

TJ's Ride

Chapter 1

Protagonist George Webber wrote, "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." From these few lines Thomas Wolfe came up with the idea and title for his book, "You Can't Go Home Again." Whether you subscribe to this line of thought or not, I found it to be very true.

I joined the Navy and left home in December 1964. After Navy boot camp I received orders for specialized training, then to the Brown Water Navy patrol in Viet Nam. After my tour there I was assigned to attack squadrons with various ships in the Western Pacific. Perhaps this would make an interesting story in its self, and maybe someday, but that isn't the story I want to tell right now. In truth, that was a million years ago and really has nothing to do with who I am now.

In 1968 I received orders from LeMoore, California, back to my home town of Corpus Christi, Texas. This was no surprise as it was part of my agreement with the Navy for volunteering to spend fourteen months in Viet Nam and a tour with attack squadrons on a few different carriers. It's many sailors' dream to be assigned a station in or near their home town, and I was no different. I had dreams of riding with my old friends, spending time fishing for shark on Bob Hall Pier, and partying at Padre Island. Had I known what was coming, I'm not so sure I wouldn't have asked for orders to hell before accepting orders to the Naval Air Station backyard.

On my return to my home town I discovered the truth being told by Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Webber. At first glance I thought everyone else had changed, the fact of the matter was they were the same, I had changed. They were the same people I had left, doing the same old things; they still talked about the game-winning touchdown, the game-saving block. They had been born, raised and now lived in the same twenty-mile circle while I had been to war, visited numerous countries, lived in other states and seen both amazing and scary things. They harbored the same old prejudices I once did but now found appalling after working with so many people of different ethnic and even native backgrounds. No, you can't go home again, not because home has changed but quite the opposite.

I was living in the enlisted men's barracks, a place I hadn't slept in once since leaving Navy boot camp, and I wasn't overjoyed by it. Even though my rating allowed me a two-man room, I missed the privacy my own apartment afforded me. It was still better than sharing sleeping quarters with seventy-five other men. Living on a Navy ship is not the greatest of joys. You get to know people all too well.

I had been out late partying with a few old and a number of new friends, and had consumed more than a little Jack Black. I couldn't figure out what all the noise was until I got my eyes open and realized it was after nine in the morning; I was almost two hours late for work. I went to the door to find Bill Rose, the first class I worked for, and the shop chief standing there. The chief and I got along pretty well but Bill was on my ass all day long. As a second class I was doing work that someone of a much lower pay grade should have been doing. To make a long story short, Bill wrote me up and pushed the charge to go as far up the ladder as possible. The fact that I threatened to kick his ass may have had something to do with him pushing so hard. Before I knew what was happening, I was standing in front of the squadron skipper, scared to death I was going to get busted.

The skipper gave me a royal chewing out, then sent everyone out of the room but him and another captain I didn't know.

"Petty Officer Hamlin," the skipper said. "This is Captain Joseph of JAG. He wants to talk to you, but first I need to tell you something. Nothing you discuss in this room is ever to be spoken of beyond these walls unless you are otherwise directed. If you choose not to help Captain Joseph, there will be no retribution. But if you do, you will be assisting the Navy with a grave issue and I will make these charges go away." Captain Joseph offered his hand, and I shook it before taking a seat near the skipper's desk.

"Petty Officer Hamlin... wait, can we get on a first name basis?" Captain Joseph asked. "What do your friends call you?"

"Just call me TJ, sir, if that is okay with you," I replied.

"Oh? Why TJ?" he asked.

"My name is Thomas Jefferson Hamlin, sir, ergo, TJ."

"Okay, TJ. Have you ever used drugs?" Captain Joseph asked.

"Of course not" was the answer he expected, and that's what I gave him.

He grinned at me and looked at the skipper, who immediately got up and left the room. "Let me tell you what we know here, TJ, and maybe we can skip all the bullshit." He opened a file in his lap. "You work at a bar a few nights a week for a man named Louis Hornbuckle; in this bar are two dancers, Leslie and Jessi. On four occasions in the last three months you made trips to Mexico and brought something back with you for them. I know that you've been working some long hours and suspect you have to be using something to keep awake. What did you get for the girls and yourself in Mexico—and no more BS or I terminate this discussion, and everything in this file is released to legal."

I thought for a moment. *These guys are slipping*, I thought. I made a trip down to Mexico almost every week picking up Dexedrine, a light speed some people used to keep their energy level up, while others used it for weight control. I had been selling it to the girls and a few other dancers in the area at a profit you would not believe.

I looked at the captain. He was not playing around. "I picked up some dex," I said finally, "sometimes to help me stay awake and sometimes as a favor for someone else."

"Good," he said. "Now, with that out of the way maybe we can get to the point. There has been a huge increase of drug use in the Navy. A few weeks ago we busted a sailor selling pot and crystal meth. He told us a little, but not enough to be of any great assistance. What he did tell us leads us to believe you can be of great assistance in our investigation."

"Look, I don't go in for the heavy stuff, not pot or anything else," I stammered.

"We are pretty certain that is true, but we have an unusual opportunity here. Corpus Christi is your home town, is it not?" he asked, and I knew he already knew the answer. "Not only that, but you were a member of the CC Riders motorcycle club and are, or were, good friends with a man referred to as Mad Dog. Am I right so far?" he asked as he looked up from the file.

"I haven't even been in touch with any of the guys since I got back in town," I told him. "I don't even ride where they hang out."

"We know that too, but we want that to change," he smiled.

"I don't know what you're talking about or where this conversation is going but I don't think I like it. It sounds like you want me to bust on some brothers, and I want nothing to do with it. If that is all, sir, may I be excused?" I asked.

