

The Wolf and the Lion

by

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Chapter 1: The Two Paths to Hell

July 1994

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Two boys, ages 12 and 14, hid in the shadows near a chain-link fence, just outside the yellow cone of a streetlight. It was closer to sunrise than sunset, and the alley, which ran through Saint-Henri like a seam through a grimy patchwork blanket, was dark and still. The backs of each row house were as different from each other as possible. Some were made of brick and covered in graffiti. Others were of decaying wood and crusted paint. Some had ramshackle garages, while others had fenced backyards. In the distance, a dog barked incessantly.

“Arrête de respirer si fort,” the older boy, Raison, snarled to the younger in French. “Stop breathing so hard. You sound like a horse.”

He was an average sized boy, with shaggy brown hair and blue eyes. His cheeks and frame were lean, but his shoulders were broad, and he was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt.

The younger boy, Rage, frowned. “Tu es celui qui est bruyant,” he whispered back. “You’re the loud one.” Dressed in all black and with light brown hair, he was much smaller than his older brother.

“Shut up!” Raison hissed.

They were squatting in the shadows, listening, waiting. Cicadas chirped all around. Raison fumbled in his pants pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Cupping his hand close to his chest, he lit one.

“What the fuck, Raison? You’re gonna smoke now?” Rage gawked.

“Shut up, punk,” Raison said. “Just keep an eye out.”

The boys were huddled together in the shadows. Rage glanced around anxiously.

“Let me hit it,” he said.

“No, you don’t need it,” Raison spat.

“You don’t need it either,” Rage growled back.

“Yeah, I do. I need it for my nerves. You don’t know yet,” Raison dismissed him.

“You better let me hit it, or I can go home right now,” Rage said and started to stand.

“OK! Shit! Here,” Raison said, grabbing his younger brother by the arm and pulling him back down. He passed Rage the cigarette, and they sat smoking for a moment.

“It makes me dizzy,” Rage said, leaning his head between his knees.

“I fucking told you,” Raison snapped, snatching the cigarette from his brother’s hand. “You’re so fucking stupid sometimes.”

“You’re fucking stupid,” Rage lashed out with a punch to Raison’s head, which the taller boy easily dodged.

“Ostie tu m’énerve!” Raison spat. “Fuck, you’re getting on my nerves! Cut the bullshit, and let’s do this.”

“Come on then,” Rage snapped. “You’re the one acting like a scared little pussy.”

“Fuck you,” Raison said, shoving Rage’s head. He extinguished the cigarette with his shoe.

“Stop talking shit and do what I told you. Go to the front and create the diversion. Here, take these.”

Raison handed his little brother the lighter, then he picked up a glass bottle filled with liquid from the ground, a piece of cloth hanging from its neck.

“Remember, go fast and count to 20. When you get to 20, light it, throw it, and run back here as fast as you can. And don’t get it on you or you’ll catch on fire, too. Got it?”

“I’ve got it,” Rage said, reaching out to take the lighter and the Molotov cocktail.

“OK,” Raison said, standing up. He lifted his shirt and retrieved a flathead screwdriver and a hammer from his waistband. Sweat beaded on Raison’s face, and his hands trembled. “Are you ready?”

Holding the firebomb and the lighter, Rage looked up and down the alley, smiling, his eyes twinkling in the streetlight. “I said I was ready.”

“Go!” Raison urged, and Rage darted across the alley to a gap between a chain-link fence and a dilapidated garage. He wriggled his thin ribcage between the galvanized post and the rotting wood, and then he was gone in the darkness between the houses.

“One...two...three...” Raison whispered as he trotted to the fence, placed one hand on the top rail, and climbed over. He cleared it easily, landing gently on the dusty backyard.

He crouched and listened. The yard was silent, and the house ahead dark. He slinked through the shadows toward the rear of the home.

“...eight...nine...ten...” he counted as he carefully placed each foot, avoiding sticks and empty cans. The yard was filled with junked engines, rotting tires, and empty jugs of motor oil. He paused in a puddle of mud, just behind a rusty burn barrel, the smell of charred paper and burned plastic mixing with the stench of wet garbage and gasoline.

“...fourteen...fifteen...sixteen...”

He peaked around the barrel to the driveway next to the home, and there it was, parked next to the house, a 1991 Harley-Davidson Fat Boy. It had a wide gas tank painted glossy black, plenty of chrome, and solid billet wheels. Black saddle bags hung from the rear fender, and a braided leather get back whip over three feet long hung from the throttle grip.

Raison crouched and waited.

“...eighteen ... nineteen...twenty.”

There was a clank and a crash from the front of the house, then a whoosh and a flash of light that spilled out into the neighbor's yards, orange and dancing. Instantly, Raison darted across the dirt and onto the driveway, straight for the motorcycle. As he slid to a stop at the bike, a motion-activated flood light popped on, bathing the yard in halogen rays.

Panicked, using the flathead screwdriver and hammer, Raison went to work on the ignition lock. His jaw clenched rhythmically as he focused on the task. He'd almost defeated the lock just as he heard a man shout from the front yard.

“Que diable se passe-t-il?” the voice boomed. “What the hell is going on?”

Then, “Feu! Feu!” the man shouted. “Fire! Fire!”

Raison flinched at the thunderous bark of a dog from the front yard, and his heart caught in his throat. He heard footsteps thumping rapidly inside the home as occupants scrambled. The orange glow from the front grew brighter, and the scent of burning wood wafted to him.

Then Raison heard a scream, his brother's, first in fear, then in pain. Jolted, Raison dropped the screwdriver, and it clanged against the bike before smacking the concrete and rolling under the Fat Boy's wide frame.

“Merde!” he muttered, then fell to his shaking knees and felt around for the lost tool.

From the front, Rage's cries turned from pain to terror. Raison's heart thudded in his chest, and his arms felt weak. He found the screwdriver and quickly went back to work on the ignition.

“Raison! Aide-moi!” his brother screamed for help over and over.

Raison squinted his eyes and worked as fast as he could until, finally, the lock broke. With the ignition lock defeated, he turned his attention to the fork lock. Placing the tip of the screwdriver exactly right, he smacked it with the hammer until it broke, the loud banging lost in the shouts and barks from the front. With both locks defeated, Raison mounted the bike, kicked up the stand, flipped the run switch, and pushed the start button.

The hefty motorcycle roared to life, exhaust billowing from its exhaust pipes, the powerful V-Twin engine rumbling and shaking his thin frame. Raison kicked the bike into gear, eased off the clutch, and it lurched forward. The tools fell from Raison's grasp, clanking to the concrete as the bike rushed down the driveway toward the front yard mayhem.

Raison skidded the bike to a stop at the front of the house, his eyes bulging in shock. The entire front porch was engulfed in flames. A man was running around frantically dressed in white briefs, dragging a garden hose and yelling about the fire department. When he saw Raison, the man slipped and fell in the grass, staring in surprise. Then realization struck him, and he jumped up in a rage.

Raison looked around. Everywhere was chaos. The flames cast flickering lights and shadows across the small yard, and he could feel the heat and hear the crackle of the growing blaze. He forced himself to focus, to listen, and in a flash, heard his brother crying and begging for help from the shadows.

“Descendez de ma moto!” the furious man shouted, charging at Raison. “Get off my bike!”

Raison cranked the throttle and drove straight at him. Mouth gaping, the man jumped out of the way as Raison barreled across the yard, bumping over stones and a sidewalk as he raced to the sound of his screaming brother.

Rage was on the ground, curled in a ball. His pale face was scrunched in anguish as a huge dog with thick, dark hair like a wolf thrashed about him, growling and whipping its head furiously. The dog's powerful jaws were clamped onto Rage's hand, its feet were dug in, and it was yanking hard at the appendage. Blood ran freely between its yellow teeth.

In the last second, as Raison crossed the yard, he flicked on the headlight. The dog flinched and looked up, but too late. The front tire of the motorcycle struck the hound broadside, sending the beast sliding across the grass. Raison slammed the brakes and slid to a stop. His adrenaline raging, he reached down, grabbed his brother's shirt, and heaved him onto the back of the bike.

"Hold on!" he yelled.

Rage pressed his face onto his brother's back and held tightly to his waist. The dog scampered to its feet, then charged them, a blur of teeth and fury. Raison grabbed the leather whip attached to the right grip and swung it at the dog. The whip's end, weighted with a billiard ball, smacked the dog soundly on the shoulder. It yelped and recoiled away. Raison cranked the throttle and sent a shower of dirt and grass into the air as the bike fishtailed out of the yard and onto the blacktop road. He opened the throttle. The engine howled, and the two brothers took off on the stolen motorcycle, leaving a barking, shouting, blazing inferno behind them.

Block after block passed, and Raison didn't stop. He could feel Rage behind him, leaning against his back, sobbing and shaking. Raison's heart pounded and his eyes stung, but he kept going.

“Stop! Please!” Rage cried, his voice breaking. “Please, Raison, stop!”

Raison pulled the bike to the curb. The front of his jeans were soaked with warm liquid. For a moment, he feared he had wet himself. He touched it. It was blood.

“Ah! Raison! Ah!” his brother bawled behind him, so he jumped off the bike to look. Rage was hunched over his hand, holding it tightly.

“Let me see,” Raison said.

Rage tipped his head back and howled into the night, gripping his arm closely.

“Rage! Let me see it,” Raison demanded, grabbing his brother’s arm firmly.

Rage tried to pull away, but Raison was stronger. Gripping him by the biceps, he yanked Rage’s hand free and held it up to the streetlight.

Only three fingers remained. The hand was split longways into three parts, as if someone had torn it between the fingers and metacarpals. His middle finger was hanging from ripped flesh, and blood was pulsing and streaming from the mangled stump.

Raison ripped his sweatshirt over his head and quickly wrapped his brother’s hand with it. Rage whimpered and pleaded, too hoarse and weak to scream anymore.

“Maman! S’il te plaît, emmène-moi chez maman,” he pleaded, over and over. “Mom! Please, take me to mom.”

“I’m taking you,” Raison assured as he remounted the bike. “Just hold on to me!”

Clenching his teeth, Raison gunned the engine, roaring off into the night, his injured brother behind him, the wind streaking his tears away.

Chapter 2: Buddies

July 2014

Denver, Colorado, USA

A Denver Police Chevrolet Tahoe, white with a blue shield on the door, drove along the freshly poured concrete drive through a pristine suburban development, past newly constructed two-story American castles of brick and vinyl siding, each surrounded by tiny estates of freshly laid sod and shrubs still baring nursery tags. The flowerbeds cooked in the afternoon sun, and the air smelled of mulch and manure. Winding streets of completed homes blended into even newer streets lined with the skeletal frames of homes still under construction. Stick framed structures, some with insulation or house wrap and some with exposed studs, marched into the distance. The yards were bare dirt, and the mud-caked curbs were lined with work trucks and vans with ladders on their roofs. The police Tahoe continued to the end of a cul-de-sac where it stopped at a construction site swarming with workers.

Within seconds of the police cruiser stopping, the sounds of hammering and sawing ceased. The door to the Tahoe opened, and a uniformed Denver police officer stepped out. He was stocky, with a swarthy face and black hair with buzzed sides and a razor part. He wore a black uniform and his patent leather boots glinted in the sun. He looked around under dark sunglasses as he walked up the driveway, past a sawhorse and sacks of concrete. A laborer wearing muddy rubber

boots walked quickly, head down, toward the back of the house. The officer strolled casually up to the gaping front entry where he stopped and shouted inside, “Yo!”

From the shadowy interior appeared an obese, sweaty man with thick glasses, shaggy brown hair, and a belly barely tucked under his T-shirt.

“Afternoon, officer,” the man said, wiping his hands together. “I’m Morty Jones, the superintendent on this site. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Jones, I am Benito Mendez. I was in the area and stopped by to see an old friend. He’s expecting me. Mason?”

“Oh,” Morty said, releasing a chestful of air. “Yeah, uh, no problem. If you want to come inside, I’ll have to ask you to wear a hard hat. Or he can come outside. Your call, boss.”

“Outside is good,” Officer Benito Mendez said. “If you could tell him I’m here, I’d appreciate it.”

Morty waddled back into the partially constructed home. The walls were exposed studs with some wiring and electrical boxes installed, and the floor was bare concrete. He walked through the dining room, down a hallway, and into the main suite. He passed through the roughed-in doorway of the main bathroom and looked up into the rafters.

“Mason! Your cop buddy is out front scaring the shit out of the wetbacks. Fucking shit, like I need this right now. We are already a week behind. Would you get him the fuck out of here so the Mexican roofers can get back to work? Jesus Christ!” Morty blurted. Spit flew and his face turned purple.

Above him, high in the rafters, was perched a tall, wiry man wearing dirty cargo shorts, hiking boots, and a blue bandana as a headband. He was shirtless and had brown hair down to his shoulders and a thick brown beard that hung to his chest. He was tanned and covered in sawdust. A leather tool belt hung about his waist, and he was holding a tape measure. He looked down at Morty through black sunglasses.

“Guatemalan,” Mason said. He reached down and used a ceiling joist like a chin-up bar to lower himself to the floor. “The roofers are all Guatemalan. The plumbers are mostly Mexican, except Javi, who is Venezuelan. And I hate to tell you, but whoever framed this bathroom should have read the plans, because they forgot to account for the skylight.”

“Listen, I don’t care about sky lights. Just get the cop out of here. Me and you are the only two U.S. citizens on this fucking job site.”

Mason dropped his tool belt on the floor and shouldered past the obese supervisor, slapping sawdust off himself as he went. He passed through a hall lined with regularly spaced wooden studs, like ribs lining the gut of some massive whale. At the front of the house, Mason stepped through the opening of the front door and into the sun.

“Mason!” Benito shouted, a grin spreading across his face.

Mason smiled as he crossed the yard. “Benito, you old Devil Dog! What are you up to?”

The two men clasped hands in a firm handshake.

“Just making my rounds,” Benito replied, his eyes scanning the construction site. “Thought I’d swing by and see how you’re holding up in the civilian world.”

Mason chuckled, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. “You know me, staying busy.”

“Bro, it’s weird seeing you work like this. From Delta Force operator to construction worker,”

Benito shook his head and smiled. “Every day I picture us back in Fallujah, especially that night you saved my ass.”

“Yeah, man, that was one hell of a cluster fuck,” Mason agreed. “How’s life on the force?”

Benito’s expression was a mix of pride and weariness. “Thanks, man. Eh, every day is a new adventure, Mason. I can’t complain. All I really know is a uniform and a gun, so it works for me, you know? How about you? Is this working for you?”

Mason didn’t respond immediately. He looked around, back at the house he was working on, then at the many other homes, each on their symmetrical lots, each built precisely to code.

“After seeing all those buildings blown up and leveled overseas, it feels good to build something from the ground up,” he replied.

“I get that, bro,” Benito said, nodding. “Change of subject. So, you know they’re legalizing marijuana in this state, right?”

