

LITTLE WARLORD

by Roni Simunovic

First chapter preview, Oct. 2018

Ben smacked his feet up on the wrought iron cafe table between him and some gawky redheaded teenager in paint-splattered work boots and an Ed Hardy t-shirt.

“So Dad gave the guy a shot to the nuts and got kicked out of military school.”

“Just for that?” the kid asked.

“Well, he was also running blow into the barracks, but they couldn’t pin him for that.”

“At sixteen?”

“I think he was fifteen. So then he’s out of the military and he’s got no reason to stay in South Africa ‘cause his parents don’t want him, so he comes to Canada on some freighter.”

“And he... what, buys a bakery? Why would a shithead delinquent buy a bakery?”

“Because he wanted to.” The sun had set but it was still blisteringly hot, even with the shutters at the front of the bakery open to the street. Ben twisted his long, blond hair around his fist and pulled it back over his shoulder. “He didn’t *buy* the bakery, he started working at it when this old guy still owned it. ‘Cause when he first came here, he met my mom and had me, like, right away. Total accident. And then he’s seventeen and he’s got a kid, so he became a nice guy.”

“He just became nice outta the blue.”

“He was always nice! He was just, you know, a rebel. You never met him, you don’t get to say.” Ben lifted his butt to slip a crushed pack of Lucky Strikes out of his back pocket. “So then this old man gets hurt at work and has to take out a loan to pay for medical bills, but the firm who gave him the loan was super crooked and they start hounding him. Long story short, the loan guys blow up the bakery—”

“*This* bakery?”

“Yeah. This was years ago, they rebuilt it. Speaking of which, you gotta help out if you wanna hang here. Can you whip a meringue?”

“Uh—”

“It’s fine. You’ll learn.”

He lit a smoke and let his lighter clatter to the tabletop. The kid said, “Aren’t you too young to smoke? You’re younger than me.”

“Fuck off, I’m seventeen. Eighteen in two days.”

“Congrats.”

“Fuck you, Rusty. You want storytime or not?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “I want storytime.”

“Then shut up and listen. So they blow up the bakery, the old man gets further in debt and these guys start coming around trying to mess with them. In the end, the old man either skipped town or died, I don’t remember, and Dad shanked one of the loan shark cronies.”

“*Jesus.*”

“So yeah, then he was in the shit. The bakery’s fucked and he’s gotta rebuild it on his own, but he gets another job in the meantime because he’s got me and Mom. So he’s down at the unemployment office, and he meets all these other people who also got fucked over by this company! Turns out there’s this one family that owns everything in town, Briden. They’re in real estate and banking and advertising and media shit, they own billboards and bars and bus stop benches and fuckin’ everything, right? And the main dude is named Declan, Declan Briden. So, long *long* story short, Dad got some guys together and tapped his shady contacts back in old country, and now we... do this.”

He gestured at the flurry of activity in the closed-up bakery—the row of guns lined up on the glass countertop, the group of disorganized, gawky men of all ages running to and from the rooms behind the bakery. As they watched, two guys ran into each other and clunked heads.

“Ben!”

Ben jumped and fumbled his smoke, then stuck it in his mouth.

“*What, Dee?*”

Dee leaned on the far side of the counter and flipped a massive combat knife in his hand. He had dark auburn hair, big ears that stuck out and a gap between his front teeth. He towered head and shoulders over the guys on either side of him and slouched to hide his height.

“You’re skipping the important parts. Who let you do orientation?”

Ben threw his feet off the table. “It’s *my gang!* And I’m good at it! If the kid wants to shoot shit, we let him shoot shit, but he needs backstory!”

“You can’t just say Briden owns stuff, you gotta say all the bad shit he does, otherwise Telly sounds like an idiot!”

“Fuck, fine! Okay!” Ben rolled his eyes and turned back to the new kid. “So, alright, he—you want a smoke?”

The kid nodded and Ben flicked his pack at him before continuing.

