

# 1. PATCHES

*The Brigands Motorcycle Club began in California in 1966, founded by an armed robber named Kurt Oxford. There were dozens of clubs just like it: mean dudes on big bikes, oozing menace and scaring regular citizens.*

*The Brigands weren't the largest biker gang, nor the toughest or most notorious. Many thought Kurt Oxford's death in a 1969 prison shooting would be their end. But instead of breaking up or being absorbed by a larger club – 'patched over' in biker speak – the Brigands expanded.*

*As he cruised Los Angeles freeways on his Harley Davidson, Kurt Oxford never could have imagined that his motorcycle club would one day have seventy chapters spanning the United States and a hundred more, from Sydney to Scandinavia. In 1985, Brigands membership was estimated at more than three thousand full-patch members, and ten times that number of associates and hangers-on.*

*Only a full-patch member of the Brigands is entitled to wear the club's colours: an embroidered logo depicting a caped highwayman brandishing a sawn-off shotgun.*

Excerpt from *Riding with Kurt and the Brigands* by Jane Oxford

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Out of eleven British chapters, the South Devon Brigands ranked second only to London in power and seniority. Their clubhouse was a creaky affair, converted out of a pair of barns on fifteen acres close to the wealthy enclave of Salcombe. On a clear day the video cameras mounted around its corrugated metal fence could peer over the barbed wire at millionaires' yachts moored in the marina below.

Dante Scott was eight years old, son of Scotty, the vice-president of South Devon Brigands. Dante was a tough kid who'd swing at anyone who took the mickey out of his tangled red hair. He liked hanging out with his dad at the Brigands clubhouse, which was usually on Wednesday and Friday nights when his mum drove to Plymouth for evening classes.

Bikers played pool, drank, smoked dope, swore and didn't want kids under their feet. Nobody ever cleaned the compound outside and Dante's mum told him never to play out because of broken glass and jagged metal, but he'd never been hurt and his dad didn't mind if it kept him occupied.

Dante would get behind the wheel of a wrecked Ford and pretend to drive, or make a ramp with bits of rotting wood and send empty beer kegs crashing down the hill.

Mostly there were other kids around. The ground was too sloped for football, so they'd play hide-and-seek or tag, which was most enjoyable in the dark with torches. Best of all was when Teeth came and coached kids in the boxing ring.

None of the Brigands were exactly teddy bears, but Teeth looked scary even by their standards. Huge and muscular, he wore sharp spurs on the back of his boots and greasy jeans held up with a length of bike chain that could be ripped out and used to beat the shit out of anyone who messed with him.

Biker names were usually ironic. Little George was the size of a house, Fats as thin as a rake and Teeth had nothing but squishy gums and a couple of brown molars at the back. He'd never say how he lost them. Dante asked one time and Teeth just said, *you should have seen the state of the other guy*.

Teeth was a nightclub bouncer with a sideline in drug dealing, but he wanted to be a pro wrestler. Sometimes he'd get a few weeks' work at a holiday camp in the summer and he'd wrestled on TV a couple of times, though he wasn't one of the big stars who got in the wrestling magazines stacked up in Dante's bedroom.

Teeth would take Dante and any other boys who were interested into the big room at the back of the main barn which contained an ancient boxing ring with frayed ropes and a warped floor. He'd taught Dante how to box properly, how to do Karate kicks and headlocks and all kinds of other stuff that he wasn't supposed to tell his mum because his dad said she'd go spare.

Every Brigand in the world has to attend a Wednesday-night clubhouse meeting known as church. Church night was Dante's favourite. Wives and girlfriends of the chapter's sixteen full-patch members would make food and get drunk at the bar while the men had their meeting in a little outbuilding known as the chapel. There were always other kids around.

Joe was always there. He was the son of the Führer, the chapter president. Dante and Joe were in Year Four at the same school and they were good mates. On this particular Wednesday the pair had stuffed themselves with chicken wings, cocktail sausages, oven chips and cola before each getting a hard smack and a threat of worse to come after dumping an older girl called Isobel into a puddle by the line of motorbikes out front.

After some loud belching to stop Joe's geeky eleven-year-old brother Martin from concentrating on his book, the pair ended up wrestling each other and chasing around the outside of the boxing ring. When they got breathless they'd run back to the bar and fuel up on cup cakes and Fanta.

