

fiction

GYPSY BIKER'S COMING HOME

“Parade’s for heroes. Donnie was a hero, wasn’t he?
That’s what the letter said. All the Boys were.”

DOUGLAS SMITH

The morning of her husband’s second funeral, Jili wheeled Donnie’s Harley from the back garage where it’d sat since he and the Gypsy Boys had been called up. She stood it by the big oak behind their little bungalow where the early sun showed every spot of dirt and tarnish. Sitting on the dry grass with rags and cleaner, she began to polish up the chrome.

She wore the old shirt he’d always worn working on his bike. It fit her like a tent, but it smelled of him—oil and grease and gasoline and his own honest sweat. Today, she needed that, needed him close more than ever.

The screen door slammed. Jili didn’t turn. Wouldn’t be Mary. Donnie’s sister worked the early shift at the diner. Wouldn’t be Gram. Night was Gram’s time. Wouldn’t be John either. He’d be sleeping off last night’s bender. Again. She sometimes wondered if it’d been even harder on him, not getting picked with his brother, being left here.

Footsteps shuffled up behind her. She kept working the cream over the chrome of the exhaust pipes. “Mornin’, Mama.”

“What’re you doing?”

Why are you doing that? That was what she meant. But Mama never came at things head on. “Pretty obvious.”

“You never cleaned his bike before.”

His bike. Mama wouldn’t even say his name anymore. Dead and gone.

She shrugged. "I start her up every day, like he asked. Keep her tuned, like he asked." *Keep her ready, Jil*, he'd said. *I'll be back for both my girls*. She blinked away tears as she rubbed. *You came back, baby. But in a box*. "Time to pretty her up again."

"Why? Who'll see it?"

"Today? Everyone. She's riding in the parade. All the Gypsy Girls are."

"Jili, no..."

"Parade's for heroes. Donnie was a hero, wasn't he? That's what the letter said. All the Boys were."

"There'll be trouble. We've had enough trouble."

Throwing down her rag, Jili jumped up to face her mother, to shout at her. But when she saw Mama in her tattered blue robe, arms around herself like they were holding her together, Jili's anger ran away. The morning sun showed every line in Mama's face, and suddenly she looked older than Gram. *God, when did you get so old? Where was I?*

So instead of yelling, she shook her head and sat down again. She picked up her rag. "I'm just riding in a parade. A parade for heroes. Donnie can't, so I'm riding for him."

Mama didn't answer. After a while, she spoke again. "You been talking to Gram?"

"What? I can't talk to my grammy?"

"It's *what* you been talkin' 'bout worries me."

"It's just a ceremony. It's like a second funeral. A proper one."

"The old ways—Gram's ways—are dead."

"So's my husband. So are the Boys."

"Happens in war."

"Wasn't their war?"

"They had a choice."

Jili attacked another spot on the chrome. "Become a drone or go to the camps? That's a choice?"

"We'd all be in those camps. That's what he did for us. That's what the Boys did for this town."

In the polished chrome, Jili watched her shuffle back across the dry grass, weeds, and dirt. "Donnie's dead. The old ways are dead," Mama called. "Leave it be." The screen door slammed behind her.

"It's just a ceremony," Jili muttered, praying that wasn't true.

Jili rode Donnie's shining Harley toward town, his worn Gypsy Bikers jacket hanging too big on her like a shroud. Would the Girls show? Maybe she'd be the only one riding today. The only one standing by her husband's grave. Maybe she wouldn't go through with this.

But when she reached the crossroads for the main road into town, the Gypsy Girls were there. Each straddled their man's bike, wearing his jacket, waiting. Waiting for her.

The idea had come to her the day she'd identified Donnie's body in the morgue. That night, while Mama cried and Mary sat with his colours and John drank, Jili had sat alone at the scarred kitchen table where Donnie had read his conscription letter. That night, she'd read another letter from the army.

She didn't know where the idea came from. All she'd planned to do after reading the letter was get drunk, try to ease the pain. But the letter lay on the table, staring at her with its scratches of black on white, scratches saying Donnie wasn't coming home. Scratches calling him a hero.

Hero. Now there's a word. Never knew what that meant before. But now I know. A hero pays the price. A hero pays—and others receive.

So she'd written her list on the back of that letter. The names of the Gypsy Girls. Her idea started with the first name, and as the list grew, the idea had grown with it.

As she coasted off the road to where the Girls waited, she counted them. Eight. She swallowed. They'd all come. Every one. Aishe, Eldra, and Jeta. The twins, Lela and Lala. Miri, Saifi, and Vai. A wife for every man in the squad—save one.

Kaula wasn't there. Kaula would never ride with them again. She'd hanged herself after getting the same letter each of the Girls had.

Jili stopped in front of them. Pulling off her helmet, she looked at the faces staring back at her. She read pain there, but she wasn't looking for pain. She was looking for something else. And she found it in their eyes.

Anger. A cold anger, hardened into resolve. They hadn't just shown up. They were with her.

She nodded to them.

No one spoke, but every head nodded back. Every one of them put

on their helmets and turned their bikes toward town, Jili in the lead.

As the road emerged from the bush, becoming Jane Street, the main route through town, the Girls revved their engines. Jili relished how people on the sidewalks jumped at the rumbling roar, their heads snapping around as the bikes passed.

No cop's giving us a ticket today. No tickets for noisy Gypsy Bikers, for once. They wouldn't fucking dare. Not for the wives of dead heroes.

Halfway to the town square, they caught the tail of the parade. She slowed, keeping pace, waving to onlookers as if part of the procession, as if the powers now ruling their town had included the Girls in the festivities. Some familiar faces waved back, but most of the crowd were carpetbaggers who'd come with the occupying MCE forces. Opportunists and speculators looking to cash in.

Her hands tightened on the handles. *Cashing in on our pain, our blood. Selling us off, using us up, piece by piece.*

Jane Street ran from the edge of town to the central square. All she could see of the parade was the vehicle they rode behind, an EMP cannon rumbling on caterpillar treads. Donnie had trained on one before the MCE sent him off to die with the rest of the Boys.

She wove back and forth behind the cannon, leading the Girls, putting on a show for a crowd who must've wondered why they were there. *You'll find out soon enough. Party's just getting started.*

In the town square, a stage with a podium stood draped in banners adorned with the MCE's red-and-black globe logo. Just before the square, the cannon turned onto Sumner. She and the Girls followed it and the other parade vehicles into the parking lot running behind the Jane Street retail strip. They parked their bikes behind Rusty's, the local tavern.

