

VERTICAL  
COFFIN

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN ■ NEW YORK

This one's for my old friend, Chuck Bowman.  
As young men we shared far-fetched dreams  
and now we're actually living them.

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**VERTICAL COFFIN:** A term used by SWAT teams to describe any threshold. When clearing a house, police are most vulnerable to gunfire while passing through doorways.

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## PROLOGUE

# JULY 14 THESE COLORS DON'T RUN

**T**HEY SWUNG WIDE off Trancas Canyon, thirteen bikes clutching down to make the turn; high-octane Harley engines growling loudly, tearing an ugly hole in the still afternoon. Right ear down, one by one they all finished the turn and straightened up on the Pacific Coast Highway, the old Camino Real. They were ten miles northwest of Malibu, hurtling along the four-lane, timing their moves to roar around slower-moving traffic. Thirteen Harley V-twins in formation. Metal locusts growing larger and more dangerous as they swarmed, the two-second rule be damned.

They called Emo Rojas "Maniac." He was prez, so he was out front, riding point. Emo's giant shoulders reaching high to grab polished ape hangers that stretched like chrome wings over his

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black Harley Softail. His four-stroke roared angrily: intake, compression, combustion, exhaust. A growling black-and-silver she-devil.

Next was the ride captain Darren Zook, called "Goat" Big, with sleeveless black leathers and arms from Gold's Gym. Hard to tell where his arms stopped and the vest began—he was that black. Outrageous wraparound, chrome-rimmed darks hugged his square face like clip-on bug filters.

Behind Goat was Jabba the Slut. She'd arrived just minutes before the ride, patched in club colors. An American flag do-rag wrapped her head while ink-black shades the size of welders' goggles hid her porcelain-white face. She was club treasurer and had the ride money, so she rode third. Bulging biceps and man-sized thighs straddled the 95 V-twin of her yellow-and-black Screamin' Eagle Deuce; scuffed boots thrust forward on highway pegs.

After Jabba the Slut came the two-by-twos. Blam-Blam, on a chrome-and-black Harley Super Glide. A tub of guts in too-tight leathers with vibrating love handles. Next to him was Drill-Bit, then Johnny Bravo and Pebbles, Wart and Shooter, Mean Mike and The Rooster.

Then came Chooch and Shane Scully. Since they were not patched members of the club, only guests, they rode last: tail-gun charlies. Chooch on Emo's backup bike, a red Harley Fat Boy with a dry clutch. Shane rode Swede Petersen's modified Road King. They came out of Trancas Canyon at the end of the line, completed the turn and accelerated, hurrying to close ranks, bunching tight again, until they blocked both southbound lanes like scurrilous outlaws—riding four across, lane splitting, the throaty animal rumble of all that horsepower redefining them, the exhaust; a self-induced steroid.

You could see awe and revulsion in the eyes of the Sunday drivers they passed. The beach crowd in their SUVs looked over and saw thirteen thugs on custom choppers with mean-looking, radical fork rakes. They saw the head wraps and greasy leathers



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and quickly looked away. The club patch—the colors—rode their leathers defiantly. Across the shoulder blades in a death font was their name: IRON PIGS. Under that the logo: a fierce warthog with curling tusks and fire blowing out of its nostrils. The bottom rocker said “California.”

Only the baddest club in the state was allowed to wear a bottom rocker. In the eighties that was the Hell’s Angels. Then the Mongols blew in and changed all that. They shot a few Angels, ripped the bottom rockers off the dead bikers. The Mongols said you wore the California patch at your own risk. It had been the rule ever since. All bikers knew that if you were caught by a Mongol with a bottom rocker under your colors, you were dead. Mongols alone wore the patch.

Mongols, and of course, Iron Pigs.

The thirteen riders snaked down PCH. The Pacific Ocean glittered on the right, the Malibu Mountains dressed in dry, beige summer colors framed the left. Finally they turned on Mulholland Highway, climbing into the hills. Now the roar of bored pistons and straight pipes bounced off mountains, pinging loudly in the granite canyons. Another left turn off Mulholland took them to Las Flores Road, the hawks slowing as the road wound dangerously. The late afternoon sun glinted off polished chrome and lacquered paint. A few people heard the deafening rumble and came out of their houses to watch them pass. Then up onto Puma Road, two-by-two, a growling metal centipede making its way slowly along the narrow highway.

