's gaze over Unser's head. He smirked. "And *that* gives us the who."

"Still can't figure out how he'd know where to be, though," Unser muttered.

"C'mon." Tig gestured with his head for Unser to follow him. "Someone you should see."

He steered Unser toward where the truck driver knelt on the ground. Mouse was still standing guard, a white bandage neatly wrapped around his left arm. Chibs had disappeared off somewhere. Unser's stride faltered and he gave Tig a puzzled look as he recognized the guy. "Why—?"

Tig dipped his head. "There's your rat. He's the one told the thieves where to be."

"What?" Unser swung back round to the driver. "Jerry?"

Jerry cast them a terrified look. "Sorry, boss. Money was too good. And with Stace's medical bills—."

"Oh, shut the fuck up." Clay had followed them. Jerry's teeth clacked together as he did as he was told.

Unser sighed, turning away. "What'cha gonna do with him?"

"We?" Clay shrugged. "You know what *we'd* do. But he ain't our rat. Decision's yours."

Unser rubbed a hand over his neck. "Dammit. Ok." He swiveled back toward Jerry. "Get the hell outta here." He flapped a hand in the direction of Stockton. "Oh, and you're fired. Don't bother comin' by for severance pay."

Jerry clambered to his feet slowly. His gaze skittered from Mouse, who'd followed the movement with his gun and was scowling at him along the barrel,

to Clay and Tig, and then Unser. "Um...."

"Go on, dude, get goin'," Tig urged him. Without another word, Jerry set off at a lurching jog.

"Oh, hey, buddy." Clay called. Jerry froze mid-step. He turned back, shaking visibly. The terrified expression on his face betrayed he expected to be gunned down any moment now. "Don't you ever show your face in Charming again. If you do—," Clay paused for effect, then flicked a hand at Mouse, "I'mma let him take a real shot."

For a moment, Jerry looked puzzled. Then Mouse shifted the muzzle down a little, and pulled the trigger. A small cloud of dust popped up two inches in front of Jerry's feet as the bullet struck the ground. Jerry leaped half a foot in the air, before turning and scurrying away as fast as he could. Tig laughed out loud. He'd have preferred to put a bullet in the rat's graying skull for putting his brothers in danger, but he didn't think they'd see Jerry again any time soon.

"Now, chief," Clay drew Unser's attention away from his quickly disappearing former employee, "how we gonna handle this shitpile?"

Unser surveyed the debris cluttering the road unhappily: the abandoned wrecks, the bodies, the puddles of blood soaking into the dirt. "Best we make it all disappear, I guess. Nobody the wiser."

Tig had already anticipated Unser's response and was busy digging up his phone from his cut's inner pocket. "I'll get the tow truck out. And the Prospects can bury the bodies." Clay offered him a grim nod of thanks.

Listening to the distant line ringing and waiting for someone to pick up, Tig snapped his fingers to draw Mouse's attention. "You, go relieve Kozik." He flapped his hand. "And tell Chibs to take over from Boots."

Mouse pulled himself up. "Why—?" he began, with that whining note in his voice that was starting to grate on Tig more and more as time went on.

Tig glared. Goddamn dickhead never could take an order. "Need someone to haul those bodies." He arched an eyebrow. "Unless you're volunteering?"

Mouse bent his head down, shaking a *No*, and jogged off without another word, one hand cradling his injured arm. Tig sniffed, watching him go, until he heard a sleepy "Hullo?" at the other end of the line. Putting Mouse from his thoughts, he set to work seeing the mess got fixed.

The chapel windows were graying with the light of dawn by the time Tig followed Clay and Unser out into the club house common room. They'd dealt with the most pressing issues from the failed hijacking and, while there was plenty left to do, the rest could wait until they'd all gotten a bit of shut-eye.

With a nod and a grunted comment that he was going home and not to call him before noon, Clay escorted Unser out. Tig yawned widely, not bothering to hold it in. It'd been a fuckin' long night, and not at all in the fun way, with a sweetbutt in one hand and a cold beer in the other.

Kozik was sitting alone at the bar, nursing a drink. Boots was nowhere to be seen. Kid had probably gone home to change. On the couch, Mouse was relaying the story of how he'd gotten shot to anyone still around who'd listen. From the way he was going on, he'd single-handedly turned back the assault while on the brink of death.

One of these days, Tig reckoned, the idiot'd say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and if he got lucky, merely end up with his ass in jail. Tig kinda hoped that when he did, he'd get a cell mate named Bubba. No, he never should've patched Samcro; Tig regretted ever letting him have his vote. But Mouse had sweet-talked them all into givin' him his top rocker same way he used to charm old ladies out of their life savings or swindle businessmen out of their investment funds. Club had reckoned it was a skill they could use—and maybe that was true. Unfortunately, it came in a damned annoying package, and Tig was no longer sure the advantages were worth the headache.

Dismissing Mouse from his thoughts with a shake—with a bit of luck, the problem would take care of itself before it ever blew back on the club—Tig switched his focus back to his housemate. Kozik was scowling into his scotch, tapping a foot against the bar stool rhythmically, and repeatedly rubbing his palms on his knees. Too much fuckin' adrenaline still in his system. Not surprising, but that much juice needed an outlet, or it'd drive a man to serious drink—or worse. Luckily for Kozik, Tig reckoned he knew just the cure.

Surveying the club house, he quickly found what he wanted: a couple sweetbutts were whispering in the corner, heads together. He caught their eye. "Hey you." He crooked a finger to the blonde on the left. She came over, hips swaying, smiling expectantly. "Do me a favor, doll?"

Her smile widened. "Whatever you need, Tig." Her nails trailed down his arm. She looked to be a natural blonde, with big tits and legs that seemed to go on forever before they disappeared under a skirt barely covering her ass, and he hesitated a moment. Maybe he should—? Nah, he brushed off the thought before it was finished. Kozik needed it more. Besides, he'd promised he'd go

back to the house to check on the dog.

"See that guy?" He took her hand away from his arm and tilted his head in Kozik's direction. She followed with her gaze.

"The Prospect?"

"He's had a bit of a rough night. Think you can give him some comfort?"

Her eager expression dimmed. A Prospect would be far less of a catch than the sergeant-at-arms. She bit her lip and glanced back at him. "Favor to you, right?"

He smirked. "Yep."

She sighed. "Alright, then."

Tig watched her join Kozik at the bar, leaning against him so those big tits brushed his arm as she whispered something in his ear. Kozik gave a start, obviously having been deep in thought. He was quick enough to return her grin, though, and say something in reply that made her laugh. Putting her hand on his thigh, she jerked her head in the direction of the back rooms, the invitation obvious even from a distance.

Kozik glanced up, seeking Tig's gaze, eyebrows raised. Tig smiled inwardly: dude was smart enough to know Prospects could expect only slim pickings from among the croweaters, and that rank and standing counted for something in the club house. Though Kozik was worth more than Mouse and Boots put together, if you asked Tig.

He gave Kozik a tiny nod—*Go ahead*—and Kozik's grin widened as he slipped off the stool and wrapped an arm around the sweetbutt's shoulders.

Satisfied he'd done all he could for Kozik, Tig left for home. He likely wouldn't be seeing Kozik again any time soon.

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### **Chapter 3**

A heavy cloud of smoke swirled up by the chapel ceiling, moving slowly on air currents invisible to Tig's eye. The club—including the Prospects—had been in church for over an hour, rehashing the repercussions of the previous week's attack on Unser's truck. Tig reckoned they had everything under control: Piney had taken over from Jerry and driven the truck on to its destination, where its cargo had been unloaded without anyone the wiser; Kozik and Boots had buried

the three corpses six feet under in a sandy spot not far from the road; Dog and G, the regular mechanics Clay trusted most to keep their mouths shut if they happened to see something they shouldn't, had towed the wrecks to the scrap yard. Unser, of course, wasn't gonna be filing any reports with anyone, neither as the owner of Unser Trucking nor as Charming's chief of police. And according to Trammel, the county sheriff wasn't even aware anything had happened at all.

With all the most pressing issues handled, it was time to start talking about retaliation. Clay sucked on his stogie and blew out a stream of smoke, adding to the already thick fog. "Opinions?"

"Hmph." Piney wheezed out a breath before he answered. "So, Unser's got a beef with a competitor. Why should we care?"

"Come on, Piney!" Tig spat out. The old man was getting too much of a wimp for his seat. "This happened on *our* watch. That makes it our business."

"And some of us got injured," Mouse piped up from his place further down the table. Tig didn't miss Kozik's surreptitious eyeroll as he sat in the peanut gallery behind Bobby and Piney. Kozik had told them, when Tig and Clay had carried out a deeper debrief of the guys directly involved in the shoot-out, how Mouse had reacted to the bullet graze, and it hadn't sounded pretty. Still, Mouse had a point: he was full-patch, and he had gotten shot during club business. That counted for something at this table.

"Aye." Chibs evidently agreed with Tig's silent assessment. "How's the arm, Mousey?" He smacked Mouse on his injured arm. Mouse winced.

"And," Otto emphasized the word, even as he shook his head at Chibs' antics, "this happened in Charming. Do we really want word to get out we were hit on our home turf and didn't retaliate?" He snorted out a breath. "You know damn well the Mayans will come knockin' next."

"Damn straight." Happy offered Otto a dip of his head in support.

Bobby shifted in his seat, stroking a hand through his beard. It still had crumbs stuck in it from the donut he'd eaten earlier. "But we can't just lash out at random," he cautioned. "What do we even know about who's behind the hit?"

"Plenty," Mouse snapped. "Markoski Trucking Lines from Modesto. Established 1992. Owner Kostya Markoski. Romanian, or some such. Company expanded quickly. Does a lot of regular supermarket supply runs from San Jose to Modesto and Fresno."

Every man around the table swiveled toward Mouse, and he hunched his

shoulders under the attention. "What? Unser gave us the name. And the rest's all public info."

Bobby guffawed. "Kid's gotta point." His brief moment of humor quickly faded. "Alright, so we know the guy. What do we do? Snatch one of his runs in turn? And then what? Markoski gets his insurance money and we have enough toilet paper for the next decade?"

Chibs snorted back a laugh; Mouse tittered, and even Boots, sitting near the wall next to Kozik, twitched with a hint of a smile. It was the first reaction Tig had seen out of the kid during the whole meeting. He looked pale and withdrawn, as if he hadn't slept for a week and would rather be anywhere else. According to Hap and Kozik, Boots had been less than useless during the attack, and Tig was beginning to doubt the kid had what it took to be Samcro. However, he had to give him his due: he hadn't quit yet.

"Maybe not." Otto folded his hands on the table in front of him. "Talked to my sister."

*Sister?* It took Tig a moment to remember Clay had asked Otto to reach out to her, since she worked with the assistant district attorney's office in Lodi.