"You may not be excused, and I guess I need to clear up a point here that your skipper got wrong. He said that you could walk away from this and nothing would happen. That is wrong...very wrong. We have enough information and substantial proof to take you to a court martial and charge you with, to start with, possession and distribution of controlled substances. On the positive side, this will make you a civilian; on the negative side finding a job on a less than honorable discharge will not be easy. Is my point getting across now? Am I making myself understood?" He pulled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and offered me one, which I took.

I was beaten. I knew it but I couldn't just let it be. "You guys are trying to make sure you see me dead. We aren't talking about a bunch of kids on motorcycles," I said. "We're talking about people who will do whatever they need to in order to keep their business alive, and if that means putting me in a hole, they really don't care. Some of

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these people may have been my friends years ago but that doesn't buy much in their world now if they are running drugs." I took a deep drag from the cigarette. "You really aren't giving me any choice, are you?"

"No, we aren't. I will do whatever it takes to stop the flow of drugs to the military. I'm tired of seeing our young men in hospitals, kicked out of the Navy or on morgue slabs. If placing one person at risk stops this, then yes, I'm willing to risk it. If I could do it myself I would, but we both know that wouldn't sell. We will do everything we can to protect you, but we need you out there getting information for us. This is no less a war than Viet Nam, and if we don't stop it we will lose a lot more of our young men."

"Stop drugs? You must live in a wonderful world but I thought Fantasy Land was only in Disneyland. Drugs are a fact in your Navy and they always will be. You may slow the flow from one source but another will come along to replace it."

He didn't look surprised by this. "No, we may not stop drugs in the Navy but I refuse to give up. I will do whatever it takes to attack this problem at every level."

I acted like I was thinking, but I knew I had no choice. This guy was almost fanatical. "Well, it appears you are giving me no choice, so how am I going to help in your little war?"

He gave me a look that told me he didn't see it as a little war. "We have arranged a job for you at a bar where we know some of the people hang out from time to time—they need a bouncer and you need a job. When you are not at work or sleeping I want you on the CC Rider's tail finding out how, when and where they are getting their drugs, who is distributing them and who is providing them. As far as anyone knows, you are no

longer in the Navy. You will have to find a place to live, preferably not too far from your old friends. When this is all over, you will be returned to duty, apologies made and you will be advanced to the next pay grade and rewarded for your service," he said as he leaned back in his chair.

"How long do I have to play this silly-assed game?" I asked.

"Until you provide us with enough solid information and evidence to shut down this operation and put some outlaws in jail," he replied.

"Can I at least tell my mother so she doesn't go ballistic?" I asked.

"No. For more reasons than I want to explain, that is a bad idea. If anyone outside the very limited number of people finds out anything, you'll be placing their lives in danger. Let's just say that the less anyone knows, the better it is for you and them."

I thought about what I was hearing, and I wasn't too crazy about much of it. I knew the club did have an element that was involved with drugs, but I never thought it was this big. I was beginning to think that maybe I didn't really want to be a part of this. "You know, I am not so sure I want any part of this. In the first place you are asking me to be part of an investigation that could end up in court, which means I would have to testify, in which case my life expectancy is about –"

"Petty Officer Hamlin!" he interrupted. "I understand your concern, and we will do everything we can to protect you. If need be, we will transfer you anywhere you want in order to keep you safe, but let me make this as clear as possible. My primary concern is for the Navy now and the future of the Navy. If I have to sacrifice one man for that cause I will."

I sat there dazed. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your honesty, but I don't feel one damned bit better."

He leaned forward in his chair. "TJ, I don't want to see you hurt any more than I want to see any other sailor in trouble with drugs. I will do everything in my power to protect you, but I need your help. You are probably the only person on this base, perhaps the one person in the Navy who can help me, and I'll be damned if I am going to let this opportunity slip through my fingers."

I was stuck. I had no escape from this without screwing myself completely. "Okay, I'm on board, but I can't survive out there on my own."

He leaned back again, relaxing. "No, we aren't leaving you hanging. Your contact is a woman named Jean Marie. She knows who you are and will be in touch in the next couple of weeks. I don't doubt that this could take several months, even a year or more, but you will be helping the Navy and will be saving lives along the way. For the next few months no one from the Navy will be in touch with you. If anyone says they are from the Navy and wants to talk to you, don't trust them and get in touch with Jean Marie as soon as you safely can. Other than Jean Marie, don't trust anyone. You already know how dangerous this can be, so you have to do everything possible to minimize that danger. When you leave this office you are a civilian; you can't let anyone know any different."

"I want all this in writing, otherwise you guys can court martial me and bust me, kick me out, whatever you want," I told him.

He smiled. "You act like you don't trust me."

"Honestly...hell no, I don't trust you. Basically you have already lied to me, threatened me with Mast and told me if I don't do this you are going to get me kicked out

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of the Navy, and you think I should trust you? Captain, I have tried to do my job for the Navy and take care of my family at the same time and because I've done a few things that bend the law a bit you want me to risk my life without a safety net? No way in hell!"

He thought for a moment. "This is more than I can do. I can't put this in writing without speaking to someone about it."

I was angry now. "Fine, do whatever you want, talk to whoever, but I am off the radar until you get straight. I'm out of here." I headed for the door.

"TJ, I will talk to the people I need to. I will see you in an hour," he said.

"Do what you have to. I will be in the enlisted man's club as soon as I change clothes. Find me there," I said and went out the door.

After changing my clothes I got on my Harley and turned out the gate instead of going to the club. Once outside the gate, I headed for Padre Island Drive and twisted the throttle hard rolling the big bike past one-twenty. I knew if the cops stopped me at this speed I was jail bound, but at this point I really didn't care. I blew past two CC Riders—the distinctive rockers on the back of their cutoffs was easy to see. I grabbed the throttle and tube-locked it, leaving them in the dust.

