

---

## Chapter 1

---

**R**yatt McCall kicked back in his chair and propped his boots up on his well-worn desk. It had been a long week but things were progressing. They had recently been able to get the generators operational on the wells which, in turn, filled their water tanks and that made a world of difference in the quality of their lives. Things were definitely looking up. Over one hundred and fifty residents made up their community now. His club, Southern Quest, provided security and other essential services for the community. They didn't do it alone. Everyone in the community contributed. Just recently, they had two new arrivals. The men had been wind power technicians. Wind power, if feasible, would be highly beneficial. A few of their gearheads had managed to rig up solar power but it didn't provide for the whole community. Early on they had rescued a couple scientists from a local university. They had set up a lab and manufactured petroleum products. Unfortunately, the community's success drew attention. Not everyone wanted to rebuild society. Some people didn't know how to work. They only knew

how to take. So, his crew put their lives on the line every day to safeguard their new world.

Raising his cup to his mouth for his first sip of coffee, he heard heavy steps headed toward his office. He knew it was something important because his crew knew not to fuck with him before his first cup of Joe. Arsenic, head of public liaison and security, stepped into his office. "Prez, there's some dude on the other side of the perimeter yelling for you. He's in rough shape. Might be infected."

What the fuck! Ryatt got up and followed him down the hall and into the clubhouse rec room. It had been a while since anyone with the virus had shown up but they had to be careful. If it spread again people would die. Elderly and immune compromised people were under their protection and he wouldn't risk their lives.

GI, the club's Sergeant at Arms looked up as they entered. "Sup?" he asked and pushed to his feet.

"Looks like we got company." Ryatt nodded his head toward the door. GI followed.

Ryatt stepped out onto the wide, wooden porch and raised a hand to shade his eyes. The early morning sun didn't stop him from spotting a body on the other side of the fence. Jawbone, the VP watched from his post. Nobody had approached the fallen man.

"Ryatt!" The man called out in a weakened voice.

"Fuck," Ryatt said. The voice sounded familiar.

He jogged down the steps and moved closer to the fence.

"Not too close, Prez."

"It's Mr. Abner," he responded to Jawbone. Mr. Abner was the assistant principal at the local high school before shit hit the fan. He had saved Ryatt's ass on numerous occasions. If possible, he would help him even if it meant mercifully putting him down.

"Ryatt," he gasped.

“I’m here.” Ryatt had to agree with Arsenic, from what he could see it didn’t look good. “What happened? Do you have the virus?”

Mr. Abner grabbed the fence and pulled his upper body off the ground. His once blue shirt was covered in blood.

“No. Shot.”

“Open the fucking gate,” Ryatt yelled and jogged toward it. The gate was nine-foot-tall, six foot of chain link and another three foot of barbed wire. Since the virus and the aftermath, the club had to be careful. Jawbone and GI followed him.

Ryatt knelt beside Mr. Abner. He’d been shot in the shoulder and maybe other places too. There was a lot of blood. Arsenic and a couple of prospects formed a half circle and watched for any danger. As always, they were packing serious heat.

“Ryatt, you have to help me.”

Ryatt eyed him critically. He would try but it might be too late. “We’ll get Vlad.” Vlad, the doctor got his nickname because he always had someone’s blood on him.

“Not me. Eden.” Mr. Abner grabbed his hand. “My daughter.”

“Eden,” Ryatt repeated. He hadn’t seen Eden in a few years; she was several years younger than him. He remembered the cute, blonde, girl who had followed them around. “Where is she? Is she hurt?”

Mr. Abner coughed up blood. It wasn’t a good sign. “The shed behind the church on Mills Lane.” He stopped to gasp for breath. “I put her in the underground shelter.”

“Is she hurt?”

Mr. Abner shook his head. “Wasn’t.”

“Prospects we need to get him inside to Vlad.” He moved back and three prospects lifted the old man.

“Locked from inside. Yellow bird.” He grunted in pain

when they lifted him. "Password... yellow bird. She'll open the door for you."

He nodded. "I'll get her."

"Satan was there. Don't let them..."

Ryatt knew what he meant. Satan's Charge, a rather brutal, outlaw club was there. He squeezed Mr. Abner's hand. "We got it."

"You're the only one I can trust..."

Ryatt turned to Jawbone. "Gather the crew, we're riding in twenty."