Otto was still talking. "She says ATF and Stanislaus County have been looking into this Markoski guy for a while. Smuggling, mostly. Cigarettes, booze, maybe guns. Nothing they can make stick, but there's enough there to make me think they've got good reason for tryin'."

Tig harrumphed. "What're you sayin'?"

Otto scratched his chin. "If we can intercept that kind of load, we kill two birds with one stone: we send Markoski a message that we don't like being messed with—."

"—and we got valuable off-the-books goods to sell to the highest bidder." Bobby's beard split into a grin and Tig could've sworn he saw the gears moving in the secretary's brain as Bobby was calculating their profit.

"And he sure as shit ain't gonna complain to the authorities," Mouse added. "Or get insurance to pay out."

"Grand!" Chibs smacked a fist against the redwood. "I like this plan!"

"Yeah." Happy was grinning from ear to ear, a rare display of emotion which told Tig he'd been more pissed about being caught with his pants down than he'd wanted to admit. Though Tig wasn't sure he'd have done much better himself in

Hap's shoes. Happy had lost neither the truck and its load, nor any of their guys; it could've gone a lot worse.

"Ain't much of a plan yet," Piney grouched. His gleaming eyes betrayed he was mostly making a token objection.

"Mouse." Clay fixed his gaze on their youngest member. "Think you can figure out which run we'll wanna take down?"

"How should I—?" Mouse deflated under Clay's stare. "Um, yeah, of course. I'll... I'll go talk to a... a secretary or something."

Christ. Sometimes Tig wondered if the guy thought bein' patched meant he didn't have to do nothing himself no more. Did he think they'd patched him in just 'cause he was pretty? Tig snickered inwardly. Wouldn't put it past the kid, actually. "You do that." He didn't bother to hide his sarcasm.

"Okay." Clay raised the gavel. "Assuming Mouse can get us the intel we need, who's in favor of retaliation against this Markoski guy?"

They all voted yes.

As they filed out of the chapel, Tig caught up with Kozik. He hadn't had much of a chance to talk to him alone since sending that sweetbutt his way to help him blow off steam. Both of them knew life in Samcro meant facing the occasional bullet aimed in your direction, but Tig hadn't expected it to happen to Kozik so soon. Most people'd run rather than confront any of the Sons. "You okay with this?"

Kozik glanced at him. "Yeah, sure." He indicated Boots trudging ahead of them. "Why don't you ask him?"

Boots had his shoulders pulled up to his ears and was heading straight for the exit and outside. Tig shrugged. As long as the guy didn't do anything that put the club at risk, he wasn't Tig's concern. Would be up to Bobby to deal with whatever was going on there. "Cause I'm asking you."

"Why'd you think I wouldn't be okay with this?" Kozik shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, his dislike of the conversation visible in every line of his body.

Tig decided to back off a bit. "No reason."

Grabbing a couple of the beers the croweater tending the bar had set up, he held one out to Kozik as a peace offering. Maybe coming under fire again had

been good for Kozik. Sorta like climbing right back on your bike after your first spill, and all that shit.

Kozik snatched the bottle out of Tig's hand and swung away on his heel, marching straight from the clubhouse.

Tig sighed. Or maybe the firefight had hit Kozik harder than he wanted to admit. Best deal with that shit right away. He flipped the cap off his bottle and slowly followed Kozik outside. He paused under the awning, considering his next move. Kozik had his ass planted on one of the picnic tables, boots on the bench, and he was holding the bottle dangling between his hands. Tig didn't know how Kozik had earned his Bronze Star, or what had driven him to the H, but he wasn't stupid: there was some of that PTSD crap going on, for sure.

"Yer lad okay?" Chibs appeared at Tig's shoulder.

"Yeah." Tig grimaced. "Think I pissed him off."

"Pissed's good." Chibs' mouth twitched upward, tugging at the scars. "He's been talking to me about gettin' in the ring. Whaddayathink?"

Tig gestured with his beer. "He's got a mean right, is what I remember."

"I'll take him to Lumpy's, see what he's got." With a pat on Tig's shoulder, Chibs headed back into the clubhouse, hailing one of the sweetbutts as the door swung closed behind him.

Squaring his shoulders, Tig crossed the few yards to the picnic table and hoisted himself up next to Kozik. Kozik took a deep pull from his bottle, sneaking Tig a quick glance as he drank.

Tig gazed out across the lot. It was quiet; the garage doors drawn down and very little traffic coming and going. It was getting late, too, and the day was cooling. He took a gulp from his own bottle, rolling the beer around his mouth before swallowing. Shit, he sucked at this. "That sweetbutt I got ya last week? She any good?" He turned slightly so he could look at Kozik.

"I guess." Kozik's response was curt. Tig kept looking at him, until Kozik snapped, "Christ, Tigger, what you want?" Tig waited him out, still not responding—and a heartbeat later, Kozik's shoulders drooped and he sighed, "Thanks for that, but I told ya, I'm fine, okay?"

"A'ight." Tig smirked and bumped Kozik's shoulder with his own. "Thought the bitch might help. Booze and a good fuck'll take the edge off anything."

"Yeah." Kozik snorted back a laugh and Tig felt the tension bleed out of him. "Still not givin' you a *blow-by-blow*—," he stressed the words slightly, lips curving upward, "report."

"Don't need one." Tig had spotted the blonde across the lot. He tilted his chin in her direction to bring her to Kozik's attention. "Think I'll go find out for myself."

The croweater must've sensed their eyes on her and she looked up. Tig called her over with another head-jerk. Until Mouse got hold of the intel they needed, there wasn't much they could do about the retaliation, and he planned to make the most of the downtime.

"Hey, sugar." She sashayed over.

Tig wasn't sure she was addressing him or Kozik, the way her gaze kept flicking from one to the other. Probably wasn't sure what Tig wanted from her. He guessed he couldn't quite blame her for that. Didn't stop him from making his intentions known beyond a doubt by slipping his hand around her waist and reeling her in until the bench prevented her from taking another step. "Koz here give you a good time, doll?" The girl's teeth flashed as she bit her lower lip and nodded. Tig grinned. "Good girl."

Kozik huffed and Tig angled forward to nuzzle the sweetbutt's ample cleavage. Next to him, Kozik thumped the beer bottle down on the table and jumped off. "See ya later."

Tig straightened, abandoning his exploration. "Where you goin'?"

"Thought I'd swing by the house. Gotta take Missy for a walk."

"Seriously?" Sometimes, Tig wondered who was holding the leash between Kozik and Missy. "Party's about to start." Further down the lot, another pair of high-heeled beauties were pouring out of a car, fluffing their hair and tugging their tops for maximum exposure.

"She's a young dog. She needs to get out. Burn off some energy. And the neighbors've been complaining."

"That asshole across the street?" Tig furrowed his brows, pulling his hand away from massaging the club girl's ass. "I'll set him straight."

"Next door, too." Kozik combed his fingers through his hair, making the spikes stand up. "Dog's been howling like a banshee, to hear them tell it. I 'xpect she's lonely 'cause we're never around no more. Auto shop all day, club all night, and now the weekends too."

"Jesus." Tig pushed the croweater away from him and hopped off the bench. He gave the girl a light shove in the direction of the club house, absently throwing her a, "Later, darling." As she pouted and scuttled off, Tig closed the distance to Kozik until they stood chest to chest. "Club too much for you? Wanna turn in your patch?"

"Fuck, no, man." Kozik flung up his hands. "That's not what I'm saying. But that dog's... unhappy. And that ain't right."

Tig sniffed but took a step back from Kozik. *She's a dog*, he wanted to say, *not some stuck-up old lady*. And even old ladies learned to accept the club came first, always. But then he recalled how overexcited Missy had been when he'd come home at daybreak last week, jumping up against him and licking his face with her rough tongue. Remembered how she'd shredded his favorite pair of boots the other day, and scratched the paint off the kitchen door. Dammit, he'd thought he'd saved her life when he'd found her abandoned, just a puppy, and taken her in. Had he only sentenced her to another kind of misery? "Shit." He thought for a minute. "So, we bring her here."

"Here?" Kozik's brows rose to his hairline. "To the club?"

"Yeah. Think about it." Tig swept his arm around. "Lots of people to pet her, plenty of bikes to chase...." Bitch loved to run after them, if they weren't careful about locking her up first before they went out, and she always came barreling over when either of them rode up the street and she was outside.

"Clay'll never go for that."

Tig jabbed Kozik in the chest. "I'll handle Clay. You go take care of our girl."

Kozik gave him another dubious look, which made Tig frown again. What, did Kozik think he couldn't handle their president? He shooed him away with a flap of his hand.

At last, shaking his head at himself, Kozik strode off to where his bike was parked at the end of the line. Tig watched him grab the helmet, looking up when Jax rolled in, with his girlfriend—what was her name again? Tia? Tara? something like that—perched on the bitch seat. Jax said something Tig couldn't hear as Kozik swung his leg across his bike. Kozik nodded and grinned in reply, and let Jax throw him a high-five.

Tig finished his beer, nodding in greeting at Jax and the girl as they walked by. Damn, now he'd have to convince Clay to let Missy roam around T-M. Gemma too, probably.

The blonde sweetbutt was watching him from next to the doorway. He remembered he'd been planning on finding out tonight if those tits tasted as good as they had felt. He leered at her, letting her know wordlessly he had time for her now. Clay could wait.

oOo

"What's the hell is this?" Clay's disbelieving voice drifted into the club house kitchen a few days later. Kozik froze in the middle of making coffee, the milk carton poised over his mug. He exchanged a look with Tig, who was rooting through the fridge for something to eat.

"A dog," they heard Bobby answer. Bobby had been clinging to a bar stool, nursing a coffee of his own, as well as a muffin, when Kozik and Tig had walked in a few minutes earlier. He'd given them a sleepy "Mornin' boys," and left them to search for their own caffeine to fuel up for another busy day at the garage.

"Thanks, genius." That was Clay again. "I meant, what's it doing in my club house?"

"Thought you said you'd handle Clay?" Kozik whispered. Clay didn't sound *handled*. And it wasn't like Tig hadn't had a chance to explain, either: several days had gone by since Kozik had brought up how them spending so much time at the club house was making Missy lonely and miserable. Damn dog *loved* company.

"Dunno. Ask Frick 'n Frack; it's their mongrel."

*Frick 'n Frack?* Tig mouthed. *Mongrel?* He widened his eyes and Kozik couldn't tell what was bothering Tig more: Bobby's nickname, or that he'd called Missy a mongrel.

Tig's brows climbed even higher at Clay's reply. "Tig and Kozik are sharing a goddamn dog?"

"Uh-huh," Bobby muttered, around what could only be a mouthful of muffin. "And a house. Wouldn't surprise me if they share—."

"Okay, stop," Clay interrupted. "I don't wanna know."

