

The scene: Sam Dunne, the first-person narrator, is trying to bring the killer of his former band mate Eddie Shay and a mutual friend of theirs, Lottie Williams, to justice and clear himself as a suspect with the help of Wendy Conn, a crime reporter for the city newspaper. In this scene, he and Wendy go to a rough local hangout to enlist the help of one of his shadier acquaintances.

I have a soft spot in my heart for Bendik's, even though it's one of the roughest bars I've ever played. Every town has one place where the misfits, outlaws and people on the fringe gather and operate under their own twisted code. In Harriston, Bendik's was it. I worked there with different bands over the years, and while the rest of the world evolved, Bendik's never changed. There are times when I walk in there and flash on the bar scene *Star Wars*. You think by the time you're legal age you've seen every kind of weirdo, degenerate and bad actor breathing, but the first time you walk into Bendik's you find something new.

The bar is in the East End, the neighborhood itself a poster child for urban blight; streets of chain link fences and boarded facades. The one story building is the old Bendik garment factory that made military uniforms in World War II then segued to industrial clothes with company logos in the fifties and sixties before the company went tits up. The building stood idle for a few years then somebody decided the neighborhood needed one more bar. Mac Jacobs the new owner started with just the front half of the building, then expanded to the back half as Harriston's misfits found a new home and dropped anchor. Mac kept the old Bendik name and never bothered to change the sign.

The windows facing the street were glass block, primarily to minimize replacement. Harsh flood lights shone from above, not on the sign but on the sidewalk where two big bikers guarded the door. There was no need to light the sign. People who would go to Bendik's found it almost by instinct. The cops had an unofficial treaty with Mac; they never came in unless somebody died. The bouncers pretty much settled issues without outside help. The payback: Bendik's kept a lot of baddies off the streets at night.

I parked the van in the gravel lot. “Shove your purse under the seat. You won’t need it.”

Wendy nodded.

“And when we go in, don’t talk to anybody and avoid eye contact.”

“I know the drill. I’ve been in bad places before.”

“Not like this one.” I took the bills out of my wallet and shut the wallet in the console. I divided the cash into four parts and put them in different pockets.

Wendy eyed me. “What’s that all about?”

“Somebody picks your pocket or knocks you on the head, they don’t get it all.”

We crossed the street and stepped through an uncountable rank of Harleys propped at the curb. The doormen eyed us up and down. The one on the left had severe acne and wore a Confederate Flag bandanna; the one on the right was bare headed, his black hair slicked back into a short ponytail that looked like he groomed it with motor oil. Aviator shades perched on his nose.

Pony tail nodded to the urban rebel, who opened the blank steel door to let us inside. The blast of heat, music and smoke was enough to knock you over. I stepped over the threshold and into what looked like Dante’s Inferno. The brightest lights in the room were the red bar neons, which made the joint look like a foundry pit.

Inside the door, Frankie sat behind his table collecting the five-dollar cover charge. Frankie—I’ve never heard his real name if he has one—is short for his nickname, which I’m sure you can guess. When he stands up, the rest of us feel like midgets. His face had a dozen scars, the worst a thick white seam from the side of his nose all the way to his chin, giving him a look like a double hare-lip. His

forearms, as thick as four- by-fours and crawling with jailhouse tats, rested on either side of a pile of bills like a small haystack, daring anybody to grab for it. He looked at me for a second and said, "Dunne."

I nodded and returned the greeting. "Frankie." I handed him a ten and he dropped it on the pile and raised his chin in acknowledgement. He nodded and smiled at Wendy, the way a grizzly bear smiles at a fawn.

We shouldered through the standing crowd to the bar. Jill the barmaid came over, smiling. Her face glossy with sweat in the bar lights. "Hey, Sam, long time gone," she shouted over the noise.

"Hi, Jill. Two longnecks. Leave 'em capped."

Her smile evaporated. She hesitated for a second then nodded. "Four bucks." She turned to get the beers and I pulled a five out of my shirt pocket. Jill came back with the beers. "Keep the change, hon."

I handed Wendy one of the bottles and she leaned up and shouted in my ear, "Why are the caps on?"

It annoys me when I'm at a concert or a club and people yell in my ear to be heard over the music. Besides that, it's painful. I leaned down and said in a normal voice, "If you get right up on my ear and talk normally, I can hear you fine. You don't have to shout."

She nodded.

