



Ghost (Fire Lake #9)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: The Thrilling Last Story in the Fire Lake Series

THE INVISIBLE MAN

A cop down to his bones, Detective Ray Sommers has seen it all, and knows how to trust his instincts.

While visiting an old friend, he finds what he knows with what he sees colliding right in front of his eyes. A man has appeared from out of nowhere. Literally. And in more ways than one, Rays visit has gotten way more complicated.

Darren, aka Ghost, ran from his traumatic past taking with him some unbelievable secrets. But now he's found a family where he's been accepted for the first time in his life.

Ray and Darren's initial encounter might've been a bit unorthodox, but interest sparks and their attraction is undeniable.

Ghost and his Fire Lake family are targeted by a powerful and ruthless man, and they fight back with every weapon they have—of which Ghost is one.

Now that he's found someone who genuinely sees him, he's not sure he'll live long enough to enjoy him.

Total Pages (Source): 21

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Detective Ray Sommers

Marshall, Texas, hadn't changed much over the past decade, at least not physically. The diner sat in the same spot, the high school and football field remained much the same as when Ray had lived there, and the main thoroughfare still typified small-town America with its flags, flowers, shiny storefronts, and welcoming sidewalks. It screamed: Here's a place where you could raise a family in peace and safety—at least from all outward appearances.

Stopping here was little more than a quick visit on his way to a four-day law enforcement conference in Las Vegas. This was his way of keeping a promise to an old Marine buddy without being forced to linger too long.

He'd promised his friend, Sheriff Elias Cooper, he'd come back for a visit one day. They'd served together in the Marines before returning to civilian life—as if anyone who knew better considered being a sheriff or homicide detective a civilian.

Being a cop was as fraught with danger as being in the military. A while back, the pair of them had been on the hunt for Fletcher's missing brother, Kyle. Fletcher was one of the members of a semiretired team of Navy SEALs that lived on a compound on Fire Lake. In the course of the investigation, they'd shut down a human trafficking ring in Seattle in which Fletcher and Kyle's parents were involved.

So here he was, back in the town he'd grown up in. The town that had expected him to take over as sheriff someday as his father had, and his grandfather before him. Due to a twist of fate and a few better offers, that reality had never happened. Instead, he became a cop in Seattle.

As he drove through town, old memories crept in. The street he grew up on to the left, the park he used to play basketball in, the corner store that sold the best candy, the skate park where he broke his first bone, and the bench where he got his heart broken.

It was all here in this town, and it was choking him. He felt imaginary hands circling his neck, growing tighter by the moment. He pulled at his shirt collar for relief, but finding none, he sped up.

Those fingers loosened once he made it outside the town limits, and his breathing evened out. A town shouldn't have such a visceral effect on him after so many years that he'd spent thousands of miles away.

He took a calming breath and turned down the side road that led to his friend Brick's lake house. He'd be meeting Elias and his partner, Fletcher, at their cottage on the property.

It'd been a couple years since the case they'd investigated together had been closed, and Ray had run out of excuses for not visiting his old friend. Being so close to his hometown had him planning his escape before he'd even turned onto the road to Fire Lake.

He knew the area well and didn't require directions, but in his day, Sophia Matthews had owned the lake house. Her older brother, who was Brick's grandfather, had moved away years before Ray was born and his father had taken over as sheriff. All of it seemed like a lifetime ago. A past he'd preferred to stay that way.

To say he was shocked when he pulled onto the driveway leading to the old lake house would be an understatement. What lay before him wasn't the same place he'd left behind years ago. The house looked shiny and new, and the cottages dotting the property between the large oak trees reminded him of one of those idyllic scenes from a movie. Almost too perfect.

“Shit. Times have changed around here,”

he mumbled as he threw his truck into park.

When he got out, he spotted boats moored to a large dock, and he recognized Spencer, whom he'd met on Kyle's case, fishing off to the side while a smaller man sat in a lawn chair reading a book. Doors opened on the lake house, and Brick, Elias, and Fletcher walked out onto the back deck.

“You finally made it,”

Elias shouted as he waved at Ray. “Thought you might've gotten lost.”

“Yeah, well, some of us have busy caseloads and can't hop on a plane whenever they want,”

Ray zinged back as he changed directions and headed their way.

“Don't give me that shit. You forget who you're talking to,”

Elias said as he held out his hand for Ray to shake when he reached the top step. “How the hell are you, buddy?”

he asked, bringing him in and slapping him on the back.

“Good, good,”

Ray said. “You know. Same story, different day is all. How has small-town life been treating you?”

“Beats the hell out of living in the rat race.”

Elias laughed. “You couldn’t pay me enough to move to the city.”

“Good to see you again, Ray,”

Fletcher said as he shook Ray’s hand.

“You keepin’ this guy on the straight and narrow?”

Ray asked with a nod toward Elias.

“Hell, we wouldn’t be here if he was straight,”

Fletcher joked, making Ray laugh along with the others.

“So true. How are you, Brick?”

Ray asked, shaking the team leader’s offered hand. Brick led the team of semiretired Navy SEALs who lived and worked as private security out here on Fire Lake.

“Keeping busy. You know how things go.”

Brick smiled.

“Yeah, I do. I hear those missions have you guys pretty tied up lately.”

Elias had mentioned a bit about Fletcher being away with his military team, but had never gotten into specifics. Ray was aware that being semiretired still meant the government came calling now and then.

“Come on in. We’ll grab a beer and get you caught up,”

Brick said with a welcoming back slap.

“Sounds great.”

He could use a beer or two.

Ray followed them into the lake house, taking in how nice the place was given a bunch of men were living there. There wasn't a coat lying across the back of a chair or an area rug askew.

“This house has come a long way since I was here last. Congrats on the renovations and the cottages. It's really something.”

Truthfully, it was damn near picturesque.

“Thanks. We've worked hard and had help,”

Brick said. The look of pride on his face was well deserved.

A young woman walked in as if looking for something. This had to be the infamous Julia he'd heard so much about. The heart of the lake house and all its residents.

“Ray, I'd like you to meet Julia,”

Elias said.

Julia turned and smiled wide.

“Hello, ma'am. I've heard lots of wonderful things about you,”

Ray told her.

“Same here. I’m glad you found the time to visit us after helping out with finding Kyle.”

“These guys would’ve found him without me, but I’m glad I could help in some small way.”

Julia opened her mouth to speak, but something to her left side caught her attention.

“Found you,”

she hollered at the wall roughly ten feet away.

Ray was about to ask what she was looking at when a nude, slender man appeared out of thin air. Standing there as plain as day and as real as the table beside him.

“What the fuck is that?”

Ray shouted before taking a few steps forward to place himself in front of Julia.

The naked man’s eyes widened, and he screamed, but before another word was spoken, his eyes closed, and he slumped to the floor.

Julia pushed past Ray, and she and Fletcher ran to the man.

“Oh shit. Darren. Darren, talk to me,”

Julia said as she lifted his head off the hardwood floor. The man groaned and opened his crystal-clear blue eyes that stared at Ray in abject fear. A chilled gust whooshed through Ray’s body as he was overcome with a most unexpected and unwelcome feeling: the absolute need to ensure he never saw that expression on Darren’s face again.

Shit.

He turned to Elias for answers. “You forget to tell me something?”

“Yeah, we need to talk,”

Elias said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Ghost (Darren)

“You’re a freak. What the fuck is wrong with you? Crawl back under your rock, asshole. No one wants you around.”

Words he’d heard repeatedly over his twenty-eight years assaulted him as he paced the newly installed hardwood in his room. Darren had been staying at the lake house since the team returned from New Orleans and spent much of his time practicing to gain more control over the ability given to him by the scientists working for the Noah Group. “Given”

might not be the correct wording—forced on him seemed more appropriate. Genetic testing of unsuspecting people was the sort of thing the group thrived on.

Hated memories flooded him of a past spent in hiding. Hiding away from the other kids in foster care, and from his foster parents, who were perpetually angry. Hiding away from all the pseudo-concerned adults who’d tried to fix him over the years. Now, twenty-eight years later, here he was, hiding away again from the confused and angry looks of a stranger who reminded him of a lumberjack with piercing dark eyes and a thick beard.

Darren grew increasingly disgusted with himself by the second for several reasons, but his apparent cowardice was high on that list today. Just when he thought he was getting a handle on his issues, they came screaming back with a vengeance. Not only was the stranger freaked out and likely angry, but Darren had been naked on top of it all. Of course, he couldn't camouflage himself while still wearing clothing, but the handsome stranger didn't know that, and Darren never practiced when the kids were home.

Hell, he probably thought Darren was some sick freak on top of it all. Running around naked, getting his kicks from spying on people while invisible. Shit. No matter how he looked at the situation, it was hella bad from all angles. Maybe he'd stay in his room until the man left. Luckily, his room had a bathroom attached to it, and Julia could leave food outside his door. It could work.

He couldn't even imagine the terrifying results if the lumberjack or the others only knew about his other ability. The one he hadn't shared with anybody. The one he'd kept buried since the day he'd used it, and things went to hell. Darren would likely be kicked out of the house, hell, probably the town of Marshall altogether. Nobody wanted the sort of gift he could provide, even if they wished for its power. That other ability would stay locked away forever for his own and everyone's safety.

Someone knocked on his door. He guessed his time hiding was up.

He stopped pacing and didn't move, hoping whoever it was went away, but the knocking persisted, and Darren knew he was sunk.

"Darren, can I come in?"

Julia's voice echoed from the other side of the door.

He couldn't hide forever; she'd probably pick the lock. She was resourceful. "Okay.

Hold on.”

Darren unlocked the door, and Julia took a few steps in before closing the door behind her. He was thankful she hadn’t left it open to inquiring eyes.

“Are you okay?”

she asked, looking as concerned as she sounded.

“I don’t know. Is the lumberjack still here?”

Julia smiled. “Yes, Ray is still here. He’ll be here for a few days.”

“You mean he didn’t cut and run from the house the moment he had a chance?”

“No. Ray doesn’t strike me as the running kinda guy. He was shocked,”

Julia said as she came over to sit beside him on the edge of the bed. “He and Elias served together in the same Marine unit; they go way back. He’s a police detective in Seattle and helped us save Kyle when he went missing.”

Great, he’d embarrassed himself in front of the war hero lawman who’d saved Fletcher’s brother. Damn, it kept getting worse.

“I was honestly trying to sneak away before anyone noticed, but I couldn’t break my oath to appear when I was found during a training session. So I was sunk. Stay hidden and break faith or appear, chance being pummeled into the wall.”

“I shouldn’t have called attention to you. I was too into the game and blurted it out without thinking. My fault.”

“No, it’s not. You’re one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. You can’t help I’m a freak.”

“Don’t ever say that. You’re not a freak. Promise me you won’t say that again, let alone think it.”

Julia’s hands sliced through the air as she spoke. She often spoke with her hands and became more animated the stronger her emotions became.

Darren was shocked by how upset she was. “I promise. Sorry.”

“You aren’t a freak. You aren’t responsible for what those horrible people did to you. You’re doing your best under extreme circumstances. I mean, you’ve already used your power to save several lives—several team members would have died if you hadn’t done what you did back in that factory. Without you, the Noah Group would have done irreparable harm to one of the only teams out there fighting to stop them.”

Darren snorted. “You give me way too much credit. I was simply in the right place at the right time. I’m sure Brick and the others would have figured something out.”

“No. You’re the one who gives yourself too little credit,”

Julia huffed. “I’ll get through to you eventually, but in the meantime, are you ready to meet Ray the old-fashioned way?”

“We’ve met. I’m good here.”

Why would the guy want to see me again?

“No, you’re not. You’ll keep stewing on what happened, making it ten times harder on yourself. The sooner you see Ray is a good person, the quicker we can get back to

training.”

“I’m sure this Ray is a great guy, but there’s no way I’m going ghost while he’s here. I think I’ve given him enough shit to work out in therapy without adding to it.”

“I like that,”

she said, confusing Darren.

“What? Forcing people to seek therapy?”

That was odd.

“No. That term you use. Going ghost.”