This got repetitive after a while, so Dante and Joe were pleased when church ended and Teeth came out of the meeting room. Most of the Brigands joined the women and club associates at the bar, but Teeth sauntered past the pool table and blinking fruit machine to stick his head between the elasticised ropes of the boxing ring and give the two eight-year-olds high fives.

'How's my little champions?' Teeth asked, as he cracked a big gummy grin. His lips curled into his mouth

and he couldn't sound Ss and Ts properly, but nobody was ever going to take the piss.

The two eight-year-olds were covered with grime and dust off the floor of the ring. They had bright red faces and glistening brows.

'You gonna show us a new move?' Joe asked, panting as he sat down with his legs swinging over the side of the ring.

'Kickboxing drills,' Teeth said seriously.

Both boys groaned.

'That's so boring,' Dante complained. 'Show us something cool, like that secret move you told us about where you hit the guy in the back of the head and his eyeballs shoot out of their sockets.'

'You're too young,' Teeth said cheerfully. 'Fancy moves do not a good fighter make.'

As Teeth spoke, he pulled off his boots and hung his leather Brigands jacket on the ring's corner post.

'Tell you what,' he said, as he jumped into the ring, with holey socks and a giant foam sparring pad over his right hand. 'Show me some decent kicks and punches. Then I *might* just show you a good way to dislocate someone's shoulder. Dante, you're up first.'

Over the next quarter hour Teeth worked up a sweat as the two boys chased him around the ring punching and kicking his sparring mitt. A couple of older girls also came in, and while Dante and Joe leaned against the ropes watching, Teeth showed the girls a devious thumb lock that could be used on any boy whose hands wandered into places they shouldn't.

‘I don’t know why you bother, Sandra,’ Dante chirped. ‘You’re so ugly no boy’s gonna come near you anyway.’

Sandra was thirteen, with her hair scraped back tight and a mouth like a foghorn. ‘I dare you to come down out of that ring and say that,’ she yelled. ‘I’ll rip your bloody little head off.’

‘My cousin reckons you’ve already slept with half the boys in Year Ten,’ Joe added.

‘Oh does she indeed?’ Sandra said, placing her hands on her hips. ‘Like she can talk after everything she got up to with—’

Teeth interrupted. ‘Now, now, children! Play nicely. If you’re gonna start shrieking and whining I’m off to the bar to get drunk.’

Dante blew Sandra a cheeky kiss as Joe turned back into the ring and picked up the sparring mitt.

‘You wanna put on your gloves and spar some more?’ Joe asked.

‘Too knackered,’ Dante puffed, as he glanced at the clock on the wall behind the ring. ‘Let’s get a drink.’

As the boys jumped out of the ring, their dads – the Führer and Scotty – came into the room. The two men had been holed up in the club office for more than an hour after church finished.

Scotty was a big man, thirty-four years old, square jaw, rugged looking and with the same tangled red hair as his son. The Führer was twenty years older. Short and squat, with a titchy Hitler moustache and his arms fully inked with tattoos. His bald head and fat belly meant that

Dante could never look at him without being reminded of a bowling pin.

‘Is Martin in here?’ the Führer barked, so angry that all the tendons in his neck stuck out. Then he turned to Teeth. ‘Has my boy Martin spoken to you?’

Teeth shook his head. Dante thought it was weird because Martin was the last kid on earth who’d jump into a boxing ring.

‘I told him to speak to you,’ the Führer said, before steaming off to the other room.

Joe grinned at Dante and whispered cheerfully, ‘My geeky brother’s about to get his butt kicked.’

Before Joe could explain, the Führer was back, dragging eleven-year-old Martin by his white school shirt.

‘What did I tell you, brat?’ the Führer shouted. Sandra and the other teenage girl backed off as Martin got bundled against the wall.

‘Talk to Teeth,’ Martin replied sheepishly. ‘I forgot.’

‘And what did you do?’ the Führer yelled, as he ripped the book out of his son’s hand. ‘Harry Potter!’ he snorted. ‘You spend the night reading some book about dragons and tomorrow you’ll go back to school and get your arse kicked again. What’s the matter with you?’