When I started getting close to busier areas of Corpus Christi, I hit a median and flipped back toward the base. The two riders did a "U" turn and were soon on either side of me; one of them pointed at a bar up the road, and I pulled into the lot. One of the riders came over as I stepped off the bike.

"Hey, bro, you're TJ, right?"

I looked at the big man. "Yeah, but I don't think I know you," I said wearily.

"No, man, you don't know me, but you know Eddie, right?" he asked.

Eddie was one of the brothers I rode with years ago, before I joined the Navy.
"Certainly I know Eddie. I haven't seen him in years."

"Eddie heard you were in town and told us to watch for you, said he saw you but couldn't get back to you and he told us what your bike looks like." He handed me a CC Riders card with Eddie's name on it. "He just wants to hear from you, bro. Give him a call." He returned to his bike, and the two men spun out of the parking lot.

I headed back to the base.

I went into the enlisted men's club and ordered a double single malt. This really felt like a drunk day, and I intended to end the pain of reality as quickly as possible. I was on my third double when a third class in sharp whites came in. "Captain wants to see you," he said almost as though he had power.

I finished my drink and followed him out, got on my bike and fired it up; the idiot in whites was standing there holding his vehicle's back door open. "I will drive you over," he said. I pulled up next to him and twisted the throttle, throwing dust all over his shiny white uniform, and headed for the captain's office.

When I walked into the office, the captain was waiting for me holding an envelope. I took it from him, opened it, pulled out the paper and began reading it. I looked at the civilian secretary and saw the "Notary" sign behind her. "Will you please notarize this for us and make three certified copies?" I asked.

She looked at the captain who nodded to her; she stamped and signed the paper then made the copies.

I handed one to her. "Please keep this in a file that only you have access to. The others I will take with me and make sure particular people have them."

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The captain escorted me into his office and instructed me to sit down as he handed me another paper. "This has your primary contact, mine and a couple of other people's phone numbers. I suggest you find a very safe place for it." He handed me another envelope. "There is five thousand dollars in there. That should get you started and keep you going until you start getting paid from the Blue Note."

He gave me the rest of my instructions and sent me on my way.

After emptying what few things I had in the barracks into my GTO, I loaded the bike on my trailer and headed out the gate.

The first thing I did was go to a lawyer I knew and felt I could trust. I told him the whole story and gave him two copies of the notarized paper and told him we would be talking again in a few days.

Next I headed for the Blue Note bar to meet my new "Boss."

Chapter 2

Finding an apartment in Corpus is no mean feat but finding something half decent with a garage was a task. I finally found an older house that had been pretty well cared for with a detached two-car garage for \$120 a month. That was a little steep, but I had to have a safe place for the bike and my GTO. The woman who owned the house was nice, plus she lived in a town about twenty-five miles from Corpus, so I didn't have to worry about her being around much. I paid her for four months rent and that made her much happier. I found a place that rented furniture and got what I absolutely needed and had it delivered.

I knew where the Blue Note was—my folks and I had been there a few times. I don't know why they wanted me to work there. I could have kept working for Louis. I rolled into the parking lot where there were only about four cars parked, and I pulled up as close as possible to the door.

I got off the bike and strolled into the bar. The bar was much as I remembered it, nothing special, though the dance floor looked smaller than I remembered. The gal behind the bar looked at me from top to bottom, "What can I get you?" she asked.

I looked around. "Is the owner around?"

Now she looked at me a little closer. "Yeah, what do you need?"

"I need to talk to him," I said, getting a little irritated. "Where is he?"

"She."

"What?"

"I said 'she.' The owner is a she. Her name is Sherry. Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is TJ Hamlin. She knows who I am," I replied.

She walked from behind the bar and back to a door, knocked and walked in. After a few seconds she walked out followed by a short, attractive redhead. The redhead looked at me and motioned for me to follow her. We walked into a small office with the air conditioner working hard to keep summer on the other side of the door. "Have a seat," she said motioning to a chair.

I sat down and looked at her but before I could say anything she started talking. "I know about your situation, Mr. Hamlin. Someone who knows me very well talked to me about bringing you in here and I agreed; not because I have a lot of trouble in this bar but because I know a little about what they are trying to do, and I am all for it. I don't want drugs in my place if it can be stopped."

I looked at her, "TJ." She looked at me strangely, "Please call me TJ."

This little redhead was living up to the reputation redheads have. Sherry just barely stepped above five feet tall and was a green-eyed knockout. Her body looked like

it would be comfortable on a stage but her attitude told me she wouldn't be comfortable there.

"Okay," I told her, "then you probably know more than I do."

"Bullshit! I've heard all about you, TJ. I knew you were in town before your engine cooled down. That's all these suicide jockeys could talk about was you being back. Before I agreed to this thing I was given your complete history, so let's hit an agreement right here and now—you don't bullshit me, I won't bullshit you." Her eyes almost blazed.

I sat there thinking for a minute. "Okay, I am going to take for granted you know everything they could tell you, and it is only fair that you do. The club I belong to is supposedly big into moving meth. I don't know how true it is or how deeply they are involved. I have been asked—no that's not right—I have been ordered...*commanded* to do this and threatened if I don't."

She sat back a little. "That's better. Do you have any idea who is doing what or are you flying blind?"

"Right now I'm flying blind. I don't know who is buying, selling or using. I haven't been in touch with any of my old brothers since I got into town. The only ones I know for sure are still around are Mad Dog and Eddie."

She sat there a minute. "Mad Dog. Is he tall, about six-four, tips the scales somewhere around 250? He looks like a real mean sucker. I know him as Kenny."

