

**Title:** Semper Fi

**Author:** Scribblesinink

**Rating:** Teen

**Characters:** Tig, Kozik,

**Content notes:** Mentions of drug use and addiction.

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**Author notes:** Part of the Two Brothers series, exploring (among other things) the past history of Tig and Kozik's friendship.

**Summary:** Tig has dedicated his life to the Sons, and the club comes first, always. But when an old buddy needs his help, he suddenly finds his loyalties are divided.

**SEMPER FI**  
**By: Scribblesinink**

*Oakland, 1994*

Tig stayed close on Clay's heels as they followed a young One-Niner through a maze of filthy rooms. A scattering of people were sprawled on dirty couches and broken arm chairs, forcing them to take a winding route, and the place stank of piss and sweat and mold. Tig scanned his surroundings constantly, alert for potential dangers, and kept his hand on his gun.

His loathing of the collection of junkies was mirrored in Clay's expression. Catching Clay's eye for a moment, Tig curled up his lip. *Let's get this shit over and done with, so we can get the fuck outta here.* Clay gave him a barely-there nod of agreement.

"Laroy's through here." Their guide—a black kid who couldn't be more than sixteen—waved them toward a back hallway. Tig eyed the boy warily. Was it a trap?

The gangbanger flinched under Tig's narrow-eyed scrutiny, but Tig didn't see any deceit in his face. Maybe Clay was right, after all, and Laroy was a legit contact. Still, Tig didn't much like the location Laroy had picked: why did he want to meet in a run-down housing complex filled with junkies that was deep inside a part of the One-Niners's Oakland territory that bordered on a neighborhood the Mayans owned. The sooner they could leave this junkie-infested dump behind and get back on the road to Charming, the happier Tig would be.

At least back-up wasn't far if the shit did hit the fan. They'd rolled five deep on the run, and Bobby, Chibs and Big Otto were keeping watch outside, just a

holler away. Couldn't ask for better guys to watch your back, either.

Tig wasn't about to let his guard down or be less vigilant, however, and he let his gaze roam around the room they were walking through one last time. Something pinged his sixth sense. Unsure what it was, he paused, searching for whatever had caught his attention.

*There.* A guy in frayed jeans and checkered shirt who was slumped on a ratty couch that had once been pale yellow but was now a stained and torn brown. One of the man's legs was slung over the shredded arm rest and his head lolled back, eyes closed. Scruffy stubble shadowed his jaw and he looked to be stoned out of his mind. It couldn't be, could it?

Needing to be sure, Tig walked over for a closer look. Jesus Christ, but it was. "Hey!" He kicked the motionless figure. "Koz, dude."

Kozik didn't react. He was too far gone to feel Tig's heavy biker boot connecting with his ankle. It took a couple more well-placed kicks before he gave a shudder and let out a plaintive, "Ow!" His eyelids fluttered as he slowly raised his head. "Huh?" He squinted at Tig blearily. "Sarge?"

"Christ, man, what the fuck?" Tig still couldn't believe his eyes. A reeking junkie hangout was the last place he would've expected to run into his former corporal.

"Tig." Clay's low-voiced call made Tig turn his head. The president was hovering in the door opening to the hallway, with the kid who'd guided them hopping anxiously on the sneakered balls of his feet behind him. "Something wrong?"

Tig cast another look at Kozik, who was struggling to drag himself into a sitting position. Disgust replaced his shock. "Nah." He spat. "Just some goddamn junkie." Turning swiftly on his heel, he strode back to where Clay was heading through the door into the further recesses of the house, and put Kozik from his mind. Time to concentrate on the business that had brought them to this stinking place.

They found Laroy where the kid had said he'd be. Early twenties, Tig guesstimated. Tall, with a glint to his dark eyes that made him appear both determined and dangerous. A guy who knew what he wanted, and how to get it, Tig reckoned. Could be a good business partner for Samcro—or not. Whatever Laroy was up to that he needed the Sons' help with, it was something he didn't want his One-Niner bosses to know about, or he'd have suggested a less nasty location for the meet.

Introductions were quickly made, and then Laroy fired off the opening salvo of negotiations. "I hear you're the go-to guys for what I'm lookin' for."

Clay arched a brow. "Depends what it is you lookin' for."

Tig took position at Clay's right shoulder, resting his hands loosely on his belt buckle. He didn't have to add anything to the conversation: Clay and the One-Niner would dance around the issue for long minutes, neither stating outright what it was they were talking about, but slowly circling in to the actual subject under discussion. Tig hated this part; he preferred to come right out and say what was on his mind. But the dance was necessary, so he settled in for the duration, his gaze constantly darting around, never focusing on any one spot for more than a few seconds, while his ears were pricked up for any sound that spelled trouble. It didn't distract him from reliving the shock of running into Kozik again, though, a man he hadn't seen since...?

Well, since they'd been deployed to that hellhole somewhere in the fucking desert. Tig couldn't recall the name of the place, but he sure remembered the barracks baking under the hot sun, the dust swirling lazily under a cloudless sky, the sweat trickling down his brow. Kozik had caught him just as he was finishing stuffing his belongings into his duffel for the last time.

"It's true, then. You're really gettin' out." Kozik was leaning a shoulder against the door. Muscles strained under his green undershirt as he flexed his arms before crossing them over his chest.

"Yeah." Tig zipped his duffel shut with a determined yank on the zipper. "I'm sick of this shit, man." He flicked a hand to indicate their surroundings. Kozik would understand he was talking about more than this particular Marine base in Buttfuck, Wherever that they were currently stationed at. "Thought I'd try my hand at civilian life for a change." Feeling Kozik deserved something more, he added, "'Sides, Colleen's got a bun in the oven."

Kozik snorted. "For real? You gonna go play daddy among all those pussies? This is in your blood, bro."

"Mebbe." Tig shrugged, hefting the duffel onto his shoulder. "We'll see." Kozik might turn out to be right, but Colleen had been on his case to get out of the Corps for a long time, and since he'd knocked her up, he reckoned she deserved more from him than the occasional pay-check and a couple weeks R&R every few months.

They were both silent for a moment, neither sure what to say. They'd seen and done so much shit together, shit that was best buried and forgotten. While they stood there, the noises of the hot, dusty camp drifted into the barracks: the distant rumble of Humvees going out on patrol; the shouted instructions of a drill sergeant; the rhythmic thump of boots against dirt as a squad trotted by.

At last, Kozik pushed off from the doorway. "Gonna miss you, man."

It was Tig's turn to snort and he shot Kozik a look that said, *Really?*

Kozik spread his hands. "Hey, who else am I gonna talk hog with?"

Tig smirked; Kozik had a point there. Nobody in their unit had the love for old Harleys that he and Kozik shared. Damned cage drivers, the lot of them. "Look me up if you ever get in the area. Stockton, Southside."

"Will do." Another pause. Then Kozik stepped forward. "Watch your six, Tigger." They embraced briefly, slapping each other's backs.

"You too, bro." Tig brushed past Kozik, lugging his duffel along, taking the first step toward returning to the world and the start of a new life.

What the hell had happened to Kozik since then? How had he gone from the kick-ass Marine who'd saved Tig's life at least as many times as the other way round to this? This cesspool. Sure, they'd lost touch after Tig had left the Corps, but Kozik had been Tig's best friend, and if Kozik had gotten into trouble, he'd have come to find Tig, wouldn't he? Maybe if—.

Something in Clay's tone pulled Tig from his thoughts, though the president still sounded calm as he said to Laroy, "You're plannin' a takeover." To the uninitiated, Clay would've sounded indifferent, but Tig heard the underlying note of interest.

*Focus, man.* Clay was counting on him to watch his back and make sure they both got out of there whole. He couldn't afford to get distracted by the past.

"That's how life goes." Laroy rolled a shoulder. "New takes over from old. Good for business. Progress and shit, ya know."

Clay sucked in air through his nose, and Tig easily read his thoughts: Clay was thinking about another instance of the old guard bumping heads with those who were more ambitious. But Laroy wasn't waiting for a stroke of misfortune, like the semi that had dragged JT to his death, to put him in the top dog position. No, Laroy was plannin' a fuckin' coup.

Damn. No wonder the guy needed guns.

Tig took another good look at the guy. So, Laroy wasn't just another young brother who knew what he wanted, but also the kind of guy who didn't care what he had to do to get his way. Including turning on his own people.

And that was what made the MC different from any old street gang. Loyalty and brotherhood. No matter how much Clay and JT had fought, or how loud they'd

shouted at each other in church, none of Tig's brothers would ever engineer a takeover the way Laroy was doing. Did the club really wanna get into bed with a sneaky bastard like that? Assuming Laroy succeeded in his plans, who was to say he wouldn't turn on Samcro the second it suited him better?

Clay folded his arms across his chest. "And what if your plan works? Whatcha gonna do then?" Tig shifted his gaze from Laroy to Clay. Sounded like his prez wasn't too sure about this deal, either.

"If?" Laroy laughed cockily. "Get me the weapons, Clay, and there ain't gonna be no *if* about it."

Teeth glinting, Clay smirked, unfazed by Laroy's arrogance. "Didn't answer my question."

"What's it to you?" Laroy's smug grin disappeared and he oozed suspicion. In instinctive reaction, Tig shifted his stance, hand twitching, though he stopped short of reaching for his gun.

It was Clay's turn to shrug in unconcern. "Wanna make sure whatever you do don't blow back on my club. Or my town."

Laroy remained silent for a moment, nibbling on his lower lip as he considered Clay's words. Then he gave a curt nod and Tig relaxed a fraction. "A'ight. Don't sweat it. I ain't got no plans beyond Oakland." He gestured at the building they were in. "Good bank to be made in the H-trade around here. This place is small fry, brothers fumblin' on the fringes, but I plan to expand. Take everything south of 40th Street."

"That's Mayan territory." Two pairs of eyes swung in Tig's direction.

"So it is." Laroy dipped his head again. "Don't mean it's gotta stay that way."

Clay laughed. "Can't accuse you of lack of ambition, that's for damn sure." His expression grew stern again and he pinned Laroy with a cold-eyed stare. "Want your word your shit'll stay in Oaktown."

Laroy didn't hesitate. "You got it."

Clay glanced at Tig, a question in his eyes. Clay would make up his own mind, of course, but Tig appreciated being asked for his opinion. He gave a nod. The Sons still had a score to settle with the Mexicans after the bloody wars of '92 and '93, and if this kid wanted to take those wetbacks down a peg, that'd be just fine with Tig.

Clay turned back toward Laroy. "Alright. Let's talk price and schedules. Then I'll

take it to the table."

An amount was settled on quickly, much to Tig's relief: the stale air in the building was getting to him, and he found it increasingly difficult to remain still. Agreeing a delivery date proved harder. The Sons never stocked much hardware, so an unplanned order like this one, while welcome, was difficult to fill at short notice. And Laroy was impatient. At last, Clay got him to accept they'd let him know the exact time and place for the delivery in a few days.

"Need the shipment by next week Sunday," Laroy warned, his gaze stony. "Or I'll take my business elsewhere."

"Sons are good for their word." Clay was evidently damned sure he could push this deal through at the table. He shook hands with Laroy to seal the agreement and turned toward Tig. "Let's get the hell out of this dump."

"You go on ahead." The words tumbled from Tig's mouth unbidden, and his own surprise was reflected in Clay's face. Tig scrubbed his neck, reluctant to meet Clay's eyes. That hadn't been what he'd planned to say. "Somethin' I gotta do."

Clay fixed him with a hard look for a moment, and then sighed. "Sure thing. Want me to tell Chibs or Bobby to stay with you?"

"Nah." Tig didn't want any of his brothers to know what he was gonna do, and he reckoned he could deal with Kozik by himself. Fuck, *he* had no idea what he was gonna do—hadn't been planning on doing *anything* until a minute ago. "Can handle it."

Again, Clay gave him a long look. "Alright. See ya back at the club house." He slapped Tig's shoulder. "Don't be late for church."

oOo

Kozik was no longer on the ratty couch where Tig had left him. Cursing under his breath, Tig grabbed the nearest junkie, a girl with pasty skin and black hair that showed light-brown at the roots, and hauled her upright. "The guy over there. Tall, spiky blond hair. Where'd he go?"

"Dunno." She blinked at Tig with unfocused eyes, her pupils tiny pinpricks of black. She was high as a kite; it'd be hours before he'd get anything useful out of her. Assuming she'd even noticed where Koz had gone. With a growl, Tig let go of her and she flopped on the seat. Useless gash.

He made quick work of searching the rest of the building, methodically going through the maze of connecting rooms, knocked out walls and narrow hallways.

None of the junkies he stumbled across was the man he was looking for; Kozik had evidently snuck off while Tig and Clay had been dealing with Laroy.

*Shoulda gone back with the guys.* Running a hand through his hair, Tig puffed out a disgusted breath. Why did he even give a fuck, anyway?

Sensing someone watching him, he swung around, his right hand automatically seeking the butt of his gun. Laroy was standing in the doorway, arms folded across his chest. An small, amused smile played around his lips.

"What the hell you want?" Tig had sent his own brothers home so they wouldn't witness him acting like a sentimental fool over an old Marines buddy, and now this upstart punk was laughing at him?

Laroy uncrossed his arms and stepped further into the room. He carefully avoided a puddle of dried vomit coating the filthy carpet. "Try south of Temescal Creek."

Tig eyed the One-Niner warily. He'd be encroaching on Mayan turf if he went that far south and Laroy would know that. What game was he playing? Though the Mayans and Sons had forged a cease-fire, a Mayan-controlled 'hood wasn't somewhere Tig wanted to go alone, especially flying Sons' colors.

Laroy shrugged. "Just sayin', it's a good place for your friend to score."

"Ain't looking for a friend," Tig spat. "Just—." He left the sentence unfinished. Who, exactly, was he looking for? They'd been best buddies in the Corps, but he didn't owe Kozik shit, did he? He sighed. "Gotta go."

He shoved past Laroy, heading for the door leading out front. Once on the pavement, he breathed in deeply. The inner city air was far from fresh—heavy with exhaust fumes and the smell of rain—but it was a damn sight better than the stink inside the building.

His bike was where he'd left her: despite his brothers no longer keeping watch, nobody had dared touch a bike displaying Reaper paint. Grabbing his helmet off the handle bar, Tig quickly strapped it on. Clay didn't expect him at the table for a while yet; couldn't hurt to look around the neighborhood a spell. Kozik had been too doped up to sit straight, so he couldn't have gotten far. Tig was bound to come upon him soon.

oOo

For forty minutes, Tig cruised block after block after block of potholed streets, crisscrossing the entire territory held by the One-Niners, without seeing hide nor

hair of Kozik. At last, he pulled over to the curb to rethink his strategy. He was so going to kick that dumb blond ass when he found it. All this effort, and he had shit to show for it.

If only Kozik had disappeared on Tig's own turf, in Charming: the Sons' patch would've gotten him all the answers he needed in double-quick time.

Lighting up a cigarette and taking a drag, Tig cursed out loud. He was starting to feel like the punch line of a bad joke.

*How far can a doped-up junkie walk?*

*Further than you think.*

While he smoked and fumed, he went on scanning his surroundings; he'd never lost the long ingrained habit of always being on guard. A flyer stapled to a telephone pole, partly torn away and fluttering in strips in the wind, caught his eye. Sucking in another lungful of nicotine, Tig was about to dismiss it as irrelevant when something about it made him squint to make out the print.

*Last Hope Detox and Rehab Center - Escape from Addiction Today!*

Underneath was an address Tig recognized as two neighborhoods over.

Tig snorted a laugh. He was neither religious nor superstitious and had never believed in signs or portents. But this looked like a message specifically aimed at him, providing him with the answer to a question he'd so far left unexamined in the back of his head: what was he gonna do with Kozik when he found him?

Swinging off his bike, Tig walked over to the pole, tore the flyer loose, folded it and stuffed into the pocket of his jeans. So, now he had a plan.

But he still didn't have Kozik. Cussing inwardly, Tig finished his cigarette and ground the butt against his boot to snuff it out. No way around it: he'd have to look for the fool in Mayan territory. It was the only place he hadn't searched. With any luck, the truce would hold long enough for Tig to locate Kozik and drag him off to Last Hope, and he'd get in and out without bloodshed.

Because Clay'd already given him a weird look after Tig'd rescued Missy from the pound; Tig could only imagine what he'd say if he got his ass killed by the fuckin' wetbacks over some doped-up junkie.

