

# The Trickle Down Kill

By Garnett Elliott

“Ah, how the mighty’ve fallen.”

Kearney thought for a second he’d imagined the voice. There’d been mornings after his operations where he’d sit in the back yard, medicated to the gills, and slices from his past would come back to him. Play out like a phantom movie, only to fade after awhile into the fresh Sinaloa air. But he’d weaned himself off pain pills months ago. His only staples now were bottles of Modelo Especial and the sangria he scored off the tortilla lady two miles down the road.

“You look like crap, Kearney.”

No denying it. That was Chester Shaw, strolling up between the chicken coop and the rusted ‘72 Dodge pickup. Older, of course, but Kearney could never misplace those pale Okie eyes.

He reached for his gun.

Chester drew a long-barreled Ruger from behind his back and hip-fired without breaking stride. The fat pitcher of sangria next to Kearney’s piece exploded. He snatched his hand back. What the fuck was he thinking? With all the nerve damage, he could close three, sometimes four of the fingers on his right hand into a claw. It’d take precious seconds to wrestle a gun into firing position. He kept the thing around out of habit.

“Sensible,” Chester said, smiling. He stopped about five feet away. The shock of the gun’s report faded from Kearney’s eardrums. “You don’t think the neighbors heard that, do you? Think they’d call anyone, this far south into Mexico? I don’t.”

Kearney tried to spit, but hell, his salivary glands weren’t what they used to be. He made a retching sound instead.

“Can’t you still talk?” Chester said.

“I can talk.”

“Sounds kind of slurred. Maybe you’re just drunk, though.” Chester had shaved off his beard. He looked more like a ranch hand than an ex-biker, dressed in Wranglers and a light blue work shirt that had been ironed stiff. Clean living? Hard to imagine, but people could change. Lord knew Kearney had.

“You’re probably wondering how I invaded the sanctity of your back yard,” Chester said. He motioned with his pistol past the rows of Ruby’s tomato plants, towards a twelve-foot cinderblock wall. Shards of broken glass winked from the wall’s top. “I got to tell you, it was pretty damn easy. First off was your dog. I fed him some rat poison wrapped in bacon, which is why he’s not barking right now. Shame about that. I’ll put a round in his head after I finish with you.”

“Hurry it up, then.” Kearney didn’t like the thought of his three year-old Airedale curled somewhere, getting eaten from the inside.

“I’ll take as much time as I want. Second thing was that little chili-shitter, Humberto, who you’ve been paying to skulk around here with a shotgun. Jesus, Kearney. Time was when you’d never trust a man from a lesser race. Your Aryan ways are slipping. I paid him off smooth as Judas, and for less money, too.”

“If you’re trying to get into my head, you slick fuck--”

“Third thing’s that sweet raven-haired piece. Don’t know her name. Don’t know where you found her, but it must’ve been way after my time, seeing how young she is. If your pecker’s fared like the rest of you, she’s probably deprived. Which would explain why she’s slipping out all the time, instead of staying home and wiping your ass. Don’t worry, though. I’ve got plans for her. When she’s mine I’ll keep her on the straight and narrow.”

Ruby had left for Los Mochis earlier that morning. Kearney felt some relief Chester hadn’t gotten to her. Yet. “I won’t ask how you managed to track me,” he said. “But as you can see, there’s not much left to take revenge on.”

“Oh, there’s enough.” Chester’s lip curled. “What happened to your goddamned skin? You look like a batch of Extra Crispy someone left in the fryer.”

“Gasoline fire.”

“Huh. You know what that reminds me of?” Chester tugged his shirt out of his jeans and hiked it up. An ugly sight. A strip of hairless, dead-white skin ran from his belt buckle to the lower part of his chest, like a skunk’s stripe. Bad case of road burn, and it’d come from a quarter mile of Calexico blacktop. The pavement had chewed through Chester’s leather jacket to get at the flesh underneath. Kearney knew all that because he was the one who’d dragged him behind his bike.

“Bad as it is, it’s still a damn sight better than you,” Chester said.

He cocked his head to one side. The unmistakable thunder of a Harley came rippling from out front, then ceased, like someone had just pulled up. Kearney’s heart surged, but he kept his face blank.

“What’s this?” Chester said. “Visitors? You got friends coming by today?”

“I don’t know.”

