

Smooth Sailing
A Wild West MC Novel
By Kristen Ashley

TEASER CHAPTER

Author's Warning

Please note that there are frank discussions of sexual assault in this novel.

If this causes you distress, I hope you have love and support around you, and if you need it, you find help.

However, if this distress can get to be too much, you may wish not to read this book.

Prologue
Beat-up Chairs

Big Petey

Denver, Colorado
Not too long ago...
Thursday Night

The bar wasn't the worst Pete had been in, it wasn't the best either.

But it was a bar, a busy one, and shit went down in bars, busy, seedy, or neither.

And shit was going down.

That was why he tensed, and Rush, sitting across from him in a back corner booth, tensed with him.

They'd seen the dipshit on the barstool cop a feel of a woman's ass as she walked by with her friends. They'd seen her negative reaction to that unwanted touch.

And they'd seen how Harlan McCain hadn't missed either.

Now, Harlan, a bouncer at the bar, was on the move.

Pete knew Harlan also hadn't missed the man on the barstool had a crew with him.

And that bar had one bouncer.

Harlan.

That didn't stop the man from walking right up to Barstool and having a few words.

Unsurprisingly, those words didn't go well.

Even if Harlan appeared to be going about things calmly and rationally, the situation deteriorated. Barstool got off his seat, going right into a two-handed shove on Harlan without the man doing a thing to stop him.

His buds all exited their seats and gathered around.

Harlan went back a step at the shove, but that was it.

Except Harlan kept talking.

Barstool got in his face, and it was clear he wasn't sharing the weather.

Harlan stayed cool, and when Barstool finally shut up, he kept calm and kept talking with some easily read head and hand motions that indicated Barstool, and his buds, were invited to walk out the front door.

Barstool, either drunk, stupid, or both, took a step back, cocking an arm to throw a punch.

This caused Pete to prepare to move.

It also caused Harlan to dodge, and while dodging, take Barstool by the back neck of his shirt, the back waistband of his jeans and frog-march him right out the front door.

His crew followed, and their set faces and body language shared what they intended to do when this shit went outside.

Pete and Rush instantly slid out of their booth.

Harlan was a big guy. Tall. Built. And the man's muscle wasn't lean, it was bulky.

If he knew how to use it, it would pack a mean punch.

If he didn't, it could slow him down. Make him vulnerable.

But four on one wasn't good odds for anybody, no matter how they could handle themselves.

This being why Pete and Rush quickly wound their way through the bar to the front door and out of it.

Rush was young, fit, and he knew how to take care of business.

Pete had long since passed his days where he could throw down.

Shit, he had to brace in preparation just to stand up from a chair. His knees were bad. His back ached most days. His neck got stiff easily. Even his hips got to hurting on more than the rare occasion. Cold weather seized him right up. He went through ibuprofen like he owned stock in that shit.

The thought of throwing a punch, or catching one, made his stomach curl into itself.

But this was Harlan.

This was Jackie's boy.

So Pete would get trounced to dirt if it came to it.

Rush pushed out the door first, Pete followed, and they both stopped in their tracks right outside.

Barstool was flat on his back on the pavement, and he looked like he was out cold.

One of his crew was bent double, his hand to his face, blood streaming through his fingers, hollering, "You broke my nose, asshole!"

Another was on his knees, both hands clutching his junk, a look on his face no man needed translated.

The last was backing off from Harlan, his hands up.

"Well...shit," Rush whispered.

That said it.

What, it took them half a minute to get out there?

Impressive.

"Banned," Harlan's low, rough voice came, his gaze centered on Hands Up.

"You just earned a lawsuit," Hands Up threatened.

