

# A PLAGUE OF IRON

A close-up photograph of a handgun, likely a Glock, with a target reticle overlaid on the word 'IRON'. The reticle is a white crosshair with a central dot, positioned over the letter 'O'. The handgun is black and silver, with the serial number 'F23509A' visible on the slide. The background is dark and out of focus.

**chuck freadhoff**

## CHAPTER 1

Wade glanced at the clock again. An edge of worry began to invade his thoughts. Scott was almost an hour late.

His gaze swept the kitchen. The grout on the counters seemed gray, the walls needed paint, and the cabinet hardware was dull from use. He told himself to relax, he was too anxious. But it had been months since Scott had taken the time to come by the house. So why tonight?

Wade remembered when Scott called more than two years ago to tell him about his new job. “It’s time you stopped hopping from place to place and settled down,” Wade had said, just a little fatherly advice.

“Yeah, well this one’s different, it’s, ah . . . . It’s what I need to do right now,” Scott had said.

Wade thought “need to do” was an odd phrase, but when he’d pressed, Scott had turned quiet. Thinking about it now, Wade realized that was when things had changed between them. Since that day, he’d suspected that Scott was hiding something. Maybe they could talk about it tonight.

Wade glanced at the clock again. Only two minutes later than the last time he’d looked. From the corner of his eye he caught Maggie studying him. She was in her late forties and wore her dark hair short. Her green eyes were gentle.

“Relax, he’ll be here,” she said. “Maybe he’s just coming to ask for a loan.” He knew he should listen to her. She’d only known Scott for four years, but sometimes seemed to understand him better than he did.

Wade hoped it was only money. When Scott had called and said he was coming by, there had been an edge in his voice, a nervousness Wade hadn’t heard before and it worried him. But what he hadn’t heard was what really got Wade’s attention. The cool distance that had shadowed

their relationship the past couple of years was gone. Maybe they'd finally turned some invisible corner. Wade thought of Scott's voice again. Yes, something had changed.

Wade glanced at the clock and Maggie stood up from the kitchen table. "Go wait outside. You're driving me crazy," she said.

Wade took a beer from the refrigerator and went through the back door to the patio. Somewhere nearby, a neighbor had just started a barbecue and the faint smell of lighter fluid and charcoal drifted past. He twisted the top off the bottle and heard a car in the driveway.

Moments later, Scott came from the kitchen carrying a beer. At six foot two, he was a good three inches taller than Wade and he had to bend slightly when they hugged. His shoulders were broad and his biceps strained the sleeves of his polo shirt, but he'd lost some color in his face and Wade wondered how often he was getting to the beach.

"Sorry I'm late. I know I should have called, but I've been running behind all day," Scott said.

He took his cell phone from his belt, started at the screen, and put it on the round, glass-topped patio table. "I'm expecting a call," he said. He attempted a smile and shrugged. "Just some business but . . . well, it's important."

He sat, leaned forward, and stared at the concrete, his forearms resting on his thighs. The bottle, pinched between two fingers and a thumb, dangled between his legs. He seemed to be a thousand miles away.

"You cut your hair," Wade said, trying to draw him back.

Scott's blond hair had always hung to his shoulders or tumbled down his back. Now he wore a crew cut and the newly exposed skin behind his ears and at the top of his neck contrasted sharply with his tanned face and arms.

"Oh yeah, I need a different look," Scott said.

"Different look? For what?"

Scott waved the question away, ran his palm over his head, and picked up the phone. He glanced at it then shifted to face Wade. "I'm glad you had time, Dad. I really wanted to see you."

"Anytime you want to talk, it doesn't matter what else is happening, we'll talk. We can talk about anything. You know that, right?"

"Sure." Scott took another sip of beer. He was silent for a moment. "You remember what you told me when I started thinking about making surfboards for a living? What I'd need to be successful?"

Wade felt his stomach muscles relax. Maybe it was just a loan. Scott

had spent years working every job he could find — electrician's helper, carpet installer, delivery driver, sales guy at a surf shop, anything — so he could save enough to open his own surfboard business. Now, Wade figured, he probably just needed something to help him get started.

He nodded. "You have to have passion."

"You said if I was really passionate about something, no matter what it was, I could make it happen. Like you and the shop."

"I remember," Wade said, surprised that Scott remembered.

They'd talked about it years ago. Scott had explained the process of building a surfboard, the shaping, the laminating, adding the fiberglass, putting on the resin, and the sanding. You needed talented people at each step, he'd said. The whole process could take two weeks, there was a ton of competition, and the Chinese were flooding the market with cheap boards. Yeah, a lot like building custom motorcycle engines, as much art as mechanics.

"Is that what you want to talk about?" Wade asked. "You ready to start your own business?"