"Better get out there," Kozik hissed in Tig's direction, "and deal with this." Christ knows what other ideas Bobby had gotten into his mind and wanted to share with the club president. Plus there was the small matter of explaining to Clay what Missy was doing in the club house in the first place.

Tig slammed the fridge shut and strutted back into the main room. "Oh, hey, Clay," he said cheerfully, pretending he hadn't overheard the entire conversation.

"What's with the dog?"

Finishing fixing his coffee, Kozik followed Tig into the main room. Clay was scowling down at Missy, who was blithely sniffing his crotch. Kozik bit the inside of his cheek—laughing was not gonna do him any favors.

"Ah, her." Tig offered a goofy grin.

Acknowledging Clay with a wordless nod, Kozik took a swallow from his coffee and grimaced; he'd put too much milk in it. Setting the mug on the bar, he turned his back to it and propped himself next to Bobby. The club secretary was swiveling his head between Tig and Clay as if he were watching a tennis match.

"See, poor girl was bein' left alone so much. Didn't like it at all. Did ya, girl?" Missy made a noise that wasn't quite a bark. "See?" Tig pointed out. "So Kozik suggested—."

Kozik jolted straight upright, nearly sending the coffee mug flying. Bobby took a large bite of his muffin, attempting—and failing—to hide a grin. Kozik fired a dark scowl in Tig's direction. Goddamn Tig was gonna lay the blame on *him*?

"Bitch make a good watch dog?" Clay asked.

"Damned sure, boss." Tig patted Missy on the head and her tail started wagging even faster. "Eats burglars for breakfast." Kozik resisted rolling his eyes at the blatant lie. Missy was far too friendly to strangers to be a threat to anyone.

"Hm." Clay pushed the dog away from him and headed toward the chapel. He huffed out an annoyed breath and muttered, "Cockatoos at home; dogs at the club house. What's next? Mermaids in the office?"

Bobby choked on coffee, his face turning red as he coughed to clear his throat, tears streaming into his beard. Kozik helpfully thumped his back until Bobby shrugged him off.

"You know, Clay, that is a *great* idea." Tig ambled after Clay and leaned against the frame of the chapel door. "Ya know, one with those tiny round titties that fit right in your palm, and gold stars on her nipples and—."

"Oh, shut the fuck up!" Clay snapped. "Like we ain't got enough problems. Get the hell out and lemme have a damn smoke in peace."

Sniggering to himself, Tig beat a hasty retreat. While he was pulling the door shut, Clay's voice came again. "Make sure the bitch doesn't get underfoot. Compound can be a dangerous place for a dog."

"Of course, boss." Tig pumped a fist triumphantly in Kozik's direction. "I'm all about safety first." Clay's answering snort was muffled by the click of the door latch.

Still chuckling, Tig muscled between Kozik and Bobby, planted an elbow on the bar and grabbed Kozik's abandoned coffee. "Told ya he wouldn't mind."

"Jerk," Kozik grumbled under his breath, still mad about how Tig had tried to pin the blame on him. "Clay's gotta point, though, about her runnin' loose."

"Get her a crate," Bobby wheezed. He'd finally managed to get his breath back enough to speak. They both turned to stare at him, and he added with a shrug, "Precious had poodles. Used to put them in there at night so they wouldn't chew up the sofa cushions."

"Case you hadn't noticed, Missy's a real dog." Tig sniffed. "Not some pansy fur ball that yips when you pull its tail."

Bobby rolled his eyes ceilingward. "Things come in different sizes, dumbass."

Tig pushed up, fixing Bobby with an offended scowl, though Kozik could easily tell it was all for show. "Who you callin' a dumbass... fat boy." Tig pulled back his lips to show his teeth, evidently satisfied with his insult.

"I ain't fat," Bobby replied mildly. Clearly, he could read Tig's posturing as well as Kozik did. "I am *corpulent*." He affectionately patted the belly straining his shirt.

Shaking his head at the pair's antics and laughing quietly to himself, Kozik grabbed the mugs to take them back to the kitchen and dump them in the sink. The silly banter was a welcome change to the tense atmosphere that had pressed down on the club house since the hijack attempt. "You kids want anything?"

The door to the club house flew open, banging hard against the wall, preventing the others from giving Kozik grief for disrespecting his patched brothers. Startled at the sudden noise, Missy began to bark. Tig grabbed her collar to hold her back from bowling over Mouse, who'd barreled through the door and skittered to a halt in front of them. "I got it!" he squeaked, hopping from one foot to the other and flapping his hands. "I got it!" Wednesday, two weeks."

Missy bared her teeth, growling. Mouse froze as he finally noticed her, gaping an expression that suggested he'd never seen a dog before and was expecting to be eaten any second. Kozik again had to chew on the inside of his cheek to hold in his laughter. Missy might not be a good watch dog, but she'd quick enough figured Mouse for the prick he was.

"Calm the fuck down, you moron!" Tig snapped. "You're upsetting the dog." He snagged a leftover piece of muffin from Bobby's plate and shoved it at Missy. "Here, baby." Bobby gave Tig a wry look, but it did the trick to distract Missy from Mouse. She sniffed the muffin suspiciously and then, reassured, slobbered it up.

Bobby shifted in his seat. "Wednesday, two weeks until what?"

Mouse lifted his gaze from Missy. "Got the intel we wanted." His shoulders twitched from the effort to remain still. "That bastard, Markoski. I know which of his transports we should take down." He flashed a shit-eating grin around at them.

"You sure?" With the dog calmed, Tig was all business.

Mouse nodded fiercely. "Got a look at all the manifests for the routes he's got scheduled for the next couple weeks. Most are regular runs: same route every two or three days. One of the sheets looked a little different, and had something scribbled on it with a different pen. Couldn't quite read it—some foreign shit—but I checked the route and time, and everything's breaking the pattern. So that's gotta be the one, right?"

"Hm." Bobby pushed the plate of muffin crumbs away. "Ain't exactly hard evidence."

"Sounds like it could be something, though." Kozik clenched his hands at his sides. The attempted hijack had shaken him pretty badly and given him more than few nightmares until he'd gotten his dreams back under control. He'd love nothing more than to get even with those scumbags.

"Someone ask your opinion, Prospect?" Mouse was less than appreciative of Kozik's support. Kozik clamped his mouth shut, struggling not to fire back with an answer Mouse would make him regret later.

Tig offered him a faint grimace of sympathy, before he jerked his head toward the chapel. "Let's talk to Clay. We need to make plans."

## Chapter 4

"Man, this is so wrong." Boots plucked at the stripes sewn lengthwise on his uniform pants.

"Dude, shut up," Kozik snapped. He tugged at his tie, which seemed determined to strangle him, and his tan shirt – a little too tight around his shoulders – chafed as he shifted restlessly in his seat. Of all the things he'd expected to have to do as a club Prospect, dressing up like Charming's finest in a borrowed, too-small uniform wasn't one of them.

There was a tap on Kozik's side of the car and he lowered the window. "You boys all set?" Tig leaned down to look in. "Know where to go? What to do?"

"Christ. You want us to go over it again?"

"Just makin' sure." Tig's smirking face disappeared for a moment as he straightened to check the other guys were getting ready to head out. Then he ducked low again, blocking the light from the compound floodlamps. "Okay, time to go... *officers*." He slapped his palm on the patrol car roof with a laugh. Tig, at least, was having fun.

Kozik started the engine, put the patrol car in gear, and pulled out. In the rearview mirror, he glimpsed Tig walking over to his bike. Boots was thumping his head rhythmically against the mesh wire separating them from the back seats. The noise worked on Kozik's nerves, and he wanted to tell Boots to cut it out but decided against it; if this was what it took to keep Boots from complaining, he'd rather deal with the nervous tic.

Kozik couldn't say he disagreed with Boots' nerves, either. Unser had made it crystal clear that, although he'd lent the club a patrol car and a couple uniforms, he'd insist they'd been stolen if they were caught. Kozik and Boots would be in some serious shit if they ran into highway patrol or the county sheriff and got pulled over. Which was why Clay had appointed them to execute the first part of the plan. Prospects always got the shittiest jobs.

At least their current task wouldn't leave them filthy and smelly, the way unclogging toilets or digging roadside graves did. They merely had to lure Markoski's transport off the highway and into the trap set by the rest of the club.

As he steered the patrol car out of Charming and toward the state road leading south, Kozik snuck his partner another glance. "You ain't gonna piss your pants again, are ya?"

"Huh?" Boots started jiggling his knees against the dash in an equally

unwelcome change from battering the wire grill with his head. "No, I—." It was too dark in the car to see clearly, but Kozik thought Boots was blushing. He sighed, latched a finger under the collar of his uniform shirt and tried to ease it. "I don't know, man. I'm thinkin' about getting out. Turning in my cut, ya know."

Kozik shot him another quick look, before directing his attention back to the road. "For real?" The last thing he needed on this job was an unreliable partner. Bad enough he didn't believe Boots would hold up if they came under fire again. But if the kid was having second thoughts about Prospecting, that could be very bad.

"Yeah." Boots took another deep breath. "This ain't me. Hijacking trucks, getting shot at, all that crap."

Kozik snorted a laugh. "No shit, dude."

Boots sighed again and then fell into a resigned silence while Kozik carefully kept the car at the speed limit and prayed hard they wouldn't run into any real cops.

It was a while later before Boots spoke again. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Kozik checked the odometer. Another two miles before he was supposed to pull off the road and wait for Mouse's call that the truck was approaching.

Boots twisted a little in his seat. "Ain't you scared?"

"Right now? No." Kozik could answer honestly. Apprehensive, maybe. Tense. Focused. But not afraid. Not yet.

"No, I meant, when they were shooting at us?" Boots flapped a hand. "They hit Mouse. We could've *died*, man."

Kozik puffed out a breath. Like he hadn't been acutely aware of that. He didn't react right away, though, carefully considering what to tell Boots. Tig would've cuffed Boots around the head and called him an idiot and a chicken. But truth was, any sane man would rather *not* get shot at. And—a shudder went through Kozik as he got a flash of memory of that time in Somalia: the screams and shrieks of the crowd, as bullets seemed to be flying every which way; the stink of burning flesh and blood and gun powder.

Damn, he'd thought he was done with all that shit. He'd fully expected not to live through it then, either. But when it was over, he'd still been alive. Out of breath, voice hoarse from shouting, and soaked in other people's blood, but

without a scratch on him.

"Hey!" Boots punched Kozik's arm, bringing him back to the present. "You overshot our turn-off."

Kozik again looked at the odometer and swore out loud. With another muttered oath, he checked the road was clear and yanked the patrol car into a sharp U-turn, tires squealing. He shook his head, trying to bury the memories back where they belonged. Jesus, and he'd been afraid that Boots would be freaking out? *Better keep yourself in check, dude.*

A few minutes later, they were parked on a small dirt track, trees shielding them from the main road and ready to pull out as soon as the truck had passed. They waited without another word, Boots' breath rasping in and out a little too fast, while the cooling engine ticked. The sound seemed loud in the silence. The road was mostly deserted, the hour late enough that any rush hour traffic had long since ended, and only the occasional pickup rattled by.