‘Screw you,’ Martin shouted defiantly. ‘Fighting never solved anything.’

There was a sharp crack as the Führer slapped his son’s face. He turned towards Teeth and Scotty and began an explanation.

‘Yesterday I caught this little bag of bones in the kitchen, crying to his *mommy*. Saying that some kid’s

picking on him at school. Can you imagine that? My son, the school punchbag. So I brought him down here tonight and told him to get Teeth to show him some moves. So what does he do?

Joe seemed to enjoy watching his big brother getting whacked and couldn't resist stirring it. 'He can't help it, Dad,' Joe blurted. 'He's a natural born geekburger.'

Teeth spoke more sympathetically. 'It's not hard you know, Martin? Four or five sessions will teach you enough to stick up for yourself. I'll be happy to meet you up here a few afternoons after school and help you out.'

'I *don't* want to learn to fight,' Martin said angrily. 'I'll deal with this my way.'

'What's your way?' the Führer roared. 'Cry to mommy? Pay off the bully with a bag of sweeties?'

'I'm a pacifist,' Martin said, as he scowled at his dad. 'I'm not like you, Dad. I don't want to pick up an iron bar and break a guy's back, like with that dude you put in a wheelchair.'

The Führer wrenched Martin forward before thumping him against the wall again. '*You'll* be in a wheelchair if you don't get up in that ring. And the next time I see you reading I'll shove the damned book up your arse.'

Martin got hitched off the ground and thrust violently between the ropes around the ring. He moaned as his hip slammed down on the planks. People had heard the ruckus and were filtering through from the bar to see why the Führer was yelling.



‘One step out of that ring and I’ll break your skinny neck,’ the Führer warned.

Martin clutched his painful hip as he staggered towards the far side of the ring, but he wasn’t trying to escape. He’d eyed Teeth’s Brigands M.C. jacket hooked over the corner post and when he got there he picked it up by the collar and spat on the patch.

Dante’s jaw dropped. A biker’s patch is a sacred object. It wasn’t unknown for people to get a beating for accidentally brushing up against a patch in a crowded bar. If any adult had spat on Teeth’s patch in a Brigands clubhouse, they’d be unlikely to make it out alive.

‘That’s what I think of your stupid ass motorcycle club,’ Martin shouted defiantly, as he spat again and then gave his dad the finger.

‘You little *bastard*,’ the Führer snarled, as he grabbed the top rope and started clambering up into the ring.

‘Oh you big brave man,’ Martin shouted back. ‘Let all your cronies cheer while you beat up your eleven-year-old son.’

Joe didn’t like his brother much, but he didn’t want to watch him die either. ‘Martin, shut your *stupid* mouth,’ he begged. ‘Dad’s gonna kill you!’

‘Screw you as well,’ Martin yelled back. ‘You just copy everything Dad does.’

More people were coming into the back room from the bar. Outrage flashed through the gathering as everyone found out that Martin had spat on Teeth’s patch.

The Führer had a vile temper, and Teeth didn’t want his president doing something to Martin he’d regret

later. So he grabbed him around the waist and pulled him down off the ropes. Teeth was twice the size of the Führer, but he struggled to keep hold. Scotty and another biker waded in to help.

‘He’s a kid acting out, boss,’ Scotty said. ‘Calm down. I know you don’t really want to hurt him.’

‘That’s not my son,’ the Führer screamed, as he pointed at Martin. ‘When I get my hands on you I’m gonna smash every bone in your body.’

Teeth wasn’t happy that some kid had spat on his patch. He reckoned Martin deserved a slap, but he didn’t want to see him get stomped by a grown man.

‘It’s my patch to defend,’ Teeth said, as the Führer finally settled down enough for the three bikers to let him go. ‘But I’m not fighting a little kid and neither are you.’

‘He *can*’t get away with that,’ the Führer answered. ‘He’s old enough to know what the patch means to us.’

‘Someone his own size,’ Teeth said, before looking down at Dante. ‘Hey Dante, you wanna defend the club’s honour?’

Dante had sloped off to the corner of the room with Joe and was startled to find everyone looking his way. ‘Eh?’ he gawped.