"Well, there were a couple of things . . . ."

Scott's cell phone buzzed, the vibrations resonating on the glass. He picked up the phone and glanced at the screen. "Sorry, Dad, I gotta take this."

He walked to the middle of the backyard and turned his back, but in the still, warm summer evening, his voice carried easily.

"Yeah, sure. Everything's set. No, no problems. Yeah. Look, I told you everything's fine."

Scott turned, and in the fading light Wade caught an expression, gone an instant later. He crossed the yard to the table but didn't sit. He took a long swig of beer and put the bottle on the glass.

"I gotta head out, take care of something." He stepped to the sliding screen door leading to the living room.

"Wait," Wade said. "If this is about money to start your business, you know I'll help . . . ."

"That's cool, Dad. I've got to run some errands. We'll talk when I get back."

"Okay, but what else?"

"What?"

"You said there were a couple of things you wanted to talk about. What's the second?"

Scott's phone buzzed again. He answered the call and spoke in Spanish, the words fast, his accent good. Wade couldn't track it.

“Spanish?” Wade asked.

“I’ve picked up a little along the way.” He was smiling, almost beaming, obviously happy. “We really haven’t talked much lately. That’s going to change. In fact, a lot of things are going to change.”

“So take a moment, sit down and we’ll catch up now. You can tell me all about it.” Wade gestured to the patio chair where Scott had been sitting a moment before.

“I can’t. Gotta go.” He went into the living room, but didn’t slide the screen shut. A moment later he stepped onto the patio again.

“Dad, what would you think if I left the country for a while?”

“Left the country? Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Ireland.”

“Ireland?”

Scott looked at the concrete, took his phone from his belt and put it back again, then shook his head. “Forget I mentioned it, okay.”

He stepped to the table and held out his hand. Wade stood and shook it, Scott’s grip firm and strong.

“I’ll call you in a couple of days,” Scott said and disappeared into the house. A car door slammed and an engine started in the driveway. Wade turned away from the door, sank into the chair, and for the first time in years remembered pulling Scott from the ocean.

Scott had been about ten and had just learned to surf. They’d gone to the beach so he could practice, but the waves were too big and Wade forbade him from going in. Scott pleaded and finally Wade relented.

“Okay, we’ll wait an hour and see if things calm down. I’ll get some sunscreen from the car,” Wade had said. But when he got back, Scott was already paddling out. A second later, he disappeared under a huge wave. Wade didn’t remember running across the sand or diving in the water, but could still see his hand catching Scott’s long hair as he went down. Wade had no memory of dragging him to the surface or bringing him ashore, although he remembered hugging him and yelling at him at the same time, swearing that he’d never be allowed to surf again.

On the drive home, Scott’s mood had swung from scared, to thrilled, to defiant. “I could have handled it, Dad,” he’d said, but Wade had heard the edge of fear still in his voice.

That was the thing about kids, even grown-up kids, Wade thought now. They never really understand how much you love them, how you’d risk anything for them.

Maggie came through the screen door.

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“Well?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Did he ask to borrow money?”

“No. There was something else he wanted to talk about but we didn’t get a chance.”

Wade realized he hadn’t touched his beer. He took a long swallow. It was warm and flat. He put the bottle back. “He said things were going to change, and then asked what I’d think if he moved to Ireland.”

“Ireland? Why there?”

“I don’t know. He said he had to run an errand, that we’d talk again when he got back.” Wade picked up the bottle, but remembered the warm beer and set it down again. “Something’s changed. He was different.”

“He’s matured, grown up. He’s not a kid anymore. And he looked happy, happier than I’ve ever seen him.”

“Yeah, he was happy but . . . ,” Wade hesitated, remembering the look that flashed across Scott’s face as he closed his cell phone after the first call — the same look he’d seen that day at the beach years before. “He was scared, too.”

## CHAPTER 2

Wade closed his eyes and tried to leave his own fear behind. It had been four days since Scott came to the house and he hadn't called. The days had crawled past and Wade had fought to not imagine the worst. Now in his workroom at the shop, he breathed in the distinctive greasy smell of the hypoid oil that Harley used in its transmissions and the mix of clean-burned carbon, the banana-like smell of gasket sealer, and new rubber parts.

An engine roared to life just outside the workroom. The clean, sharp thunder of a newly built engine made his heartbeat jump. He opened his eyes and stepped into the shop's delivery bay.

Roberto, his foreman, was standing next to a Harley on a raised platform. The chrome-plated engine shone in sharp contrast to the jet black gas tank. They'd finished the engine a couple of days earlier. Roberto shut down the bike and looked up. He was in his late fifties, short and strong with only a hint of a belly. His blue work shirt was unbuttoned revealing a black t-shirt underneath.