Boots' phone rang, making them both jump. He fumbled with it, dropping it under the dash. Kozik cursed. Boots ducked down and scrambled around for a few seconds while the phone kept ringing, until he finally breathed out a gasped, "Yeah?"

Listening to Boots' half of the conversation, Kozik drummed his fingers onto the steering wheel, relishing the familiar sensation of adrenaline in his blood stream while his body got ready for action.

"Yeah... okay. We're ready. Three miles. Roger." Boots snapped his phone shut and twisted toward Kozik. "That was Mouse."

Kozik bit back the *I got that*, which sprang to his lips. They were both on edge, and the last thing Boots needed was for Kozik to jump down his throat when the kid was already nervous as hell. "And?" he nudged.

"Truck's right on schedule. Three miles out. Should be here in five."

"Get ready." Kozik straightened, tilting his head so he could keep an eye on the mirror, scouting for the truck's headlights. True to Mouse's promise, a few minutes later twin beams popped into sight. Kozik shifted his gaze downward; he didn't want to risk being blinded by the glare. His fingers folded around the ignition key, tightening. *Wait, wait.* The screen of trees was thin, and he didn't want the flare of his brake lights to alert the truck to their presence before it was time.

The truck trundled by.

"That's them." Boots was leaning forward, eyes narrowed to slits to make out the markings painted on the load compartment.

Grunting an acknowledgement, Kozik fired up the engine and pulled out. Boots hit the switch for the emergency lights and turned on the siren. The sudden blare made Kozik wince. Boots was grinning like a maniac, now, teeth glinting and the whites of his eyes visible. Well, Boots on an adrenaline high was probably an improvement over him pissing his pants or cowering under the dash.

The truck had been ambling along a few miles under the speed limit and they caught up with it quickly. Kozik passed it and slowed in front of it, signaling to the truck's driver to follow them. The headlamps were too bright, the mirror showing only indistinct shapes in the truck's cab: impossible to tell what was going on in there. For all Kozik knew, that cab was filled with armed men aiming weapons at his head right this second. Every muscle tense, he hit the right turn indicator, squinting ahead. Where the fuck —*there!*

He puffed out a shaky breath and, hitting the brakes briefly, made the turn. Everything slowed and he held his breath. What would the truck do?

"They bought it!" Boots squealed. He was twisted around in his seat, one knee pulled up, peering back through the mesh of the transport enclosure. "They're coming!"

"I can see that, doofus."

Despite his harsh words, Kozik couldn't keep a relieved grin off his face. Samcro's entire plan had hinged upon the truck driver falling for the ruse. They'd muddied up the lettering on the patrol car, but anyone paying attention would still have noticed it said *Charming PD* and wonder why Charming cops were intercepting a truck so far outside their jurisdiction.

Looked like either the driver hadn't noticed the words in the dark, or he had no clue about police jurisdictions. Kozik didn't dare think about all the other potential explanations: that they'd picked the wrong truck or this was a legit run. If it was, they'd have played their hand with Markoski and they'd never get another chance. Nobody was fool enough to fall for the same ploy twice. At least he and Boots had done their part; if they had the wrong load, the blame would land on Mouse.

Cresting the hill half a mile from the main road, Kozik slowed and pulled the patrol car into a shallow slant before braking to a full stop and cutting the engine. Not enough of an angle to make Markoski's guys suspicious—or so he hoped—but just enough to make it really difficult for the truck to squeeze by in

a hurry. If everything was set up according to plan, Bobby would be in position several hundred yards further on, over the next hill, holding back any late-night traffic heading for the highway. Mouse, following the truck from the moment it had left Markoski's warehouse, should be somewhere behind doing the same thing with anyone who happened to come off the highway.

Nobody was gonna disturb them; time to put the next part of the plan in motion.

Kozik snuck another glance at Boots. "You okay?"

Boots' head bobbed like a bobblehead. He swallowed hard, and Kozik could see his Adam's apple move in the glare of the truck's headlights. "Yeah," he squawked, sounding anything but okay.

Kozik thought about telling Boots to stay put, that he'd handle it alone. He couldn't; it'd look unrealistic, and they both knew it. He gave Boots an encouraging punch to his shoulder. "Don't freak out on me, 'kay?"

Another convulsive head-bob was his response. They were running out of time—those guys in the truck would start wondering what the 'cops' wanted—so Kozik sent up a silent prayer and opened his door. Swinging his legs out, he tried not to look back at Boots, too afraid of what he might see.

If Boots flipped his shit before Kozik convinced those guys to get out of their truck and step into the open, if they tipped their hand that they weren't real cops, they'd be caught right in the crossfire without any cover. Mouth dry, heart pounding against his ribs, Kozik ambled toward the truck, outwardly calm, as if this were nothing but a routine stop. He forced himself to look straight ahead and not scan the sides of the road for the rest of the guys lying in wait. Hearing Boots' door open behind him, he let out a soft sigh. Now, if only the kid would keep it together long enough....

The truck driver lowered his window. "Is there something wrong, officer?" The words were pronounced carefully, and his accent was the same as that of the guys who'd tried to hijack Unser's truck. Kozik suppressed a scowl; either Markoski hired only his own countrymen or he didn't trust anyone else to do his dirty work. Kozik would bet good money it was the latter. Which meant they had the right truck.

"If you could step out of the truck, please, sir." He gestured to underscore his request, aiming for the right mix of politeness and firmness that was part and parcel of every cop's repertoire. He sensed Boots' eyes on him, the kid standing a few feet behind. Christ, he hoped Boots would remember to keep playing his part.

There was a brief instant of hushed conversation inside the cab, the words too muffled to make out, though Kozik suspected he wouldn't have understood them anyway. "Sir?" he reminded the driver. Best not give them too much time to talk about their response or start asking questions. He still had the upper hand, and as long as he did, he needed to get them out onto the road, where Samcro could deal with them.

At last, the cab door swung wide, and the driver planted a boot on the top step. Behind Kozik, Boots let out a long-held breath in a whoosh. A heartbeat later, the passenger door on the cab's other side opened as well. Kozik took a few steps back, so he could keep an eye on both. It would seem their charade was still holding: the three men jumping out looked anxious and nervous—which made sense after being stopped by cops—but they didn't seem hostile. None of them was had a gun in their hands, although Kozik was sure they had weapons stashed in shoulder holsters or at their backs.

"Down! On the ground! Now!" Suddenly, Tig's voice boomed through the dark night.

Though Kozik had been expecting it, his heart skipped, and another shot of adrenaline flooded into his bloodstream. Shadows materialized from among the trees and rose from the ground: dark hoodies and jeans had served to keep everyone invisible until they moved.

Grabbing the nearest guy, Kozik shoved him face down before the surprise could wear off. Tig and Otto dashed forward to do the same to the rest of Markoski's men, while Chibs stayed back, covering the prisoners with an AK. Happy sprang up the steps into the truck cab, gun cocked. He jumped back down a few seconds later. "Clear."

The truck driver spat out a string of incomprehensible words, likely cursing them, before snarling in broken English, "You make big mistake."

One of the other men, face pressed against the road while Tig patted him down and relieved him of the gun stashed in his belt, managed a harsh laugh. "You have no idea who you are fucking with." His English was better than the driver's.

"Some prick from overseas." Tig kicked the man in the ribs and the guy's laughter changed into a groan. "Now shut up."

With the three prisoners secured, Clay ambled over. He lit a cigar as he surveyed the scene. "Well done." The remark was directed at Kozik and Boots and Kozik beamed back at him, relieved and pleased at the same time. Boots looked about ready to faint; his face was the same sickly color as his uniform shirt.

Clay turned toward the three men lying in the dirt. He dropped to one knee next to the driver, and blew a lungful of smoke into the guy's face. "You tell your boss not to mess with Samcro again." Clay kept his voice low and his tone mild. He sounded all the more dangerous for it. "Retaliation will be swift and ruthless. This time, I'mma let you live. Next time—." Clay formed his fingers into a gun shape and aimed it at the driver's head. "*Pow*. Got that?"

The man nodded his head, though from the way he scowled darkly at Clay, Kozik wasn't convinced he was well and truly cowed. He checked Otto, Chibs and Happy were still keeping a close eye on their prisoners. He needn't have worried: they were all old hands at this sort of thing, and none of them even glanced over when a black van came rumbling up the road from the direction of the main road. It did a u-turn just before it reached them and backed up to the rear of the truck. A moment later, Piney clambered out.

Clay straightened. "Let's get this done." He walked along the length of the truck to meet Piney. Tig followed, beckoning Kozik and Boots to come with him and provide the muscle to shift the contents of the van into the truck. The other guys would take care of the prisoners; even as Kozik jogged after Tig Chibs was shaking loose a length of rope to tie them up.

"Let's see what our two fake flatfoot boys got us." Tig smirked at Kozik, resting his palm against the rear of the truck. Reaching up with his other hand, he drew back the bolt and released the hasp. Kozik craned his neck, curious to see what the cargo was. Mouse hadn't been able to find out but, from what Otto's sister had said, they were expecting either cigarettes or booze.

"What the hell?" Clay, in the best position to see inside as Tig opened the door, almost spat out his stogie.

Startled and alarmed, Kozik yanked out his gun and aimed it at the shadowy interior. Around him, he had other guns being cocked, either also in instinctive reaction or because the guys could see something Kozik couldn't.

Tig, his back turned as he pushed the heavy door further open, swung around. "Jesus! There's fuckin' nothing in there!"

Even in the dim light, it was easy to see he spoke the truth: the truck was empty.

Abruptly, Kozik's arms grew too heavy and he let them fall to his sides. All the tension of the last few hours bled out of him in a single rush and he fought the urge to simply drop down where he stood. This was what he'd risked life and freedom for? What Boots had nearly freaked out over? A goddamn empty truck, with a few crumpled sheets of paper littering the floor and a couple forgotten wood pallets sitting to one side? "Sonofabitch."

No wonder Markoski's men hadn't seemed very intimidated once they discovered they'd been hijacked by Samcro instead of the cops. And before, when they'd still believed Kozik and Boots were real cops, they hadn't been concerned because of their load. No, they'd been anxious because the cops in whatever fuckhole they'd come from weren't known for either being reasonable or fair.

"Goddamn Mouse!" Clay snarled. "Get his dumb ass over here!"

Not waiting for further orders, Boots trotted down the road to where Mouse would be watching for traffic. Otto, Chibs and Happy, having finished tying up the prisoners, also sidled up to take a peek. Judging by their disbelieving expressions, they needed to confirm the failure with their own eyes.