He paused before riding off. One thing he could do to make himself less conspicuous: take off his cut, or wear it inside out. Less chance of being recognized and getting into trouble. But—no, fuck that shit. He was a goddamn Son, and no way was he gonna deny that. If those Mexican fuckers couldn't



handle it, well, that was their problem. He had enough shit of his own to deal with.

oOo

Tig finally hunted Kozik down in a trash-strewn alley a couple blocks north of the interstate. The place was deep in Mayan territory but, thankfully, Tig hadn't bumped into any of the wetbacks. Maybe the Mexicans would keep hiding from the rain, which had started falling a while ago, until Tig got himself and Kozik's ass out of there.

Leaving his bike at the curb, Tig kicked his way through the debris cluttering the alley. Kozik had squeezed himself in between two overflowing dumpsters and it was sheer luck that Tig had spotted his boot sticking out from under a moldy blanket stained with stuff Tig didn't want to think about.

Stopping in front of the dumpsters, Tig tried not to breathe in the stink too deeply. "You're a hard man to find, dude."

For the second time that day, Kozik blinked at Tig, though his eyes were a bit clearer than they'd been before. He scrambled to his feet, backing up toward the wall. "Mebbe I didn't wanna be found." His upper lip curled into a sneer.

Tig sniffed contemptuously, regretting it immediately as his nose involuntarily scrunched up. Chrissakes, the man was badly in need of a shower and some clean duds. He planted his hands on his hips and gave Kozik back stare for stare. Kozik's defiance would've been more impressive if he hadn't looked like something even the cat wouldn't bother dragging in.

Under Tig's disdainful glare, Kozik withered. Plucking at the tattered sleeves of his stained shirt, he slowly shuffled further backward, boots scuffing the concrete.

Tig narrowed his eyes. "You gonna run from me like some bitch now? That it?" He wasn't about to give Kozik the chance. Not after all the effort and risk it had taken to ferret him out.

Tig's accusation hit home enough that Kozik stopped moving and visibly pulled himself up straighter. "What the fuck you want, Trager?" he snapped.

Tig suppressed a grin. Anger was good. He could work with anger. "Jeezus, dude. Look at yourself."

Kozik stuffed his hands under his armpits, his brief flare of temper vanishing. "Think I don't know?" His voice cracked. "You ain't got no fuckin' clue what it

was like, man. You *left*, remember?"

Christ, was that what this was about? Tig cocked his head. True, he must've left the Corps before Kozik went through whatever shit had sent him down this path. But Tig had been a Marine long enough and been through enough shit himself to be able to make a decent guess about the kind of thing that could bring a man to get high rather than remember.

"Hey." He purposefully kept his tone soft, coaxing. A guy in Kozik's state of mind could just as easily fly into a rage as break down in tears, if he said a wrong word. "None of that matters, brother. You know it don't." He flapped a hand toward his bike. "Let's just get you outta here."

Kozik barked a harsh laugh. "You want me to ride bitch with you?"

"Jesus, you dumb fuck!" Tig exploded, losing the hold on his temper. Didn't Kozik understand that every minute they stood here arguing was another minute those Mexi assholes could discover them? "Look at you. You can barely stand, let alone ride. How else am I gonna haul your ass from here?"

Kozik shrugged, pulling his shoulders to his ears. Wet patches were starting to form on his shirt where the rain had soaked in and Tig instinctively wiped the water from his cut, his fingers brushing over his sergeant's patch.

"Goddammit," he burst out. "Screw you then, asshole." He didn't need this shit. He stomped back to his bike. If Kozik didn't want his help, Tig wasn't gonna push it on him.

Swinging one leg over the saddle and reaching for the handle bars, he heard another noise over the constant patter of rain on his helmet: the low rumble of straight pipes. More than one, too. His head whipped around and he peered through the gloom in the direction the sound was coming from. "Oh, you gotta be shittin' me."

Four Mayans were riding in formation down the street. They weren't in a hurry, but coming on steadily, like sharks that had smelled blood and were circling their prey. They knew Tig was here, for sure.

Tig cursed again. Someone was certainly having fun at his expense today: first the wild goose chase to find a junkie who refused his help, then the cold rain soaking him to the bone, and now the fuckin' Mayans hunting him down? Fuck it, he could've been hanging out warm and dry at the club house in Charming right now, a cold brew in one hand and a hot sweetbutt to bounce on his knee in the other. But what was the saying? No good deed goes unpunished?

"Corporal!" he barked. Kozik, listening to the approaching bikes with a slightly

puzzled expression, clearly had no idea what trouble was bearing down on them. And he wouldn't stand a chance against four wetbacks if they came after him. Not in his current state. "Get your useless ass up and over here."

Something in Tig's words, or perhaps simply the tone, must've conveyed the urgency of their situation to Kozik: he jogged toward Tig without a word of protest and clumsily slung a leg over the bike. Tig steadied him while he found his balance and wrapped his hands around Tig's ribs.

Once he was sure Kozik wasn't gonna fall off as they moved off, Tig cracked the throttle, and away they went. Behind them, the Mayan engines changed pitch as their riders also sped up.

o0o

Hair plastered to his head and water dripping from his cut, Tig hurried into the chapel, the last one to arrive. It had finally stopped raining by the time he and Kozik had crossed into Charming, but the drizzle had already soaked him to the bone. Since he was running late already, he hadn't wanted to risk Clay's ire by taking the time to change into a dry shirt and jeans before making it to church.

His brothers sat around the table, looking warm and comfortable. Judging by the thick cloud of smoke under the lamps, they'd been at it for a while, too. Tig ignored the curious looks tossed his way, the questions on their faces. Between the damned Mayans and Kozik, the assholes should count themselves lucky Tig was around for church at all—though he wasn't about to tell anyone that.

When the Mayans had sped up behind him, Tig had thought quickly. They wouldn't let him escape their clutches lightly, and he didn't know the streets of Oakland as well as they did. Better not to try to shake them in the alleys. No, his best bet would be to get on 580 ASAP.

He found an on-ramp less than two blocks later and, much to his grateful surprise, the Mayans hadn't followed him up on to the interstate. He hadn't been scared—never that—but he also didn't have a death wish.

"Tig. Glad you could join us." Clay's tone was heavy with sarcasm. Tig grimaced an apology, wiping drops of water from his face, and flopped into his chair.

"Phone?" Piney rumbled from the VP seat across from him.

Shit: he'd forgotten the phone rule. With another unhappy grimace, he ducked back out of the chapel, fishing his cell from his cut pocket. At least the leather had served to keep it dry. He dropped the phone on top of the bricks already piled in a shoebox on the pool table and stalked back into the chapel, closing the doors behind him. He slipped back into his seat while Clay was finishing telling the others about the meet they'd had with Laroy.

"You believe this is a good deal?" Bobby was first to speak once Clay threw the discussion open to the table.

Clay leaned back in his chair. "Kid's young. Play it right, he could prove a loyal customer for years to come."

Big Otto barked a laugh. "How we even gonna deliver? Ain't got that much in stock."

Clay rested his palms on the redwood table in front of him. "Was thinkin' about reachin' out to other charters."

"Tacoma might scrounge up a couple AKs," Happy piped up from his spot at the far end of the table. He should know; he was spending enough of his time up in Washington to help get the fledgling charter up and running.

"No. Let Lee hold on to what he's got." Clay turned toward Bobby. "Get on the horn with Rogue River and Fresno. Ask what they can do."

"And if that ain't enough?" Piney's skepticism was obvious. Tig glanced across at the old man. Piney sounded a little winded, despite doing nothing except sitting on his ass chain-smoking. He'd always been on JT's side when it came to guns, and he'd made it known more than once he wasn't much in favor of expanding their business into Oaktown.

Clay shrugged. "We can delay shipment to the Italians, or the Grim Bastards, if need be."

Though Piney hmph'ed and grumbled, "Caccuzza won't appreciate that," the vote went Clay's way, just as Tig had expected. If Clay hadn't believed he could push the deal through, he wouldn't have promised Laroy they'd deliver. Tig had to give it to his president: he knew how to handle business. The club did well under him, and if this latest deal went as planned, they'd do even better.

The gavel came down with a bang, and church was over. Tig pushed his chair back, getting up. A hot shower was calling his name from the apartment at the back of the club house, and he reckoned he could scrounge up a pair of jeans and a shirt from somewhere. Might not be clean, but he'd settle for dry.

"Tig." With a nod, Clay indicated he wanted to have a word. Shelving the idea of a shower, Tig hung back while his brothers filed out of the chapel. Out in the common room, someone turned up the music and Chibs hollered at the sweetbutt tending bar for whiskey. Bobby, last to leave, cast a meaningful look back at Tig and Clay but didn't speak. Soon as Bobby'd left, Tig shut the doors. He'd want privacy for this conversation.

Clay's face was expressionless as Tig sat back down. He swiveled his chair a few degrees until he faced Tig head on. "Got a troubling call."

Tig's eyebrows shot up. Not what he'd expected. "Who?" he blurted, before he could stop himself.

Clay's forehead furrowed. "Mayan president."

*Oh, crap.* Tig hung his head. *Shoulda seen that comin'.*

"Says a Son was cruising their turf. Chased him off."

"Wasn't chased." Tig's head whipped up. Would Clay think he was that much of a pussy?

Clay's lips twitched. "Course you weren't." The faint smile faded. "Wanna tell me what you were doin' there?"

The truce with the Mayans was tenuous at best. Both clubs were still busy licking their wounds after the craziness of the past few years and Clay's tone indicated that, despite his brief smile, he wasn't amused in the slightest by his sergeant-at-arms jeopardizing that shaky peace.

Tig scratched at an eyebrow, trying to figure out what to say. He decided on the truth. Wasn't much else he could tell Clay, anyway. He wouldn't lie to his brothers, and he sure as hell couldn't lie to the club president.

"Was looking for an old buddy. Served together in the Gulf and shit."

Clay reached out to take a cigar from the box. "The junkie?"

"Yeah."

"Found him?" Clay sucked the cigar into life, blue smoke billowing to the ceiling to join the rest of the cloud.

Tig offered another nod. "Yep."

Clay chuckled around the butt of the stogie. "You do have a thing for vagrants, don'tcha?"

"Guess so." Tig rolled a shoulder to hide his wounded pride at the mockery in Clay's tone.

"First the dog," Clay went on relentlessly. "And now a down-and-out ex-jarhead?"

Tig opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He didn't know what he could say. Clay wouldn't understand. Hell, *he* didn't have a fucking clue why he'd sought out Kozik and taken him to Charming. He'd been running on instinct and old memories—and the knowledge that if things had been different, it might've been him burning up his braincells with dope. And he wasn't about to leave an old buddy behind, ever.

So that was how he'd found himself riding along the interstate with Kozik clinging to him as if for dear life. Once he was sure the Mayans were off his tail, he'd had slowed to the speed limit while he continued north and east. Now the Mayan threat was gone, he had time to think. What the fuck was he gonna do with the junkie on his bitch seat? Take him to that Last Hope place? He'd have to get off the highway again and re-enter town to drop Kozik off. But a Christian detox center smack in the middle of Oakland's shitty neighborhoods? Was that really the best place for Kozik? He'd never struck Tig as being much of a guy to find Jesus, and between the Mayans pushing heroin and the One-Niners wanting their own piece of the H-pie, he wouldn't stand a chance in hell to get clean. Let alone *stay* clean.

From the few half-finished sentences Kozik had mumbled back in the alley, Tig had recognized the kind of hopeless despair he'd seen in plenty of other soldiers. Hell, he'd seen it in his own gaze in the mirror before he'd taken the plunge and quit the Corps before it could eat him alive. But he'd had Colleen and the twins to come home to. And then, after the useless bitch had kicked him out, he'd had the club.

From the looks of it, Kozik had had nobody.

"Where we goin'?" Kozik hollered into Tig's ear, leaning close to be heard over the rush of the wind and the roar of the engine. Must've crawled out from whatever memory hole had made him climb on the bike without a single protest.

"Charming." Tig hadn't know the answer until he said it, and he instantly regretted it. What the hell was he gonna do with Kozik's jonesing ass in Charming? He pictured Clay's face if he showed up at the club house with a junkie in tow. Yeah, that'd go down well: Clay had made it crystal clear what he thought of junkies and the Nords' neverending attempts to deal crank in town.

"Where?" Kozik shifted again, and Tig had to fight to keep the bike steady.

"Stop movin' the fuck around!" he snarled across his shoulder. "Unless you want both of us to end up a bloody smear on the asphalt."

He felt more than he heard Kozik huff behind him. But at least the idiot got the message and stopped wriggling.

"Charming's where I live at," he explained in a calmer voice, after they'd gone another few miles.

"Thought you said Stockton?"

Surprised Kozik remembered—if he'd known where to find Tig, why hadn't he tried to look him up?—Tig lifted a shoulder in a wry shrug. "Colleen still lives there. Got divorced about a year after I came home. She couldn't hack me bein' around all the time."

"No shit, man."

They'd stopped talking then, until they reached Charming. Tig had dropped Kozik off at his house, with firm instructions to wait until Tig came back from church.

"What d'you plan to do?" Clay now asked. The million dollar question. All mirth had vanished from his expression and he looked thoughtful.

Tig sighed. "Shit, Clay, I don't know, alright? Clean him up, I s'pose. Then send him on his way. I dunno." Chances were, it didn't matter what he wanted. He didn't believe Kozik would actually still be around when he got home.

"Hm." Clay was silent for a minute, considering. "Whatever you do, don't let it interfere with the club." The *again* was unspoken.

"I won't," Tig promised. He meant it from the bottom of his heart. The club was everything: his home, his family, his life. He wasn't gonna risk it over a junkie he didn't really owe anything to.

oOo

Tig's certainty Kozik would have skedaddled the minute his back was turned proved to be wrong. Though Tig had hung around the club house for several hours after church was over, wanting to prove his dedication to his brothers by playing pool and sharing beers, the lights were on at the house when he finally pulled up into the driveway, and he could see the TV flickering inside.

Trying to decide whether he should be relieved or annoyed Kozik hadn't left, he put the bike on the kickstand and opened the front door.

"Like your dog, man," Kozik called out.

"Bitch is a terrible watch dog." Tig tossed his keys on the dresser next to his helmet and glanced into the living room. Kozik was on the couch, a beer in

hand, watching TV. He seemed a bit more together than when Tig had left him. Missy was asleep on the cushions next to him, her head resting on his knee as if she belonged there. Unlike Tig, Missy unconditionally loved every person she met.

Shaking his head at the dog, Tig headed into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge before coming back and plopping down on the other end of the sofa. Missy raised her head, blinking at him while he took a long pull from his bottle, before laying her head down again. Tig met Kozik's eye. "Didn't think you'd still be here."

Kozik looked away, idly playing with the dog's ears, and muttered, "Got nowhere to go." He was staring intently at the TV as if watching the Superbowl in the final minute of play instead of a commercial for ready-made pasta.

Tig made a face. He reckoned he had kinda scooped Kozik out of Oakland and dumped him in the middle of nowhere without a ride. "We can go back for your bike tomorrow. Where'd you stash it?"

"Nowhere." Kozik darted a shifty glance at Tig, before picking at the seam of his dirty jeans. "Sold it."

"What?" Tig sat up straight, swallowing a too-large mouthful of beer. He coughed and managed to gasp, "You sold the *Panhead*?"

"Needed the money, man." Kozik sounded defensive.

Tig sniffed sharply, falling back against the cushions and propping his boots on the coffee table. "I bet ya did." Another wary glance from Kozik. "Shit, Koz. What the hell—?" He broke off, taking another drink from the bottle. Yeah, he wanted to know what had happened to Kozik. Probably had a right to, even, after the chances he'd taken today. But it wasn't the sort of thing you outright asked another man. Not if you wanted to leave him with a smidgen of self-respect.

"Why'd you bring me here?" Kozik's voice was quiet, the words barely audible over the clamor of the TV and Missy's snoring.

"Damned if I know." Tig tipped his beer bottle in Kozik's direction. "Gotta kick that habit, brother. 'Fore it kills ya."

Kozik let out a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sob. "Easier said than done, Sarge."

Tig decided he'd rather believe the noise had been a harsh laugh. "Ain't your sarge no more." He rubbed a free hand across his face. It had been a long fucking day.



"Sure about that?" Kozik looked pointedly at the patch over Tig's right chest that clearly identified him as *Sgt-at-arms*.