"Got cameras everywhere, man. They caught that genius"—Harlan jerked his head toward the prone man on the pavement—"doing his grab-ass shit in the bar. Caught him refusing to leave when it was made clear he was no longer welcome in this establishment. Caught him shoving me and winding up to land a blow. Out here, caught him doing the same, then that professor"—an additional jerk of the head to the one bleeding—"jumped on my back." Another jerk in the other direction. "That one tried to pile on. Now, you tell me, what judge is gonna see some assclown grab a woman's ass, refuse to leave when asked, all four of you throwing down against one guy,

and give you that first dime for me protecting myself and the women in the bar, something I'm employed, in part, to do?"

Before Hands Up could speak, Harlan kept at him.

"None of 'em. Trust me on this, I been doin' it for a while. Now gather your troops and get gone. Don't come back either. Lifetime ban."

Hands Up was pulling Nuts Busted straight and talking trash. "Was a shit bar anyway."

"Good you won't miss it," Harlan muttered.

Hands Up, Nosebleed and Nuts Busted dragged Barstool, who was regaining consciousness, to his feet, at the same time they glared at Harlan. Pete noticed their attention often bounced to Rush, who was standing not near, but not far, from Harlan's back.

They ignored Pete. Then again, even he had to admit he wasn't much of a threat.

Harlan didn't move, nor did Rush or Pete as they watched the four men make their way to an SUV.

They still didn't move as the vehicle drove out of the parking lot.

Once it exited the lot, Harlan turned to them.

He glanced at Rush, but his focus settled on Big Petey.

"If I wanted in, I'd have hit the Compound, man."

"You ride," Pete replied.

Harlan's wide shoulders went up and down. "Lotta men ride bikes. That don't mean they got patches."

True.

But this was Jackie's boy.

"It's time," Pete replied.

Harlan shook his head. "I'm not a joiner."

"Joker isn't either, but he's a brother. Snapper, the same," Pete told him. "It isn't about joining, son. It's about family."

Harlan had a mess of blond-brown hair and a full, thick beard that couldn't decide if it wanted to be blond or brown, and there was even some black vying for space.

Pete could still see his lips thin in that mass of whiskers at the mention of family.

Pete was too old for this shit.

And he was tired.

He'd survived two wars with his Club. They'd lost men, to both death and dishonor. They'd put their asses on the line. They'd seen their women in danger.

Personally, he'd watched his only child, his beautiful daughter, waste away from cancer.

But he had to do this. He had to find the energy for it.

This had to happen.

For Harlan.

For Jackie.

Therefore, Pete pulled out the big guns.

"She'd want you with us, Harlan," he said quietly. "You know that. You know it, son. I heard her say it myself."

It was all about direct eye contact, until Pete said that.

When those words came out, Harlan looked away.

And Pete knew he was right.

He also knew Jackie died wanting that for her boy. She wanted that purpose, that solidness, that brotherhood for her only child.

And she died without him having it.

Rush entered the discussion.

"Listen, this decision doesn't need to be made now. We're havin' a get-together Saturday. It starts at one o'clock. Come whenever. It's FFO. That way, you'll get a feel of us. Be able to make an informed decision."

And we'll get a feel for you, he did not say, but Pete knew that was a part of it.

Rush was too young to know.

Tack knew. Hound. Hop. Dog. Brick. High. Arlo. Boz.

They all knew.

Rush didn't know.

Pete had told him, but he didn't *know*.

Harlan already was one of them.

The tightness in Pete's chest relaxed a hint when Harlan asked, "What's FFO?"

"Friends and family only," Rush answered.

Now it was direct eye contact with Rush. A lot of it. And it lasted awhile.

Finally, Harlan said, "We'll see."

Both he and Rush knew that was as good as they were going to get.

They left it at that and walked to their bikes.

They'd see on Saturday.

And on Pete's part, he'd hope.

And that hope was all for Jackie.

* * * * *

Diana

Tucson, Arizona

Several years earlier from Big Petey and Rush's visit to the bar...

Was this happening?

Was this crap really, freaking *happening*?

I pushed. I shoved. I bit. I scratched.

And I shouted.

Had everyone gone *deaf*?

It was late, but a woman shouting didn't wake at least one person up?

