

WILD LIKE THE WIND

By Kristen Ashley

PROLOGUE

You'll Never Be Alone

Seventeen years ago...

“Do you have anything to say?”

Hound stood in the line with his brothers of the Chaos Motorcycle Club, staring at the man kneeling before them, waiting for him to say something just so they could end this.

There were four drums of fire dancing at the corners of the grouping. Outside of the moon, that fire was the only thing lighting the clearing. It danced on the man in front of them and on the pine trees surrounding him.

There was nothing but nature out there for miles all around.

And no sound but the fire crackling and the men who were talking.

“Go fuck yourself,” the man on his knees spat, literally. The words coming out of his mouth included spittle that Hound could see, even by firelight, was tinted with blood.

His face was a mangled mess because he'd been held with his arms behind his back while each brother took a one-two punch, every one of them packed with power, all the power they could muster.

And with their motivation, they'd each been able to pack a lot of power.

Hound was the only one who'd snuck in a third punch, right to the kidneys.

It was the first but not the last time the man had chucked up blood.

His eyes were swelling shut, his mouth dripping blood, the flesh on his cheeks opened up.

His condition meant he was listing. On his knees because he was forced there, keeping his position probably because he didn't have the strength to get up.

This wasn't about the beating he'd taken from his ex-brothers.

It was that he'd taken the slice of each brother's blade carved deep through his back.

This was Tack's idea, and Hound and every brother that stood with him supported it.

It was about obliterating their mark on his back that claimed him brother.

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In the rare event a man renounced the Club, he blacked out the Chaos tattoo inked on his back.

If a man played traitor to the brotherhood, by the brothers' hands that tat would be scorched off.

This man in front of them had not renounced the Club.

He had not simply played traitor to it.

He'd betrayed it in a way none of them would have expected.

A way none of them could allow to go unavenged.

He'd stabbed a brother in the back, figuratively.

But that brother was gone all the same, because the man right there on his knees had ordered the hit.

Therefore he'd taken their blades for two reasons.

An eye for Chaos was not for an eye.

It was for your pound of flesh.

Stab Chaos in the back, that's returned.

And then some.

The man kneeling before Hound and all the brothers of the Chaos MC now had a mangled face and a back that was nothing but opened pulp of bloody flesh.

And very soon he would be what he'd made Black.

Gone.

Hound shifted on his feet, impatient, when their new president, Tack, pushed, "That's all you got to say?"

"Suck my dick," the man on his knees replied.

He was known as Crank.

He'd been their president. Their leader. The man who had sworn to honor his brothers. Respect them above all else.

Protect them, even if it meant giving his life to do it.

And for his own greed and pride, not one fucking thing to do with the brotherhood, he'd brought Black low.

Hound's eyes shifted to Tack as he moved closer to Crank.

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“You were Chaos, we were you,” Tack said quietly.

It took some effort, but Crank hocked up a loogie and spat it at Tack’s boots. It didn’t hit its mark but it said what he wanted to say.

Hound shifted impatiently again, feeling his jaw tighten.

“You were Black, he was you,” Tack continued, speaking low.

Hound felt that in his throat and swallowed hard to wash it away.

“Fuck you,” Crank whispered.

“You ordered your own death by ordering his,” Tack told him something he had to know, but even if they hadn’t made that clear in the proceedings, he knew it before.

What he did could not stand.

Not even out there in the other world, the world not owned and run by Chaos.

But in their world, retribution for what he did was not swift and it had only one end.

“Motherfucker,” Crank hissed. “You killed Black, and you fucking know it.”

Hound growled, his eyes cutting to Tack to see his jaw go hard, which meant his brother took that in.

All the boys started to get restless.

“*Order the fire!*” Hound bellowed.

“You’ve been gagging for the gavel since you were a recruit,” Crank bit off to Tack. “It was you that put Black where he is.”

“We are not what you made us,” Tack replied.

“We’re outlaws,” Crank shot back.

“We are not what you made us,” Tack returned.

Crank swung his torso back and asked sarcastically, “Yeah, right, so I’m gonna walk away from this?”

“No. You. Are. Not,” Tack stated deliberately, his face changing from pensive to hostile. “Because we’re,” he leaned in toward Crank, “*outlaws*. But we’re also,” he leaned farther forward, “*brothers*.” He leaned back and took a step away, ordering, “Get to your feet.”

“You take out a man down on his knees, it’s as pussy as you’re gonna make my Club, so I’ll make that statement for you since you’ll be taking me out on my knees.”

“Face your death on your feet,” Tack urged.

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“Blow me,” Crank clipped.

Tack took a moment to study him.

Then he muttered, “Your call.”

After that, he walked back, taking his place in the line.

The men went from restless to wired.

Tack felt it and didn’t waste any more time. He couldn’t. If someone jumped the gun, this would not be what Tack needed it to be, what the brothers needed it to be.

For Tack, it wasn’t about one man taking the right to vengeance from the others.

For Tack, it was about one man shouldering the burden of the end of a human being, even if that being was a man as lowdown dirty, useless and an absolute waste of space as Crank.

They would do it as one.

They would do it as a band of brothers.

That was who Kane “Tack” Allen was.

That was where he was guiding Chaos.