Tig laughed. "Not the same thing, bro. Not the same thing at all."

Kozik hunched his shoulders. "Yeah. Guess not."

Silence reigned while Tig finished his beer. The TV's sound rose and fell, depending on whether it was showing a sitcom Tig couldn't name or had gone to commercials. He doubted Kozik could name the show, either. Missy whined once or twice, her head still on Kozik's knee, paws twitching. Bitch was probably dreaming of chasing cats.

"Anyhow," Tig cleared his throat. "If you wanna detox, you can do it here." And then, before he could stop himself, he added, "I'll help ya."

Kozik gaped at him. "Why?"

Kozik's expression was so filled with a mix of incredulous hope and disbelieving gratitude that Tig had to look away. Thank Christ none of his brothers were here to see the two of them, or he'd have destroyed his rep as a hard-ass for sure. "I got no fuckin' clue."

"Thanks, Tigger."

This time, Tig couldn't fool himself: that had definitely been a sob.

"But I ain't got time to dick around, you hear," Tig growled. "We start right here, right now. Cold turkey." He scowled at Kozik until Kozik nodded. "And don't call me Tigger anymore. Name's Tig."

oOo

Over the course of the weekend, Tig quickly found out that playing nurse maid to a detoxing junkie was so low on his list of fun things to do, it should've fallen off long before he'd told Kozik he could stay. Between Kozik's unpredictable mood swings—he could go from cussing like a drunk Marine to a mess of blubbing self-pity from one second to the next—and the filth of his body ridding itself of the crap he'd put into it, Tig was more than once ready to flee and abandon Kozik to his suffering.

Especially when he could have been enjoying a club house full of pussy, booze and the company of his brothers. So what the fuck was he doing uncapping water bottles and cleaning up puke instead? Must be that bleedin' heart of his Colleen had always said he didn't have.

But each time Tig stood in the hallway, keys in hand and with Missy staring up at him dolefully, he ended up turning around without opening the door, dropping the keys on the dresser, and going to check if his old buddy needed anything.

Goddamn bleedin' heart, indeed.

He knew his absence at the club would have been noted, though. And after he'd called the garage on Monday, deflecting Gemma's questions with lame excuses for not coming in that day, he was expecting someone to drop by later.

So the grumble of an approaching Harley in the middle of the morning wasn't a surprise. Recognizing his visitor by the sound of the engine, Tig cursed inwardly: Clay had sent Happy. Fuck. He'd been hoping for Mouse, the current prospect. Woulda been a hell of a lot easier to get rid of.

"You sick, or somethin'?" Hap demanded the instant Tig opened the door.

The check-up, if not the words, smacked of Clay. Sending Hap was a reminder of Clay's warning not to let Kozik's troubles interfere with Tig's club duties.

"Uh..." Tig stalled. He desperately racked his brain to remember what he'd told Gemma, hoping he could keep Hap outside on the stoop. He should've known better; Hap wasn't one to take shit from anyone and, after a brief scuffle, he shoved his way inside.

He took one look at Kozik, huddled on the sofa and shivering under the triple layer of blankets Tig had wrapped him in, and snarled, "What the actual fuck?"

Missy, warming Kozik's feet, bared her teeth at Hap's tone. Damned dog was just as much of a bleeding heart as Tig himself.

"It's—," Tig began, although he had no clue what he could possibly say that Hap would accept.

Hap glanced over his shoulder at Tig, cutting him off with a curt, "How long since his last shot?"

Tig thought quickly. "Three days. Give or take."

"Hmph." Hap let out a grunt. "Got any NyQuil?"

Tig blinked. "What?"

"Helps some." Hap strode toward Tig's kitchen as if he owned the place. "Fill the tub. Water as hot as he can stand. You got peanut butter?"

Finding his jaw had dropped in response to Hap's barrage of orders, Tig snapped it shut and, for the first in his life, let himself be bossed around by someone who wasn't higher up the chain of command. Although what peanut butter or NyQuil could do for Kozik, he had no fucking clue. But Hap sounded as if he knew what he was talking about, and Tig was glad for the help.

An hour later, Happy left, promising Tig he'd think up something to tell Clay and leaving a bunch of instructions detailed enough Tig thought he could start up his own rehab program.

*Exercise, that was what Hap had stressed. Keep him hydrated, warm, and moving. Quickest way I know to get rid of the shit.*

Grateful for the excuse to get out of the house after having been cooped up for three days straight, Tig eagerly took the advice to heart. And though he had to threaten Kozik with bodily harm and cuss him out for being a softass and a whining pussy, he got Kozik up and moving.

It proved less easy to *keep* him moving, however. "C'mon, asshole!" Tig snarled across his shoulder at where Kozik was leaning against a lamp post. "Call yourself a Marine?"

Kozik gave him a kind of look Tig reckoned was supposed to frighten him. It might have worked, too, if Kozik hadn't been clinging to the pole as if for dear life and sucking in air like a steam train. He hadn't even the breath left for a sulky comeback.

At Tig's feet, Missy was yapping, as happy to be out as Tig. She was begging for him to throw the tennis ball he'd brought along—her only interest at that moment to chase after it, carry it back and start the game all over again. Tig tossed the ball, letting it bounce along a track leading from the sidewalk up the grassy hillside, and the dog dashed off. Tig turned back to Kozik, who was still hugging the fuckin' street lamp. "Jesus Christ, stop humping that damned pole and get crackin'!"

Though Kozik looked mad enough at the insults flung his way that he'd have taken a swing at Tig if he hadn't been as sick as a dog, he gulped in another lungful of air, pushed away from the pole and tottered after Tig on unsteady feet. Missy came galloping back, the yellow tennis ball held between her jaws. Her tail whipped from side to side as she looked up at Tig eagerly, and he snatched the ball from between her teeth, and threw it a second time up the track. As she ran off again, Kozik caught up, breath rasping in and out.

"Sick," he gasped, stumbling off the path and dropping to his knees in the grass. His stomach was empty and all he could do was dry-heave. Tig waited for the

spasm to pass and, when Kozik straightened, handed him the water bottle he'd brought. Kozik spat, then took a long drink, before handing the bottle back.

"Gotta keep goin', bro," Tig reminded him, screwing the cap back on the bottle and sliding it into his pocket. "Get all that shit outta your system."

Kozik didn't answer, but he did hoist himself back to his feet and gestured for Tig to go on. When they reached the summit a short while later, Kozik collapsed to his knees again, head lolling forward. *Give him a minute*, Tig told himself, watching. As soon as Kozik raised his head, his eyes red-rimmed and wet, Tig regretted giving him the respite.

*Oh crap, not this again.* He hated these moments the most, when Kozik would bawl like a baby, filled with self-pity and loathing. Cause that wasn't the man Tig knew. It was the junkie talking, not the Marine who'd once dragged Tig to safety behind a wall after a piece of shrapnel had caught him in the thigh and bullets had been thwacking into the dirt all around them. Wasn't the buddy he'd shot the breeze with during downtime, or shared his copies of *American Iron* with.

As Kozik opened his mouth to complain, Tig cut him off with a curse. He reached down to grab Kozik by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back to his feet. "Did I say you could quit?" he snarled into Kozik's face. "Did I? Keep your goddamn ass going!"

"Can't," Kozik whined.

"Bullshit. Get your ass in gear, or I'll kick it down this hill so fast, you won't know what hit ya!" He gave Kozik a shove hard enough to make him stumble. Kozik managed to keep to his feet, his stubborn pride visibly at odds with the junkie's craving for another hit and the desire to lay down and curl up in a ball of misery. "You ain't a quitter, man." Tig gave him another push, less forcefully this time. "Don't give up now. You heard Happy: first few days are the worst."

Kozik wiped at his face with his sleeve. "Gotta be the stupidest nick ever: Happy."

For an instant, Tig just stared at him. Then he laughed. "Got that right, brother. Now, *move*."

oOo

The next evening after Hap's check-up, Clay called. "Need you on a run tomorrow." He spoke as soon as Tig had flipped open his cell. "You up to it? Hap said you got a bad case of the flu...." His tone made it clear he hadn't believed a word Happy had said.

"Uhm...." Tig glanced over to where Kozik had collapsed onto the couch after they'd come in from a last hike through the hills. He'd rolled himself into a ball, knees drawn to his chest, and was fighting off another round of the shakes. He hadn't had a hit in four days, and he was no longer as bad he'd been during the weekend, but he was far from out of the woods and Tig didn't think he was ready to be left on his own.

"Club needs you, brother."

Shit. Clay knew exactly which buttons to push. "Okay. Yeah." Tig pulled in a breath. "Yeah, of course. Whatever you need." Club came first; he'd just have to figure out what to do with Kozik while he was gone.

"Good." Clay sounded satisfied. "Need you to go to Rogue River, bring back their supply." He didn't mention supply of what over the phone, but Tig didn't need an explanation to know. Clay was talking about Rogue River's weapons cache. "You and Otto. Take the van. It draws less attention. Otto says he wants to leave at ten. Be back by dark the next day."

He'd hung up before Tig could even acknowledge the order. Tig scowled at the silent phone, before shutting it down. He looked over at Kozik again. An overnight run to Oregon? Goddammit, what the hell was he gonna to do?

"C'mon." He dragged Kozik to his feet, ignoring his mumbled protests, and steered him toward the bathroom. Best do something about the shakes first. "Time for another soak, brother." He was already dreading the utility bills, but Happy had been right: a regular dunking in a hot bath did help with the chills that kept racking Kozik at regular intervals.

Tig set the water running and then reached for the zipper on Kozik's hoodie. Borrowed from Tig's closet, it was a little tight around Kozik's shoulders, but it kept him warm.

Kozik slapped Tig's hands away. "Don't. I'm not a fuckin' kid."

Arching a brow at the flare of temper, Tig watched as Kozik started to undress, before nodding to himself. It hadn't been his imagination: Kozik was doing better. The first couple days, the tremors had been so bad, he couldn't even grab hold of the zipper, let alone pull it down or get out of the rest of his clothes. But though Kozik's fingers were still trembling visibly, his hands were much steadier than they had been.

Satisfied Kozik would manage okay, Tig left him to his own devices. He had other things to deal with. Like what the hell he was going to do about the guy in his bathroom while he went up to Rogue River on a gun run.

Since they were using the van, maybe they could take Kozik with them?

He had a sudden crazy vision of him and Otto loading Kozik's shivery ass on top of the AKs and shotguns they'd be bringing back from Oregon. He snorted in wry amusement; Clay would have his balls for breakfast if he brought an outsider on a gun run. A junkie outsider, at that. Though Tig was sure Kozik wouldn't rat on them, he also agreed with what Clay would say: Kozik had no business in Rogue River.

It had grown quiet in the bathroom, the splashing noises that indicated Kozik was clambering about in the bath having died down. Tig took a quick peek around the door. Wouldn't do to have the bastard drown in his tub after all the trouble he'd gone to. Kozik scrunched his eyes into slits to glare at Tig. "Dude."

Tig smirked. Like he hadn't already seen it all. Shutting the door and leaving Kozik be, his brief humor faded quickly as he again considered his options. Perhaps he could get someone else to keep an eye on Kozik while he was gone? Sure, Kozik would hate being assigned a babysitter, but Tig didn't give a shit about that; he hadn't worked his ass off to get Kozik this far to let him fall off the wagon at the first opportunity.

But who could he ask?

He scrubbed a palm across his face as he padded toward the kitchen. He got the bread out, dropped a slice on a plate, and took a jar of peanut butter from the cabinet. Hap had muttered something about protein and carbohydrates when he'd given his instructions. Whatever the reason, and while Tig suspected Kozik would forever be put off of peanut butter sandwiches, they were one of the few things he'd managed to keep down more often than not.

Hands busy slathering the bread, Tig turned his mind back to his current predicament. Every idea he came up with had one fatal flaw or another. Taking Kozik along was obviously out of the question. So was leaving him on his own—Tig was certain he'd come back to an empty house, with Kozik having hauled ass back to his Niner dealers. Maybe a sweetbutt? Nah, bad idea. Chances were, he'd find *both* of them had run off to the nearest crack house.

He could call Clay back, say Hap had been right, he was still sick with the flu and—No. Tig shook his head, chucking the thought away with a disgusted grunt. He couldn't do that. Club needed him. No matter what previous history he and Kozik had, what would the Reaper on his back be worth if he chose Kozik over the club?

He'd have to find someone he trusted to keep Kozik out of trouble. Gemma? Or Piney's ex, Mary? Tig barked a humorless laugh while slapping a second slice of bread on top of the first. He could just imagine how well *that* would go. Not to

mention the amount of shit he'd get from them for taking Kozik home instead of dumping his ass in rehab. Better he get someone who understood why Tig had done what he'd done.

Someone like Hap.

Before he could think about what he was doing, Tig had wiped his hands on a dish towel and hit the dial pad on his phone. At Hap's gruff, "Yeah?" he spoke quickly.

"Need a favor, bro. I gotta—."

"No," Happy broke in before Tig could get more than a few words out. "You need a nanny, find someone else."

"Think I didn't try?" Tig barely succeeded in sounding more aggravated than whiny. "There ain't nobody."

Happy remained silent for a few beats, and Tig was afraid he'd just hang up. Then he sighed. "My mom."

"Your *what*?" Tig must've misheard; Happy couldn't possibly have said what Tig thought he'd done.

"My mother." Hap's voice was an unhappy growl in Tig's ear. "She's dealt with junkies before. Knows what to do. Won't take any shit."

Tig reckoned it best he didn't ask where Mrs Lowman had gotten her experience with drug addicts. He probably didn't wanna know, anyway. He was just stupidly grateful Happy had offered a suggestion that actually might work. "Think she'll wanna do it?"

"I'll ask her."

"You do that." *Please*. "And Hap? Thanks, brother."

But Happy had already hung up.

oOo

"Jesus, Tig...." It was early the following morning and Kozik was pacing in the narrow space between the sofa and the TV set. From where she lay on her pillow, Missy followed his every step with a hooded gaze. She'd been Kozik's constant companion since he'd first fed her dog biscuits, only away from his side when Tig locked her out—at which point, she'd scratch the door and not stop whining until she was let in again. Kozik wasn't sure why a dog he'd only just met was so devoted to him, and he was damned sure he didn't deserve such loyalty, but he'd been grateful for Missy's unwavering support nevertheless.

"Shut up." Tig shot Kozik an exasperated scowl, before looking out of the window again. "And sit the fuck down. You're making me twitchy."

Kozik was too agitated to stay still for long. His knees might still be wobbly, but he was doing a lot better, and he didn't need a goddamn babysitter to watch over him while Tig was off doing his club thing. Besides, he was far too glad he could stay upright again on his own steam, without needing to cling on to something or fight off muscle cramps every few minutes, to remain seated.

Fuck, these last days had been among the absolute worst of his life. That first morning in Tig's guest room, he'd woken to shivering tremors, kinda like he was coming down with a bad case of the flu. "No biggie," he'd said, laughing it off, when Tig noticed. Going cold turkey surely wouldn't be such a big deal. Not like he'd been using for years, after all.

Christ, had he been wrong...! Those flu shivers had steadily grown worse, and he'd been hard-pressed to hide his anxiety from Tig, until the cramps had hit and he'd given up all pretense at being unafraid, and cursed himself for staying with Tig in the first place.

He should've hustled the minute Tig had dumped him at his house and hurried off, muttering he was late for 'church'. Even Kozik's addled mind had figured the term was a euphemism for something else. The Tigger he'd known had believed in bullets and fists, not God, and wouldn't have been caught dead in a real church. But he'd been so goddamn tired and cold and wet, after the long bike ride in nothing but the clothes on his back. It couldn't hurt to catch his breath for a moment before figuring out his next move, could it?

He'd been drifting into sleep when wetness on his face had woken him. At first, he'd thought it was raining again. Then he scrunched open an eye and his gaze met a huge pink tongue hanging from a large German Shepherd's maw as the dog panted hot breath into his face.

"Holy crap!" Kozik had flown up from the couch, heart thudding against his ribs. He wasn't sure who was more startled: him or the dog. The animal barked loudly enough to make his ears hurt, but it didn't attack, and gradually Kozik's memory returned. He was in Tigger's house, on Tigger's couch. So it stood to reason this was Tigger's dog.

While his heartbeat slowed to something more like normal, he held out a hand to let the dog sniff his scent. A small tag on her collar declared her name was Missy.