Kozik took a few weary paces back, giving them space to look. From where he stood now, he could see Markoski's men lying in a trussed-up jumble near the front of the truck. One of bastards caught Kozik's eye and snickered, clearly enjoying the obvious disappointment among the Sons. Kozik's hands curled. Christ, he wanted to punch that smirking fuck....

He wasn't the only one. Tig, his face twisted, closed the distance and jabbed a ringed fist down. Bone crunched and the guy cried out. Not satisfied with the damage he'd done, Tig hauled his victim off the ground with one hand and pulled back the other for another swing. Blood glistened darkly on his knuckles.

"Tig!" Clay called. The rumble of an approaching motor cycle distracted them all for a moment. Looked like Boots had delivered the message to Mouse, and had been smart enough—or scared enough—to take Mouse's place to turn back traffic. Tig glowered at the prisoner he was still holding, before he curled his upper lip, his menacing scowl a silent promise he wasn't done, and flung him back among his buddies.

Mouse parked his bike and walked up. "Boots said you wanted me?" Seeing the looks turned on him, he slowed. Kozik hung back; curious as he was to hear Mouse's explanation, he didn't want Clay's wrath turned on him. He didn't feel the slightest sympathy over the ass-chewing Mouse was about to get.

Mouse, frowning now, came to a stop still some distance from the truck. Tig strode forward, snatched him by the collar and hauled him over. He ignored Mouse's squeak of protest and slammed him, chest first, against the cargo bed. "See that, asshole?"

Having learned better than to fight Tig in this mood, Mouse peered into the truck. "See what?"

Kozik sucked in a breath: was Mouse really that stupid? Tig must've been thinking the same thing; he smacked the back of Mouse's head and growled, "Are you dimwitted, or just pretending to be?"

"I don't see nothing," Mouse whined, rubbing his skull where Tig had cuffed him.

"That's the point, dickhead." Clay took a step closer, until both he and Tig were towering over Mouse. "You promised me a smugglin' load. So where is it."

"How should I know?" Mouse swallowed as his gaze flicked from his president to the sergeant-at-arms and then to the rest of the guys. "I'm tellin' ya, this run was out of the ordinary."

"Did they catch you snoopin'?" Otto asked.

"Course not." Despite a faint tremor in his voice, Mouse sounded indignant. "I'm not stupid. Look, I never saw a manifest. Just the schedule."

"Did you set us up, then?" Tig cracked his knuckles. "Work with those assholes?" He jerked his head toward the three captives.

"Christ, guys!" Mouse cringed back against the truck, the whites of his eyes showing as it dawned on him just how much trouble he was in. "No! Of course not. I'm—shit, I don't know what happened, alright?" His voice cracked with fear.

Kozik had been around the club long enough to know that tattling on one's brothers was considered a capital crime. No excuse would ever be good enough, and there could be no forgiveness. He was suddenly glad Boots wasn't here to see what was was going on.

Mouse's gaze skittered around wildly, searching for an escape. His arm shot out, aiming straight at Kozik. "Why don't you ask him? Or the other Prospect? They're the ones made first contact. Maybe they're the fuckin' rats."

"You goddamn little shit!" Kozik took a step forward, angrily shaking off Chibs' restraining hand. He and Boots had risked their fuckin' lives so this asshole could accuse them of being traitors? He no longer gave a shit that Mouse was a patched member and he wasn't. He wasn't gonna stand for—.

"Hey!" Clay's shout sliced through the haze of anger. "You two. Save it for church."

"C'mon, Koz. Back off." Tig put himself between Kozik and Mouse, shepherding him back. "That'd be a dumb move."

Kozik let Tig move him away, though he gave Mouse a black look—*this ain't over*. Mouse's gaze slid away and he used the distraction to sidle a few steps to the side right and put some distance between himself and the others. Kozik slowly released a long breath, letting it take some of his anger with it.

"Goddammit." Clay punched the truck door. "Someone fucked up for sure, but now's not the time to figure out who. We gotta clean this up."

Tig gave Clay a nod. "Agreed." He fixed Kozik with a last, hard look—*you gonna behave?*—and pointed at Mouse. "You. Get your ass back to the club house. We'll sort this fuck-up out later." When Mouse opened his mouth to protest, Tig took a step toward him, and Mouse thought better of it. Without another word, he walked off to his bike.

Tig combed a hand through his hair as he watched Mouse go. "Gag 'em and put those fuckers up in there," he ordered, indicating first the prisoners and then the cargo bay. "Then let's get the hell outta here. Someone'll come along to rescue 'em soon enough."

Happy was already hauling the first of their captives to his feet. With a last, regretful glance into the empty truck, Kozik began to walk up to the front of the truck to lend a hand. He stopped mid-stride, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. Something wasn't right.

His let his gaze rove over the scene. Was someone coming? Darkness reigned around them, so he couldn't tell for sure, but he didn't think whatever had put him on alert was coming from outside the dim circle of light around the truck. He looked thoughtfully back at the truck's cargo bay. Something about it bothered him, something beyond it being so infuriatingly empty.

"What *you* lookin' at?" Clay snapped. "Hoping for invisible cargo?"

"No...." Kozik hesitated. If he was wrong and made Clay even more pissed than he already was, he'd pay for it later. Trying not to worry about that, he concentrated on the elusive thought that had snagged his attention. He'd learned long ago to trust his instincts. But what—?

"Hot damn." The words rushed out of him on a whoosh of air. No wonder those bastards had been on edge when he and Boots first stopped them. And no wonder they'd been quietly laughing their asses off once the Sons saw the empty truck and accepted what they thought they were seeing.

Kozik reached out and grabbed Clay by the shoulders, dragging him into the spot Kozik had just been standing in. "Just look."

Clay tried to shake him off. "What the fuck's gotten into you?"

"The back wall." Kozik flapped his free hand. "Look at it. It's too fuckin' far in. Truck's longer on the outside."

After staring at Kozik for a moment as if he thought Kozik had lost his mind, Clay swiveled to see what Kozik was pointing at. Kozik, his hand still resting on Clay's shoulder, felt the exact instant Clay saw it

"Oh, fuck, yeah." Clay looked back at Kozik. "False wall?"

Kozik nodded grimly. "Would be my guess."

Clay dipped his head toward the empty bay. "Check it out."

Kozik hopped up into the truck. Without the benefit of a flashlight, and with most of the glow from the headlamps, it was dark enough he had to edge his way forward cautiously to avoid tripping over the pallets and breaking his neck. He rapped his knuckles lightly against the back wall. A dull, hollow echo answered him. "There's some kind of space behind it."

"Good catch." Clay's lips twitched in a slow, satisfied grin. Whatever Markoski was transporting, if it was important enough to hide from casual view behind a secret partition, it had to be valuable. "Tig!"

Tig came jogging up, tossing a puzzled look in Kozik's direction. "What's up?"

"Your Prospect's got a good eye." Clay quickly relayed Kozik's discovery.

"Goddammit! Guys? Forget about them for a moment." Tig waved the others over. From the bitten-off cries of pain, Kozik reckoned they'd dropped their captives where they stood.

Within seconds, they were all once more gathered at the back of the truck. Kozik's mouth went dry. What if he'd gotten it wrong after all? What if the secret compartment held nothing but air? He'd look as much of a fool as Mouse had.

There was no time to voice his doubts. Tig was climbing in to join him, jerking his head to check out the compartment. A moment later, he and Tig were running their fingers along the seams, trying to find a way to wrench the panels open. "Shit, can't see a fuckin' thing."

Tig guffawed. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

"What?" Kozik snapped back, kneeling to investigate the bottom edge of the panel.

"What you got on that cop belt of yours?"

Kozik froze an instant, and then swore again under his breath, while Tig let out another laugh. A moment of fumbling with the unfamiliar clasp later, and Kozik had snatched the flashlight hanging the Charming PD uniform belt and switched it on.

Once they could see what they were doing, they made quick work of locating the latch. With a soft click, an invisible tumbler fell away and the panel shifted a little. Kozik squeezed his fingers into the narrow crack and pulled until the gap was wide enough to angle his flashlight into the space behind the panel and peer inside.

His breath caught. "Holy crap...."

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## Chapter 5

"Mary Mother of Christ." Chibs, evidently with a view past Kozik from where he stood with the rest of the guys at the back of the truck, uttered the words quietly.

Tig furrowed his brow. What the fuck were the pair of them going on about? Shouldering Kozik aside, he wrenched the panel the rest of the way open so he could see into the space behind.

His jaw dropped, too shocked to even find a curse to give vent to his surprise. Markoski's fake wall wasn't hiding cigarettes or booze. Not even guns, which at least would've made sense to Tig.

Huddled together in the tight space were three very wide-eyed women—no, girls, he amended, estimating they weren't older than eighteen—goggling back up at him.

Tears gleamed in their eyes and their rapid breathing was loud in the stunned silence that had fallen over the truck. With an effort, Tig closed his mouth and gave the girls a dirty scowl, as if it was their fault he still couldn't come up with any words. Jesus Christ, what the fuck was going on here?

"What the hell are you doin' in there?" Kozik squawked. It was as dumb a

question as dumb questions could go, but right now Tig couldn't blame him. At least he'd managed to say something.

The only reply from the girls was another frightened whimper and more petrified blinks. Their gazes skittered from Kozik to Tig and back again and again, like rabbits confronted by a fox.

The truck rocked slightly as someone else climbed in. An instant later, Chibs wormed himself between Tig and Kozik for a better look. All three girls gaped at the sight of the Scotsman's face—at his scars, Tig realized, after a moment.

"Oi, Otto!" Chibs' brogue was even stronger than usual, and Tig had trouble understanding Chibs' next words. "Think Luanne's got a job for these 'ere lasses?"

The girls cowered back against the wall, though Tig doubted they had any clue what Chibs had asked—or what it meant.

"Prob'bly not." Otto had no problem catching what Chibs was saying, and his reply was swift.

"Aye, I guess not," Chibs muttered, almost to himself. His stunned smirk changed into something more compassionate.

"C'mon, your ugly mugs are scaring them." Kozik shook himself and took a step back. He tugged at Chibs' arm and beckoned Tig away as well. "Let's give these girls some breathing room."

As soon as they'd all moved off a few paces, one of the girls, a pretty brunette who was too skinny for Tig's taste, started jabbering in a language he didn't understand.

"Oi, English," Chibs scolded.

The girls flinched again. They exchanged a look, and then the girl on the left, a blonde with long, straight hair, said haltingly, "No speak good English."

"No shit." Tig was beginning to wish Kozik had never caught on to Markoski's false wall. Look at the crap that had landed at their feet because of it. What was the club gonna do with three chicks who were clearly illegal aliens and couldn't even speak proper English? He turned around fully to face the rest of his brothers, hands out to either side. "What the fuck are we gonna do with them?"

For a long moment, nobody answered. Even Clay seemed to have no idea what their next move should be. Happy was the first to find his voice. "Leave 'em.