“Yeah, I saw that,” Mason said. “How does that affect you at your job?”

“Bro, honestly, nobody knows,” Benito replied, hooking his thumbs into his duty belt. “The entire department is like ‘What the hell?’ Where’s your probable cause to search a vehicle if everyone smells like weed? How do you prove DUI? Bro, it’s a mess. But honestly, I don’t care. I say legalize it all. And that’s really why I’m here to see you.”

Mason looked up and cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?” he asked.

“Yeah, bro. Check it out. Not everyone knows this yet, so I wanted to come tell you myself. The chief of police—everybody calls him The Colonel—quit the force to start a new security company specializing in the legal cannabis sector.”

“Really? Why do they call him ‘The Colonel?’” Mason asked.

“Because he was a colonel in the Marine Corps. In fact, he was commander of our regiment during Operation Phantom Fury. Colonel Mack Radford. In fact, I’m leaving the force, too, and joining his new company.”

“Wait, so you served under him in Iraq, then again here on Denver PD, and now you’re leaving the department to work for him in the private sector?”

“What can I say? Let’s be real,” Benito said. “The risk is less, the money is better, and the hours are regular. I am done with overtime, bro. Plus, he’s a good boss. Things have been going pretty good so far, so I figured why not just stick with the winning team?”

“Well, damn. Aren’t you loyal?” Mason said.

“As a dog,” Benito laughed. He looked around, picked up a nail from the street, and flung it into the yard. “I know you say you’re happy here, but The Colonel is offering top pay at this new company. He wants guys with combat experience. Like you, Mason. You’d be perfect. Former Delta Force operator, decorated war hero.”

“Last time I listened to a recruiter,” Mason replied, “I ended up freezing my ass off in the mountains of Afghanistan and getting shot at. A lot. And for not enough money.”

“Ah, man,” Benito brushed him off, “it’s nothing like that. It’s basically armed transport. The dispensaries can’t put their money in the banks because weed isn’t legal federally. So, The Colonel had the idea of collecting the cash from the dispensaries in armored vehicles and storing it himself in a safe house.”

“He wants to start his own bank?” Mason asked.

“Not exactly. More like just a storage vault. Armored transport and safe storage, that’s what he told me. He already has a building figured out and all that. Now he’s looking for drivers and guards, and he wants the best of the best.”

“I’m not licensed to do security work,” Mason said.

“It’s nothing,” said Benito, waving him off again. “It’s just a city license. There’s no state security guard license in Colorado. Piece of cake, bro.”

Mason looked into the distance quietly.

“Look, the reason I came to see you is to tell you that tomorrow, The Colonel is meeting with a bunch of recruits at the gun range. He rented out the entire place, and he wants to see everyone go through drills.”

“I thought you said it wasn’t a shooting kind of job,” Mason objected.

“The Colonel says he can tell all he needs to know about a man by how he shoots. And I bet he’s never seen anyone shoot like you,” Benito replied.

“Eh,” Mason said, waving him off.

“Look,” Benito stepped closer, “at least come and hang out with me. If you want to shoot, then shoot. If not, at least it’ll be cool to be at the range. Don’t tell me you’re going to be out here climbing around in rafters on a Saturday. Come, hang with your homie.”

Mason thought a moment longer. “Sure, man, I’ll come shoot. Just text me the details.”

“Hell, yeah!” Benito said, punching Mason in the arm.

“Damn, chill out. I need that arm today,” Mason said, laughing and pulling away.

“Cool, Mason. I’ve got to take off, but I’m glad you’re coming,” Benito said, reaching out to shake Mason’s hand goodbye.

“It’s good to see you, too, Mendez,” Mason said.

With a toothy smile, Benito strolled back to his cruiser. “You better bring your good eyes because I’ve been practicing. I might be able to out-shoot you.”

“We’ll see,” Mason said, watching his friend leave. Just as Benito opened the driver’s door, Mason called out. “Hey, what’s the name of the new company?”

“Green Zone Defense,” Benito called back.

“Oh, great,” Mason grumbled. “Green Zone, like in Iraq.”

“Yeah, but with less bombs and more bongos,” Benito said, holding his pinched fingers to his lips to mimic smoking a joint.

Mason laughed and waved. He watched his friend drive away, then turned and walked back into the job site.

The gun range was a well-maintained, expansive outdoor facility on the outskirts of Denver. It was bordered by a towering dirt berm designed to absorb bullets. The range was segmented into several lanes, each marked by weathered wooden stands and tables where shooters could prepare their firearms and gear. The parking lot was made of dirt and gravel.

Mason pulled into the lot in his lifted 1986 Ford Bronco in Desert Tan Metallic, a few spots of rust showing around the chrome trim. The air was alive with the sharp reports of gunfire, each shot resonating crisply in the open air.

He opened the tailgate of the Bronco and slid a rigid black rifle case and an olive drab canvas duffle from the rear of the vehicle. He was wearing a worn blue ball cap, a gray T-shirt, and jeans. Black sunglasses covered his face, and the tails of his beard and hair blew in the breeze as he carried his gear into the staging area. As he was checking in with the range master, Benito, who had been engaged in a discussion with a group of fellow officers, spotted him. With a broad smile, he approached Mason, extending his hand.

“Mason! Glad you could make it,” Benito exclaimed, his voice carrying over the noise of the range. He was wearing tan cargo pants and a black Denver Police T-shirt.

Mason returned the handshake firmly. They walked together through the staging area. Men wearing shooting glasses and ear protection were scattered around, about 50 in total. Some were already at stations shooting. Others were loading magazines or checking their weapons.

“Can’t miss a range day,” Mason replied.

“Oh, yeah? You still keep your skills sharp?” Benito asked.

“I do what I can,” Mason said, setting his gear bags on an open table.

“Good deal,” Benito said. “Everybody out here today can shoot. You’ve got Denver PD, sheriff’s department, SWAT, everybody. I see one former SEAL right now.”

Glancing at Mason’s gear bags, Benito asked, “What toys did you bring?”

“Oh, nothing major,” Mason said, clicking open the clasps on the rifle case. He lifted the case’s lid, revealing a short-barreled FN 15 semiautomatic rifle. It had a three-point sling, vertical foregrip, and Trijicon holographic site. It was scratched, and in many areas, the black finish was worn to the shiny metal underneath.

“Nice, old faithful” Benito said. “The instructors have some different drills planned. I’m not really sure. I know there will be pistol and carbine drills, but they’re talking about some vehicle work, too.”

Mason unzipped his canvas gear bag and pulled out a tactical belt set up with a holster, pouches for extra magazines, and other gadgets. He pulled a SIG Sauer P226 MK25 pistol from the bag

and racked the slide to verify the chamber was empty. He slid the pistol into the holster and dug around for magazines.

“I’ll be ready,” Mason said.

“Cool, I’ll let you do your thing,” Benito said. “I’m glad you made it, bro.”

His friend walked away, and Mason continued preparing himself and his gear. Once his rifle, pistol, and magazines were ready, he retrieved a pair of shooting glasses and protective ear muffs from the bag, then stood waiting for instructions.

Just then, a man with a blonde flattop and wrap-around sunglasses wearing black cargo pants and a black T-shirt with “SWAT” across the front called for everyone’s attention. The chatter died down.

“Listen up! Let me get all eyes on me, please. My name is Sergeant Matt Anderson. I am a training officer with Denver PD, and I will be the officer in charge today. We are still getting a few things squared away, and we will get started shortly. The main thing I want to stress right now is safety. Let’s keep those weapons clear and on safe when not on the firing line, OK? Get geared up. In a few minutes, we’re going to divide you into groups and assign team leaders to walk you through the drills. OK, guys?”

A few minutes later, five team leaders wearing matching black SWAT T-shirts spread out in front of the shooting lanes, and once again, Matt Anderson addressed the crowd.

“Listen for your names. When I call out a team leader’s name, they will raise their hand. If I call your name after that, line up on the leader with their hand raised. Here we go.”

Matt Anderson read down the list, and the men divided themselves into five groups of ten.

Mason found himself on Charlie Team, shooting third after Alpha and Bravo. The team leaders called out drills and provided instructions to their teams.

Just as Alpha Team took their stations to start the pistol drills, Mason noticed a group of three men standing to one side who were not dressed to shoot. Two of them were older and one younger, and all three wore civilian clothing. The two older men had pistols in leather holsters on their hips. One was short but powerfully built with a salt-and-pepper flat top. He wore blue slacks and a blazer. The other older man was tall, balding, and dressed like a cowboy in jeans and a straw cowboy hat. The younger man, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, looked a bit like the first man with the salt-and-pepper Marine haircut, but about half the age. All three wore dark sunglasses and watched the proceedings intently, occasionally chatting amongst themselves.

When it was Charlie Team's turn, Mason took his position at the firing line and aligned his stance. He took a few deep breaths and focused his mind. The team leader, a large, baby-faced man with a barrel chest, stood behind them, a whistle hanging from his neck. The other participants took their places at the shooting line, each awaiting instructions for the drill.

"First drill, rapid engagement!" called out the team leader, his voice cutting through the air.

"Draw. Present. Take two shots per target, hit all three targets as quickly as possible! On my mark!"

Mason's stance tightened. The whistle blew and instantly, Mason's pistol was up and firing. His movements were a blur — two shots rang out, hitting the first target dead center. Without

hesitation, he pivoted, firing two more shots at the second target, and then swiftly to the third. The rhythm of his shots was precise, and the steel disks rang out like dinner bells six times.

“Transition drill!” the team leader barked next. “Engage right, center, left—two shots each, move!”

Mason’s transitions were fluid, his body turning smoothly as he engaged each target in succession. His shots were deliberate, each one finding its mark with a mechanical consistency.

The team leader then upped the challenge. “Movement drill! Advance towards targets, engage with two shots each as you move. Go!”

Mason advanced, his steps measured and controlled. He fired as he moved, keeping a steady aim. The targets had no chance against his unerring precision, even in motion. Then, he repeated the drill in reverse, moving backward with the same level of accuracy and control.

As the drills concluded, the team leader blew the whistle, signaling the end of the session. The other participants were visibly impressed, some shaking their heads in disbelief at Mason’s display of shooting prowess.

After completion of the pistol drills, the Charlie Team leader waved for the team to move down to the rifle section of the range. Mason, along with the others, prepared for the next phase of their evaluation. He carried his FN 15, a familiar weight settling comfortably into his grasp.

The team leader called out the first drill. “Multiple target engagement! Start close, move to long range. Two shots each!”

Mason's stance shifted as he raised the carbine, his eyes focusing intently through the sight. The first burst of fire from his FN 15 was crisp and precise, the rounds punctuating the air as they hit the set of close-range targets dead center. Without missing a beat, Mason advanced to the next position, engaging the longer-range targets with the same pinpoint accuracy.

“Transition drill!” the team leader shouted next. “Engage, switch shoulders, move to the next target!”

Mason fluidly transitioned the carbine from one shoulder to the other, a maneuver that allowed him to keep a steady line of sight and fire as he moved between targets. He flowed through the course, adapting to different shooting positions with ease. Standing, kneeling, through doorways, windows, partially obscured targets, reactive targets—anything the range offered—Mason peppered with bullets easily.

Interspersed between the bursts of fire were Mason's swift and seamless magazine changes. He ejected each spent magazine and loaded a fresh one with an economy of motion that was almost balletic. While he was shooting, some of the other men stopped to watch.

As the carbine drills ended, the baby-faced team leader nodded approvingly at Mason's performance. “Outstanding work, Mason! You've done this before.”

The final drill was shooting from a stationary vehicle. Mason positioned himself in the driver's seat of a parked Chevrolet Suburban, his weapon ready. At the signal, he rolled down the window, leaning out to engage targets positioned at various angles and distances. His control of his pistol and rifle were masterful, his shots precise and effective. He demonstrated various

techniques—shooting with one hand, transitioning to the passenger side, and exiting the vehicle to engage targets. He executed every move flawlessly.

As Benito watched, the tall, older cowboy from the group of three observers quietly made his way to his side.

“Mendez. Who’s the hotshot?” the cowboy asked.

“Captain Frazier, how are you?” Benito asked. He turned toward Mason and smiled. “That, sir, is my buddy Mason, former Delta Force operator, and real-life bad ass. He saved my life in Fallujah. The Ba’athists had a fifty-thousand-dollar tag on his head. After the war, we always stayed in touch. Then we both ended up moving here.”

Captain Frazier stood watching for a moment. “What’s he doing with all that hair? Is he a cop?”

“No, sir,” Benito laughed. “He’s a builder.”

Captain Frazier harrumphed. “The Colonel wants to talk to him.”

Benito grinned even broader. “I bet he does, sir. I bet he does.”

Mason walked over, breathing hard, his rifle slung over his back, sweat dripping down his face and soaking his shirt.

“Good shit, Mason,” Benito said as they bumped fists. “You got the brass all hot and bothered.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mason replied, glancing around for the three men he had seen watching, but he couldn’t spot them.

“Nice shooting,” another man said, walking up and offering his hand. He was young, Asian American, athletically built, and had the good looks of an actor or model. “I’m Park Min-kyu, but everybody calls me ‘Mink.’”

“Because he’s so soft,” Benito said, dragging his fingers tenderly down Mink’s cheek. He quickly brushed Benito’s hand away.

Mason chuckled and shook Mink’s hand. “Thank you. I take it you’re with Denver PD, too?”

“Yeah, yeah. Grew up in San Diego. Was supposed to go to college but joined the Marines instead. Ended up getting married and dumping the Corps. My wife and I moved here about 5 years ago. What about you? Where are you from, Mason?”

“Texas, mainly,” he replied.

“I did advanced infantry training at MRTC, but I haven’t seen anybody shoot, move, and reload like you just did. I heard somebody say you were Delta Force. Is that right?”

“Mmmmm,” Mason replied, fidgeting with his gear and looking around.

Mink nodded. “Cool, man. I know you can’t really talk about it. But the training shows. Are you applying for a job at The Colonel’s new security company? GZD, I think they’re calling it?”

“Man, I really just came to knock the cobwebs off my trigger finger,” Mason replied.

“Este vato,” Benito laughed. “Don’t even bother trying, Mink. He’s always like this. He’s Mr. Freeze when he’s around a lot of people, but in a firefight, bro, he’s the one you want.”

“I bet,” Mink said. “Well, it was good to meet you, Mason. Benito, you need help.”

Mink feigned a punch at Benito’s face as he walked away.

Benito flinched. “Hey, watch it, pendejo. I know judo.”

Mason finished packing his rifle into its case when he saw them coming. The three men he had seen together earlier stepped up to his table. The shorter man with the dark high-and-tight haircut spoke without removing his sunglasses.

“That was some damn impressive shooting,” he said, extending his hand. “Mack Radford. Colleagues tend to call me ‘The Colonel.’”

Mason shook his hand. “Thank you, sir. Pleasure to meet you. I’m Mason.”