“Brother Crank,” Tack called out. “You’ve been found guilty of a crime against the brotherhood, the worst of its kind, the betrayal of a brother. Your patch has been stripped. You’ll rot without the mark of Chaos on your back. Your final sentence is execution. You’ve had your chance to speak. You’ve got five seconds to take your feet before you meet your maker.”

In the end, unable to do it on his knees, Crank struggled up to his feet.

“Ready!” Tack shouted.

All the men lifted their guns and pointed them at Crank.

But when Hound took aim, his focus was not on Crank.

He was looking at Crank, but everything he had in him was focused on Tack.

So the minute the first sound from the first letter came out when Tack boomed, “*Fire!*” Hound was already squeezing the trigger.

It was a nanosecond before any of his brothers, all who did the same, pulled theirs.

But Hound knew it was his bullet that was the first that penetrated Crank.

And it did this right through his eye.

This made Hound happy.



Later that night, which was the early hours of the morning, Hound was with Tack when they went to the house. He was one of five men with him—Hop, Boz, Dog, Brick, and Hound. They were all, Hound knew, in consideration for being Tack’s lieutenants.

For Hound, who was young, this consideration was an extreme honor.

Still.

Hound did not want this.

He had another position in the Club, now more than ever.

And he needed to be free to focus on it.

But he went anyway.

He had to.

For him, there was no other choice.

Tack knocked on the door and she didn’t make them wait. She probably hadn’t slept in weeks. But she’d know to be waiting for this.

Because she was Chaos.

When she opened it, Hound felt the sight of her hit him like a punch in the throat.

It wasn’t about her beauty, which was extreme.

A sheet of black hair that glistened like silk. Lush features that stamped plain her American lineage was either native or seriously exotic. Body, long and lean. Tits, firm and high. Ass, round and sweet. Skin, smooth and tanned.

Hound had rounded the Compound years ago in order to dump a spent keg back there and caught Black fucking his then fiancé, now widow, against the back wall. Before he’d backed away silently, he’d seen that beautiful face in orgasm and he’d never forgotten it.

But it was before that when he’d taken the fall for Keely Black.

So now it was not about her beauty, that punch in the throat.

Now it was about the dead in her eyes, the grief carved in her features in a way each brother knew, Hound especially with the attention he’d given her, she’d not put the effort in to smoothing it out.

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She'd met, fallen in love with, married and given two sons to the only man on earth that was good enough for her.

Now he was dead.

And she might be breathing, but she was the same.

"Where are the boys, honey?" Tack murmured.

"Asleep," Keely replied, her unusual, low, smooth voice even on that one word slithering through the air like a ripple of velvet.

She knew the drill and moved out of the way as Tack moved in.

Hop, Boz, Dog, Brick and Hound moved in after her. Each man took time with her, stopping, touching her, pressing lips to her forehead, stubbled cheeks to her smooth one.

Not Hound.

He stopped in front of her and looked down into her dark-brown eyes.

She stared up in his.

I'd take his place if I could, he thought.

But he said nothing.

He just followed his brothers and walked into her living room.

Keely followed him, and after Hound stopped by Brick, Tack spoke.

"It's done."

For a second, Hound didn't know if she heard him.

Then she asked, "It is?"

"It is, darlin'," Tack said gently. "Black has been avenged."

He hadn't, Hound thought. *Not yet. Not fully. But he will be.*

"Now what?" Keely asked, and Hound reckoned he was giving her all of his attention, but at that question he realized he was wrong.

"We—" Tack started.

"I don't care about Chaos," she cut him off.

He felt the men beside him draw in breaths, shuffle their feet uncomfortably, because this wasn't just said about the brotherhood. This was said by Keely, who was an old lady but she was so much a part of Chaos, through Black but also just on her own, she'd loved her place in it so huge, it was also like a punch in the gut.

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But Hound narrowed his eyes at her, taking in every inch of her, his lungs on fire, his palms itching, his need to go to her, draw her near, pull her close, absorb her pain, make it all okay so overwhelming, he felt his energy leaking out of him with the effort it took to contain it.

“What I wanna know is, now what? Now what for me? For my boys?” she asked.

“We’ll take care of you, Keely. Like Black was still with us, until your last breath, Chaos will have your back. You’ll get his cut of everything at the store, the garage. The brothers will—”

“You gonna take out the trash?” she asked.

Yes, Hound thought.

Brick waded in. “If that’s what you need, baby.”

She looked to Brick. “Okay, so who’s gonna make my boys chocolate chip and peanut butter pancakes every Sunday morning?”

I will, Hound thought.

“Keely, darlin’—” Tack began.

“And who’s gonna drag Dutch’s ass outta bed when he’s bein’ a pain. He’s in kindergarten and he hates school so much, I know I’m gonna have a fight on my hands for the next twelve years until he can see the end of it.”

I will, Hound thought.

“We’ll be there for your boys,” Dog said.

It was like Dog didn’t speak.

She kept at them.

“And who’s gonna bring me a shit ton of ibuprofen when I get period cramps so bad it makes me sick to my stomach and I can’t move?” she pushed. “Who’s gonna make up the hot water bottle for me and rub my back until they’re gone? Who’s gonna do that? Tell me, *who?*”

I will, Hound thought.