---

Ryatt headed off with a mission. Find Tracker, the Road Captain and make a plan. The church was in neutral territory but Tracker knew the best routes. Just because it was neutral didn't mean there wouldn't be others there searching for resources. If anyone knew about Eden they'd definitely be out. Women were the hottest commodity, especially if they were young and attractive.

The cure and the aftermath decimated the population. Women were affected in even greater numbers. The Southern Quest MC Club did their best to provide for their community and to rescue others in need. The enforcers and members scouted and hunted every day. Rescuing a young lady would be their pleasure.

Tracker had his maps spread out. Things are a lot harder than they used to be. GPS was a thing of the past along with a lot of other modern conveniences. Ryatt's walkie screeched and he turned it down. Jawbone put out an all call. Cell phones stopped working a long time ago. But the club still had a lot to be thankful about.

"It's only thirty minutes out if we run the gauntlet through town or we skirt it and add ten."

“She might not have an extra ten. We put a cage in the front and the back with some high-power shit. We roll through twenty deep and drop Sniper at the tower. By the time we hit town, he’ll be locked and loaded.”

Ryatt knew he could trust his crew. They were good ol’ boys and most ex-military. The fuckin’ Satans weren’t even a crew until everything went to hell. They were violent but undisciplined. Their leader, Rabid was a real dick weasel. His own crew couldn’t trust him. It was rumored he took the vaccine and survived but it fucked up his head. Something had fucked him up. Eventually, he would have to put him down.

“Jawbone, you are staying behind.”

“Prez—”

“No argument. I need you in charge here. We need security on the club and the lab. This could be a set up.”

“K, Boss.”

“Speaking of security, is the observation tower by the water tanks finished? We don’t need anyone fuckin’ with that.”

“Just about,” Jawbone answered.

Ryatt went to his room for extra mags. He tucked a second blade in his boot. Eden had been a cute girl. She had always been smiling. Her mother, before she passed had been a knockout. Chances were Eden would be a damn fine-looking woman. She’d have to be twenty-four give or take, by now. Rescuing her might cause a new set of problems with the crew but he would keep his promise to Mr. Abner. Ryatt owed him. If it weren’t for Mr. Abner, he might be an entirely different person today.

The crew had gathered in the rec room. The club secretary, Frat pulled his long, blond hair back into a ponytail. He didn’t much resemble the frat boy prospect he’d been five years ago. Everyone had tats but Frat had the most. The only thing he didn’t ink was that pretty boy face. “Frat, I was just thinking. Don’t you have history with Eden?”

Frat shook his head. “Yeah, Frat.” How’d that go?” GI chuckled. He knew the story.

Frat rubbed his jaw. “Watch her right hook.”

“You’re lucky Luke didn’t come after you. She was only fourteen.” Luke was Eden’s older brother and one of Ryatt’s best friends. Luke had been in the military when the virus struck. He was given the vaccine. It hadn’t ended well for him. Luke was another reason he would move heaven and earth for Eden.

“She looked older. Fuck! I was only seventeen.” Frat shrugged his massive shoulders.

Luke, Jawbone, GI, and Ryatt were all in the military when Frat crossed the line with Luke’s little sister. It was a good thing for him because they always had each other’s backs. He wouldn’t have tolerated anyone messing with Luke’s sister. They had grown up together and joined together. After they got out, they’d formed this club. They’d met Arsenic, Sniper, Tracker and Vlad in the service and welcomed them to the team. Frat was their first prospect. He’d proven his loyalty. He had the face of an angel but would die to protect this crew. These men were the main crew, the officers, his brothers, the ones Ryatt had and would trust with his life.

They weren’t your typical MC Club. Before the virus, they had a few shady dealings but mostly dealt in security and arms. Occasionally, they’d hired out as mercenaries if the price was right. But the goal had been to clean up and protect their community. The town had been hit hard by drug use and had been on a downward spiral. The local community college had closed. It, along with student housing, had sat empty and boarded up. The town had fenced the whole area off to try to keep out vagrants. Jawbone, GI, and Ryatt took a couple overseas merc jobs to raise the cash to buy the property. The Southern Quest MC Club was born. The rest of the officers soon joined the club. They did some minor remodeling on the

student housing building to suit their needs but most of their time had been spent recruiting young men off the streets as prospects into the club. Club rules: no hard drugs and zero disrespect.