“The fuck you don’t.” He raised the gun like he was going to pistol-whip him, then hesitated. His eyes darted from the side lawn to the porch, and back to Kearney. He wiped sweat from his forehead. “You stay right there and don’t make a sound.” He started to move away, towards the side of the house, but came back and grabbed Kearney’s gun off the table. The barrel dripped sangria as he stuffed it in his back pocket.

“If you’re going to kill me anyway,” Kearney said, talking loud, “then why should I shut up?”

Chester glared at him.

“Didn’t plan on this, did you? Well, go ahead and shoot me. I’m sure it’ll be quicker than what you had in mind. Go ahead.” Kearney craned his head back and called out: “Hey! Hey, back here! *Gun!*”

“You crazy fucker.” Chester leveled the Ruger at his heart.

“Yeah, I like that. Clean shot.”

Something rustled from the side yard. Chester whipped the gun up and whirled. Kearney, on instinct, shoved his chair back and went sprawling with it to the ground. Three shots rang. They didn’t come from Chester. Three red splotches appeared on the back of his work shirt, center mass. He spun around like he was drunk, and toppled forward. Landed with his face inches from Kearney’s boots, his mouth open. Tasting Mexican dirt as he died.

A hand reached down and helped Kearney up. Strong fingers. He steadied himself against the nearby table. His benefactor had a gray handlebar moustache that

drooped several inches past his chin. Long gray hair pulled back from his broad face. Despite the heat, he wore a black leather vest with multiple patches over a long-sleeved shirt. That he still wore the vest was a nod towards tradition. Or nostalgia. Old English letters spelled 'Crusty Losers' above the left breast pocket.

He hawked a fat one at Chester's corpse. "Reunion, huh?"  
Duncan.

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They laid Chester out in the bed of the '72 Dodge. Duncan did most of the lifting. Kearney found a dirty tarp and tucked it over the body. Just a temporary arrangement, they agreed. Duncan told him he'd met a guy who ran a catfish farm up in Guaymas, and he could pay him to hide the body there. He thought it'd be fitting, a swarm of bottom-feeders nibbling on a piece of shit like Chester.

They found the dog stiff on his back alongside the house. Eyes open and glassy. The fur around his stomach was mottled red, already drawing flies. Duncan said they'd give him a proper burial in the evening, when the temperature cooled down. Maybe put him near the tomato plants.

"Now let's eat," he said.

He showed Kearney what he'd haggled from the fisherman's market that morning. A bucket jammed with king prawns, some of them still wriggling. Kearney stoked a fire in the pit while Duncan skewered the prawns on two-foot steel shafts, then dragged out an ice chest full of Modelo. They guzzled while the meat cooked.

"You picked a damn good day to visit," Kearney said.

"Let's just say I had a feeling."

"Chester had this place staked out. At least a couple days. He knew about Humberto, the dog, and Ruby, but I guess he hadn't figured on you being around."

"He say how he found you?"

"We didn't get that far in the conversation."

"Asshole like Chester finds you, then other people can, too."

"I'm not worried about it."

"That's the spirit." Duncan reached over and snatched a skewer off the fire.  
"These fuckers are ready to go."

They ate by probing past the feelers and claws, cracking the tiny armor plate for popcorn-sized shreds of white flesh. Duncan's fingers were much more clever. For Kearney, the extra work enhanced the taste. Like eating pistachio nuts. They made a little mound of prawn carcasses between them. Empty bottles piled up, too.

High on protein and old fashioned beer-buzz, Duncan pulled the tarp off Chester and sat him up in the truck's bed. Put a longneck in his stiff hand.

"He was a first-class fuckhead, and he tried to kill you, but he was a Crusty Loser, once," Duncan said. His voice shook a little.

"Amen," said Kearney.

"It doesn't seem right, though. We're honoring the dead, and your faithful dog is still by the side of the house. Let's drag him over here, too."

"Don't be so goddamned morbid."

They finished off the ice chest. Kearney, with what moisture his tear-ducts still permitted, talked about the rise and fall of their motorcycle club. Duncan recalled great battles with the rival Latin gang, Barrio Sombra. How they'd brawled and bloodied the pavement all over the Imperial Valley, fighting for distribution turf in the days when methamphetamine was simply called crystal.