“Mason? First or last name?” The Colonel asked.

“Last,” Mason replied, and The Colonel nodded.

The Colonel gestured to a young man standing beside him. “This is my son, Caleb. Just starting as a licensed security officer.”

Caleb shook Mason’s hand enthusiastically. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“And this is Doug Frazier. Doug is a captain with Denver PD, where I used to work,” The Colonel said, and the tall cowboy reached out his hand for Mason to shake.

“They tell me you were a military man of the highest caliber. I recently resigned from my post as police chief and have decided to take my 40 years of combat and tactical experience to the

private sector. Recent changes in laws and societal norms have created a unique opportunity for men like us. A chance to blaze new trails. I am guessing your buddy Sergeant Mendez has mentioned Green Zone Defense to you?”

“Yes, sir, he gave me a general briefing,” Mason replied.

“And what are your thoughts on that, Mason?” The Colonel asked. “Your skills are valuable in the private sector. Hell, you can do pretty well these days just instructing. Have you ever thought about having your own business training others how to shoot?”

Mason stood tall, blinking, looking around. He ran his hand through his beard and stammered,

“Well, no. No sir, I have never given it much thought.”

“Where do you work now, Mason?” The Colonel asked.

“I subcontract as a carpenter. Framing, mostly, but sometimes I do trim work or custom cabinets.”

“A carpenter, huh? Well, that’s a valuable skill, too,” The Colonel said. “Listen, I won’t keep you. But if you get tired of wondering where your next paycheck is coming from, we are well-financed and ready to move. We’ll have an application process set up soon. Sergeant Mendez can keep you updated. I would love to see your application come across my desk. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” Mason replied. “Thank you for letting me come shoot today.”

The Colonel smiled and clapped Mason’s shoulder. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Mason packed his gear, shouldered his bags, and carried them back to his Ford Bronco, the thunder of the range fading behind him. Benito waved goodbye after promising to keep in touch. After loading his bags in the back, Mason slammed the tailgate and climbed into the driver's seat.

He cranked the V8 and sat behind the tinted windows, letting the engine rumble. He stared ahead, then removed his sunglasses and rubbed his temples. His head was spinning. His ears rang and whistled, his teeth were clenched, and his fists were balled into knots. He forced himself to take deep breaths, to relax his muscles, starting with his feet, then his calves, then his thighs. Little by little, he fought down the wave of anxiety.

Reaching under the seat, Mason pulled out a bottle of Tito's vodka. He unscrewed the cap and took a mouthful, feeling the warm burn as it slid down his throat, the tension in his gut releasing.

As he sat there, the muffled sounds of gunfire continued to resonate in his head. Mason reached for the Bronco's radio. He turned the dial, the speakers coming to life with the abrasive, thundering double bass and screaming guitars of thrash metal. The intense, pounding rhythms and aggressive guitar riffs filled the vehicle, drowning out everything.

With the music blaring, Mason didn't stop or bother looking back as he barreled out of the driveway, the bottle of vodka sloshing in his lap. He took the blacktop road out of town, trying not to think about anything.

Chapter 3: Fight

Inside the octagon, a glob of bloody spit splattered across the referee's black shoes just before Matheo and Ramon crashed to the canvas. The crowd inside the Cabaret du Casino de Montreal jumped to their feet and roared. Grunting and straining, sweat running down his bald head, Matheo took the top position, hooking his legs under Ramon's and wrestling to control his arms. Ramon wrenched his arms free and unleashed a flurry of elbow slashes to the side of Matheo's head. Forced to retreat, Matheo released his clinch and stood up. Standing at 5-feet 6-inches, wearing red and black trunks, Matheo was the shorter of the two combatants. He was white, bald, clean shaven, and covered with Japanese tattoos. With his square jaw, heavy brow, and swollen, scarred ears, he looked like he was chiseled from granite. Blood mixed with sweat trickled from a cut on his eyebrow, and his chest heaved with each breath.

Ramon, a Dominican boxer and jiu-jitsu expert, stood, and the two fighters squared off in the center of the ring. Matheo darted in and landed a kick to Ramon's lead leg with a resounding smack. The fighters exchanged punches, kicks, and elbows, crashing into the cage and struggling for dominance.

The Cabaret was bathed in a soft, red glow. In the center of the room, an octagon of black chain-link fence had been erected on a platform. Every seat in the theater was filled with 600 mostly French-Canadian fans. A raucous crowd, they shouted encouragements to Matheo, the hometown hero, and jeered Ramon in Quebecois French.

Loudest of all was a group of burly, leather-clad bikers in the front row nearest to Matheo's corner. They ranged from tall to short, thin to massive. There were women mixed amongst them, wives and girlfriends with bleached blonde hair, wearing minidresses and cropped leather jackets. One biker had the swarthy complexion and traditional hairstyle of the Mohawk people. The sides of his head were shaved bald, leaving only a narrow strip of black hair down the center. A strand of black and red beads hung from his neck, along with a gold chain.

"Leg kicks, Matheo! Work the leg kicks!" he shouted.

The other bikers around him cheered and pumped their fists, sloshing beer from plastic cups and banging metal chairs on the ground. Each of them wore a black leather vest, or "cut", covered in patches, though some had more patches than others. Large patches covered the backs of most of their cuts, featuring a menacing wolf's head with blood-streaked fangs flanked by mechanical gears. The top banner, or "rocker", read "Dead Wolves," and the bottom rocker read "Montreal." A black, diamond-shaped "1%" patch was displayed to the left of the wolf's head, and on the right, a patch bearing "MC" completed the design.

At the front of the group, an older biker with long brown hair and a mostly gray beard raised a plastic cup in the air and bellowed. A patch on his right breast read "Max", while a similar patch on his left breast read "President". He wore a black T-shirt under his cut that revealed tanned, wiry arms covered in faded tattoos. His face was sundried, and his eyes were surrounded by wrinkles.

To his right, a tall man with long brown hair and a reddish goatee stood drinking heartily from a pint of foamy beer and smiling widely. He whistled and cheered with the rest. His chest patches

read “Wild Bill” and “Vice President.” He wore a red bandana around his neck and had large rings on every finger.

To Max’s left, a younger but larger member of the Dead Wolves MC stood, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops. He watched the fight with a furrowed brow. Unlike the others, he barely cheered. He had short brown hair and a square jaw covered in stubble. His intense blue eyes sometimes stared into the distance for a moment before snapping back to the present. He wore a white T-shirt under his cut that revealed the muscular and tattooed arms of a weightlifter. On the front of his vest, one patch read “Raison” while the other read “Sgt. at Arms.”

Wild Bill clapped Raison on the back. “He’s going to get this asshole!” he shouted.

In the octagon, the fighters were clenched against the cage, trading knee and elbow strikes. Matheo almost secured an arm lock just as the bell dinged for the end of the round. The crowd cheered and clapped.

“Only one round left,” Raison said. “Matheo should go for the knockout.”

“Nah, the Dominican is an excellent boxer, and he’s got reach on our boy,” Wild Bill said. “He’s doing the right thing going for the submission.”

“Matheo is submitting this guy this round, guaranteed,” said another biker as he stepped up to Raison and clapped him on the shoulder. He was in his early 20s and had long, unkempt brown hair and a curly brown beard. Three teardrop tattoos ran down his left cheek. He wore black jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt under his cut. He rested his rigid, flesh-colored prosthetic left hand on Raison’s shoulder with a grin.

“Your brother doubts Matheo’s boxing skills, too, it seems,” Wild Bill said.

“You both assume he will use his hands. But you forget, Matheo studied Savate. He will win with his feet, not his hands,” Raison replied.

A cocktail server came by, and the men ordered a round of drinks. Across the room, also in the front row, another group of about twenty bikers and their women congregated. Most of them were sitting casually, but several of the biggest men, hulking beasts covered in prison tattoos and wearing dark sunglasses, stood as bodyguards. Their cuts all bore the red, white, and black colors of the Big Machine Motorcycle Club. Their back patch, or “colors”, featured a grinning skeleton riding a massive V-twin motorcycle. The top rocker said “Big Machine” in red on a white field. Below the main patch, some of their bottom rockers read “Toronto” while others read “Nomads”. To the left of the chopper-riding skeleton was a diamond-shaped patch with “1%” written in red.

One of the Big Machine members sat smoking a cigar, one ankle crossed over his knee. A tall, thin man in his fifties, his long blonde hair and beard fell wildly around the collar of the Western shirt he wore under his cut. Unlike the others, his cut was made of denim. He wore tight blue jeans, brown ostrich skin cowboy boots, and a big belt buckle like a bull rider. His chest patches read “Tommy Boy” and “President”.

On the Dead Wolfe’s side, Raison leaned down and said to the club president, Max, “Big Machine is over there. Looks like Tommy Boy from the Toronto chapter and a few Nomads, too.”

Max kept smiling. “I see them,” he said. “We’re good until I see a Montreal or Quebec rocker underneath a motorcycle-riding skeleton. They can pass through Quebec. They can even visit

Montreal. But if we ever see Big Machine *claiming* Montreal or Quebec, then we have a problem. Do you get it?"

Raison inclined his head but did not respond. "We've been seeing them more and more in the city," he said. "They're probably offering local clubs the chance to patch over and join them. Bruno said he saw them hanging with a new club in town the other night, which could mean they're setting up dummy clubs here to recruit."

"Raison, you don't have to tell me how Big Machine operates," Max growled. "I've been riding since before you were some poor mom's biggest mistake. I can't stop another club from patching over if they choose, but if Big Machine is setting up dummy clubs in Quebec, then they're looking for war. And just because they're the biggest, doesn't mean they're the baddest. We're a vicious pack of wolves. This is our turf and always will be."

Max spit on the floor and glared at the group of Big Machine bikers through squinted, wrinkled lids. Raison stood quietly.

The bell dinged to start the final round of the match. The fighters met once more in the center of the ring. Matheo's face was bruised and bloodied, and his torso shone with sweat in the flashing lights. He reached out his glove to tap Ramon's in a show of sportsmanship, but the Dominican refused. Matheo grinned and beckoned the taller fighter to come closer. Ramon launched a quick left-right combo at Matheo's head, which he easily avoided. Matheo slipped left, through a left hook which caught Ramon in the chin, then an overhand right that caught him on the side of the head. The Dominican fighter wobbled, and the crowd leaped to their feet cheering. The Dead Wolves MC members roared.

“Get him, Matheo! Finish him!”

Matheo unleashed a barrage of punches, driving Ramon across the ring. He bounced off the cage, his footing uncertain. Matheo unleashed a snapping front kick followed by a spinning, jumping back kick. His heel crashed into Ramon’s cheek, and the Dominican dropped to the mat. Matheo dove onto the collapsed man and reined hammer blows to his head. The black-shirted referee dove between the fighters to stop the carnage, and Matheo jumped up, screaming and beating his chest in victory. The Dead Wolves were on their feet, hugging and shouting. Some of them left the stands, climbed the steps of the raised platform, and forced their way into the ring. Nobody tried to stop the triumphal bikers as they lifted Matheo onto their shoulders.

“That’s my boy!” Max cheered. “That is one vicious son of a bitch.”

Raison did not join his brothers in the ring. Instead, his eyes never left the group of Big Machine bikers, all of whom had risen and were clapping and whistling to support Matheo. The blonde-haired cowboy in the group, Tommy Boy, looked across the room at Raison. Both men held each other’s gaze for a moment.

After the fight, the Dead Wolves, shouting and whooping with excitement, made their way to the casino’s main bar, le Roi de Pique. The bar was a lavish and opulent space. Circular balconies lined with ornate wrought-iron railings rose above the casino floor, creating a multi-tiered oasis of entertainment. The bar itself was a masterpiece of dark mahogany, polished to a high sheen, which stretched along the curved wall of the circular room. Overhead, a grand chandelier bathed the space in a warm, golden glow. Plush leather stools lined the bar, and bartenders in crisp white

shirts and black vests expertly mixed cocktails. The sound of clinking glasses and animated conversations filled the air as guests celebrated their victories or commiserated their losses.

Around the circular room, small tables were arranged with plush velvet chairs. Richly adorned curtains in deep burgundy framed tall openings offering a panoramic view of the bustling casino floor below. In one corner, a jazz trio played smooth tunes on a small stage. The rhythmic beats of the drums, the sultry notes of the saxophone, and the skillful strokes of the piano keys supplied the perfect backdrop for the evening. The Dead Wolves lined up at the bar where Max ordered a round. They raised their glasses in a toast to Matheo's victory.

"May we never go to hell, but always be on our way," Max shouted, holding his glass high.

The men cheered. They downed their drinks, clapping and shouting.

Next to him, and in stark contrast to Wild Bill's seasoned appearance, Marky was a younger member of the Dead Wolves in his late teens. He had long sandy blonde hair that flowed freely down his shoulders, and a wispy mustache adorned his upper lip. Marky was tall and slender, with arms almost devoid of muscle. Like the others, he wore the black leather cut and vicious wolf's head patch of the MC.

Wild Bill stepped over, a warm smile on his face, and clapped Marky on the back. "How about that, eh, my boy? He did it!"

Marky grinned. "Hey, Dad. Yeah, great fight. Epic finish!"

Wild Bill chuckled, taking a sip of his beer. "Damn right it was. But it ain't just about the fight, son. It's about brotherhood and family. You're part of something special here."

Marky nodded, his hair falling across his forehead. "I know, Dad. Being a Dead Wolf means a lot to me."

Wild Bill smiled. "To the pack."

Marky raised his glass and clinked it against his father's. "To the pack."

Amid the jubilant celebration at le Roi de Pique, as the Dead Wolves basked in the glory of Matheo's victory, Tommy Boy, the President of the Big Machine MC's Toronto chapter, along with a group of his brothers, made their way through the crowd towards Wild Bill and Max.

Raison, ever watchful, remained nearby.

The mob of Big Machine bikers stopped at the bar and waited as Tommy Boy's bodyguard and Sergeant at Arms approached Raison. He was a 6-foot 6-inch, 400-pound brute named Jester. He had a ring through his septum, long greasy brown hair, and an equally greasy beard he kept bunched together with green rubber bands. He had a massive gut, and his forearm featured a tattoo of Elvis receiving a sex act from a nun. He wore his leather cut over a black Rush concert T-shirt. On his left breast, under his name patch, there was a red and black patch featuring the word "Mechanic" with several rows of screw patches underneath, one screw for each kill he'd committed for the club.

"What's up, Raison? Your bro can definitely scrap," Jester said.

The two men shook hands.

"Thank you, Jester. We appreciate that," Raison responded.

“Tommy Boy wants to congratulate Max and Wild Bill,” Jester said.

Raison nodded. “I’ll go ask,” he said, and strolled over to Max.

He leaned into Max’s ear and said, “Tommy Boy wants to speak with you. Say congratulations and shit,” Raison said.

Max looked up at Raison, then over to Tommy Boy. He thought for a moment, then said, “Ok.”

