

## Twenty-One

**W**e saw the motorcycles in front of the Wigwam a half-block away. There were four of them, and they were parked at the curb right at the front door. The riders had left their helmets strapped to the seats. All the places in front of Cowpokes were taken, so we pulled around to the side and parked.

Junior was ready. It was all I could do to keep up with him as we crossed the street and went inside. You know I'm a smoker, but at first the smoke almost stifled me. At angles where there was artificial light in the background you could see it floating blue-gray all over the room. Then I saw Ben.

The place was a madhouse. The jukebox was playing so loudly it was vibrating the walls and

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everybody was talking at once. We eased on back to a vacant booth and slid in.

“I thought Christine was supposed to be working tonight?” I said.

“That’s what Red told me,” he said.

I was sure Ben had seen us come in, so I didn’t want to rush right out. He and the girls had their hands full. I checked my watch, and it was over five minutes before one of them got to us. Some of the same guys I’d seen when we were here before were here. The light over the pool table was on and two of the cyclists were playing pool. Their movements were slow, careful-like, like they were stoned or had been drinking all day. The other two were sitting on the bench by the wall. A grimy-looking blond woman with her right leg jackknifed stood leaning against the wall. Her face was a little wide, but she was built like an ice skater and would’ve looked pretty good had she been cleaned up.

All five were dressed the same: black leather jackets with zippers all over them, jeans, boots, and those black visor caps they wear when they

take their helmets off. The woman didn't appear to be as loaded as the rest of them. The men were talking loud and laughing like hell.

“Another round back here,” one of the shooters yelled, looking up toward the front. It was obvious he was their leader. He was about six-foot-four, wiry, and had a naturally booming voice. He was an ugly guy—one of those guys with a long bony face, long humped nose, long neck with a prominent Adam's apple, and he had blubber lips. His uneven teeth were bucked so that his mouth was open most of the time. He habitually worked his top teeth with his tongue and closed his mouth, but it wouldn't stay closed for long.

I saw Ben stop what he was doing and stand eyeing them. Then he said something to the barmaid and started putting drinks on a tray. I had a feeling that something was wrong, that the trouble had started before we arrived and we'd missed it.

“There's too much going on over here tonight,” I said to Junior. “Let's get out of here

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and come back some other time.”

He'd picked up on the tension, too. “Relax,” he said. I could see the excitement in his eyes as he kept sitting there, his hand on the table, tapping to the beat of the music. It irked me that he'd put me off like that—I'm supposed to be the boss. I was about to say something when I heard the crash of glass.

I looked around. The cyclist, the one with the booming voice, had apparently tried to shoot his empty bottle into the trash can like a basketball and had missed. He was still in a shooter's pose. Broken glass was scattered all over the floor. He turned his face away, his hand covering his mouth like he was trying to suppress a laugh. He took a couple of quick peeks toward the bar, making silly faces as he did, then took on an innocent look and got ready for his shot. I looked at Ben, but I don't think he'd heard anything.

The barmaid, Freda, I'd heard her called, came with the beer and took their money. As she turned to leave she noticed the broken glass. “Who busted this glass all over the floor?” she

asked the guy.

“How the fock am I supposed to know?” he shouted, and that apparently pissed her off. She headed straight for Ben.

I could see her talking to him, her mouth moving like crazy, nodding toward the guy as she talked.

Suddenly the juke box stopped and every voice in the place died out. The silence was eerie. Ben came around the bar and out through the tables and marched right by our booth. He was no more than three feet from us as he passed. I could see the anger in his dark eyes.

The cyclist seemed unaffected by the silence. His hip was on the edge of the table and he was stretched out to shoot when Ben marched up and plucked the cue ball off the felt.

His head snapped up. “The fock you doin’?” he shouted.

Ben ignored him and stood braced with the cue ball in his hand.

“This is it!” he shouted to them all. “You guys’re cut off! Get your stuff and get the hell

outta here!”

“I said, the fock you doin’?” the guy shouted again.

Ben’s arm was just a blur, like a propeller. I heard a “wop” like bone on bone and the guy dropped straight down as if his legs were rubber. I heard the cue ball rolling on the floor.

“Oh, my God! Stan!” the woman cried. She hurried around the table, dropped to her knees, and cradled Stan’s head in her arms. He looked like he was dead.

“Oh, my God!” she cried again, “Somebody do something! Get me something!”

One of the cyclists pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. She began dabbing at the bloody mass of thinning hair on top of Stan’s head. She shook her head impatiently and handed it back. “Here, go get some water on it! And bring me some paper towels.”

Ben went back up front. Two of the cyclists eased out. The other one returned with the wet handkerchief and paper towels, got down on the floor beside the woman and gave them to her.

The jukebox started again.

Stan's eyes opened and he lay motionless, his head cradled in the woman's arms, as if he was afraid to move. I kept looking for Ben to come back and hurry them up, but he didn't.

They finally got Stan to his feet, helping him at first, and when they came past us he was walking slowly on his own. I heard him cursing under his breath, "Focker's gonna get it! Focker's gonna get it!"

We must've sat another five minutes before I saw the redhead come in. Then I noticed the brothers were here, also. When they'd come in, I don't know, but none of them even looked our way.

The patrons had thinned out now. There were no more than ten in the place. Three more got up and left. Then Ben said something to Red and the brothers, and they left.

"Hey, Freda," I said to her as she passed. "What's going on?"

She stopped like she knew me and was going to talk awhile. "They say that guy Chief hit said

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he was goin' to get his gun and come back. Says he lives around here somewhere. I don't believe it, though."

"You don't?" I said.

"No," she said, but I don't think she had any idea one way or the other.

I looked up front and realized—except for Ben, the two girls, Junior and me, the place was now empty. "Damn!" I said. "Where'd everybody go?"

Freda had missed everything, too. She hurried back up front. Just then the jukebox went silent again and I heard the roar of a motorcycle outside. Freda ran to the window and looked out. "He's out there!" she cried. "I think he's got a gun!" Then both she and Wynona ran around the bar and disappeared through the rear door.

"Damn!" I said to Junior. "We're the only ones left in the place!"

Ben brought a shotgun from under the bar and aimed it toward the alcove. The cyclist came barging through the front door with a revolver in his hand. He had lost his bearings, and he almost

ran into the alcove wall. The revolver was big, silver plated, looked like a .357 magnum I used to own. The guy was bareheaded, and I could only see him from the waist up. He came around the corner, and I heard the “Boom.” It was horrible! In the blink of an eye, his face exploded! It looked like blood and hamburger, and I lost sight of him as he was slammed back against the wall and dropped.

“Good God almighty!” I said to Junior. “Let’s get the hell out of here!” My heart was beating so fast I thought I was going to have another heart attack. I twisted out of my seat, keeping low, and headed for the side room door. Junior was right behind me. We made our way through to the alley, took the back street, circled around two blocks, and came by the back way to get my car.