At some point Kearney felt his eyelids droop. He never could sleep for shit anymore at night, not since the accident. So when he felt like nodding off, he just went with it. No telling when the mood might strike again. Duncan was narrating a knife-fight he'd gotten into at a roadside vegetable stand, and his raspy voice slipped him between the folds of sleep.

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He woke to the sound of metal scraping dirt.

Disorientation, for a second. The *where am I?* that comes from day-sleeping, and in the background the last reel of a half-remembered dream sputtering away, something about Ruby against the hills of New Mexico, wearing a white dress.

He looked around. First thing he saw was Chester, still upright in the truck bed. Paler now. Rictus had set in, and he grinned in Kearney's general direction. Not the nicest thing to wake up to. He figured it was late afternoon. The scrape sound was coming from a giant hole near the tomato plants. Duncan – or his naked upper torso, anyways – stuck up out of the hole. Old man's sweat gleamed from the bunched muscles in his shoulders, dripped down the gray-white hairs curled on his chest. He shoveled dirt.

Kearney got up, tottered over to the truck bed. "Scuse me," he told Chester, and pried the bottle out of his hands. Took a pull of sour beer.

"Where's Ruby?" Duncan asked him, mid-shovel.

"She's still not back? Lord. Told me she was going into town to shop. That's all the bitch does anymore, shops. Likes these little glass turtles the locals make." He peered at Duncan's work. "Jesus, you're digging that deep enough. It's just for an Airedale."

Duncan thrust the shovel down with a crunch. "Kearney, we got to talk."

Something funny about the way he said that. "Hell, we've been talking for hours."

"Not that glory days shit. Listen. When I came down to Sinaloa a couple months ago, I told you I was on the run. That's not completely true. I mean, I am on the run, sorta, but there's a reason why I ran here."

"If this is about staying with me and Ruby, I've already told you my house is open--"

"It's not about that." He leaned forward. A formless weight seemed to lean with him, topple, spill over onto Kearney's bent shoulders. "We made each other a promise, once. A vow."

Kearney shuffled back a step. Vows? What the fuck was he talking about?

"You don't remember, do you?"

Kearney had stayed drunk for most of his biker career. Blacked out entire chunks. Probably killed, fucked, and befriended more people than he could ever recall, not that that was a bad thing.

Duncan clambered out of the hole. When he bent, Kearney saw Chester's Ruger thrust in the back of his jeans. He walked over with slow steps, hands clasped in front of him like a preacher. He smelled of dirt and beer-sweat. Kearney wanted to take another couple steps back, but checked himself.

"Kearney, you can't ride anymore. I've watched you. You can barely put your pants on."

An accusation.

"I haven't tried, yet. I'm still working up to it."

"Ruby said you've gotten back all you're going to get. There's no way." Duncan lowered his head. "I know you've softened, some. The accident did that to you. This life you've got here, sitting on your ass, waiting, that isn't how the head of the Crusty Loser's supposed to go."

Despite the beer, Kearney's throat felt dry. "You feeling sorry for me? Is that what this is about? Why'd you stop Chester, then? Way you put it, he was about to do me a favor."

"No. He was going to torture you. The man that takes your life knows the value of what he's snuffing out. Loves you. And that's going to be me, brother."

He looked up at him. His eyes didn't waver. Kearney wished to Jesus his friend was joking. Slap him on the back, tell him that was good, very convincing, and could they get back to the business of burying his gut-rotten dog? But Duncan didn't joke like that. He told you he was going to do something, he did it. He told you he was going to kill you, well, kiss the orifice of your choice goodbye. Even in his prime, when all his muscles did what they were supposed to do, Kearney could never take him. Not in a fist-fight, not with chains or knives, and certainly not with guns. Fool to try.

"It's my life," Kearney said, trying to put some iron back into his voice. "My decision. And I've never been square with suicide."

"It's not suicide if I do it for you."

"Shit, man, are you listening to me? I said I don't want to go."

Without warning, Duncan reached forward and grabbed him. Locked both hands behind his spine. He drew him up with no effort and hugged him tight against his chest. "Brother," he whispered, "you're already gone."

"Duncan--"

"I should've just throttled you in your sleep," he said. His whole body shook as he shifted his hands upwards.

Kearney pretended to sob with him. He let his head droop like he was giving up, then reared back and butted. Not as hard as he'd hoped. Duncan stumbled backwards a few paces, more surprised than hurt. Kearney thrust a wobbling leg down, between Duncan's boots. They toppled backwards into the giant hole. Lucky for Kearney, he landed on top. Luckier still, Duncan landed on the shovel. He grunted. An edge must've bit into his back, because he wasn't so quick to slip his hands around Kearney's throat.