"Leave your jackets," she said. "Bait's not bait if it's covered up."

The Girls took off their jackets. They were good-looking women, and what they wore made that obvious.

She led the way through an alley back to Jane where vendors lined both sides of the street. One nearby booth caught her eye. She walked over to it.

Used clothing lay on a rough wooden table. Jeans, shirts, boots. A hand-written sign read, "Hero Souvenirs," and under that, "Wear what our heroes once wore!"

His shirt was there. The red-and-white plaid flannel. The one she'd

bought him last Christmas. The one he wore when he left with the rest of the Boys on an MCE shuttle.

The sign said “Shirts—\$200.” She’d paid \$15 for that shirt at a recycled clothing store. Holding it to her face, she breathed in—then flung it down as tears welled in her eyes. His smell was gone. They’d washed it, and now his smell was as dead and gone as he was.

Scowling, the man behind the table grabbed the shirt and began folding it again. “Shit, lady. I just laid that out.”

She stared at the shirt, ignoring him. She didn’t know him. He wasn’t from the town. Just another carpetbagger. “That’s my husband’s,” she said, more to herself than him. “Last thing I saw him in.”

The man stopped folding. He eyed the shirt, then her. “Well, ma’am, I can give you a deal on it. Say \$150?”

She looked at him then. At the man trying to sell her dead husband’s shirt back to her for ten times what she paid. Hooked nose, fringe of greasy hair, scarecrow body. Her right hand clenched, but something must’ve shown in her eyes. He stepped back before she could drive her fist into his face.

She turned away, fighting her anger. *Not the time. Stick to the plan.* She walked back to where the Girls waited in front of Rusty’s.

Eldra, her round face tight, watched her walk up. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. If she told them, somebody’d start something with the guy. They couldn’t afford attention. Not today.

Aishe brushed straight black hair out of her eyes. “Now what?”

Jili nodded at the stage. “We watch the show.”

Taller than the rest, Saifi scanned the crowd near the stage. “How we gonna find them?”

“Yeah,” Vai said, running a hand through her purple spiked hair. “We don’t know what they look like. We don’t know their names.”

“Don’t need names,” Jili said. “Or faces. We know their unit. The 105 will be here. This fucking day is about them. Celebrating the heroes of Guangzhou. So mingle. Look for uniforms, then check for a 105 arm flash.”

From her jeans pocket, she pulled the olive-green patch she’d ripped from Donnie’s uniform, the uniform the MCE had returned after the Boys’ funerals. She held it up. Beneath the MCE globe logo, it showed silhouettes of two soldiers connected by a stylized radio

wave. One soldier carried a long-barreled weapon. The other wore a visored helmet. Below was the unit name: ADC 105.

ADC. Army Drone Corps. The Merged Corporate Entity's contribution to modern warfare, and the reason they now ruled Earth. Some said their mining ships had found alien tech in the asteroid belt before the plague hit. Whatever the reason, after the Fall, the MCE was the first to start picking up the pieces.

"When you find a 105er, get friendly. Let him buy you drinks in Rusty's after the show."

"Why not the Inn?" Aishe asked.

The 105 was barracked at the Mayfair Inn, across the street from Rusty's. Maude Teller, the Inn's manager, had told Jili.

"We'll get there," she said, "and it'll be their idea. But we gotta get 'em drunk first. Them—not us. Rusty'll help with that. And remember, no real names. First, last, whatever. Nothing tying you to your man. And we're not the Gypsy Girls. We know each other cuz it's a small fucking town."

"Yeah, we get it," Vai said.

"Then one last thing." She scanned their faces. "We gotta find them all. All ten. The whole unit."

"But there's only nine of us," Jeta said softly, pale face under hair the colour of straw. The rest exchanged glances or dropped their eyes.

"Kaula will be part of this, too," Jili said quietly.

Aishe furrowed her brow. "The fuck?"

"Mary'll stand in for Kaula at the cemetery. She's bringing Bobby's bike there." All the Girls knew Mary. Bobby had been Kaula's husband.

"John came by," Eldra said.

"Came to see all of us," Aishe said.

"You give him what he asked for?" Jili said. They all nodded. "Good. He's bringing those, too."

"Is he okay? He looked...rough," Aishe asked, kicking the ground with a toe, and Jili remembered Aishe'd been sweet on him in high school.

Drunk most nights. Most days, too. "Hangin' in. But he's got this," Jili said, ignoring the looks of sympathy. "Let's go." She headed towards the crowd gathering at the stage, the Girls following.

As she walked, part of her scanned the spectators for a 105er.

Another part was thinking about the cemetery, the last place she'd seen Donnie—in his coffin as they lowered it into the ground.

But a bigger part was thinking of the *first* time she'd seen him after he came home...

The morgue lights hurt her eyes. *Bright so you get a good look.* But bright wasn't why she was crying. The pain in her eyes was nothing compared to the pain in her heart.

The morgue was cold and stank of chemicals. *Donnie never smelled like this. He always smelled good. Like Donnie.* But this place smelled harsh and bitter. *Cold and harsh and bitter. Like the world.*

She followed Doc Severin to a wall with three banks of gray metal doors, each the size of an oven door. *Won't find Sunday's roast behind those. Won't find nothing but pain.*

Doc was the coroner and one of only two medical practitioners in town. He'd known Jili all her life. Literally. He'd delivered her after the midwife couldn't deal with a breech birth. He was skeletal thin, bald and bespectacled, and never seemed to age.

Wrapping bony fingers around the handle of a door in the second bank, he turned his long, kind face to her. "Sorry it has to be you, Jili. But..." His words ran into a shrug.

But...

But John was drunk, every day, every night. To Mama, Donnie was already dead and gone. Mary had offered, but Jili said no. *It should be me. Nobody loved him more than me. And nobody will ever love me again like he did.*

Opening the door, Doc pulled out the shelf holding the shroud-covered body of her husband. Even under the sheet, she knew him. Knew the shape of his body. Knew every inch of it. *And I won't ever know you like that again. Not like that. Dead and gone.*

"You ready?" Doc asked.

No. But she nodded. He pulled back the sheet.

She had to turn away. *No, not ready.* In that moment, she realized some secret part of her hadn't believed it, had held a hidden hope it'd all been a mistake. That Donnie was still alive, was coming home to her. But seeing him on that slab, pale and cold, the wounds in his chest and skull, she knew.