Max went back to his conversation as Raison returned to where Jester was waiting.

“He said it’s cool, man. Come on over,” Raison said.

Jester walked to where Tommy Boy was at the bar, drinking and laughing with his brothers.

Jester whispered in his ear. Tommy Boy turned and walked across the bar to Max, his hand out, a big smile on his face.

“Impressive win out there, Max. Your boy Matheo’s got some serious skills,” he said as the men shook hands.

“We appreciate the compliment, Tommy, but you didn’t come over here to talk about the fight, did you?” Max responded.

Wild Bill, standing beside Max, crossed his arms over his chest and regarded Tommy Boy with a stern expression. “We know how your club operates, Tommy Boy, and we’ve got no interest in playing along. We’ve done great business over the years, but Montreal is and always will be Dead Wolves territory.”

Tommy Boy's demeanor remained calm, despite the tension in the air. "I understand your reservations but hear me out. Big Machine is expanding, and we've been looking to build alliances, not rivalries. Quebec is a big place, and there's room enough for both our clubs to thrive."

Max's temper flared, and he stepped closer. "You think we'll just roll over and let Big Machine muscle in on our turf? You've got some nerve, Tommy Boy."

Raison watched intently from a few feet away.

Tommy Boy sighed. "Max, all I'm saying is let's sit down, talk about the future, and find a way for our clubs to coexist peacefully. No one wants a war, especially not in our own city."

Max's eyes narrowed, and he leaned even closer to Tommy Boy. "*Our* city? I'll tell you this once more, and I won't say it again. This is Dead Wolves' territory. We don't need your alliances, and we sure as hell don't need your peace talks. Now, if you don't want trouble, you better back off."

Raison continued to watch, silent but vigilant, as the tension between the two clubs hung in the air. The charged atmosphere in the bar simmered as Tommy Boy and his Big Machine companions turned to leave. As Tommy Boy passed Raison, they held each other's eyes once again. Then the Big Machine members trailed out of the bar and vanished into the casino.

Raison realized the bar had gone silent with everyone watching, but as soon as Tommy Boy and his goons left, the mood within le Roi de Pique picked back up.

Matheo wandered into the bar wearing a blue tracksuit, his face swollen and battered. Despite bruises and a piece of tape holding his eyebrow together, his smile was broad, his eyes shining with the thrill of triumph. As he approached his fellow Dead Wolves, a chorus of cheers and backslaps greeted him.

Bruno, a seasoned member of the Dead Wolves in his 50s, cut an imposing figure. His square jawline and hawkish nose gave him a rugged appearance. A salt and pepper goatee framed his lips. He had a long ponytail cascading down his back, and his dark eyebrows complemented his intense gaze.

“Look at the champ,” Bruno exclaimed, his voice booming over the chatter as he wrapped Matheo in a bear hug. “You made us proud tonight.”

Matheo smiled, wincing slightly at his bruised ribs. “Thanks, Bruno. It feels good to win, especially with you all here.”

Raison, who had been quiet for most of the night, raised his glass towards Matheo. “You fought like a wolf out there. Fierce and relentless.”

“Couldn’t have done it without the pack’s support,” Matheo replied, clinking his glass with Raison’s.

Marky, standing nearby, piped up with youthful enthusiasm. “Man, you should have seen the look on Ramon’s face when you landed that kick. Priceless!”

The group laughed, the sound mingling with the smooth jazz playing in the background.

Max, observing the scene, clapped Matheo on the back. “You did more than win a fight tonight. You reminded everyone here why we ride together.”

Matheo nodded. “Thanks, Max. Means a lot coming from you.”

Nearby, Wild Bill and a giant biker named Moose were chatting up a table of women who laughed and blushed at the bikers’ antics while the jazz band riffed on a Duke Ellington tune.

After a while, Wild Bill excused himself from the group. “I’ll be back in a minute. Just need to find the bathroom.” He navigated through the crowd, disappearing from sight as he headed towards the restroom.

Max ordered a round of shots from the bar, and everyone raised their glasses in another toast.

“Tonight, we witnessed greatness,” Max said, raising his glass. “Our brother, Matheo, has secured himself a shot at the title belt. But most importantly, he showed those who would take what is ours that the Dead Wolves are fearless!”

“Wolves, what do we say?” Raison shouted, lifting his drink higher.

“Roulez comme si vous étiez déjà mort!” they shouted in unison. “Ride like you’re already dead!”

The men cheered and downed their drinks.

As Wild Bill stood at the urinal in the relatively quiet casino bathroom just outside le Roi de Pique, smooth jazz playing softly, he chuckled at an internal joke. The celebratory mood had somewhat loosened the tight grip of caution he usually maintained.

Suddenly, the bathroom door swung open, but Wild Bill paid no attention, assuming it was another patron. Then the sound of heavy footsteps approaching with urgency made him look. He glanced up, catching a dark reflection in the polished metal surface above the urinal.

Behind him, a figure dressed in black riding leathers and wearing a motorcycle helmet with a tinted visor pulled down closed the distance. He raised a gloved fist, a black pistol in his grip. Wild Bill saw a flash of orange as the killer squeezed the trigger just feet away, then blasted shot after shot into Bill's back and ribs as he floundered and fell. The booms were deafening inside the tiled bathroom. Wild Bill hardly had a moment to react. His body jerked and blood splattered onto the porcelain urinal as he collapsed to the floor, lifeless under the fluorescent light. The assassin took a moment to study the dead body before dashing from the bathroom, its swinging door slamming loudly against the wall as he fled.

At the bar, patrons flinched at the muted sounds of popping coming from somewhere nearby. Most continued smiling, while others looked about uneasily. Bruno glanced around, his forehead wrinkled.

“Are they supposed to have fireworks tonight?” he asked the biker next to him.

Just then, a man rushed into the bar wearing black leather riding gear and a helmet, holding a sawed-off pump shotgun. A woman screamed. A man at the bar flinched, grabbed his wife by the blouse, and shoved her hard out of the way.

“Gun!” Bruno yelled as he drew a shiny stainless steel 1911 from the back of his belt.

Max was standing at a high-top table talking to the ladies from the bachelorette party. The first shotgun blast hit him in the ribs, knocking him sideways as if he’d been kicked by a mule. The second shot hit him in the stomach. One of the Dead Wolves shouted in primal rage and anger. Doubled over, Max staggered back, his body slamming against the balcony railing. The third blast hit him in the head, sending the Dead Wolf’s leader flipping over the balcony. He fell thirty feet and crashed onto the main casino floor’s stage, landing directly on the drum set, sending cymbals, drums, and hardware scattering. The band ducked and ran from the sudden falling object, and screams erupted from the casino like tornado sirens.

Bruno drew a bead on the black clad shooter and fired. The rounds hit the killer’s back, but he ducked and dove behind the bar. Bruno wondered if the assassin was wearing body armor just as the black helmet appeared over the bar, followed by a blast from the shotgun. The pellets went wild past Bruno’s head, causing him to duck. He waited a second under a table before popping up and letting off three rounds into the bar where the shotgun-wielding killer had been. Then he noticed movement from the right of his vision just in time to see the killer running full speed from the room.

The casino erupted into a frenzy of confusion and alarm. As patrons scattered and screams echoed through the opulent halls, Raison’s instincts kicked in. His eyes locked onto the shooter

making his way quickly through the panicked crowd, and he bolted after. His powerful strides carried him swiftly through the casino's flashing lights, weaving between startled gamblers and overturned chairs at slot machines.

The shooter quickened his pace, pushing gamblers aside and knocking over chairs. As they neared the entrance, the bright lights of the casino's facade spilled into the dimly lit interior, casting long shadows that flickered with the movement of the fleeing figure. Raison's breath came in heavy gasps, his focus on the retreating shooter.

Bursting through the doors, the humid night air hit them. The shooter made a beeline for a motorcycle idling at the curb, where an accomplice waited, engine running. Raison burst out just in time to see the shooter leap onto the motorcycle's back. The bike lurched forward and sped off into the night.

Raison stood, panting, his hands clenched into fists. The taillight of the motorcycle disappeared into the distance. The roar of the engine still echoed in his ears as he turned back to face the chaos inside.

Three days later, under a leaden sky, the surviving members of the Dead Wolves Motorcycle Club congregated in the hallowed stillness of the cemetery. They stood alongside friends and family, and the air was thick with a somber reverence. The cemetery was dotted with rows of headstones standing as silent sentinels over the departed. Amidst this backdrop, the twin black caskets of Wild Bill and Max lay side by side. Each casket bore the snarling wolf's head of the Dead Wolves MC.

Raison stood stoically. His eyes, usually sharp and commanding, held a depth of sadness as he gazed upon the caskets. Beside him, Bruno, his features etched with grief, stood in quiet solidarity. The air was filled with the muted sounds of weeping and whispered condolences as those gathered paid their respects.

Finally, Raison turned to Bruno, his expression grave. “We need to talk,” he began, his voice low.

Bruno’s eyes stayed fixed on the caskets. “What’s on your mind, Raison?”

“Tommy Boy called me this morning. He knows who’s behind Max and Bill’s deaths.”

Bruno’s eyes narrowed, a mix of surprise and skepticism crossing his weathered face. “Big Machine Tommy Boy called you? Shit, of course, he knows who killed them. Big Machine killed them, right? He probably ordered it himself.”

Raison shook his head. “He said it wasn’t Big Machine. He said it was some Middle Eastern dope dealers trying to move into Montreal. But he’s got his ear to the ground. Big Machine has connections and information we don’t. If anyone knows who’s behind this, it’s them.”

Bruno continued staring at the caskets. “Are you saying you believe this guy?” he asked.

“I am saying maybe it was Big Machine, but maybe it wasn’t. We’ve got beef with fifty other gangs, clubs, and cliques across Canada, but we’ve never had beef with them. Tommy Boy was just there partying with us and congratulating us for Matheo’s win.”

“Yeah, and Max told him to fuck off,” Bruno cut in.

“He did,” agreed Raison. “So, I guess we decide right now rather to blame Big Machine and start a war with the biggest outlaw motorcycle club on earth with no evidence, or we go hear what Tommy Boy has to say.”

Bruno sucked his teeth and spit. He breathed out hard and thought for a while. Finally, he said, “You know, my dad was in the Corsican mafia. He was a close associate of Paul Mondoloni, one of the French Connection guys. They were some of the first big time dealers to bring smack to Canada. They had to build the distribution from scratch. So, here’s my dad, an Old World mafioso who speaks Italian and French. He comes to Quebec to meet with the local bosses and convince them to buy their dope from him. The trouble is, the guys he’s trying to sell to speak Quebecois French, while my dad speaks Corsican French, and they have all kinds of misunderstandings. One time, he was trying to convince this old French-Canadian gangster that they should do business, and the old gangster told him ‘Tire toi une buche’ or ‘take a log’, which is something a French-Canadian says when they mean ‘Sit down. Let’s talk about it.’ But my dad thinks it’s some kind of Canadian insult, like ‘Go take a shit’ or something. Anyway, my dad gets offended, and the guns come out. I don’t know, maybe he was having a bad day, but he was convinced the guy was telling him to fuck off and he didn’t like it, so he shot the guy. The Canadian boss’s bodyguard shot back, hitting my dad in the stomach. He survived, but with bullet fragments all inside him. Those fragments caused him pain for the rest of his life. It really slowed him down. So, anytime I would have a problem with a guy or didn’t like someone, my dad would say, ‘You can always tell a guy to go fuck himself tomorrow.’ He would always say that. What he meant was, if he had given the guy the benefit of the doubt, or even waited to ask somebody else what the guy meant by ‘Tire toi une buche’, he wouldn’t have had to suffer the rest of his life with bullets in his belly.”

Raison waited for him to finish. “I think I got from that story that you are down to meet with Tommy Boy. Something about we can listen to them now and still tell them to fuck off tomorrow. Am I right?”

Bruno sighed. “It’s probably the fastest way to figure out whether Big Machine is behind the killings of Max and Bill or not. So yeah, I’ll go with you to meet Tommy Boy. But we better not tell the others. It won’t look good. Most of them think Big Machine is behind this.”

“I know,” Raison replied. “But we’re in the dark here. We need answers, and we need them fast. This isn’t just about retribution. It’s about survival. If there’s a threat to the club, we need to know what we’re up against.”

Bruno sighed. “All right, Raison. But we better watch our backs. I feel the crosshairs on me now.”

Raison nodded in agreement, his jaw set in determination. “We’ll do it right, Bruno. For Max, for Bill, and for the pack.”

As the funeral service continued, Raison and Bruno stood side by side, watching the ceremony, both deep in their thoughts.

In the back room of The Rusty Hub, a biker bar on the outskirts of Ottawa, Raison and Bruno sat at an old wooden table scarred with knife carvings and graffiti. They faced Tommy Boy, president of Big Machine MC’s Toronto chapter, who sat smoking a cigar, sunglasses pushed up on his head. His golden hair and beard appeared weathered, like fall leaves. Jester, Tommy

Boy's mountainous bodyguard, was at a pool table nearby with three other Big Machine members, smoking and drinking.

Tommy Boy broke the silence, his voice steady and deliberate. "I speak for myself and for our club when I say we are all real sorry for your loss. Max and Bill were legends. True outlaws. It's sad to see them go."

He took a drink from a longneck. "The streets talk, and we listen. But before I tell you what I know, I have a proposition."

Bruno's eyes narrowed. Raison remained stoic but alert.

"The landscape's changing," Tommy Boy continued. "It's time for what our boss, Pop, calls 'strategic alliances.' Everyone is coming to Canada now. We've got Turks, Moroccans, Iraqis—everyone—bringing product into our country. They want to take over, to push us old one-percenters out. We knew they were moving into Montreal. In fact, we've been watching them already, right in your city. That's why I came to the fight, to warn Max and Bill and to offer our support. We didn't realize the invaders were planning to move that night, or we would have stayed and protected you guys, even if Max and Bill didn't want our help."

Tommy Boy took a drag off his cigar as Bruno and Raison listened in silence, their faces unmoving.

"Why would Big Machine care if Max and Bill, or any of us, get smoked?" Raison asked.

"If we let the Pakistanis and Afghanis and the rest take control of the supply, they will soon replace all Canadian dealers with their own people. We didn't always see eye-to-eye with Max

and Bill, but we always did good business. I've supplied the Dead Wolves with primo weed for the last decade, and we've made a lot of money together. Max and I never had an issue until he got it in his head that we wanted to push the Wolves out of Montreal. But nothing could be further from the truth. We know your club has always proudly claimed Montreal. We respect that. You're some mean sons of bitches, and we'd rather be on the same side with you than fight against you. We have product by the ton. Anything you want, anything you can move. Coke, crystal, smack, guns. And you know we have the finest weed on the planet, grown right here in Canada and distributed across the globe. When you ride with us, you get the best deals on the best shit. Plus, when the foreigners come to push you out, you have an army behind you. I'm offering the Dead Wolves a chance to patch over, to trade in your wolf's heads and join Big Machine. I never came to offer you war. We would see that as a major loss."