No one said anything.

But she still wasn’t done.

“And who’s gonna fuck me breathless, make me come so hard I think the world is ending? Who’s gonna give it to me again and again and again, night after night after *night*, just like I like it? *Exactly* like I like it,” she bit out.

I will, Hound thought.

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“Keely, honey—” Hop tried gently.

“It’s not *done*,” she spat, leaning toward Tack, her gorgeous face twisting with an agony no woman should be forced to bear. “It’ll never be *done*.”

“I used the wrong words, darlin’, I’m so sorry,” Tack whispered.

“How *done* is he?” she demanded to know.

“Very done,” Boz answered firmly.

“Who did it?” she asked Boz.

“We all did,” Hop answered.

But her eyes went right to Hound.

And he looked right into them.

She knew.

There was a reason he was called Hound.

It started out as a joke, the guys digging into him about his unusual first name.

But with the hell Crank had thrown them into, it became other things.

Loyalty, one.

Stubbornness, another.

Difficult to rein in, and when he got the scent, impossible to hold back, yet another.

Not giving up and going the extra mile until the job was done, the last.

She was an old lady and she’d been around a long time.

But she was Keely, her heart as open and giving as her mouth was smart. She was Black’s and she was Chaos’s and she loved it like that. She knew every brother down to his soul. Even if they didn’t give her that, she watched, she looked after them in any way she could.

She knew.

Because the first part that made Hound a hound was the most important.

“We’ve lost Black, but you, Dutch and Jagger haven’t lost Chaos,” Tack told her, and she turned her attention to him.

Hound felt his entire frame tighten when the change started coming over her features, and he felt his brothers experience the same as the air in the room went flat.

“I can’t do it,” she said quietly.

“You can,” Tack said firmly.

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“The boys are lost,” she whispered, the agony of a woman who’d lost her man melting into something far more difficult to witness.

The anguish of a mother whose boys lost their father.

“We’ll keep them steady,” Tack vowed.

“I’m—” she cut herself off and swallowed.

“We got you,” Tack said gently. “We’ll always have you. We’ll always be there.”

Keely said nothing, she just stared in Tack’s eyes like she was waiting for him to clap his hands, she’d wake up, and the nightmare she was living would be over and she could rest in the knowledge it was all a bad dream.

Tack didn’t do this because he couldn’t.

So she looked away.

“You want me to get Bev over here?” Boz asked.

Bev was Boz’s old lady, and Keely and her were tight.

It took visible effort but she looked at him. “No. If I’ve gotta go it alone, I gotta learn how to do that.”

That was when Hound spoke.

“You’ll never be alone.”

She turned to him.

“You don’t get it,” she whispered. “He wasn’t the other half of me. He didn’t complete me. He wasn’t my old man. He wasn’t my husband. He wasn’t a dick I fell on. He wasn’t the father of my sons. He was,” her voice suddenly got scratchy, “*my life*. He was my reason to get up every day and *breathe*. He’s gone and losing that, losing him, I’ll always, *always* be alone.”

Hound made no reply because he didn’t have one but also because he again felt like he’d been punched in the throat.

“We’re gonna look after you,” Tack told her, and her gaze went to him. “Please, darlin’, he’d want it this way, so will you let us look after you?”

She tossed her head and the sheet of her hair glistened in the light by her couch that was the only lamp lit.

“He’d want it that way, you’re right. So...yes,” she agreed.

“Let me get Bev over here,” Boz again suggested.

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She looked to him.

Then she nodded.

“Boz, go. Call,” Tack ordered then turned to Hop, Dog, Brick and Hound. “Just go. I’ll stay until Bev gets here.”

Hop, Dog and Brick nodded and moved to Keely.

Hound just moved to the door.

He turned to her and caught her eyes before he walked out.

He had no idea if she read his promise.

But it wouldn’t matter.

He was still going to keep it.



He had her by her hair on her knees.

Her girl was standing, pressing herself against the wall, fear stamped in her features, tears running down her cheeks.

“Am I clear?” Hound asked, leaning over her, twisting his hand in her hair.

“Y-you’re clear, Hound,” she stammered.

“Honest to Christ, if I find I’m not...” He didn’t finish that.

The flash of terror in her eyes said he didn’t need to.

He let her go by yanking her hair and sending her sprawling to her back, her legs bending in an unnatural way not the only reason she let out a cry of pain and surprise.

Without another word, he turned and walked away from the two prostitutes Chaos used to pimp before Tack scraped them clean of that bullshit that none of them, but Chew, who’d renounced the Club before they carried out an execution he did not agree with, wanted to do in the first place.

Hound had no idea how that shit started. He hadn’t been Chaos then.

He just knew Tack had plans to end it.

So he’d become Chaos.

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They were the two prostitutes that informed Crank that Tack was making maneuvers to take over the Club and clean it up.

The two prostitutes that initiated Crank calling a hit on a brother in order to focus their attention on where he wanted them to be.

“Hop, it wasn’t what you think,” the one against the wall called out. “We had no choice. We—”

Hop cut her off. “Crank’s rotting. Think on that, bitch.”

Hound was barely through the door before he heard it slammed.