I took a quick memory check. "That sounds like Kenny, but he wasn't that big the last time I saw him. He can be a pretty bad number when he is crossed or has had a little

too much to drink. Kenny and I were very good friends once. I don't know where we stand now."

She sat there thinking, "Okay, we'll have time to chat later. Let me explain where you stand here; you have the door and keeping order. We don't have trouble often but it will be nice to have someone around if there is any. I know you won't be around all the time but if you can help out on Fridays I would appreciate it—that seems to be the worst day. That's when the guys get paid and come in here to blow their paychecks."

I thought about the bar layout. "So exactly what do you want me to do?"

"TJ, I almost live in this bar and I need a break." The look on her face was serious. "To start, I want you to keep things on an even keel; stop the guys from grabbing at the girls, keep the drunks from raising too much hell, get to know the people who come in and the people who work here. If you are in here any days during the week I may take a little time to get out of this place and away from the smell of beer." She tossed me a set of keys. "You have keys to everything in the place but the safe. If I'm not here at closing, there is a slot you can drop the receipts in."

"You're trusting me with keys and cash? You don't even know me," I said.

She laughed. "You can't run away; I know how to track you down. Now, I am paying you five hundred a week. Well actually I am paying you a hundred; the rest is coming from someone else. For my hundred I really hope you can be here at least Fridays and one other day of the week. I know you have a job to do and this isn't really that job but you could help me a lot."

I looked at her closely for the first time. There was something soft behind that hard shell, something that said she was a lot more than a bar owner. "I will be here every

Friday unless it can't be helped, and every night I can during the week, but I promise I will help out at least one day a week. Again, unless something comes up that I can't."

"I've known Jean Marie for a long time and I trust her. She says you are okay. I have to believe her. So I am doing something I don't usually do; I'm trusting you based on a friend and my gut. I usually wait until someone proves they can be trusted." Her face softened a bit. "I don't know what it is, TJ, but there is something that tells me you are different than most of the other men I know."

"Well, I'm not so different than the guys I'm supposed to bust. If I hadn't joined the Navy I might be right where they are, doing the same things they're doing. I will promise you this though; you can trust me, not because the government says so but because I say so."

"Okay, I will introduce you to the day girl, Mindy. She is something of a dip and the only reason I don't think she would steal from me is that she isn't smart enough, but she is a good girl," she said as she got out of her chair and headed for the door.

She introduced me to Mindy, the girl I met when I came in. Mindy was as hot as her name hinted. I am not much of a breast man but hers were beyond belief, that was the first thing I noticed. Then I realized she had long blonde hair, a somewhat pretty face, and a figure that was full enough to indicate she would probably spread out a bit in her later years.

Sherry showed me the rest of the bar. There was a bandstand and on it was a Gibson guitar connected to an amp. I picked up the guitar and plunked out a few notes. She turned on the amp and the sound blared from it.

I twisted through an early Beatles tune, probably missing half the notes.

"Not bad," she said. "Been playing long?"

I smiled. "Since I was ten but I haven't played a whole lot in the past couple of years."

She turned off the amp. "Well, practice a bit; I could use another guitar player. The one I have is a drunk who only shows up when he remembers where his guitar is."

The guitar felt good in my hands. "I'll see if I can find my old Fender. Maybe I can plunk out a couple of tunes. Look," I said, putting the guitar down. "I'll be back in a couple of days—if not before Friday, certainly then."

She put out her hand and I took it. "I'm here to help if I can, TJ. I guess you're part of the family now."

I strolled out the door and headed back to my new digs. I had been putting off calling Eddie but it was time to bite the bullet and do it. I dug out his card and dialed his number.

He laughed. "Well, I'll be damned, you are alive. I thought maybe you fell off the face of the earth. What the hell is the idea of hitting town and not touching base?"

I had to think about how to connect without sounding like I was trying too hard. "Well, a lot has been going on. Leaving the Navy was a real change for me."

"Really? What's that all about?" he asked. I told him the agreed upon story and hoped it sounded true. "Hey, we're going to be at the island this weekend. Come on out and party with us, maybe meet some of the newer guys. There isn't many of the old guard around anymore—everyone turned straight and became citizens," he continued. "How is that old Harley doing? The two brothers that stopped you said you were screaming down the drive."

My Harley was an old one. It was new in 1959 but had been through a number of changes. The latest upgrade was a performance kit that Harley added when the engine was rebuilt and beefed up in California. "It'll get down the road," I said. "It's more of a Frisco chopper now, no more rigid frame. It's on an Amen Savior frame with a girder front end. Engine is now an 80-incher with a cam that bounces the front wheel at stoplights." The bike really was a screamer; 140-plus was no problem for the nine-year-old machine.

"That's hot, man! I'm driving a brand new machine that has been chopped out, pretty radical for around here. It cost me a bundle but it was worth every dime," Eddie replied.

I wanted to jump in and ask him where he got the money but Eddie was no idiot; he would see right through me. "So, what are you doing these days? Last I heard you were talking about opening a shop."

He laughed a little. "Hell, man, I put that shop up and it went like gangbusters. First year I busted my ass in the shop but after it took off I became management. Man, can you see me as manager?" He laughed again.

"Right, man, you sittin' behind a desk with clean hands? No way," I said.

"I still work on a few of the bikes, mostly for the old guard and do some custom work, but for the dirty shit I let someone else handle it."

"I'm glad things have worked out for you, bro," I told him. "Maybe things will turn around for me."

"So what are you doin'? I heard the Navy let you go. That's a pretty shitty deal, bro. You get your ass shot at for them and they dump you. That really sucks."

"I'm bouncing at the Blue Note; you know the bar out beyond Military run. It isn't a bad gig; the booze is good, pay isn't bad, I have a place to crash, and the chicks that work there give me plenty of eyeball liberty," I told him.