“Seemed appropriate, considering that’s what it appears I’m doing. Vanishing into thin air.”

“That can be your new codename on the team. Ghost.”

“Code name?”

Why the hell would he need a code name?

“Yeah. You know how Brick, Stryker, Gunner, and Gator all have nicknames for various reasons like Brick is tough as bricks, Stryker never misses anything he aims at, Gunner is an amazing sniper and ordnance specialist, and Gator wrestled an alligator to save a kid. Well, yours can be Ghost as part of the team.”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“What?”

Julia asked with a shrug.

“You’re trying to make me feel better by including me in the team’s makeup.”

“You are part of the team, Ghost. So get used to it. We’re in the kitchen when you’re ready to rejoin the masses,”

Julia said before giving Darren a quick hug for encouragement and leaving.

He sighed. Was he truly part of the team? If he was or ever wanted to be, he had to start acting like it, and that could only happen if he managed to get his ass out of this room and face the world, mutation and all.

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Ray

“Well, hell. When you said there was some serious shit going down in these cases, I have to tell ya, this wasn’t anywhere on my radar,”

Ray said as he set one of the files back on the kitchen table. “The Noah Group performing genetic manipulation within babies’ DNA in utero and even earlier is the thing of sci-fi movies. It’s hard to wrap my mind around it, even with the proof right in front of me.”

He ticked off on his fingers: “A human lie detector, mindreading, x-ray vision, healing abilities, talking to the dead, telekinesis, telepathy, and chameleon-like capabilities are all hard to believe. I’ve seen a lot as a Marine and detective, but this is off the charts.”

“There are more varied abilities among a guy we met named Apollo and his team in New Orleans and countless other survivors scattered all over the world who’ve yet to be discovered,”

Brick said. “Apollo happened along on a case we were working and thought he was coming to the rescue when the Noah Group tried to nab our guy. Turns out he leads his own crew of survivors and was key in our taking out another would-be lab.”

“And this all began generations ago with the Navy?”

“Yes. Originally, the Navy hired two geneticists, Dr. Isabelle Noah and Dr. Frauste, to lead a team of scientists in an attempt to create the perfect warrior,”

Brick explained.

“Unfortunately, they didn’t keep close enough tabs on their experiments, and by the time they realized the program had gone off the rails, the damage was done,”

Elias said as Julia set three more beers on the table.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Ray said.

“You’re welcome, Ray, and call me Julia.”

“Okay, Julia. If you don’t mind me asking, was Darren okay when you checked in on him?”

“Yes, he’ll be fine. Just needs a bit of time to regroup.”

“I didn’t mean to scare him.”

“Of course not. This is all a shock to you. Elias thought it would be best to explain everything to you in person, but it’s become so commonplace for us that I didn’t clue in that you had no idea what would happen when I called Darren out of hiding. We were training while the kids were at school.”

“Right, the children.”

Ray chuckled. “I’m going to need a diagram to keep this straight. Let me see if I got this right. Ben is Jason’s son and Gunner’s nephew; Sammie is your son; and Frank is Stryker and John’s adopted son.”

“Right,”

Julia confirmed. “Frank is the only one of the children at this location with abilities. There’s another boy, Freddie, who has them, and he lives out at the ranch with the other half of the team. We brought him back from California with Harris and his sister, Jennifer,”

she explained. “Freddie can speak to spirits of the dead.”

“Though we aren’t sure what Frank’s abilities are yet,”

Elias explained. “He hasn’t shown more than a keen intellect.”

“And now different factions of this Noah Group are hunting down the survivors in order to use them in some messed-up plan to gain power?”

Ray asked.

“Yes,”

a voice said from behind him. When Ray turned, he found Darren standing a couple of feet away. “We’re pawns in a sick game of chess where whoever has the most genetically modified survivors under their control wins.”

“Good to see you again,”

Ray said as he stood.

It was easy to see Darren wasn’t completely comfortable with Ray’s presence. The detective was a large man, but he tried to appear less menacing.

“Hello, Detective,”

Darren said.

“Ray, please call me Ray. Look, I’m sorry for the way I reacted earlier.”

“It’s understandable. Not every day you see a man appear out of thin air.”

“True, but I’m still sorry I scared you.”

“Ghost, come join us,”

Julia said. “Want a beer?”

Darren grinned. “You’re not going to let that nickname go, are you?”

“Not a chance; it’s perfect. You’re part of the team, so you’ll get treated like one,”

she replied.

“Ghost. I like it,”

Brick agreed.

“Figures you would, ‘Brick,’”

Darren joked back.

Ray couldn’t help but feel a warmth spreading through his body as the handsome man smiled. Hell, what’s wrong with me? I don’t do complications, and I’m sure as hell not sticking around in Marshall long enough to get to know the guy. Still, he found himself pulling out the chair beside him so Ghost could sit down.

“Thank you,”

Ghost said as he took a seat.

Julia returned from the kitchen with another beer and set it before the latest arrival before sitting.

“So, we’ve been bringing Ray up to speed on the Noah Group and their past exploits,”

Brick said.

“I imagine that was very eye-opening,”

Ghost said. “Not every day you find out real-life mutants walk among you, not on a movie screen.”

Ray could tell Ghost’s words were measured as he sized Ray up. Caution was warranted, though it bothered Ray more than he’d admit. He wanted this man’s trust for some inexplicable reason that made no sense. But now wasn’t the time or the place to recite his resume, military service, or past deeds to reassure the man.

“Yes, the information verges on the unbelievable, but I’ve no reason to doubt its truth.”

Ray rolled his shoulders and stretched. “Now, it’s a matter of stopping this Noah Group from harming anyone else and helping the survivors find a safe place to live their lives in peace. Who knows what the ramifications are for future generations.”

“Really?”

Ghost turned to face Ray wearing a skeptical expression when another voice called from the doorway.

“He’s telling the truth.”

Ray turned to find two men, one gruff and menacing, the other one who’d spoken, and smiled, appearing much friendlier.

“Ray,”

Elias said. “I’d like you to meet Gunner and Conor.”

He’d not met them before but recognized the names from what Elias had told him about the team. He stood to greet them, holding out his hand.

“Good to meet you. I’m Ray Sommers.”

“I’m Gunner, you’re Elias’s friend. Part of the team who helped find Kyle,”

the big man stated.

The other man smiled. “I guess that makes me Conor,”

he said as he slapped the big guy’s chest. “Do me a favor, babe, can you grab us a couple of beers?”

Conor walked over to sit beside Ghost while Gunner strode to the fridge.

“So, how long are you staying, Ray?”

Conor asked.

“Only a couple of days. Got a conference in Vegas I need to head to.”

The relief on Ghost’s face was hard to miss before the guy tipped back his beer. At least they agreed on one point: Ray had to escape Marshall as quickly as possible.

Conor gave Ray a long look before turning his attention to Elias. “I trust you’ve brought Ray up to speed on the crazy-ass events and the cast of characters he’s walked into?”

He grinned as he took his beer from Gunner’s huge hand. Ray took the other one and uncapped it.

“Pretty much,”

Elias said as he hung his arm across the back of Fletcher’s chair. “I’m sure there’s some shit I’ve forgotten, but he can roll with it now that the preliminary details are clear.”

“And the fact that he saw Ghost appear out of thin air certainly should’ve convinced him it’s all real,”

Fletcher said with a grin.

“Ghost?”

Gunner asked.

“Yeah, that’s what Julia thinks my team nickname should be,”

Darren explained.

“I like it,”

Gunner agreed.

“You would,”

Ghost said. “I guess it’s not too bad.”

“Wait. You’re saying Ray walked in on Ghost when he was training?”

Conor asked.

“Yep,”

Julia said. “And, of course, I wasn’t thinking and called him out when I caught his movement.”

“Oh shit.”

Conor chuckled. “That had to be one hell of a shocker.”

Ray didn’t want to rehash their less-than-stellar first meeting. “Yeah, yeah. All’s fine now. I know to expect the unexpected from this point forward.”

“Dude, you have no idea,”

Gunner grumbled as he set a beer in front of Conor and took a seat. “Imagine never being able to keep a secret from your lover ’cause he knows when you’re full of shit.”

“Works great for me,”

Conor joked, causing the entire table to laugh. Gunner grinned and stared at Conor with affection.

Ray liked the banter; it reminded him of his time in the Marines. He missed that kind of camaraderie. He had friends on the force back in Seattle, but it never felt as close to when he'd been with his military unit.

“So, what’s the plan? Show Ray the sights of Marshall?”

Ghost asked. “Before he leaves.”

“Hell, he knows Marshall better than any of us,”

Elias said. “He grew up here. A third generation born and raised. His grandfather and father were both sheriffs of Marshall before me.”

“You didn’t want to become sheriff?”

Conor asked.

“No,”

Ray said, hoping that would end any further talk of it.

“Better life out in Seattle as a detective,”

Fletcher said. “I get it; small-town life ain’t for everyone.”

“Yeah, something like that,”

Ray responded. “Seattle keeps me pretty busy.”

“What was it like growing up in Marshall?”

“Same old story as every small town. You knew everyone and everything that happened. You couldn’t wipe your ass with new toilet paper without the neighbors knowing. But it wasn’t all bad.”

“Wait, if you grew up here and members of your family served as the local sheriff, then you’d know Great-Aunt Sophia and Father Henry Jones,”

Julia said with an overly excited expression.

Well, shit. Digging up old dirt didn’t take long at all for this crew.

“Yeah, my family and I have lived in Marshall for over two hundred years. I knew Brick’s aunt and her family.”

“That’s great. We’ve been trying to pull together information on a mystery involving the shooting of Jericho Miles back when Sophia was in her early twenties,”

she explained.

“That’s a long time ago. Don’t know how much help I’d be. That was more of my grandfather’s and father’s time, and Elias mentioned another detective named Woodley is on your team. Why are you so interested in a shooting that took place generations ago, Julia?”

“It’s as a favor to me,”

Brick spoke up, his voice calm, but something about his behavior had Ray paying closer attention. “You see, my great-aunt left me this place, and when we began fixing it up, we found boxes of old records on the case. Hell, probably some from

your grandfather's office, as he would have been acting sheriff at the time. Detective Woodley is out of town on a family matter, but more importantly, he's unfamiliar with the area."

"Still, what's a couple of old boxes of paper got to do with an old, closed case?"

Ray enquired.

"At first, it appeared as though Sophia had kept the information for a specific reason, but we came up empty when we visited Father Jones in the penitentiary. After his death, we figured it would all remain a mystery as to why Sophia was so interested in the case. We knew Jericho Miles was found out here on Fire Lake and arrested a couple of times for trespassing, but that's all,"

Julia explained.

"Then we met a guy on Apollo's team in New Orleans. He goes by the name of Hendrix and is also a survivor. There's another member of our team named Stryker. He's another retired SEAL from our unit, and we discovered he and I are related by DNA testing while in the service,"

Brick explained. "Which was all fine and good; we figured distant cousins by some fluke, an aunt thirteen generations ago or some shit like that, ended up on the same team. We're all related somewhere down the line, they say. That was until we met this Hendrix."

"One of Hendrix's abilities is to see a person's lineage in his mind. Like a genealogist without the equipment and map-out-their-family-tree sort of thing,"

Conor said. "When he met Brick and Stryker, Hendrix immediately knew they were much closer, first or second cousins on Brick's father's side."

“Meaning?”

It was all interesting but still didn’t lead to the old case.

“Means that with Brick being the only child of William Matthews, son of Sophia’s brother and grandfather to Brick, and Sophia never getting married or starting a family, if Hendrix is to be believed, and we have no reason not to believe his ability based on past confirmed reports, Sophia would then had to have had a child at some point in her life for Stryker to be her grandchild. A child that was never reported or declared.”

“Ah, okay, I see.”

Ray laid it out as he saw it. “So, with Brick’s grandfather and Great-Aunt Sophia being brother and sister, and Brick’s grandfather only having one child, then for Stryker and Brick to be related so closely, Sophia would have had to give birth to a child who would be Stryker’s mother or father.”

“Yep,”

Brick confirmed.