Gypsy Biker, you ain't ever coming home.

"Jili, I'm sorry but I need you to say it," Doc said quietly.

She turned back, strong now like Donnie had wanted. *You gotta take care of them, Jil*, he'd said when he left. *Take care of our family.* She swallowed. "Yeah. That's Donnie."

Doc sighed. He began to cover Donnie again, then hesitated. He looked at her. "I hate those MCE fuckers."

She'd never heard him swear. "We all do, Doc."

He bit his lip as if struggling with a decision. "I need to tell you something. You weren't the first person to see Donnie. I mean, in here."

Someone else looking at her dead husband? Even the thought felt like a violation. "Who?"

"An MCE Colonel. Ordered me to hold off having kin identify any of the Boys before he saw the bodies first."

"*Any* of the Boys?" She looked at the bank of doors.

"Yeah. They're all here. All ten."

"So? This guy come in?"

"Yesterday afternoon. Brought a tech. Looked at the Boys. Every one."

"Did they..." She took a deep breath. "Did they do something to them? To Donnie?"

"They sure as hell did."

Wrapping her arms around herself, she looked at Donnie on the slab. *That's just his body. That's not him anymore.* But it didn't help. What helped was her anger. The MCE had killed her man. Now they were messing with his body? "Show me."

"Come around this side."

When she joined him, she understood why he'd positioned her on the opposite side. "Fucking hell."

A gray metal plate, three inches square, lay embedded in Donnie's skull. A flap of skin, shaved of hair, hung beneath it, folded down to expose the plate.

"Haven't sewn this up yet," Doc said.

He wanted to show me.

"Sure you're okay?"

She hugged herself again. "What *is* that?"

"See for yourself." He pressed the top of the plate. A soft click

echoed in the morgue, and the plate swung slowly down to hang over the skin flap.

Silver metal and coloured wires. Inside her Donnie's head. Metal and wires.

Her hand flew to her mouth, too late to muffle the moan that escaped. *Oh baby, what did they do to you?*

Doc pointed to a thin slot inside the jumble, about the size a quarter coin. "That's where it was. Little black rectangle. Circuit printed on it in gold. Like a computer chip. They had me expose that plate. The tech opened it, then says to the Colonel, 'gotta enter the eject code.' He taps on his tablet, and the black chip pops out."

"What was it?"

"Don't know. The tech slips it into his tablet. Reads the display. He looks surprised and says, 'Sir, it's still working.' The Colonel frowns, says, 'So why did the retire command fail?'"

"Retire command?"

"That's what he said. The tech looks inside again and says, 'Sir, the charge is still primed.' Looked scared then."

"Charge?"

"Like in...*boom!* The Colonel swears and steps back. 'Fuck,' he says. 'Can you turn it off?' The tech fiddles inside, real careful, then says, 'Done.'"

"Jeezus," she whispered. *They put a bomb in his head?* "Then what?"

"They took a black chip from all the Boys. The tech bags the chips. Tells the Colonel that to solve the 'retire problem' they'll need to test them with the pilot headsets they'd been paired with." Doc shrugged. "Then they left."

"That was it? They just wanted those chip things?"

He looked around the empty morgue. "Listen. Don't tell anyone, but I took x-rays." He pointed to Donnie's head again. "That wiring connects into the cerebral cortex lobes controlling sensory processing plus motor control."

"I don't understand."

"It's what turns them into drones. And those chips they pulled out? I'll bet they're the heart of it. How the pilots connect to—and control—their drones."

"But what was that shit about *retiring?*"

Doc covered Donnie, then rested a hand on her husband's shoulder. "Drones can take a lot of damage. But..." He shrugged. "They're still human."

She wiped at her eyes. "They can still die."

"And they do it in enemy territory, thousands of miles from their pilots. With secret tech in their heads."

The chill she felt had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. "The retire command," she whispered. "They were supposed to blow up. They tried to blow up my Donnie."

In the town square, the crowd now stretched across Jane Street about twenty people deep. Men in MCE uniforms stood scattered throughout. As the Girls spread out, Jili picked her target, a slim soldier at the far side.

Ambling in his direction, as if seeking a spot to view the stage, she glanced back. The other women were walking through the crowd, individual and casual, part of the gathering audience. Ahead of each was a uniform. They'd all picked their target.

She stopped behind the man she'd selected. Pretending to scan the street, her eyes rested for a second on his arm flash.

ADC 105. She sidled closer.

He had buzz-cut blond hair under a short-billed MCE Forces cap. Shorter than Donnie, without the muscle her husband had carried so easily. But this guy was a pilot, not a drone. Pilots didn't need muscle. Didn't need to run and jump. Or carry weapons and supplies. Or shoot and fight hand-to-hand. Pilots sat in comfy chairs, thousands of miles from the battlegrounds where their drones fought.

And died.

She stepped up beside him, not looking his way but her peripheral vision caught him checking her out. She glanced at him. He winked back. "You part of this?" she said, forcing her best smile.

He puffed up his chest. "Yes, ma'am. It's my unit they're honouring today." He tapped his arm flash, his eyes running over her. "The 105th Army Drone Corps. We're the ones who took Guangzhou."

"Wow!" She pushed out her own chest as she pushed the bile down in her throat. "You're a hero!"

He gave an "aw shucks" grin as he eyed her tits. "Guess you could

say that.”

“So, what was it like over there?” She kept her expression innocent.

His face fell. “Well, I’m a pilot, so I wasn’t...you know... *physically* there. Just my drone.”

“Drone?”

“Boots on the ground. Drone soldiers. Each pilot has a drone twin.”

You’re no fucking twin to any of the Boys. She focused on looking wide-eyed and dumb. “How does that work?”

He jerked a thumb toward the stage. “You’ll soon find out.”

Another MCE uniform was mounting the stage. Officer of some kind. Brimmed, peaked hat, different markings on his arm.

“Kyle Saunders.”

She turned back. The pilot had his hand out and wore a wolfish grin she itched to backhand off his face. But she just smiled from under half-lidded eyes. She shook his hand. “Millie.”

“Maybe after, I can buy you a drink, Millie.”

She looked him over, pretending to consider this. “Just one?”

He chuckled, and she worked to keep smiling. “C’mon,” Kyle said. “Let’s get you a better look. I’m on soon.”

“On?”

“I’m part of the show.” Grabbing her hand, he pushed through the crowd with her in tow. Shouted curses died when people saw his uniform. Kyle ignored them all. Reaching the front, he led Jili to a spot in the middle. He gave her a wink and strode toward the stage.