He looked behind him to see Hop following him.

“If they don’t skip town...” Hound growled, again not finishing it.

“They’ll go,” Hop ground out.

Hound didn’t say another word.

He turned to face forward and kept moving.

He had things to do.



Tack had a hand to his chest and was pushing him back.

“This is not who we are anymore, brother,” he bit out. “We still got work to do to get ourselves clean, but that part died when Crank hit the ground.”

Hound locked his legs and stood solid, staring straight into Tack’s eyes.

“It’ll get done,” Tack told him quietly.

Yeah, Hound thought. *It would.*

Then, quick as a flash, determined, he moved clear of Tack’s hand, advanced swiftly to the man tied to the chair, took hold of his hair, wrenched his head back, yanked his knife from his belt and hesitated not an instant before he drew the blade across his throat, going deep.

Blood spewed. The man’s eyes got huge. His mouth gurgled.

Hound watched it happen with dispassion.

The man in that chair had carried out the hit on Black.

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And now he was going to die like he'd killed Hound's brother. Chaos's man.
Keely's life.

"Fuck yes," High, standing to the side, rumbled.

"The way it should be," Arlo, standing with him, stated.

"Done," Pete, standing behind the man's chair, clipped out.

Hound turned and stopped because Tack was standing right there.

"*Now* that's not who we are anymore, brother," Hound stated.

Then he skirted him and walked out of Chaos's cabin in the foothills.



It was likely she heard his bike.

Whatever the reason, Hound did not stand too long in the middle of the walk up to her back door before that door opened and she stood in it, her hair perfect, her face exhausted, the shapeless nightshirt she wore drooping on her.

He was covered in blood.

He didn't have to say a word.

She stared at him, not in horror, not in fear.

With sorrow.

And not just for her loss.

For where it took Hound.

"Now it's done," he growled.

He heard her whisper from halfway across the yard.

"Hound," was all she said.

"Heal," was all he said to finish.

Then he turned on his boot and walked away.



One month later...

Keely slamming the phone into its cradle repeatedly set all five men at her kitchen table to alert, and all eyes, including Hound's, went from their poker hands to her.

"Yo," Arlo called, and at the word she stopped with the receiver in the cradle, her hand still on it, and stared angrily at the phone.

"All okay, honey bunch?" Pete asked gently.

She took her hand off the phone and whirled.

"So, my parents weren't all fired up I was dating a guy in a motorcycle gang," she began.

Hound felt his jaw get tight at the word "gang." He knew she was saying that shit because her parents thought that shit. He knew she knew better. They were a Club. An outsider might not see much difference. But there was a mountain of it.

"Therefore, needless to say, they weren't fired up about me marrying him and getting knocked up by him...twice," she went on. "So it's not like I'm not in the know that they weren't Graham's biggest fans."

At that, Hound fought a flinch.

They didn't call Black "Black" because it was his last name, which it was.

They called him Black because the man was so far from the darkness, it was fucking hilarious that was his last name.

He was goodness.

He was light.

He was brotherhood.

If there was a disagreement between the brothers, Black waded in and had everyone laughing.

If one of the brother's kids walked into the Compound, faster than snot Black would have them up on his shoulders, horsing around.

They all had their place in the Club, and Black's place had been the glue that held them together in shaky times or in times when those shakes were like earthquakes.

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But it was also because he was their light. The beacon of the brother they all wanted the Club to be. He was about Chaos. He was about Keely. He was about his boys. And nothing on this earth mattered beyond that. Not money. Not respect. Not a thing.

He was not Graham.

It was a solid name and Hound had heard Keely calling him that, but usually in a teasing way. The rest of the time, if she wasn't using a sweet nothing, it was always Black.

She'd dropped the Black since he died, and Hound knew it was another way she wanted to drop the brotherhood.

"So now, essentially," she kept going, "they pretty much feel like I made my bed, I made my boys' beds, and we need to lie in them."

Fucking assholes, Hound thought.

"Whatcha need?" Brick asked softly, and her pissed-off eyes went to him.

"I need my parents to give a shit that my husband got his throat slit," she spat.

Hound, nor any brother, could beat back the flinch at that.

She stomped out.

The men around the table all looked at each other.

"They were always motherfuckers," Dog muttered under his breath. "Remember their wedding. They had sticks rammed so far up their asses it's a wonder they didn't come out their mouths."

Hound remembered that too.

"She's better off without them," Arlo put in. "She's got Chaos, she doesn't need their shit."

He knew that was true. Every man at that table knew that was true.

The problem was, Keely didn't know that was true.

He waited until after he won all his brothers' money, they got pissed and it got late so they were all taking off.

He hung back.

She was at the door.

So was he.

He waited again, this time until she impatiently caught his gaze.

She wanted him gone.

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“Whether you want us or not, you got a family who wants you. You can’t do anything to make that change. Nothing, Keely. We’re yours. Forever.”

With that, he didn’t let her say a word.

Hound gave her what she wanted.

He walked away.



Several months later...

Hound stood at the end of the walk with his arms crossed on his chest, his leather cut on his shoulders beating back the October chill, and watched as Keely headed back down the walk with Dutch and Jagger.