"You know bro, I can always use a good man I can trust in the shop, and I am sure the pay would be better than bouncing," he offered.

I had to think up a good excuse quick. "The pay might be better there, but I bet you don't have any luscious ladies working there. Look, man, I have to cut this off, I need to run. I'll try to make it out to Padre this weekend." I said goodbye and we hung up.

Okay, I had made my first contact with them. I have to admit it felt good to get back to my old friends. I wondered how many friends I would have when this was all over.

I had just poured another cup of coffee when there was a knock at the door; this surprised me since no one knew where I lived. When I opened the door there stood a brown-skinned beauty. She wasn't very tall, 5'2" at most but a wonderfully voluptuous figure. She quickly flashed a badge. "Mr. Hamlin, may I come in please?"

I looked back to her lovely face. "Certainly. Welcome to my humble abode. I guess news travels fast in this town." We walked into the kitchen and I offered her a cup of coffee as she sat down.

"No, thank you, this needs to be very brief. I assume they have told you that you would have a contact within the force. My name is Jean Marie. I will be the only one you will speak to. No one else on the force knows who you are. The only thing anyone will be told is that we have someone on the inside." She handed me a slip of paper. "These are all the phone numbers where you can reach me any time of the day or night."

I took the paper then threw it back on the table, "If I am going to be in this, no one is to know there is someone on the inside. You let *anyone* know there's a rat and people will die. Eventually that someone will be me. Second, this is the last time you come into this house or approach me at all. If you need to talk to me you will call me and we will meet some place where people won't tie the two us together. The same goes if I want to meet with you."

She looked a little flustered but quickly regained her composure. "I take it you don't trust the police department. I can assure you all the people on this task force are completely trustworthy."

"You are either brainwashed, very stupid or one of the best actresses this side of Hollywood. There is no way that drugs could be hitting the streets at the levels I am being told without the assistance of someone inside the police department. So absolutely no one is to know that anyone is on the inside. Does anyone already know? If so I need to check out of this game right now."

"The only one who knows is the Police Commissioner; he was the one who set this thing up. He is also the one who will assign people to the task force and he wanted to meet you. When can we do that?"

"Do you have a hearing problem?" I asked. "Been spending too much time out on the range? Or do you have a problem comprehending my words. I can't speak Mexican so you better take a quick course in English. No one but you is to know I even exist. If I have to say that again I'm walking away, and if I ever find out you leaked my existence to anyone I will drop you so fast you won't remember I was here. Do you have that clear in your mind now?"

I have to admit I was impressed by the way she held her ground. She didn't get in my face, and it was clear she respected where I was but she never backed down either. "You're quite right. I guess I took for granted that we knew what was best, not thinking about the fact that you know a whole lot more about how these people think and operate." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a card, started to hand it to me then pulled it back and looked at it. "I don't suppose it was a good idea to have acquired a concealment privilege for you?"

"Now you are starting to think a little less like a bureaucrat."

She stuffed the card back in her pocket. "I will make sure there is no record of this. Maybe we can start over. I can see we need to work as a team, not with me in the lead."

I smiled. "No, we have accomplished too much to start over. Let's just take this as a learning opportunity and go from here."

"Okay, how can we maintain contact in such a way so as not to arouse suspicion?"

I thought about it for a minute. "There is a mom & pop store on Padre Island Drive named Dave's Bait and Beer. He sells groceries, beer, bait and such. Dave is an old friend—I have even crashed in the back of his store a few times when I was too drunk to make it home. Go in and meet Dave. Don't tell him what you do, just your first name. I'll stop in and talk to him this weekend so he'll know who to look for. If you want to leave anything for me just put it in an envelope and write Lil Brother on it. When there is no one at or near the counter pass it to Dave. If he has anything for you he will pass it to you as well. If the store is too busy, don't hang around; just leave and come back later."

She looked at me concerned. "Are you sure you can trust him?"

"Definitely! Dave and I have been friends since high school. He has never been a part of the biker scene so he has no ties there. I saved his ass in high school when he stupidly made a pass at a Latina girl and she told her brothers. Two days later her brothers, cousins and everyone who lived in her neighborhood were waiting for Dave when he left school. I happened by and saw there was about to be a serious bloodbath. Fortunately her younger brother was a friend of mine. I apologized for my new friend's stupidity and Dave apologized to Maria. She accepted the apology and the issue was dropped. You know the really crazy thing? That stupid son-of-a-bitch started dating her a month later and they got married when they graduated. So to answer your question, I trust Dave with my life. Just make sure no one sees you there too often, don't stay too long and never leave without buying something. Okay, for now you have been here too long. Meet me at Mike's on North Beach around eleven tonight."

She put her hand out. "I will be there. Thank you."

I took her hand and was surprised to discover she had a firm grip, better than many men I have met. "Don't thank me yet. We are starting down a road we may both wish we had never taken the first step onto."

I escorted her out, went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of carbonated water and noticed I didn't have much left. I would need to keep a good supply back here to keep me from attacking the booze at the bar.

* * *

Mike's was a small bar on North Beach, kind of a crummy place, like most everything on North Beach. At one time it was a resort area but over the years it had

become run down. It was a great area if you were looking for hookers, drugs or a really cheap roach-infested place to live. The owner, Mike, was another trusted friend—actually he had been my mother's friend but he'd been nice to me since I was a kid. Of course he still seemed to see me as that kid.

Jean Marie showed up dressed much more casually, that is if you can call casual a pair of jeans that looked like they had been painted on and a sweater that made her breasts appear to stand up even prouder. I looked her over. "Damn, honey, you are gonna spoil my bad reputation."

She frowned at me then broke into a smile. "I would slap most men who said that to me, but you actually made it sound like a compliment."