Below and in front of the stage sat a long, metal-barred cage, maybe thirty feet wide, ten deep, ten high. Inside it, at the right end, stood a soldier wearing an ADC arm flash. He was big, well over six feet and muscular. He reminded her of Donnie. Except for his face. For one thing, she’d never seen Donnie look terrified.

Inside the cage at the opposite end, two large metal boxes sat beside each other, five feet a side and perforated with fist-sized holes. *Breathing holes. Something’s inside those.* Outside the cage, another ADC soldier stood beside the boxes, grinning at the man inside.

Kyle the pilot had joined nine other ADC soldiers standing at ease on stage. *Ten pilots. Is that them?* Marjorie Dunham, the mayor, stepped up to the podium, accompanied by the MCE officer. Short and plump, her plaid suit too tight, Dunham tapped the mike, prompting

loud pops from the speakers. The crowd's babble died.

Frank Kearney had been the town's elected mayor. But after the invasion, the MCE had replaced Frank with Dunham, just as they'd replaced the local police with MCE soldiers.

Dunham cleared her throat. "Can you hear me?" Some soldiers responded, but the townies just stared with hard faces. Frank Kearney had been popular. Even Donnie and the Boys had liked him. Worse, no one had ever seen Frank again.

"Welcome! Today, we celebrate the victory of MCE forces in... Goo...Gooang...zoo." She tittered. "Well, in China. Now, I'd like to introduce Colonel Leonard Gonzales of MCE Special Forces." She turned to the Colonel, but he was already stepping to the mike, and she had to scurry aside.

Gonzales began explaining why Guangzhou had been "the final step to set Earth back on the road to recovery...."

To Jili, it sounded like Guangzhou had been a final step, all right—one where MCE eliminated the last resistance to its global rule.

Gonzales pointed to the ten soldiers behind him. "...today to praise those brave pilots of the 105th Army Drone Corps who..."

Brave? Pilots are never in danger. But she smiled through her anger. Ten pilots of the 105. They were all here.

"...and by those actions have guaranteed the return of civilization."

"You call this civilized?" Norm Badali, the drug store owner, muttered beside her. Two MCE soldiers turned to stare at him. He paled and shut up.

"In order that you may appreciate what enemies of the MCE face—" Gonzales' eyes swept the crowd. "—we have arranged a demonstration." He looked back at Kyle.

Kyle now held something resembling a visored skin-tight helmet covered with stubby spikes. Slipping it over his head, he walked forward to stare down into the cage. The helmet's visor obscured Kyle's face, stripping the pilot of his humanity.

No. Donnie never looked like that when riding his bike. None of the Boys did. It's not the helmet. It's the man. This man became something else under that thing. Something not human.

"You will now witness an ADC pilot..." Gonzales flipped a hand at Kyle, "...controlling a drone soldier." He pointed to the man in the cage. "Drones carry MCE tech imbedded in their brains. A pilot's

helmet links to that tech, feeding the drone's sensory information to the pilot in real time."

Gonzales raised a finger. "Real time. With no delay no matter the intervening distance. Physics says that's impossible. Speed of light is a limit, right? Wrong. Our science geeks solved that."

Alien tech, she thought again.

"A pilot," Gonzales continued, "once paired with their drone, gains *complete* control. The drone's body is no longer their own. It becomes the pilot's body to command. A weapon of war, for the pilot to wield."

Kyle touched his helmet. Below, the caged soldier stiffened. And snapped a salute.

She imagined Donnie on the battlefield, fucking MCE tech in his skull. With some pilot comfortable and safe half a planet away. Making Donnie fight. Making him kill.

Making him die.

"Controlled by a pilot," Gonzales continued, "a drone is stronger, faster, tougher than any soldier."

Kyle's head bent toward the imprisoned drone. In the cage, the soldier suddenly executed a flurry of punches and kicks so fast Jili only grasped what she'd seen after the man snapped to attention again.

"But drones are more than speed and strength," Gonzales said. "Drones do not fear, do not doubt, do not hesitate. Drones feel no pain, no fatigue...." He paused. "Well, drones may feel *all* those things—but it doesn't matter, because their pilots feel *none* of it. A piloted drone is oblivious to feelings. It becomes superhuman."

It?

Gonzales smiled. "Now, for that demonstration." He nodded to the soldier standing outside the cage where the two metal boxes sat inside. The soldier saluted, then tapped a device he held. The box on the left swung open.

A tawny blur leaped snarling into view, to land crouched, head lowered, tail lashing. Jili sucked in a breath. A mountain lion. And the soldier was unarmed.

"We trapped this beauty in the foothills two days ago," Gonzales explained. "Don't know when it last ate. We sure haven't fed it." His eyes swept the now silent crowd. "Let's see what happens."

A memory. A late August afternoon. Riding behind Donnie, leaning

with him into corners, thrilling as he gunned it on straightaways. Climbing into the foothills, road turning rougher, town falling away below.

Then being thrown against Donnie's back as he braked hard, rear wheel skidding sideways. Something big landing in front of them before it slid snarling over the side into the gully.

Donnie stopped the bike at the edge, and they peered over. Thirty feet below, a cougar shook itself free of dust from its slide down to the dry creek bed. The cat stared up at them for a breath, then padded away, disappearing around a bend. If Donnie hadn't seen it crouched above them....

In the cage, the cougar snarled again, snapping her attention back. Its gaze took in its surroundings then settled on the soldier trapped inside with it. Lowering its head, eyes never leaving the man, the cat stalked closer.

The soldier dropped into a crouch, the ease of his body language belying the terror etched on his face. Ten feet away, the cat stopped. It crouched, muscles bunching.

This man's going to die. But she couldn't look away.

The cat pounced. Too late.

Moving faster than she'd thought possible for a human, the soldier leapt forward an eyeblink before the cat left its feet. Slipping between the cougar's outstretched front legs, the soldier barreled into the cat, slamming his shoulder into the beast's chest, propelling it back.

Cougar and man tumbled, over and over, a blurred flurry of human and animal. Snarls from the cougar filled the air. From the soldier, no sound emerged.

The two combatants slammed into the metal boxes at the far end of the cage, and the storm of motion slowed. A gasp escaped the crowd, as if the onlookers had become one.