“Holy shit. I might need another diagram for this one,”

Fletcher groaned, rubbing his head. “Are we trying to uncover whether the priest shot the town drunk or whether Sophia had a child and who that child was?”

“No kidding. It’s confusing, but it all comes down to this simple fact,”

another man said as he entered the room. “Great-Aunt Sophia had a child and never told anyone. We must figure out whether that child could be my dad or mom and

what happened back around the same time as the shooting. It could all be related somehow.”

Elias waved a hand. “Ray, this is Stryker and his partner, John.”

Ray stood and shook both men’s offered hands. “Good to meet you. Are you the person who can see through things?”

Ray asked the second man at Stryker’s side.

“That’s me,”

John said with a wry smile.

“I hear you saved everyone’s lives with your ability. That’s amazing,”

Ray said, meaning every word. He’d hate for his old Marine buddy, Elias, to be taken out by this Noah Group.

“Thank you,”

John said. “I’m still getting the hang of it.”

Ray turned to Stryker. “Are you close with your parents? Can we ask them some questions?”

“No. My father took off when I was a kid, and my mother grew up in the foster care system before marrying some rich asshole and expediting my signing up for the service and shipping out, but she died a little under a year ago.”

“What’s your legal name?”

Ray could feel his detective juices flowing and coming to life. He lived for a good mystery.

“Zaine Rogers.”

“Might as well sit and have a beer. This may take a bit to hash out before we devise a plan to solve the mystery,”

Ray said. “Anyone got a notebook I can use?”

“We? Plan? You’re leaving in a few days, right?”

Ghost asked.

Shit.

“He’s a detective through and through.”

Elias chuckled. “Give him a puzzle he can sink his teeth into, and he’s the best chance we have of finding the truth. Why don’t you stick around, buddy?”

“Or you could go to your conference and come back here afterward,”

Julia suggested as she pulled a notebook and pen from a drawer in the kitchen. “Do you have to rush back to Seattle?”

“I’d appreciate your expertise in helping me put this mystery to rest for my family,”

Brick said, his tone of voice changing. Deeper, clearer somehow. “This has become a priority for myself and others on my team. I must see it through to the end, wherever that may lead.”

Brick's earnest way spoke volumes about the man, as he looked Ray straight in the eyes asking for assistance. This man was more accustomed to handing out orders and having those orders followed to the letter on missions across the globe. Now, he was asking Ray for his help with something very personal to him. How could he say no?

"We can work something out,"

Ray agreed, sealing his fate.

So much for leaving Marshall in the dust as quickly as possible. Damn, he was so screwed.

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Ghost

Great. Just fucking great.

The lumberjack was sticking around. Ghost's mind raced as he took another drink from his beer and watched the team rally around to discuss the case of Great-Aunt Sophia's mystery child.

He felt like an asshole for wishing Ray would hurry up and leave when he was so obviously needed to help Brick solve a mystery that'd been plaguing the team leader for years. He sighed. For now, he'd put on his happy face; he was good at faking being fine, so that part shouldn't be a problem. The real concern was his growing attraction to the hulking man, who made Ghost's heart beat faster with every look. Part of him was exhilarated, another shit scared. How messed up am I to be to be attracted to something that scares me? Jeez, I need therapy.

A few team members saw a therapist in town; maybe he should look into it.

There was no way on earth he'd ever feel comfortable in this man's presence, let alone be able to act somehow on his attraction to him. He'd never allowed himself to behave impulsively or veer too far off the walled path he'd created to keep himself safe throughout life. Ghost glanced around the table, finding almost everyone's attention placed on adding to the detective's growing must-do list, everyone except Conor, who was smiling while staring straight at Ghost. He knew. Shit. Ghost suddenly needed air.

Without warning or a word, he pushed his chair back, scraping the legs harshly

against the tile, and stood, effectively silencing all discussion around him.

“Um, I’m going for a walk,”

he explained before taking off for the patio door like the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels.

Ghost had to put some space between himself and Ray, even if it was a short hiatus. He could return to the ranch instead, because there was no way he’d be able to stay here with Ray under the same roof. He’d still be able to practice his ability out at the ranch.

Ghost rounded the firepit, not really paying attention to what direction he was heading, and found himself stepping onto the dock. It was quiet near the water with no one else around, and that was exactly what he needed: peace. He tried to calm his thoughts; the day had kept coming at him from all angles.

Staring out across the water, he was seconds away from taking a dip into Fire Lake when something—or someone—distracted him. He spun on his heels only to find he’d been followed.

“Going for a swim?”

Conor asked with his typical smile.

“Funny. The man’s got jokes,”

Ghost grumbled as he maneuvered around the uninvited guest. “Why are you following me?”

“I thought you might want someone to hash it out with.”

“Hash what out with?”

“Really? You can’t pretend with me, and I suspect you know that, and that’s why you left the kitchen in such a flurry.”

“I’m beginning to understand Gunner’s point about living with you,”

Ghost said. “Some shit should be left alone.”

“Is that what you want—to allow yourself to fester?”

“Fester. That’s a nice choice of words, dude. I’m a pus-filled wound?”

“Or the intransitive verb, a situation, problem, or feeling of festering, you disapprove of the fact that it is allowed to grow more unpleasant or full of anger because it’s not being properly recognized or dealt with.”

“Shit. My respect for your grumpy, over-protective partner is growing by the second.”

Conor laughed, making Ghost smile even though he didn’t want to. “He’ll be glad to hear that. It’s not all bad. With me around you, you never have to worry about making someone understand how and why you feel a certain way. Cause I already know.”

“That is both scary and oddly comforting in equal measure.”

“Story of my life, man. Deal with it. Now, back to your situation.”

Ghost picked up the pace and headed for the tree line; a good hike might help. Unfortunately, Conor was keeping pace, and any hopes of losing the guy grew

slimmer by the second. He could go ghost and disappear, but that would require him to stop and strip out of his clothing.

“I’d still feel your emotions and know where you are,”

Conor answered without Ghost saying a word. “So, let’s discuss this internal fight you’re having regarding the detective.”

“I’d rather stick pine needles under my nails,”

Ghost said honestly.

“Don’t worry; it’s only hard to open up the first time,”

Conor assured.

“Since when are you my therapist?”

“Therapist, friend, teammate, I wear many hats comfortably. Now, quit skirting the question. What’s going on? There’s no reason to be ashamed of being attracted to the man, especially around here. You can’t wave a stick around here without hitting a gay man.”

“Because I don’t want to be.”

God, he sounded like a petulant child.

“You don’t like him because of how he acted when you first met?”

“No. Hell, if someone randomly appeared out of nowhere in front of me, I’d start throwing fists and asking questions later. I’m lucky I didn’t get punched.”

He was truly thankful for Ray's restraint.

"Are you embarrassed?"

"You're going to have to be more specific."

There could be a multitude of things in his life to be embarrassed about.

"Passing out there for a second when all the shit went down or being naked in front of a stranger?"

Conor cocked an eyebrow.

"No, the whole naked thing really doesn't faze me at all anymore. I'm pretty sure it bugs others more than myself."

"What about the passing out?"

"It wasn't one of my finer moments,"

Ghost admitted, "but I can rack that up to all the other embarrassing shit I've done since I began taking practicing my ghosting more seriously."

"Yeah, that time you tried to go into the lake camouflaged had unexpected results."

Conor was obviously fighting the urge to chuckle.

"That fuckin' fish tried to swim straight through me. You would have freaked out in the same situation."

"True. You're extremely brave, putting yourself through all this to help us. I

appreciate it.”

“You do?”

Ghost said, stopping beside an old oak to look Conor straight in the eyes and confirm he was serious. He’d always thought the team kinda saw him as a joke. Fumbling around like an idiot in the dark naked and searching for some scraps of control over his freakish ability.

Conor’s face turned dark. His eyes became steely, and his lips thinned into a severe line. What the hell have I done wrong now?

“You aren’t a freak. You’re a valued team member, and no one views you as any less than the rest of us. You’ve been working hard to control your ability, and in fact, men on this team, one specific man I love beyond all reason, owe his very life to you and what you did back in that factory by disarming the bomb while ghosting. I never want you to feel less than anyone or assume you know what others think of you from this moment forward because it’s all false. I understand that this may take some time for you to work through, so I will happily remind you regularly. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Ghost had never seen Conor this angry before. The dude was always calm and friendly, with a smile and a positive word to say. However, it seemed this was Conor 2.0. The fuck-around-and-find-out Conor. The take-no-shit Conor, and the man who could stand toe to toe with any badass the team faced. Ghost couldn’t help but want to be like him.

“The only way for you to move forward and grow into the person you’re meant to be is by letting all that shit go. You are good enough, and those who made you feel as if you weren’t are of no value to your current life. You need to shed it like an old coat,

let it go, and pick a new one that fits you better.”

By the end, the old Conor had returned; his welcoming smile was back in place, and his concern was evident.

“How the hell do you do that?”

Ghost asked.

“What?”

“Cut to the core of a person so precisely. Like a surgeon with a scalpel, you go straight to the tumor that’s sucking the life out of someone and attempt to excise it. To make the person feel better and survive.”

If Ghost wasn’t seeing things, he was positive Conor blushed.

“I’ve never heard it put that way before.”

“But it fits. I’m already feeling better than before I left the house.”

“Good. Now, back to the topic at hand. What about Ray has you literally sprinting away from your attraction to him? From what I’ve been told, he’s a stand-up guy, and with his honest willingness to help Brick with the investigation, I haven’t seen or felt anything to indicate anything different. He may be anxious about returning to Marshall, but returning to your hometown isn’t always like a Hallmark movie.”

“It’s not ideal to pursue anything with him or anyone. Besides, the guy has zero interest in anything related to me. We aren’t exactly at the same level. He’s a detective in Seattle, and I’m a mutant on the run from a psychotic group bent on collecting me, along with others like me, to use to gain power. Pretty well opposites

and not exactly dating material.”

Ghost had to laugh at the situation. Here they were trying to prevent some crazy shit from going down, and he and Conor were discussing his love life or lack thereof.

“Did you date much?”

Connor asked.

“No, that wasn’t a top priority for me. Growing up, I mainly tried to stay out of the way and stay alive with relatively few injuries. My existence was based on survival and what I needed to do to ensure I made it to the next day.”

Facts were facts.

“Aren’t you tired of simply surviving now that you have the safety of this community?”

“How do you turn off the only instinct you’ve depended on for your entire life? It’s not simply a matter of saying, ‘Oh, I’m relatively safe now, so I can act like any other person’ because I can’t. I don’t even think I want to be a normal, well-adjusted member of society anymore. I want to be alive.”

Conor sighed heavily. “What is normal and well-adjusted, and who the hell decided what it should be? I’m so tired of the masses thinking that if you’re not the same as they are, then you’re abnormal. We all have our own hang-ups, differences, problems, and freaky shit to deal with. Trust me when I say I’ve seen into their minds, and not one person is the same as the other. There’s no standard to go by. We’re all fucked up one way or another.”

Ghost shook his head in disagreement. “You can’t stand there and tell me someone

who can disappear into the scenery like a chameleon has the same screwed-up issues as the local corner store dude pumping gas.”

“Really? You’re more alike than you think,”

Conor said, raising his hand and beginning to count with his fingers. “Acceptance, safety, security, family, love, and happiness are all things both of you want and need. What does it matter that your genetic makeup was fucked with and that other person’s wasn’t? You both deserve all those things and more.”

“Deserve and attainable are two different things.”

“Nothing is attainable unless you’re willing to take the first steps. That’s the point. It doesn’t have to be here and now with this man. That’s not what I’m trying to convince you of. What I’m hoping to get through to you is that someday, somewhere, you have to allow yourself the chance to have what you view as unattainable because you deserve to have those things, even if you believe you’ll never be able to have them. You have to give yourself a chance.”

Ghost stood frozen in the middle of the forest beside Fire Lake, having his first come-to-Jesus moment or existential crisis, awakening, whatever the hell you wanted to call it. He was smack-dab in the middle of ground zero as the realization swam laps in his brain. Was he the reason he couldn’t move forward and not what those bastards had done to him? Could it be as clear-cut as that, and could he get past it? Did he have the power to do it? Did he want to?