I laughed. "It was a compliment. I'm just glad you weren't dressed that way when you came to the house. You make it hard to concentrate."

She smiled. "Okay, next time I'll wear a gunny sack so I don't distract you. Now, what's good to eat here? I'm starved."

I looked at her appreciably; thinking even a gunny sack couldn't hide her charms and if she ate very much those jeans would explode. "You better like seafood—the fish and shrimp are fresh and excellent, but this guy can turn any steak into shoe leather."

We made small talk as we ate, then we ordered a beer and sat there. "So tell me about these guys," she said. "I know you have been away for a while but tell me what you know."

I leaned forward in my chair, "Okay, let's see. First there is Eddie. He is the club Pres, that's president. Eddie is pretty much old-school biker; he lives to ride, drink, fight and screw in that order, or at least he did before he opened the shop. Last time I saw him,

he didn't have two nickels to rub together, and now he seems to be rolling in green. The bike he rides is probably worth twenty grand and it had to cost him a hundred thou to even start up the shop. He hasn't opened up about where he got the cash."

I took a drink and continued. "Then there is Mad Dog, Kenny. He is the enforcer for the club and he loves the job. I don't know much about where he stands now, but I understand from my government contact that he is a major player in the drug scene. That is pretty surprising because I remember him as being pretty straight-laced about drugs...booze, yeah; he would hit that but never drugs. He is a mean son-of-a-bitch drunk or sober. I hate to think what he would be like on meth. Those are the only two I have heard about since I got back to town. Now, I did notice when I ran into a couple of club members, they were carrying guns, something we never did in the past."

She looked at me concerned. "How are you going to get in close enough to find out anything? I seriously doubt these guys are just going to open up."

"You are absolutely right. This is not going to be a brief operation, and results aren't going to come easy. It will take time to build trust," I told her. "The down side is, the longer it takes, the more chance for mistakes but if we rush in they are going to make me and I'm dead. These guys are as bad as they come. When they are crossed they strike back and they strike back hard, doing four times the damage that was done to them. I don't know exactly how I am going to get in close to them, but I know it is going to be a slow process."

She slid a package across the table toward me. "I understand the .45 is your weapon of choice. This one is a customized Colt Combat Commander that has had an accuracy job done to it, adjustable trigger and Rattlesnake grips. The gun is completely

clean, no history or records at all. If you need anything else, go to Stan's, the surplus store on Staples and hand them this" —she slid a card across that had one word stamped across it: "Vet" — "The man who runs the place is Stan. You talk about trusting Dave with your life, that is how I feel about Stan. If there is anything you want, just tell him. He will get it and if you need me in a hurry and can't call, just tell him to call J and tell him what you want to pass along."

I took the card. "Thanks, there might be a couple of things I want to pick up."

"TJ, I am more than a little concerned for you," she said seriously. "Do whatever you think is right but if things get too hairy, run like hell. I would rather explain why we failed than bury you."

She really did care about what happened to me. "I know these guys. There are some newbies who I don't know at all, but I think I can deal with them. I have a long history with the club and the old guard will pretty much trust me—they have no reason not to. As for the newer members, I am certain they will be suspicious but the old guys will back me."

We finished our beers and left without saying much more. The ride back felt good, I was back in the saddle, back in my home town and ready to rock and roll. As I rode over the bridge from North Beach I was able to look across the whole city. Somewhere down there drugs were passing from hand to hand, people were being hurt, people were dying. It was a very sobering thought.

I decided it was a nice night to head for the island, so I pointed the bike in that direction and as soon as I was away from the city proper I rolled the throttle and let the little beast breathe.

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I was not quite to the causeway to the Island when I changed my mind and headed for The Cue, the bar where my ex-girlfriend worked and where I suspected I would stumble across some of the brothers.

Chapter 3

The Cue had been a nice pool bar at one time. Now the tables have cigarette burns, beer stains on the felt and the stench of stale beer throughout. Except for the hanging lights over the tables, there was little to brighten the darkness, but my old girlfriend's voice, a sound similar to the screech of a Blue Jay, cut through the darkness so I was able to find the bar. I walked over, sat down and ordered a beer as my eyes became accustomed to the low light. There were at least five CC Riders in the bar shooting pool, then I saw Mad Dog at the back of the bar. Now was as good a time as any to talk to him; I was certain he knew I was in town.

I walked to the back of the bar and up to Mad Dog. "Hey bro, long time."

He looked at me. "I heard you were in town. What are you doing here?"

"Just stopped for a beer," I replied.

He looked at me as though I were a bug. "I mean in Corpus, smart ass. I don't much give a shit why you are in here."

"I got stationed here and this is where I left the Navy, so I decided to hang here for a while."

"What I hear is that you got your dumb ass kicked out. What were you doing, punkin' in there?"

"Mad Dog, I don't want to have to deal with your bullshit, but if I have to I will, and you remember what happened the last time you decided you wanted to dance? Next time I won't be so nice." I turned and started walking away. Some would say it isn't smart to show your enemy your back, but he knew me well enough that he didn't want to jump me.

I walked back to the bar and two of the other bikers came over. "You givin' Mad Dog a hard way to go?"

I picked up my bottle of beer. "Who are you, his wet nurses? Back off unless you want to deal with Eddie."

One of the little punks was stupid enough to open his mouth. "Eddie doesn't run my life, and I see no reason to back off from some punk ass like you."

"I'll be sure to pass your sentiments along to Eddie, and unless you're looking for a little dental rework I suggest you back off," I said, knowing I was goading him. I looked at his friend. "That goes for you too."

They looked at one another then walked away. I finished my beer and walked out.

Once out the door I moved pretty fast, stepped across the bike, cranked it up and blew down the road. After running through some back streets I got back on Padre Island Drive and headed for the Island.