Not to mention, we were in a college dorm. Half the occupants didn't get to sleep until early morning hours, if they slept at all.

But no one came.

And this was happening.

I could not let it happen.

The problem was, the longer it went on, the more I felt like I was slipping into a haze. The disbelief was retreating, the fear was increasing, he was so obviously stronger than me, the hope was fading that I'd be able to get away, and for some shit reason, my mind was taking this opportunity to shut down.

Suddenly, though, I got my opening and did not hesitate to haul up my knee as hard as I could, and I slammed his balls into his pelvis.

He grunted, moaned, rolled off me, grabbing his crotch, and I immediately rolled the other way, off the narrow twin bed in my dorm room where he'd forced me.

Once I got steady on my feet, I realized how hard I was breathing. I could actually feel my heart pounding in my chest, my skin tingling with the rush of adrenaline and fear.

And, thinking of nothing but being absolutely certain he was incapacitated, I punched him in his dick with all the power I could muster.

It was a cheap shot in a vulnerable area, but for heaven's sake, the guy was trying to rape me.

His groan shared agony as he curled into a fetal ball.

I ran out the door, down the hall and to the RA's door.

I hammered on it as my heart continued to hammer in my chest and my breath came out in explosive bursts.

She opened it and blinked at me.

Of course, most of the dorm was probably awake, but this woman had been sleeping.

"Did you not hear me shouting?" I demanded. "My study date just tried to rape me!"

Her face went pale, and suffice it to say, my adrenaline was still flowing, I was freaking out, pissed, scared, shocked, and still, I saw the myriad of emotions drift through her expression.

Surprise. Concern. Anger. But also hassle.

This was going to be a hassle for her.

Seriously?

"Um...now's the time when you call the campus police," I informed her.

"Right," she mumbled. "Come in."

I walked in.

I sat on the side of her bed.

That was when I started shaking.

Bad shakes.

Cataclysmic.

Dang.

I'd never been sexually assaulted.

I hoped I never was again.

It wasn't as bad as it could be, but it was still awful.

Terrifying.

I knew, sitting there, it would change my life forever.

What I did not know was that it definitely would.

But in ways I'd never imagine.

* * * * *

Harlan

Denver, Colorado

Several years later from Diana's attack...

Saturday

Harlan sat away from the crowd in a white resin chair in the forecourt behind Ride, the auto supply store, and in front of the other part of Ride, the custom car and bike garage that sat at the back of Chaos Motorcycle Club's property.

He was on Chaos.

Again.

Though, this was the first time in more than a decade.

No.

More than two.

Harlan didn't want to like what that resin chair said.

But he liked it.

It was the kind you bought for twenty bucks (if that) at Walmart.

These men, with their businesses (they had auto supply stores all over Colorado) were raking it in. Their builds from the garage were so phenomenal, they'd had magazine articles written about them.

His mom had collected every magazine, saved special in little plastic sleeves.

So now, he had them.

But that chair was not only cheap, it was bought in bulk (because there were a lot of them scattered around). They were nicked and scraped and obviously had been there awhile.

No one bothered to replace them.

No airs, no graces.

White resin chairs. A man at a huge-ass grill that was far from brand-new (and that grill had seen years of action), frying up burgers, brats and hotdogs. Potluck dishes all over a table. So much food, double the FFOs could show at this shindig and walk away stuffed. Kegs in barrels filled with ice. Massive coolers with bottles of beer, pop and water sticking out. Music playing. It was metal, it was loud, but it wasn't so loud you couldn't talk and listen. Kids running around everywhere.

Lots of kids.

Everywhere.

And women.

It was the women that shook him.

There were some in expensive clothes that even he could clock as pricey (though they were expensive in a casual way), wearing high-wedge sandals on their feet (that were also costly ...and casual). There were others who were born old ladies and wore that proudly with their jeans and Harley tees and silver jewelry.

Christ, one of them had a cute dress on, a mass of honey blonde ringlets and looked like a goddamn cheerleader.