"Hey girl. How ya doin'?" Her tail started flicking from side to side and she peered up at him hopefully.



With the dog padding at his heels, Kozik dragged himself off in search of the kitchen. Would Tig have dog biscuits? He didn't have to spend much time looking: Missy unerringly steered him toward one of the lower cabinets, where he found a full box of treats. He laughed; damn bitch sure knew what she wanted, and how to get it.

He gave her a couple of biscuits and they then played tug-of-war with a knotted rope he spotted lying on the kitchen floor, until she was dancing around him and once again barking loud enough to raise the dead.

"Easy girl," he warned, afraid they'd wreck what little scuffed furniture Tig had. Besides, he was running out of steam, even if she wasn't. Settling back on the sofa with a beer he'd liberated from the fridge, he turned on the TV. Much to his shock, Missy hopped onto the couch next to him and draped her head across his knee as if they were the best of buddies.

So Kozik had stayed put, Missy's head on his knee, until Tig had gotten home around midnight and then surprised Kozik with the offer of his guest room and help to get clean. And here Kozik still was, waiting to meet his new nurse.

"Look at me, dude, I'm fine." Making one last effort to persuade Tig he didn't need a caretaker, Kozik held out his hands, palms down. They were trembling visibly and he willed them to stop shaking. He didn't quite succeed. He quickly curled them into fists and stuffed them into the pockets of his jeans.

Tig's only response was a soft snort. He hadn't even bothered to look. They'd been arguing about it ever since Kozik had found out the person Tig had coming over to keep him company was Happy's mother. "I don't need a fuckin' babysitter," he'd groused. No way was he gonna have some grown man's *mother* watch over him like he was a nut case—or a goddamn kid who couldn't wipe his own ass.

Kozik would rather not remember how, these last few days, he had actually been like that kid, unable to look after himself. If not for Tig—. Unwillingly, he shuddered.

No matter how much Kozik had begged or threatened or tried to cajole Tig to leave him alone or take him back to Oaktown or just kill him now, he'd ignored it. But he'd been there every single time another cramp hit, brushing the damp hair from Kozik's sweaty face with cool, calloused fingers and pressing a bottle of water to Kozik's lips, encouraging him to, "Here, drink this." Most of the time, Kozik's stomach had threatened to send the water right back up and it had taken all his will power to keep it in. He'd failed more often than not, leaving it to Tig to clean up the mess

Christ, he'd been such a pathetic fuck.

"Hap's here." Tig's announcement was filled with relief. The low rumble of the approaching Harley was accompanied by the quieter *put-put* of an old station wagon.

Kozik pulled his hands out of his pockets and toyed with the cuffs of the sweatshirt Tig had lent him. The letters S-O-A were stenciled on the front; he could see them upside down if he tilted his head forward. Tig's club. And Happy's: Kozik caught a glimpse of the same kind of cut Tig wore on Happy's back as he swung off his bike. Kozik only had a fuzzy, disjointed recollection of Happy's earlier visit, but he knew he had the dude to blame for those endless hikes through the surrounding hills that Tig had made him do. What sort of woman would produce a man like that?

Tig had opened the door, and Kozik stood on tiptoe to look past him. Happy was helping someone out of the station wagon. She was short, thin, and looked fragile enough she'd break in half if someone so much as raised their voice to her. Kozik blinked: *that* tiny woman was Happy's mother?

He stepped outside to stand next to Tig. Happy's mother tripped up the path and looked up at them. She had to crane her neck to do so. Though her expression wasn't nearly as malicious as the scowl Happy had directed at Kozik while he passed by with a small suitcase and disappeared into the house, it held the same warning: this was someone who wasn't to be trifled with.

"You must be Tig." She fixed Tig with dark, sharp eyes. "Heard a lot about you."

Tig cleared his throat. "Um, yes, ma'am."

Kozik brushed a palm across his mouth to wipe off an unexpected grin at seeing Tig flustered. Then Happy's mother turned toward him, and the grin withered on its own. "And you must be the convalescent."

"Kozik, ma'am." He'd told her his name before he could remind himself he was *not* okay with this and was resenting her presence.

"Kozik," she repeated, as if to test the word, though he reckoned it was just her way to memorize it. She smiled suddenly, and it warmed her entire countenance. "I'm Maria Lowman."

"Mrs Lowman to you," Happy grunted, stalking back out past them. Stepping close to Kozik, he went on, "If you give her any shit...." He didn't say anything else, but he didn't have to: Happy's face told Kozik he would enjoy a long and painful death if he so much as looked funny at his mother.

"Now, Happy, there's no need to frighten the poor boy." Mrs Lowman lightly smacked her son on the arm. "I'm sure Kozik and I'll get along fine, won't we?" Her eyes twinkled merrily as they met his.

"Um, yes, ma'am." Kozik might dislike her being there, but it was hard to resist her kindness.

"Alright, then. Hap and I gotta go." Tig snatched up the helmet dangling from his bike's handlebar, as if he couldn't get out of there fast enough. "Should be back around six tomorrow."

"That'd be good." Mrs Lowman dipped her head. "I'd like to be at Happy's aunt by eight, I'd rather not miss our monthly bingo night with the girls."

"Call me if you need anything," Happy told her as he climbed back on his bike. "Got some stuff to do, but I'll be around." Kozik was pretty sure the last words were meant for his ears as much as Mrs Lowman's: another veiled warning that Happy was only a phone call away.

"Thanks, honey." Mrs Lowman offered her son her cheek for a quick peck and tugged his cut straight before she stepped back. Tig rolled his eyes where she couldn't see. Happy suffered her attentions silently. "You boys have a good time."

A moment later, both Harleys had fired up and roared off. Kozik and Mrs Lowman watched them go, she with a slightly worried frown creasing her brow. Kozik might not know much of what Tig or his club were up to, but he doubted it involved having the kind of good time Mrs Lowman was talking about.

"So," Mrs Lowman broke the silence left in the Harleys' wake, "shall we go in?" She didn't wait for Kozik's reply, and he found himself needing to trot to catch up with her as she bustled into the house.

Two paces into the living room, she stopped abruptly in her tracks. Only a quick reaction on Kozik's part kept him from running into her. "Well, well." Her nose crinkled up at the same time as she drew her brows down. "I can see we'll be busy, you and I."

Seeing the room through her eyes, Kozik grew hot with shame: an ashtray on the coffee table overflowed with cigarette butts; a number of empty beer bottles were scattered on the floor; a tattered copy of Playboy lay discarded on the sofa with the centerfold in clear view; and the smell of the pizza box that had held Tig's dinner made Kozik's stomach flipflop.

Sighing deeply, Mrs Lowman pulled off her coat and gave it to Kozik to hang up on the rack near the door. She rolled up the sleeves of her blouse. "Let's get

started, dear. Time's awasting."

oOo

A few hours later, Kozik was slogging along Charming's sunlit streets, with Missy bouncing ahead of him. The dog was far more excited about the idea of a walk and some play than Kozik. Thinking of conquering that damned hill without Tig to curse him along was intimidating. He wasn't gonna admit that, though, even to himself. And, hill aside, thank Christ he was away from the tiny slavedriver running the show back at the house. Who the fuck did the damned witch think he was, anyway? Wasn't his fault Tig was such a pig.

Chuckling ruefully at the inadvertent rhyme, he turned onto the familiar track leading up the slope. Sweat broke out on his brow within a few paces.

Still, better than being gopher to a woman half his size.

Because, from the second Happy's mother had arrived, she'd put Kozik to work, oblivious to his desire to lie down on the sofa for the rest of the day and paying no attention to his grumbling. Instead, she'd shaken out a garbage bag and asked him to gather all the trash to take outside. She'd stood there, holding the bag out to him without another word, but with an expectant look on her face, leaving him no other choice but to comply if he didn't want to feel like the world's biggest asshole.

Missy yipped, reminding Kozik he was still holding her tennis ball. She was dancing around in front of him and he almost tripped over her. Her eyes never left the ball in his hand as he lifted his arm. He couldn't help smiling a little—at least someone was having a good time—as he threw the ball ahead of them, as far up the hill as he could manage.

Of course he'd taken the bag and done as Mrs Lowman had asked. And no, he reassured himself, watching Missy sprint off, the thought of having to answer to Happy for giving his mother lip had played no part in his surrender. None at all.

After he'd collected all the trash and taken it out, Mrs Lowman had chased him up a ladder she'd unearthed in the garage and made him take down the curtains. Next, she'd pulled on a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves and run a bucket of soapy water to wipe the dust off the furniture, while setting Kozik to scrub the greasy dishes that had piled up in Tig's kitchen. While she worked, she'd hummed sixties tunes under her breath.

Drying off the second load of dishes and filling a third bowl with soapy water, Kozik had concluded he really, *really* hated her.

Wiping his face with his shirt sleeve, hot and out of breath from the climb, he

picked up the ball Missy had dropped in front of him and threw it again. Shit, he'd really fucked himself up good, hadn't he?

Like the way he'd ended up grunting at the effort needed to push Tig's sofa—the one he'd spent many hours on—back into position, while Mrs Lowman ran the vacuum cleaner around him. The whine of the motor was grating on his already raw nerves; after giving the couch a last nudge with his knee, he plopped down onto it, glaring daggers at the machine. Damned thing was old and scratched, and probably not very effective. To be honest, he'd been shocked to see her dig it out of a closet in the first place. Tig Trager: vacuum cleaner owner. Who'da thunk?

Mrs Lowman seemed to get the hint and turned off the infernal thing. However, Kozik's relief at the sudden quiet was short-lived. Tsk'ing her disapproval, she came to stand right in front of him, her head cocked slightly on that frail neck, peering down her nose with those dark eyes of hers.

"What?" Kozik snapped before he could catch himself. Mrs Lowman narrowed her eyes, and the resemblance to her son was uncanny. Involuntarily, Kozik swallowed and sat up straighter.

"Did no one ever tell you hard work is a balm for the soul?" she asked.

Kozik blinked. "Thought that was confession," he grumbled under his breath. She caught his words anyway.

To his surprise, her features softened. "Yes, that too." She reached out, pushing some hair that was stuck to his face out of the way, shocking the living shit out of him. He didn't dare move.

"That only works when you're ready for it, honey," she went on, speaking softly. "Only when you're ready." Pulling back, she gave him a small smile. "Until then, hard work's the next best medicine."

Kozik sighed, letting his shoulders slump. He knew when he'd lost. "What do you want me to do next?"

Happy's mother pondered for a moment. "Why don't you take that poor dog for a walk?" She dipped her head to indicate the shaded yard, where Missy, long since banished from the house after she'd repeatedly gotten underfoot, was gazing morosely at the rope Kozik had used to tie her down. "It's a nice day. Bit of air'll do you both good."

Kozik hadn't given her time to change her mind. He'd scurried from the house like the devil was on his heels, grabbing Missy and her ball as he went, and almost run down the street, only slowing once the house had fallen far enough

behind that she couldn't call him back for another task.

A sudden shift in the ground underfoot brought him back to the present: he'd crested the hill without being aware of it. Huh. He stopped in surprise. Yeah, he was out of breath and sweat was trickling down his back, but he hadn't had to stop once on the way up to puke or work a cramp out of his legs.

Did that mean the worst was over? To be honest, he hadn't had much of a chance to crave a hit all morning. Except, now that he thought about it—. With a grumbled curse, he pushed the thought away and ducked to pick up the ball Missy had again brought back. She sprinted after it like a loosed arrow when he threw it, barking loudly, and he happily let himself be distracted by her antics. She rooted frantically through the tall grass where the ball had landed for a minute, before she came bouncing back to him, ball clamped between her jaws.

He stayed on the hill top for a long time, throwing the ball again and again, until the muscles in his arm started to ache. Missy never seemed to get tired of playing fetch and it was a beautiful day, too. Charming lay stretched below their feet and in the distance, the air was hazy. Only a handful of other people were around to walk their dogs. Most of them exchanged nods and hellos, and allowed the dogs to sniff one another, but nobody stayed to talk to Kozik, giving him wary looks as they walked on. He couldn't quite blame them for that; he'd seen himself in the mirror and knew he looked like crap, in ill-fitting, borrowed clothes and with his hair too long and unkempt. He'd probably not have given himself the time of day either.

He offered Missy the last of the water from the bottle he'd brought and she slobbered it up greedily. All that running must've left her thirsty. He considered his options: the smart thing would be to go back to the house and get more water. Dehydration could bring back the cramps.

With a sigh and a slump of his shoulders, he called Missy to join him from where she was now digging through the dirt looking for whatever dogs looked for, and the two of them started for the trail leading down the hill. Maybe Mrs Lowman would be done with her cleaning spree and he could find some peace and quiet.

The afternoon sun was high and hot, despite Thanksgiving just being around the corner, and he was sweating again by the time he trudged into Tig's driveway. He tied Missy up again, making sure she had access to shade and a bowl of fresh water. At last, he had no more excuses to stay outside and he dragged himself into the house.

The smell hit him as soon as he opened the door: something cooking on the stove. His stomach clenched reflexively, the water he'd drunk churning in his belly like acid.

"There you are," Mrs Lowman said brightly, appearing in the kitchen doorway, spatula in hand. "Had a nice walk? Be quick to wash up. I'll have your omelet ready in a minute."

The mention of food on top of the smell was too much for Kozik. He lost the battle with his stomach and bile rose in his throat. Not giving Mrs Lowman an answer, he sprinted into the bathroom and upchucked the contents of his stomach, little as they were. He gagged a second time at the bitter taste it left in his mouth.

Jesus Christ, would it never stop?

Unexpectedly, a small hand came to rest on his back, lightly running soothing circles across his shoulder blades. "It's okay. Not ready for real food, huh?"

Mrs Lowman's voice held no judgment, only understanding. That actually made Kozik feel worse, after she'd bothered to cook for him. He was an ungrateful dog, and if Happy wanted to kick his ass for that, well, Kozik wouldn't hold it against the man.

"Sorry, Mrs L. I can't—." The apology came out on a sob, but he didn't care. He was so *sick* of being sick; he needed a hit, just one to take the edge off and—. Catching where his thoughts were going, he groaned and dropped his forehead against the cool porcelain rim of the toilet bowl.

"Shh, I know, honey, I know." Mrs Lowman's hand was warm, never letting up her gentle rubbing, while she waited for Kozik to catch his breath and get himself under control. He couldn't help but arch up into her touch. "Here, wash out your mouth." She offered him a glass of water, and he gulped at it eagerly, spitting the first mouthful into the toilet before drinking the rest.

"Feeling better now, dear?"

Kozik nodded, sitting up cautiously. His shirt was plastered to his back and he was shivering worse than he had at any time all morning. But his stomach held on to the water and he dared draw a deeper breath. Mrs Lowman reached around him to flush the toilet.

"I'm sorry you went through all that trouble," he muttered, once he was confident the nausea was over. "Can't seem to hold anything in."

Mrs Lowman smiled gently down at him, accepting his apology with a small nod. "I should've thought of that." She pushed to her feet and stepped away. "Why don't you freshen up a bit, and then we'll see what we *can* do for you."

She left him to splash some water on his face and go hunt for a clean shirt. God, he hoped that whatever she came up with didn't involve peanut butter sandwiches. For all those had been the only solid food he'd managed to hold onto more often than not, he was getting really tired of the damned things.

To his relief, as he glanced around the kitchen, there was no peanut butter jar in sight and Mrs Lowman had opened the window to let in some fresh air, so there was only the faintest hint of the smell of egg left.

"Please, sit." She waved for him to grab a seat at the table. "Here, try some of these." She put a plate of sweet-smelling cookies in front of him, along with a glass of bubbling Coke. He stared at the food for a moment, startled that neither the sight nor smell of it made him run for the bathroom again.

She chuckled at the face he made. "Ginger cookies and Coke. Miracle cure for nausea." She gestured. "We'll go to the store later, to see about fruit and vegetables. Bananas should be good, I think."

Kozik wasn't sure he agreed with her but, at her insistence, he nibbled on one of the cookies, praying his stomach would hold, and carefully took a sip from the Coke. The ginger in the cookie was sharp on his tongue and the fizz of the drink made him belch like a drunkard. His cheeks heated. "Um, sorry."

Surprisingly, his bad manners didn't seem to bother her in the slightest, and, much to his delight, he managed to keep both cookie and Coke down without much effort.

