

The crotch rocket was true to its nickname as Kimi Furio flew down a desert highway at twilight. It buzzed between her long, slender legs, offering heady excitement as she raced through the homeward-bound rush hour.

Traffic was rarely heavy on the outskirts of Holbrook, Arizona. It was steady that evening, however. Kimi wove in and out, her shoulder-length blond hair whipping about her helmetless head. She used the shoulder when necessary to pass vehicles. The bright green color of her motorcycle was often all that kept her from disaster when she opted to squeeze between her lane and oncoming traffic. Startled motorists swerved violently to miss her.

Sooner or later, her luck would run out. It had to. She caught up to the slowest vehicle in the line, a rattling 90s-era sedan, holding the rest of traffic back. Kimi cranked the throttle, daring the oncoming tractor-trailer to roll the dice.

She jetted between the two vehicles. The buffeting wind remarked on a near miss of mere inches. The semi's horn blared angrily. Kimi lifted a gloved hand and offered the driver, the commuters, and life itself the single-finger salute.

She rode on, a woman with only her unwanted life to lose, chasing a death that never came. At least not for her.

After a ten-minute ride that should have taken her twenty, Kimi pulled into the parking lot of a string of picturesque shops and restaurants. She spotted a space three cars down from a familiar Humvee and cut off a pickup truck to claim it. She received a honk and a yelled curse word, for which she rewarded the driver yet another middle finger. Nowadays, her life's motto boiled down to that one gesture.

She shut the engine off. Kimi combed her fingers through her wind-tossed hair and listened to the engine tick as it cooled for a few seconds. It was Friday. The sun had finished going down, leaving streaks of coral just above the desert town's horizon. She could already hear the bass-heavy beat coming from her favorite bar, Rafters.

A few seconds were all that she had to soak in the atmosphere. Under the bald glare of an overhead streetlight, she inhaled the acrid layers of gasoline and the once-mouthwatering perfume of fried food that wafted from the restaurants. Kimi had little appetite for anything non-alcoholic these days.

Then Maurice and Todd were in front of her, wearing the same frown on dissimilar faces. Probably for not wearing a helmet, she figured.

Maurice Taylor's deep bass voice shook her bones almost as deliciously as the motorcycle's vibrations at 120 miles per hour. "Living dangerously, I see. That finger of yours isn't as lethal as a gun, you know."

"I can take anyone who tries me."

The former pro-football player and present mountain-of-muscle scowled at her. "This is America, Barbie Doll. You realize half these assholes are carrying."

"Nice to see you too, Maurice." Kimi got off the bike and wrapped her arms around as much as the massive African-American as she could. He sighed, but hugged her in return.

Not as big as Maurice and not as lily-white as Kimi's Nordic princess features, Todd Jackson stepped forward and got his hug too. "Hey, Kimi."

"Hey, Todd. How are you doing these days?"

The All-American Boy gave her a lopsided, uncertain smile. "Not bad. We're hiring at the prison," he added clumsily.

Kimi waved off the offer. "Yeah, the PTSD is going to keep me out of there. If not that, my shitty attitude. There's no point in me trying."

Bless his sweet heart, Todd refused to concede. “I can put in a good word. The warden’s easy to work for, and the prisoners don’t give him any trouble. It’s a decent gig, as prisons go.”

Maurice shook his head. “Give it up, Toddster. The chip on her shoulder is too damned big.” He gave her a severe look, which would have scared the living hell out of those who weren’t familiar with him. “Listen, *chica*, if you don’t clean up your act, you won’t be able to get hired as a bouncer.”

“Whatever, Mom.”

“Come on, Kimi. Do you think Raven would appreciate you throwing in the towel?”

Hearing Kimi’s best friend’s name was a thunderbolt to her heart. Six months after Raven Virtue’s disappearance, the reminder stole her breath away.

She channeled the hurt into anger, her second choice to her new best buddy, the bottle. “What the fuck are you talking about? I’m here, aren’t I? Despite being on psych leave that will no doubt turn into a firing any day now, not to mention my parents and my best friend dead, I’m still here.”

Why that was, was anyone’s guess.

Todd, Raven’s boyfriend—did he continue to count as that with her missing and presumed dead?—asked in his gentle voice, “Are you? Really here, I mean?”