All of them mingled together, laughing with each other, gabbing with heads bent close, a clear sisterhood among the brotherhood.

Harlan was really young the last time he was here, and his mother was desperate. He didn't remember much, except he felt powerless because his mom was in a situation he couldn't help her with.

He also remembered those men treated her differently than practically anybody.

She'd been unsafe.

They'd made her safe.

His gaze drifted to Tack Allen then to Hopper Kincaid, and finally to Hound Ironside.

Yeah.

With Big Petey, they'd made her safe.

He still felt the change from then to now.

This was what Pete said it was. It was what his ma told him Tack was building.

It was family.

He heard a chair scrape and looked to his side to see Rush, Tack Allen's son—and his heir, since Rush was now president of the Club, a position Tack used to hold—was dragging another beat-up white chair to Harlan.

Once he got it where he wanted it, Rush sat in it and slouched, testing that old chair's viability in a way that Harlan, who had to have at least fifty pounds on the guy, would never consider doing. Rush took a drag off his bottle of brew and kept his Oakley sunglasses aimed to the forecourt.

“You gettin’ it?” Rush asked.

“Hard not to,” Harlan answered.

“No one has to know,” Rush assured him.

It was a laid-back day. Sunny. Autumn was coming in, but the weather was still great. He'd had a brat and a burger and some of the best homemade potato salad he'd ever tasted. And these were clearly good people.

He didn't want to get pissed.

“Not ashamed of it,” he stated tightly. “Ma wasn’t either.”

Rush looked to him and repeated, “No one has to know.”

He got it then.

If he joined, he'd be in the brotherhood, but that didn't mean they owned him. That didn't mean they got every piece of him. That didn't mean he owed them dick.

He came as he came. He gave what he gave. And both were his choice.

Harlan had to admit he was surprised about that.

Especially coming from Rush.

“So how does that work, considering what I know of this business, you join up, it’s all in for life?” he asked.

“You do your time as a prospect,” Rush explained. “Warning, it’s gonna be shit. It’s not about hazing. It’s about duty. Loyalty. Commitment. The brothers decide you’ve done enough time, we

patch you in. Through this, and after you earn your patch, you work the store or the shop. You get paid like any brother, a percentage of the monthly take. Except it's less as a recruit. You patch in, you get what we all get."

More surprise.

"Equal?"

"No one is above anyone else in the Club, Harlan."

"No matter the time they got in?"

Rush shook his head. "No matter anything, outside your status as recruit or patched-in brother."

"And that's it?"

A smile curved Rush Allen's lips. "You haven't been a recruit. It sucks bein' at the beck and call of a bunch of assholes who might be in the mood to bust your balls."

That did not sound fun.

"You do it?"

Rush jerked up his chin. "Everyone does it. Even a legacy, like you."

That surprised him too.

It also cut him.

He took his own drag from his beer, looked away and said, "Nah, man. I'm not legacy."

"I think Pete, Dad, Hop, High, Hound, Arlo and Boz would disagree."

"They were good to her," Harlan muttered.

"We're good to a lot of people, man. You decide to let me sponsor you, find out for yourself."

Harlan tipped his head toward the forecourt. "You gotta know, life I've lived, that seems too good to be true."

"What you should know is that Big Petey shared the essentials, nothing else, so I don't know," Rush told him. "That's yours to give or keep to yourself."

Harlan found that interesting.

Rush kept on. "It isn't like we don't have rules, we just don't have many of them. We also have structure. There's a hierarchy. It isn't about lording over anyone. It's about keeping balance and order. This is a democracy. Every man with a patch has a vote that's as equal as everything

else. But prospects have a voice, and we all got ears, so they might not have a vote, but they're heard."

Harlan nodded that Rush was also heard, and Rush kept at it.