In fact, he enjoyed the cookie so much, he reached for a second. "Thank you," he told her, meaning it from the bottom of his heart. Maybe he didn't hate her quite as much as he thought he did.

She smiled with pleasure. "You're welcome." She took the plate away and wrapped it with cellophane. "So, now that that's settled, let's get the beds changed, shall we?"

oOo

Not long after the sun had set, Kozik rolled into his freshly made bed. He was more exhausted than he could remember ever having been in his life. Mrs Lowman was worse than any Marine sergeant he'd ever met, and she—just. Kept. Going. Like that fucking energizer bunny.

The scent of laundry detergent and fabric softener surrounded Kozik, and he snuggled into his pillow and quickly drifted off to sleep. He slept better than he had for weeks. Fierce leg cramps woke him only twice and both times, Hap's mom was there, dressed in a white cotton nightgown that covered her from neck



to ankles. She massaged his calves until the muscles relaxed, made him drink Gatorade and water, and then stayed until he fell asleep again.

She was already up when Kozik dragged himself from his bed the next morning, fully dressed and puttering around in the kitchen as he entered. He yawned and scrubbed a hand through his hair.

"Good morning." She smiled at him. "Today's a good day for yard work, wouldn't you agree?"

Kozik let his head fall down to his chest, not entirely successful at suppressing a groan. Couldn't she at least let him wake up properly? Yet, at the same time, he couldn't keep a grin from tugging at the corners of his mouth. Yup, she was *exactly* like the energizer bunny.

The look she gave him, as he glanced up at her through his lashes, told him she knew just what he was thinking. He gave a resigned shrug. "I suppose so."

She was kind enough to make him breakfast and let him get a shower in before putting him to work. He managed a slice of dry toast and half a boiled egg. A mug of her mint tea further soothed his developing hunger.

Afterwards, he helped her put away the dishes, stuck his feet into his boots, and they went outside. Mrs Lowman tilted her head back to look at the sky. It was a dark blue, unmarred by clouds. "Maybe you should start with the lawn, while it's still cool."

"Um...." Kozik surveyed the unkempt field of knee-high grass and weeds that was Tig's lawn. Dismay filled him. It had probably been a real lawn once, but now it hardly deserved the name. And it was impossible to see where the grass ended and the flower beds—most of the plants in them brown and dead—began.

Mrs Lowman blithely gestured. "I think I saw a mower in the garage."

Kozik heaved a breath. Jesus, there was no arguing with the woman. Knowing he'd lost every discussion they'd had so far, he dipped his head. "Yes ma'am."

She laughed softly and briefly rubbed his arm. "Thank you, honey."

Shaking his head to himself, Kozik trudged around the house toward the garage. It was hard to tell her 'no' when she thanked him so earnestly each time he did something she asked. Even more so, when he offered his help unasked. Like he had yesterday, fixing up her car.

Once they'd made up the beds, they'd driven to the store in her old station

wagon to buy the vegetables and fruit she'd promised, along with a supply of cleaning materials Kozik reckoned would last Tig for the rest of his life. On the way, he'd noted the engine had an unpleasant rattle and remarked on it.

Mrs Lowman had given him a troubled look. "That started a few days ago. I was going to ask my son to take a look at it but..." She shrugged slightly. "He's always so busy. And I don't want him to think he's gotta look after his old mama every minute of the day."

Kozik blinked in disbelief. He'd only known her for a few hours, but it was hard to imagine anyone would think she'd need looking after. "Maybe I can take a look?" he ventured, and her face brightened.

The rattle, it turned out, was nothing more than a couple loose cables, which were easily tightened. When they took the car for a test run around the block, she told him, "You're a good boy, Kozik."

Nobody had called him 'boy' in a very long time, and he shrugged off her gratitude, mumbling it was no big deal.

The lawnmower, however, proved a lot more broken than her car, and he cursed loudly as the damn thing refused to start, despite his best efforts to fix it. Mrs Lowman frowned at the bad words in silent rebuke and he gestured ruefully. "Sorry, Mrs L." He kicked at the lawnmower to vent his frustration. "Could probably get it running again eventually, but that'd take hours."

She eyed the machine unhappily. "Well, I guess there's nothing to it, then." Spreading her hands in defeat, she added, "we'll just tackle those flower beds instead. Decide which plants can be saved. And we'll have the beds dug over and fertilized, too."

Leaving the mower to sit in the drive, thinking he'd look at the damned thing later, Kozik rolled his eyes at her use of 'we'. Very unlikely she'd be doing any of the digging. Though, to his surprise, he didn't mind the prospect of more hard work half as much as he would've expected. Perhaps she did have a point: it did make for good medicine.

A short time later, he was struggling with a shovel to turn the dirt. Shaking her head, Mrs Lowman had declared most of the plants beyond redemption, and it was heavy going digging through the roots. Sweat broke out on Kozik's brow as he jammed the shovel back into the ground and leaned on it to use his weight to drive it in deeper.

"Mornin'...." A hesitant greeting made Kozik swing around, leaving the shovel standing upright in the hard-packed earth. A woman was standing at the end of the driveway, offering him a wave and a shy smile. Brunette, late twenties, nice

rack; he automatically took stock. Dressed a little conservatively for his taste, in a white blouse and a skirt that covered her knees. Shapely legs, though, from what he could see, with her feet encased in low-heeled sandals. She'd painted her toenails a dark red.

"Oh, hello sweetheart." Mrs Lowman, carefully pruning one of the plants she'd pardoned, raised a hand to shield her eyes as she peered at the newcomer. "How's your boy?"

"He's fine now." The woman's smile grew bigger. "Your cookies really helped."

Kozik knuckled his back and wiped his face with his forearm, eyeing the woman curiously. Who was she? And how the hell did she know about Mrs L's cookie-baking skills? Happy's mother had only been there for a day.

As if in reply to his unasked question, Mrs Lowman turned toward him. "This is Emily. She lives across the street." She indicated a pleasant-looking two-story house, half-shadowed by a large tree. A tiny red car sat in front of the double garage.

"Hi." Emily gave him another small wave of her hand. Kozik grinned in return and told her his name.

Introductions done, Mrs Lowman went on, "Emily's little boy—Robbie, was it?" Emily nodded. "Robbie skinned his knee, right there on the sidewalk." She pointed at where the pavement was cracked and uneven. "Yesterday, while you were taking the dog for a walk."

Unsure what to say, Kozik grumbled something under his breath that he hoped sounded sufficiently sympathetic. He needn't have worried; they weren't paying him much attention.

"Where's the poor lamb now?" Mrs L scanned the street with her hawkish gaze, searching for the child she was talking about.

While the women chattered on, Kozik seized the opportunity to take a breather from digging. When had his life turned into the set of a suburban soap opera? Luckily, it seemed neither woman expected any input from him, until—

"So you're going to do something about... this?" If Emily's tone hadn't given away her opinion on the state of Tig's yard, the vague wave and her scandalized expression would have. "It was such a pretty garden when Mr Briscoe lived here." She darted Kozik a quick look, her cheeks coloring slightly. "I mean, I'm sure Mr Trager is a very busy man, but—," she gave a faint shrug, "it's such a shame, seeing all those plants wilted." She dipped her head in the direction of the lawnmower. "Mowing the lawn once in a while isn't too much to ask, is it?"

Kozik grunted. He wasn't sure if he was annoyed at Tig, or on Tig's behalf. "Maybe not, if it the damned thing wasn't broken."

He got another frown from Mrs L for the cuss word, and Emily's shoulders drooped. "Oh. Oh, of course. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—. Oh!" Abruptly, her face lit up. "I have an idea. Why don't you borrow ours? I'm sure Lloyd won't mind."

Mrs L clapped her hands together, happily agreeing with Emily. Already unable to resist Mrs Lowman's energy, Kozik was certainly no match for the combined enthusiasm of the two women, and a minute later, he was striding toward Emily's house, while she jogged to keep up with his longer legs.

"It's an electric one."

Kozik guessed she was talking about their mower. He *hoped* she was.

"Very easy to use. I mean," she nattered on eagerly, "I've never used it, but Lloyd says he's very happy with it."

Lloyd, Kozik reckoned, having caught a glint of sunlight sparking off a gold wedding band on Emily's left hand, must be her husband. He growled something in reply.

"So, are you—," Emily hesitated a moment as they reached her driveway, "*staying* with Mr Trager?"

Something about the way she stressed the word 'staying' gave him pause and made him shoot her a sharp look. "Visiting."

She flushed deeper. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

Kozik huffed; that was exactly what she'd been doing. Then it sank in what she was really asking. "Jesus Christ, no." She flinched, and Kozik took a deep breath. Better nip this sort of gossip in the bud. "No. Tig's an old buddy. We were both in the Marine Corps." And why did he tell her that? Wasn't any of her fuckin' business, was it?

"That's... good." She smiled prettily at him, and his irritation melted away. Probably better she didn't know the real truth about why he was staying with Tig, anyway.

"So, where's that mower?" he asked, in an attempt to distract her.

"Oh, in here." She opened the garage door to reveal a riding mower that wouldn't have looked out of place on a golf course. Kozik resisted the urge to

roll his eyes.

oOo

Tig switched on the van's headlamps and carefully steered into the curve outlined in the beams. Sunset was approaching rapidly, plunging the road winding through the forested hills into deep gloom. It'd be touch and go if they made it to Charming before full dark. Not that it mattered: unloading the guns would best be done under cover of night anyway.

"Tig, five-oh." Otto's warning came as a hiss, although Tig had already spotted the highway patrol car, half-hidden behind a bush, parked on the shoulder.

Tig glanced at the speedometer. They had nothing to worry about: both headlamps were working; he'd checked the brake lights before they left Rogue River; and the van was coasting along a handful of miles below the speed limit. Not slow enough to be remarkable, but taking care a heavy foot wouldn't accidentally draw the cops' attention, either. Nevertheless, his skin crawled at the patrol's presence, and he fought the instinct to step on the gas.

As they passed by the patrol car, Tig resisted the urge to scowl in its direction. A couple hundred yards on, when no flickering lights had appeared in the rearview mirror and no sirens were screeching after them, he let out a long breath. If those cops had gotten a glimpse of the load in the back, he and Otto would have been fucked, looking at years, maybe decades, behind bars. Not a prospect either of them welcomed; Otto's relief was visible in the way he slouched deeper in the shotgun seat, planting a booted foot against the dash.

Tig lit up a cigarette, inhaling deeply and letting the nicotine calm his hammering heart.

"What's up with you, brother?" Otto asked.

Tig briefly switched his attention away from the road to his passenger. He crooked an eyebrow. *What ya talking about?*

Otto shrugged. "You're like a live wire, dude. I can feel you hummin' from here."

Tig gave him another look, before focusing again on driving. "Nothin', man. This deal's making me nervous, is all." Not a lie, but it wasn't the full truth, and Tig knew it.

Because, true, he wasn't convinced that putting all their eggs in Laroy's single black basket was a good idea—the kid had yet to prove he could deliver on his promises. But over the past twenty-four hours or so, he'd also found his thoughts straying toward Kozik more often than he would've liked. He was worried about what he'd find at the house. Mrs Lowman hadn't seemed very strong, and Tig had learned the hard way what a real bastard Kozik could be once he set his

mind on something. If anything had happened to her, Tig wouldn't give a dime for Kozik's life—or for his own. Happy would kill them both, long and hard. Tig shuddered. *Stop acting like a neurotic housewife, bro.*

"What about you?" Tig attempted to divert both his own thoughts and Otto's scrutiny.

Another raised shoulder was his answer. "Thinkin' about Luanne."

Tig sniggered. "I bet."

"Not like that, douchebag." Otto smacked Tig hard on the arm. Not expecting it, Tig nearly lost control of the van.

"Watch it, asshole!" he snarled, steering them back into their lane. Jesus, he didn't want to crash with a half dozen AKs and a box full of illegal handguns in the back.

Otto held up both hands in apology. Tig checked their speed again.

"Promised I'd find a way to get her behind the camera instead of in front," Otto went on, after a few minutes of silence. "Money from this new Niner deal might just do it."

"Yeah?" Tig didn't particularly care what Otto did with his old lady. The whole club knew he hated her sucking dick in front of the camera, though, and he kept scheming for a way to get her out of the job. Too bad, really. Luanne retiring from acting would be a major loss for the porn industry. Tig knew better than to say that to Otto's face, however. He liked his own face too much as it was.

"Thinkin' about maybe setting up a small production company." Otto grew more animated as he continued talking about his plans. "She's got all these great ideas for movies, you know." He sat up straighter. "She says—."

Tig tuned him out, letting the words wash over him without really listening, while Otto elaborated on Luanne's plans for skin flicks.

Another thirty minutes later—Otto was still talking—they reached Teller-Morrow and turned into the lot. Tig backed the van up close to the club house entrance and climbed from the cab. Bobby and Chibs, who'd made the run to Fresno with the tow truck, were hanging around the picnic table. Mouse was busy sweeping the empty work bays. Tig didn't see Happy anywhere. Good sign, or bad? For all Tig knew, Hap was off at that very moment burying Kozik in a shallow grave. "Hap around?" he asked, hoping he didn't sound too concerned.

"Left a while ago." Chibs hopped off the picnic table. "Ye're late, brothers. Had

us worried."

Tig grimaced. "You try sticking to the speed limit in a goddamn cage all the way from Oregon."

Chibs laughed heartily.

Otto, climbing out of the other side, had walked around the van to open the back door. Tig checked their surroundings one final time to make sure nobody was paying attention to what they were doing. With business hours over and the mechanics gone, there weren't many people left in the compound. A sweetbutt was making out with a hangaround at the far end of the lot but, other than the prospect cleaning up, there was nobody there beside his brothers—and he'd trust them with his life.

Reassured they were safe, he helped Otto haul the crates from the van. Chibs and Bobby took the first one from them and carried it into the club house, where the guns would be stored temporarily until they could be moved to Oakland for delivery to Laroy.

Tig put the smaller box of handguns on top of the second crate and gestured for Otto to lift his end. The crate grew heavier with every step as they lugged it down the hallway to the apartment at the rear, and Tig was glad when they could finally plunk it down next to its twin.

"Any problems?" Clay popped up in the doorway.

"Nah." Tig's spine crackled as he stood up straight. "Went as well as could be."

Still blocking the way, Clay nodded his satisfaction and struck a match. He held the flame to the tip of a cigar he'd clamped between his lips. He drew deeply until the stogie glowed and then shook out the match. "When you're done here, want your opinion on something. You, Bobby, Piney."

"Sure." Cursing inwardly, Tig filed out with the others toward the chapel. Hap had promised his mother that Tig would spell her at six, and it was already well past the hour, but he could hardly tell Clay he needed to get home to relieve Hap's mom from nursing a junkie. Especially after having sworn Kozik's issues wouldn't affect his dedication to the club.

Piney was waiting in the VP seat as they came in, scowling and puffing on a cigarette. Tig, the last of the men to walk inside, turned to shut the doors behind him.

"This Laroy thing," Clay began, once Tig had slid into his seat. "If—if this turns into a permanent thing, we need a better way to move those weapons into

Oaktown. Can't keep 'em running around ourselves."

Tig grunted in agreement—though why this couldn't have waited until full church on Friday, he didn't know. Was Clay holding him back on purpose? Testing his loyalty? He narrowed his eyes. "Shouldn't keep the damn things at the club house, either."

Unser would always give 'em a heads-up if he got wind in time that the ATF or any of the other federal agencies had gotten it into their minds they wanted a closer look at Samcro's compound, but they couldn't rely solely on Unser's protection. Not if they'd be keeping enough hardware stacked in the apartment to lock all their asses in jail for years if someone decided to toss the place and Unser's warning came too late.

"I know." Clay's cigar had gone out and he struck a fresh match to get it going again. "Talked to the lawyers. Asked them for suggestions. They said to set up a dummy corporation and rent some space outside of Charming borders."

"Sounds like a good solution." Bobby was nodding along as Clay spoke. "You planning on bringing that up next church?"

"Was gonna." Clay sucked on his stogie and blew out smoke. "Still gotta figure out how to transport the guns."

The room was silent as each man mulled over the problem. Tig shifted on his seat, aware of the minutes ticking off on the clock.

"What about Trammel?" Piney leaned forward, wheezing, and stubbed his cigarette out in the tray.

"The state trooper?" Tig's brows rose to his hairline. "You want a *cop* to move our guns?"

Piney grinned. "I think he's in deep enough. Won't rat on us. And who'd intercept him?"