Before the disaster, they were making progress cleaning up the town. They had bought a small strip mall located just outside the gates with a gym, restaurant, laundromat and tattoo parlor. They had tried to provide jobs to the youth of the community and make money for the club. It had been going fairly well until fuckin' Armageddon. They still provided for the community but it was more of a challenge. Thankfully, they didn't have to worry about the Crazies anymore, the ones that took the vaccine and flipped. They all died out in the early months. That was a fucked-up time. Ryatt had no idea how many Crazies, he'd killed. Too many! Unfortunately, some of them wore familiar faces. The club lost a couple of members and more than a few civilians. Protecting the community during that time proved difficult because so many had taken the vaccine. He was glad they were a skeptical group and hadn't run out to get vaccinated.

"Prez, we're ready to roll," GI announced.

"Counting on you, Jawbone," Ryatt said. Straightening his shoulders, he headed for the door. He never showed any weakness to the men, his confidence inspired theirs.

Jawbone walked out with them. "Nothing comes through me. You know I got the perimeter mined up and my finger on the trigger. Anybody trying to roll up and we are pickin' 'em up in pieces, brother."

"Okay brothers. Heads on a swivel. Sniper, you're in the back of the first cage. Hop out at the tower and cover our asses," Ryatt gave the order.

Sniper jumped in the back of the first truck. He was their treasurer but a fuckin' dope sniper as well. There was a prospect driving and another on the big gun. The sound when

twenty bikes roared to life was deafening. Ryatt gestured and Sniper banged the side of the truck as a signal to roll out.

There was nothing like the power of a cruiser between your legs. Ordinarily, he enjoyed a ride but today was serious business. On the open road they could see anything coming their way. But as they neared the town, Ryatt's tension mounted. The main drag was full of shops that had been looted long ago. They were perfect cover for anyone who waited to draw them in. Ryatt scanned the rooftops.

The church was on the far end of town on the right. As planned a few bikes pulled off and cut over another block to recon the area.

The walkie squawked. "All clear from up here," Sniper announced.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Ryatt motioned for the crew to stop as he and GI rode around back of the church. He had attended this church a few times when he was young and he knew exactly where the storm shelter was located.

Ryatt felt a knot in his chest when he saw the rickety shed door hanging open. Skidding to a stop, he hopped off his bike barely taking time to make sure it stayed upright. His hand was on his weapon as he ran toward the shed. The trap door stood open. His heart dropped.

"Fuck!" he cursed. They were too fucking late. The thought of Eden in those bastards' hands made him want to puke his guts out. He slammed his fist into the shed door and it bounced back at him. From behind the door, a Glock was leveled at his head.

He froze in place. It wasn't the first time he stared down the end of a barrel. Hopefully, it wouldn't be his last.

GI's weapon clicked behind him. A prospect approached from the left.

Ryatt held his hands out and motioned to lower the weapons. The figure holding the weapon was decidedly femi-

nine. He tilted his head to see under the straw hat. “Yellow bird,” he said hesitantly.

Eden tipped her cowboy hat back. “Ryatt,” she gasped as she threw herself at him. She was all long legs, arms, and blonde hair as she wrapped herself around him. He tightened his arms and squeezed. She wasn’t that flat chested little girl anymore. Instead, she was a woman and soft in all the right places. She laughed, cried, and kissed his neck and jaw. He gritted his teeth and tried to rein in the carnal direction of his thoughts.

“I knew Daddy would make it and you would come.” She pulled back and beamed at him. Her eyes were as green as grass and still looked at him as if he hung the moon. Ryatt sucked in a ragged breath. He had such a pain in his chest, for a moment, he thought he’d been shot.

“Eden,” he sighed. She was just as beautiful as the garden she was named after. Her head reached to just under his chin and most of her height was long, lean legs. Her curves promised a better ride than Sturgis. And he was the only one who would claim that ride.

The crew closed in around them and he pulled her closer. “Claimed,” he announced with a firm warning.

“What?” she asked, her wide innocent eyes turned up to him.

He didn’t answer. He just ruffled her riotous, blonde curls. The proclamation was for his brothers to hear and to heed. “We need to roll.” He had to get her to safety before Satan’s Charge decided to return.

“We can put her in the cage,” a prospect suggested.

“She rides with me.” He used his ‘don’t fuck with me’ voice.

No one argued.