"Straight up, no drugs. Weed, okay. That's legal. Other shit, that's a problem. You do you, but if you get a woman and you do her dirty, you have kids and you fuck them up, or you mess with the brotherhood, that'll be a problem, and the Club will deal with it. You'll be given the chance to have your say, but you won't have the choice but to abide by the decision of the brothers."

None of this was an issue for Harlan.

Harlan turned back to him. "I like my job."

"I get it. Action."

That wasn't it, but Rush didn't get that.

Not now.

Maybe not ever.

"You join, you learn, we don't just run a store and make kickass cars," Rush informed him.

And again, he was surprised. His ma told him they got out of all that shit.

"Outlaw?" he asked.

Rush's lips curved again.

"Not the bad kind," he said and took another drag from his beer.

Harlan did too.

But this time when he did it, he found he was intrigued.

Beat-up chairs.

Potluck party.

The screeches and giggles of kids mingled with men's and women's laughter and metal.

The "rules" being no drugs and treating your women, kids and brothers right, and that was it.

"Not the bad kind" of outlaw.

Harlan threw back some more beer and settled in.

Because...yeah.

Harlan was intrigued.

Very intrigued.

* * * * *

Diana

Tucson, Arizona

*Several years earlier than Harlan and Rush's conversation...
But also a Saturday.*

The college administrator came out of her office, gave me a look I couldn't decipher, and then said, "Your father wants to have a word with you. You can use my office."

She smiled a tight smile, and I could decipher that.

Nolan Armitage wants to have a word with you, you come in on a weekend to have that word with him. He wants a private word with his daughter, you let him use your office to do it.

As I passed her, I mumbled, "Sorry."

I couldn't stop myself. It was habit. I did it a lot when Dad got involved.

She said nothing and closed the door behind me.

Dad was standing there, and when he had picked me up earlier to bring me here, I knew he wasn't messing around. It was the weekend, and he was in a full three-piece, look-at-me-I'm-*important!*, custom-tailored suit.

"Well, that was costly," he sniped.

I was confused.

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"Taking care of your situation required a donation that was costly."

My...

Situation?

I shook my head. "Dad, I don't—"

"Fortunately, it's early in the semester. They'll be removing you from the class you share with that young man..."

That young man?

Not, *that absolute cretin who attacked my daughter in her dorm room?*

“...you’ll be re-enrolled in it next semester,” Dad went on. “And this situation will be expunged and not reflect on your record...or his. It will be as if it didn’t happen at all.”

My mouth dropped open as my lungs hollowed out, mostly because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Really, Diana,” Dad carried on. “What were you thinking, studying late at night with a young man who made it clear he had a crush on you? Of course he’d read that particular situation a certain way.”

Uh-oh.

Oh no.

Oh crap.

I was going to start crying.

Angry tears.

Very angry ones.

And maybe yelling.

Loudly.

I couldn’t do either. I’d learned that.

Boy, had I learned.

I had to be strong, smart, ambitious, hardworking, busy doing things that mattered, and although tears weren’t verboten, they were discouraged and only accepted in certain circumstances.

Those didn’t include when I butted heads with my dad.

“He’s agreed to steer clear of you,” Dad shared. “I suggest you do the same.”

“Well, yeah, Dad, I’ll do that since he *attacked me*,” I snapped.

“Diana—”

“You’re telling me you didn’t come here to make absolutely certain, at the very least, this predator was expelled from this institution, but also doing what you could to make certain what should happen actually happens, that being he’s arrested and charges are filed. Instead, you smoothed things over *for him*, and *I* have to change my schedule to avoid *him*?!”

“Listen to me,” he said in his well-known and oft-used *I fear you’re too dim to understand, but I’m going to try to explain anyway* voice. “You haven’t had a great deal of experience with men—”

I cut him off again. “I’ve dated a lot, Dad, and none of the guys I’ve dated have wrestled me to a bed and tried to tear my clothes off.”

I’ll hand it to him, when I said that, he flinched.

But he recovered quickly.

“Those were boys in high school,” he retorted. “They were not men.”