Huh. Seemed he had a little thinking to do.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Ray

Walking down the worn sidewalks of Marshall after all these years wasn't as emotionally grueling as Ray first thought it would be. The sun was high, and the sky was blue; shops were open and busy, and people were waving hello as he, Elias, Fletcher, Brick, and Roman walked by. More than one person did a double take at Ray, and several recognized him rather quickly, considering he was the spitting image of his father, the former sheriff.

"Ray Sommers, it's good to see you back in town."

Or "Is that you, Ray? Where the hell have you been?"

Or better yet, "Look what the damn cat dragged in." And "Never thought I'd see the day."

Any way you cut it, the word was spreading like damn wildfire that Ray Sommers was back in town, and by the time they reached the bar, he almost pulled the door off its hinges with how fast he opened it and bolted inside. He could use a beer or two.

His friends watched closely but had yet to come out and ask what was going on with him. That would take more than a couple more beers to fully explain his history with the town.

"Hey, guys, what can I get you?"

the bartender asked as they pulled up to the bar.

“Hey, Gator. This is my buddy Ray from Seattle,”

Elias explained. “We’ll take a round of beers and hot wings.”

“Yeah, the detective I’ve been hearing about,”

Gator said as he reached out his hand over the shiny bar top. “Good to finally meet you, man.”

“Gator, the infamous alligator wrestler,”

Ray said as he shook the man’s offered hand. “Pleasures all mine.”

They sidled to the bar, and Ray easily downed half his beer bottle in one swig when it was set down in front of him.

“Take it easy. I’m not carrying your seven-foot ass back to the truck if you get shit-faced.”

Elias chuckled before downing his own beer in the same measure.

“Shut up. It would take a hell of a lot more than half a beer to knock me on my ass.”

“You gonna explain the situation about this town, or will I have to wait you out?”

Elias asked.

“Not yet.”

“Understood. I’m a patient man. After lunch, we’ll swing by the station, pick up a few boxes we dug out of the old storage shed, and take them back to the lake house.

Julia, Gunner, and Stryker are bringing out the boxes Sophia had stored in the house and the one that the prison sent over with Father Jones's belongings after his death."

"There are records dating back to the fifties,"

Brick explained.

"That'd be during my grandfather's tenure as sheriff. My father took over in the late seventies and retired when Elias took over a couple years back."

"Imagine it'll be interesting going through your family's notes,"

Roman said. "Where are your parents now?"

"They retired out in Florida,"

Ray said. "That was always their plan after my father finally hung up his badge. And yes, I'm eager to look through the files."

He'd honestly loved listening to the stories his father and grandfather used to tell him when he was young about cases and interesting happenings around town. Ray remembered sitting in awe of them and all they'd done and seen. At least until the shine wore off when he became an adult and learned the way of the world.

"I figured. It'd be a walk down memory lane, but you have years of experience to draw on this time. Be like looking through new eyes,"

Elias said.

"So, what are you gonna do about your conference in Vegas?"

Roman asked.

“I’ll have to attend that, but I’ve got some vacation time that my captain has been hounding me to use up. I’ve sent him an email, and if it checks out, I’ll come back to Marshall after Vegas and pick up wherever we end off.”

“I appreciate you doing this for me and the help you provided when we were searching for Kyle,”

Brick said. “If there ever comes a time when you need help, you’ll have it.”

Ray didn’t imagine Brick was in the habit of handing out IOUs, and he took the offer with the same degree of seriousness as it had been given.

“Thank you.”

“Here you go, guys, five orders of wings and another round of beers,”

Gator said as he began handing out their lunches.

The conversation died down as they dug into their hot wings, but Ray’s mind circled back around to Ghost, as it increasingly did. He wondered if Ghost was still out walking in the forest or had come back into the house now Ray was gone. He was still worried about Ghost’s reaction to him.

Flashes of those unforgettable crystal-clear blue eyes made his senses spike, and the hair on his arms stood up. I am so screwed.

Ghost

The team gathered throughout the lake house's kitchen and living room, searching through stacks of boxes full of paper. At least two dozen boxes were already stored in the renovated shed on the property, and another dozen boxes had arrived today when Brick and the others returned from town. The plan was to divide all information regarding Sophia and her family, Jericho Miles, his family, and Father Henry Jones.

Ghost couldn't help but be hyperaware of Ray's location at the kitchen table, as he took notes when team members brought any interesting paperwork for him to review. Ghost had to admit Brick was placing great faith and trust in the detective by giving him the lead on this case.

From what he'd been told, not only did Ray grow up in Marshall, but he'd been the sheriff's grandson. When Ray's dad took over as sheriff, Ray had molded himself into a good son—star quarterback on the high school football team, model student—and he'd been scouted by several high-level colleges offering full rides. But Ray had had different ideas as to his place in the world. He'd immediately signed up for the Marines the day after graduating high school and shipped out almost the same week. Ghost had the distinct impression that Ray had been running from something, but perhaps he'd been simply patriotic.

After over a decade spent serving in the Marines and receiving multiple medals and promotions, Ray decided to change things up and took a position in Seattle as a detective instead of his expected position as sheriff in his hometown. Ray recommended his Marine buddy Elias Cooper instead for the position, then walked away. His career as a detective had seen Ray receive awards for bravery and a promotion to the rank of lieutenant.

The man was a mystery to him. Above the surface, Ray appeared calm and in control, but to Ghost, more interesting things were happening underneath that strong, unshakeable image. Ray was a man with secrets he was unwilling to share. Ghost knew what it was like to appear one way on the outside while concealing a crucial

part of himself from the rest of the world. It was the only way to survive. He knew what it was like to have a secret so deep it festered.

It always came down to one thing for him: fate. Fate had always been a vicious four-letter word in Ghost's world; nothing was left to chance, the future foretold. It had been used as a weapon, as the reasoning for events unfolding around him or for horrible things done to him. As the scientists put it, it was his destiny for these events to occur. The things he saw haunted him at times, but intervening opened a whole new can of fucked-up worms.

The scientists had placed a wrist restraint on him to protect themselves from what he could do. Then, hope had come along in the men who came to save him and the others. Now, he found himself at a new beginning here on Fire Lake.

His chameleon abilities had become more prominent in the past six months; the other one had been floating around in his consciousness since childhood. He'd exhaustively researched Greek mythology to understand what he was and find some way to control it, but to no avail.

"Here,"

Julia said from his left. He hadn't seen her approach; he was so wrapped up in his thoughts.

Ghost looked over from the stack of paperwork he was sorting through to find Julia holding out a mug for him. The aroma of chamomile tea filled his senses, making him smile.

"You sure you don't have a bit of mutant ability?"

Ghost asked as he took the mug, careful not to touch her hand.

“No, why?”

“You always seem to know what everyone needs before they even realize it themselves.”

Julia laughed and sat down on the couch beside him. “I’m a mother. That’s my superpower. I can coddle and fuss over people in a single bound.”

Picturing Julia with a red Superman cape flying through the air with hot mugs of tea and cozy blankets to wrap people in made Ghost smile even wider.

“That might be the best power to have,”

he said, meaning every word. “The team is lucky to have you.”

“Thank you, and I’m lucky to have them. Brick saved my son and me at a time in my life when it only had two ways to go.”

“Two ways?”

“Yes. Either it got better, or I’d lose everything I held dear.”

“He has the habit of doing that. Saving people. Has anyone ever saved him?”

Ghost asked.

“Good question. I guess Roman would be one.”

Julia looked reflective. “I also know of one time Stryker knocked a poisonous snake off his chest with a rock during a mission. However, they chalk that up to teammates doing what needed to be done, the brotherhood effect they called it. Other than that,

Brick tends to do the saving.”

Ghost couldn't agree more. He'd been saved when Brick and the team broke them out of the cells he and other survivors were held in by the Noah Group back on the East Coast. They were given a place to live and hide under Brick's protection while the team continued to fight the Noah Group and save more people. That's why it was so important for Ghost to get control over his ability to help the team in their work.

“He's a good person,”

Ghost said.

“They all are,”

Julia agreed. “Though I doubt they'd ever tell you that themselves.”

“No, I imagine not.”

People, men like Brick and his team, seldomly viewed themselves as heroes. Dangerous, unpredictable, fucked up, beyond redemption, destroyer, fighter, serviceman, soldier, slayer, brute, savage, and deadly. Those are the words they'd use. Not hero.

Yet the world they lived in was not easy. A warped sense of truth drove many into seclusion, left with their own thoughts and memories replaying in their minds. And then there was the percentage who took their own lives, believing they had no other choice to escape their demons.

Everyone serving in the armed forces deserved to know the difference they'd made in countless lives.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Ray

I've never had to fight so hard to stay on task. He was becoming frustrated about the level of distraction Ghost was providing. Ray looked down at his list of leads and tasks and cracked his neck. Time to have a break from all this investigating.

"Let's leave this here for now and pick it up in the morning,"

he said as he collected his paperwork. The team looked as relieved as he felt. "I've got a few calls to make and created a list I'd like Spencer to take a crack at, as he's the best choice for hacking into a few databases."

"You got it,"

Spencer agreed before walking over and taking the list from Ray's hand.

"We'll meet back up in the morning and set up plans for the next few days,"

Brick said. "In the meantime, get some rest."

The team started to pack up what they'd been working on and began to disperse to their bedrooms or cottages. Ray was staying at Elias and Fletcher's home in their spare bedroom and had already stowed his gear there. He gathered his notes and looked back up to see Ghost standing on the opposite side of the kitchen table, holding a piece of paper.

Ray cleared his throat and asked, "You got something, Ghost?"

“Yeah, well, I think so,”

Ghost said uncertainly.

“Sure. Let’s see it.”

Ghost came around the table to stand beside Ray and handed him the wrinkled and yellowed paper. This close, Ray could smell the man’s cologne, woodsy, or was that because he’d spent the afternoon in the forest? Whatever it was, Ray liked it a little too much, and he quickly redirected his attention to the paper.

“Hmm, an address?”

“Yeah, I noticed someone handwrote it beside a case number corresponding to the Jericho Miles case,”

Ghost said. “I thought it might be important.”

“Good catch. It could be. I’ll add it to the list of locations to check out.”

“Okay,”

Ghost said as he turned to walk away.

Ray frantically tried to think of a reason to keep him there a bit longer. “Wanna have a beer?”

he blurted.

Shit, smooth. How the hell have I gotten so out of practice? That answer was easy enough. Years of burying himself in work without a second thought about what else

was out there. Living alone in his one-bedroom apartment above the local diner in his borough of Seattle had been great when he needed to eat but not for much else. Hell, he was seldom there anyway. Always on a case, tracking down a lead, and chasing the bad guy. Being alone had worked for him then, but its allure was wearing thin.

Ghost froze briefly, and Ray was positive the guy would say no.

Then Ghost nodded. “Sure, I’ll grab them and meet you on the back deck for some fresh air.”

“Deal.”

Ray gathered up his papers and nodded to Elias. “I’ll meet you guys at the cottage later.”

Elias smiled wide. “Sure, man.”

Why the hell do I suddenly feel like a teenager going on his first date? Fuck, he was a grown-ass man, war-hardened and jaded. I like the guy. So what. Get on with it, Lieutenant.

It wasn’t long before Ghost walked onto the deck holding two beers and an unsure smile. Okay, so he might not be the only one feeling like they were drowning in unfamiliar waters.

“Thanks, Ghost,”

Ray said as he took the offered beer.

“You’re welcome,”

Ghost replied before sitting in an Adirondack chair one over. It was not too close, but it wasn't miles away either. Ray could respect that. They were feeling each other out to get a sense of where each stood.

"Again, I'm sorry for the confusion earlier. I didn't mean any harm," Ray said.

"Again, it's okay. I get it. I'm fortunate you had enough self-control not to start throwing punches."

"Yeah, I've learned over the years to control some gut reactions in certain situations."

"Like in the Marines?"

"Yeah. There was a time for immediate action and a time to think first. The trick was figuring out which was which in high-stress situations."

"That had to be hard."