Shane looked over at Chooch and saw him grinning. Hard not to feel the rush of all that energy and power. They were nearing the end, rolling in, loud and dangerous. Around the corner, up ahead, was a biker hangout high in the Malibu Mountains.

They rounded the last curve and saw The Rock Store. The parking lot was full. Almost a hundred bikes lined up like soldiers at parade rest, all dressed right, leaning on metal kickstands. Mostly, it was American iron, Harleys and Indians,

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with a few Japanese rice-burners. The Rock Store was Mecca for Southern California bikers. It was the high church—hawg heaven.

Maniac pulled in and, one by one, the Iron Pigs backed their bikes into a line, then shut them down. Silence filled their ears, laid tight against their skulls. Goat dismounted and turned to face the Pigs.

“Ride captain buys the beers,” he said. A cheer was followed by a round of vicious insults.

“I got your ride money, Goat. Right now, you couldn’t buy a Hoover Street hooker,” Jabba the Slut scoffed. Then she threw a canvas bag full of cash at him. The Iron Pigs whistled and hooted.

Chooch and Shane climbed off their borrowed bikes. “I’ll buy you a beer if you don’t tell your mother,” Shane whispered, instantly realizing he sounded like a Boy Scout at a truck stop.

“I own you now, Dad,” Chooch teased. “If I tell Mom about this, you’ll be in honey-do jail until Christmas.”

“You gotta take a few chances in life,” Shane grinned, and threw an arm around his son’s shoulder as they all walked toward The Rock Store.

Shane heard a bike start up and looked around just in time to see Jabba the Slut pulling out on her custom Softail. Then he remembered she said she was on the mid-watch and had to get to work. She deep-throated the yellow-and-black Harley, roaring down the road, laying rubber, kicking ass on her way back to L.A.

“I wonder what she looks like under those goggles and do-rag?” Shane pondered.

The Rock Store had been a stagecoach stop in the early 1900s. Ed and Veronica Sazko owned it since the sixties. They made it into a convenience store. The rock foundation was responsible for its name. Two old red-and-white gas pumps sat out front dingy off the gallons like antique slots. In the seven-

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ties, the Sazkos had added a dining room and bar. They'd sold one hell of a lot of beer since then. Most L.A. bikers eventually hit the Rock Store. Everybody from Jay Leno to old-time, bee-in-the-teeth Harley roughnecks hung there. Shane, Chooch, and the remaining Iron Pigs found three open booths, crowded in, and drank beer as the roof shadows grew long, stretching across the porch into the dirt yard. The place started to clear out by seven. By seven thirty most of the Iron Pigs had left. Maniac, Goat, Chooch, and Shane hung on stubbornly, not wanting the ride to end. Alexa was in Chicago at a police convention so Shane and Chooch were spending some guy time together. Maniac and Goat took off their head wraps and the cool biker handles disappeared with them. They were back to being Emo and Darren.

Chooch was explaining the Wing-T offense he quarterbacked at Harvard-Westlake High School, finger painting plays on the table using the moist condensation from their beer cans. Emo watched closely as the play was diagrammed on the sawed wood.

"Don't you run any options off that formation?" Emo asked. His overdeveloped shoulders and muscular build made him look like a linebacker, but Shane knew he'd once played quarterback at Cerritos Junior College.

"Yeah." Chooch drew another play as he talked. "You can fake to the halfback, coming across like this; or do a naked roll-out pass run option. We also have a pitch to the trailing back."

Emo leaned over and looked down at the diagram painted in water on the chipped cedar table. Then he added a play of his own.

"You should tell your coach to put in a Z-Option off the roll-out. You throw back to the wingback on the far side." He drew the pass pattern and Chooch looked carefully at the play.

"Counter-motion," he said, and Emo Rojas nodded.

Shane thought this was just about perfect. He and his son

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were making the important, but difficult, transition from parent and child to buddies.

They heard the four Harleys pull in, but nobody paid too much attention. Darren Zook went to the restroom to tap a kidney. Shane went to get another beer from the bar. He had just paid when he heard angry voices coming from the other room.

"Do I look like I give a fuck?" he heard somebody shout.