"I think it's ready. Owner's coming by tomorrow," Roberto said and stepped away from the bike. "You okay? You seem a little distracted."

What could he say, that his son hadn't called in four days? Roberto knew that he and Scott didn't talk much.

"I'm fine," Wade said and walked back into the small workroom. Pegboards filled with tools, gaskets, clamps, and gauges covered the walls behind a stainless steel workbench that formed an L along two sides of the room.

Roberto fired the engine again and for a second Wade enjoyed the ferocious, masculine roar. But the joy faded quickly. He scanned the cluttered

workbench. He was already behind — he owed a guy from Ohio a rebuilt panhead and some movie producer from Malibu was expecting a customized flathead. He reached for a wrench on the pegboard but stopped, his eyes settling on a postcard taped next to a gasket. Scott had sent the card from Mexico during spring break his senior year in college.

He left the wrench on the pegboard, walked back to the office, and dropped into the swivel chair behind his desk. He opened a drawer, took out a framed picture of Scott, and studied it.

Scott was standing on the beach, a long board next to him, his Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned. His sun-bleached hair reached his shoulders and his eyes sparkled. His lazy smile spoke of an easy charm, but Wade knew it hid a stubbornness and independence that had been a flashpoint between them. The picture had been in the drawer since their last argument almost two years before. Wade blew the dust off and pushed aside a chrome-plated piston and con rod he kept on his desk — a souvenir of the first engine he'd rebuilt at the shop — and put the photo on the desk next to the piston.

Why hadn't he called? Wade told himself he was being stupid, that he'd barely talked to Scott for eighteen months and now was waiting for a call like an anxious schoolgirl. He swiveled and took in the office: cement-block walls decorated with photos of motorcycles in black metal frames, linoleum flooring, a couple of brown metal desks pushed together, and a filing cabinet. An old refrigerator, where the machinists had kept their lunches until it had broken down a few weeks earlier, was against the far wall, waiting to be hauled away.

He took a stack of invoices and bills from the desk and began working his way through them, reading each column of figures twice or three times because he couldn't concentrate. It was slow work and when he finished in the early evening he was alone in the building. He initialed the last bill, put it atop the stack, and glanced at the phone, willing Scott to call. Moments later, he turned off the desk light, stood, and gathered his keys and cell phone. He'd just stepped through the door to the parking lot and slipped his key into the lock when the phone rang. He pulled the door open and ran to the desk.

"Scott?"

"What? Is this Mauer Motors?" The speaker's Australian accent was unmistakable.

"Yeah, sorry. This is Wade Mauer. How can I help you?"

"Hey, mate. It's Sean Collins, don't know if you remember me. I'm from

Sydney.”

Wade had spent almost thirty years gaining a reputation for building some of the finest handmade Harley engines in the world. Most of his business came from the U.S. and Canada but the day before he'd shipped an engine to Germany. He flipped on the desk light, pulled the chair back, and sat.

“Certainly Mr. Collins. It's been a few years but I remember every engine I've ever built, at least every one I've shipped to Australia.”

“Well, is this a good time to talk? It's well-past quitting time there I suspect.”

“It's always a good time to talk about engines,” Wade said, relieved to have the distraction.

“Well, I bought a new scooter, thought maybe I'd give you a call.”

So, serious riders called Harleys “scooters” down under, too. Or maybe Collins had just read it somewhere. It didn't matter. If Wade remembered correctly, Collins knew engines and was willing to spend a lot of money to get what he wanted.

“Let's see, last time we built you something a little hotter, right?” Wade said. “What are you thinking this time?” He slid a pad across the desk to him, straightened it, and picked up a pen.

“That's why I called. Thought we'd talk it over.”

“Well, we could do a street port and mill job, give you a little more speed,” Wade said. He knew Collins wanted more, but it was a good starting point — bring the customer along one step at a time until he gets where he wants to go.

“Yeah, that sounds good. That pretty involved?”

“Oh, it really wouldn't be all that much. I'd increase the cam duration and lift, upgrade the ignition and carburetors, get a little more compression, that's all.”

“You thinking of shaving the heads?”

“I could do that, sure. Maybe go from eight-point-eight to one to nine-point-eight to one. Of course, if you're thinking of something a little more serious . . . .”

From out of nowhere he remembered a long-ago conversation with Scott. Scott had been explaining why the short, pointed, narrow boards called bullets weren't designed for speed. “You're not trying to go faster, Dad. You build these for maneuverability. They're for riding the big, monster waves. Coming down one of those, you'll be going as fast as you need to.” Not much different than custom-building motorcycle engines, Wade

thought. How you built it depended on how you were going to use it.

“Hey, Mauer, you there?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“What’d you mean by something a little more serious?”