Cat and man lay on the cage floor. The soldier straddled the cougar's back, legs scissored around the animal's torso, one arm encircling its throat, other hand under its jaw, forcing its head back. Hind paws flailing, the cat tried to rake the man with its claws, but the only damage it inflicted was to itself. The soldier's neck muscles bulged as he tightened his hold.

The cougar's hind legs stopped moving. Its front legs twitched. On stage, Kyle clenched his fists. In the cage, the soldier roared

like a beast. His arm around the cat's neck spasmed. His other hand wrenched its head back.

Over the silence of the crowd, a loud crack sounded. The cat fell limp. The soldier pulled himself free of the dead animal, then walked to the far end of the cage to stand at ease. Kyle remained helmeted, head tilted toward the caged soldier.

"Jeezus," someone said. Stunned and sick, she didn't look to see who'd spoken.

"That," Gonzales said, "was a single, unarmed drone. Imagine what a squad with MCE weapons can do. Imagine what an army can do." He pointed at Kyle. "This is how we won Guangzhou. This is how we will build a new world."

He pointed to the pilot, not the drone, she thought. Drones are disposable. That's what Donnie and the Boys had been. Disposable.

"Maybe you're wondering," Gonzales continued, "if MCE tech killed the cat. Or was it the man?" He flipped a hand at the caged soldier. "He's a big guy, right? Fast, strong. Maybe he could've done it himself." Gonzales rubbed his chin, as if considering this. He shrugged. "Let's find out." He turned to Kyle.

Kyle removed his pilot helmet. Below, the soldier standing outside the cage tapped his device again.

And Jili remembered the second box.

From that box leaped another cougar. It sniffed the body of its dead companion, then locked eyes on the trapped man. The cat stalked forward.

The caged soldier looked up to Kyle. But the pilot stood immobile, helmet under his arm, features impassive. Something left the soldier then. He took a shaking step back as wide-eyed terror grew on his face.

This time the cat pounced first.

Jili turned away, closing her eyes. But she couldn't close her ears from the man's screams.

A gunshot jerked her back. The soldier outside the cage lowered his rifle. The cat now lay sprawled over the remains of the caged soldier. On the stage, Gonzales shook hands with Kyle and the other pilots as Mayor Dunham announced details about the barbecue and the dance later that night.

Jili stumbled through the dispersing crowd, not caring where she

ended up, only wanting to escape the cage and its contents, wishing she could escape those memories as easily.

“There you are!”

She turned. Kyle the pilot was walking up to her. “That...” She shook her head, “That was horrible.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. I guess soldiers get used to death. The Colonel wanted to send a message.”

Message received. “That man... why?”

Kyle shrugged. “He deserted. Gonzales gave him a choice—firing squad or...” Another shrug. “At least here, he had a chance.”

No, he didn't. But that raised a question. “How could he desert? Aren't drones controlled by pilots?”

“Not all the time. Else pilots would operate 24/7. Left on their own, drones have full free will.”

“Don't drones desert a lot, then?”

“Nah. It's rare. Drones are...*encouraged* to behave.”

Same way you encouraged the Boys to enlist, I'll bet. Behave—or everyone you love ends up in camps. Or dead.

“So—” Kyle said. “Ready for that drink?”

Scanning the dispersing crowd, as if considering better options, she spotted four Gypsy Girls, each with an ADC soldier, heading toward Rusty's. Well, she'd been at the front and farthest away. Maybe the others were already there.

Cuz we gotta get all ten.

She turned back to Kyle, letting her anger feed her the strength to paint on a smile to cover what this man had done to the caged soldier. What he and his kind had done to Donnie, to all the Boys. She hooked an arm through his. “Sure. Why not?”

They got all ten. Every Girl had hooked up with a 105 pilot. Vai had snagged two. So, nine Girls, ten pilots.

In Rusty's, the pilots paid and the drinks flowed. Rusty poured full strength for the men. But the little red-headed ex-boxer cut the Girls' drinks with water or soda. The Girls kept forgetting each other's made-up names, but even that helped—no one suspected they were together.

Once the men hit the happy drunk stage—loud, stupid, but still

capable of walking—the Girls dropped their feigned resistance to the men’s propositions. As they all left Rusty’s, heading for the Inn, Rusty presented them with two bottles of whiskey. “In honour of the real heroes of Guangzhou,” he told the pilots. Only the Girls knew what he meant. *The real heroes are the Gypsy Boys.*

Jili carried one bottle, Aishe the other. Jili’s bottle was for the pilots. It had a torn label and contained more than whiskey.

Outside, the sun had set, the street lights were on, and the party was going full blast. A country band playing on stage. People dancing in the streets. Eating from buffet tables. Drinking. Lots of drinking.

The townies stuck together, avoiding the carpetbaggers and soldiers, who seemed to be competing to be drunkest and loudest. Jili checked the town hall clock. Nine-thirty. They’d have to hurry to be ready by midnight. Gram had been very clear on that.

“Somewhere you gotta go, little lady?” Kyle said, slurring his words as he grabbed her ass.

She caught him as he stumbled going into the Inn. “Nope. I’m right where I want to be.”

The ten pilots occupied five suites, including one huge one. *Why not? Bet they aren’t paying for them.* Kyle led them to the big suite. As the Girls and the men paired up on chairs and couches, Aishe and Jili poured drinks and handed them around. High ball glasses for the pilots, filled from the drugged bottle. For the Girls, watered whiskey from the other bottle, in low ball glasses so a Girl wouldn’t pick up the wrong drink.

Handing Kyle his drink, she slipped in beside him on a cramped love seat. Rusty had promised the drug was tasteless. Still, she didn’t relax until Kyle gulped his whiskey, then leered at her.

He called out to the room. “Last drink, ladies, before we move to other activities.” The men hooted, and the Girls pretended to join in.

“What’s the rush, honey?” Vai called from where she sat entangled with a pilot who seemed to have four hands.

“My squad’s got an early morning,” Kyle replied.

Another pilot, Aishe on his lap, snorted. “Just because some fucking drones didn’t go boom.”

Kyle buried his face in Jili’s neck, his hand moving from her waist

to cup her breast. Her guts clenched. Rusty had said the drug took about ten minutes, but she couldn't see any effects yet, and her plan didn't include having sex with these men.

She leaned forward, putting her drink on the table, forcing him to drop his arm. Then she took his hand, interlacing her fingers in his. "What did he mean? Drones going boom?"

Sighing, Kyle sat back. "Nothing."

"But your job's *so* important. I want to understand."