Like boys in high school might not have the same inclinations.

Was he crazy?

“I’m a sophomore here,” I reminded him. “And I didn’t do a nun impression my first year.”

“Diana—”

“So what you’re saying is, now that I’m dealing with ‘men,’ I can’t be safe in my own space and instead have to have a mind to how some loser might feel about whether he wants to have sex with me or not. But *he* doesn’t have to have a mind *to me* about whether I want the same, and maybe, you know, use his words to share what he wants and *asks me* instead of attacking me in order to simply take what he wants.”

“It’s the way of the world,” Dad said stonily.

Oh yeah.

I couldn’t believe I was hearing this.

I should believe it. This was my dad. Nolan Armitage. The epitome of the heartless, power-mad, money-hungry, workaholic attorney who found his way to getting what he wanted by any means necessary, and what he wanted, obviously, was power and money. All other things—his daughter, his wives (yes, plural, though not at the same time)—didn’t factor.

Not to mention, he was the man who ground my mother to dust.

But still, I couldn’t believe it.

I thought I’d learned how to deal. I thought I’d built appropriate walls that would keep the pain at bay. I didn’t think he had the capacity to hurt me anymore.

Every day you learned new things, though, and today, this was my lesson.

And it hurt like hell.

“Do you have any clue how terrified I was?” I whispered.

He softened, slightly.

But not enough. Not near enough.

He proved that with what he said next.

“You need to have a mind to keeping yourself safe.”

“I *was* safe. In my dorm room. With people right next door on both sides and across the hall. On a study date with some guy I barely know, so obviously, I don’t want him ripping my clothes off.”

“You barely know him, and you let him into your room?”

“I’m not on trial here, *Dad*,” I bit out. “Save the courtroom machinations for re-traumatizing assault victims your rich clients pay you to get off.”

Dad’s face got hard. “That was unnecessarily nasty.”

I stared at him.

He scowled at me.

He honestly didn’t see what was happening here, what had happened to me, *his daughter*, and what he was doing to me, *his daughter*.

He didn’t freaking *see it*.

But I did.

Oh, yeah, I so totally did.

Crystal freaking clear.

I shouldn’t have wasted time building walls.

I should have used that time to form an escape plan.

“I’m done,” I stated.

Dad nodded. “Yes, it’s done. We’ll have an early dinner and then I’ll head back to Phoenix.”

“No, I mean, I’m *done*.”

His brows drew down. “With what?”

“You.” I swung an arm out in front of me. “This. All of it.”

He released a heavy sigh. “Please make sense, Diana. It was kind Ms. Bainbridge allowed us to use her office, but we can’t stay in it all day.”

“I’m dropping out of college.”

An angry flush started up his neck.

“You are not,” he stated flatly.

“You’re paying for it, and I want nothing more from you, so until I can pay for it, I’m out. I’m out at home too. I’ll move in with Gram and Gramps.”

His lip curled with distaste. “Now is not the time to throw a tantrum, Diana.”

At his words, a sudden calm stole over me.

No, not a calm, a chill. But I welcomed it completely.

“I’m not five, I’m nineteen,” I reminded him. “I’m officially an adult. I can vote. I can serve my country. So please don’t mistake me. I’m not throwing a tantrum. I’m making a decision and carrying it through.”

“This is ridiculous. You’ve had something unpleasant happen to you and you’re being overly emotional.”

“I can assure you with one hundred percent accuracy, until you’ve experienced your own sexual assault, you cannot make that first judgement about the level of emotion of a person who’s experienced one. I can also share what happened to me wasn’t *unpleasant*. It was terrifying. It was shocking. It was *unconscionable*. And it was *felonious*. You are a student of the law, but more, you’re *my father*, and you making it easy for that asshole to get away with what he did to me, which might mean he’ll do it to someone else, is utterly unthinkable.”

“A lady doesn’t curse.”

Oh my God!

That was what he focused on in all I said?