Teeth ducked down beside Dante and spoke in a whisper. ‘Martin’s a head taller than you, but he’s skin and bones. You can take him easy. Will you get up there and fight for the honour of my Brigands patch?’

Dante didn’t know how to answer. Teeth was one of his favourite grown-ups and he’d normally do anything

Teeth asked, but it wasn't exactly normal for an adult to ask you to jump into a ring and beat up another kid.

Dante's dad, Scotty, crouched down opposite Teeth.

'We've got to do something to satisfy the Führer,' Scotty explained in a whisper. 'You know what his temper's like. If we let him deal with Martin, the boy's gonna end up in hospital with his skull caved in.'

Dante looked warily at Teeth. 'So you want me to go easy on him?'

Teeth shook his head. 'The little prick spat on my patch. He deserves *some* pain. I just don't want the Führer killing him.'

Dante looked left and right at the two men he admired most in the world. 'OK, I'll fight him.'

Ever since his outburst, Martin had hung back at the far side of the ring looking increasingly scared. He'd seen his dad dragged off the ropes, but had no idea what was coming next until Teeth dinged the bell at ringside. By this time there were nearly forty people in the room.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Teeth shouted. 'Following the desecration of my beloved Brigands patch by the skinny young chap now cowering on the far side of the ring, I'm pleased to say that cool heads have prevailed. The honour of defending the Brigands Motorcycle Club will be taken up by someone his own size. Namely, young Dante Scott!'

Most of the crowd was drunk and cheered noisily as Teeth lifted Dante into the ring and his dad led a chant in his name. The ring felt huge and its height gave a strange sense of isolation.

‘Kill the geek, Dante,’ Sandra shouted. ‘Smash his brains out!’

‘Put your fists up, Martin,’ Joe shouted. ‘Stop being a pussy.’

Everyone was yelling something, except poor Martin who stood on the far side of the ring with his arms at his side. Dante’s brain ran at full pelt. Two things occurred to him. First, he wasn’t wearing gloves, gumshield, or any other safety equipment and nobody had laid out any rules. Second, he thought about school and how his teacher made kids shake hands and sit together for the whole of the following lesson if they got in a fight.

Dante felt like he lived in two different worlds. The world of his mum and his teachers, where you weren’t supposed to swear or fight and always had to be nice to everyone. Then there was the Brigands’ world, where men sold drugs, stabbed snitches, got drunk, stole cars and found it perfectly acceptable to stick you in a boxing ring and tell you to beat the crap out of another kid who’d spat on a jacket.

‘Stop stalling, Dante,’ the Führer shouted. ‘Wipe the floor with the skinny prick!’

Dante stepped away from the ropes and saw Martin backing into the opposite corner of the ring. Getting cornered is the worst thing a boxer can do, but Martin had never boxed in his life and held his arms crossed meekly in front his face.

Dante closed fast and threw a punch. He was surprised by how swiftly Martin dodged and he thought – almost hoped – that the fight would be more even than

everyone assumed. He followed up with a Karate kick and his trainer sank deep into Martin's undefended stomach.

The crowd shouted wildly as Martin stumbled sideways. With everyone cheering him on, Dante got a taste of bloodlust as the older boy hit the ropes and bounced back towards him. He pounded Martin's face and stomach before an especially satisfying blow hit the squishy part of Martin's nose.

Blood spurted up Dante's arm and across the front of his T-shirt as Martin's legs gave out. The crowd was going insane and Dante felt wonderful and terrible at the same time. At the front of the crowd, Sandra was jumping up and down and screeching, 'Kill him, kill him. Scramble his brains!'

The amount of blood was shocking, but all the cheering made Dante feel like he was king of the world. Martin was sobbing and clearly had no intention of getting up, despite a few unsympathetic souls telling him to be a man and find his feet.

Teeth symbolically held his Brigands jacket aloft and rang the bell at ringside.

'Honour restored,' he shouted, before looking at the Führer. 'Are you happy with that, boss?'

The room went quiet as the Führer considered his reply. 'My boy got what he deserved,' he nodded. 'I'll settle for that.'

Teeth looked relieved as he stepped into the ring. 'Could someone get me some ice for Martin's nose, please?'

As Dante ducked between the ropes to leave the ring he found the Führer standing right in front of him.

