

CHAPTER 1

He was thinking about Detto. Not because he was particularly concerned. It was his job. He was out front. When you're out front, you have to watch the twists, turns and obstacles....and the guy behind you. That guy was Detto and, God knows, Detto had watched out for him. But he was thinking about Vermont and what had happened there. He had a pit in his stomach. Or maybe it was a little higher. But whichever it was, he was screwing up. He just didn't know it yet. The wind felt good and he cracked the throttle.

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Carson milled around with the other cops. The crime scene people had done their work and the body, or what there was of it, was being removed.

“Jesus Christ, Virgil!” Carson instinctively jumped back. She had witnessed far worse, but that was another time and another place.

“Getting squeamish on me, Kit?” Virgil answered as he held the head up by the hair like a trophy turkey as he walked out of the brush onto the roadside.

“Bite me, Virgil.” Carson had regained herself almost immediately. “And don't call me

Kit. And put that head down. Don't you have any respect?"

"He was a prick."

"Doesn't mean you have to be one." But Carson knew that bus had left the station.

"Anybody got a little bitty body bag?" Virgil snorted through a laugh.

"Virgil, put Mr. Sturgill down and get back to your prowler before I burn your ass."

Sheriff Andrew Stockwell was not amused by his nephew's sophomoric ways and he found it particularly annoying in front of the SBI, CSI, State Troopers and the National Park Police. His sister could never pay him back for putting up with the little shit and he never passed up a chance to let her know.

Carson let out a scream and dove to the ground. This time she was followed by every other cop in harm's way.

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Striker's first instinct was to grab a handful of front brake. The front of the bike dove hard as the big shocks compressed. But he knew instantly it was no good. He let off the front brake and slammed his foot on the rear brake as he jerked the big cruiser over onto its side.

Detto was riding through a sea of sparks as he held his front brake and back brake simultaneously. He was in the back. He had more room. Maybe he could stop and keep the Harley upright. And maybe he wouldn't run over his partner who was now sliding

down the Blue Ridge Parkway in front of him. Who the hell were all these people in the road?

Matt stayed with the bike. This wasn't his first rodeo and he knew how to slide the bike to a stop. But he had never slid one through a crowd of cops jumping every which way, scrambling for their very lives. Even if he didn't hit anyone, he knew he was screwed.

Vito DeBenedetto finally had the Harley Ultra stopped. He quickly looked from the stern face of a Sheriff, to a macabre bloody head on the roadside, to his pal, prostrate and seemingly lifeless on the pavement. He marveled as he slammed down his kickstand and scrambled to his buddy. How could pastoral serenity turn to a cluster-fuck in a nanosecond?

Matt slid out from under the Vulcan with a groan. The chewed-up highway bars and left side floorboard had kept the 800 pounds of searing heat off his leg. But he was going to have road rash. He knew that. He stiffly worked to stand. Someone was pulling him upward by his bicep. He cast a cloudy look at his partner.

"Slower, Detto. Give me a second, here."

"You okay, Matt?", Detto eased his grip.

"Yea, I think so..." Matt scanned the faces of the gaggle of cops. "Carson?"

"Mike Striker? Get out!" Carson said.

"Carson." Detto stated with little enthusiasm.