Clay snorted a laugh. "Good point." He turned to Bobby, and gestured with the stogie. "Feel him out."

"That it?" Tig was already halfway up out of his seat. It was getting close to seven and he needed to get the fuck home.

Clay reclined in his chair, eyeing Tig with a faint amusement, as if aware of Tig's need to hurry and determined to make him even later. "Mouse," he said, resting a palm on the table. "His time's almost up."



Tig growled inwardly as he plopped back onto the chair. He had better things to do than blather about Mouse's top rocker. "Don't like him for a patch," he grunted.

Bobby laughed. "You never do, brother."

"Kid's learning." Piney sucked in a rattling breath. "The hard way."

Bobby laughed even louder, and Clay smirked. Even Tig couldn't help snigger at the memories of some of the shit they'd put Mouse through. "Yeah," he agreed reluctantly. He had to concede the point: the guy had stuck it out this far.

"A'right." Clay pushed back from the table. "We'll vote his patch next month."

At Clay's dismissal, Tig popped up from his chair and scurried out of the chapel, ignoring Chibs' hail to share a beer, and pretending not to see the hopeful smile his favorite sweetbutt was tossing his way. Better he hightail it outta here before Clay came up with another bullshit excuse to keep him around.

oOo

Missy's doleful gaze followed Kozik as he paced the length of Tig's small living room. Where the hell was Tig? The clock's tick, counting the seconds, was loud in the quiet house.

Mrs Lowman had left not long ago, escorted by her son. She hadn't wanted to leave Kozik alone, but Kozik had convinced her he'd be okay on his own for a bit. "Tig's gonna be here soon." He'd half-looked at Happy for confirmation while he pleaded with Mrs Lowman to not miss her bingo night on his account. "I'll be fine."

"You sure, honey?" She'd frowned up at him, concern in her dark eyes.

"Yes ma'am." He grinned. "You're a miracle worker."

The quip earned him another dark scowl from Happy. Those black eyes still unnerved Kozik, but he was beginning to understand it was Happy's normal demeanor, and not specifically aimed at Kozik for anything he said or did.

"Well, okay then, if you're certain," Mrs Lowman agreed, still not sounding entirely convinced. "You take care of yourself now."

Kozik nodded, a sudden lump in his throat making it impossible to speak. Mrs Lowman reached up and patted his cheek. Her fingers were cool. "And don't you make me come back, you hear?"

"No ma'am." Kozik managed a grin as he dipped his head again. Much to his shock, she pulled him into an embrace, her skinny arms, which he'd learned were a lot stronger than they looked, tightening around his ribs. Unbidden tears stung his eyes. He blinked them away angrily—dammit, he was turning into a fuckin' chick. "G'bye, Mrs L. Thank you."

If she noticed the tears, she didn't mention them. She simply gave his shoulder a last squeeze, before climbing behind the wheel of her station wagon.

Kozik had watched her drive off, Happy's bike close on her bumper, until their tail lights faded in the darkness.

It had taken no more than a handful of minutes alone for Kozik to regret telling her to go. The house smelled of bleach and soap and detergent. It should've been a nice, clean smell, pleasant and comforting, but with nothing to do to distract him, all it did was make his nose twitch.

He sneezed, startling a bark from Missy. "Sorry, girl," he told her absently, scratching at his arms through his sleeves. Just what the hell was taking Tig so long?

Mrs L had been right: soon as his hands were idle, his mind started drifting, thinking, mulling over the past. His demons were lurking in the shadows and remembered screams seemed to resound in the heavy silence. With a muttered oath, he grabbed the remote, turned on the TV and flopped onto the plumped sofa cushions. At least the TV's noise kept the memories down, though nothing could hold his focus for more than a few minutes: all he found, flicking through the channels, were cooking shows and dumb sitcoms that weren't funny at all.

Another glance at the clock showed him that not quite thirty minutes had passed since he'd waved off Mrs L. It felt like thirty hours. Christ, he couldn't take this any longer; he had to get outta here.

This godforsaken town had to have a bus depot, right? Maybe he could catch a bus to Oakland. Or hitch a ride with someone.

He was already browsing a tattered, dog-eared phone book in search of information when it dawned on him what he was doing. Shit! He flung the book from him with a vile curse Mrs L wouldn't have approved of.

Something else to take the edge off, then. At least until Tig got home. If he could hold out until he got company, he should be fine. Hoping against hope, he rummaged through the medicine cabinet, finding nothing but the new box of Nyquil liquicaps Tig had been feeding him and a stack of bandaids. He slammed the door shut with another expletive. Mrs Lowman had thrown out the rest of what had been on the shelves, muttering about expiry dates and irresponsible

dullards.

He plunked himself back on the sofa, letting his head fall into his hands. No use going through the rest of the house, either; Mrs L had gone through it top to bottom, cleaning more thoroughly than a crime unit could. Anything that might've done for Kozik would be in the trash bags they'd taken to the depot earlier in the day. The only vices left were beer and coffee. Neither would do him any good.

*Christ, man, get it together.* He tugged at his hair until his eyes watered. He was fuckin' pathetic.

At the faint rumble of a Harley coming closer, Kozik dropped his hands. He jumped from his slouch, again startling Missy, who had been dozing once he'd sat down. Yawning, she stretched and got up from her dog bed and padded toward the door. Tig strode in a minute later, combing a hand through his hair.

"Where the fuck you been?" Kozik snapped, raising his voice to be heard over Missy's happy yapping.

Tig peered up from scratching Missy behind the ears. His eyes narrowed. "Hello to you, too."

Kozik grimaced, struggling to regain his composure. "You said you'd be back an hour ago." He cringed at the whiny note in his own voice. Jesus, he sounded like a jealous girlfriend.

"Something came up and—." Tig broke off, huffing out a breath. "Why the hell am I telling you? Ain't none of your goddamn business." He glanced around the room and his blue eyes widened. "And what the fuck did you do to my house?"

"Um..." The last of the fight bled out of Kozik. He hadn't minded helping Mrs Lowman on her spree—not really, despite his protestations—but under Tig's incredulous, pale-eyed stare, his balls shriveled.

"Jesus Christ." Tig strode past Kozik and into the kitchen. Kozik knew what he'd see: gleaming counters, bare of any dirty dishes. He waited in resignation for the outburst sure to come.

Tig pattered around in the kitchen for a while, opening and closing cabinet doors, before whistling softly. "Hey." He appeared in the doorway, holding up a dinner plate with a 1992 date printed on it. Kozik remembered finding it at the bottom of a huge pile of greasy dishes stuck together with dried food. "You found my favorite plate."

"You got a favorite *plate*?" It was Kozik's turn to let his jaw drop.

"What about it?" Tig's glower dared Kozik to make further fun of him. "Had it made for my girls."

His girls? "You mean Colleen?"

Tig shook his head and headed back to the kitchen. Kozik took a few steps until he could see Tig was returning the plate to the cabinet where he'd found it.

"My daughters," Tig answered, closing the cabinet door. "Dawn and Fawn." He sounded wistful. "Didn't even know I still had that."

Ah, yes: Colleen had been pregnant when Tig had quit the Corps. "Maybe if you weren't such a slob and cleaned up once in a while, you'd remember," Kozik pointed out in acid tones. He hadn't figured Tig to be so sentimental.

Tig sniggered. "You lookin' to be my old lady or something?" He ducked into the fridge to reach for a beer, pausing momentarily to gape at the gleaming shelves that greeted him.

"Fuck you!" Kozik burst out hotly. "And don't expect me to clean up your shit again any time soon, either."

Tig straightened, meeting Kozik's gaze. Kozik caught an amused, if still somewhat disbelieving twinkle in Tig's eyes.

"Shit." Kozik forced himself to be calm. He returned to the couch and flopped down onto it. Tig's smirk grew wider and Kozik couldn't hold on to his irritation any longer. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you. That woman is... shit, man. She's *insane*."

Tig barked a laugh and popped the cap of his bottle, tossing it over his shoulder to clatter on the counter. He held the bottle up to Kozik, brow arched in silent question. Kozik shook his head. He had no desire for a beer. His stomach likely couldn't hack it, anyway.

Tig walked over to an easy chair and sat down. "She's Happy's mom. I'll believe anything." He put his boots up on the coffee table and raised the bottle to his mouth.

"Hey, dickhead." Kozik slapped at Tig's legs. "Mrs L just wiped that. Feet on the floor."

Tig gaped at him, the bottle held frozen in mid-swallow. He choked down the mouthful of beer and coughed. "My God, she's created a monster," he muttered under his breath. But he did put his feet down.

o0o

The second Saturday after Tig brought Kozik home dawned overcast, the low-hanging clouds threatening rain. Pulling the kitchen curtains aside—the scent of laundry detergent wafted from them, making his nose tickle—Tig glared up at the gray sky. The club would be delivering the guns to Laroy today, and he didn't want to get soaked during the ride into Oakland.

He was about to let the curtain drop, his gaze landed on the lawn. Not satisfied giving his house a make-over, Kozik and Hap's mom had also been busy in the yard; the grass was now neatly shorn, although dry, brown patches showed where it had died under Tig's neglect. He sniffed. Damned Kozik.

The man himself was sitting at Tig's kitchen table—also scoured to a gleam—and working on his last piece of buttered toast, unaware of Tig's amusement at his expense. Tig poured himself another mug of coffee. "Gonna have to head out for a few hours." He stirred sugar into his cup. "Got a thing up in Oaktown." He left the rest unsaid, though he watched Kozik closely over the rim of the mug.

"Sure, whatever." Kozik swallowed the last bite of his toast. Once he noticed Tig's intense look, he rolled his eyes. "What? Thinkin' 'bout gettin' me another nanny?"

Tig puffed out his cheeks. "Nah. That part's done with."

He didn't regret he'd had Happy's mom over while he'd been away in Rogue River. How could he, with the reminders of her cleaning spree all over the house: grime-free bathroom tiles, the fresh sheets on his bed. His girls' fucking plate...!

But he also knew it hadn't sat well with Kozik. Couldn't fault him for that either, though they both knew Kozik had needed someone to look out for him while Tig was gone. Even if he refused to admit it out loud.

But now, a week after Tig had taken Kozik in and cut him off from the drugs, the worst of the withdrawal was over. Most of the shit had worked itself out of his body. But, as Hap had warned, the physical part was the easiest. The mental craving was gonna last a lot longer. Years—forever, really, if the knowledge Tig had picked up from various addicts over time was anything to go by.

"Gotta keep close watch," Happy had said. Tig had nodded his understanding but groaned inwardly. Easier said than done, considering Tig's day-job boss and his club president were one and the same—and Clay already had Tig in his crosshairs. He'd expect Tig to handle club stuff at a moment's notice—and rightly so: that responsibility came with the patch, and doubly so for the SAA.

At least the planning for moving the shipment had happened long enough in

advance that Tig had had time to think things over, decide how to handle it. Though he'd waited until the last moment, just now, to tell Kozik, he'd have to go on another run.

"Oakland, huh?" Kozik was muttering thoughtfully, as he pushed away his plate.

Tig mentally smacked himself. Moron. As if staying clean wasn't gonna be tough enough, he had to go and remind Kozik of the one place he didn't want him thinking about. Simply hearing the name of the city where Kozik had bought his poison was bound to call up memories Tig would rather he forgot. Not that Oakland was the only place to score—the Mayans had a pipeline up and running to Lodi and beyond, after all—but it'd be where Kozik knew his way around best.

"Yeah," Tig confirmed cautiously. He reined in his urge to tell Kozik to forget whatever he was thinking about. Better see where Kozik was going with this. Might give him a line on the guy's mental state.

"Do me a fav—." Kozik broke off without finishing. "Never mind." He offered Tig what Tig considered a shifty look.

Tig harrumphed under his breath. Should he call Kozik out? Push for what he was gonna say? Or let it slide? Shit, he wished there was a manual for these situations.

When Tig didn't say anything, Kozik got up and began collecting the breakfast dishes to put them in the sink. Despite his concern over his suspicions about what was going on in Kozik's brain, Tig smirked. In those two days, Hap's mom had seriously housebroken his old buddy.

Although, frankly, it wouldn't surprise Tig if pure boredom had brought on the bout of neat-freakishness. What was that saying again? Something about idle hands and the devil? Sounded about right. Either way, he better find something to keep Kozik occupied and distracted. Before the bastard got it into his mind to pick out new curtains or bake cookies or some such shit. A mental image of Kozik in an apron sprang to mind, and Tig sniggered. Kozik gave him a wary look across his shoulder.

Tig schooled his features into neutral. Garage could always use more hands, and Kozik used to be a good mechanic. Always tinkering with that damned Panhead, whenever he got a minute. Maybe he should talk to Clay. A job at T-M would give Kozik a chance to get his legs under him properly. And, even better, allow Tig to keep an eye on him without anyone being the wiser.

Satisfied he'd worked out a plan, Tig pulled on his cut. Giving Missy a final pat on the head, he gathered up his keys. "Later." Kozik uttered a similar-sounding

grunt in response.

A minute later, Tig was roaring down the street. His across-the-street neighbor was outside, putting a bag of golf clubs into his trunk, and looked up as Tig swung out of the drive, making a face. Tig laughed and opened the throttle further than necessary, adding to the racket.

The clouds hadn't broken yet and, with luck, the rain would hold until he got back from the run.

o0o

For the first thirty or so minutes after Tig had left, Kozik worked on cleaning the kitchen. Tig would've given him shit if he saw, but Kozik didn't care. Anything was better than listening to the silence that even the Saturday morning cartoons on TV couldn't chase away. He scrubbed the dishes till they gleamed, wiped the counter a number of times, and scoured the stove. Then he lined up the kitchen chairs with the table, put the dish towel in the wash, and stored the clean plates in their cupboards.

He'd waved off Tig's concerns, feigning that he was fine and pretending Tig's worrying irritated him. Truth was, being his own company scared the crap outta him. Funny: he'd never minded being alone before. But nowadays, the bad shit was always lurking, watching, waiting to catch him unawares, and once he was alone, the ghosts would pounce. During the hour or so between Mrs L's departure and Tig coming home earlier in the week, he'd been ready to climb the fuckin' walls. Only one sure thing made the ghosts stay away: snorting H until his brain was so numb he could barely recall his own name.

He was running out of chores and desperately raking his brain for what to tackle next when a knock on the door startled him. Tig hadn't said anything about visitors, and he wouldn't dump another sitter on Kozik without even telling him, would he?

The neighbor, Emily, was on the stoop, twisting the hem of her T-shirt between her fingers. "Hi. Kozik, right?" She offered up an uncertain smile. "I, um...."

"Yeah?" Kozik braced a shoulder against the door and crossed his arms in front of his chest, staring down at her.

"I, um, I was wondering," she stammered, "if—if it's not too much trouble, that perhaps you could help me fix that window?"

It took Kozik a few seconds to figure out what she was talking about, and then he remembered. Two days ago, after he'd returned her outlandish lawn mower, he'd noticed one of her garage windows had a shot lock and pointed it out to

her. Looked as if that good deed was boomeranging right back to bite him the ass.

"What about your old man?" Girl was fuckin' married, wasn't she? Why did she need his help? "Lloyd? Why can't he fix your damn window?"

Emily tittered nervously. "Oh no." She shook her head emphatically. "Lloyd's gone to play golf with some buddies. And he works so very hard for us, so I don't want to trouble him over the weekend. He's an accountant, you know, and he's always very, very busy."

Kozik decided Lloyd was a jerk. Stupid, too. If Kozik had a sweet piece of ass like Emily waiting for him—.

He cut the train of thought short. "Accountant, huh?" He mentally checked off another mark against Tig's neighbor.

"Yes." She bopped her head.

"Hm." He scrutinized her with narrowed eyes. Was she trying to use him to get one over on her absent husband? Not that he'd mind too much if she was; she might be a fluffhead, but she also had nice tits and great legs. And accountants were like DoD pencil pushers: sneaking lowlifes. Dude was probably off banging some other man's girl, while his pretty wife sat waiting, scared over her damned broken lock.

"I'd call a carpenter," Emily went on, when he didn't speak, "except it's Saturday, and they won't come out until Monday, and to be honest—," she briefly paused her rapid monologue to draw breath, "—I haven't been sleeping so well, knowing that window's broken." She gave a shaky little laugh, as if to say she agreed she was being silly, before Kozik could say anything. "Guess I am a bit scared. You told me what lock to get, so you know how to fix it, right?"