I stopped in at Dave's on my way to pick up a six pack. "Hey Dave, how's it hangin'?"

"Hey TJ. Too low to be used," he said and came out from behind the counter to give me a hug and slap me on the back so hard I almost stopped breathing. "How have you been? It's been a long time."

I thought for a second. "Yepper, a little over three years. I'm doing okay, working a gig at the Blue Note."

"Really? You mean to tell me you get to work around all that sweet stuff down there?" he said in mock wonder.

"Oh yeah, all of it sweet and dangerous," I told him. "Dave, hey, there is a little Mexican gal who might stop in and drop something off for me from time to time. Will you hold on to it until I stop in again?"

"You got it, man, anything you want, you know that."

"Thanks Dave, this is just between us. I don't need to tell you to keep it quiet. How are Maria and the kids?"

He laughed. "Pregnant again, man, pregnant again. It seems like she's been pregnant from the second I said I do. This will make number seven. I have my basketball team. I guess she either wants backups or she is shooting for a baseball team. You better get your ass over to see her. If she finds out you're in town without stopping, she will chase you down and cut off your balls."

"I promise I will stop by as soon as I know it's safe. Look, Dave, I have to be straight. I'm in some pretty tough shit. I can't tell you much about it, only that it could come down hard on me and the less you know the better."

He looked at me concerned. "Hey man, you know I'm here. I will keep it quiet."

"If any of the club come around tell them, yeah, I've been here, long time friends catching up. I won't go see Maria unless I know it's safe, but I will stop by soon," I promised.

He looked at me, knowing not to push the issue. "Okay bro, you know where we live. You know where I am, and you know you are welcome any time. I heard you had some trouble in the Navy, got kicked out or something. Is that true?"

"I'm afraid it is. Now I just have to work things out from here; it's almost like starting over again. I know everything will work out in the long run, but this short run is killing me. I will talk to you later, bro, I have to get on down the trail for now." I shook hands again and headed for the door.

"Keep the shiny side up man, and, hey, you know I am here any time you need me," he said as I walked out the door.

The moon was setting like a small reddish orange ball on the horizon. What was that old saying? Oh yeah, "Red at night sailor's delight, red in the morning, sailor take warning." I wondered if a red moon meant the same thing. I was sure that much of the red came from the pollution we were filling our atmosphere with.

It had been a hot day but the night promised a little cool down, and I figured the best place to be to cool down was the island; that's where all the brothers would be. I pointed my bike toward the causeway and rolled the throttle open, letting the big bike

breathe to life, and headed for Padre Island, not sure what I was going to find there. I love the road, particularly with a big engine thumping under me and the wind pulling at my hair. It was times like this when all the troubles in the world were somewhere behind me and the rest of the world could go to hell.

I heard a sound and looked in my mirrors. A cop determined to ruin my day. I rolled to the side of the road and reached for my wallet as the cop walked toward me.

He looked me over disapprovingly. "Driver's license and registration please," he said in a tired voice.

I was already holding them out and almost made a smart-assed remark but held my tongue.

"You know, we have speed limits in this state for a reason; they aren't a suggestion, they aren't a minimum, they are the limit at which you may drive this road when conditions are good."

I sat there while he walked back to his car.

A few minutes later he walked back beside me. "Keep your speed down and as soon as you get a chance call Jean Marie," he said as he handed back my cards. He looked at me like I was a bug. "You're lucky, you must have friends somewhere," then he turned, walked back to his car and took off slinging gravel at me as he went.

I have to talk to Jean Marie. She is going to get my ass killed yet, I thought as I started the big machine and rolled my speed past ninety, blowing past the cop who had just stopped me. As long as I was protected I might as well have fun with it.

Padre Island was always the place I felt at peace. I rolled down onto the beach, past Bob Hall Pier and moved further down the island. I pulled up into the sand, took off

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my vest and set it under the kickstand to prevent it from sinking into the sand and stepped off my bike once I was sure it was safe. I sat there allowing the roar of the engine and the wind to float from my ears and soon had the roar of the waves crashing on the beach replace it. Here I found the kind of peace I could know nowhere else in the world. I felt I was home again for the first time since my return.

I sat there and dozed off for a little while and was startled awake by the sound of a half dozen Harleys passing by. I got up, shook the sand from my vest, brought the engine to life and headed the same direction the bikes had gone.

The party could have been seen by planes flying at 10,000 feet without any problem. There must have been at least seventy-five bikes there, and twenty of them were drag racing in the sand. I stopped and looked up just as a ragged-out Sportster went down, throwing the rider a good twenty feet. The young rider got up spitting sand and cussing the other rider for pushing him into the softer sand. Some dweeb was trying to play "Wild Thing" on an acoustic guitar and butchering the song so bad he should have been arrested by the music police—some people should just enjoy their music in the quiet of a soundproof room somewhere.

Eddie was holding court amongst a dozen bikers, most of them prospects and none of them looked like they knew what a razor was; long hair was the deal but these guys looked more like girls than guys. I couldn't help but think, *where the hell are the new bikers coming from, some kiddy farm?*

I found the beer and popped a top and just strolled around the collection of bikers and their women. Suddenly hands went over my eyes. A body with well-formed breasts

pressed against my back and a sweet sounding, "Guess who?" whispered into my ear on beer-dusted breath.

I knew who it was; she was probably the only person who could slip up on me without me knowing she was there. "Shauna," I replied. Shauna was a Native American who came to Corpus on the back of a member's bike when we returned from Sturgis a few years ago and had been hanging around ever since. I turned to her and was a bit amazed by her appearance; though her breasts were still large and firm, her face had aged by decades instead of years.