“Okay, I skipped some stuff. Briden’s company, organization, media empire, whatever the fuck, gets real drastic. The people my dad met had their brothers and wives and husbands straight up *killed* over real estate bidding wars and legal shit and buyouts. Like, this one old dude had his wife taken off life support because she was a business lawyer who got in their way.”

“Shit.”

“I know, it’s insane. Mountain out of a molehill, right? They make the cops forge evidence and make the hospital let people die, and it—it’s a lot. So we didn’t start being like this, *they* started it, and we’re just—or, my dad just—wanted to take them down.”

“Alright. So if that’s why your dad does it, why do *you?* That family business shit?”

Ben sucked his teeth. “To get them back for killing my dad.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh.*”

“So that’s why you’re in charge.”

“Yeah.”

“Even though you’re like, five feet tall.”

“Five-three, and shut your mouth.” Ben squinted at him. “So, you said you want in ‘cause of your brother or something?”

“Yeah. He’s in jail, and I just want something to *do*. Even if it’s, uh... whipping meringues.”

Ben nodded seriously. “Who’s your brother?”

“You didn’t know him. He always talked about you guys, but I don’t think he knew what you did besides the firefights by the lake. Everyone knows these two blocks are a no-fly-zone.”

“Yeah, and what’s here?”

“What?”

Ben tapped on the table. “*We are*. This place, Mirrors. They’re coming onto our turf, we’re not trying to start anything. We’re tryina be smart about it, petty theft, shit like that, and they’re the ones escalating. We don’t wanna kill anybody. But, you know. We do.” He pressed his hand flat to the table and for a second, he looked pained. “It’s gotten worse recently.”

“Right.”

“Speaking of which, it’s showtime. Let’s get you fitted up. And you owe me a buck for that smoke. Pay me back whenever.”

The kid hauled himself to his feet. “You’re kind of an asshole.”

Ben slapped him on the back. “Pitter patter. We got a job to do.”

—

Dee leaned on the far wall of the bakery, tossing his knife and watching Ben prattle to the greasy redheaded kid he met at Burger King. He picked at a scab on his knife-scarred arm and watched as Ben played with his hair as he spoke, as his dark eyes got wild and focused the way

they did whenever he talked about Telly. He followed the lines of his big, curved nose and his sharp jaw, his small, bony hands and his brown skin, tacky with summer sweat.

Colm sidled up next to him and said, “Do you know what sirens are?”

Dee spooked and almost caught his knife upside down. He glanced down at Colm, slim and pretty, dark skin, his hair twisted into soft spikes. He had an AK-47 hanging off his shoulder.

“What, like on cop cars?” Dee’s voice was deep and permanently hesitant, like every word was a secret he was reluctant to share.

“No, like mythology. They’re sexy fish people who lure sailors to their deaths for shits and giggles.”

“What does that have to do with—” Dee looked back at Ben. “Oh, fuck you.”

Vic overheard, sniggered and shoved his massive shoulder against Dee’s. “I think the word you’re looking for is ‘jailbait,’ *huevón*.”

Colm said, “I was trying to be subtle.”

Dee stuffed his knife into his hip sheath and pushed up off the wall. “Get your shit together. We leave as soon as Ed Hardy over there’s got a piece.”

—

It was two in the morning and the night was stuffy and hot. Ben lost sight of the new kid after a few minutes and gunfire crackled from the doorways of shops on both sides of the street. He sprinted across the dry, dusty sidewalk and ducked behind a mailbox, breathing hard. Dee watched him from around the corner and tossed his knife once, twice, and pushed his hair out of his eyes. He was always Ben’s backup and Ben hated having backup, but regardless of how good a shot he was, he was still shoulder-height to most of the guys out there and if any of them got on him, he was a goner. That’s where Dee was helpful: six-foot-five and built like a quarterback,

carrying no less than two razor-sharp objects on his person at all times. He was clumsy as hell, but if everything worked out, it didn't come up.