‘Sweet-faced little bulldog,’ the Führer beamed, as he gave Dante a quick hug and slipped a ten-pound note into his palm. ‘You gonna wear a Brigands patch one day?’

‘Sure,’ Dante said, as the other Brigands gathered around, saying stuff like *you saved the club’s honour* and taking it in turns to shake his hand.

Two metres behind, Teeth had Martin sitting up. The boy’s nose dripped blood on to the wooden boards. As Teeth held a handkerchief over a split lip, Martin kept saying thank you because he knew he’d have come off far worse if his father had done the beating.

Joe chased his friend as Dante walked away from the ring, looking at the clotting blood spattered up his arm as he crossed into the deserted bar.

‘You were *lethal*,’ Joe said enthusiastically. ‘When my brother’s nose burst! Oh man, I wish I’d been allowed to do that!’

Dante kept walking silently, until he was out in the night air facing a line of bikes.

‘You OK?’ Joe asked uncertainly. ‘He didn’t even hit you, did he? *And* you got a tenner off my dad.’

‘Just shut *up* a minute,’ Dante said, as he tried getting his head straight. He felt really confused and if Joe hadn’t been standing there, he probably would have started crying.

## **2. ANIMAL**

It was eleven by the time they left the clubhouse. Dante strapped on his helmet and locked arms around his dad's waist as the V-twin engine rumbled to life. Some Brigands ran beautiful bikes with custom paint and expensive chrome components. Scotty preferred what's known as a rat bike.

His twenty-year-old Harley-Davidson Softail had clocked 178,000 miles and was finished in matt grey, streaked with rust. The leather seat was cracked so bad you could see the springs inside and only Scotty's love had kept it running, long past the point where it would have been cheaper to buy a replacement.

The Scott family lived amidst farmland a fifteen-minute ride from the clubhouse. Dante loved riding with his dad, especially after school pickups when he got to put on a cool leather jacket and a crash helmet while

his mates clambered into people carriers. But it was two hours past bedtime, the roads were near deserted and the whole way home Dante was scared that he'd drift into sleep and fall off the bike.

Scotty didn't want to wake his other three kids, so he cut the engine and freewheeled down his front driveway. The house got a lot less love and attention than his Harley. The driveway was badly overgrown and the kitchen light shone through a boarded window that Dante's brother Jordan had smashed with a cricket ball several months earlier.

Scotty pulled up under a car porch next to a stack of kids' bikes. Dante yawned as he stepped off the Harley and unbuckled his helmet.

'Kitchen light's on,' Scotty said. 'Your mum'll be waiting in ambush. Whatever you do, *don't* tell her about the fight.'

Dante raised an eyebrow as he unzipped his leather jacket. 'I know, Dad, I'm not stupid.'

'Oh!' Scotty blurted as he saw the dried blood all over Dante's T-shirt. 'Take that off.'

'It's freezing,' Dante complained.

'Hurry up, before she comes out to see what we're up to,' Scotty said, as he put his key in the front door. Dante pulled his shirt over his head, but he had no pocket big enough to tuck it into so he threw it behind a shrub as his dad stepped into the hallway.

Dante's mum, Carol, stood in the kitchen doorway. She wore a pink dressing gown and slippers, but a tattoo of coiled snakes ran from her ankle up to her left knee



and marked her out as a biker chick.

‘Don’t give me a hard time,’ Scotty begged, giving his wife pleading eyes as Dante pushed back the front door.

Carol was angry, but kept her voice down because eleven-month-old Holly was sleeping in her parents’ room at the top of the stairs.

‘A hard time!’ she hissed. ‘You’ve got a bloody nerve. Dante’s eight years old and he’s got school in the morning. Do you know the job I’ll have getting him out of bed?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Scotty said quietly. ‘I was discussing the development deal with the Führer and it just dragged on forever.’

Dante put his foot on the bottom step.

‘Wee and teeth,’ Carol told him stiffly. ‘Then straight to bed and keep the noise down. Everyone’s asleep up there.’

‘Can I get a glass of water?’ Dante asked.

‘I’ll bring it up for you,’ Carol said. ‘And where’s your shirt?’