"It took a good while for me to figure it out. When I first joined, I was all action. Go, go, go. Thankfully I had a drill instructor who took the time to sit my ass down and help me figure shit out. He taught me how to be aggressive enough, quickly enough for each situation, and that hesitation kills. That's where the quick thinking comes into play."

"I've heard basic training is grueling."

"It's designed to test your physical, mental, and moral strength. They want men and women who can hold the line and have the mental fortitude to know if you have to cross it and by how far without compromising the Marine motto."

"Semper Fidelis."

“Yes. Always Faithful. Faithful to their fellow Marines, their country, and to success. Oo-rah.”

“Oo-rah?”

“It’s a battle cry adopted from the World Wars.”

“That’s interesting.”

“We keep talking about me, but what about you? Where did you grow up?”

Ray asked before taking a swig of beer.

“Not much to say. I grew up in foster care in New York after being dumped by the Noah Group in an orphanage. However, I wasn’t aware of that fact until years later.”

“That had to suck.”

Why sugarcoat it?

“Yeah. I never knew where I belonged. Until now.”

“Here at Fire Lake?”

“It’s the first time in my life I feel normal. Weird to say, but being surrounded by other survivors and a team of lethal Navy SEALs makes me feel comforted.”

“Hey, home is where you find it. I may have been born in Marshall, but I felt more at home with my military unit stationed across the globe.”

“Do you feel at home in Seattle?”

“No. I don’t think I’ll ever find a place that feels like home.”

“Why?”

“Not sure.”

Ray shrugged. “Just never had that feeling. You know what I mean?”

“I do. I always felt like I was running, and I was never settled. It was exhausting.”

“Like you can’t stop long in one place or set down roots because it never feels right,”

Ray said as he tapped his head and chest. “In here or here.”

“Exactly,”

Ghost agreed, giving Ray a strange look, his eyebrows furrowed and an adorable wrinkle appearing between his eyes.

“What?”

“I would have never guessed we’d have anything in common,”

Ghost admitted.

“You’d be surprised how alike we may be after all.”

“Maybe.”

“How did you discover your ability? It’s amazing, by the way.”

Ghost blushed. It looked good on him. “You say amazing; others say freak.”

The moment the word left his mouth, Ghost sat up straight and glanced around, putting Ray on alert.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just looking for Julia. I promised her I’d never use the word ‘freak’ when referring to myself again. She’d kick my ass.”

Ray couldn’t help but chuckle. “I bet she would. Julia doesn’t strike me as a person who takes shit from anyone. I like her.”

“She’s one of a kind. I don’t remember the exact day, but I remember the feeling. I wanted to disappear, to become invisible from the world. I looked down at my hand and realized I couldn’t discern where the pattern on the sofa started and where my hand began. They were the same.”

“That had to freak you out.”

“You’d think, but I was more comforted than upset. So, why didn’t you like living in Marshall? Your whole family was here; hell, between your grandfather and father, they policed the town for many decades.”

Ray wasn’t sure how to answer that question, so he went with ambiguity.

“Life as the law’s kid was less than ideal, let’s say.”

“I guess it would be hard being the grandson and son of the sheriff. Anything and everything would get reported back to the lawman,”

Ghost said, adding a little extra flare to the word “lawman,”

and smiled. “Never being able to get away with shit.”

“It was like living under a microscope,”

Ray said, hoping that would be enough information for Ghost to let it go. “Were your foster parents decent?”

“Decent at collecting their checks. Decent at doing the bare minimum and drinking half the day away. Decent at forgetting I existed until child welfare got a call from some concerned neighbor.”

“Shit, that sucks. I’m sorry, man. Growing up like that must have been tough, but now I understand your need to disappear.”

“I survived,”

Ghost said emotionlessly.

Ray recognized a roadblock when he saw one. Ghost wasn’t willing to discuss his upbringing, and he wouldn’t push it. At least they were starting to talk instead of tiptoeing around each other.

“I’m glad you did,”

Ray said softly.

“Really. Why?”

Ghost cocked his head curiously.

“Ah, ’cause I wouldn’t have had a chance of meeting you if you hadn’t.”

“You know that’s corny, right?”

Ray could tell Ghost was enjoying their banter by the slight smile on his face.

“Yeah, but I’m good with it. I’m a geek at heart.”

He held up his hands admitting to it.

Ghost’s laughter lit up his entire face, making Ray smile. It wasn’t a usual thing for him, but it seemed to be happening more lately. In less than twenty-four hours, Ray felt lighter than he had in recent history, an odd feeling of companionship but something he could easily become addicted to.

“Tell me, Detective, what are your spidey senses picking up when you look at me?”

Ray thought about it and decided to go with the truth.

“I see a man in hiding. Someone who’s been hiding his entire life.”

“Well. That’s not too hard to figure out, considering my history.”

“True, but there’s more to it. Something you’re afraid of admitting. Something that likely keeps you up at night. You’re driven to help Brick and this team fight the Noah Group and are even willing to sacrifice yourself for that endeavor. You’d do whatever it took to protect the people who’ve become your family, but a part of you is still waiting for the day you’ll be rejected by them. So inside, you can never truly be comfortable and accept this life. You don’t like touching people. I’ve noticed several times that you avoid physical skin-to-skin contact.”

As Ray spoke, Ghost's eyes grew wider.

"You have a great deal to give, but you're unsure who to give it to or even how. You blame yourself for something, I'm not sure what it is, but I don't believe it has anything to do with your ability to camouflage yourself. You're a good person, but don't see yourself as one and punish yourself for something in the past you believe you can never outrun."

Silence stretched out between them.

Ghost swallowed nervously. "You got all that from knowing me less than twenty-four hours?"

"I'm good at what I do,"

Ray said. "I could be off base, but I'm not too far off based on your reaction. Don't worry; I'd never share anything personal with anyone else. This is you and me talking."

The last thing he wanted to do was scare the guy off, but he wanted to be truthful.

"How long have you had this ability to read people so well?"

Ghost asked.

Ray didn't pretend not to know what Ghost was referring to. "Since childhood. I can get a sense of a person pretty quickly after meeting them."

Ghost nodded. "You were made to be a detective. You have a sixth sense. It's impressive."

Ray respected the fact that Ghost didn't try to bullshit him by denying what he'd said, but he also knew when not to push it.

"It's getting late. Maybe we can pick this up tomorrow if you don't mind,"

Ray said. He'd said enough about himself for one night. Hell, Ghost probably knew more about him now than anyone else.

"I'd like that,"

Ghost said as he stood and took the two empty beer bottles. "I'll see you in the morning, Detective."

"Sleep well, Ghost."

While walking over to Elias and Fletcher's cottage, Ray had difficulty wiping the smile from his face. Another first in a day full of them. He couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

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Ghost

Ghost was shaken. Ray had been too close to the mark with his analysis of him. He'd done his best to keep his cool but doubted he'd done a good enough job to go unnoticed by the astute detective. It would be at this point that Ghost backed away from the danger posed by the man, but he found himself wanting more time with him.

After a sleepless night, Ghost found himself in the passenger seat of Elias's truck with the man of the hour behind the wheel. How he'd gotten here was simple. Julia. Nothing more needed to be said for those who'd ever met the woman who ran the lake house like a well-oiled machine. They were on their way to investigate a few of the addresses of interest found among the files the evening before.

As Marshall's scenery flew by, Ghost looked down at the three addresses on the list. They were scattered across the county, and it would take at least half a day to visit all three of them. Julia knew what she was doing when she suggested Ghost accompany Ray on his investigation. Other team members were researching further areas of interest on Ray's compiled list.

"Do you think there'll be anything to find in these places after all these years? Anything of value to us?"

Ghost asked.

"You'd be surprised what goes unnoticed by the general public,"

Ray said. "You have to keep your mind and senses open."

“I’ll try, but I doubt I’ll be useful. I’m not good at finding the proverbial needle in the haystack, never have been.”

“Give yourself a chance. You never know what you’re capable of until you’re in the middle of it, and anything could be a clue.”

As they rolled up to the first address, Ghost’s hopes were dashed even further as he found nothing remarkable about the old barn before them. It looked like every other graying wood barn in the area.

“It’s a barn,”

he deadpanned.

“Great deduction, Watson. How about we go in and take a look around?”

“Lead on, Sherlock.”

Ghost played along. He couldn’t remember the last time he bothered to joke and tease another person.

The barn door creaked angrily as Ray shoved it open. By the overgrowth of vegetation and dusty, web-filled interior, he could tell this barn hadn’t been used in an extremely long time. Ghost coughed as the dust kicked up from the breeze filtering through the open door.

“Place looks empty,”

Ghost remarked as he scanned the area and pointed upward. “Except for the birds.”

Ray stood with his hands on his hips, scanning the area. Ghost tried to look at the

location through a detective's eyes but still came up with nothing.

"Let's take a closer look around," Ray said.

"You're kidding. There's nothing here, Sherlock."

"Humor me, Watson,"

Ray said with a sexy grin, and Ghost knew it'd be impossible to say no to the handsome detective.

"Fine,"

Ghost huffed, shaking his head. "But it's a wild-goose chase."

Ray chuckled and headed toward the three vacant stalls. Ghost still didn't see the use of looking around. No one had been here in years, but he'd play along, so he turned in the opposite direction. Ghost kicked a few stones out of his way as he watched the morning sun's rays filter through the old wooden beams. He noticed a ladder built into the wall that led up to what had to be the old hay loft.

"Why not,"

he mumbled before tugging on the boards to ensure the ladder was still securely attached to the wall.

It seemed safe enough, and he began his ascent into the rafters. Strangely enough, there were still a few old hay bales in the loft, and most of the floor was covered in a layer of straw. He couldn't help but think it would have been fun growing up on a farm compared to the city. There were so many adventures and places to sneak off to where he could have been alone instead of being faced with people everywhere as he

grew up.

Ghost wandered the large space, finding pretty much what he thought he would. Nothing. He was about to call it quits when he noticed something on one of the larger timbers holding up the roof. As he got closer, he could make out the shape of a heart and quickly realized what it was. Ghost couldn't help but smile at the thought of two young lovers carving their initials into the wood to declare their love for all time.

Ghost pulled out his cell phone and snapped a picture. He figured it was useless but tried to remember what Ray had said. No matter how small, anything could be a clue. With one final look around, Ghost turned and headed back toward the ladder. He was roughly ten feet away when a loud cracking sound echoed through the barn, and the old floor underneath him gave way, sending him down to the first level.

At the last second, he was able to grab onto a floor joist with his right hand, temporarily halting his fall, but a few seconds later, it gave way as well. Ghost braced for impact with the hard ground but was shocked when he landed on something much softer. Whatever it was began to move, and soon Ghost found himself staring up into the concerned brown eyes of his lumberjack.

“Are you hurt?”

Ray asked as he moved his hands over Ghost's body, likely searching for injuries.

Ghost took a few moments to see if he registered any pain, and finding none, said, “No, I think I'm fine, thanks to you.”

“You scared the shit outta me,”

Ray said as he hovered over Ghost, double-checking him for injuries.

“I scared the shit out of myself,”

Ghost said before he started laughing. “Stop that; I’m ticklish.”

Ray’s scowl turned into a grin. “Are you? Good to know.”

And began tickling him intentionally.

Ghost laughed even harder and squirmed under Ray’s touch. All fear of falling long gone, replaced by laughter and fun. His lumberjack had a knack for making Ghost smile no matter the situation.

“Okay, okay, I surrender.”

Ghost laughed, and Ray’s hands slowed.

When he opened his eyes, he found himself mere inches away from Ray’s delectable lips and decided to go with what he wanted for once. Closing the distance, he took Ray’s lips into a tentative kiss, still unsure if this was mutually desired, but it didn’t take long for Ray to take over and deepen the kiss.

Ghost opened his lips and allowed Ray’s tongue to explore and command his mouth without a concern about whether it made him seem weak or submissive. He soaked in the man’s attention and returned it in kind. One kiss turned into another, and without thought, Ghost’s hands went exploring over Ray’s hard pecs, threading his fingers through thick chest hair.