He puffed up a bit. "The drones we piloted in Guangzhou...." A shrug.

"Did something go wrong?" she asked, all wide-eyed and innocent.

He glared at her. "*We* didn't do *anything* wrong." He took another drink.

No, you just got them all fucking killed. "But what happened?"

"Remember what Gonzales said? The tech in a drone's head?"

She nodded, suppressing memories of Donnie in the morgue.

He pulled a small black rectangle etched with gold lines from his shirt pocket. "Here's the heart of it. The key to the ADC. Each drone has one, paired to another in their pilot's headset."

She struggled to keep her excitement from her face. *They have the chips.*

He wagged the chip. "And *this* shouldn't exist."

"What? Why?"

"Came from my drone. Killed at Guangzhou. When brain activity stops, a drone's s'posed to deac...deac..." He frowned. His speech was slurring.

"Deactivate?"

He shrugged. "Blow up. Destroy its embedded tech. But none of the Guangzhou drones did. Gonzales wants to know why." He rubbed his eyes, then blinked, as if trying to focus.

"Why's he care?"

He gave her a patronizing grin. "Can't let our enemies get these, gorgeous. You pull a drone chip without sending the eject code... boom!"

That's why drones don't rip it out of their heads.

"But when the Guangzhou drones didn't deac...blow up, MCE worried that the eject failsafe might also..." He frowned, as if searching for a word. He shrugged. "Fail."

“Oh! Then the bad guys’d get our chips.” She thought the “our” chips was a nice touch.

“Yeah. So Gonzalish...” He frowned. “...Gon-zall-liz...ordered an extrac...ex-track—.”

“Don’t they always bring drones back?”

“Nah.” He waved the hand with the chip, then had trouble stopping it. “Just replace ‘em. Warm bodies, fresh tech, an’ we’re good ta go. We train pilots, not drones.” He waved that hand again. “Drones cost nothing.”

Except the lives of the men who were drones. She fought to keep the revulsion from her face. Drones were expendable. Donnie, all the Boys—expendable.

“So,” Kyle continued, “we brought ‘em back home....” Brow furrowed, he squinted at her. “Say, did you know any of ‘em? The drones?”

She sipped her drink to hide the sudden constriction in her throat. “Might’ve. Gimme some names.”

He stared at her bleary-eyed, then shrugged. “Don’t know any.”

She came closest to losing it then. To smashing her drink into his face and slicing his throat with the broken glass.

You never even knew their names. The men you used and threw away. The Gypsy Boys. My Donnie.

But Kyle’s eyes closed, his head lolling back—and the moment passed. His glass fell to the thick carpet. Prying the chip from his fingers, she slipped it into her bra. She looked around.

Each pilot sat slumped, eyes closed, mouth open. The Girls were going through their pockets. Cries of “Got it!” and “Yes!” filled the room.

But one cry cut through the rest.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” Male voice. Angry.

In a far corner, Eldra struggled with a pilot. He was big, the biggest of the ten. Throwing her to the floor, he stumbled forward, blood-shot eyes sweeping the room where each of the Girls stood frozen over an unconscious pilot. “You goddam....” He swayed. “You goddam bitches—”

From behind him, Aishe swung a whiskey bottle two-handed, catching him back of the head with a sickening crack. He pitched forward, crashing face down onto the floor, then lay still.

Eldra picked herself up. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. The whiskey didn’t work on him.”

Aishe hefted the bottle. “Matter of opinion.”

Jili kneeled beside him, feeling for a pulse. “He’s alive.”

Aishe shrugged. Jili searched his pockets, then held up another black chip. “Everybody find theirs?”

Each Girl held up a chip. Vai had two.

Relieved, Jili tossed the big man’s chip to Eldra. “We need their headsets. Get their key cards and search their rooms. Aishe and I’ll do this one. Meet back here.”

The suite had two bedrooms. Aishe searched one, Jili the other. In hers, she found a mannequin’s head on the bedside table, fitted with a pilot headset like Kyle wore at the demonstration. Lifting it free, she turned to leave. Her eyes fell on a uniform hanging from the closet door, a name stitched on the shirt pocket flap.

K. Saunders.

She felt a chill at the coincidence. *But Kyle’s the squad leader, so it makes sense he’d take the big suite.*

Still...something...flitting at the edge of her mind...gone when she reached for it.

Pushing the thought aside, she returned to the room where the ten pilots lay unconscious.

Aishe was waiting, holding a headset. “Now what?”

“Wait for the others.”

“What if we don’t find them all?”

“Use the ones we get. All we can do. I gotta call Maude.” Jili picked up the phone and dialed the extension for the Inn’s Manager.

Maude answered right away. “Yes?” Tentative, fearful.

“It’s Jili. All’s good. We’re ready.”

“I’ll be right up.” Relief and something else. Pride. Joy. Righteous anger.

The Girls returned before Maude arrived. Like the chips, they’d found all the headsets. Maude came in carrying a large cardboard box printed with “Mayfair Inn Bakery.” She surveyed the sleeping pilots, shook her head, and handed Jili the box. “This work?”

Jili opened it. “Perfect.”

As the Girls packed their headsets into the box, Maude walked to the door. “Good luck. And I was never here.”

“Maude,” Jili called.

Maude turned back.

“Stay off the streets.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I know. All the townies know.” She left.

Jili picked up the box. “Let’s roll.”

Outside on Jane Street, the party was going stronger than ever. Another band played on the stage, but not a local one. More people jammed the square, all drunker, all louder, but Jili recognized nobody. No townies. Only soldiers or carpetbaggers. No one paid them any notice as they wove through the crowd, heading for their bikes behind Rusty’s.

Except for one.

Hooked nose, fringe of greasy hair, scarecrow body. The man who’d tried to sell her Donnie’s shirt. Blocking her way, he eyed the bakery box. “Got enough to share?”

She shifted the container to her other arm. “Private party.”

He squinted at her. “Don’t I know you?”

“Don’t think so.” She moved past, the Girls following. Reaching the alley, she looked back. The man stood watching her, his head moving between her and the Inn they’d just left.

Doesn’t matter, she told herself. We got what we need.

Ten minutes later, she was counting white lines on the highway, riding Donnie’s bike into the foothills, the Gypsy Girls behind her.