“Christ, you’re both assholes.” Kimi wanted a big bottle of whatever she could find. Needed it. She turned on her heel and marched for Rafters. “Are we having a half-assed therapy session, or are we dancing?”

They didn’t answer as they followed in her wake. They didn’t have to. They knew as well as she did that she was on borrowed time. Unlike them, she no longer cared.

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Kimi’s buzz, cultivated and lovingly maintained since the moment morning turned into afternoon, was wearing off. She’d ordered three drinks, one right after the other, but hours had passed after the third. Maurice kept dragging her out to the dance floor, not letting her sit out for longer than a minute. The bastard wanted her sober, and Kimi was dead set against sobriety these days. Especially under the strobing, blinking lights that threatened to give her a headache amid the nauseating mixture of odors. Fried bar food and stale booze assaulted Kimi’s nostrils. Those were joined by the sweat of surrounding dancers, along with the buckets’ worth of perfume and cologne they used to cover it up. It was bone-chilling cold outside, but inside the second-floor environs of Rafters, it was a sauna.

There was a line between being a drunk and openly admitting it to everyone. Kimi had marched up to that line, but she hadn’t crossed it yet. She let Maurice remind her how much she loved to dance and pretended it was what she’d come out for. The clearing of the fog from her brain was unwelcome, but she consoled herself with the thought that there was plenty of booze at home, waiting to help her black out later.

Todd spent far less time shaking his fine-ass self to the pounding dance beats of remixes, served up by a deejay who had the sense to not offer a lot of irritating patter. Nonetheless, he managed to drink slower than Kimi. She was certain he was only on his second rum-and-cola as he perched on a stool at the dimly lit bar a few feet away. He alternated between watching her and Maurice dance and talking to a handsome black-haired man Kimi had never seen before. He smiled easily, making his handsome features impossibly more perfect, yet Todd had a vague look

in his eyes. Occasionally his gaze swept the club, as if he searched for someone in particular. The same way Kimi kept looking around.

She leaned close to Maurice to speak over the throbbing beat of the music. "He's been lost since Raven disappeared." She nodded toward Todd.

Maurice glanced over his beefy shoulder at the fresh-faced guy who looked ten years younger than his early thirties. "Honey, he was lost long before she went missing. He needs to get over the guilt and move on."

Biting anger rose in Kimi's gut at Maurice's cold words. Raven had been Todd's live-in sweetheart. Kimi's bestie. Kimi sure as hell wasn't ready to move on from the supposed murder and disappearance, and she couldn't imagine that Todd was either.

She bared her teeth at Maurice, not caring he had over a hundred pounds of pure muscle on her. "You lose someone you love and see how easy it is to pick up the pieces. How the fuck can you be so callous?"

Maurice snorted, not impressed by her temper. "Ice Queen, I'm not saying he shouldn't miss her, at least not as a friend."

"They were more than that."

"On the surface."

Kimi frowned at darted another glance at Todd. She'd had her suspicions, especially after Raven had confessed to the less-than-stellar love life she shared with Todd. "You don't know that for certain."

"Don't I? Girl, I played the game myself for years. I have experience with how it goes. Todd cared for Raven, loved her, but not in a happily-ever-after way."

Kimi hated to believe it. It would be a crime for women everywhere if sweet-as-sugar Todd with his built-for-sin stature wasn't born for them. "You weren't pals with Todd until I started bringing him around so he wouldn't spend his nights alone crying over Raven. You could be wrong."

"I can smell my kind no matter how they present themselves. Honey, Todd was not meant for Raven. Or any woman, for that matter. I'm not sure he realizes that himself."

Kimi digested the revelation, continuing to dance as she did so. She realized that despite being tight with big, masculine Maurice, she equated gay as being lispy and flouncy, qualities neither he nor Todd possessed.

Not cool. She sighed at her clueless bigotry and vowed to do better. "Are you attracted to him?" she asked, hoping some lucky bastard somewhere could win a happy outcome after the hell of the last few months.

"As a potential sweetheart, you mean? No, not even as hot as he is. I could look at him all day, but he's a bit too clean-cut for this bad boy. I prefer a stud with a bit more naughty in his stocking. Someone Santa would spank, except my dream man would spank Santa instead!"