Footsteps clattered up the alley behind him and someone ran into him and yelled; it was the redheaded kid from earlier, holding a Fisher-Price-looking revolver and terrified by it.

"Oh, Christ, it's you," the kid said. "Are you 'Colm'? I got a text from a—"

"It's pronounced *collum*. Weird, I know."

"You're not Colm?"

"Colm's the Black guy, I'm Dee."

"Oh, shit. Alright. Fuck, how do you guys *do* this? I saw that big, slick guy—"

"Vic."

"—bust a dude's arm open. Like *open*, I saw bone!"

"That's not that bad. You—"

One of Briden's guys trotted along the storefronts across the street and Ben peeked up over the mailbox with his revolver, took aim and missed by an inch. The gunshot banged off the houses and echoed back at them.

"Look," Dee snapped at the kid, giving him a shove, "go back to Mirrors if you're spooked, we'll—"

The footsteps of the guy coming across the street towards Ben slapped loudly.

"Boss!" Dee barked, no names in public. "Four o'clock!"

The guy heard him and started to run. Dee couldn't see if he was holding a knife or a gun or something else, so he burst out of the alley and sprinted towards them. Ben stumbled as he scrambled out from behind the mailbox and there was a single loud, crackling shot. Dee barreled into the guy with his shoulder down and smashed his head into the mailbox. There was blood and it was immediately apparent that some of it was Ben's. Ben fell hard to the curb and blood poured from his shoulder, up where it met his neck, and his pupils were pin pricks in the dark. Dee stuffed his boot knife into its sheath and grabbed Ben's arms.

“It’s just your shoulder, right?”

“He clipped it,” Ben said, his voice light and wobbly. “Where were you?”

“Around the corner, cut me some slack.” He looked back towards the alley and the new kid was gone.

“Asshole.” Blood gugged out of the gash and Ben glanced down at it as if it were a wine stain. “Huh. Never been shot before.”

“Move your hand,” Dee snapped, and he did. His shirt was torn up but the wound didn’t look deep. “Okay, put pressure on it, you’re coming to my place.”

“Do you want me to move my hand or put pressure on it? Mixed signals.”

“Don’t be a smartass. Call Colm, tell him—”

“I know what to do!”

“Boss!” Colm yelled from the other side of the street. “I saw that, you alright?”

Dee shouted back, “He got hit. I’ll fix him up. Was that the last of them?”

“Couple of stragglers here. Vic’s still working someone over, we’ll be fine.”

“Alright. Lemme know if you need me, we’re going.” He looked down at Ben, who was glassy-eyed, sunken and sick, not looking at much of anything. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Dee put a hand between his shoulder blades and guided him a couple blocks down to where his rusted panel van waited at a broken parking meter. He found a rag in the back and tied it under Ben’s arm and over his shoulder, cinching it tight.

“Slow the bleed or you’ll pass out,” he said. He climbed into the driver’s seat and got the van going after a few false starts, then lit two smokes and stuck one in Ben’s mouth. “You’ve never gotten shot before.”

“Like I don’t fuckin’ know.” Ben wiped blood from his face with the back of his hand. His nose was running and his upper lip was sweaty and he looked half asleep. “Bound to happen sometime. How old were you the first time you got shot?”

“I dunno. Seventeen, eighteen.”

“See? Fair ‘nuff.” Ben rested his head against the window and Dee watched him out of the corner of his eye as he drove. “I’m lucky I didn’t get shot at thirteen.”

“I don’t know if that counts as lucky.”

“Does for me.”

Ben had gotten cut and beat up before, but getting the shit beat out of you was a rite of passage and getting shot was something else. Dee, who would be thirty in the spring, vaguely remembered being Ben’s age, just past puberty and feeling bulletproof. His first serious injury had been a wake-up call that said *the things you do to other people could happen to you*. He had never been a very good shot, too big a target and too anxious to hold a gun steady, so he preferred knives and other things he could put his muscle behind. He’d been shot a few times and had the knots of scar tissue to show for it, along with myriad other scars from cuts and burns and things he didn’t remember anymore. He kept his arms covered in public.