Kozik winced under her verbal onslaught. Girl made his head hurt, talking a mile a minute like she was. Her distress seemed genuine enough, though: no batting of eyelashes in his direction, no furtive touches, no head tosses. And hadn't he been looking for something to keep his mind off his own issues? "Sure, okay."

The utter look of relief on her pretty face helped dispel his irritation a little more. Perhaps he could put one in the karma bank with this one. He sure needed it. Calling Missy to him, he pulled Tig's door closed and headed across the road. Emily scurried alongside him, still talking, and the dog trotted after them.

Inside the garage, she handed him the lock she'd bought at his instruction, still wrapped in its fused plastic cover. "Is that the right one?"



Kozik examined it briefly and nodded. Looked like she could take directions, at least. Perhaps she wasn't as featherbrained as he'd thought.

A few minutes later, he was rummaging through Lloyd's dusty toolbox, stashed in a shadowy corner of the garage, for a hammer and screwdriver. As he began to remove the broken lock, he caught movement from the corner of his eye. He glanced down, wondering what Missy was up to.

It wasn't the dog, however, but a tow-headed little boy, who squinted up at him. The kid was sucking on his thumb, and bent to scratch at a wicked-looking scab on his bare knee.

"Robbie, don't do that," his mother warned from where she hovered nearby, watching Kozik work.

The boy pushed out his bottom lip. "It itches," he whined around his thumb.

"I know, sweetie." Emily knelt before him, taking his hand in hers. "You still shouldn't scratch it. You don't want to get an ugly scar, do you?"

Kozik held his tongue. In his book, there was nothing wrong with a couple well-earned scars. But a small-town accountant's wife likely wouldn't agree. Besides, it wasn't his kid she was talking to. "Hey little man," he asked, "wanna help me with fixing this lock? Pass me the screws when I need them?"

Robbie's face lit up. "Can I?" He glanced at his mother. Emily nodded. "Okay!" She gave Kozik a grateful smile.

The screws on the old lock had rusted tight and it took Kozik a lot longer than he'd expected to remove them. Once the old lock was done for, he dropped it on the work bench and wiped an arm over his face. It wasn't a very warm day, but the garage was stuffy, and the physical effort to get the screws out had made him hot. Definitely wasn't back to his old self yet, that was for sure.

So when Emily suggested he take a break, and offered to get him a glass of lemonade, he hesitated only briefly. "Thanks, that sounds great." He was still teaching his stomach how to handle real food, but he reckoned plain old lemonade should be okay.

While he waited for Emily to fix him his drink, he settled himself on the top step of the front porch, scrubbing a palm over his face and watching Robbie chase Missy around the yard—or vice versa: he wasn't entirely sure what game they were playing.

A car rolled by, slowing as it approached the house. For an instant, he expected

it to be the wayward husband and he tensed involuntarily. Then the car's driver took a good long look at him, before driving on and turning into the driveway of a house further down the road. Kozik scowled. Fuckin' nosy asshole.

"Here." Emily materialized behind him, carrying a tray with three tall glasses on it, their surfaces beaded with moisture. Kozik took one. It was cool in his grip, and he made sure not to gulp it down too fast.

"Thanks." Taking another sip from the lemonade—too sweet for his taste, but cool and wet—he looked out across the yard again, making sure Missy wasn't running over Robbie in her play. A little red Subaru sat parked in the drive, and he gazed at it thoughtfully. Maybe...?

"That your car?"

At Emily's nod, he went on. "Think I can borrow it for a bit?"

"Uh.... Right now?" Emily looked dubious.

Kozik didn't reply right away. The longer he waited, the greater the chance someone would—. "No. In a couple days, maybe." Tig had said he'd be in Oakland, and with his luck, he'd run smack into him the instant he crossed into the city. "I'll let you know."

"Well...," Emily still dithered. "I need it to take Robbie to pre-school and pick him up."

"It'd only be for a few hours," Kozik assured her. If she wouldn't lend him her car, he'd have to figure out another way to get to his shit. "Just a quick trip to pick up some stuff." And when she still wavered, he added with a grin, "Call it payback for fixin' your window."

Emily drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, okay, I guess. We can't tell Lloyd, though. I don't think he'd like me letting other people borrow my car."

"Won't say a word," Kozik promised. He'd never met the guy, but he already disliked Lloyd fiercely, and he certainly wasn't gonna sell out his wife to the dude. "It'll be our secret." He pushed to his feet and returned his empty glass to the tray. "Best I get that window finished now, huh?"

oOo

Three days after the club had delivered the promised guns to Laroy, Tig left Kozik watching over Missy and rode to T-M for a full day's shift. Gemma had said the roster needed him, and Clay had actually gone as far as to threaten he'd fire Tig if he didn't show his ass and put some goddamn real work in. Feeling more confident by the day that the worst was over for Kozik, Tig had caved.

It was the last day before Thanksgiving and the lot was in chaos when Tig arrived: customers scheduled for maintenance or repairs were dropping off their vehicles all at once, leaving their trucks and compacts parked haphazardly while vying for a mechanic's attention. Looked like everyone and their uncle wanted their cars seen to before Thanksgiving. Why none of the asswipes could line up and wait their turn, Tig would never understand.

He navigated slowly through the bedlam, barely avoiding a thick-set woman with spectacles who popped out of her hatchback without checking her surroundings. She squeaked when he squeezed by, with his front wheel missing her toes by barely an inch. Tig lowered his sunglasses to the tip of his nose to offer her his best glare. She grew white under her fake tan and snapped her mouth shut without further complaint. Tig shoved his sunglasses back up. Stupid cow. As if it was his fault he'd nearly run her over.

"Shit, Tigger. Don't go scarin' the customers." Gemma came wading through the mayhem, striving to bring order to the chaos by pointedly ordering people to keep the main strip clear, and confiscating keys so the mechanics could start putting vehicles into bays to work on.

Tig shrugged, unimpressed by the glower Gemma was directing at him. Hatchback bitch shoulda checked her mirrors. Leaving Gemma to handle the shaken woman, he backed his bike into line next to his brothers' already at the rail. Shaking his cut off his shoulders, he walked over to the bays, where a Chevrolet was already up on the lifts waited for his attention.

Clay was watching him from under the club house's awning, eyes hidden behind his shades. Tig raised a hand in a casual wave. His president wasn't too happy with him. Or was it his boss who was pissed? Either way, he'd better put in his full hours today if he wanted to get back on Clay's good side.

At least he didn't have to worry about Missy wrecking his house. Whatever else Kozik might be good for, he made a damned fine dog sitter.

Kozik had given Tig a fright, though, after Tig had begged off from the party celebrating the successful Oakland run to come home to an empty house, the door closed but not locked, and neither Kozik nor Missy in sight. He told himself Kozik could've just taken Missy for a walk, but no matter how much he wanted that to be true, he didn't believe it. No, he knew—he just goddamn *knew*—the jerk had somehow managed to haul his ass over to Lodi or Stockton to score, the minute Tig's back was turned. Fuck, Hap had warned him this was a possibility, more than once.

Uttering a heartfelt "Goddammit!" Tig had stormed out and slammed the door behind him, though what he was gonna do, he had no idea. He wasn't gonna

hop on his bike to rescue Kozik's ass a second time and—. He stopped dead in his tracks, shocked empty of any rational thought, at the sight of Missy and Kozik strolling across the road as if they didn't have a care in the world.

"Where the hell were you?" Tig snarled, ignoring Missy bumping his hand with her nose to get his attention.

"Whoa...." Kozik held up his hands, giving Tig a hurt look. "Keep your shirt on, dude. Was helpin' out one of your neighbors." He jerked his head at a woman standing in the shadows of a tree across the road. She gave Tig a shy wave. He'd seen her around a few times, and she was pretty in that innocent way none of the croweaters ever managed, no matter how hard they tried.

"Goddamn." Relief rushed through Tig, strong enough to make him sway on his feet. "You dog!" He smirked at Kozik. He hadn't thought Kozik had it in him. Not so soon.

Kozik rolled his eyes. "Not like that, asshole. Like I said, I helped her out with something around the house. 'Sides, she's fuckin' married."

"So?" Tig laughed even harder at Kozik's scowl. He slapped his shoulder. "Come on, boy scout. Let's grab a beer and you can tell me all about it."

Even so, the scare had shaken him enough he'd stuck around as much as possible. Easy enough on Sunday, with the promised rain finally falling, making it simple to cough up excuses to his brothers. Harder on Monday and Tuesday, when Tig had had to show his face around T-M to appease Clay.

He hadn't talked to Clay about giving Kozik a job yet, either. Clay was hardly in the mood to feel charitable toward Tig, and Tig had wanted to be sure Kozik could hack it, before he stuck his neck out even further for him.

Hanging his cut from a hook near the bay door, Tig turned toward the Chevy and picked up the work order. Kozik had reacted with a genuine shrug to Tig's announcement he was gonna spend the day at the garage. Quite unlike when Tig had told him about the run to Rogue River, or even the trip to Oakland. Both times, Kozik had failed to mask the anxious panic flittering across his face at being left on his own. Yeah, perhaps Tig should talk to Clay later today.

oOo

By the time noon approached, Tig was up to his eyeballs in the innards of yet another car. He'd lost count how many cages he'd serviced; they'd all been easy, regular maintenance jobs, tasks he could've done in his sleep: replacing air filters, spark plugs, distributor caps. Nothing requiring his full attention. Which had given him plenty of time to think about other things. Like how to broach the

subject of a job for Kozik with Clay.

"Oi, look who's surfaced at last!" Chibs' heavy brogue cut through Tig mentally composing arguments to convince Clay.

Tig back out of the engine compartment and straightened. "I was here yesterday, asshole." He hadn't seen Chibs since the run to Oakland; somehow, they'd kept missing each other.

Chibs took a sip from a can of Coke. "'Course ye were."

Tig finished tightening the distributor cap and wiped his hands on the greasy kerchief tied to his belt loop. He slammed down the hood and waved for Mouse to drive the car out of the bay. "Ain't my fault you weren't payin' attention." He refused to rise to Chibs' sarcasm. Walking a few paces until he was out of the bay, he dug up his cigarettes while he waited for the prospect to fetch the next vehicle. Lighting up, he looked out over the lot.

After the craziness of the early morning, relative quiet had fallen. Otto and Dog had taken the truck to bring in a tow; the remaining cars were all neatly lined up; and, one bay over, the radio was tuned to a classic rock station, the music dueling with the whine of air compressors. Tig took a drag on his cigarette and blew out smoke.

The office door was standing open, Gemma a dimly lit figure at her desk. She was hunched over the computer. From the hard set of her shoulders, Tig understood the system wasn't cooperating with what she wanted. Best leave her to it, then.

"Somethin' goin' on with you?" Chibs stepped up beside Tig, shaking the Coke can as if checking how much was left. "I'm thinkin' ye've got yerself a lass stashed somewhere you don't want us knowing about." He smirked. "Hap won't say a word, but Otto thinks—."

"Jesus Christ." No longer able to stay quiet, Tig cursed around the butt of his smoke, cutting Chibs off. "You assholes gossip worse than a bunch of thirteen-year-old skirts. Ain't none of your fuckin' business. Any of you."

Laughing, Chibs held up both hands in mock surrender. "A'right, brother." He backed away, still laughing.

Tig ground out his cigarette and headed over to the work board to grab the next order. He grumbled under his breath: another damned oil change. Yeah, a true challenge for a man of his talents.

His irritation only increased when he recognized the car that Mouse was rolling

up the ramp: the stupid cow's hatchback, the one belonging to the bitch he'd nearly ran over. Fuck, he needed a break.

"Here." Tig shoved the clipboard at Mouse as he got out the car. "Make yourself useful for a change."

"Mouse!" Gemma's sharp call rang out across the lot. "Get your skinny ass over here."

Mouse clutched the clipboard to his chest, his face contorted in clear indecision as he tried to figure out who to obey.

"Oh hell." Tig snatched the clipboard back and rolled his eyes toward the bay entrance. "Better not keep her waiting." Gemma had sounded less than happy. While an oil change for a dumb cunt in a hatchback was low on Tig's list of fun things, he was glad he wasn't in Mouse's work boots.

Mouse gulped and scurried off, his boots thumping against the oil-stained concrete.

Chuckling, Tig tossed the clipboard onto the workbench and went in search of an oil pan. While he worked to raise the car enough to slide the pan underneath, he kept one ear open. Better he be ready to keep Gemma from clawing Mouse's eyes out, if it came to that.

The oil drain plug was screwed on tight. Tig grunted with effort as he strained to turn it, but it refused to give. In frustration, he smacked a palm against the hatchback's underside. The car gave a shudder on the wheel ramps, and Tig froze in place. Had that little shit forgotten to pull the handbrake?

He rolled quickly but carefully out from under the car and clambered to his feet. Leaning in through the driver's door, he checked brake. It was engaged. For good measure, and just to be sure, he yanked on it anyway. Goddamn foreign piece of shit of a car. Venting his annoyance with a passing kick to the front wheel, he rolled back under the car again, changing his angle of approach in the hopes that would give him better leverage on the fuckin' plug.

The tendons in his arm corded as he put his full strength into working the wrench. He'd be damned if he let a goddamn plug get the better of him. Concentrating all his efforts on getting the thing loose, he didn't hear Mouse shuffle back into the bay, huffing under the weight of a heavy box, until Mouse set the box down with a *thump* loud enough to cause Tig to flinch.

Apparently, the sudden movement was just what the plug needed: it slipped loose without warning, and a rush of warm oil spouted from the opening.

"Jesus!" Tig jammed the plug back in, tightening it until the oil stopped streaming, but too late. He rolled out from under the car, uttering a stream of curses at the slick feel of the oil soaking into his hair and collar. Mouse stood gaping at him, eyes round and jaw dropped. Tig lunged for him, grabbing him by the throat. "You piece of shit!"

"Lemme go!" Mouse wheezed around Tig's fist, his arms flailing and feet kicking helplessly as Tig hauled him close. "Wha—what I do?"

Their shouting brought the rest of the garage running to see what the ruckus was. Disgusted, Tig shoved Mouse away and stomped out of the bay. The small crowd scrambled to clear a path.

"Where're you going?" Clay asked as he backed out of Tig's way. Barely contained laughter laced his tone.

"Club house. Shower." Tig wiped another glob of goo off his face and flicked it onto the concrete.

"That's out." Gemma's voice held a note of wry sympathy, though she didn't bother to hide her smile.

"What the fuck?" Tig scowled at her, not caring that the bearer of the bad news was hardly at fault.

"Sorry, Tigger." She rolled her shoulders. "Hot water tank broke yesterday."

"Which you'd have known if you'd bothered to stick around." Clay's mutter held a note of pleasure at Tig's discomfort.

Tig only just succeeded in swallowing the "Fuck you" that jumped to his tongue. He settled for an angry grunt, not even sure who he was most furious at. Snatching his cut from its hook, he stalked toward his bike. If he couldn't clean up at the club, he'd do it at home.

"Make sure you come back when you're done," Clay called after him. "Lots of work still to do here."

Tig flipped him the bird and roared from the lot. Accidents like this happened occasionally—risk came with the job. But it had been a long, long time since he'd suffered such indignity himself and he didn't like it one bit.

oOo

Tig drove as fast as he dared through Charming's streets. He had to get the goo out of his hair before it dried to chunks that only a pair of clippers could fix.

Within minutes he approached the turning to his street. A small, red car was nosing out of it.

"Goddammit," Tig swore as he saw that Kozik was folded awkwardly into the tiny red compact, his spiky hair a dead giveaway.

Kozik was looking the other way and hadn't seen Tig yet. On instinct, Tig swerved behind a delivery van parked at the curb and planted both feet on the asphalt, letting the engine idle.

So this was why Kozik had been sucking up to the little tart across the street. Helping her out, Tig's ass. He was neither blind nor stupid; he'd recognized the car immediately, having seen her drive it once or twice while he worked outside on his bike. Kozik must've sweet-talked her into letting him borrow it. And there was no doubt in Tig's mind why: Hap had been right, after all. And goddammit if the fucker hadn't waited until Tig had lowered his guard.

Christ, what to do?

Tig's first impulse was to catch up with the red car and force Kozik to the shoulder. But junkies were lying bitches, and Kozik was just as likely to give him some lame excuse as to admit the truth. No, best Tig catch him red-handed, with his paws in the smack jar over in Oaktown. See how Kozik talked himself out of *that* pickle.