He didn't seem to be choking him as much as simply crushing his windpipe. Not trying to draw this out. Kearney reached back behind Duncan's jeans for the Ruger, but it wasn't there. He groped around; his fingers touched dirt, then a smooth piece of metal that had to be the barrel.

Now came the challenge. His right hand, the one he used to shoot with, was fucked. Good thing he'd had all that practice learning to wipe with his left. The two

hands helped each other. They got the gun twisted around, with one good thumb on the trigger. Kearney prayed the hammer didn't catch.

His throat closed shut.

A bomb went off in the hole.

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Kearney's throat had opened back up, just in time to vomit chunks of prawn all over Duncan's vest. He heaved until everything was gone. His ears rang. The Ruger's magnum round had exited Duncan's neck, leaving behind a bright flower.

"I told you I wasn't ready to die," Kearney said.

He'd sort out the implications of this. But not now. His ten-odd seconds of struggle had cost him; he felt the burn of torn muscles, maybe a bruised rib, and when the adrenalin ebbed there'd be more. First thing to do was get drunk. He surprised himself by how fast he was able to scabble out of the hole.

Fire shot up through his hip as he staggered for the back porch. Maybe bruised that, too. He clawed open the sliding glass door and bumped inside. His shin smacked the coffee table stacked with Ruby's collection of blue and green glass turtles. One of them took a suicide-dive onto the tiled floor. He wondered for a second how he was going to explain that to her, then realized, fuck, how was he going to explain the two corpses in the back yard?

She'd just have to deal.

Bottle of Glenfiddich stashed high in the kitchen cupboard. He got it down, sloshed amber into a juice glass. Drained it. Pouring himself a second when he heard the sound: an engine's throb, somewhere out front.

Bottle in hand, he stepped into the hall and eased the front door open a crack. Ruby had pulled up. She'd parked the jeep in a crazy angle along the lawn, next to Duncan's bike. The motor was still running. She wore a pair of black sunglasses, and her face, even through the Jeep's dusty windshield, gleamed a sickly white-green.

Kearney threw open the door. Ruby's head snapped towards him and froze. Her lips worked; whatever words she made were lost to the engine's hum. Kearney realized he had Duncan's blood splattered on his shirt. He must be a sight. She reached for something on the passenger's side and rolled down the window. Her small hand came up, shaking, with the nine-millimeter he'd bought for her just before they'd crossed the border. She steadied the barrel by resting it on the window's frame.

The bullet sang gut-level several feet to his left. He never had gotten around to showing her how to aim.

Automatically, his feet propelled him backwards, step over step, carrying him into the hall. Another round cracked and ricocheted off the doorframe. He retreated until he was out of her line of sight. Slumped against the wall and let his ass slide all the way to the tile.

Crap.

This was not a good day to be Simon Kearney, ex-leader of the Crusty Losers.

He heard the Jeep's door bang open. Ruby's voice, shrieking: "You better not've hurt him. You better not've, you walking pus-bag, because I'll put a bullet in your ugly

face. I will.” Coming closer. “He wouldn’t touch me. He wouldn’t touch me until after you’re dead, because that’s the kind of friend he is.”

Kearney allowed himself a smile. Good old Duncan.

He had a half-full bottle of Glenfiddich in his left hand. If he pretended he was hurt, and she got close enough, he could try to brain her. If she didn’t shoot him from the doorway. If his fucked-up body let him do what he wanted.

And then what? Maybe douse the whole place with gas, light them all up in one big Viking funeral, the kind he and Duncan used to talk about. His best friend, his enemy, his lover, himself. Their ashes joined in some south-of-the-border Valhalla, or carried away by hot winds to Baja’s shores.

He frowned. The suicide angle, again. Not his style. Plus, he hated gas-fires. Reminded him too much of the day Fate had reached down her gentle hand to finger-bang him sideways. All the times he and his bike had dodged asphalt death, had come within millimeters of speeding semis, close enough to smooch the tires, and he had to go and get blindsided by a Pontiac with a full tank. A fucking Pontiac.

Never live that down.

He stared at the doorway and waited for Ruby’s shadow.

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