I leaned in again. "The bottles aren't to drink; they're to swing if we have a problem. Jill won't do that for most people, but they know me in here. Stick close." We wormed our way through the crowd, hard-eyed men and harder-eyed women in denim and leather. Bendik's was a kind of resort for vacationing Carnies and ex cons.

In certain places, you learn a way of looking around people, not at them, if you want to avoid trouble. You register their presence, but your eyes pass over them like quicksilver, never lingering long enough to make them self-conscious. “Look at me once, look at me twice, look at me again there’s gonna be a fight.” People in Bendik’s never got past their second look.

When I looked back at Wendy, she was wearing an impassive face, looking almost bored as we moved through the tables. She handled it well. Past the bar and table area Bendik’s opened into a huge dance floor with a six-foot-high platform at the far end and a second bar to the right. Tables ringed the floor, and tonight it was packed. Black Lightning was playing.

The stage was flanked by scaffolds with arena-sized speakers and colored spots. A cloud of smoke floated between the heads of the crowd and the high ceiling, part tobacco, part reefer, and probably a little crack, changing colors with the flashing lights. On the stage, Black Lightning was tearing through a cover of ACDC’s “Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap,” and the room pulsed with the music like some primordial heartbeat. The bass punched you in the chest. The drummer played with a pair of sticks in each hand, and his rim shots ricocheted off the inside of your skull.

In the center of the stage, the lead guitarist launched into an extended solo, fingers flying up and down the neck and ripping through the room like a blade. “That’s the man we’re here to see,” I told Wendy. That’s Razor.”

Tall, lean, rawboned and wiry in jeans and a dark sleeveless T-shirt, Razor strutted back and forth across the stage like a barnyard rooster while he cranked out riff after riff. He sneered through two days’ worth of stubble and his lank blond hair whipped around his face as he jerked his head from one side to the other. The crowd on the dance floor surged like waves in a hurricane.

I stole a glance at Wendy. In spite of herself she was caught up in the uninhibited spectacle. This was a long way from Jackson Browne. The song ended to cheers from the crowd. "And now," Razor snarled in to the mic, "Let's hear it for her majesty, The Duchess!"

From the back of the stage, a tall, big-boned woman in leather pants and bustier strode onto the stage to more cheers. Her black hair cascaded almost to her waist, and her sensuous lips were painted that shade of fresh blood you find in your First Grade Crayola box.

"Who's she?"

"One of the most amazing people you'll ever see."

Duchess grabbed the stand and didn't bother taking the mic out of the collar. She looked out into the crowd and shouted, "How you all doin' out there tonight?" Whoops, whistles and hand clapping answered her. "All right! Let's tear this mother down!" She clapped her hands over her head and the crowd picked it up. In a minute she gave her hair a toss signaling the drummer, who rolled into Etta James' "Tell Mama."

While the band ran the song's signature intro, Duchess opened those red lips wide enough to swallow the mic and belted out a raw vibrato scream that lasted five measures and gave me chills. The crowd cheered louder.

Duchess tore through the song as a wild-eyed mob jammed the front of the stage, reaching for her. Razor hunched over his guitar as he played his solo, and she arched her back over him, mouth open with pure lust.

Wendy nudged me. "That's the closest thing I've ever seen to sex with clothes on."

"It gets better."

The song ended with a long shrieking chord and pounding drum rolls. Duchess held the mic stand with two hands over her head like a barbell. Before the cheers died down, Razor cranked out another opening riff and the crowd exploded again when it recognized Bonnie Raitt's "Love Me Like A Man." Duchess strutted across the stage like a panther in heat to grab the mic, and when the band got quiet, so did the crowd in rapt attention. Her voice dripped honey laced with smoke and bourbon; every man in the room was sweating, and their women understood.

After two verses, she reached into her bustier and pulled out a blues harp. The crowd went crazy as she and Razor faced off. She'd blow a sinuous riff on the harmonica, and Razor would answer with a fluid cascade of notes. At the peak of the song when the band stops and she sings the tag line, she got as far as "Love me like—" and just stopped. Nobody breathed. Duchess looked at the floor, looked at Razor, looked at the floor again and said, "Oh, fuck it."

She turned away from the mic and crossed the stage to Razor, grabbed a handful of his hair and gave him a kiss so full of passion and violence that it about tore his lips off. The drummer gave three flams and the band kicked back in, finishing the song while Duchess ground her pelvis into Razor's thigh. Applause thundered.