Shane moved out of the bar and stood in the threshold of the dining room. He saw four scruffy looking bikers leaning over the booth where Emo and Chooch sat. Shane knew at a glance these were outlaws. One-percenters. Chooch was trying to get to his feet, but one of the large thugs had his hand on the boy's shoulder holding him in place. Hard to do because Chooch, at eighteen, had grown into a six-foot-three, 225-pound college football prospect. These four outlaws were patched. When one of them moved, Shane saw the Mongol's colors riding his back like a dangerous insult.

"This ain't gonna work, dickhead," one of the Mongols said to Emo. He was big. At least two hundred and fifty pounds, with a red beard and deep-set eyes. He looked mean, but slow.

"Hey Rainman," one of the other Mongols said to red beard, "this kid ain't patched. Maybe he's a prospect."

Rainman leaned in and glared at Chooch. "Then you're prospecting for dead people." He turned and growled at Emo. "You wear the bottom rocker in our state, you eat shit and die."

Chooch was still being held in place. But then without warning, he bolted up, spun, and shoved the Mongol behind him hard, using a forearm shiver. Suddenly everyone was moving at once. Emo Rojas ducked under Rainman's wild right and bolted out of the booth. Chooch scrambled out beside him.

A hard-eyed Mongol with GEEZER stitched on his pocket was holding the door. He pulled a cut-down out from under his three-quarter-length coat—a shotgun with a four-inch barrel.

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Cut-downs were illegal in California, but these guys made their own laws. Geezer chambered the piece and everybody froze.

"You got one way outta this place," Rainman said to Emo. He was smiling through his red beard, but his slit eyes offered little humor and no hope. "You get down on your belly and ya crawl out the door. I'm gonna break you up, rip that bottom rocker off, and stuff it up your ass. Then if you suck this prospect's dick, I might let you run."

Now a slight smile appeared on Emo's face. Adrenaline, or some form of street insanity. Chooch was on the balls of his feet and ready.

Shane left the bar threshold and moved quietly along an adjoining wall, then looped right and ran through the service door. Geezer didn't see it coming until it was too late. Shane dove over a table and hit the gunman between the shoulder blades, right in the middle of the ugly, snarling Mongol logo, taking the man to the ground. The shotgun flew from his hands, discharging into the air. It landed, then bucked out the door into the dirt.

How long the fight lasted was a topic of dispute for months. Darren Zook, who heard the shotgun blast and ran out of the can, said he thought he was only in the brawl for about thirty seconds. Shane and Emo felt it had lasted over three minutes—but to be honest, fish and fight stories always get bigger with each telling.

Most dustups end up on the ground, so the LAPD and the L.A. Sheriff's Department teach a version of Brazilian jujitsu, which is a ground-fighting technique. Tough guys and heroes like to stand toe-to-toe and trade punches, but Emo, Shane, and Darren all took their guys down fast, wrapping them up in arm locks and leg holds. Geezer screamed as Shane applied too much leverage and broke his right wrist. Rainman hit Chooch, who shook it off and countered with two sharp left hooks that dumped him.

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Whether it took a minute or an hour, the end result was the same. Shane, Darren, Emo, and Chooch were standing over the four dazed Mongols. It was a moment that would bond them forever.

"Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. You're under arrest," Emo said, as he flashed his deputy's star and cuffed Rainman.

Shane flashed his LAPD badge, then grabbed his cuffs and hooked Geezer up. Darren and Emo cuffed the other two, who called themselves Crash and Nasty, then went through the bikers' pockets and finally found enough meth in their saddlebags to add Possession with Intent to Distribute to the charge sheet. Afterwards, they escorted their captives outside and waited for the LASD transport van.

The Mongols shook their heads in dismay. "You guys are cops?" Rainman asked. "I thought you were outlaws."

Darren said, "Iron Pigs don't ask if they can wear the bottom rocker, because you gotta be a cop to join." Then Emo reached out and tore Rainman's California rocker off his leathers and stuffed it in the trash can out front. He tapped his own club logo. "These colors don't run."

When the sheriff's van pulled away with the four Mongols, it was almost dark. Shane and Chooch said good-bye to Emo and Darren then walked back to their borrowed bikes. As Chooch turned to get on his Fat Boy, Shane saw that he had a cut on his eyebrow trickling blood. His lip was also beginning to swell.

"Your mom's gonna kill us," he said.

"We didn't run, Dad," Chooch said proudly.

"Yep. We hung solid," Shane agreed. As he started his Harley he thought this boy had surely been sent to him by God.