Bruno spoke first. "And what about our autonomy? The Dead Wolves have their own history, their own code."

Tommy Boy leaned back and grinned. "You'd keep your autonomy, to an extent. But think bigger. Think of the resources, the protection. You know how the world works. It's about power, and together, we have more of it."

"You said you know who killed Max and Bill," Raison cut in. "Do you have names? Locations?"

Tommy Boy nodded. "We do. But this information comes with the understanding that we're moving towards a partnership."

Bruno rubbed his chin. Raison's gaze remained fixed on Tommy Boy.

“Bruno and I can’t make a deal to patch over,” Raison said. “A decision like that has to be made by vote of the active club members. You know that.”

“Of course,” Tommy Boy said. “But before I tell you what we found, I need to know: Am I helping friends tonight, or am I walking away from rivals?”

Bruno and Raison sat watching the smoke drift in front of Tommy’s face. Broken blood vessels crisscrossed his nose and cheeks, and his mustache was yellowed from tobacco.

“We have to discuss this with the rest of the Dead Wolves,” Raison finally said. “And we’re mourning our loss. But we see no reason to have bad blood with Big Machine. Like you said, you’re our biggest and best supplier.”

Tommy Boy smiled, revealing stained teeth. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. Laying it on the table, he said, “Good. The assholes who killed your bosses are a Pakistani family. It’s a bunch of brothers and cousins and shit. They move a lot of weight in Toronto, but a few months ago we caught one of their uncles and made him talk. He told us they were also in Montreal. Lately, they’ve been using the same three women to move the dope by passenger train from Toronto. We have photos of all three. Plus, we know their typical schedule and the location of their Montreal stash house. It’s all in the envelope.”

Raison took the envelope and slid it into his jacket pocket.

Tommy Boy stood up, extending his hand. “The invaders are coming for your club and your territory. I am sorry we didn’t know ahead of time what they had planned. We had a great deal of respect for Max and Bill.”

With that, Tommy Boy walked away to join Jester and the others at the pool tables.

Outside the bar, the night air was crisp, carrying with it the faint sounds of the city. Raison and Bruno walked to where their motorcycles were parked.

Bruno glanced over at Raison, his expression serious. “This won’t be easy, you know. Convincing the club to patch over, it’s a big ask.”

Raison nodded, his face set in a grim line. “I know. Especially Rage. He’s Dead Wolves through and through.”

“Yeah, your brother takes the club to heart,” Bruno replied. “But we need to think about the future. Big Machine’s offer could give us the edge we need, especially now that Max and Bill are gone.”

Raison sighed, a hand running over the handlebars of his bike. “It’s not just about power. We’ve got a responsibility to our brothers. To keep everyone safe.”

Bruno mounted his motorcycle, his eyes meeting Raison’s. “We’ll lay it out for them, every detail. They need to understand why this might be our best move.”

Raison swung his leg over his bike, the engine roaring to life under him. “We’ll make them see. For the club, for Max, for Bill. We owe them that much.”

Both men kicked their bikes into gear. The engines growled, a powerful symphony that echoed off the nearby buildings as they rode off into the night.

The Dead Wolves MC's clubhouse stood in a forgotten corner of the Saint-Henri neighborhood in Montreal, on a street bearing scars of neglect. Asphalt, cracked and uneven, weaved between the looming shadows of old, derelict buildings. Graffiti sprawled across their brick facades, telling tales of turf wars and forgotten dreams in vibrant hues. Abandoned cars, their once-glossy paint now faded and peeling, sat on deflated tires. The air held a stagnant smell, a mix of old trash and exhaust with none of the hope other recently gentrified streets in Saint-Henri exuded.

The three-story row house looked like any other, with its aged brick facade and sturdy wooden door. Painted on a black background above the door was the snarling wolf's head of the Dead Wolves MC. Inside, the clubhouse was dim. Most light came from neon beer signs over the worn pool table. Stale beer, cigarette smoke, and the scent of leather conditioner permeated the space. Aged stools and mismatched chairs were scattered about. An old bar with a collection of bottles stretched along one wall, next to a basic kitchen with worn appliances.

That night, the Dead Wolves gathered under the dim lights of the main room. The air was somber, with a heavy mix of grief and anger. Most sat in wooden chairs, while Raison stood at the front. His eyes scanned the gathered members. Bruno was there, wearing all black and a pensive expression. Matheo was there, his face still bruised and cut from the fight. Next to him sat Okwaho, their Mohawk brother, who wore beads around his neck and three upright feathers in his hair. Behind them sat Moose, the powerlifter. Next to Moose sat Marky, Wild Bill's son. The thin young man was pale, his eyes swollen with dark circles. He sat staring at the floor.

Leaning against the wall was Raison's younger brother, Rage. Tall and lean, his long hair hung limp and oily around his collar, and his beard was curly and tangled. His cheeks, lean and sunken, sported three tear-drop tattoos. He wore black jeans, cowboy boots, and a dirty T-shirt under his black leather cut. He was smoking a cigarette with his right hand, the thumb of his prosthetic left hand hooked in his pocket.

"Loups! Écoutez," Raison began. "Wolves! Listen up."

He waited a moment for the room to quiet down.

"This is now a club business meeting. Any disruptions won't be tolerated," he said. "In the wake of the cowardly assassinations of our President, Max, and Vice President, Wild Bill, it is time to choose new club leadership. As sergeant at arms, I am the highest-ranking member alive, so I will conduct this vote. We should start with the highest position. Do I hear any nominations for club president?"

"I nominate you, Raison," said Moose in his deep, booming voice.

"Ok, I accept," Raison nodded. "Any other nominations?"

"I nominate Bruno. He's the oldest," said Okwaho.

Bruno sat up straight and blinked. Murmurs arose amongst the club members.

"Ok, Bruno, do you accept the nomination?" Raison asked.

"Boys, I think I'll have to decline. I am honored though," Bruno said, clapping Okwaho's hand.

“Ok, Bruno declines. Are there any other nominations?”

The group sat quietly.

“I nominate Rage as president,” Matheo said.

Murmurs broke out again. Raison looked at his brother leaning against the wall, smoking.

“Well, brother, do you accept the nomination?” he asked.

Rage smoked. Raison waited.

“Well?” Raison asked.

Rage continued to smoke. The whispering amongst the men died down, and they waited in silence.

“Hell, why not?” he finally said.

“Why not what?” Raison growled through gritted teeth. “Was that an acceptance?”

“Yeah, fuck it, count me in,” Rage said.

“Anyone else?” Raison asked.

The room was silent.

“Ok, then we vote for club president. There are two nominees: Raison and Rage. If you vote for Raison as president, say ‘Aye!’”

Many “Ayes!” rang out around the room.

“If you vote for Rage as club president, say ‘Aye!’”

Matheo was the sole vote.

“The vote carries, and I accept the position as president of this club,” Raison said. “Now for the position of vice president. I will now accept nominations. I nominate Rage for VP.”

A few eyebrows lifted amongst the men, but otherwise, the room was dead silent.

“Do you accept,” Raison asked.

From his place on the wall, Rage chuckled.

“Yeah, I accept,” he said.

“Good. Any other nominations?”

Silence again. Raison scanned the men’s faces.

“Anyone?” he asked again. “No? Ok. With just one nominee and nothing barring you from serving, the VP position is yours, Rage.”

Rage made an elaborate bow, then held up his beer. “Many thanks to the men and women of the Academy of Motion Pictures for this lovely evening and this fine award,” he joked.

The men chuckled, and Raison sighed quietly.

“That leaves one open officer’s position: Sergeant at Arms. Rage, I propose we give it to Bruno. What do you think?”

Rage looked at the older Corsican man.

“Absolutely,” Rage said.

“That means this is yours,” Raison said as he removed his cut and laid it on the podium. He pulled a shiny hunting knife from a leather sheath on his belt and cut the “Sgt. at Arms” patch from his vest. He handed it to Bruno as he stood.

“You know the job. I don’t have to tell you. Do it well, brother.”

Bruno held the patch and flipped it around it in his hand, studying it.

“I will,” he said, his face like stone. “I am honored.”

“These are trying times for us. We’ve lost brothers, and now we face decisions that will shape our future. But together, as Dead Wolves, we’ll ride through any storm. We’ll honor the memory of those we’ve lost by keeping this club strong and united.”

The room erupted in a chorus of agreement.

“First order of business: We destroy the assholes who killed Max and Bill.”

The men cheered and stomped their boots on the wooden floor. Raison reached into his pocket and removed the envelope Tommy Boy had given him.

“We know exactly who and where they are,” he said, holding the envelope up.

The room erupted in cheers. Bruno clapped but said nothing. Raison stood at the podium. He looked toward Rage, but he was already walking out the door.

Chapter 4: Bust

Inside the bustling Denver Police Department's District 3 substation, an African American woman in her mid-thirties sat at her desk inside a cubicle typing rapidly at a computer. She wore black slacks, a black blouse, and a leather belt that carried her badge, a holstered Glock 17, handcuffs, and two extra magazines. Her hair was pulled into a neat, tight ponytail, and she wore minimal makeup. Her brows were arched, and her eyes were tilted in a cat-like manner. The name plate outside her cubicle read "Det. Kim Wright."

In the cubicle across from her sat a middle-aged white man with bifocals perched on his red nose. He was bald and had a thick gray mustache. He wore a navy suit that hung loosely on his overweight frame. His name plate read "Det. Harold Clarke."

Unlike Kim's desk, which was virtually devoid of paper, Harold's was piled high with stacks of files.

"I don't know about this new generation," Harold began, "but it takes some real balls to sit there with not one case file on your desk. In the old days, if brass walked by and saw a narcotics detective with no cases to work, they'd make them go outside and do hand-to-hands with the street thugs. They really loved to make rookies do that kind of thing in the dead of winter. If there was a hard freeze coming, you did not want to be sitting at your desk slacking."

Without looking up, Kim Wright rolled her eyes.

“Luckily,” she said, “not everyone is as old as you, Fred Flintstone. Some people understand that paper files on a desk don’t mean you’re getting any work done. We both know you haven’t opened all those files you pulled just to make yourself look busy. That stack has looked the exact same for three months.”

Harold laughed. “I don’t need to open them. I’ve been a detective so long I can lay my hand on them and know exactly what they say.”

“Ha!” Kim exclaimed. “Now you’re a psychic? Too bad you can’t lay your hand on your computer and learn how it works.”

“I don’t know how you did it in the Air Force Security Forces, but I can tell you that narcotics cases aren’t won with computers. This isn’t forensic accounting or check fraud. Narcotics detectives bust drug dealers by catching them with drugs in their cars or homes or in their pockets. That’s what we do. Nearly 40 years with a badge and I never saw a dealer hide his dope in a computer.”

“So, you think a drug bust can’t be made with a computer?” Kim asked, swiveling in her chair to face the older man.

“As soon as they sell heroin on eBay, I guess we can get a bust, but until then, no,” Harold said.

“Ok, Harold,” Detective Wright said, her eyes sparkling as she leaned forward. “I bet you I can make a bust today, using nothing but the internet.”

The older detective raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued. “Just the internet? No informants, no stakeouts, no rip and run?” he asked.

“Exactly,” she replied with a grin. “Technology has changed the game. I don’t need to pound the pavement like the old days. I can set up a bust sitting right here.”

Intrigued and amused, the older detective leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “OK, Wright, you’re on. But let’s make it interesting. If you pull it off, I’ll do your paperwork for a week. But if you fail, you buy me lunch for a week.”

Detective Wright’s smile widened. “Deal,” she said. “I’m about to give you a master class in modern policing.”

“We’ll see,” Harold replied.

Kim slid open her bottom desk drawer. Inside was a shoebox filled with cell phones. Reaching in, she chose a touchscreen model. She plugged it into a charger on her desk and booted it up. Once the screen illuminated, she tapped an icon to open a dating app. She checked the profile. The photo was of a pretty young girl of college age with blonde hair wearing a bikini on a beach. There were several other photos of the same young woman wearing tight or revealing clothing at bars, nightclubs, and parties. The profile read, “From Arizona! In Denver visiting friends! Looking for a plug.” The words were followed by an emoji of a green tree, a snowflake, a wall plug, and a puff of smoke. The account had 1,589 notifications and scores of unread messages. Kim tapped to open the messages folder. The first dozen were from eager men offering to supply any drug, often for discounted rates, sometimes even for free.

Kim chose a message received earlier that day. It was from a young man appearing to be of Indian descent. In his profile photo, he wore a hooded sweatshirt from the University of

Colorado Boulder. In his message, he offered “White, Molly, Lucy, and green in many flavors for the best prices.”

“Oh, yeah. Get ready, Harold. This won’t take long,” Kim said out loud. Harold waved her off and returned to reading.

Kim messaged the boy, “Need green and molly. When can you meet?”

Before she could set the phone down, the boy messaged back, “Right now. What do you need?”

“What’s the molly like?” she typed back.

“Fire! Pinkest I’ve seen,” he texted back with flame emojis.

“It’s for me and my friends. We’re going to a music festival this weekend. Whoop whoop! How much for 5g of molly and two zips of green?”

The boy took a moment to respond.

“It’s \$350 for the first part. For the green, depends on what you’re trying to spend?”

Kim went back and forth with the dealer a few more times before she exclaimed, “Boom! Done. Let’s go, Harold.”

The older man looked up from his desk and removed his glasses.

“Go where, Wright?” he asked.

“To the Shell station at Federal and West Florida to make a bust,” she replied as she put on her jacket.

Harold sat looking at her incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“Come on, grandpa. I’ve got a bet to win,” she said.

The two detectives walked through the substation and out to the parking lot where Harold offered to drive. As they walked toward his personal vehicle, a light blue Chevrolet Caprice Classic, Kim laughed.

“Harold, you drive an unmarked police car as your personal vehicle?”

“Hey,” Harold snapped back, “I spent 30 years driving one of these around. I can’t be switching from cruiser to minivan then back to cruiser every day like some of these cops. I like to have the same car in my driveway as I drive at work. Switching cars back and forth everyday just leads to stress and ulcers.”

“You are too much,” Kim said, laughing as they climbed in.

Harold pulled the blue sedan out of the precinct parking lot and drove south on University Boulevard. After a few blocks, he turned right onto Evans Avenue.

“So, how do you like civilian policing?” Harold asked as they drove.

“I like it,” Kim replied, looking out the window through black sunglasses. “Being an Air Force cop was fun, but I had enough of the military’s ‘hurry and wait.’”

“You’re a real go-getter, huh?” the older man asked. “What made you leave the Air Force?”

Kim looked out the passenger window.