Dante couldn’t think of an excuse so his dad butted in. ‘He got hot running around with Joe and took his shirt off. We had a look around, but we couldn’t find it. I’ve got to go back tomorrow morning and do some work on the bike. I’ll take a proper look in daylight.’

Dante found his mum’s fluorescent pink fingernail wagging under his nose. ‘I’m *fed* up with you losing things, Dante. If that shirt doesn’t turn up, the replacement’s coming out of your birthday and Christmas money.’

Normally Dante would have protested, but he was so tired he could barely keep upright.

‘Goddammit, Scotty,’ Carol said, as Dante crept up the stairs. ‘Two nights a week is all I ask and you can’t even bring him home at a decent hour.’

Dante was one of four kids, and their dirty clothes and damp towels were spread thick across the scruffy little bathroom. Along with puddles on the floor were his big brother’s mud-crusting rugby kit and sixteen-year-old Lizzie’s stash of deodorants and beauty products.

After a leak and a twenty-second excursion for his toothbrush, Dante headed down a narrow hallway and quietly opened the door of the room he shared with his brother Jordan. The thirteen-year-old snored, with a foot hanging over the side of his bed and his duvet mounded over his head.

Jordan was moody and Dante was likely to get a punch if he disturbed him, so he crept towards his bed. He took off tracksuit bottoms, undies and trainers with a single sweep and slipped on a pair of pyjama bottoms before straightening his pillow and rolling under the sheets.

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Dante woke on his back with Jordan leaning over his bed. The older boy held the curtains open and peered through the window.

‘What are you doing?’ Dante moaned sleepily as his brother’s briefs hovered above him. ‘Get your damned nuts out of my face.’

‘Do you know that car?’ Jordan asked seriously.

Dante pressed the button on his projector clock making 02:07 flicker in red on the ceiling. As he slid out from under Jordan he heard men speaking downstairs and his heart quickened when he realised they were angry.

‘Maybe it’s the police,’ Dante said edgily, as he shuffled up to the window next to Jordan and looked down on to the driveway.

There were no streetlights out here in the country, so it was usually pitch black at night, but the living-room and kitchen lights were on downstairs and enough light escaped through the blinds to illuminate the outline of a Ford Mondeo and a customised Harley Sportster.

‘That’s the Führer’s bike,’ Dante said.

Jordan shook his head. ‘He drives a Sportster but that’s not his.’

Dante took pride in knowing something his older brother didn’t. ‘It is so. Remember the Barcelona run last summer? That’s the one he took when he couldn’t get his orange one running.’

‘You’re right,’ Jordan admitted. ‘And I’ve seen that Mondeo at the clubhouse before as well.’

As the two boys peered out, blurred words from the three men downstairs came up through the floorboards.

‘I’m gonna sneak down and listen,’ Dante said as he hopped off the bed.

Jordan grabbed his arm. ‘I wouldn’t. Dad’ll go ape shit if he catches you.’

‘I’ll be casual,’ Dante said confidently, as he pointed to the shelf beside his bed with his clock and a box of

tissues on it. ‘Mum never brought my water up so I’ll just say I’m thirsty.’

Jordan let go. He was fond of his little brother, but he was also curious to know what was going on and it was no big deal to him if Dante got yelled at.

‘Just be careful,’ Jordan said. ‘Don’t hang around.’

The lights were on in the hallway and bathroom. Dante crept down in socks and pyjama bottoms. By the time he reached the hallway he’d worked out that the three voices belonged to his dad, the Führer and a big hairy Brigand who everyone called Felicity because he looked like some actress in an old TV show called *The Good Life*.

They were arguing about the redevelopment of the clubhouse. Dante was only eight and didn’t know the ins and outs, but understood that the land on which the Brigands clubhouse was built was worth a lot of money. Some members of the chapter, led by the Führer, wanted to knock down the barns and build shops, restaurants and a block of apartments. A smaller group led by his dad said they liked the clubhouse the way it was and didn’t want to sell it.

It was risky standing at the bottom of the stairs where he’d be spotted through the archway into the living-room, so Dante moved into the kitchen. He quietly slid the toaster out of the way and leaned across the worktop to peer through the wooden slats in the serving hatch above the washing machine.