“I wouldn’t shoot to kill if they didn’t,” Ben said. He raised a shaky hand to pull the cigarette from his mouth, then cracked the window to blow smoke outside. “I mean, I don’t. Not usually.”

“I know.” Dee pulled the van around a dark corner and his dilapidated apartment block rose up between a Chinese bakery and a pawn shop at the end of the street. “Maybe you should start.”

“I’ll remember you said that.”

He helped Ben up the steps into his building and into the dark den of mildew that was his one-room apartment. He didn’t let Ben visit often and he was ashamed of his mattress on the carpet, the cracked window frame, the smelly bench press and the stolen dollar store candles crammed into empty bottles in lieu of working electricity, most of the time. He had weights stacked under the bench and plates and dirty laundry stacked around the bed. But, he had medical supplies, and they couldn’t go to the hospital for gunshot wounds.

He asked, “It isn’t still lodged in there, right?”

“What, the bullet? How would I know? It just hurts, I don’t know.”

“God, fine.” He sat Ben down on the mattress and lit a couple candles by their feet. “Take your shirt off.”

Ben grunted as he peeled the shirt from his shoulder and yanked it over his head. Dee soaked a washcloth under the sputtering kitchen tap, then crouched in front of him and tried to remember everything he knew about extracting bullets and, if he had to, soldering wounds. He tongued the spot in his teeth where he was missing his canine on the left side, an ugly physical habit he didn’t think about much. Ben sat ramrod straight on the edge of his mattress with sweat glinting in the pit of his throat.

“You said it wouldn’t hurt much, you liar,” Ben said through his teeth.

“I said it wouldn’t hurt at *first*. When you’re just like, surprised or whatever. Lemme get you something to bite.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll crack your teeth when I get in there. The bullet’s stuck.” Dee peered into the torn mess of blood and flesh at Ben’s shoulder. “Bodies are disgusting.”

“The fuck kind of thing is that to say?”

“Hold on.” Dee dug his fingers into the wound before Ben could stop him. His fingers slipped in all the blood and Ben made an awful, high-pitched noise and twisted Dee’s shirt in his fist, his body twisting and seizing up in pain. Dee tossed the bullet onto a plate with a wet, ringing *clink* and held the washcloth to the streaming wound, his other hand clutching the back of Ben’s head. “You’re okay, you’re okay okayokayokay...”

Ben ground his forehead against Dee’s shoulder, every muscle in his body tense and straining, and Dee held him there. He tried not to think about what would happen if things had been even slightly different—*bam*, shattered solar plexus, busted ribs, a bullet in the heart. Nothing they didn’t both know.

Dee said, "I've got that stitch-twine if you want me to sew you up."

"I don't know anything about this, do whatever you gotta..." Ben trailed off. "Just, whatever. Don't let me die."

"You're not gonna die, you baby."

"*You're* a baby. I got shot, I'm allowed be a baby."

Dee rooted around for rubbing alcohol and a spool of surgical twine in his makeshift first aid kit. The tiny needle in the kit didn't seem any different from a sewing needle. Dee heated it over a candle and stuck Ben with it once, but Ben's face was so scrunched up in pain that bile rose in his throat and he backed off.

"Shit, I can't do this. You gotta call somebody else."

"What? I'm not sitting here with a needle hanging out of me, you got this."

"I can't hurt you, you—"

"I'm fine. Just get it over with."

Dee managed to get through the rest with Ben twisting at the front of his shirt. When he sat back, the fabric was all stretched out. He wiped at it and got blood on it. "I'll wrap it up. You can go home tonight."

"Do I have to?"

"You'd better."

"I guess." Ben cracked his knuckles. He cracked his knuckles when he wasn't holding a smoke and didn't know what else to do with his hands. "It's my birthday tomorrow," he said, like both of them didn't know exactly when his birthday was. "Eighteen."