“In 2010, I was sent to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. My unit was tasked with interdicting narcotics trafficking, especially any of our own service members tempted to send Afghan heroin or hash back to the States on one of the C-17s. I was only supposed to be there for 90 days, then I was going to cycle back here to Schriever Air Base. While I was at Bagram, early on May 19, we came under attack by the Taliban. They sent about 40 suicide bombers at our perimeter. They had vests covered in grenades, AKs, RPGs, and mortars. Some made it through the wire. Four of them were dressed in American uniforms. They were trying to make it into a tent or mess hall to inflict mass casualties. I just remember waking up to explosions and running to a bunker. After that day, I realized that, more than anything, I wanted a life of peace. Especially as a mother. I wanted to wake up every day to a normal, calm, safe world. And there is nothing normal, calm, or safe about war. I had over ten years in the service, and my husband, Mike, had already retired and was finishing civilian flight school, so I requested a separation once we cycled back. I took a year off to travel and see the world, then I moved here and joined Denver PD.”

“So, you think being a civilian cop is—what did you call it?—‘Normal, calm, and safe?’ Let me tell you, you never know what you’ll come across in these streets,” Harold said.

“I know,” Kim replied as she stared out the window at the passing city, “but this is my home. My family is here. If I am going to risk my life, it should be here.”

At the intersection of Federal and West Florida, Harold pulled his Chevrolet sedan into the parking lot of a Super Save station directly across from the Shell they were scheduled to meet the

dealer at. Harold parked the car so they had a full view of the station's parking lot. The Shell station was a small, one-story red brick building with glass windows covered in steel bars. Four white, red, and yellow gas pumps stood under a yellow trimmed canopy. It was mid-afternoon, and the intersection was busy with cars and pedestrians.

"OK, detective," Harold said as he put the car into park. "We're here. Where's your guy?"

"Let's see," she said as she tapped to open the cell phone.

"OTW, what are you driving?" she typed to the dealer.

He didn't immediately respond. After a minute, Kim put the phone on her lap.

"What's wrong? Is he not coming?" Harold seemed pleased.

"Just relax," she soothed him.

After a few minutes of silence, the phone buzzed, and Kim checked it.

"Says he's driving. Be there in 10. Purple Nissan Altima," she said.

"Purple, huh? This just keeps getting better," Harold chuckled.

The two sat in silence.

"Were you in the service, Harold?" Kim asked.

"Army," he said. "After Nam. Spent a lot of time staring at North Korean border guards through a scope, but never saw combat. Finished my contract, got out, became a cop."

“Have you liked being a cop?”

“I’ve been a cop my whole life. At this point, if I don’t like being a cop, it doesn’t even matter,” he said.

Kim thought for a moment. “I guess not,” she said, and they went back to watching the intersection in silence.

After almost a half hour passed, a dirty purple Nissan Altima pulled slowly into the Shell station, hesitated, then parked.

“Boom,” Kim said. “Purple Altima.”

“This guy has dope on him now? And he told you he was going to sell it to you on that phone?” Harold asked.

“I have the texts, his phone number, his account details, car description, and profile photos right here,” she replied, wagging the phone side-to-side at Harold.

“Ok, it’s your show. Better call for backup,” he said.

Kim pulled her personal cell phone from her jacket pocket and dialed the division dispatcher. After requesting uniformed assistance, she checked her decoy phone again.

“He’s asking where we are,” she said out loud as she typed. “I’m telling him we’re almost there.”

She hit send on her message, and almost at once got a response.

“He said, ‘Cool, hurry,’” she read to Harold.

He chuckled. “Don’t get in too big of a hurry there, ace. You aren’t going to like where you’re headed.”

Kim’s personal cell phone buzzed, and she answered, “Detective Wright.”

She listened for a moment.

“Sergeant,” she told the uniformed officer on the other end of the line, “we’re looking to make an arrest on a male suspect approximately 25, black hair, brown skin, possibly Middle Eastern or Hispanic, for possession with intent. He is driving a purple Nissan Altima that is now in the parking lot of the Shell station at Federal and West Florida. Detective Clarke and I are across the street observing the suspect from an unmarked blue Caprice. We already have enough cause to search the vehicle, so I want you to roll up on him and detain him. Sound good?”

She thanked the sergeant and clicked off the phone.

She picked up the other cell phone and texted the dealer, “5 minutes.”

“Uniforms are almost here,” she told Harold.

“Too bad we didn’t bring popcorn, right?” he responded.

Five minutes later, a white Chevrolet Tahoe with a black steel bumper guard and a blue Denver PD shield on the door pulled into the Shell station, turned on its overhead lights, and stopped behind the purple Altima, blocking its retreat. A large white police officer in a black uniform climbed out of the SUV and took position overlooking the car. Within seconds, two more Denver

PD Tahoes pulled into the station parking lot, and soon uniformed officers had the car surrounded.

“The fellow in that purple car just pooped himself,” Harold said, and Kim laughed.

Harold put this Caprice in gear and slowly drove across the intersection and into the Shell parking lot. They parked, got out, and waved to the officers as they approached. The uniformed officers already had the driver out of the vehicle and spreadeagled on the hood. The would-be dealer was smaller than he appeared in his photos. His hair was shaggy and in need of a haircut. He was wearing sandals, swim shorts, and a Phish concert T-shirt. One officer frisked him while others opened his car doors and peaked around inside with flashlights.

“What the hell, man?” the dealer said. “I was just sitting in my car.”

“Oh, yeah? Why were you sitting at a location known for drug transactions?” the officer frisking him asked. He pulled the young Indian dealer’s wallet from his back pocket and tossed it onto the car. He then emptied the dealer’s other pockets onto the hood. There were several lighters, a cell phone, a vape, and a wad of cash bound with a rubber band.

“Whoa!” Kim exclaimed, thumbing through the cash. “We’ve got a big-time dope dealer here. Who are you? El Chapo’s nephew?”

“My last name is Patel,” the dealer exclaimed. “Ashok Patel. My family is from Mumbai. How could I be related to a Mexican drug lord?”

“You sell his dope, though, don’t you?” Kim asked.

“I don’t know anything, and further, I don’t consent to this search...” Ashok started to speak when one officer searching the purple Altima shouted. He pulled a black canvas duffle bag from the backseat and set it on the hood. Kim Wright unzipped the bag and tipped it forward to show it was filled with plastic bags of green marijuana.

“Are you licensed to have this much cannabis, Mr. Patel?” she asked. “The law says an individual can possess up to one ounce of marijuana at a time. This is four or five pounds.”

“But cannabis is...” Ashok began when once again an officer searching the Nissan’s front seat shouted. This time, the officer came out with a Ziplock baggy of crystalline powder. He walked over and set it on the car hood. Kim Wright put on blue latex gloves and picked up the baggy.

“What is this, meth?” she asked.

“That’s federal prison time,” Harold piped in. “And a lot of it. Did you know the feds don’t even have parole? They give you twenty years, you serve all twenty years.”

“Hey wait...” Ashok stammered. His thin arms were shaking, and he couldn’t keep his mouth shut.

“Just have a seat right there, Mr. Patel,” Kim said, and the uniformed officer pushed him down to the curb.

“Should I book you for possession of methamphetamine with intent to sell to an undercover cop, or are you going to tell me what this is?” Kim asked, holding up the baggy.

Ashok took a deep breath, then looked at his feet.

“Molly,” he mumbled.

“What did you say? Speak up?” Kim instructed.

“It’s not meth, it’s just MDMA. It’s no big deal,” Ashok said a little louder.

“For you it’s a big deal. It’s getting you sent to jail,” Kim said.

“Stand up,” she motioned to Ashok, and a uniformed officer pulled him up by the armpit.

“Sergeant,” she continued, “please place Mr. Patel under arrest for possession with intent to distribute.”

“OK, Mr. Patel, I am now placing you under arrest...” the officer said as he handcuffed Ashok.

Kim and Harold turned back to the black duffle bag of marijuana on the hood.

“So, I guess this is how it will be from now on,” Harold said. “My generation had to police the streets, but your generation has to police the internet.”

“That’s right,” Kim agreed.

“Well, you promised a master class, and I was not disappointed. That was the easiest bust I’ve ever seen. I can’t believe anybody would be dumb enough to sell drugs to a complete stranger over the internet.”

“Embrace the new ways, Harold. Like you said, easiest bust ever.”

The uniformed sergeant organized the transfer of the suspect and evidence back to the District 3 substation. Ashok was fingerprinted and photographed, then left in a holding cell. Harold tested a sample of the crystalline powder with a reagent testing kit, which turned deep purple.

“MDMA it is,” Harold said, packing the evidence away in official bags.

“Let’s see what else we can get from the kid,” he said. The two walked over to the jailer and asked him to move the suspect to an interview room.

The interrogation room was stark and utilitarian, a setting designed for unvarnished truths. Kim and Harold sat across from the young college student. Ashok, visibly anxious, shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Ashok,” Kim began, “we tested the substance in the baggy, and it came back as MDMA. We weighed it and the marijuana in the black bag, and all together you are looking at felony possession with intent to distribute. Since it was me you were messaging on the dating app, we, of course, have a record of the intended transaction.”

Ashok sat looking at his hands.

“You’re a student at UC Boulder, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ashok said in an almost whisper.

“What year?”

“I’ll be a senior next semester. I graduate next May.”

“You mean, you were supposed to graduate next May, before you tried to sell dope to a cop,” Harold said gruffly.

“A conviction for drug dealing and time in jail won’t help you finish your degree, will it?” Kim asked more calmly.

“But it’s not even real drugs. It’s just party supplies. It’s not like it’s crack,” Ashok protested.

“You’re right,” Kim said, “and you’re not El Chapo’s nephew. You’re a good kid, about to finish college and make his family proud. But you made a bad choice, and now you have to face it.”

Ashok looked at his hands again.

“Now, I’ve talked with my partner,” Kim continued, “and we don’t want to see you go down for this and throw away all that you’ve worked for. We don’t want to see you disappoint your family. Not over a little weed and some molly. But to help you, you’re going to have to help us.”

Ashok fidgeted with his fingers.

“One thing I noticed is the labels on the marijuana packaging. They’re from a dispensary. How did you get bulk cannabis from a dispensary?”

Ashok sat quietly.

“Which dispensary did the weed come from?” Harold asked.

Ashok sighed. “I didn’t get it from a dispensary. I got it from the Dark Web.”

Harold stared blankly at the boy while Kim smiled knowingly.

“So how did that go down?” she asked.

“I go on a site where you can buy anything. Guns, identities, all kinds of drugs. People have stuff to sell, and you can just buy it with crypto. It’s like eBay for black market goods. I order what I want, and they send it to me,” he said.

“How? Through the mail?” she asked.

“Sometimes, but not with this guy. He advertised as local. He actually dropped the order off and gave me coordinates to pick it up.”

“Where was that?” Kim asked.

“At Barr Lake State Park, just outside of town,” he said.

“So, the supplier sells weed on the Dark Web because it’s anonymous, but then he meets you in public to deliver the goods? Defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

“No,” Ashok replied. “He sent me the coordinates, and I found the weed in the black bag under a bush in the park.”

“How did you pay the guy?” Harold asked skeptically.

“With Bitcoin. You pay through the website, and they hold it in escrow until you confirm you received the product,” Ashok explained.

“So, you’re saying you never met the supplier?” Kim asked.

“Never,” Ashok said. “Nobody sells drugs in person anymore.”

“You did,” Harold replied, and Ashok looked down at his hands again.

“Are you really going to charge me with delivery? What about simple possession?” Ashok pleaded.

“That’s between you and the DA,” Kim said, and she and Harold stood up and walked out. After Harold closed the interview room door, he turned to Kim Wright.

“So, is that it?” he asked.

“No,” she said as she tapped her fingers against her leg. “The packaging is local, and he claims the delivery was local. If a dispensary is selling on the Dark Web, that’s against the law. I am going to see if I can track this packaging to the source. We’ll see what’s up.”

“Sounds good,” Harold said. “Impressive work, Detective. You taught this old dog some new tricks today.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” Kim said, patting Harold on the back. “But since I won that bet and you owe me a week of paperwork, you can get started by filling out the reports for the arrest of Mr. Patel.”

“I knew that was coming,” Harold laughed as he turned to walk to his cubicle. “Let me know if you find anything else.”

Kim smiled and returned to the table where the black canvas duffle bag of cannabis and other evidence was laid out. She took photos of the plastic bags containing the green buds, capturing the logos, dates, and other markings on the labels. She paid special attention to a greenish

rectangular tag printed with a bar code and a long identification number. When she was done photographing, she placed the contraband into a plastic tub, labeled it with the suspect's name, and walked back to her cubicle.

At her desk, she hung her jacket over the back of her chair and sat down. Within moments, she had emailed the photos of the cannabis packaging to the police liaison at the Colorado Marijuana Enforcement Division, requesting identification of the legal owner. Within minutes, she received an email back with the name and address of the dispensary associated with the RFID inventory tag.

"I've got the dispensary where the weed came from," Kim said to Harold, who was at his desk hunched over the keyboard. "Do you want to come?"

"Hell, Wright. You can't save the world in one day. I haven't even had lunch yet."

"Come on. We can get something on the way," Kim said as she walked away.

The dispensary was on the south side of town. It was a storefront in a shopping center that also had a tailor, a pho noodle shop, and a tax preparation service. They parked Harold's Caprice and entered through the glass door. Inside, they were greeted by a young security guard.

"Detectives Wright and Clarke, Denver PD," Harold said. "Is there an owner or manager here today?"

The guard pointed them towards a tall man of about 40 with long hair and a tie-dyed shirt standing at the register. Kim and Harold walked through the shop toward the man. It smelled of marijuana smoke and incense. As they approached, the man looked up from his cell phone.

“Officers,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Are you the manager?” Kim asked.

“I am the owner,” he replied. “Along with my wife. Allen Randall, but everyone calls me ‘Moon Dog.’”

“Mr. Randall,” Kim held up her cell phone. “Do you recognize these RFID tags?”

Moon Dog squinted and looked closer. The pungent stench of cannabis radiated from him.

“I mean, that’s definitely an RFID tag. They all look like that,” he said.

“Yeah, but this one traces back to here,” Kim said.

Moon Dog frowned. “What are you telling me?”

“We confiscated three-and-a-half pounds of weed from a college kid who tried to sell it on the internet. As you see, it is stamped and tagged from a licensed dispensary. *Your* dispensary. Do you want to tell us how that could be?”

Moon Dog looked flustered. “Can you show me that again? Are there more photos?”

Kim held up the phone and swiped through a few more pictures.

“Whoa! Go back,” Moon Dog said. “Back to the one showing the bag.”

Kim raised an eyebrow but obliged him by swiping back. The picture was at a wider angle, showing the black canvas duffle bag and all its contents laid out on the table.

“That’s a trip, man,” said Moon Dog.

“What’s ‘a trip?’” Harold asked.

“Let me show you something,” Moon Dog said, and he reached under the counter and came back with a white three-hole binder filled with pages. He laid the binder on the glass counter and spun it around for the detectives to see.