They reached the cemetery just after ten. Gram was waiting, looking the way Gram always looked. Like she’d been born old and planned to stay that way forever. She sat on a folding chair inside the circle of the Boys’ graves, her hair a silver shawl cascading over her shoulders. Before her, a small fire burned beside a pile of wood, casting her weathered face in flickering light and shadow. A canvas bag lay on the lap of her long skirt. Inside it, something moved.

Four graves had already been dug up. Pairs of shovels and work gloves, along with a clasp knife, lay on four more. As Jili rode up, she saw John chest-deep in Donnie’s grave, heaving dirt onto a growing pile. Across the circle from him, Mary was waist-deep in Bobby’s, with Bobby’s bike behind it. John’s truck stood twenty feet back.

Each Girl parked their bike behind their husband’s headstone.

Getting off the Harley, Jili looked down at where John leaned on the shovel in his brother's grave, weight on his good leg.

"Thanks," she said.

Wiping his face with a sleeve, he shook his head. "First day I haven't wanted a drink. Worth it just for that."

He'd dug down to the coffin. Cheap white pine, stained by dirt, peeked from under his feet. She swallowed and hugged herself.

John caught it. "Go see Gram. She's been worryin'."

She walked over to Gram, leaned down, and hugged the old woman.

The returning embrace was as strong as always. "You're late, child."

"Came as fast as we could."

"Midnight's comin'."

Jili looked around. The other eight Gypsy Girls were already working in pairs at the remaining graves. "We'll make it. I'll go help Mary. I'm stronger than her."

Gram smiled. "That you are, child."

At Bobby's grave, Mary looked up from the hole she'd started. Her sister-in-law was sweating and pale-faced. "Fuck."

Grabbing the other shovel, Jili jumped down and started in. The graves were only three days old, so the soil was easy to dig. "How was Bobby's bike?"

"Heavy as shit and corners worse. But I got it here."

"Get his jacket, too?"

"Yeah. Kaula's mom."

They both kept digging.

The Girls finished just before eleven-thirty. Tossing their shovels away, each retrieved their man's Gypsy Biker jacket and jumped back into their husband's grave. They laid the jackets on the unearthed coffins, cut a gash in the palm of their left hands, and dripped their blood over the leather. Climbing out of the graves, they gathered around Gram.

She had them each take a piece of wood and, whispering the old words, add it to the fire. The flames blazed brighter, lighting up the ravine. Meanwhile, John pulled rifles from his pickup and laid one beside each grave. The Gypsy Boys' guns, supplied by the Girls.

Jili handed out headsets from the bakery box, and each Girl took

out their black drone chip. Vai handed her extra chip to Mary.

Jili held up the black chip she'd taken from Kyle. "The headsets have chips, too. Silver, not black. And they pair to one of these. For this to work, we have to match them up."

"How?" Vai asked.

Using her headset, Jili showed how to pop out the silver chip. "Each pair of chips has the same serial number. We'll go around the circle. Read out the last three numbers on your headset chip. Whoever has the matching drone chip, hand it over." She turned to Aishe, standing beside her. "You start."

Aishe read the numbers on her silver chip. Saifi raised her hand, and they exchanged black chips.

They continued around the circle until it came back to Jili. Each of the women had exchanged a black chip. Except her. Which meant she must hold matching chips. She read her headset chip. Two five one. She read her black chip.

Eight seven two.

What the fuck? "Everyone, check your chips again."

Everyone checked. Everyone held matching pairs. Except her. Nobody held a black chip matching the silver chip in her headset.

Aishe squinted into her headset. "These have names inside. The pilots?"

Jili read the name inside her headset, knowing what it would say.

K. Saunders.

Through another chill of coincidence, the answer came. She stared at the two chips she held. Black and silver. The black one she'd taken from Kyle came from a Guangzhou drone. One of the Boys. Kyle had told her that.

But the silver chip she'd just taken from this headset would've been paired to the last drone Kyle piloted. And that hadn't been in Guangzhou.

It had been *here*. The doomed soldier in the cage today.

Kyle's headset had the wrong chip. The one that paired to her black chip must still be in Kyle's room.

"I'm going back," she told the Girls after she explained.

"No time, child," Gram said.

"Don't wait for me, Gram. Do the ceremony. For Donnie, too. I'll join you when I get back."

“They’ll catch you,” Aishe said. “They’ll be awake by now. And searching for us.” The other Girls nodded.

“Jil,” Vai said, “you can wear mine.” She held out her headset and chip. The other Girls did the same.

“No.” she said, “I won’t do that to any of you. This was my fault. I should’ve checked at the Inn.”

“None of us checked,” Eldra said.

Not answering, Jili tossed her black chip and headset into the box, then headed for John’s pickup. Donnie’s bike had to stay here.

“They’ll catch you,” Aishe insisted.

She climbed into the truck. “You’d do the same, if it was your man.”

The Girls looked at each other. “Good luck,” Vai called.

She drove through the cemetery, not looking back till she hit the highway.

At the fire, the Girls stood round Gram in a circle. Gram held a live chicken in one hand, a knife in the other.

Jili turned away, eyes on the road, pushing the old truck as fast as she dared, desert wind rushing in, dry and bitter cold.

They caught her before she even hit town. She’d just passed the crossroads where the highway became Jane Street when two army trucks shot out from the trees, blocking the road ahead. Braking hard, she spun the pickup. But two more trucks had emerged behind her, cutting her off.

Someone shone a light in her face, then they dragged her out, searched her, and threw her into the back of a truck. She lay there, bouncing on the floor as they drove into town, four soldiers sitting with eyes and semi-automatic rifles locked on her.

I’m going to die. But that’s okay. Long as Gram and the Girls make it work.

The truck braked hard, tumbling her forward. No one seemed to care. Rough hands pulled her up, then tossed her off the truck. She landed hard on her back, punching the breath out of her and bouncing her head off the pavement.

Iron hands lifted her to her feet and held her as she forced air back into her lungs. They’d stopped outside Rusty’s. Her head spun, her

eyes blurred, but she recognized Gonzales and Kyle standing before her.

Gonzales stared death at her, his jaw working like he was biting through steel. The party crowd still jammed the square, but everyone had stopped, standing silent witness to this scene. She saw no townies.

Kyle stepped up to her, getting right into her face, his breath hot and sour. “What did you do with them, bitch?”

“Not here, Lieutenant,” Gonzales said, his voice low. He motioned to the soldiers holding her. “Get her inside. Upstairs, with the other one.”

As they led her into Rusty’s, Gonzales called to the crowd. “Nothing to see here, folks. Lady just skipped out on her bar tab. Go back to your party. Enjoy!”