Dutch had demanded that his Halloween costume be mini-biker, and as much as Keely pushed back, he’d have none of it.

And where Dutch went, Jagger followed.

So they were both in jeans, little-man biker boots, white T-shirts, little leather vests that Bev made for them, with bandanas tied around their foreheads.

Dutch’s was red. It was Black’s bandana, he wore it all the time. Now Dutch had it all the time.

Hilariously, Jagger’s was purple. It was Keely’s. She used to wear it all the time too, tied around her neck, wrapped around the top of her skull and tied at the back with her hair flowing out under it. Even wound around her wrist.

Dutch told Jag that real bikers didn’t wear purple, but Jag dug in and purple it was.

Keely made it to Hound and stopped.

“You’re scaring all the neighbors,” she accused.

“Good,” he replied.

Dutch laughed.

Jagger pulled his hand from his mom’s and caught Hound’s.

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Then he tugged on it, grunting and demanding, “Let’s go! Candy!”

Hound allowed himself to be tugged.

Keely walked next to Dutch.

Hound stood at the end of the walk as they all went up to the next house (Jagger racing to the door, Dutch playing it cool).

He did the same at the next house.

And the next.

And the next.



One year and two months later...

Hound moved back up the walk, into the kitchen and saw Keely where he left her, at the kitchen table, practically buried under Christmas paper, bows and ribbons.

“Trash is out,” he grunted.

She looked to him and nodded.

He looked to the doorway that led to the rest of the house then back to her. “Where’s Bev?”

“She has to get ready for her own Christmas,” she told him.

He nodded.

He got that seeing as it was Christmas Eve.

“What more you got to do?” he asked.

She was distracted with wrap and boxes and similar shit, and her eyes came to him.

“Jag’s mini-Flintstone-use-your-feet motorcycle came unassembled.”

“Right,” he grunted again. “Where is it?”

“The box is in the basement.”

He nodded once, turned on his boot and headed to the door in the basement.

He put the little-kid motorcycle together and hauled it up the steps.

She slapped a bow on it and he put it under the tree.

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“You rock, Hound, thanks,” she whispered. “Now go home. And Merry Christmas.”

He nodded again.

“Later.”

Her eyes stayed dead but her gorgeous face got soft. “Later, honey.”

Hound walked out her back door.



Four years later...

Hound did not hurry through the halls of the hospital.

But he didn't take his time.

He hit the nurse's station and grunted, “Black.”

The nurse behind the station stared up at him with big eyes and such was her bullshit judgment about bikers, she didn't have it in her to speak. She just lifted a hand and pointed down a short corridor at the end of which was a number of curtained bays.

Hound walked that way.

When he hit the bays, he looked left and right.

They were three in to the left.

He barely moved into the space when Dutch hit him, wrapping his little kid arms around his hips.

He put a hand to the boy's back.

The doctor or nurse or whoever was working on Jag in the bed looked up at him.

“Can I help you?”

Dutch turned in his hold so Hound's hand was at his chest.

“He's with us,” he said.

Hound wasn't and never would be.

And he absolutely was and always would be.

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Hound forced his eyes from a pale Jag with his pinched face and his yellow tee stained with blood to Keely sitting next to him looking even paler and totally freaked.

Her eyes were glued to Hound.

“What happened?” he asked.

“It’s my fault,” Dutch spoke up, and he looked down at the kid.

Then Hound turned his gaze to his brother and saw the gaping wound tearing up the inside of his thin, kid forearm that the nurse or doctor or whoever he was, was stitching.

He returned his attention to Dutch.

“How’d you do that?” he asked quietly.

“We were fightin’,” Jag put in, his voice usually loud and excited, was weak. “I did wrong.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Keely whispered. “Get you stitched up, it’ll all be okay.”

“We were just messing around,” Dutch muttered.

Hound looked down at him again and his tone was still quiet when he asked, “Tell me how messin’ around got your brother that gash, son.”

“We were just messin’ around then I got mad then Jag got mad then Mom told us to cool it, and she sent me out to the yard and Jag up to his room, but Jag was so mad he went to the back door and slammed his fist on the glass and it went through and he got cut,” Dutch answered, looking beaten. He cast his eyes to his feet. “But I shoulda cooled it before it got to that place. So it’s me did wrong and I know it.”

“What’d you learn from this?” Hound asked.

“Hunh?” Dutch asked back, lifting his head.

“What’d you learn from this?” Hound repeated.

“Uh...I...dunno,” Dutch answered.

Hound looked to Jagger. “What’d you learn from this, Jag?”

“Well, uh...not to hit a window with your fist?” Jagger asked back, uncertain his answer was the right one.

Hound beat back his smile and gave them the knowledge.

“What you learned is that life is gonna pull its own punches so you gotta stand strong to fight those. You don’t waste your energy fightin’ your brother. You *never* fight your brother. Your

brother is gonna be in your corner from now until forever. You might get pissed at him. You might have words. But you don't fight. Are you hearing me?"

"Yes, sir," Jag muttered.

Hound shifted his gaze to Dutch.

"Yes, sir," Dutch mumbled.

He looked at Keely and did not allow the look on her face to penetrate.

"The window?" he asked.

"It's messed up," she told him.