“Everything we sell is tracked, as you know. Every cannabis product has an RFID tag and is tracked in the state Inventory Tracking System, from seed to sale, as they say. My wife keeps up with the inventory on the computer, and she keeps this book as a double check. I can show you we are not missing any inventory.”

“And yet we busted over three pounds of weed you’re ‘not missing’ just a few hours ago,” Kim replied.

“Yes, in one of these,” he said. Reaching under the counter again, he came out with an empty black canvas duffle bag just like the one they had busted Ashok with.

“Yes, that’s right,” Kim said, her eyes narrowing. “So, what’s with the bag?”

“We don’t use these bags for our business. These are provided to us by a licensed transportation company. We buy cannabis in bulk, but it’s not safe to store it here. Also, banks won’t deal with

us because weed is still illegal at the federal level, so they won't let us deposit the money we earn."

"Ok..." Kim said.

"So, we use this third-party company to transport and store the bulk of our weed and cash. They have armored cars, guys with guns, and a safe house where they keep everything."

"Are you saying this armored car company stole your cannabis?" Harold asked.

"They're the ones who provide us with these black bags. They come by every week to do pickups and drop-offs. When we need them to pick up cash or excess product, they have us put it in these bags. That way they can come in quickly, grab it and go. They're like Navy SEALs. Boom, boom, in and out. I'm not saying they stole it. But the fact that you found it in one of these black bags seems like a big coincidence. Especially because, as I said, you can check our inventory. We are square here."

"We just might do that," Kim said, thinking. "What's the name of the armored car service?"

"Green Zone Defense," Moon Dog said. "It's owned by the former Denver chief of police. Radford, or something like that, right?"

"The Colonel? Mack Radford has an armored car business moving marijuana now?" Harold asked in surprise.

"That's my understanding," Moon Dog said. "That's why we use them, because we figured he would do everything by the book. We don't want any trouble. We follow the law to the letter."

Kim drew a slow, deep breath.

“We appreciate your cooperation. We’ll be back if we have any more questions,” she said, and she and Harold turned and walked out. When they got in the car, Harold spoke first.

“No way The Colonel is dealing drugs. That man is a war hero,” he said angrily.

“I know,” Kim responded. “I was only there a few years while he was chief. I think I spoke to him one time, but everyone knows who he is. Maybe it’s not him. Maybe it’s somebody who works for him, a janitor or something.”

“What did he say the name of the business was?” Harold asked as they drove off.

“Green Zone Defense,” Kim said, putting on her sunglasses. “I guess I better look them up.”

Chapter 5: Retribution

The passenger train clackety-clacked and swayed as the tree-filled landscape rushed past. A man with deep crevices covering his cheeks and thin wrinkles around his eyes shifted in his seat. He wore a blue pea coat. His pants were khaki and well-worn, and his shoes were brown leather.

The loudspeaker chirped and said, first in English, “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for choosing Via Rail. We are now en route to Montreal. Please ensure your...”

Then again, in French, “Mesdames et Messieurs, merci d’avoir choisi Via Rail. Nous sommes maintenant en route vers Montréal. Veuillez vous...”

The elderly man slouched in his seat, sinking into his pea coat. He studied his reflection in the window. His eyes were sunken and shrouded by heavy lids. Wrinkles and spots adorned his cheeks. A gray beard billowed from his lower face, and strands of gray hair escaped his worn brown fedora.

There were only a few people on the train from Toronto to Montreal at 06:30. The train car’s interior resembled a commercial airplane’s, but with a row of two seats on the right and one seat on the left. Passengers stored their carry-on luggage in overhead bins, and there was a restroom and a coffee bar at the rear. Near the coffee bar, there were recessed areas where passengers stacked their oversized luggage, which were held in place behind cargo nets.

The elderly man sat on the right near the back of the car. A young woman with bleached blonde hair wearing a purple raincoat sat just in front and to the left of him. Other passengers were seated farther to the front. One was a large, bear-like man with a shaved head and a massive brown beard spilling down his black T-shirt. He wore heavy work boots with thick soles and mud caked along the heels. One hand rested on the armrest. It was muscular and veiny, adorned with silver rings on each finger.

About halfway up the car on the left side, two men wearing Toronto Maple Leafs jerseys were seated. One man was shorter than the other. He wore a black beanie over his ears. He had a thick, short brown beard and his eyes were shrouded in shadow. His brow bones protruded so that he looked primitive, almost Cro-Magnon. His taller friend was even more challenging to see, as he wore a hoodie over his head despite the heat. The shorter man was animated as he chattered about something to his associate, who sat quietly facing ahead.

The train shook and rumbled as it passed by rolling green corn, wheat, and soybean fields. A woman wearing blue nurse's scrubs sat towards the front of the car, her fingers tapping away at a laptop. Her bronze skin glowed in the overhead light, and her black hair was pulled into neat, small braids.

The train ride took over seven hours. Seated in his chair, the old man gripped the armrests, resisting the swaying of the rails. His khaki pants clung to his legs as he shifted about restlessly. As the train snaked through the countryside, the rolling hills of corn and wheat gradually morphed into streets lined with houses as they entered the outskirts of Montreal. Throughout the ride, the large, bearded man with the solid, ringed hands remained motionless like a tree trunk.

Close to 14:00, the Via train pulled into Montreal Central Station. As the locomotive decelerated, some passengers stood and took their belongings from the overhead bins. One of those travelers was the big, bearded man.

As the train arrived at the gate, the young blonde woman in the purple raincoat remained seated with her hands in her lap, gripping a cell phone tightly. The two men in the Maple Leafs jerseys stood up together. The shorter one became increasingly erratic. He was telling an animated story or reenacting a boxing match for his friend, swaying back and forth, pumping his fists and getting more and more excited. The old man's face flushed with heat, and he could feel sweat dripping down his sides under the coat. Shakily, he stood up as the train came to a stop.

He stumbled and caught himself on the blonde woman's seatback.

"Whoa there. Lost my balance," he said.

She flinched at his voice and glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyes wide. He scrutinized her. Her dyed hair was growing out, revealing dark roots underneath, and the sweet scent of her shampoo masked the scent of Chaat Masala. Her eye makeup was heavy, her lips plumped with color and gloss, but her cheeks were hollow and thin.

The Maple Leafs fans moved up the train, closer to the big, bearded man. The shorter hockey fan shadowboxed in an exaggerated display. His colleague in the hoodie stood stoically, hands jammed into his pockets. The excited fan tried to demonstrate a straight right punch and accidentally elbowed the great bearded man in the back.

With narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw, the big man turned. Puffing out his chest, the small hockey fan bravely stepped towards his challenger. Wide-eyed, the woman in braids and scrubs hastily folded her laptop and looked to escape from her seat. The shorter hockey fan stepped closer to the enormous bearded man. Spittle flew from his lips as he cursed in Quebecois French.

With two firm shoves, the giant drove the smaller man away. The shorter hockey fan reacted in a blur. His right foot shot forward in an explosive high kick, the heel of his boot smashing into the bigger man's chin, sending him stumbling backward and crashing into a seat. Within seconds, he was up again, lunging toward the shorter man just as the train doors opened. Punches flew, feet and elbows slammed into seats, and the big man's head crashed against an overhead bin. The bin door popped open, spilling luggage into the seats.

Passengers recoiled in terror. A woman screamed, and a man bellowed at the men to break it up. Amid it all, the young blonde woman in the purple raincoat sat frozen. She stared at the rapidly escalating fight, ten feet separating her from the open door. She looked towards the back of the train, the restroom, the coffee bar—and the cargo nets with the luggage.

The old man watched closely as she sat up in her seat, looking around in panic.

Abruptly, she stood and darted toward the back of the train and the cargo nets holding the luggage. She cast a frantic look toward the fight at the front of the car as she wrestled with a hard gray plastic suitcase stuck behind the net.

The old man shuffled toward the struggling woman. As he stepped behind her, he placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Hey, don't worry, I can help."

With both hands on the suitcase's handle, she cast a frown at him over her shoulder.

"I'm OK," she said. "I don't need any help."

"Sure," he replied. Then his calming hand on her shoulder suddenly gripped a fistful of purple jacket and jerked her around.

"What the..." she protested.

The old man's gloved hand flicked from under his jacket and slashed upward, driving a ten-inch steel blade just behind her chin. Her teeth clacked together, and she whimpered. He drove the blade upward until he felt the tip strike the inside of her skull. Then he pressed a button on the knife's handle, releasing a hundred thousand volts of electricity directly into her brain. He held her arm with one gloved hand as she slumped in his arms, her life gone.

Looking around quickly, he leaned her body into the nearest seat and closed her eyes. There was no blood on her throat's pale skin, but a puff of smoke escaped her lips, and the smell of roasted flesh nauseated him.

The old man suddenly straightened. He stood tall, his movements lithe and catlike. Using the knife, he sliced through the cargo net and grabbed the handle of the gray suitcase. He pulled it from the net with ease, and it landed on the floor with a thunk. His gaze swept over the train car. The bald hockey fan was on top of the bigger man, pounding his face. The braided nurse, trapped in her seat, shrank in horror next to them, screaming.

No one noticed as the old man exited through the rear door of the train into Montreal Central Station, but the commotion on the train had alerted other people. Panicked shouts carried, and

rubber-soled shoes squeaked on the polished floor. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a teacher with a group of students clambering up steps to escape the fray.

He rolled the heavy suitcase across the open train station as fast as a hunched-over elderly man could, accidentally banging the luggage into the sliding door frame as he exited into the parking garage. He trotted a short distance up the garage ramp to a white van idling in a parking spot. As he approached, the rear doors flung open and a man wearing a black hoodie and ski mask jumped out. Together, they heaved the suitcase into the open back doors. The old man used the van's rear bumper to step up and into the vehicle.

“Everything good?” the ski-masked man asked.

“We're about to see,” the old man responded, sitting on an upside-down milk crate on the van's floor.

At that instant, the glass door to the train station slid open, and the two Maple Leaf fans burst through, running at full tilt. The ski-masked man, stationed by the open rear doors of the van, waved them to hurry. They sprinted to the vehicle and jumped in through the back, both erupting hysterically.

The man with the ski mask closed the van's back doors and sprinted to the open driver's door. He jumped in, slammed it shut, and sped out of the parking spot, maneuvering the van sharply, tires squealing against the garage's concrete floor.

“Did you see that giant?” the shorter Maple Leafs fan exclaimed in Quebecois, slapping the old man on the knee. “He was colossal! But I dropped him like a sack of potatoes. You saw that, right?”

“Next time you’re told to cause a distraction, pick someone your own size, you short bastard,” the hooded Maple Leafs fan quipped. “What if that huge beast would have beaten you? I would’ve had to shoot him.”

“No chance!” the shorter man said.

The van careened out of the parking garage and headed south on Route 136.

“Is that it?” the hooded man asked, gesturing with his chin toward the gray suitcase on the van’s floor.

“That’s it,” the elderly man nodded.

“Well, let’s see,” he said as he tugged the suitcase towards himself. “Damn, it’s heavy,” he muttered. He fumbled briefly with the suitcase’s locks before drawing a shiny hunting knife from under his jersey and prying them open. The latches popped. He unzipped the main pouch and opened the flap to reveal the contents. The suitcase was filled with rectangular brown packages, like loaves of bread, each meticulously wrapped in packing tape.

He plucked and scrutinized one package.

“Nice,” he declared, holding it up. A white label with the black stamp of a lion’s head adorned it.

“Straight from Pakistan. Grade A dope.”

The old man nodded. He removed his pea coat and fedora and ran his fingers through his few strands of gray hair. Then he pulled the brown leather gloves from his hands, revealing young pink flesh without a single liver spot. Reaching up to his weathered, wrinkled face, he grabbed his nose, and with a firm pull, the nose stretched, then tore away, finally ripping off completely. Large chunks of flesh peeled from his eyelids, cheeks, and forehead. Then he grabbed the long, gray beard and, with a tug, ripped off the lower half of the mask. He picked off the last bits of latex and glue, revealing Raison's gleaming blue eyes, straight nose, and broad, stubble-lined jaw. Under the mask, he wore a wig cap, which he removed, revealing his short brown hair.

As the van drove them away, the hooded man pulled a Glock 19 from his waistband and set it on the van's floor. He peeled his jersey and hoodie over his head, revealing a black Kevlar vest underneath. His pale-skinned latex mask was taut over his features, making him appear twenty years younger. He removed it with slow precision, revealing Bruno's swarthy features underneath.

"Damn, it's hot under all that shit," he spat in New York-tinged English.

Next, the shorter Maple Leaf's fan removed his mask, revealing Matheo's bald head. The bruises and cuts from his match at the Casino du Montreal were mostly healed.

"Throw me my phone," Raison told the driver, who tossed him a flip phone.

Raison selected a number, dialed, and placed it to his ear.

"Everything's good," Raison said into the phone. "Time to exterminate the rats. Show no mercy."

He listened for a moment.

“Roulez comme si vous étiez déjà mort,” Raison said, then closed the phone.

He reached down and retrieved one of the brown packages from the suitcase. He looked at Bruno and Matheo as he tossed the kilo of pure heroin up and down.

“Now, the wolf pack hunts,” he said.

The van took the Route 10 bridge east over Nuns’ Island, passed Brossard, and then turned onto Route 223. They continued until they turned down a dirt drive leading to a secluded fishing site on the Richelieu River. There, a green Ford Explorer was parked in the trees, waiting. They exited the van, took off their clothes, placed them near a fire pit, and changed into jeans and T-shirts from bags in the back of the Explorer. After they had changed, they pushed the van down the grassy embankment and into the river, where it floated and sank slowly into the fast-moving water, like a whale made of glass and steel.

Matheo built a fire at the campsite with split logs and lighter fluid. He placed their disguises into the flames one by one, hesitating only when he got to the Maple Leafs jerseys.

“Damn, bro,” he said. “This is sacrilegious. I can’t do it.”

“Do you want life in prison? Huh? Maybe Mats Sundin will write to you there,” Bruno laughed, then said sternly, “Make sure all that shit is burned up.”

Bruno squirted lighter fluid into the fire just as Matheo tossed in the jersey. The flames leaped, singing Matheo’s eyebrows. He jumped back, swatting his scorched face.

“Mother fucker!” he exclaimed.

Bruno roared with laughter. “Don’t worry, Baldy. You can’t burn your hair off if you don’t have any.”

Raison and Marky, the van’s driver, dug through gear bags at the Ford Explorer.

“Hey, Marky,” Raison said. “Good job today. Your dad would be proud.”

Marky looked down into the canvas duffle he was rustling in. With his ski mask off, he appeared even younger than his 19 years.

“Thanks, man,” Marky replied. “Dad taught me everything about driving.” He continued rummaging. His arms, covered in black and red tattoos, appeared thinner than ever.