Forgetting about the oil drying in his hair, Tig concentrated on tailing the little red car down 580 west. What he'd do once he caught up with Kozik, he didn't waste time figuring out.

It proved easy to follow the Subaru without risking being seen; the bright red roof stood out like a sore thumb among the duller-colored vans and pickups that cluttered the road. Tig only drew closer once they approached the outskirts of the city, not wanting to risk losing Kozik in the warren of cross-streets—though he reckoned he knew where to catch up with him if he did.

To his surprise, Kozik didn't make an immediate beeline to the Niner smack house where Tig had first spotted him. Instead, he stayed on the freeway for a couple more miles, going further south and—fucking hell, the bastard was heading straight for the exact same Mayan territory that Tig had hauled his ass out of less than two weeks ago.

"Goddammit, couldn't make this easy, could you?" Tig muttered under his breath as he briefly pulled over to flip his cut inside out. Clay would have his balls for breakfast if Alvarez had to make another call.

oOo



As soon as Kozik was certain Tig was truly gone for the day, he grabbed his borrowed hoodie, locked Missy in the garage, and jogged across the road. This was his chance to borrow Emily's car and get his stash out of Oakland without Tig being any the wiser.

He didn't want to tell Tig about the trip; Tig wouldn't understand why Kozik thought his stuff was important. Would call him a sentimental fool, no doubt. But each day Kozik waited to retrieve the box he'd hidden in the wall at the back of his old hidey hole, the chances grew that some other bum would crawl in between the dumpsters and find it.

Nothing he could do about fetching his stuff without a ride, however. And Emily's car wasn't in its usual spot in the drive. Kozik furrowed his brow in concern. Had she gone out? Would be just his kinda luck, wouldn't it?

Maybe the car was in the garage. Hoping against hope, he knocked on the front door. No answer. He knocked again, knuckles loud on the wood. Still, nobody came to answer it.

Dammit, he should've risked it yesterday, when Tig had gone into work for a few hours. But he'd waited too long, unsure when Tig would come back and struggling to gather his courage. By the time he'd found enough guts to make the attempt, the noise of a distant Harley had stopped him dead in his tracks halfway down Tig's drive. Oh Jesus. If he'd left a minute sooner.... If Tig had returned a minute later.... Turning on his heel, Kozik had hurried straight back into the house, installing himself on the sofa with the remote in his hand and pretending to be boredly watching TV when Tig walked in the door.

And now Emily was gone.

Kozik stood on the stoop, entirely at a loss, for a long minute, trying to come up with a new plan. Then, slowly, he trudged back across the street. He really couldn't catch a break, could he?

But there was no way he could make it to Oakland and back to Charming before Tig came home if he had to hitch rides. Not to mention, the city was large, and he had a particular spot he wanted to go. No, better to wait and hope Emily wouldn't be gone too long. Perhaps she was just getting groceries after taking her boy to pre-school.

Hopping up and down on the balls of his feet, Kozik kept looking out the front window, waiting for a flash of red. Missy, with that uncanny instinct of all animals, had picked up on his anxiety and was restlessly winding around his legs, whimpering and nudging at his hand. He stroked her ears absently.

At last, after what seemed like days—but was barely a few hours—Emily drove up the street in her little red car. Kozik was out the door while she was still maneuvering the car into her drive. She spotted him jogging over and gave him a small wave through the rear windshield. With large steps, he reached the car and opened the door for her. "Hey. Was looking for you."

"Hey." She took her purse from the passenger seat and climbed out. She didn't seem to have any shopping with her. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." Kozik realized he was looming over her in his haste to get going. He took a step back, giving her some breathing room. "Just wondering if I could borrow the car today."

"Now?" She tucked her purse under her arm.

"That a problem?" Crap, if she said no, he didn't know when he could next slip away for a few hours. "It's important. Please." He hated begging, but he would for this.

"Well, okay, I guess." She blew out a breath. "If it's not for too long?"

"Couple hours, tops." He put a palm on his chest, over his heart, and turned on the charm. "I swear."

She laughed. "Alright. Just don't tell Lloyd, remember?"

"Never." Kozik grinned, relieved, and accepted the keys from her. Without thinking about it, he gave her a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Thanks, darling." She giggled and blushed prettily as she watched him fold himself into her car.

Five minutes later, having remembered to once more lock Missy in the garage, he was on his way.

oOo

An hour later, Kozik was approaching Oakland. The trip had gone off without a hitch. His worst problem had been cramp in his muscles from having to hunch over the steering wheel and jam his knees against the steering column, even with the seat pushed back as far as it would go. But he'd suffered worse, so he just gritted his teeth and hung in there.

He'd also had to fend off the strong desire to take the exit that led to the crack house. No, dammit! He concentrated all his effort on going straight to alley and the stuff he'd left there. That was why he'd come to Oakland. He hadn't fought this hard to get clean only to fall off the wagon again at the first opportunity.

Once he reached the alley, he dumped the dinky-sized car at the corner and unfurled himself from behind the wheel. Joints popping and muscles creaking, he straightened his spine. Damn, this fuckin' cage was tiny!

The stink from the alley was stronger than he remembered and it made him gag. He pulled his shirt up over his nose and, keeping his breathing shallow, crawled into the narrow gap between the dumpsters. He clawed at the loose board, and felt around in the space behind it. His fingers touched metal and he sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

Curling his hands around the small box, he maneuvered it far enough to pull it out through the gap.

"Gimme that."

Kozik jumped at Tig's gruff voice behind him in the quiet alley. He'd been so focussed on getting his shit, he hadn't heard the bike, or even Tig's footsteps approaching. Instinctively clutching the box close to his chest, he crawled out backward and gathered his feet under him. "Ain't none of your business."

"Like hell it ain't." Tig made a grab for the box, and Kozik yanked it out of his reach. "You goddamn lying junkie bitch." Tig snatched a handful of Kozik's hoodie and pulled him close. "Gimme the stuff." He reeked of motor oil, streaks of black stiffening in his hair and striped down his jaw.

Distracted by Tig's appearance, Kozik stared at him. Then his words sank in. "You think *that's* what this is?" The accusation hurt more than Kozik would've thought possible. "You think this is my secret stash?" He angrily shoved the tin into Tig's hands. "Take a look, then, asshole!"

Taken aback by Kozik's sudden cooperation, Tig prised open the lid of the box. "What the hell?" His blue eyes pinned Kozik. "You snuck back for *this*?"

Kozik looked away, unable to meet Tig's gaze. "All I got left, man." His voice cracked on the last word, and he winced.

"Jesus," Tig muttered. Kozik ducked his head down between his shoulders and waited for Tig to start laughing.

Tig would probably understand Kozik keeping his various service ribbons and the Bronze Star—something Kozik didn't think he deserved but had been unable to toss anyway. But Tig'd scoff at the engagement ring, which had belonged to Kozik's mother and which he'd given to Jenn before his last tour—and found hidden among his clothes in his duffel after she'd thrown him out. And Tig would definitely laugh his ass off at Kozik holding on to the tank emblems from

his very first Harley.

With another quiet, "Jesus," Tig snapped the box shut. He held it back to Kozik, who hesitated for a moment before taking it. "Let's get the hell outta here." Tig sniffed and wrinkled his nose. "Place stinks of piss."

"I didn't ask you to come." Now he had his box back, and Tig wasn't laughing, Kozik's resentment rose to the fore. Tig must've tagged him all the way from Charming and he'd never even noticed. Shit, he'd really lost his edge.

Tig snorted, not speaking, though his look spoke volumes. *How dumb do you think I am?*

Kozik stroked the box absently with his thumb. "You don't trust me." It was more a statement than a question. Frankly, if he were in Tig's boots, he wouldn't trust himself, either.

"Round here?" Tig flapped a hand. "Damn right I don't. Back in Charming? Maybe."

Kozik's jaw fell. "Really?" The word escaped him before he could catch it. That was more than he'd expected. More than he had any right to. To cover up his shock, he added, "Can't stay there forever." Though what he'd do when Tig got sick of him and kicked him to the curb, he had no idea. Crawl back to Jenn? Yeah, right. Like he'd still want that bitch.

"Nope." Tig smirked. "But the longer you stay clear of the shit around here, the better. And I got a plan." He turned and stalked out of the alley, to where he'd left his bike in front of Emily's car. "You comin' or what?"

Kozik followed. "What happened to you, anyway?" Once they'd made it out of the dim alley and into the sunlit street, he'd gotten a better look at Tig. "That oil?"

The furious scowl Tig sent his way made Kozik take a step back, though he had a hard time keeping his expression neutral.

"Work accident." Tig scrunched up his face with disgust and tugged on a lock of greasy hair, his fingers coming away coated with gritty black gunk. "Was on my way home to clean up when I saw you sneaking off." He wiped his hands on his jeans. "Now, will you get the fuck moving? Clay'd have both our hides for boots if he knew we were here."

Clay was the president of Tig's club, Kozik recalled. He fingered the car keys in his pocket. "What's he got to do with any of this?"

Tig stared at Kozik. Then he narrowed his eyes. "You don't remember?"

"I..." Kozik racked his brain. All he could dig up were some fuzzy, disconnected images of being on the back of Tig's bike, with the scent of Tig's cut in his nose—funny, how he'd remember that and not much else. "Not really," he admitted. "Was kinda out of it."

"No shit." Tig scratched at an eyebrow. "This is Mayan turf, brother. Mayans and Sons don't get along so well."

"That why you got that on inside out?" Kozik dipped his head at Tig's cut.

Tig grimaced. "Yeah. And I don't like it one bit. So, can we quit yappin' and get goin'?"

"Absolutely." If Kozik never laid eyes on this alley again, it'd be too soon.

"I'll follow you back." Tig waited for Kozik to fold himself behind the wheel of the car before starting his bike. Kozik wasn't sure if his words were a promise or a warning. He thought it best not to ask.

oOo

The day after Thanksgiving, having taken Kozik to the garage, Tig waited for him to finish buttoning up a Teller-Morrow work shirt. Borrowed from one of the non-club mechanics, the shirt had the wrong name tag, but Gemma would have that fixed next week, once Kozik's probation was over. Because Clay might have been unwilling to give Kozik a job in the first place, but there was no doubt in Tig's mind he'd want to keep Kozik on.

Fixing Kozik up with a job at the garage was another step toward helping him get his shit back in order, even if Tig still had no clear idea what exactly had brought Kozik down to the gutter in the first place. He could make a few good guesses, though, especially after he'd seen just what had been so important to Kozik he'd risked sneaking back to Oakland for it.

He'd pushed Kozik about it that same evening, with the smell of cooling Chinese take-out sitting heavily in the kitchen. "You were gonna ask me on Saturday about that box, weren't you?"

Kozik didn't answer straight away. He toyed with his chopsticks for a minute. He hadn't eaten much, but he'd proclaimed himself well enough for some real food, and he'd managed what he had gotten down with less trouble than Tig had expected. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you?"

A shrug was the answer. "Didn't wanna put any more of my shit on you." Kozik glanced up, meeting Tig's eye, and gave him wry grin. "Didn't mean to freak you

out, though."

Tig huffed a laugh, waving it off. "Rear view, bro." He took a swig from his beer. True, he'd been freaked out alright. Betrayed, pissed, disappointed, too—until he'd seen the contents of the box, and a whole bunch of puzzle pieces had fallen into place.

Kozik wasn't done, though. "Look." He stabbed his chopsticks into the uneaten food in front of him as if to underscore his point. "I told you, I want this." He gestured around the kitchen. "I wanna stay clean. I will."

"Sure, man." Tig shifted on his seat, unsure what else to say. He believed Kozik. If the vehemence of his words might not convince him, having witnessed Kozik go straight for his stuff without any detours sure had.

They were both quiet for a minute. The fridge kicked on and started humming. Missy wandered over from her water bowl, her nails clicking on the linoleum floor. Kozik was picking at the label of his beer bottle.

"Lawn mower don't work," he said at last, breaking the silence.

"Huh?" Tig blinked, momentarily thrown off course. Whatever he'd expected Kozik to say, that wasn't it.

Kozik had the grace to look embarrassed. Yet he plowed on. "Your lawn mower. Is kaput."

Tig laughed uneasily. "Don't got one." Had the smack killed too many of Kozik's brain cells after all?

"Yeah, you do. Back of the garage." Kozik rubbed at his neck.

"Huh," Tig said again. He'd never bothered cleaning out the garage. He didn't own a car, and in the California climate, his bike was usually fine in the drive. Until he'd gotten Missy, he'd barely spent any time at the house, anyway. It had been more of a place to have than a place to be. "Musta been left by the previous owner. Guy was a prick. Probably knew it was busted." Tig leaned down to scratch Missy's ears with his free hand. "Old coot didn't wanna sell to me at first."

Kozik's eyebrows shot up. "You bought this place?"

Tig realized he'd never told Kozik he owned the house. "Yeah." He set his bottle on the table. "Couple months after I patched Samcro. Reckoned I was in for the long haul. Thought I might as well put down roots." He patted Missy's flank, and she pushed against his hand, begging for more attention. "So, uh, you know, if

you wanna hang for a while longer, you're welcome."

Kozik swallowed, throat bobbing. "I'd like that." His voice sounded strange, and Tig had to look away. "Guess I should maybe see to fixin' that lawn mower then, huh?" He huffed a laugh. "Gotta earn my keep, and all."

"I can maybe do you one better." Tig shrugged. "Garage always needs more hands."

Kozik had been skeptical about his chances but, all the same, he'd let Tig introduce him to Clay and explain the situation without going into too many details. Clay knew most of it already, anyway; what he didn't know, he evidently guessed.

"For God's sake, Tigger," he burst out, once Tig had finished explaining who Kozik was. "What d'you think I'm running here? A fuckin' unemployment relief project for junkies?"

Kozik unhappily hunched his shoulders under the heavy-browed scowl Clay threw in his direction. "Uh, I could—."

"Shut up," Clay and Tig both barked at the same time, before giving each other a startled look. "Clay," Tig went on quickly, not giving the other man the chance to recover, "Koz's a good mechanic. Knows his bikes, too. We need guys like that. Since Harland—."

Clay uttered a warning growl and Tig shut his mouth with a snap.

*Dumb move, Trager*, he told himself. Bringing up Harland's disappearance—and in front of Kozik, no less!—wasn't gonna improve the odds he'd get his way. He drew in a breath and decided on another approach. Forcing his shoulders to relax, he twisted his lips into a smirk. "C'mon boss. Where's your holiday spirit? It's fuckin' Thanksgiving."

"Christ onna crutch, asshole." But from Clay's tone, Tig knew he'd defused the worst of the situation. He broadened his grin, while struggling to come up with another argument in Kozik's favor.

"Dude fixed my mom's car." Happy's unexpected input surprised all three men. Their heads swiveled toward where Happy had appeared in one of the bay doors. He rolled a shoulder, unperturbed at being the sudden focus of their attention. "She was pleased."

"Oh, for Chrissakes! I got Hap's mother telling me who to hire now?" Clay flung up both his hands. "Well, I cry uncle. You two win. I'll give the guy a chance." He turned a cold, blue-eyed stare on Kozik. "One week. You ain't any good, or

you give me any trouble, your ass is toast. Understood?"

He then sent Kozik to see Gemma in the office. She'd given him a clipboard and a loan shirt, and told Tig to show him the ropes.

"Alright, bro." Tig squinted down at the clipboard Kozik had put on the work bench. "Easy one to get you started." He hoisted himself up on a stool and gestured at the car already on the ramp. "Oil change. You know what to do, right?"

Kozik smoothed down his work shirt and grabbed an oil pan. "Not get splashed?" His mouth twitched as he fought back a grin.

"Watch it, dude." Tig scraped a hand through his hair, wincing at the uneven cut. During the ride to and from Oakland, the oil in his hair had dried to a sticky, thick goo. Kozik had had to use the clippers on him to cut the worst of it out before Tig had been able to wash the rest clean. Dude had been a better marine than barber, for sure. "But yeah. You stay clean and you'll do fine."

Kozik's expression turned serious. "I will." He lowered himself onto a trolley and slid under the car. His voice drifted out from the shadows. "Now get the fuck outta here and let me work."

Tig laughed and hopped off the stool and ambled from the bay. There'd be coffee in the club house and, with any luck, Bobby would've brought muffins.

And Kozik? Kozik would be fine.

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