Ghost wanted more of Ray. He couldn’t stop the groans when Ray grabbed his hair and pulled Ghost’s head back, exposing his throat to the handsome man’s roaming mouth and tongue. Hell, Ghost was ready to get naked right there and then. It wasn’t until they heard someone behind them clear their throat that they broke apart.

Ray seemed to instinctively shove Ghost behind him, and he found the move endearing even if he didn't require the big guy's protection.

"Sorry to interrupt, but you're on private property,"

a man's voice said.

When Ghost peeked around Ray, he knew who it was immediately; they'd met at the diner when Brick introduced them.

"Good morning, Mr. Cross. Sorry for busting in like this,"

Ghost said. Mr. Cross was the local veterinarian.

"That you, Darren?"

"Yes, sir."

"Whatcha doing out here in this old barn?"

Mr. Cross asked.

"We're investigating an old case. This is Detective Ray Sommers. Ray, this is the town vet, Mr. Cross."

"Any relation to Roger and Sam Sommers?"

Mr. Cross asked.

"Yes, sir, my grandfather and father."

“Well, hell. I haven’t seen a Sommers in these parts in over six years since your dad retired.”

“Yes, I’m in town helping Brick Matthews with a few things.”

Ray stood and held his hand out for Ghost to take, which he did, and he was back to standing in moments. There was no use avoiding touching Ray after they’d locked lips. Ghost’s other mutation was working overtime, and he fought to keep his thoughts from showing.

“Ah, I understand. I was driving by after a call out on Joe Berry’s ranch for a downed heifer when I saw the sheriff’s truck parked out front. Thought I’d pop my head in and see if he needed any help.”

“Yeah, we borrowed Elias’s truck, as mine had a flat this morning,”

Ray explained.

“Well, I see the two of you have this under control,”

Mr. Cross said with a knowing smile. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. Good luck with your case.”

“Wait, Mr. Cross, do you know who owns this barn?”

Ray asked.

“Yes, it’s part of the Berry ranch, but before that, it belonged to the Miles family.”

“Jericho Miles?”

Ray asked.

“Yes, sir. To his grandparents before they sold their land off.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cross.”

“If I can be of any help, let me know. Tell Brick I said hello,”

Mr. Cross said.

The town vet walked out of the barn, and Ghost could feel his cheeks getting warmer. He felt like a teenager getting busted making out behind the bleachers at school.

Ray turned to look at Ghost and asked, “You still feel okay? Nothing hurt when you stood up?”

Ghost couldn’t help but smile; the big guy was still worried if he’d hurt himself in the fall. “I’m fine. Besides, I landed on you; perhaps I should be asking if you’re okay.”

Ray smiled wide, bent to give Ghost another quick kiss before taking his hand and heading for the door.

“I feel better than I have in decades.”

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Ray

Had anything ever felt so perfect in his life? Ray doubted it. All he could think about was kissing Ghost again. It didn't go unnoticed that Ghost wasn't averse to skin-to-skin contact with him now they'd kissed, but he was left with questions. Ghost's demeanor had changed. Ray wouldn't push about the nophysical-contact rule—Ghost would feel safe enough to tell him sooner or later.

The second address was a bust, and they were on their way to the third location when his cell phone chirped. He checked out the message quickly and grinned.

“Seems I’m good to go on the whole vay-cation thing. The boss has signed off on it. Looks like I’ll return to Fire Lake after my conference in Vegas.”

“Good to know. Brick will be happy.”

Ghost grinned.

“I hope he’s not the only one.”

Ray knew he was fishing, but he couldn't help himself.

“There may be more than one person happy with the knowledge,”

Ghost said coyly.

Ray chuckled. “I wonder why the address for a barn that used to belong to Jericho

Miles's family was handwritten on the papers Sophia left in the lake house?"

"Yeah, it seems weird. The place is nothing special unless you consider teenage lovers important."

Ray turned to look at Ghost. "Teenage lovers? Care to explain?"

"Yeah, before my swan dive from the hay loft, I found an old carving on one of the beams. It was a heart with initials in the center of it. You know, the ones teenagers carve into trees to declare love for each other. I took a picture because you said anything could be a clue."

"Good job. Can you send it to my phone? I'll have a look at it later."

"Sure."

The GPS chimed, letting Ray know they were nearing the location of the third address. He scanned the area and snorted when he realized what they'd come across.

"Well, this is unexpected."

"Okay, I draw the line at wandering through an old overgrown cemetery,"

Ghost said with a slight growl.

"It's okay. You can stay in the truck while I have a look around."

"Thank you."

Ray pulled the truck up and parked along the side of the dirt road. The area reminded him of those old family plots that dated back hundreds of years. An old, rusted fence

surrounded the perimeter and a large cross was above the entrance gate. It appeared no one cared for this cemetery any longer, and Ray wondered if the families had died out or moved away, with no one left to care for it.

The gate was rusted shut, so Ray braced his hand on the bar and jumped over the fence, his boots landing on the hard-packed Texas dirt. There were shrub brushes and long grasses dotted around the old tombstones. Some were made of wood, others rock, and a few looked like marble. Those would be the newer ones, likely the last people to be laid to rest in this plot.

Ray thought it best to start with the older-looking headstones and approached the back of the small cemetery. The marble gave way to stone and then to wood as he stopped at the back fence. He knelt, moved aside the dried brush, and wiped the last bits of dirt from the wooden plaque. It was hard to make out the name, but the year of death was easier to identify. 1864.

He thought that whoever this was might have been one of the founding members of Marshall. The name was worn and six letters long. One name alone, whether it be the first or last name, was unknown. Ray took a quick picture of it and moved on; he could take his time later to hash it out. He'd be leaving tomorrow for the conference, and Ray knew he'd have downtime to fill.

The next three headstones were the same shape, so he moved on to the stone models after a few quick snaps. The names and dates were much clearer now, although still worn by the elements. The dates ranged from the early 1900s to the 1930s, and along with the names came the realization that Ray was standing in the Miles family plot. Clues kept bringing him back to Jericho Miles and his family, and he suspected Sophia was the one who wrote these addresses in the files.

Abe Jerome Miles, 1897 to 1928; Anne Elizabeth Miles, 1898 to 1929; and on it went. Ray took more pictures, careful not to miss a single headstone. Toward the

front of the cemetery stood four marble headstones with newer and much clearer carvings. Johnathan Roger Miles, 1901 to 1955, and Vera Marie Miles, 1905 to 1955, were combined in one large headstone, and their inscription read “Together in life and in death”; Susan Ellen Miles, 1931 to 1932; a fourth headstone was completely overgrown in the brush, and a small hedge was planted to one side. Ray believed he’d found the final resting place of the infamous Jericho Miles, whom Father Henry Jones allegedly shot on November 6, 1954.

“Is this you, Jericho?”

Ray asked as he brushed away the vines and dirt. “What secrets are buried with you? What have we here?”

Instead of the headstone being brown like the other three in the man’s immediate family, Jericho’s was white granite. The dark Lithichrome shading used in the inscription was familiar to Ray, and it read: Allan Jericho Miles, SGT, US ARMY. KOREAN WAR Jan 1930 to Nov 1954. Loving Son.

“Well, shit. A serviceman.”

There wasn’t any mention in his file about his time in the military. Ray knew the war had lasted from 1950 to 1953 and, as with most wars, didn’t end well for most who served. The bloody conflict had scared many and solved nothing.

Johnathan and Vera were Jericho’s parents, and according to his prior research, Susan was his baby sister who’d died of tuberculosis when she was only one year old. This was another twist in the story.

Ray took pictures of all four headstones before standing and scanning the area to confirm he

hadn't missed anything. Satisfied he'd seen all there was to see, Ray turned and began walking

back to the truck. It was almost lunch, so Ray thought stopping at the diner on the way back to

the lake house might be okay if Ghost was hungry.

He opened the driver's door and was about to ask Ghost if he wanted to go to the diner

when he heard the first thud, a sound he'd never forget. Ray threw himself across the bench seat,

thankful Ghost had removed his seatbelt. He grabbed the passenger door handle, shoving them both out of the truck and onto the ground on the vehicle's passenger side. He covered Ghost with his body as the front windshield exploded and glass rained down on them.

"What's the hell's going on?"

Ghost shouted. "Is that someone shooting at us?"

"Somebody's using us for target practice. Can you reach your cell phone and call Brick to let him know the situation?"

Ray said grimly. "We need backup."

Pop, pop.

Two more rounds were fired, one taking out the driver's headlight and the other

hitting the ground roughly five feet from them. Ray pulled Ghost closer to the vehicle until they were almost underneath it, his body still protectively covering the smaller man. Ghost snapped his phone shut.

“Brick and the team are on their way,”

Ghost said. His face was pale and tense.

Another bullet hit the driver’s fender.

“Elias is going to be pissed about his truck being turned into Swiss cheese,”

Ghost huffed, causing Ray to chuckle.

“We’re being shot at, and you’re worried about how Elias will respond? Are you always this cool under pressure?”

“No, but I know neither of us is destined to die here,”

Ghost said, but before Ray could ask any further questions, he heard sirens in the distance.

Elias must have called in his deputies, because it seemed one was close enough to make it to their location quickly. The shooting had stopped, and Ray was fairly confident that whoever it was heard the sirens and took off, but he still wasn’t willing to move off Ghost.

The sirens were louder now, and when he looked up, two cruisers were racing down the road in their direction. The cavalry had arrived, and now all that was left was figuring out who the hell wanted them dead.

Ghost

The morning had ended on a much graver note than what had transpired in the barn only hours earlier, and Ghost wanted to return to that moment instead of sitting here rolling through his mental Rolodex of people who wanted him dead. Unbelievably, someone had decided to take potshots at him and Ray, but which one of them was the actual target?

Okay, it's most likely me.

Ghost wasn't naive; he was a moving target, kill or capture according to the Noah Group's agenda; his life was fodder for movie plots. However, it was his reality, his everyday existence, even though he might have fooled himself into thinking he was safe for a time.

Ray, on the other hand, had been exceptionally quiet during their drive back to the lake house, and Ghost doubted it was only due to the gunfire that had taken place. The guy was a retired Marine and currently a detective in Seattle, so being shot at wasn't exactly a new experience. Still, something was wrong.

"You going to spit it out, or will you make me dig?"

Ghost asked.

Ray looked over from the driver's seat, not bothering to hide his scowl, and Ghost wanted more than ever to see that mischievous grin he'd seen back in the barn.

"Surprise, I'm pissed,"

he growled. “Someone used us for target practice.”

“I appreciate you not acting like you didn’t know what I meant,”

Ghost said. “Okay, you’re pissed off, got it. Is it with me?”

“You? You have got to be shitting me. The getting shot at part and the fact that I don’t think it was me they were after. Which means you’re in danger. More danger than I’d thought.”

“So it is at me. I figured you were used to getting shot at because of your career choices. Besides, it might have been you they were after.”

“First, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to being shot at, and second, nobody gives a rat’s ass about me.”

“I do,”

Ghost said under his breath before thinking about stopping himself. “It’s not the first time the Noah Group has come after me, and I doubt it’ll be the last. That’s my lot in life. A genetically engineered weapon that has to be brought under control or destroyed.”

“How the hell are you still calm? And do me the same favor of respecting my intelligence and acting like you haven’t got a clue. You said you knew this wasn’t our day to die; why? Can you tell the future?”

The look of concern and confusion on Ray’s face did nothing to quell Ghost’s fear of sharing the truth with anyone. The reaction, the fear, and concern it would cause no matter what Ghost said to quell those fears was inevitable in his view. After that would come questions, demands, and anger, and Ghost would find himself alone yet

again.

He was sunk. He couldn't get out of this, but he still wasn't willing to have this discussion. At least not yet. Maybe never.

"I wish it were that simple,"

Ghost admitted honestly before feigning interest in the scenery flying by his passenger side window. "I need something from you, Ray."

"What?"

Ghost didn't need to turn around; he heard the skepticism in Ray's voice. How many times in the past had the detective been told 'trust me' for it to blow up in his face?