“Yeah?” I asked.

“It’s *yes...and yes*, you know that, as I’ve told you repeatedly I do not accept that kind of language from my daughter.”

“Well, hear this, Dad. I’m not a lady. I’m a woman, and I can talk however the fuck I want. So fuck you, Dad.” I leaned toward his stunned straight body and bit, “*Fuck you.*”

With that, I walked out of Ms. Bainbridge’s office.

She was standing outside it. Her eyes came immediately to me and the softness and concern in them almost blew it for me.

“Thanks,” I muttered and got the heck out of there.

I'd fall apart somewhere else.

Not here.

Not now.

Not with him close.

Later.

I'd give myself that, but not much of it, because I'd need to put myself back together, build myself up and stay strong so he didn't grind me to dust too.

This was right.

This was good.

I needed an education. I needed to think about my future.

What I did not need was to owe that man anything.

Some might think it crazy, or even stupid, but they'd be wrong.

This was the smartest thing I'd ever done in my life.

* * * * *

Harlan

Denver, Colorado

Present day...

Rush had been wrong.

Being a prospect for the Chaos MC wasn't that tough of a gig.

Hugger and his ma had some rough times, more lean ones, some scary ones, so he'd been cooking and cleaning and helping his ma at the laundromat since he was in single digits. He got his first job, getting paid under the table, when he was eleven.

In his life, he'd lugger more kegs than he cared to count, cleaned up puke and blood, took punches, meted them out, got talked down to, taken for granted, screwed over.

Pulling a beer from a tap for a brother at his demand and driving home drunk biker bunnies was not a hardship.

Sure, there was tougher shit than that to do, a lot tougher, but it was shit that had to get done.

Hugger had learned in his life, if something had to get done, just do it. Don't waste your time trying to figure out how to con someone else into doing it or assessing the easiest way to get it done. Just get stuck in and do the job right.

Then move on.

He worked out his time as prospect, got paid for it (which, seriously, made it just like a kind of shitty job), then got patched in, and now he got paid a helluva lot more, which was not shitty at all.

And the brotherhood was good.

They were all like those beat-up chairs he'd had to stack more than once when he was a recruit.

They were all a lot like him.

Nicked. Scraped. Worn. But still standing and doing their jobs.

Those jobs were, as he'd noted over the years he'd spent with them, being good husbands, good fathers, good brothers and keeping the businesses strong and thriving, mostly so they could keep their families the same.

That was it.

There was other stuff they got into, but it was up to you if you wanted to get involved.

Hugger had signed on to that right away.

He suspected they all knew who he was, of a sort. Definitely the older brothers did.

But no one got up in his shit. No one pressed for more than he wanted to give. No one did anything but let him be who he was.

Though, they might give him crap about it, like making his Club name Hugger because he wasn't a big fan of being touched, unless he was having sex with a woman. But after, he was not a cuddle guy. If she stayed the night, she had her side of the bed, and he had his, and if she tried to encroach, he put her back where she should be. If she kept at it, he was out the door, or she was.

He didn't give a lot of headspace to trying to understand that. It was obvious.

He and his ma were a team of two.

The end.

His ma died, he was one, and he was down with that, not on the lookout to let anyone in.

Until he got Chaos.

But the way they were, no pressure, hands off, he was down with that too.

He headed through the tatty, lived-in bar area of the Compound, a place where he felt at home the minute he'd first re-entered it, and that had nothing to do with the fact he'd been there before, to the brother's meeting room.

He'd been called in.

He walked through the door to the meet room and was surprised, though also not, when Rush and Big Petey were the only ones sitting at the big table with the Chaos flag enshrined under a Plexiglas top.

Rush, because Rush was the president, and he was involved in everything the Club did.

Pete, because Pete had been trying to fashion himself as some kind of dad-like dude to Hugger since Hugger signed on to recruit.

Hugger didn't have a problem with this. Pete was a good man.

But he didn't encourage it.