He nodded and looked down again to Dutch. "You're goin' with me. We're fixin' the window." He turned his attention back to Keely. "You got Jag."

She nodded.

He then looked at the doc or nurse or whatever he was. "How many stitches?"

"Probably..." he started, still working, "seventeen, maybe a few more."

Hound grinned at Jag. "Boy, when you get bloody, you do it up big. First battle scar."

Jag grinned back.

He felt that particular comment didn't win a soft, grateful look from Keely, but he didn't look at her to get her pissed.

He wrapped his fingers around Dutch's shoulder and said, "Let's roll."

"Kay, Hound," Dutch muttered.

"Later," he said to Jag, turning to go.

"Later, Hound," Jag replied.

His eyes skipped through Keely. "Later."

"Later."

With that, he and Dutch took off.

When they did, like he always used to do when he was with his Hound but hadn't in a while since he'd reached the age to stop doing it, the situation made him need it, so Dutch found then held Hound's hand.

And seeing as Dutch had reached the age that Hound had lost that from his boy, instead of reminding him it was time for him to think about being the man he was becoming, like he always used to do, Hound let him.

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Three years later...

Using his fist in the collar of his tee, Hound pushed the kid up against the brick wall.

Then he got in his face.

He was the perfect mix of his old man and his momma.

Fourteen and already a heartbreaker.

“Am I gonna have to make another visit?” he asked.

“Piss off, Hound,” Dutch Black bit back.

“Scrappin’ at school. Skippin’ classes. Caught with your hand in the pants of a fifteen-year-old girl. Two months into your freshman year and already suspended twice. This is not Black’s boy. This is not Keely’s son. This is not *you*. Straighten the fuck out,” Hound warned.

“You don’t know dick about who I am,” Dutch returned.

That was a lie and a ticked one at that, and they both knew it.

But Dutch was gearing up to shut Hound out and Hound could not let that happen. Not when he was fourteen and the measure of the man he was going to be was at stake.

And Dutch was already falling down on that, acting out, doing stupid shit, driving his mother around the bend.

Hound needed to sort this shit out...and now.

“Slit the throat of the man who took out your dad,” Hound fired back and saw Dutch’s eyes get large. “Man who ordered his death took my bullet first, through his right eye. Vengeance is not taken lightly. Vengeance is earned and meted out in the way it’s bought. And bottom line, vengeance is carried out in the way the reason it’s deserved demands. I didn’t blink before I fired that shot. I didn’t hesitate before I drew my blade across that throat. And this was because the man who demanded that vengeance was your father. The woman who deserved that vengeance was your mother. And the boys left behind who wouldn’t know the straight-up, solid, steadfast, down-to-his-boots good that was your father, needed it. Black *made you*, kid. He raised you or

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not, not only the goodness of your mother but the man he was means you live, you breathe, you fuckin' *exist* to make them *proud*. Are you hearing me?"

"You...you *killed them*?" Dutch asked.

"Fuck yeah, two proudest goddamn moments of my life," Hound answered.

"Whoa," Dutch muttered.

Hound had nothing to say to that.

"Ev-everybody talks about how fuckin' great he was," Dutch said.

"That's because he was fuckin' great," Hound replied, easing up on his fist in the kid's shirt but not getting out of his space.

"I...Jagger doesn't even remember him."

"But you do."

Dutch stared up at him.

"You do," Hound repeated. "And you know. You know you lighted his world. You know he was prouder of nothin' than him and his woman makin' you."

Dutch's handsome face got ugly.

"He was so proud, why'd he get dead?"

"Because he wanted to live clean and he wanted to do right by his family. He wanted to slide into bed with the woman he loved and not bring filth into it. He wanted to make pancakes for his boys on Sunday and eat 'em with you, tasting nothin' but goodness in his mouth. Because he was all in to fight for that. Because he was willing to die for it. And it's just life that sucks in ways too mammoth to fully comprehend that he was the man among us who did. Not a brother who's got a patch wouldn't have taken his place. Believe that, Dutch, because it's the straight-up, motherfucking truth. And I would have been first in line. And that would not have been for your mother. That wouldn't have been for you boys. That wouldn't have been for Chaos. That would have been *for Black*."

Dutch was searching for some smartass shit to say to that.

But he couldn't find it.

"Stop fuckin' up and drivin' your mother insane," Hound ordered. "She needs you. You're all she's got."

Dutch had something to say to that.

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“I know and that’s too fuckin’ much. I’m fourteen, man, and Jag’s only twelve. We can’t be everything to her.”

“Your dad would not fall down on that job and he was all she needed. Sayin’ that, he would love every goddamn minute of it and woulda killed to have more.”

Dutch looked away, a muscle ticking in a cheek that didn’t even have fuzz on it yet.

“You got him in you,” Hound said quietly. “Be the man he didn’t get the chance to fully be.”

“How do I do that when he’s not here to teach me?” Dutch asked the space at their sides.

“You need a lesson, you find me.”

Dutch looked back to him, misery and hope both fighting in his dark eyes.

“If I haven’t proved it already, it’s you that’s not payin’ attention. I’m there for you, kid, any way you need me.”

“Jag too?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Hound answered.