"I know we just met, which admittedly went over like a lead balloon, and now you know about people like me, you can understand my need for secrecy. My life has been one giant secret after another, and that's kept me alive. Alone but alive. Trust comes hard, and there are some things I'm not ready to share. I need you to understand that."

"I take it this is something you haven't told anyone else."

"No one."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Not to the people I care about."

Ray took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay."

“Thank you. I understand it’s a lot to ask.”

After a few moments of silence, Ray said, “So odds are they were after you, but why kill you? Wouldn’t you be a prize to try to capture?”

“You think I’m a prize. You’re special too,”

Ghost teased, hoping to lighten the moment.

Ray’s chuckle made the lame joke worth it.

“Smart-ass.”

“Thank you. Now, about your question. The traditional way of thinking would make what you said logical. Take me instead of killing me, but the Noah Group doesn’t rely on logic as much as one would hope. They’d kill me to stop me from helping those who are fighting against them and, by the same token, to stop me from being taken by another faction of the Noah Group.”

“That’s fucked up,”

Ray growled.

“Agreed, but a fact proven time and time again. They will do whatever it takes to further their own agenda. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

Ray looked concerned, and Ghost worried he’d done the one thing he’d initially wanted more than anything but no longer held the same appeal—he’d scared the detective into leaving.

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Ray

The whole Ghost and Noah Project situation had taken on a new level of crazy, and Ray regretted signing up for the conference as the representative for his station. At the time, he'd thought it was the perfect solution to get out of Marshall fast, but now all he wanted to do was return.

Only yesterday, he'd been pinned down by gunfire behind Elias's truck, and now he was checking into the Four Seasons on the strip in Las Vegas. Surreal didn't even cover it, and Ray secretly wished he could return to the barn they'd visited and still ha Ghost in his arms.

Amazing what a little over forty-eight hours could do to a person's point of view. He'd be stuck here for the next two days and was already counting down the hours before he could catch a taxi back to the airport, and back to Marshall—and Ghost.

They were still no closer to figuring out who the shooter was and which of them was the likely target, though all indications suggested Ghost was the one in danger. As for the case of Aunt Sophia and her missing baby, things were moving along well enough. Spencer was able to dig up Jericho's Army record after Ray discovered his service during the Korean War. He was surprised to learn the sergeant had been relieved of duty only months before the United States pulled out of Korea, and was sent back to the States on a medical discharge. Upon further investigation, they discovered the man had a mental breakdown during a skirmish outside Saigon.

Jericho's records indicated that he'd been behaving erratically and even had been put on suicide watch for a time. Of course, none of this was uncommon in such hostile

and deadly circumstances, but all prior notes in his file classified Jericho as a stable individual with keen insight and skill. He'd even been promoted and received several citations for bravery.

It wasn't as uncommon as you'd hope for service members to snap and completely lose their shit without warning, and back in Jericho's day, there weren't the mental health avenues available to service members today. Back then, it was shut up and move out. If you were a little bit crazy, that would be even better.

After Jericho was discharged, he returned home without a risk assessment or plan for his reintegration into civilian life. It was unfortunate that most "shell-shocked"

vets were institutionalized without any hope of improvement or let loose on the general population. The military had come a long way in the past forty years, but it wasn't a secret that there was always room for further improvement.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in,"

a voice said from behind Ray.

Funny, it was the second time he'd heard that line this week. Hell, it wasn't like he'd fallen off the planet, but by others' reactions, Ray may as well have.

He turned to find Detective Rocko Owens standing roughly twenty feet from him across the lobby. Owens and Ray had a past; they'd fallen into bed on more than one occasion, and Ray had even looked forward to picking up where they'd left off the last time they'd been in the same city for more than twenty-four hours. Now, oddly, the thought didn't hold the same appeal.

"Where the hell have you been hiding?"

Owens asked.

“Some people have to work,”

Ray shot back. “Not all of us have the cushy job you do over in Boca Raton, where you’re more likely to die of old age than by a violent crime.”

“You’re jealous.”

Owens laughed.

“That you’ll likely get a melanoma from that Florida sun or be eaten by a shark while swimming in the ocean?”

Owens closed the distance and slapped Ray on the back good-naturedly.

“How the hell are you, man?” he asked.

“Living the dream. You?”

“Leave it to you to be the realist. As for me, I’m stellar. Couldn’t be better. Life is good.”

That was the thing about Owens: he was the optimist and pretty much the opposite of Ray.

“Want to grab a drink?” he asked.

“Can’t. I’ve got some work to do before the welcome banquet tonight.”

“Want some company?”

Owens asked suggestively.

Normally, Ray would have been open to the company, but not today.

“No, man. I gotta work.”

“No worries, plenty of time to catch up later,”

Owens said, adding a wink. “Hope to see you tonight and with much less clothing on.”

Owens left Ray standing in the lobby, feeling at a crossroads. It wasn't as if he and Ghost had some sort of relationship. Hell, it takes a lot more than a stolen kiss and heated moment, that's for sure. Then why was he feeling so guilty?

Ghost

“You can't be sure it was me they were after,”

Ghost tried again to talk some sense into Brick. “It could have been this new case. Maybe someone didn't like us poking around into the whole Jericho Miles issue or Sophia's missing baby.”

Brick gave him another withering look. “The odds of that are slim.”

“However, there is still a chance I'm right, and forcing me to stay on the property is overkill.”

“Seriously, give up already,”

Fletcher said. “Until we get to the bottom of this, you’re safer here.”

Fletcher and Gunner were preparing for a run to the hardware store in town to grab some more lumber for the finishing touches on another cottage.

“I could go ghost. It’d be the perfect chance to try my ability in a real-world setting. No one would know I’m there but you guys. All you’d have to do is make sure to leave the doors open a few seconds longer so I can get in and out of the truck and store.”

“If we let you, will you shut the hell up about it?”

Brick huffed, giving Ghost a glimmer of hope.

“Yes.”

“Fine. Go, but don’t let anyone see you. Got it?”

The look on Brick’s face brooked no argument. Fuck around and find out.

“Got it,”

Ghost cheered and began stripping on the spot.

“Go get naked in your room. I’m already weirded out you’ll be sitting beside me with your balls hanging out,”

Gunner growled.

Ghost laughed. “My balls are fabulous.”

He dashed off to his room to finish undressing and go ghost.

Freedom was almost his, and he couldn't wait to get off the property. He'd been on lockdown since the shooting at the cemetery and was desperate for some room. It wasn't as though the lake house property was small by any means. Hell, there were acres of land to wander, but it wasn't the same when you were ordered to remain there.

He returned to the living room within minutes and shouted, "Ready."

"Shit,"

Gunner growled even louder. "A little warning when you're in ghost mode would be appreciated."

"Sorry, I forgot you couldn't see me."

Fletcher was laughing along with Brick at Gunner's scowl.

"Man, you knew he was returning in chameleon mode,"

Fletcher chuckled. "Besides, you should have learned long ago to expect the unexpected."

"You're funny,"

Gunner huffed. "Let's get this shit show on the road."

Ghost was intimidated by Gunner's tough and angry demeanor until he saw the man with Conor and got a new view of him. He was calm, friendly, and open when his partner was around. That didn't mean the guy wouldn't beat the shit out of him if he

screwed up, but it somehow made Ghost feel better.

They loaded into the truck, and Fletcher held the door open for a few extra seconds before he jumped into the passenger seat. Now securely seated in the truck, Ghost allowed himself to enjoy the freedom, even if only for an hour.

They pulled up to the hardware store as Elias drove by in his squad car. He pulled in after them.

“Hey, guys. Watcha up to?”

Elias asked.

“We need about ten more two-by-fours to finish up the deck on the new cottage. And FYI, Ghost is here,”

Gunner said.

“Oh, come on, way to rat me out. I was going to wait to see if he could see me,”

Ghost whispered, not wanting anyone to hear a voice coming from nowhere.

Elias chuckled. “You’re getting good at that, I gotta hand it to ya. I wouldn’t have even noticed you there.”

“Thanks, I’ve been practicing hard so that I can help on missions.”

It was his greatest wish. He wanted to help those who had saved him and others like him, and if he got good enough, he might be able to do that on the regular.

“Okay, let’s go,”

Gunner barked out orders as if they were on a mission.

Ghost followed Gunner into the store, and Fletcher pretended to wave goodbye to Elias as he held the door open for a few extra seconds. They were good at this. The moment the thought entered his mind, Gunner abruptly stopped, and Ghost slammed into the back of him. He covered his grunt with a cough and turned to look back at Fletcher.

“Isn’t that the town vet?”

Gunner asked.

Ghost looked up and recognized the man he’d met before with Brick. The same man who caught him and Ray kissing in the barn the other day. Thoughts of Ray had been a constant issue for him since the man left for Vegas. Ghost couldn’t seem to get the guy out of his head.

“Yep, that’s Mr. Cross,”

Fletcher answered.

As Gunner and Fletcher headed toward the lumber, Ghost decided to have a look around and practice going unnoticed by the townspeople.

He wandered toward the cash register, where a middle-aged woman and the cashier were conversing.

“You know, since those men moved into town, I gotta say the eye candy around this place has definitely improved,”

the customer said.

The younger cashier blushed. “Too bad none of them is looking for a woman. There’d be lots of takers.”

“Why are all the hot men gay?”

Ghost had difficulty stopping himself from laughing at these two and was soon on his way to the next person. A gentleman Ghost hadn’t seen before stood facing a wall of tile, appearing to be looking for something he liked. It wasn’t long before the old vet came over and stood a couple feet away from the first guy.

Ghost felt pretty proud of himself at that moment, considering that would make four people who hadn’t been able to spot him as he ghosted around the store. He was about to move on when the vet stopped him in his tracks.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Ghost froze. Shit.

“What do you mean by that?”

the stranger asked.

Ghost could breathe again; the vet wasn’t talking to him.

“You know exactly what I mean, Jackson. You weren’t supposed to take potshots at them.”

Oh shit, this was getting interesting.

“They were snooping around in places they shouldn’t be.”

“I didn’t call you to let you know they were investigating Miles so you’d go out and kill them,”

Mr. Cross said.

“I wasn’t trying to kill them, just scare them off.”

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with. These folks don’t scare off. They hunt harder, you idiot. Now they know someone’s on their radar, and they won’t let it go until they find out who it was.”

“Then maybe I should take them all out. That would solve the problem.”

“How have I ever not noticed how stupid you are?”

Mr. Cross said, shaking his head. “These men are trained military, special ops shit. You might get one or two before you’re dead.”

“Fine. What do you suggest we do?”

“Sit tight. Let this blow over and wait to see what shakes out. Don’t go doing anything stupid again. Your parents and grandparents haven’t made it this far for the entire plan to go up in smoke as we stand before the finish line.”

Mr. Cross stormed off, and Ghost managed to get out of his way at the last second. The other man huffed and headed for the front of the store. Ghost followed him. When he stepped out into the hot Texas afternoon, the guy jumped into a shiny new truck parked beside Gunner’s. Ghost was quick to memorize the license plate before he tore off down the street.

Ghost was nearly vibrating with nervous energy, and he knew he had to get out of the

store and breathe, or he might begin reappearing. The older lady from earlier walked to the front door and opened it, and Ghost took the opportunity to sneak out behind her as the door slowly closed. He'd wait for Gunner and Fletcher by the truck.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, the guys came out from the side alley of the hardware store carrying the two-by-fours.

"You better be here, you little shit, or I swear I'm going to use you for target practice,"

Gunner growled under his breath.

"I am,"

Ghost whispered.

Fletcher threw the lumber into the back of the truck and opened the passenger door.

"Get in."

Ghost did as he was told, and soon, the three pulled away from the store.

"Mind telling me why you took off?"

Fletcher asked, sounding as angry as Gunner.

"I wanted to test my ability in public, but that's unimportant."

"Not important? You took off on us when you know how dangerous it is out here for you."

“That’s it, I now know those bullets weren’t for me or Ray,”

Ghost explained.

Gunner looked over. “Explain.”

“I overheard the vet and some guy named Jackson discussing the shooting at the graveyard.”

“What?”

Fletcher asked.