Kimi laughed, a response she rarely managed anymore. It was part of the reason she continued to come out to dance, though she preferred to stay home and drink herself blind these days. It was because of Maurice, outrageous and wonderful Maurice. If the guy had been hetero, she would have given him plenty to think about. It wasn't the first instance she wished they could have been lovers.

She glanced again at Todd, wondering if he was indeed clueless to his own urges as Maurice suspected. Or if he actively rejected his leanings. Well, she wasn't going to figure that out looking at him, not when he was walking off toward the men's room.

The guy he'd been chatting with was still sitting at the bar. Staring at her. It was an intense, unblinking gaze that gave her the creeps despite his clean-cut ebony hair and devastating turquoise eyes. His expression drifted into a smile as they locked eyes. It made him more handsome than any man had a right to be.

She should have been swooning with desire and plotting how to lure him to her apartment for wild sex without feeling totally slutty about herself. He had wide shoulders and a frame every bit as delicious as Todd's, filling out his tee-shirt and form-fitting jeans. And what a form they fitted. Her pussy spasmed, reminding her it had been on hiatus from all activities remotely pleasurable since Raven's disappearance. Her body forgot she was mourning and responded eagerly to the delicious morsel of sex appeal.

Yet every hair stood up on Kimi's head, as if an instinctive alarm to deadly danger had activated. He was gorgeous, outrageously so, but he felt lethal, even at a distance.

As a ranger for the National Park Service, a more dangerous job than most people realized, Kimi had learned to heed that instinct. She smiled up at Maurice and spoke through gritted teeth. "Creep alert."

"Where is he, honey?" Maurice was always on the lookout for men who made unwanted advances on women. He might not have been sexually attracted to Kimi's gender, but he respected the hell out of them. He had unbreachable lines drawn where a woman's safety was concerned.

Kimi could handle just about any asshole, but she preferred having backup. "He's sitting at the bar, next to where Todd was. Wait, he's leaving."

Tall, Dark and Unsettling had risen from his barstool, smiling that enigmatic smile. Kimi was on the verge of believing she'd imagined his too-intense interest until he reached the door that led to the parking lot. He turned, gave her and Maurice a little nod, and left.

Maurice scowled, his wide face squashing down in abrupt fury. "It's good I always walk you to your death-wish machine. That dude felt off. He's got too much of that spider-looking-for-a-fly vibe, you know?"

"I hear you. I'll remind you, I can take care of myself. I'm just letting you in on some of the ass-kicking fun."

Maurice rolled his eyes, but Kimi knew he believed her. Anyone familiar with her in the past year would.

She'd started the second worst year of her life—she ranked the year of her parents' accidental death in a boating accident as the worst—by killing a man in hand-to-hand fighting. She'd caught him stealing protected Native American artifacts from the Petrified Forest park where she worked as a ranger. Instead of surrendering when caught, the idiot had pulled a gun on Kimi. An expert in martial arts, she'd kicked it out of his hand, sending it flying too far for him to reach. He'd lunged at her, trying to grab her weapon from its locked retention holster. She'd fought him off, but the perp—who they'd later discovered had been hopped up on meth—kept attacking.

She'd been determined to not shoot him. She'd only wanted to knock him down and keep him down. Because the poacher had been too high to realize he was in real trouble, he didn't fall until he was dead. Forced to defend herself, Kimi had splintered his ribs in a dozen places with punches and kicks, piercing his heart and lungs.

It was SOP that Kimi had been put behind a desk during the ensuing investigation. She'd been cleared of all charges, but the ass-hat of a department psychologist had been slow to clear her for active patrol in the wake of the incident. Kimi hated the therapist more than anyone else

on the planet. If not for the stubborn shrink, Kimi would have been on patrol the day Raven Virtue disappeared. She might have been on hand to save her best friend. Raven could have been in Rafters with Kimi tonight, whole and safe. Not six months gone, leaving behind a running duty truck, bullet-riddled asphalt and gallons of blood on the road.

If Kimi had been on the active roster that day, she'd at least have had the opportunity to track down Raven's body. That she would be a corpse was of no doubt, though there had been more than one person's blood out there in the desert. But at least with the remains, Kimi could say a real goodbye.