"I know," Dee said, suddenly tense. It was after midnight and tomorrow meant the morning after next. He still thrummed with nerves and guilt and mind-numbing fear at the possibility of, even for a moment, losing Ben. "Eighteen," he said back.

He washed his hands and wrapped clean surgical gauze under Ben's arm and over his shoulder in a pattern that could be hid by a sweater. The wound had mostly stopped seeping and

he'd be able to sleep if he wanted to. Dee considered giving him a slug of whiskey but like always, the thought of Ben being too young to drink was like a sucker punch. He'd stopped shaking, at least. He pulled the last cigarette from his crumpled pack and lit it on one of the candles. Dee lit his own and sat back on his haunches while they eyed each other but, Dee thought, it wasn't *eyeing* anymore. In the past year, *eyeing* had become *gazing*, *watching* and a thousand other flowery words. Everything had changed and *kid* had bled into *man*, *more or less*, and *friend* became *lover*???? with a billion question marks. For Dee, *your dead best friend's son* had become *Benjamin* by name. And now Benjamin sat across from him all ashy and bloody with his hair hanging dull around his shoulders and his nail beds stained with blood. He'd been shot for the first time and it was Dee's job to clean him up. It would have been Dee's job even if Telly had been alive because that's just the way it was: Dee watched out for Ben whenever Telly couldn't. But Telly had always been there—he should have been sitting on the end of the half-rotten bench press in the corner of Dee's room, his elbow on the window sill with a crumpled cigarette hanging from his meaty hand. But he wasn't. For six months, he hadn't been there.

Ben's jaw was set hard. He got this look when he thought about Telly, when they were both thinking about him, uncertain eyes and clenched teeth. He looked down at his hands and said to Dee, "It's just you and me now, eh?" for the thousandth time since Dee could remember.

Dee had known Ben since he was sixteen, when Ben was a shy four-year-old and Telly was this confident twenty-something stranger with a thick South African accent who worked in a bakery and was collecting teenaged street urchins like Dee for some kind of half-cocked uprising. Dee was best friends with Telly and Sophie, Ben's mom, and everything had been perfect. And now, fourteen years later, Telly had a cheap cemetery plot, a widow who didn't know exactly how he died and two devastated sons, the eldest of which had fallen head over heels for his best friend, Dee, who was pushing thirty and feeling queasy about it.

Dee rolled forward on the balls of his feet and kissed Ben, feeling the cold rush of the breath he sucked in his nose, the surprise. His lips were small and dry and bitten, and he kissed

him back. It wasn't their first kiss, or their tenth or twentieth. Dee didn't let it linger. He moved back, humming with the nauseating cocktail of arousal and guilt that he'd gotten used to living with for the past year.

"Thanks," Ben said, looking down at Dee's chest. His fingertips danced over the blood on Dee's shirt in a rare display of anxiety; Ben didn't fidget, so determined to appear any fraction beyond his years. "For the stitches and stuff."

"No prob." Dee wanted to kiss him again so badly that it ached behind his eyes. The thought that he could have lost him and might have been hauling his nearly-dead body to the hospital made him sappy and desperate. He said, "I'll give you a couple Tylenol. You should get home."

Ben shrugged. Dee knew he had mass in the morning. Ben leaned forward, hopeful, and Dee kissed him once and then a second time, his control ebbing away under adrenaline and fear. He let the backs of his knuckles brush Ben's hot, blood-smearred cheeks. Ben pulled his shirt back on and Dee gave him a handful of codeines. They snuffed out the candles and got back into Dee's van, then roared through deserted red lights towards Ben's neighbourhood, a bunch of narrow, two-storey brick houses wedged unsteadily between one another right up against the road.

Dee parked in the shadows down the street from Ben's place. Ben took a pill with a warm bottle of water and Dee kissed him again, then gave him two cigarettes to last until they saw each other in the morning. He climbed out of the van and stood on tiptoe to unlatch his fence, then scaled the walnut tree that grew alongside his house and pulled himself through his bedroom window.