They didn’t have a separate dining-room, and his father sat at a small dining-table, the back of his head less

than half a metre from Dante's prying nose. There were documents spread across the tabletop. Felicity sat opposite, while the Führer stood up jiggling Dante's Wrestlemania pen between his thumb and forefinger.

'Just sign,' the Führer said, his voice the calmest it had been since Dante awoke. 'You're the only one blocking this, Scotty.'

'Bull crap,' Scotty said, as Dante watched his head shake. 'The vote was nine to four, two abstentions.'

'Those guys are with *you*,' the Führer said. 'If you change, they'll change. And the vote doesn't matter anyway. It's your signature that we need: president, vice-president and club secretary can authorise the land deal.'

The Führer leaned on the back of the couch and spoke louder. 'You know how many palms I had to grease to get permission to build on that land, Scotty? Half the county council have had their houses decorated gratis; the mayor's wife is wearing a three-K watch. All that came out of my building company, not club coffers.'

'It's just money with you,' Scotty shrugged. 'But what's gonna happen to the club? We lose thirty years of tradition and spend three years without a clubhouse. Members will drift away, the chapter will die.'

The Führer gave Scotty the kind of *silly boy* look that Dante got off his Year One teacher when he poured PVA glue in his lap.

'We'll hire a church hall or a school gym,' the Führer said. 'And when the project's finished South Devon will have the best Brigands clubhouse in the country, probably the world.'

‘The barns have got soul,’ Scotty explained. ‘Sure it’ll be swank, but you can’t buy history, you can’t buy class.’

Felicity interrupted, ‘Scotty, guys like me and Big Ted need the money. We’re looking at two hundred grand for each full-patch member.’

‘Guaranteed, up front from Badger Properties,’ the Führer added. ‘Look around you Scotty. You’re living in a shithole. You can pay off your mortgage, fix this place up, buy a decent bike and still have enough left to take the kids to Disneyland or something.’

Dante had only previously heard his dad’s side of the argument: how the Führer’s plans would turn the club compound into a tourist trap, how the members would take their money and drift away. But the instant Dante heard the word Disneyland he flipped sides and wanted his dad to take the pen and sign.

But Scotty stood up and looked at his watch. ‘It’s two in the morning,’ he yawned. ‘We’ve been over this six, ten, maybe even twenty times. Everyone knows where I stand and now I’m going to bed.’

Dante grimaced as Mickey Mouse and a trip on an aeroplane vanished in a puff of smoke. Then he jolted and slid down off the cabinet as his mum crept up and touched his shoulder.

‘Nosey parker,’ she said irritably as she dragged her son towards the fridge-freezer. ‘You should be asleep. If you start up whining when you’ve got to get up for school in the morning I’ll make you *damned* sorry.’

Dante studied his mum’s expression. Sometimes she got so angry that you had to do exactly what she said or

she'd go bananas, but he wasn't getting that look and decided to play for sympathy.

'I came down because *you* forgot to bring my glass of water.'

His mum took a tumbler out of a cabinet and slammed the door shut before filling it from the cold tap. 'There,' she said, as she passed it over. 'Now scram.'

Dante reached the hallway as hell broke loose in the living-room. His dad shouted. Then the table grated across the floor and the Führer shouted back.

'I've put my own sweat and money into this, Scotty. I'm not leaving this house until these papers are signed.'

'You think you can bully me?' Scotty screamed. 'You don't know me at all, do you? Get out of my house you short-arsed son of a bitch.'

Scotty stepped out from behind the table, muscles swollen beneath his vest and looking like he could break the Führer in half with a sneeze. Dante swelled with pride, but the balance of power changed when Felicity pulled a handgun from beneath his leather waistcoat.

'You sit down and sign it,' the Führer ordered, as the Wrestlemania pen smacked down on the table.

'You think you can muscle this?' Scotty shouted incredulously. 'After all these years? You'd better kill me because this is way out of order. I'll have this put to a vote and you'll be out of the club.'

The Führer smiled. 'The accountants found some irregularities in the books from last year when you were club secretary. I've already discussed it with the London chapter and the national president. They've left

it at my discretion for now, but you're looking at a disciplinary hearing and being kicked out of the club in bad standing.'

'Trumped up bullshit,' Scotty hissed. 'How much did you bribe them?'