It had appeared that Raven had pulled someone over, since there had been another truck on the shoulder of the highway, its engine also running. Its owner had been identified but never found. He shouldn't have been driving in any event, as he'd lost his license due to DUIs. A shotgun had been discovered in the middle of the massive pool of blood, along with spent shells and bullets that corresponded to the type Raven would have used in her service revolver.

A traffic stop. A gun battle. A horrific amount of gore. No intact bodies. And the added enigma of a missing agent named Douglas Bringer, who had been supposedly dispatched by the General Accounting Office to audit Kimi and Raven's duty station, an officer it turned out the GAO had no record of. His rental Lincoln had been discovered half a mile away from the crime scene. It was too weird to be a coincidence in an already bizarre and unexplainable scenario.

That was the worst part: the mystery. Not knowing what had really happened to Raven, sister of Kimi's heart, was what drove her into masking the pain until she could make it stop forever.

The sight of Todd coming out of the men's room woke Kimi from painful memories, musings her too-sober brain had dove into while she continued to sway in instinctive response to Maurice's dancing. Kimi waved Todd over where she and Maurice shook their stuff on the dance floor. He joined them and danced along, moving as awkwardly as a guy with two left feet could. Bless his hot-looking ass, he couldn't groove to save his life.

"What's up?" he called over the driving beat that somehow failed to guide his efforts.

"The guy you were talking to at the bar...black hair, gorgeous?"

Todd glanced at the stool the scary stranger had vacated. A shadow of disappointment drifted over Mr. All-American's face. "It looks like he's gone now. He apparently knew Raven."

Kimi stopped dancing. "He did? What did he say?"

"Not much. He asked what was being said since she disappeared. Mostly, he was interested in you."

"Yeah?" A chill ran through her, and she tried to reassure herself. *Killed a man with my bare hands. Could do it again. It wouldn't bother me, not now, because I have nothing to lose.*

"He asked if Maurice was your boyfriend. Wanted to know all about you. I gave no personal details, but I offered to introduce him. Is that a problem?" Todd stopped dancing too. His blue eyes narrowed, his sweet face stern in a hurry.

As a corrections officer with the federal Bureau of Prisons, Kimi trusted Todd wouldn't have given any stranger information about her. He'd be circumspect in that regard.

Kimi patted him on his beefy shoulder, reassuring him she understood he had her back. "He left. But not before giving me a once-over. Did he tell you his name?"

"Lawrence. Or maybe it was Larry. It definitely started with a 'lar' sound to it. It's hard to hear with the music blaring so loud."

Maurice danced on, his expression unconcerned. "He's gone now. I'll see to it he stays gone."

“If I don’t do it first,” Kimi retorted. She mock-growled and flexed threateningly at both men. They relaxed and laughed.

A song she enjoyed came on, and she began to dance again, searching for the joy in it. Kimi danced as if she didn’t have a care in the world, trying not to think about her life. Not about lost jobs, lost parents, lost friends, and weirdos who at least had the decency to get lost too.

She tried not to think about anything because all of it hurt. As usual, she had no success.

In the wee hours of the morning, Kimi and Maurice closed down Rafters with a few other hardcore dance floor enthusiasts and what Maurice called the “don’t-want-to-go-home-by-myself” types. Todd, who did not fall within either camp, had headed out at midnight.

Maurice was his usual gentlemanly self, escorting Kimi to her motorcycle as he always did. Kimi had a flash of amused affection at his protectiveness. She was also touched. Maurice’s problem wasn’t that he cared; it was that he cared about someone who no longer cared for herself.

Kimi was already contemplating the bottles of alcohol awaiting her attention at home. She’d had enough at the bar to not feel desperate for a drink, but the need nagged at her anyway. She wasn’t numb enough to sleep through the night.

Maurice looked around the parking lot as they reached her bike. The area was empty but for a few stragglers. “It looks as if the coast is clear. No madmen I have to lay the tackle on.”

“Thanks for the escort, Maurice.” It was then that Kimi saw the scrap of paper taped to her gas tank. “What’s this?”

“Probably a note from Todd. He forgot to tell you something before he left?”

Kimi pulled the folded white scrap off. It was a note, but not from Raven’s ex. “Hello, Kimi. We haven’t met, but I’m acquainted with your friend Raven. No doubt you want to find out what happened to her on that road six months ago. I’ll call you tomorrow.”