Raison hesitated, then laid a hand on Marky’s shoulder. “He’s watching over you. You make him proud.”

Marky rummaged for a moment longer, then slammed his fist against the SUV.

“Fuck, man, I wish you would have let me go with Rage to kill those motherfuckers,” he shouted.

Tears were streaming down Marky’s face.

“All of us want revenge, and we’re getting it. We all have to play our part, and we needed you to drive. That girl I just x-ed out on the train? She wasn’t just a mule. That was the shooter’s girlfriend. The girlfriend of the one who pulled the trigger on your dad. I melted her brain, bro.”

Marky breathed heavily, his fists clenched tightly by his sides.

“Right now, as we speak,” Raison continued. “Rage and our brothers are finishing off the rest of the assholes who killed your dad. Nothing will bring Wild Bill back, but today we’re getting revenge, little brother, and that’s as good as it gets. Those assholes are probably dead already.”

Marky took a deep breath and let it slowly leak out.

“I hope they all suffer,” he said.

“Me, too, little brother,” Raison said. “Me, too.”

Bruno and Matheo were thirty feet away at the campfire, horsing around, watching the disguises burn.

“Are you done yet?” Raison shouted at them.

“Depends how you like your laundry. Medium or well-done?” Bruno shouted back. Matheo doubled over in laughter.

Raison slipped a cell phone into his back pocket and a Glock 43 into his waistband. He pulled his hair back and secured it with a rubber band. He wore a yellow Molson Ice trucker hat and pulled a denim shirt over his muscular arms and shoulders.

The phone buzzed. Raison answered it.

“Go ahead,” he instructed.

He listened for a moment.

“None of ours hurt? None of theirs left?” he asked.

He listened again.

“Good work. Everything is good here, brother. I’ll see you tonight.”

Raison clicked off the call. He walked to the water’s edge, reached his arm back, and flung the phone far into the river, where it vanished with a splash. He strolled past Matheo and Bruno at the fire pit. Their polyester disguises had melted into a stringy blob of melted plastic. The black smoke smelled both sweet and acrid.

“Hurry up. Let’s get out of here,” Raison shouted as he climbed into the Explorer’s passenger seat and closed the door.

He lit a Marlboro, took a deep drag, and blew it out the open window, then rested his hand on the windowsill. In the side mirror, he noticed it was shaking.

Meanwhile, in Montreal, a blue Jeep Grand Cherokee with tinted windows was parked at the curb near the intersection of Saint-Michel and Rue Deville with its engine running.

The street was lined with old, brick row houses on both sides. Rain had splattered the cracked concrete sidewalks. Trash cans overflowed with food wrappers, and TV sounds blared from open windows. The stench of boiled cabbage wafted out of droop-shouldered doors, past men smoking on doorsteps.

Four Dead Wolves sat inside the Jeep. Robeur was driving. Moose and Okwaho were in the backseat. Rage was in the front passenger seat. They wore tactical vests complete with body armor, extra magazines, knives, flashlights, and other gear. Each vest was constructed of Kevlar fabric and ceramic armor plates capable of stopping powerful rifle bullets. The two men in the back seat wore hard-knuckled combat gloves. Only their dark eyes gleamed through the narrow slits in their black balaclava masks. The men in the backseat held AK-47 rifles between their knees.

“Roger that,” said Rage into a mobile phone. “Roulez comme si vous étiez déjà mort!”

He removed the cell phone from his ear and handed it to Robeur in the driver’s seat. Then he lifted a small pair of binoculars and peered at one of the row houses halfway down the block on the right.

Rage sniffed twice, then forcefully blew his nose into his prosthetic left hand.

“Shit, Rage,” Robeur said, “that’s disgusting.”

Rage lifted his left hand and inspected the dripping snot. The hand was stiff, unmoving. Using his right hand, he gave his mucus-covered prosthesis a sharp twist and detached it from its mount with a click.

“What’s wrong, Robeur?” Rage asked, holding the hand towards Robeur. “Do bodily fluids frighten you?”

Robeur flinched away. “Fuck off, man! That’s not fluid. That’s straight up slime.”

Okwaho laughed in the backseat. Rage pulled down the visor and used the mirror to glare at the men behind him.

“What about you, Okwaho? Are you also afraid of bodily fluids?”

“Well, there was this one time with your mom...” the smaller of the two men in the backseat joked. The larger man seated next to him, Moose, laughed.

“And you, Moose. Are you a moose or a mouse?” Rage challenged.

Moose stopped laughing. “There’s no mouse back here,” he growled.

“Good,” Rage said and flipped the visor back up. “Because there’s about to be a lot of bodily fluids, my brothers.”

He retrieved a polished steel hand from a pouch on his vest. This prosthetic was shaped into a fist with a hole through it from top to bottom, as if it were gripping something invisible. He attached the new fist to his forearm with a firm twist and another click. Then, he retrieved a steel tomahawk from a pouch on his plate carrier. It was about a foot long and had a broad, polished steel blade. He slotted the small axe’s handle into the prosthetic fist, where it rested on its hilt. He then secured it with a steel pin through a hole in the handle.

“C’est l’heure, mes loups,” he said as he pulled the ski mask down his face. “It’s go time, my wolves.”

Taking a deep breath, the masked driver, Robeur, shifted the Jeep into drive and pressed the accelerator. The Jeep, powered by a growling V8 engine, sped down the neighborhood street.

Rage held the door handle as they raced toward a red brick row house with peeling white shutters and green moss growing up the steps. As they neared, Robeur slammed the brakes, throwing the Jeep into a skid. It swerved, crashed into a chain-link fence, and bounced back, coming to a skidding halt at the red and green house's front stoop in a shower of dirt and rocks.

Rage quickly opened the passenger door and jumped out, pulling a CZ P-10 pistol from a vest holster with his right hand, his tomahawked left hand at his side. Simultaneously, the back doors opened, and Moose and Okwaho emerged, shouldering their Kalashnikovs. They dashed toward the house's peeling front door. Rage reached it first, but stepped aside.

Moose, the largest of them, delivered a front kick to the old wooden door. It cracked in protest. Rebounding, he delivered two more kicks. The jam splintered, and the door flung inwards with a bang. He shouldered his AK-47, crouched like a boxer, and entered the house.

Upon entry, the dimly lit hallway greeted Moose with the smells of Pakistani food. A cacophony of screams and shouts echoed from within.

A young black-haired man wearing jeans and white socks slipped on the linoleum floor in the hallway. Three bullets from Moose's AK-47 tore through his chest and stomach, spraying blood and tissue across the white baseboard. He curled into a fetal ball on the hallway floor, moaning.

Moose stepped over him and into the living room. A young man with long hair and a woman with dark hair and heavy eye shadow stood in front of the TV, frozen. The man started blabbering. Without hesitation, Moose fired.

Okwaho followed Moose. Together, they moved from the living room to the kitchen.

Rage, pistol at high ready and hatchet in a low defensive position, stalked carefully down the hallway, deeper into the house. Coming from the afternoon sun into the dimly lit hall, he waited for his eyes to adjust. From the back, he could hear confused shouting. He heard panicked feet thumping on the second floor. Listening, he crept down the hall.

A loud crash carried through the wall to his right as his brothers broke down a door, followed by shouting and four thunderous AK-47 shots. Then, a shout of, “Clear!”

Rage arrived at the stairs leading to the second floor. He slowly ascended the wooden steps, his eyes and the muzzle of his 9-millimeter aimed up the stairway.

The closer to the second floor he got, the clearer he could hear voices shouting in fear and confusion. He discerned two distinct male voices and one female. Rage found himself in an empty second-floor hallway with doors on either side. It reeked of cigarettes and marijuana. He stopped and considered the closed doors.

“Premier étage dégagé!” Moose shouted from downstairs. “First floor clear!”

“Deuxième étage! Deuxième étage!” “Second floor! Second floor!” Rage shouted back.

The rapid thud of boots on the stairs signaled the approach of his comrades. When they joined him on the landing, Rage gestured for silence with his tomahawk hand. Then he listened closely. The floor had gone silent. He motioned with his pistol for Moose and Okwaho to take positions on either side of the hall. Both men spread out while reloading their rifles with fresh magazines.

Rage waved his tomahawked hand, and both shooters unleashed a barrage of AK-47 fire, blasting high-powered rounds through doors and walls. The house erupted with flying bits of plaster and wood. Dust and smoke choked the air.

While the shooters reloaded, Rage kicked in the nearest door—a bathroom. A naked, bearded man, still wet from the shower, lay bloodied on the floor from a gut shot. He held up his hand in protest. Rage stepped into the bathroom, raised his tomahawk hand, and struck the wounded man in the top of the head. The blade stuck in the man’s skull like an axe in a log. He gargled and convulsed. Rage kicked his chest and yanked his axe-hand free, blood splattering on his clothes.

Continuing down the hallway, the masked killers meticulously checked each room. They found two more victims in various states, dispatching them quickly with gunshots and tomahawk slashes. After the last room was clear, Rage listened. All was silent.

The men ransacked the second-floor rooms, scattering items across the wooden floor.

Once they had searched the last upstairs room, Rage ordered them back downstairs to the rear of the house. There, the yellow kitchen was outdated and dirty. Opening the refrigerator, Rage found Indian beer and to-go food containers. Next, he inspected the oven—empty.

“Check the cabinets,” he shouted. “Let’s go!”

Moose emptied the cabinets’ contents onto the floor with a clatter while Okwaho opened a pantry door, revealing shelves of plastic containers. Leaning his rifle against the wall, he opened a container and peered inside.

“Found it!” he called out.

Rage walked over and checked the contents: small, blue baggies of white powder. He opened two other containers, finding bags of marijuana in one and colorful pills in another.

“Get all this,” he ordered.

Okwaho removed a black trash bag from a pouch on his vest. He shook open the bag, took the containers from the shelves, and dropped them inside.

“Let’s go!” Rage shouted as his companion shoved container after container into the bag.

“Shit, it’s a lot. It won’t all fit!” Okwaho exclaimed.

“Leave the rest. Let’s move!” Rage replied.

Okwaho grabbed his Kalashnikov rifle with his right hand, then gathered the neck of the sack with his left and slung it over his shoulder like Santa Claus. They stormed through the hallway to the broken front door and stepped into the Montreal sun.

Tossing the trash bag of looted drugs through the Jeep’s open door, Okwaho climbed into the vehicle. Moose came barreling out of the house, ran to the SUV, and jumped in.

Rage strolled casually behind. He scanned the deserted street, his eyes drawn to fluttering curtains and pale white faces in windows. Distant sirens grew louder. He walked to the Jeep and reached inside the open passenger door. From the cupholder, he retrieved a glass bottle filled with yellow liquid, a strip of white cloth dangling from its mouth.

“Come on!” Robeur yelled from the driver’s seat.

Rage reached into his pocket, removed a silver lighter, and lit the cloth on fire. He reared back and threw the flaming Molotov cocktail through the open front door. The bottle shattered on the entryway floor, sending flames whooshing up the walls like crashing orange waves.

Rage jumped into the passenger seat. Before he could shut the door, Robeur pressed the accelerator, the sudden jerk slamming the door shut. The Jeep fish-tailed onto the street, its engine roaring. Robeur made a fast right turn at the intersection, causing the tires to squeal and the Jeep to rock.

“All right, slow down,” Rage commanded, “and hand me my phone.”

Robeur removed the phone from his jacket pocket and tossed it to Rage. He caught it with his right hand, tapped several buttons on the mobile device, then held it to his ear.

“It’s done,” he said into the phone. “Rat’s nest exterminated.”

Listening momentarily, he agreed, then set the phone in his lap.

He noticed that the tomahawk attachment, which was still fixed to his left forearm, was caked with blood and hair. He removed the steel pin, slid the hatchet out of its fist mount, and wiped the blade on his pants before sliding it back into its sheath on his plate carrier.

The men rode in silence, the only sound their heavy breathing. The Jeep continued south, out of the city, across the Honore Mercier Bridge, past the Kahnawake reservation, to a farmhouse near Russeltown Flats. There, they pulled the Jeep into a detached garage.

The men exited, and Moose pulled down the garage door. Inside, the men removed their clothing and threw them into a blue plastic barrel. They stacked their firearms on a workbench. Rage added his CZ pistol to the pile of weapons.

“Outside, let’s go,” Rage said.

Naked, they walked through a side door of the garage and into a fenced backyard, where a garden hose and bottle of dish soap waited. Each man took a handful of soap and smeared it over his head, face, and body while they took turns running the hose over themselves.

Once washed, the killers returned to the garage. Duffel bags of clothing awaited them on the floor. Each man quickly unzipped his bag and dressed in fresh jeans and T-shirts. Once dressed, Rage gestured toward the stack of weapons on the workbench.

“Moose,” he said to the big man. “Cut those up with the torch.”

Moose stood at a sturdy 6-feet 5-inches, and his broad frame was covered in tattoos and thick body hair. When he moved, his muscles flexed. His long, brown hair, woven into a braid down his back, matched his beard. Moose glanced behind him at an acetylene torch. Nodding, he walked to the stack of rifles, selected one, and proceeded to field strip it. He ejected the magazine and worked the bolt several times to ensure the chamber was empty before picking up the torch. Donning dark safety goggles and leather gloves, he unraveled the green and red lead from the bottles. He used a striker to light the torch, then adjusted the flame. Once it burned blue, he picked up the first AK-47 and, with slow precision, sliced it up like a block of cheese, sending sparks showering across the garage.

Okwaho put on a white T-shirt, black jeans, and black riding boots. His damp mohawk dripped water onto his shoulders.

The prospect, Robeur, was younger than the rest at barely 20. His arms were covered in tattoos. He was short and stoutly built, with a reddish buzz cut and a long, red goatee. He had scars on his eyebrows and wore a denim shirt over blue jeans and work boots.

Rage replaced the steel prosthetic fist with his usual plastic hand. Then, after dressing in black jeans and a T-shirt, he stepped to the barrel of clothing. He pulled a long, black rubber glove up to his elbow and picked up a bottle of sulfuric acid. He emptied it over the gear.

Once Moose had cut up the rifles and pistol, they placed the scrap metal into another barrel.

Rage and Okwaho poured eight gallons of muriatic acid onto the scraps of steel. Then they added their vests and other gear to the steaming barrels, which bubbled as the contents dissolved. Using plastic lids, they sealed the barrels and loaded them into the back of the Jeep.

“Jim at the junkyard is going to come by later with a flatbed truck and take care of all this,” Rage said. “Let’s get out of here.”

The men exited the garage, crossed the yard, and walked to the front of the house. There, four motorcycles sat in the driveway. The crew of Dead Wolves killers mounted their bikes, fired the engines, and roared onto the road back to Montreal.

THANK YOU!

Seriously, thank you for reading the first 5 chapters of *The Wolf and the Lion*,
Book One of The Mason Series.

The full novel is available on Amazon in paperback, Kindle, and audiobook.