'Enough,' the Führer smiled. 'That's all you need to know.'

Dante had the best view in the house. As well as a clear view into the living-room, the crashing table had brought Jordan and Lizzie out on to the top of the staircase behind him. In the kitchen, his mum stood on an upturned bucket and pulled a shotgun wrapped in a bin liner down off the cabinet.

'Dante, upstairs,' his mum shouted, before ratcheting the shotgun, heading into the living-room and aiming it at Felicity. 'I think it's time you boys said goodnight.'

Scotty was alarmed and raised his palm. 'Carol, you be careful with that thing,' he warned. 'It's loaded.'

'Well you don't say,' she carped, as Dante got halfway up the stairs and stopped. 'Now I don't give a shit about your development, but it's two in the morning. I'm awake, my kids are awake and I want you two out of my house. Is that crystal clear?'

The Führer looked at the barrels of the gun and smiled. 'Carol, why don't you put that thing down?'

'You know what?' Scotty said, eyeballing the Führer. 'I don't need this shit any more. I'll sign the papers and take my two hundred grand. I signed up for a brotherhood not a business, so you can take my Brigands patch and stick that too.'



As Dante's mum lowered the shotgun, his dad bent down to pick the pen off the floor. The Führer set the table straight and told Felicity to help pick up the papers and find the pages that Scotty needed to sign.

Carol looked back into the hallway. 'You kids get back in bed,' she shouted. 'Don't make me come up there.'

Dante moved up a couple more steps, but his two teenage siblings didn't like being spoken to that way and stayed defiantly still on the top landing.

'Don't make me come up there, you three,' their mum repeated.

'I'm trying to get past,' Dante protested.

This earned him a withering look from Lizzie at the same moment as a baby's squeal came out of their parents' room.

'Aww great,' Carol said, as she turned back towards the three men. 'That's an hour getting Holly back to sleep.'

'I'll get her,' Lizzie said wearily, as she headed towards the cot in her parents' room, mumbling, 'Don't mind me, I've only got a Spanish exam tomorrow,' to herself.

In the living-room the papers were back on the table. Scotty reached between toy cars and blocks underneath the sofa to grab Dante's pen. As he straightened up, he saw Felicity's handgun pointing limply at the carpet. Felicity's eyes stared dumbly at the Führer, awaiting his next order.

'OK,' the Führer said, as his titchy moustache bristled in a self satisfied way. 'Three signatures by the Post-it notes.'

Scotty was serious about signing the documents, but the Führer's smile and the happy little bounce of his size eight Dr Marten boots made him angry. Scotty loved the Brigands as much as – maybe even more than – he loved his family and the thought of handing in his patch and burning off his highwayman tattoo was too much to take.

With a powerful movement, Scotty sprang to his full height while simultaneously driving the pen through Felicity's windpipe. Blood gurgled; Dante and Jordan nervously came down the staircase to see why their mum had screamed.

'Shoot him now, Carol!' Scotty shouted.

Dante's mum raised the shotgun as Felicity staggered back to the wall. The giant still had the pen sticking out of his throat and he was choking on his own blood, but he managed to raise the pistol slightly.

Two triggers were pulled in the same second.

The shotgun erupted with two orange muzzle blasts, spraying shot over a wide area concentrated around Felicity's head and torso, but also peppering the surrounding wall with tiny holes. The pistol made a sharper bang. Felicity hadn't the strength to raise it high but the final act of his thirty-eight years on earth was to shoot a bullet into Scotty's kneecap at such an angle that it bored on down, shattering his right fibula and exiting through the back of his calf after severing the main artery in his leg.

In the seconds before he passed out, Scotty groaned as he hit the carpet and reached for Felicity's pistol.

The Führer had ducked under the table and he too crawled towards the pistol as Carol pumped the shotgun to reload.

Carol had known the Führer since she'd been a fourteen-year-old tearaway hanging around the Brigands clubhouse looking for free marijuana. She knew that the Führer would kill her now that he was riled, but she felt calm as the empty cartridge flew out to her left.

To Carol the consequences of murder were nothing compared to her need to protect her kids. But as she pushed the barrel forward, there was lightness to the action and a hollow sound from inside. The shotgun was empty.