They ain't our business. Stick to the plan."

Behind Tig, one of the girls made a soft, mewling noise. Tig wasn't sure how much they could understand, but between Hap's expression and his tone, he couldn't fault them for growing even more terrified. Besides, even if they could make sense of what was being said, he doubted they'd be any happier being left in Markoski's clutches.

Kozik had lowered himself in a crouch and was muttering something soothingly. Tig suppressed a snicker. Did he think they were dealing with frightened kittens? Jesus, this whole situation gave new meaning to the term FUBAR.

No, Hap was right: easiest thing would be to load Markoski's pals into the truck with the girls and get the hell outta Dodge. They could forget they'd ever seen the women. What use did they have for trafficked pussy, anyway? None, that was what. No, those girls were of no value to Samcro. They were a liability, in fact. And yet....

He sought out Clay among the pack of Sons. The president wasn't usually one to let his feelings shine through in his expression, but he looked as indecisive as Tig felt. It wasn't often Clay got caught out like this.

Tig waggled his eyebrows. *What do I do?*

Clay gave a brief shake and started riffling through his cut until he fished out his phone. Holding it up so Tig would know to wait for him to make a call, he turned away and started dialing. Calling Unser, Tig realized, as soon as Clay started to talk. Made sense. This kinda crap was way over their pay grade.

Leaving Clay to hammer things out with Unser, Tig turned back to the girls. "Let's get them out of there." Whatever Unser suggested, Tig doubted it would include abandoning the girls in their cramped space in the truck.

Kozik started to explain to the trio that it was safe for them to come out, nobody would hurt them. They hesitated for a few moment longer, and then, he and Chibs were helping them gather themselves onto trembling legs. All three of them were wearing cheap sneakers and shirts that were too thin for an October night in the hills, and they clustered together, shivering.

"Alright." Clay snapped his phone shut. "Unser says to bring 'em to Charming. Take 'em to his warehouse to hand them over. He'll take care of the rest."

"What about those assholes?" Otto dipped a head toward their three prisoners. "Does he want them, too?"

"Nope." Clay shook his head. "Says he can't make a case." He sniffed. "We compromised any potential evidence. All he can do is tip off INS to keep a close eye on Markoski."

"Shit." Tig swore as he vaulted down from the truck to join his president on the road. He wouldn't have minded seeing the bastards processed into the system. Smuggling guns or cigarettes was no big deal but trafficking teenagers? Now he'd gotten over his shock he was clear on one thing: that shit was just wrong.

"Well, look at it this way," Otto reminded them all, "the plan was to send Markoski a message, right? What better message than to mess up his flesh trade?"

Tig thought it over. "Guess it'll do."

Clay stashed his phone back into his pocket as he watched Chibs and Kozik helping the girls down from the truck. "Put 'em in the squad car with Kozik. Less suspicious that way."

Kozik tossed an unhappy look in their direction. Tig could almost hear his mental groan. But Clay was right; nobody would look twice at a cop car meeting the chief of police to hand over a few girls. Besides, what other choice did they have? State those chicks were in, they wouldn't survive riding bitch; if they didn't freeze their asses off, they'd not hold on past the first curve. If they put them in the van with Piney, they'd never hear the end of it. And Kozik seemed to be developing something of a rapport with the girls in a way none of the other guys were. Maybe it was the uniform. Whatever the reason, they should take advantage of it.

"No fuckin' wonder ATF never could get a thing on Markoski." Otto joined Tig, hands in pockets, head cocked, as they watched Kozik and Chibs herd the trio toward the patrol car. "They were looking for the wrong fuckin' thing."

As they move past the front of the truck, the girls caught sight of the prisoners sitting in the road, glowering over their gags. Their footsteps faltered and they bunched together. Then the blonde chick, the one who seemed to speak a few words of English, pressed her lips together in a thin line and broke away from her friends. Before Kozik could catch her, she'd kicked the closest of the prisoners in the nuts.

"Ow," Tig muttered in unwilling sympathy, as a high-pitched scream escaped through the guy's gag and he curled around himself as much as the ropes let him.

The girl drew her leg back for another kick.

"Whoa, sweetheart, that's enough." Kozik took her by the elbow and pulled her away.

She spat at the whimpering prisoner, her eyes flashing angrily. "Is pig."

Chibs began to laugh. "Ye're a feisty one, ain't ye?"

She turned a puzzled look on Chibs. "What is feisty?" Chibs only laughed harder.

"Gutsy. Courageous. C'mon." Tightening his hold on her arm, Kozik guided her back to her friends and urged them all forward again. All three of them kept casting Markoski's men looks filled with a mixture of fear and hatred until Kozik pulled open the back door of the patrol car and ushered them in.

Tig made his way over as Kozik head around the car to the driver's side. Ducking his head to peer inside and check the girls were settled, Tig warned, "Straight to Unser's, you hear?" He glanced up and waggled a meaningful brow at Kozik.

Kozik rolled his eyes. "You were born being a dick, weren't you?"

"And you're a fuckin' saint." Tig's expression sobered as he straightened. "Don't forget to pick up Boots. And go slow. Give us a few more minutes to clean up."

Kozik nodded to show he understood: as soon as Boots got in the car and abandoned his post down the road, the club would be exposed to any traffic coming up from the highway. But they wouldn't need much time: just enough to load Markoski's men into the truck and get out of the area. Otto and Happy were already dealing with the prisoners, while Piney was putting the van into gear and rumbling off.

"Okay, go." Tig flicked a hand for Kozik to get behind the wheel.

"I'll get Bobby," Otto announced. Chibs and Hap were already locking up the truck. "Bring him up to speed. See you guys back at the club house."

Tig waved in acknowledgment and Otto trotted over to the clump of trees behind which they'd hidden their bikes. Bobby wasn't gonna believe what Otto had to tell him.

Tig double-checked the truck doors were locked tight and cast a final look around to make sure the scene was clean. Satisfied there was nothing to tie the Sons to the ambush, he got on his bike and followed the others home.

Trusting the guys to tie up all the loose ends, Kozik had squeezed the patrol car past the truck and pattered off down the road. It took an effort to go slow and not stomp the gas pedal down as far as it would go. Christ, how did he always end up in this kind of shit?

He'd thought pretending to be a cop in a patrol car would be the worst of it. And then somehow a bunch of kidnapped women had gotten added to the mix. He'd be spending the rest of his life behind bars if the real cops caught him. And, sure, he wasn't Boots, wasn't gonna consider turning in his patch over this shit, but as far as he was concerned, this whole thing couldn't be over fast enough. He longed for the moment he could strip off the uniform, grab a cold one, kick up his feet, and feed Missy dog biscuits.

His gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. The three girls in the back seat had their heads together and were whispering in their own language. From the furtive glances they threw his way, and the way the brunette was shaking her head fiercely, he reckoned they were discussing their situation. Probably wondering what to expect next or what to do. He hoped they weren't gonna do anything stupid.

"Sit tight," he reminded them. He tried not to growl; it wasn't their fault. "Nobody's gonna hurt you."

Soon as he spoke, the girls froze and fell silent. The blonde leaned forward, putting her face closer to the mesh. "Where you take us?"

He met her gaze briefly. The look in her blue eyes was wary. "The cops," he replied curtly. Snatching a glimpse of Boots waving him down in the headlights, he put his foot on the brake and pulled the car to a stop.

"Cops?" The girl evidently didn't recognize the colloquialism.

*Simple words, dude*, Kozik reminded himself. Out loud, he clarified, "The police."

She recoiled. "You are not police?" Her voice was high and tight and she sounded as if she was seconds away from panicking. Kozik cursed inwardly. He'd completely forgotten what the uniform would make them think. He turned his gaze up to the mirror again.

"Other police." It seemed the fastest way to reassure her and it seemed to work: while she watched him in the mirror, weighing his words, she didn't freak out. After a few seconds, she lowered her gaze, muttered something to her friends, and settled back in the seat. Kozik let out a breath. The last thing he needed, on

top of everything else, was for those three to go to pieces.

"Kozik? Did we—?" Boots yanked open the door, ready to jump in. "Whoa!" He did a double take. "Who—?" His utter bafflement at seeing the girls would've been funny, if Kozik hadn't been in such a damned hurry to get rid of his passengers.

"Long story." He gestured. "Get the fuck in."

"What about—." Boots gave a vague wave toward the road he'd been guarding.

"We're done. Club's finishing up." Eager to get the hell away, Kozik ducked his head so he could catch Boots' eye and snapped, "Get your damn ass in here, or you're gonna have to hoof it back."

Boots scrambled into the front seat. He snuck a peek across his shoulder and whistled softly through his teeth. "Where'd you find them?" He kept his voice low. Like that mattered, with the few words of English those girls understood.

Kozik snorted a wry laugh. "In the truck, if you can believe it."

"Huh?" Boots tugged his tie loose. "But—how?"

Kozik quickly caught him up on what he'd missed after he'd gone off to get Mouse.

"Holy shit." Boots pulled up a knee and twisted half-around so he could see into the back without contorting his neck. "What were you ladies doing in there, anyway?"

Kozik shook his head. "Don't bother. They don't speak English."

They'd reached the highway, and he hit the blinker, peering left and right before turning onto the main road. Though every instinct told him to floor it, he reminded himself that not abiding by the traffic rules was an easy way to draw unwanted attention. And the less attention they got, the better their chances of making it to Charming without any hiccups.

"Turns out Markoski was smuggling, alright," he patiently explained to Boots. But it wasn't booze or smokes." He gave a small jerk of the head backward. "He was smuggling girls."

The girls were tittering softly among themselves again.

"What the hell would Markoski do that for?"

"You serious?" Kozik huffed. "I thought you were the smart one. Think, dude. Why the hell would someone move pretty girls into the country illegally?"

Boots sucked in a breath. "Prostitution?"

Kozik barked a laugh. "Wow, clever guess, college boy."

"No!" the blonde protested, and Kozik reckoned she must've understood more than he would've expected. "We are not prostitute. They promise we work for family. Cook, clean. Look after children."

Kozik met her gaze again. The wariness in her expression was overlaid with indignity, and perhaps a smidgen of fresh fear. He glanced away, using the excuse of steering around a curve to pretend he needed to focus on the road.

Boots swiveled around in his seat fully. "Hi, I'm Boots. Want some gum?"

Kozik whipped his head around. "Are you insane?" For someone who'd made it to college, Boots sure was dumb.

"What?" Boots wormed a strip of spearmint through the wire mesh. "Just being friendly."

Kozik snorted. "That kind of friendly can land your ass in jail, fool."

"They wouldn't do that. We rescued them." Boots squinted at Kozik uncertainly. He put the packet of gum back in his pocket. "You ladies wouldn't give us up, would you?"

The blonde asked, "What is rescued?"

Kozik swallowed a laugh. The girl recognized the word for whore, but not for getting her ass yanked out of the fire.