This wasn't about Club family dynamics.

This was something else.

Not many of the brothers weren't in to do what needed to get done when the Resurrection MC, another Denver club (also known as the Angels of Vengeance, a name they earned in a number of ways, they were further known as the Angels of Death, and the same applied), came calling for assistance with their vigilante missions.

There was a lot of history there, it was tied up with Chaos, he'd learned it all as prospect, and he was in two minds about Resurrection.

What they did that forced them on the never-ending path to seek redemption was something he could never forgive. It didn't happen to him, and it was well before his time.

Still, he could, and would, never forgive them doing something that entirely fucked up.

But there was no doubt every one of those men was on that never-ending path, and not a one of them would ever stray from it.

So there was that.

He did a chin lift to Rush and Pete, got them in return, and took his seat at the table.

He reckoned he knew what this was about.

When Rush spoke, he found he wasn't wrong.

"That situation down in Phoenix needs some attention. I talked with Beck. He's sending down Muzzle and Eightball. They didn't ask for our assistance, but I'm not feeling the digging that's getting done by that particular player in the Valley of the Sun. Chaos history that needs to stay buried is getting dredged up. I don't know what he's got up his ass about us and Resurrection, but we have links, and he's making them. I want one of ours down there too."

"I'm in," Hugger said straightaway.

Beck was president of Resurrection, also known by his club name, Washington, or Wash. Muzzle and Eight were brothers in that crew.

Rush and Pete shared a glance.

It was Pete who spoke next.

"This guy you'll be looking into is some serious shit."

Hugger nodded. "Imran Babić. Bosnian gangster. Has his finger in every pie he can shove it into, as long as it's unlawful. Also, certifiable. Case in point, he played with the president of the Aces High MC's old lady."

"You prove you listen good, but you've already proved that," Pete replied. "But recently, shit has gone south for this guy."

"No surprise. He lives south, and I don't mean Arizona," Hugger returned.

"He's recently been arrested and made bail, after a brutal rape," Rush said.

Hugger sat perfectly still.

"She's messed up. But she pressed charges," Rush continued. "It's making him vulnerable. The kind of vulnerable he'll pull out all the stops to do something about."

Hugger's voice was ragged when he forced out, "She got protection?"

"That's part of what Muzz, Eight and you will be doing."

Oh yeah.

He was down with this.

"I'm coming with," Big Petey stated.

Hugger kept his mouth shut about Pete being involved, but he didn't like it.

The man was not young, for one.

And he was not well, for another.

Someone gave you no shit, no pressure, let you be who you were and always took your back, you returned that.

So Pete not reaching out about the way he was losing weight, slowing down, and sometimes seemed hazy meant they all had to lock down their concern and let him do it like he wanted to do it.

But Hugger knew he wasn't the only brother who was worried.

So it was Rush and Hugger who exchanged a glance after Pete spoke those words, but other than that, they didn't open their traps.

At least, not about that.

"There's a slight hitch in that plan," Rush went on.

"Yeah?" Hugger prompted.

"She's already got protection. A woman named Diana Armitage."

Oh shit.

"A chick?" Hugger asked.

No shade. Women could get the job done.

But one chick against a Bosnian gangster with a massive crew was not good odds.

Rush nodded his confirmation.

"She security? Ex-military? A cop? What?" Hugger asked.

Rush shook his head. "None of that."

This wasn't *oh shit*.

It was *oh fuck*.

And Rush wasn't done.

"She's also Babić's attorney's daughter."

Nope.

Now it was *oh fuck*.

He had no idea why the daughter would wade into this, but he did not sense good things.

Hugger looked to Big Petey.

"When do we leave?"

Pete grinned. "Pack for hot, son. The heat isn't off the Valley yet. Soon's you're ready, we ride."

Hugger stood.

Then he walked out to jump on his bike, go home, pack his saddle bags, and get his ass down to Phoenix.

***Smooth Sailing* will be unleashed February 4, 2025**

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