“Chaos is—”

“Yours,” Hound finished for him. “And it’s you. You grow up, wanna make that official, every man will welcome you. You just want us at your back, you’ll have that until the day each and every one of us stop breathing.”

Something washed through his face before his lips quirked. “She was wet and hot down there, man.”

Hound let him go but again didn’t get out of his space. “You’re growin’ up too fast. Your looks, you’ll get your share of hot, wet pussy. Before he tagged your mother, your old man made an art of gettin’ his share. When it comes your time, and by that I mean you hold your shit for another coupla years, first, you see to them. They won’t be pantin’ for it if you don’t give it good. You need pointers on that, talk to me, Hop, Dog, Tack. And second, condoms. No excuses, no exceptions. You can’t get your hands on ’em, you call me. I’ll make sure you’re supplied.”

Something else came into Dutch’s face.

“People think things about bikers, Hound. I don’t even have a learner’s permit, no way a bike, and still, my dad, Chaos, kids know things and they say shit. Am I supposed to just take that crap?”

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“Fuck no,” Hound replied. “But Jesus, son, you don’t blow your top on school grounds. Assholes need a lesson, you always do it smart and in a way your momma doesn’t feel the pain after you bring it.”

Dutch stared at him a beat before he smiled.

“Workout room on Chaos, your ass is there,” Hound told him. “I go to a gym, I’ll pick you up, take you there too. We’ll spar. Make sure you know what you’re doin’, don’t get surprised and can make your point and know when to stop. We got a deal?”

Dutch nodded. He tried not to do it enthusiastically, but he failed.

“I gotta make another visit to you like this one, it won’t make me happy,” Hound warned.

“But you won’t give up on me,” Dutch stated.

Hound stared at him.

Dutch’s chin moved in a funny way before he made his face hard and he went on, “You won’t give up on me. You won’t disappear on me. Yeah?”

“You got me, kid,” Hound whispered. “Always.”

“You won’t disappear on me.”

“I won’t disappear, Dutch.”

“Never. You won’t go.”

Christ.

He’d pull that blade across that motherfucker’s throat again right then, no question about it.

“Never, son,” he promised.

That thing happened to his chin again before Dutch looked away and drew in a sharp breath through his nose.

“Tomorrow, pick you up at your house, take you to Chaos,” Hound said. “Show you around the weights. After school. Wear shorts, tennis shoes, a loose tank. With me?”

Dutch looked back at him and nodded.

Finally, Hound stepped back.

“Need a ride home?” he asked.

Dutch shook his head. “Gotta go get Jag. He gets outta school after me. I walk him home.”

Hound nodded.

“Then git, kid. Jag wants to come with you tomorrow, call me and let me know. I’ll pick you up in my truck.”

Dutch nodded.

Hound moved toward his bike.

“Hound?” Dutch called.

He stopped and turned back.

“I was five,” Dutch said.

Hound locked his body.

“But I still miss him,” he finished.

“So do I, Dutch,” Hound made himself reply.

Dutch took him in.

Then he turned and ran the other way.



Five years later...

She opened the door, and like usual, since he was always the one to do it unless he was on assignment, Hound stuck out his hand toward Keely, that hand holding the envelope containing the check Cherry had cut for her.

“Your take this month,” he told her.

She took it, her eyes on him. “Thanks, Hound.”

He jerked up his chin, and like always said no more and started to move to turn away.

“And thanks for that jumbo box of condoms you supplied Jag with,” she continued, making Hound turn around and look at her again. “Gave me one less thing to ream his ass about after I walked in on him drilling the head cheerleader on the couch in the living room.”

Christ.

How many times had he told those boys to play it smart when it came to location *and* timing?

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“You want me to stop bein’ their supplier, you’re their mother and I’ll stop. Not my place but I’ll still say, that ain’t smart.”

“Please don’t stop. I don’t need my boys being baby daddy to half the kids in Denver.”

That was a good call.

Hound nodded.

He was about to walk away again when she stopped him.

“Dutch wants his name put forward to recruit.”

His eyes went again to her, his heart squeezed in a good way, but he said nothing.

“You, Hound, I’m tellin’ *you*, don’t allow the boys to let that happen.”

Now that was *not* a good call.

“You know that shit ain’t right,” he said low.

“Don’t let it happen, Hound.”

“He’s got Chaos in his blood.”

“His father’s blood drained out for Chaos.”

“Like I said, he’s got Chaos in his blood.”

She stared hard at him. “I’ll never forgive you if you let it happen.”

“Black would never forgive you if you did shit to stop it.”

He hated it, but after he said that she looked like he’d slapped her.

So he gentled his voice when he said, “That was harsh, but, woman, you still know it was true.”

She lifted up the envelope in her hand and said, “You can take off like you always do but thanks for this, Hound. Big, fat check every month bet makes it a lot easier for you boys to live with what *I* lost.”

And that was just bullshit.

“If you think for one fuckin’ second, Keely, that you were the only one who suffered that blow, it’s time to get your head out of your ass, look around you and see how that shit *really* is.”

Again, she looked like he’d slapped her but he didn’t go gentle because, for fuck’s sake, it had been fourteen years.

They knew she’d never get over it.

But she had to find her way past it.