"Means we saved you." Boots grinned broadly as he added, "From the bad men."

Kozik raised his eyes to the car roof. Christ, someone shoot him now.

But Boots' open approach seemed to lessen the girls' fears, and he slowly drew their story out of the blonde, who gave her name as Ania. Her friends were Olga and Tatiana. Lots of a's, Kozik noted absently, as he listened to the tale.

"One day, men come to our village." Ania spoke in a soft, toneless voice. "They tell us about work. In America. They say they help us. We," she gestured at

herself and the other two girls, "say is good thing. Little work at home. Little money. So we go."

"I read an article about that." Boots smacked an angry fist against his leg. "I bet they took your passport soon as you got off the boat, right?"

"Airplane," Ania corrected, misunderstanding the figure of speech again. "Yes, they take passport, money, clothes. Everything. They say we work for them now, pay for airplane first."

"Assholes." Boots squirmed round to face forward again. "That's fuckin' low, man," he muttered at Kozik. "Feed those girls some lies about the promised land, then whore 'em out."

Though Kozik wasn't really surprised—he'd seen what people would do for money, even sell their own mothers—he had to agree with Boots: it was a pretty nasty way of making a buck.

Boots was jiggling his knees again. "What's gonna happen to them now?"

In back, the blonde was once more whispering in her own language to her friends. Explaining what she'd told Boots, Kozik guessed.

He shrugged. "Dunno. We pass 'em on to Unser. He'll handle it." The headlamps briefly flared over the *Welcome to Charming* sign at the side of the road. Almost home, outta the woods. "Reckon they'll get sent home or something."

"Huh." Boots snuck another glance over his shoulder. "That don't seem fair after they came all this way."

Kozik puffed up his cheeks and released the breath slowly. He turned down the side road that would take them to Unser's place. "No, it don't."

So much crap in life wasn't fair, though. He'd seen more than his share of shitty outcomes during his years in the Corps. And he reckoned these chicks should count themselves lucky when all was said and done: they weren't gonna end up spreading their legs for middle-aged truckers in the back room of a seedy strip club in Vegas. They'd go home to their families in one piece, unharmed. More than a lot of people could say. Much as anyone could ask for, really.

He steered into the Unser Trucking lot, where the chief was already waiting. Almost done.

"Mousey-boy!" Chibs hollered past Tig's ear, the moment they walked into the club house.

Tig winced, tossing a dirty look across his shoulder. Chibs pretended not to notice and jostled his way ahead of Tig, making a beeline for the bar and waving at the bartender to pour him a drink.

Mouse's head had already whipped around at the slam of the door being flung open. He'd been sitting at the bar, rolling a beer bottle between his palms. His expression was wary and like he was contemplating bolting out the back. Tig kinda understood: the kid had no idea what had gone down after he'd been sent off. Far as Mouse knew, club still thought he might be a rat.

Tig and the others had, by chance, arrived back at the club house at the same time as Piney and the two Prospects. Piney had picked them up at Unser's, while everyone else had taken the long road home. As the Sons parked their bikes and pulled off helmets and gloves, Piney caught them up with Kozik's report of what the girls had told him and Boots.

Tig had hardly listened. With the retribution successful—if not quite how they'd pictured it—he was eager for some down time, with a cold beer and maybe a blow job or two to take the edge off.

Shouldn't be too difficult to arrange: though it was late Wednesday and the club house was quiet, a good handful of sweetbutts were scattered around, most watching a couple hangarounds play pool with evident boredom. They perked up as soon as the patched members strutted in and Tig caught sight of the blonde who was his current favorite—Melissa? Melinda? He couldn't recall. He gave her a wink, indicating his interest, and her smile widened and she took a step toward him.

"You weren't wrong after all, son." Clay was slapping a hand on Mouse's shoulder.

Tig sighed and held up a finger. *One minute, doll.* Seemed they'd be dealing with Mouse first. If he'd has his way, he'd have let the little bastard squirm a little longer. Payback for falsely accusing the Prospects. Christ knows, Tig had been tempted to let Kozik take that swing.

"Bout what?" Mouse winced under Clay's strong grip.

Otto, looming at Clay's shoulder, smirked at Mouse's confusion. "Markoski was smugglin' something on that run, alright. Wasn't what we thought, though. It was—," he paused, looking around at the rest of them and meeting everyone's eye briefly, before taking a big breath and announcing to the room at large, "—

pussy!"

There was a roar of laughter. Even Boots, not known for his sense of humor, joined in.

"Huh?"

"Bitches." Happy growled, sounding more than a little pissed, though his dark eyes glittered in amusement.

"Bitches?" Mouse echoed. Jesus, the little retard really was slow on the uptake.

"Yeah." Hap lost patience with the dimwit. "Ya know. Girls, chicks. *Pussy*." He grabbed an eager croweater hovering at the edge of group surrounding them and pulled her closer. She giggled as he kneaded her ass. Mouse still looked bewildered as fuck.

"Turns out the guy's into human trafficking, dude." It was Bobby who took pity on the hapless Mouse. "Pretty young women. Lures 'em over with promises of housekeeping jobs, then sends them on to clubs in Vegas or LA to whore 'em out."

"Huh." Mouse made another small confused sound. After another minute, cautious understanding dawned on his face. "So...." His voice trailed off as his eyes darted around at the other Sons. "I was right? About the transport?"

"Yeah, brother, you're in the clear." Much as it pained him to say it, Tig couldn't deny it. He planted an elbow on the bar and leaned a little closer to Mouse than he needed to, hemming Mouse in between Clay and himself, before gesturing for a beer.

"Should thank Kozik for savin' your skinny ass," Happy rumbled, even as he slipped his hand under the croweater's top.

"Too right. We'd have never known 'bout 'em if it weren't for this lad." Chibs slung an arm around Kozik's shoulders. Kozik pretended to be indifferent, but Tig knew him better than that. He easily recognized the brief flash of pleasure that flitted across Kozik's face. "He was the one figured out where those lasses were stashed outta sight."

"Kozik found them?" Mouse fell into a sullen pout. He didn't seem to like the idea Kozik was the one who'd gotten him off the hook.

"Man knows how to use that gray matter he's got in his skull." Snatching the beer the bargirl had put before him with one hand, Tig smugly rapped the knuckles of

his other hand against the back of Mouse's head. "Unlike some."

"Ow!" Mouse batted at his arm. "Shit, Tig, quit that!"

Tig laughed and took a pull from his beer. Maybe he could work it so Kozik and Mouse got in the ring together. Give Kozik a chance to vent his frustration without consequences and teach the kid a lesson in appreciation.

"So you see, laddie," Chibs tossed back his Scotch and slammed down the glass for a refill, "all's well that ends well."

With the matter settled, the group gradually drifted apart. Clay retreated to the chapel, presumably to enjoy a stogie in peace. Happy disappeared down the hall, a hand on the croweater's hip. Bobby confiscated a plate of cookies and withdrew to a corner. Otto and Chibs ambled back outside, sharing a pair of sweetbutts in skin-tight dresses between them and chatting about the modifications Otto wanted to make to his bike.

"Hey." The blonde croweater sidled up to Tig and hoisted herself onto the bar stool next to him. She leaned slightly toward him, enough he could feel her body heat.

"Hey, doll." Tig slung his arm around her, pulling her closer, not yet ready to take her to one of the back rooms. Plenty of time for that later. Enjoying his beer and the willing girl in his arms, Tig let his gaze wander around the room. Kozik had plopped on the ratty couch and was feeding Missy dog treats while he talked to one of the pool players. "Be right back, sweetheart. Don't go anywhere."

He let go of the girl, confident she'd wait for him, checked to make sure his bottle wasn't empty yet and strolled up to Kozik. A quick jab of his head in the direction of the hangaround and the guy, an old hand, retreated far enough he wouldn't be able to hear.

Satisfied he had the privacy he needed, Tig dropped next to Kozik on the sofa and threw his feet up on the low table. As soon as he was settled, Missy put her front paws next to his knees, tongue lolling. Tig chuckled, scratching her ears, happy to give her some love. "Clay's impressed. Figuring out that compartment. And Hap told him about the other day, too."

"Ain't no biggie." Kozik brushed Tig off with a casual shrug.

"Uh huh." Kozik's attitude didn't fool Tig. He might've seen the guy deal with far more dangerous shit than a bunch of wannabe mobsters from Russia, or wherever, but he knew Kozik was pleased by the compliment. "Club'll vote you in easily, when the day comes."

"Won't be for a while." Kozik folded the package of dog treats closed and put it out of Missy's eager reach. "I'm only at five months."

Tig fought a smile. Someone had been counting. "Year minimum's the rule, yeah. Gotta make absolutely sure jerks like that—," he dipped his head toward the bar, where Mouse, bolstered with the knowledge he was no longer under suspicion, was holding court again, Tig's blonde among his admirers, "—fit in right."

Kozik expression sobered. "That guy ain't ever gonna let me patch in. Not in a million years."

Tig scrubbed a hand over his chin. Kozik had a point: for some unknown reason, Mouse had taken an instant dislike to him. Did it run deep enough to vote against him? Not on Tig's watch.

Tig tightened his jaw. "He will. It'll happen. You'll see."

Smart enough not to say anything, Kozik gave him a narrow-eyed look.

Tig scratched Missy behind the ears again. "Was thinkin' about what Mouse said to you, earlier."

"You know I'd never—." Kozik's brows drew down.

Tig silenced him with a dismissive wave of his bottle. "Course not. Never woulda sponsored you if I thought you might. No, was thinkin' bullshit like that shouldn't go unanswered. And I'm guessin' you wouldn't mind gettin' back at the little douchebag?"

Kozik pursed his lips and let air whistle softly through his teeth. Missy swiveled her head attentively in his direction. "Can't say as I would, yeah. That stung, you know?"

Tig brought his bottle to his mouth again, and grimaced when he found it empty this time. "Brothers settle their differences at the table—or in the ring." As Tig had expected, Kozik's eyes lit up at the mention of the ring. He chuckled. "I'll bring it up at the table, next church."

Kozik cracked his knuckles. "Think the guys will go for it?" He waved a hand, indicating Mouse's cut and then his own.

"Hey, you forget who you're talkin' to?" Tig snorted. "I'm the SAA. My opinion counts, situation like this. So, you like?"

"Fuck, yeah." Kozik clenched his jaw. "Asshole's been on my case from the start."

"I know. This can't be about that, though." Tig waited until Kozik nodded before he thrust his empty beer bottle at him. "Now, be a good Prospect, and get me another one."

Kozik choked back a laugh. He took the bottle and walked off. Tig shifted his attention back to the gaggle of half-naked club girls strutting their stuff nearby, Melissa—or Melinda—had already forgotten him and headed off somewhere with someone else. All he had left was his pick of redheads and brunettes. Unable to decide, he simply waved them all over.