Behind her, the noise on the street picked up again. *Party on*, she thought. *Nobody gives a shit what happens to me.*

Inside, a soldier drove a fist into her gut, dropping her to her knees. They dragged her up the stairs leading to Rusty’s party rooms, bumping her hard on each step. At the top, they hauled her into a room with a single window overlooking the rear parking lot. Slamming her down into a wooden chair against a wall, they took a position on either side of her.

Her head still spun, and she wanted to puke. But she forced herself to look up—then wished she hadn’t.

Slumped in another chair against the opposite wall was Rusty, hands bound behind him, one eye swollen shut, the other just a slit. His jaw hung twisted, his face a bloody mask. The little ex-boxer peered at her with his one good eye...and grinned around bloodied, broken teeth. “Not ta worry, lass. Taken worse ‘an this.”

Footsteps. Gonzales entered, followed by Kyle. And another man. Hooked nose, fringe of greasy hair, scarecrow body. The shirt vendor. Gonzales pointed to her. “Well?”

The man peered at Jili. “That’s her. Said her husband was at Guangzhou.”

Gonzales nodded, as if expecting this. “You can go.”

Scarecrow man hesitated, licking his lips.

“You’ll get paid,” Gonzales said. “Or we can get you a chair, too.”

Glancing at Rusty, the man paled, then scurried from the room.

Gonzales turned to Kyle. “Nine of them, you said?”

“Yes, sir. But they took ten chips and headsets.”

Gonzales stepped closer, hands on hips, staring down at her. “The wives of the Guangzhou drones.”

She didn’t answer.

“Where are the others?”

She locked eyes with Rusty. The bar owner gave her a wink.

Gonzales sighed. “I’m guessing ‘Millie’ isn’t your real name. Doesn’t matter. We know the names of the drones. Won’t be hard to find their families.”

No, no, no. Mama. Gram. Mary. John. All the Gypsy Girls. All their families. She fought to hide her fear, but a shudder shook her.

Gonzales smiled at that. He squatted down, his eyes level with hers. “Here’s what’s happening, little lady. You and your girlfriends will surrender the technology you stole. Or I’ll kill everyone in every family of the Guangzhou drones.”

What have I done? Why did I start this? She tried to talk but her mouth was too dry.

“No answer?” Gonzales shrugged and stood. “Perhaps the lady doubts we’d kill civilians.” He turned to Kyle. “Lieutenant.”

Too late, she understood.

Before she could give voice to her scream, Kyle pulled his pistol from its holster...and shot Rusty through the temple. The little man’s body spasmed and slumped sideways, toppling him and the chair to the floor.

Gonzales hadn’t even flinched. He kicked Rusty’s body. “That will be your parents, brothers, sisters, in-laws. Fuck, your children, too, if you have any. Everyone you and your bitch friends know and love.”

Oh god oh god oh god. Rusty, I’m sorry. Oh god.

Then she heard the sound. Or was she imagining it?

She stared at Rusty’s body, letting it feed her anger, letting it beat back the horror. Rusty’d want her to see this through. All the Girls would. The Boys, too. She had to stall. She had nothing else left. “What happens if...if I tell you where the tech is?”

Some tension left Gonzales. He shrugged. “Then I don’t kill everyone you love.”

“What about us?”

“You bitches? You’re dead. All you can do now is save your families.”

There. Again. She'd hadn't imagined it. Because if she knew one sound in the world, it was that one.

The rumbling roar of a motorcycle pack.

Gonzales and Kyle heard it, too. Both turned to the door, listening. The thunder of the bikes grew until she knew they'd reached the square outside. But now, their noise mixed with other sounds.

Gunfire. And screams.

"Get down there, dammit," Gonzales snarled at the two soldiers. "See what the fuck's happening."

Rifles unslung, the soldiers ran from the room and pounded down the stairs. The growls of the bikes had stopped. But the gunfire was more frequent. So were the screams.

The crash of glass and splintering wood erupted from below, as if something or someone had broken through the doors to Rusty's. Or been thrown through them.

More gunfire. More screams. Louder. Closer.

Pistol in hand, Kyle peered around the edge of the doorway. "Jeezus," he swore, then stepped into the hall, firing at an unseen target. He kept shooting until she heard the click-click-click of an empty chamber. "Fucking die, damn you! Why can't you—unhh."

A burst of gunfire cut short the words and life of Kyle the pilot. His body spasmed and danced as bullets sliced through him. He fell back into the room, dead before he hit the floor.

Shrieks and shooting still rose from the street, but those noises died in her ears with the birth of a new sound. A closer sound.

The sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs.

Footsteps, yes, but their cadence was wrong, as if whatever now mounted the stairs to this room was immune to the fear and panic raging outside. Each step fell slow and steady, unhurried, unperturbed....

Unstoppable.

Gonzales, pale face slick with sweat, stood with pistol aimed at the doorway. A man-sized shadow appeared in the hallway. Gonzales fired once, twice. The figure flinched once, twice...,

...then raised a semi-automatic rifle.

Gonzales fired again. And again, and again. The shadowy shape jerked with every shot. Every bullet found its home. Chest. Head. Chest.

But none of them mattered.

As Gonzales reached for another clip, the figure fired a burst that nearly cut him in half. Gonzales crumpled to the floor, wide-eyed disbelief frozen on his dead face.

The figure stepped forward into the room and into the light. He didn't look at Gonzales. Or Kyle. Or Rusty. His eyes settled on Jili and stayed there.

She stood and walked to him. Reaching up, she put her arms around his neck and laid her head on his chest. He smelled of dirt and worms and rot.

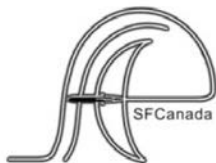
Left on their own, drones have full free will. The words of Kyle, the dead pilot.

"I should've known," she whispered, "you wouldn't need any tech to find me. You always promised you'd come home." Reaching up, she pulled his head down...

...and kissed her husband's dead lips.

She picked up Kyle's pistol and slammed a fresh clip into it. Then, hand in hand, she and Donnie left to join the Gypsy Bikers on the street where gunfire and screams still filled the air. ■

Douglas Smith is an award-winning Canadian author of speculative fiction, with over a hundred short story publications in thirty countries and twenty-five languages. His collections include *Chimerascope* (2010) and *Impossibilia* (2008), as well as the translated fantasy collection, *La Danse des Esprits* (France, 2011).



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