"Did they finally pass a law allowing you guys to drink fire water?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "Just beer, dude. I stay away from the hard stuff. It got me into too much trouble."

I couldn't help but wonder what else she was into; she looked like she had been on a meth bender for more than a day or two. I threw my arm around her shoulder, "So, what's been up with you? I see you are still hanging around this bunch of gear heads."

Her eyes were sunken into her head and had lost their shine. Her voice had even gotten a little smoky. "Nothing really, just beatin' around, trying to keep my head above my shoulders. Hey, dude, you don't have any speed or anything on you, do you? I gave up crystal, but I need something to keep the buzz going."

I looked at her hard. "Shauna, you know me better than that. I don't touch that crap and you need to pull off it too. Hell, the booze was bad enough, but this stuff will kill you. When I left here you were having fun, enjoying life...what happened?"

"Bullshit, life sucks and if I don't have something to escape that reality I might as well find a hole to crawl into. Look, TJ, you have no idea what has been going on around

here. You better watch your back." Just as she was finishing, Mad Dog came over, grabbed her arm and started dragging her away without a word.

I grabbed him by the sleeve and spun him around. "I was talking to Shauna. I don't appreciate you interrupting us." I was expecting the fist and anticipated it perfectly; he brought in a roundhouse that certainly would have cold-cocked me if it had connected, but he telegraphed every move and I easily avoided his hand. I grabbed his wrist and allowed his own momentum to drive him to the ground, then stepped back. I looked at him as he rose to his feet. "Just back off MD. The last time we did this dance you were out of commission for two weeks. Don't make the same mistake."

He looked at me as though he wanted to kill me. "I'm not the same person anymore, TJ. While you've been playing with your candy-assed boyfriends, some of us have been out here in the real world."

"Looks like you've been in the real world sucking on a bottle and growing a gut," I responded.

I was ready for him when he came. He hadn't changed; he was still the same clumsy, lumbering slob he had always been. MD was a big guy alright; he was 6'6" and around 275 and it wasn't all fat. If he ever really connected with one of his haymaker punches he could do some damage. I easily ducked his swing and caught him in the solar plexus with a sharp, hard punch. I heard the wind go out of him, and he staggered back.

"Come on, MD. You are just going to shame yourself and the colors and have your whole night ruined. Now back off before this gets serious."

The rage in his eyes was still there, and I saw his left hand moving toward his belt; before he could even unsheathe the knife, I had him in the sand face down, his left

arm pulled so far up his back that his hand almost reached his collar, and I was pushing up hard. Before he could move I slammed my elbow into his right kidney as hard as I could.

I was going for a third time when Eddie came over. "Okay, children, that's enough fun for tonight. TJ, get off him, and Mad Dog, I think you need to go for a ride and chill your bones a bit. Don't come back until you've cooled down enough to party."

I got up and walked over to Shauna, took her by the arm and walked her away. I watched as MD stepped across his bike, kicked it to life and dumped the clutch causing the bike to twist around in the sand before finally moving down the beach.

Eddie came over to me. "TJ, you better be careful of that one. He thinks you are back here to push him out."

"You know better, Eddie. That is just his excuse to stir up shit. I hate to say it but I think we are going to have issues until one of us puts the other down hard, and I will tell you right now, when the smoke clears I am going to be the one standing, so I suggest you tell him to back off. Next time you might not be around and I might not stop once I get him on the ground." I turned and walked back over to Shauna.

I could tell she was getting in a bad way; she was shaking so bad she could hardly light her cigarette. She finally got it lit and looked at me. "TJ, you know I have always liked you, but Kenny is going to beat the crap out of someone tonight and it scares me."

I looked at her and grinned. "I have no intention of allowing him to my back and that is the only way he is going to have a chance of taking me."

Her eyes blazed. "Not you, dumbass, I mean me. He is going to come back and when we're alone he is going to beat the crap out of me. The last time he got mad at me,

after he closed both my eyes and knocked out a couple of teeth, he turned me out to anyone he could find. For three days all I did was spread my legs. I can't go through that again. *I won't* go through it again. I will end it before that happens."

I could tell she really was scared. "Look, come on over to my place. Stay there until I can talk to him and cool him down. Now that I know what's bothering him, maybe I can get him to chill."

She looked down, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I'm hurting, TJ. I need a bump real bad. Can you get me something to get me through?"

I didn't like this—the very thing I was supposed to be out here trying to get a line on and I had to go hunting for it. I went to Eddie. "Hey, bro, I need to get my hands on some speed. Who's holding?"

Eddie looked at me warily. "I didn't think you were into drugs, man. I thought you were clean."

I just looked at him. "It isn't for me. Shauna is hurting and I take it MD has her stuff. Just tell me who's holding."

The frown on his face relayed his thoughts. "You are getting in over your head. Kenny has a half dozen riders he can call on, and he will do that if he can't beat your ass himself. Now you are messing with his old lady. That is as dumb as I have ever seen you. The whole damned club could come at you for that."

"I'm not messing with Shauna. She is scared to death that he's going to beat her again. She says he beat the crap out of her and made her pull a train. It sounds to me like he is over the edge."

An awkward smile went across his face. "Yeah, I've seen her on more than one occasion after he tuned her up, but she is his old lady and it is none of your business. In the end she will run back to him no matter what he or anyone else says or does. She's a meth head—she lives for that shit and nothing is going to change that. I tell you, TJ, ever since that stuff has hit the club we have more guys using. At first they just cooked and sold it. Now they're using as well. If you take her with you, there will be a dozen pissed bikers on your trail. Leave her alone, get on out of here, and I will do the best I can to take care of her."

I turned and looked over at Shauna. She was standing next to another biker and from the looks of it, she was getting fired up. She didn't even look my way as I got on the bike and headed down the beach in the same direction Kenny had.