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## Chapter 6

Boots quit a week after they took down Markoski's truck. Tig wasn't entirely surprised: the percentage of Prospects who eventually gained their top rockers was always very low. But Boots had eight months under his belt, and it was unusual to lose a prospect after they'd stuck it out that long. Sure, sometimes the vote went the other way, if one or more of the patched members weren't convinced a guy could really hack it in spite of the twelve month trial. Sometimes, the Prospect period was extended. Most times, though, if a man held out the first six months, he'd hold out till the end.

Boots was one of the exceptions to the rule. He came in a few minutes before Friday's regular church, stammering something about having found a different purpose in life, before shrugging out of his cut, tossing it on the redwood table, and practically running from the club house, never to be seen again.

Clay cursed when Bobby told him the news toward the end of church, grumbling about Boots' lack of backbone and the club needing manpower—until Piney reminded him it was better to lose the guy now than after they patched him in. Grudgingly, Clay accepted the point and asked the table for suggestions: who else was ready to be brought up? The pickings were slim, and the discussion went round in circles for a long time, while the chapel grew thick with cigarette smoke. At last, exasperated, Clay shelved the subject.

"Anything else?" He was lifting the gavel, ready to close the meeting.

"Yeah." Tig sat up straighter. Clay sighed, placing the gavel back on the table. Tig pretended not to notice Clay's impatience. The president knew well enough what this was about; he just didn't like it much. But he'd also promised he

wouldn't keep Tig from bringing it up.

Tig had talked to Clay in private earlier in the day, seeking him out while Clay was enjoying a morning coffee and a cigar at a table in the clubhouse. If he could get the president on board, there was a better chance the rest of the club would agree to letting Kozik hack it out with Mouse in the ring, despite their difference in status.

"You're talkin' about a patched member and a Prospect," Clay had pointed out, after Tig laid out his plan.

"I know." Tig's answer was curt; he wasn't a fool. "Special case."

Clay raised an eyebrow. "How you figure that?"

"Mouse accused the Prospects falsely. Tryin' to hide his own mistake."

"Turned out it wasn't a mistake." Clay drank from his coffee, looking at Tig over the rim of the mug.

"True." Taking heart that Clay hadn't outright refused him, Tig pulled up a chair, pivoted it on one leg, and sat down, resting his forearms on the chair back. "Mouse didn't know that, though. Neither did the rest of us." He cocked his head, tapping one finger against his temple. "We never would've, if Kozik hadn't been so sharp. C'mon, Clay. If it had been brother to brother, we'da had pistols at dawn. Gotta give those guys something." At the time, he hadn't known Boots was about to throw in the towel. Not that it would have mattered: this was about Kozik.

Clay snorted a rueful laugh, slapping a palm on the table. "When did you become a Prospects' advocate?"

Tig grinned smugly. "Since I figured out right from wrong."

Clay had heaved an exaggerated breath. "Alright." Scrubbing a hand across his face, he'd grimaced. "You can bring it to the table. Leave it to a vote."

Which was all Tig had wanted.

And now the time was here. He looked around the table. "Last week. Mouse said something."

Mouse fidgeted in his chair, managing to look clueless and guilty at the same time. Tig fixed him with a look while he put forward his arguments, same way he'd done with Clay.

"Jesus, I don't believe this!" Mouse spat, even before Tig had finished speaking. He jumped up from his chair. "I put up with you and your abuse for a year, and now you want to let that...that—." He was spluttering with fury.

"That—what?" Tig asked, rubbing his jaw. "Guy who saved your bacon? After you falsely called him a rat?"

Mouse spluttered some more, but he had no real arguments. In the end, it came down to a narrow vote: five to three in favor, the smallest majority possible.

"We'll do it Sunday, late." Clay brought the gavel down, confirming the decision. He aimed the gavel in Tig's direction. "And no audience. This is purely a club matter."

"Sure thing, boss." Tig lowered his head to hide his grin. Mouse was so doomed.

oOo

Sunday night arrived cold and overcast. The hangarounds and club girls had been chased away, leaving only the patched members gathered around the boxing ring outside the club house. A thin fog was swirling around the floodlights; their buzzing glare blinded Kozik as he blinked sweat out of his eyes

Even with blood trickling from above his right eye, where Mouse had landed a lucky shot, he still couldn't quite believe Tig had gotten the club to sign off on this. Yet here he was, bare-chested, hands taped, and with Mouse's thin frame clinging limply to him as Mouse vainly struggled to keep his feet.

But if anyone had expected Kozik to have an easy time beating Mouse to a pulp, they'd quickly learned they were wrong. Mouse's smaller size made him light on his feet, and sheer desperation made him reckless, which was hard to guard against. He'd broken through Kozik's defenses a couple times, resulting not only in the cut to Kozik's eyebrow but also an aching jaw. Tig sure had known what he was doing, pitching them against each other like this.

In the end, however, Kozik's experience, recent training with Chibs, and determination had won out over panicked rashness, and Mouse was finally out on his feet.

"Enough. Break it up." Clay's voice forced its way through the pounding blood and the shouted encouragements filling Kozik's ears, and Chibs and Happy disentangled Mouse from Kozik and lugged him out of the ring. While they carried him toward the club house, Chibs hollered ahead, telling Bobby to get some ice.

Clay was studying Kozik from where he stood, near a corner of the ring with his arms crossed on his chest. His face gave Kozik no clue what he was thinking. Was he mad Kozik had beaten Mouse?

"Clean yourself up." Tig tossed Kozik a towel, before climbing into the ring. Without another word, he started unwrapping the tape protecting Kozik's knuckles. His mouth quirked as though he were fighting a grin.

"Thanks." Kozik wiped his face with the towel, glancing at the bloody streak he'd left on the material before draping it over his shoulders. With the excitement over, the October evening air was chilly on his sweating skin.

"Don't mention it." Tig shrugged. "Fair warning: don't let this go to your head. This was a one time only performance. For the next seven months, you're nothing but a shitty Prospect."

"I know." Kozik flexed his hands, testing his fingers. They were throbbing, but he reckoned Mouse's face was hurting a lot more.

The soft rumble of a car broke the quiet that had fallen over the lot now the fight was over. A Charming PD squad car rolled up and pulled in across from the club house. The hunched figure of Unser behind the wheel was visible in the floodlights.

"Alright. All done." With a slap to Kozik's shoulder, Tig yanked the last of the tape loose and crumpled it together. "Now get lost." He dropped from the ring, lobbed the ball of tape overhand into a trash can and took up station behind Clay.

"Wayne. What brings you out here, this time of night?" Clay asked as Unser ambled toward them.

"Gemma said you were still here." Unser scrubbed a hand across his balding head. He looked tired. "Wanted to give you the latest in person."

Kozik had climbed from the ring and was yanking a T-shirt he'd left on a nearby chair over his head. The movement caught Unser's attention. "What happened to him?"

"Ain't your concern, chief," Clay answered easily. "Unless you think to tell us how to handle our business now?"

"Uh...." Unser blinked. "No.... No, I mean—."

Kozik grabbed his cut and, shrugging into it as he walked, quickly headed to the club house door. As a Prospect, he wouldn't be welcome to join the conversation, never mind becoming the subject.

"Anyway, came to tell you about Markoski."

Despite Tig's order to get lost and Kozik's own awareness he should skedaddle soon as he could, Unser's words stopped Kozik dead in his tracks.

"Had his business worked over by INS. Turns out a bunch of his drivers were illegals. Fake greencards, invalid licenses, the works." Unser pulled back his lips in a humorless smirk. "He's outta business. Thought you might like to know."

"What happened to those chicks?" The question escaped Kozik before he could catch himself.

Tig scowled at him, but Unser simply tugged at his ear. "From what I hear, they got put on a plane back home. Should be back with their families by now."

Kozik nodded, unable to keep his mouth from curving into a grim smile.

That seemed to be all Unser had to say for now. Promising Clay he'd forward any further information about Markoski, he left. Kozik doubted there would be anything else; the club had as good as put Markoski out of business and if the man was half-smart, he wouldn't try to set up shop near Charming ever again.

"Happy endings all around. Just the way I like it." Clay juggled his bike keys. "It's been a fun night." His tone was filled with irony. He caught Kozik's gaze. "And I expect you bright and early tomorrow morning." When Kozik nodded, Clay shifted his attention to Tig. "I'mma head home, see to the missus. I trust you'll look after things here."

"Absolutely, boss." Tig raised a sloppy salute. Even as Clay slogged off toward his bike, Tig swung round on Kozik, his blue eyes hard. "Don't do that again. When I tell you to get lost—"

Kozik held up his hands. "I know. Sorry."

"Goddammit." Tig's tone shifted to something more sympathetic. "Those bitches really got to you, didn't they?"

Kozik let his arms fall to his side. "Just ain't right, what that asshole tried to do."

"Christ, you're a soft-hearted puss, you know that?" Tig thumped Kozik's arm.

Kozik shrugged. He wasn't ashamed to admit he was happy to know those girls were safe, or that Markoski and his cronies wouldn't be luring any more innocent women into whoring with false promises.

"Christ, bro. What am I gonna do with you?" Tig shook his head and, clearly not expecting an answer, made a beeline for the club house.

Kozik followed. He tossed the bloodied towel into the basket behind the bar that held dirty dish towels. On the other side of the room, Chibs was finishing patching up Mouse, applying butterfly bandages while Mouse pressed an ice pack to his eye. Without needing to be told, Kozik started setting the room to rights: collecting the empty beer bottles and dirty glasses, emptying overflowing ash trays, straightening chairs. Taking care of the club house was a Prospect's job. Some nights, he successfully pawned off the clean-up to a couple of the croweaters. Tonight, he was the only drudge left, and he'd already overstepped the mark once. Best not do it again.

Gradually, the rest of the guys left for home or withdrew to the back room for a few hours of shuteye until, at last, Kozik was alone. Leaning on his broom, he paused in sweeping the floor to study the wall proudly showing off a collection of mug shots. He'd never even met half the guys in these pictures, yet they were all familiar to him.

He laughed quietly. His life had certainly taken an odd turn. When he'd processed out of the Marines, he'd thought he knew what the rest of his life would be like. Get Jenn to marry him, maybe produce a couple rugrats to raise....

Yeah, he sure had got that wrong. Shaking his head at himself, he abandoned the mug shots and finished sweeping. He put the broom in the cupboard and gathered up Miracle's keys from behind the bar. In the doorway, he turned, surveying the room a final time to make sure he hadn't missed anything. If he had, there'd be hell to pay come morning. Satisfied nobody would find fault with his work, he switched off the lights and closed the door.

Samcro might be an strange kind of family, and not what he'd imagined or dreamed of during his tours in those faraway hot, dusty shitholes. But they were *his* family now. And he'd do whatever it took to keep them.

Seven more months for his patch vote to come up....

Piece of cake.

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