Wendy elbowed me. "She one of your old flames?"

I smiled at the memory. "For a day and a half. She chews up men like candy, but I think she met her match with Razor."

We moved closer to the stage as the crowd allowed, and half way through the band's version of "Combination of the Two" Razor spotted me. I put the tip of my index finger at the corner of my eye. He read the signal and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

Four songs later, the band took a break. As he walked off, Razor glanced at me and flicked his head to the left side of the stage.

I tugged at Wendy's jacket and led her off the dance floor toward the backstage entrance. "Now what?"

"Now we wait." We stood at a curtained doorway in a partition between the edge of the stage and the wall. Behind the curtain the old factory offices were converted to dressing and party rooms for the bands. A guy the size of a refrigerator with a beard like a broom stood guard. He didn't speak and neither did we. A chainsaw concerto of heavy metal blasted through the sound system; Muzak for the psychotic.

In a minute, Razor came through the curtain wiping his face with a towel and tossed it through the curtains. He paused to light a cigarette and strode up to us with the same reptilian grace he plied onstage. "Sam Dunne."

"Still smokin' unfiltered Luckies?"

"I can only find 'em in Kentucky these days. Heard they make 'em in Switzerland now."

"Razor, meet Wendy. Wendy, meet Razor." He nodded toward her and his eyelids lowered. If she felt undressed, the effect was intentional.

He gestured to the bar and said, "Let's get a beer." His eyes flicked to the bottles we were holding. "One you can drink." He led us through a crowd that parted like the Red Sea. Two guys stepped in Razor's path. The bigger one was stocky, dressed in outdated grunge garb; flannel shirt, Doc Martin boots and a White Freightliner ball cap. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but judging by his face, it wasn't friendly. I moved between them and Wendy, but she edged around me anyway, the reporter in her wanting to see it all.

Razor said something back to the grunger, who took a swing. Razor's cigarette exploded into a shower of orange sparks, and the fight was on. Razor gave him a couple of hard body shots and grabbed him by the throat with his left hand and the crotch with his right. He twisted his hands and the grunger would have screamed if he could have gotten any air out of his mouth. Big as the guy was, Razor lifted him and body slammed him onto a table, scattering bottles and people. I saw the grunger's buddy edge behind Razor and I stepped in his direction. He caught me watching him and not the fight and changed his mind.

In a few seconds, five bouncers with ball bats bulldozed through the crowd. Razor let go of the grunger and jumped back, hands in the air and open. Back on his feet, the grunger rushed Razor, swinging his fists and shouting. One of the bouncers swung his bat like a golf club and swept the guy's feet from under him. He crashed to the floor and two of the others dragged him away by his ankles. His friend was smart enough not to protest or follow. He disappeared into the sea of people. I turned back to Wendy. She was holding her bottle by the neck, eyes sweeping the crowd. I was right. She had some spine. She'd do.

Razor peeled a hundred dollar bill off a roll from his pocket and threw it on the table he'd trashed. "Drink up. Sorry for the upset." Wendy stared incredulously as people applauded.

"What was that all about?" I said as we sidled up to the bar.

"Better you don't know." Razor answered. "So what's up?"

"Job."

He stared into the mirror behind the bar. We all got drafts and I leaned in so he could hear me but no one else could. Though he never looked at me, even in the mirror, he paid close attention to every word I said. At the same time he was aware of every person and everything around him. I



sketched out my case on Danny and my plan to deal with it. He listened, his expression never changing. Finally he nodded.

I pulled a wad of bills from my waistband and set it on the bar, covering it with my hand.

“Expenses.”

He shook his head. “Hang onto it. If you’re wrong, we’ll settle up after. If you’re right, this one’s on me. Lottie was a friend to all of us.” He looked past me to Wendy, who was leaning back against the bar and watching our backs. “And the babe?”

“She’s the shiner.” Wendy eyes flicked to me but she didn’t speak.

He nodded, and turned back to the mirror. I handed him a business card with my phone number. He looked at it and handed it back. “Got it. I’d give you mine, but it changes from day to day.” He laughed. “Back to work, Sam. I’ll be in touch.” He turned to Wendy. “Glad you came.” He gave her a predatory smile. “I’m sure I’ll see you again sometime.” Razor stepped away from the bar and headed for the stage.

I finished my beer and said, “Let’s go before somebody decides he doesn’t like my looks or likes yours.”