“Probably new pistons. Let me ask you, you’re not planning on climbing hills, are you?”

“Nah, those hill climbers are a crazy lot. Why’d you ask?”

“If you’re planning on climbing hills, I’d be looking to build something with twelve-and-a-half or thirteen to one compression.”

“Well, I’m staying on the road . . .” A silence stretched and Wade waited. About half a minute later, Collins cleared his throat. “But you think new pistons would be a good idea?”

“They’d boost your compression to ten to one but, of course, I can’t do that with a stock engine, the ports are too big. I’d have to fly cut them for valve clearance.”

“I don’t know if I want to do that much. I mean, what’s all this going to cost?”

Wade realized he’d stopped writing and had been only half listening. His eyes had drifted to a framed photo of himself standing in front of a 1956 Chevy that he’d raced back when he got out of the Army and still had hopes of becoming a professional driver. He’d rebuilt the Chevy’s engine himself and it had been fast but didn’t win any races. Finally, he’d had to admit that he was a great mechanic but not much of a driver.

He turned his attention to the phone call again. What had Collins just said? Something about cost.

“I’d have to add it all up,” Wade said. “But you’re right, it won’t be cheap. If you want, we could dial it back a bit, maybe just do what we did last time.”

“No, I’m looking for a little more than that. Besides, you know what they say about the difference between men and boys, don’t you?”

Wade put his pen down. He knew the old line but played along.

“What’s that?”

“The difference between men and boys is the price of their toys.”

Wade laughed politely and they spoke for a while longer. In the end, Wade promised to e-mail a proposal and an estimate.

He hung up and checked his cell phone, although he knew it hadn’t rung. He stood and started for the door, and saw the old refrigerator. It was something he’d been planning to do today and it would kill a few more minutes and give Scott a little more time to call.

Wade got a screwdriver from the pegboard in his workroom, took the refrigerator door off, and leaned it against the wall. He left the top freezer door on, figuring the space was too small for even a kid to crawl into. He put the screwdriver back, and returned to the office. His eyes settled on the photo of Scott. A few moments later, he locked the door behind him, crossed the lot to his pickup, and drove home.

When he came into the kitchen, Maggie turned from the sink and he read the question in her eyes.

“No nothing,” he said.

“Well, it could be anything,” Maggie said. “Maybe work’s been hectic, maybe his cell phone battery died, maybe he’s making more plans for the business.”

“He said he’d call.”

She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. She’d changed from the scrubs she wore at the hospital into blue jeans and a green T-shirt that hung almost to her knees. Her smile radiated a calm confidence and Wade understood again why she was so good amid the chaos of an operating room.

“It hasn’t been that long,” she said, “and as much as I love Scott, he’s not exactly been a faithful correspondent.”

“I know, but it’s been four days and . . . well, I thought things might be different this time.”

“Have you tried his work, checked with any of his friends?”

“That’s just it. I don’t even know where he works or who his friends are. I guess I really don’t know much about my own son.”

## CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Wade's cell phone buzzed when he was halfway between the front door and his pickup in the driveway. He pulled the phone from his belt, looked at the number, and felt a crush of disappointment. It wasn't Scott.

"Hello."

"Mr. Mauer, this is Brett Knowles. I'm Scott's roommate."

"Is he there? I'd like to talk to him."

"No, ah, that's why I'm calling. He's . . . ah, I think he's disappeared."

"What do you mean disappeared?" Wade pressed the cell phone hard against his ear.

"He left a note to call you."

He sounded young and spoke with a slight accent, maybe another Aussie.

Wade exhaled and fought back a bubble of panic. He moved a few feet across the driveway to his pickup and leaned one hand against the roofline as he looked at the ground.

"Tell me your name again."

"Brett. Brett Knowles. I just got here. I don't even know when he left the note."

Wade lowered the phone. A few houses down, a woman in fuzzy slippers, her thick bathrobe cinched tight, bent at the end of her driveway and picked up the *L.A. Times*. Wade raised the phone to his ear again.

"Are you there now, at the apartment?"

"Yes."

"What's the address?"

"You don't know it?"

“No. Where is it?”

As Knowles spoke, Wade watched the woman cross her porch and disappear into the house leaving a trail of footprints across the dew-covered lawn.

“Wait for me,” Wade said and slapped the phone closed.

He punched the address into his GPS, backed the pickup into the street, and headed toward the freeway. Sunlight broke intermittently through the thick canopy of trees lining the street and splashed across the truck’s windshield making it difficult to see. But Wade didn’t slow. When he reached the corner, he coasted through the stop sign and sped up again. Scott’s apartment was across the city and even with the light early-morning traffic, it would take awhile to get there. He remembered the fear he’d seen in Scott’s eyes and pushed down on the accelerator.