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“You’re right,” Hound carried on. “We’ve been so damned focused on cushioning the blow for you that in our own ways we all sustained that we haven’t seen the kinda care you really need, and that’s for someone to tell you that you need to stop wallowing in your bullshit and get it straight, woman. You need to stop shovin’ the guilt in our faces that we feel and taste and live every day. And you need to get a fuckin’ life.”

She didn’t look struck by that.

She looked remorseful.

“I shouldn’t...I shouldn’t have...not you. Especially not you. You stepped up. They all did. You all stepped up but mostly...*you*. I shouldn’t have thrown that at you, Hound.”

To leave it at that, he nodded and again turned to walk away.

“Thanks for lookin’ after my boys, Hound,” she called to his back. “With the condoms and with...well, everything.”

This time, he didn’t stop and turn around.

Because he had to. He had to bring her check to her. He had to get his shot at looking at her face. He had to have the mere moments he could get in her space. So he took them. Now especially, with the boys older, with all of them needing him less.

And also because he had to once he got those moments, he got the fuck out of there.

So he just lifted a hand, flicked it out and carried on walking away.



Present day...

“It gives me no joy to say that at least when this asshole takes you out, Hound, you’re not leavin’ anyone who loves you more than the breath they take behind,” Keely shot at him.

He tried to fight it and feared he’d failed at beating back the flinch.

Tack drew her attention to him. “Keely—”

“Do not call me again, Tack,” she demanded.

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His mouth got tight.

She looked to Hound and everything about her changed. She went from pissed and belligerent to sad and defeated.

Seeing that, it killed.

“Be careful,” she whispered to Hound. “Be super fuckin’ careful, Hound. Because you might not have a woman who loves you more than her own breath, but you still got folks who love you. So please, God, be careful.”

With that, she turned, her hair flying, yanked open the door, stalked out, and slammed it behind her.

He felt Tack’s eyes.

He was in control. His face neutral.

But he couldn’t stop looking at the door.

“We done here?” Tack asked, and Hound cut his gaze to his brother.

“Yup,” he answered, pushing away from the wall.

Tack watched him walk around the other end of the table from where Tack was sitting in the meeting room at the Chaos Compound. He waited until Hound’s hand was on the door before he called his name.

Hound looked back at him.

“You know,” he said carefully.

“Know what?” Hound asked.

“You know you don’t go there.”

Hound drew his brows together. “Brother, you call me when you got somewhere to go no one else can go. What the fuck?”

Tack shook his head but did it with his eyes locked to Hound’s.

“You know you don’t go there. She’s Black’s. Dead or alive, she’s Black’s. She can move on. I hope to fuck someday she does. But she can’t move on with Chaos.”

At that, Hound got pissed.

Really pissed.

Because he’d been living that hell for so long, it felt like he’d been born to it.

But his voice was quiet when he replied, “You think I don’t know that shit?”

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“I know you know,” Tack returned. “Just remindin’ you.”

“Don’t need a reminder, brother,” Hound grated out, so done with it, now more than before after the words Keely lashed out with, he landed it on his brother. “Lived with that for years, bein’ in love with a woman I can’t have.”

Without hesitation, after delivering that, he threw open the door and prowled out. When he slammed it, the door shook.

He knew she had a reason to be mad. Things with the Club were again getting extreme.

So extreme, an enemy had actually kidnapped an old lady. His minions putting hands on her.
Hitting her.

She was now safe, but that was not on.

Not *fucking* on.

Because they had no choice, even though she’d drifted further and further from the Club as the years passed, Keely was closest to High’s kids, so when High’s woman, Millie, was taken, Tack called Keely in to get to them and look after them while the boys rolled out.

And since she knew things were again extreme, Keely was pissed.

She had that right. She had reason. More reason than any of them and not just because she lost Black but because, back in the day, her and Millie had been super tight.

When this asshole takes you out, Hound, you’re not leavin’ anyone who loves you more than the breath they take behind.

He knew she was feeling deep feelings.

But that shit was not right.

It was not right.

It fucking *hurt*.

Over the years Hound did his best and didn’t think on it. He lived his life. He had his fun. He covered his Club. He took care of Keely. He looked after the boys.

But fuck him, he’d given himself to a woman who he not only could not have, but who would never have him.

What the fuck was he doing?

He was still tight with her boys. Of all the men, and all the men had kicked in, they were Hound’s.

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And he'd keep it that way, especially since Dutch was ready to approach Chaos, become a recruit. He was twenty-one, closing in on twenty-two. He'd got his mechanic's license, he'd bought his first bike and he got some experience under his belt. He'd also gotten his other lessons from Hound, as well as all the men.

It was his time.

Jag, at nineteen, was going to follow his father, his brother.

Hound knew Keely wouldn't like it.

But this was not his problem.

If she wouldn't mourn him should he go in the battle that never fucking died to keep the Club clean, so be it.

If she didn't know her boys would be lost again if Hound was not around, fuck her.

They might not love him more than breath.

But he'd stepped up for them, and for her, and he didn't ask for any thanks, didn't want any, it wasn't duty, it was his privilege.

But she was right.

He had people who loved him.

Just not her.

She made that clear.

So it was time to move the fuck *on*.

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