“Yeah. The vet was pissed at the other guy for shooting at us. Said he didn’t call him to kill us and that this other guy was going to ruin everything, among other things, like killing the entire team and shit. Apparently, the vet called Jackson and told him that we were snooping around that day. He caught me and Ray at the barn.”

“Shit. Get Brick on the line. We’ve got a problem,”

Gunner ordered. “Good job, kid.”

Ghost was bouncing in his seat with happiness. He’d used his ability to get a crack in the case.

“Stop bouncing your naked ass on my seat cushions,”

Gunner growled.

Nice to know things never changed.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Ray

“The Berrys? Why would the Berry family be involved in this?”

Ray asked as he put his cell phone on speaker.

“Yep, according to the license plate Ghost was able to get before this Jackson guy took off, it belongs to Joe Berry,”

Brick said. “And Mr. Cross mentioned the guy’s parents and grandparents.”

“That’s where the vet said he was coming from when he walked into that old barn that used to belong to the Miles family,” Ray said.

“And now it belongs to the Berry family. Coincidence? I doubt it,”

Fletcher said.

“There are no coincidences,”

Brick said. “Just clues.”

“I remember the Berry family from when I lived in Marshall,”

Ray said. “Grandpa and Dad were acting sheriff then. They kept to themselves pretty much. There were four boys and one daughter. Joe Berry is one of the four sons. He must have inherited the farm when his parents passed, but I don’t know who this

Jackson is.”

“There’ll be some files on the family in the town records, and if we’re lucky, one of the boxes from the station or one Sophia had saved,”

Elias said.

“By the looks of things, the Berry family bought up all the Miles land after Jericho’s death. His parents moved into a small house in town after that. I guess the old man didn’t want anything to do with the farm after his only son died,”

Spencer said.

“So why would the Berrys want us to stop looking for answers to the shooting and his relationship with Sophia?”

Ghost asked.

“That’s what we need to find out,”

Brick said. “The Berry family has now rocketed themselves to the top of the list of suspects in this case.”

“Good job, Ghost,”

Ray said, meaning every word. He was surprised by how much he missed the man. “We wouldn’t have a clue if you hadn’t ghosted and overheard their conversation.”

Someone knocked on his hotel room door, and Ray stood to answer it. When he opened the door, Owens pushed his way in, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

“You ready to fuck, Sommers?”

Owens slurred. “Take your clothes off, you old horndog. It's time we get reacquainted.”

What the fuck? Ray's panicked gaze went to the phone. What the hell was Ghost thinking right now? God, Owens was such a prick.

“Um, we'll leave you to your conference, Ray. We can discuss this development in the case when you get back,”

Brick said over the speaker, and the line went dead.

“Fuck. Owens, what the hell did you just do?”

Ghost

He stared at the phone for a few seconds as his heartbeat sped up and his mouth went dry. The kitchen was quiet, and Ghost couldn't bring himself to look anyone in the eye. He figured it was common knowledge something was brewing between Ray and him, but it seemed he'd gotten it all wrong.

I have to get out of here.

“Ghost,”

Julia said. “I'm sure that wasn't how it sounded.”

“No worries, guys,”

Ghost said. The last thing he wanted to do now was look weak in front of his new team, especially after proving himself earlier that day. “We aren’t in some kinda relationship or anything. Ray’s free to do whatever or whoever he wants.”

Ghost did his best to smile and laugh it off while backing out of the kitchen, waving his friends’ concerns away. “All good. I’ll catch up with you later.”

He booked it for the back door. Air, he needed air. Stupid. He was stupid to think there was more going on between them. Ghost had been alone for so long that he’d grabbed onto the first person to show him any interest. Lesson learned loud and clear.

It was as if he was back in foster care, holding out hope for any scrap of caring or approval from his foster parents or the other kids. Well, that stopped right now. He wanted to be taken seriously as part of this team. He wouldn’t be distracted by this lame shit of emotions any longer. He was and always would be a lab experiment, incapable of having normal human relationships. The best he could hope for was to belong to a team and be treated equally. That’s what he’d concentrate on from this point forward.

Ghost realized he’d walked down the dirt road leading from the lake house toward town. He was a good distance away and was about to turn around when a car appeared coming over the hill. Ghost turned around and began walking back to the house, staying on the road’s edge to allow the car room to pass.

As the car got closer, he began walking on the grass a couple of feet away from the ditch. At the last second, he glanced back as the passenger door of the car flung open, hitting him in his lower back and legs and throwing him through the air and into the shallow ditch. The pain was instantaneous as he lay with his face in the dirt. Just before he passed out, he felt himself being lifted, and then everything went dark.

Ray

“What do you mean he’s missing?”

Ray’s heart beat faster as he strode around his hotel room.

“We found his running shoe in the ditch down the road. There were tire marks skidding to a stop right beside where we found it,”

Brick explained.

“Do you think it was the Noah Group or the Berrys who took him?”

“We’re not sure. The team is scouring the town, and Elias has called in surrounding counties to keep an eye out for him.”

Ray had the distinct impression that Brick wasn’t telling him something.

“What else?”

“There was blood on the ground in the ditch where we found the shoe. We haven’t had a good rain in a while and the ditch was dried up.”

“How much?”

“Enough to make us concerned.”

“Fuck. I’m on my way back as soon as I can secure an earlier flight. I’ll call the airline.”

“Jason is already in the air on his way to you. I’ll send you the pickup location.”

“Thanks.”

Ray hung up the phone, grabbed his duffle bag, and began packing. He didn't give a shit that a much more sober Owens was sitting in a chair watching him. Ray had pumped coffee into the dumb bastard, and after a few hours, the guy was sober enough to feel embarrassed.

“I'm sorry, man, I don't know what came over me,”

Owens said.

“I don't have time for your shit, so let yourself out.”

“You really care for this guy.”

“No shit. Like I told you once you sobered up, Ghost is it for me, and now he's missing.”

“Do you need any help?”

“No, we got this.”

“I overheard you talking just now.”

“So?”

Ray threw another shirt into his duffle wishing the man would just leave.

Owens rubbed the back of his head. “I've dealt with the Noah Group.”

“What the fuck?”

Ray took the few steps separating them and picked Owens up by his collar. “Are you one of them? Are you part of this group?”

“No, shit, no.”

Ray released Owens and tossed him back into the chair.

“Talk.”

Owens closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. “I’m a product of the experiments the Noah Group undertook before I was left at an orphanage thirty-six years ago. I was only six at the time, but I remember everything.”

Ray would have laughed if the situation weren’t so serious. What the hell were the odds? Days ago, he knew nothing about the survivors or the Noah Group. Now he was faced with losing Ghost and discovering a man he’d known for over twenty years, a fellow detective, was also a survivor.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I think I can help.”

Hell, this day was going from bad to nuclear, and he was lost on how to fix it. But he knew someone he could talk to who could make sense of it all. He dialed the number.

“According to Spencer, everything Owens has told you is verifiable,”

Brick confirmed. “He hacked the foster care system and found the guy’s record. We were able to find mention of a young boy fitting the information provided in the files

we rescued from the storage units before Isabelle Noah could have them destroyed,”

Brick said.

“So, am I supposed to believe him and bring him along?”

Ray asked.

“Conor’s here and wants to talk to Owens,”

Brick said. “We hadn’t placed a tracker on Ghost yet, so we need to cover every option available.”

“I’ll put the call on speaker. Go ahead.”

“Detective Rocko Owens?”

Conor asked.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Are you a survivor of the Noah Group, and have you been genetically manipulated by them against your will?”

“Yes, and yes.”

“Truth. Were you dumped in an orphanage when you were six?”

“Yes.”

“Truth. Were you adopted by Joan and Randal Owens when you were eight years

old?”

“Yes.”

“Truth. Why do you want to come back here to Marshall?”

“To help find your friend Ghost.”

“That’s not the entire truth,”

Conor murmured.

“Okay, I want to help find Ghost and meet people like me. I’ve never had the opportunity to meet anyone like me before.”

“Truth.”

“How can you help us, lover boy?”

Brick snapped.

“I have this ability to find things and people,”

Owens confirmed.

“I’m going to need more than that to get you on a plane,”

Brick said.

“I’m like a human bloodhound but with a twist.”

“Twist?”

Brick asked.

“Yeah, instead of smelling for the missing person, I see shadows of where they’ve been, like a trail, and I follow that to wherever they are,”

Rocko explained.

“What if he was taken in a vehicle?”

Conor asked.

“It won’t matter, I’ll feel his vibration.”

“Truth.”

“Okay, bring him. And you’d better be as good as you say, Rocko,”

Brick commanded. “Or else.”

Ghost

Everything ached. His back, legs, hips, arms, hell, even his eyeballs hurt. His ears rang incessantly, giving him a headache. Ghost couldn't contain a pained groan as he turned over on the bare mattress lying on the floor of his cell. He could use some healing from Mrs. Greer right about now. Damn, I hurt. He attempted to pull his left arm closer to his side only to be met with more pain as his wrist slammed back onto the concrete floor, as the chain he was attached to held him in place.

"Fuck,"

he groaned.

There'd be no ghosting for him. Sure, he could get naked and blend into his background so his captors would think he'd escaped, but how the hell was he supposed to sneak out if he was chained to the floor? Would he be able to even walk? Considering the pain radiating up his legs, Ghost doubted he'd get far.

Next problem: who the hell had kidnapped him? The Noah Group or the Berry family? It was sad he now had a list of persons willing to run him down and chain him to the floor.

Lucky me. The situation that keeps giving.

Ghost began to notice strange things around his cell, and as the pain-filled fog cleared, he realized he wasn't actually in a cell. The metal bars he'd first seen when he'd regained consciousness were in the top half of a sliding door of a stall. Was he in

a barn? Who dropped someone off in a damned barn?

Bales of straw were stacked against the opposite wall. Tack and harnesses hung on hooks and he could hear hooves stomping in what he assumed was a stall on the other side of the wall from him. Could he be on the Berry farm? Did they have horses?

Ghost didn't want to jump to conclusions, but all the signs pointed toward the Berry family. He couldn't help but wonder how long he'd been unconscious but couldn't see outside to know if it was day or night. The moment he attempted to straighten his right leg, Ghost had to fight back the cry of pain to not alert his captors that he was awake. Carefully, he pushed himself up using his right arm as best he could to get a look at the damage.

Ghost wished he hadn't. Seeing the leg of his jeans covered in blood made his stomach turn, and he fought not to throw up all over himself. He was missing his right shoe, and his white sock was now red. He wouldn't be walking anywhere even if he could ghost. Taking stock of his injuries made him conclude that he needed a doctor, but Ghost doubted there'd be one on the way anytime soon. Maybe they do want me dead.

His right leg was definitely broken, his left arm was, at minimum, sprained, and he likely had a concussion. His rib cage hurt on his left side, and he felt bruised from head to toe. Ghost lowered himself back down and lay flat on the thin mattress, desperate for any relief from the pain but finding none. How did people push the pain away? Meditation? Strength? Pure grit? Unfortunately, he was in short supply of any of those right now.

The team had told him he was in danger, but had he listened? No. Now he was bruised and bleeding, chained to the floor in a fucking barn. As it usually did, his mind drifted to Ray, and he couldn't help but wonder if the man knew he was missing.

“I see you’re awake.”

Ghost was surprised he hadn’t heard the guy coming, but ringing in his ears was no doubt the reason. He’d expected to see the vet or that Jackson guy from the hardware store, but the man in front of him was neither.

“Who the hell are you?”

Ghost asked, his voice cracking with the pain in his jaw.

“Still got some fight in you, I see. Good, it will make breaking you much more interesting. My name’s Edward, and we’ve been hunting for you for some time now. It was very thoughtful of you to make yourself so easy to acquire.”

“Funny, I met you, and I already know you’re an asshole,”

Ghost growled.

“You’ll learn soon enough to be respectful to your owner.”

“Owner?”

“Yes. We created you. Therefore, we own you. It’s a simple concept, even for you. Get some rest; your training will begin tomorrow.”

So, it was the Noah Group, not the Berry family.

“If I live that long. I’m afraid your goons got a bit carried away in capturing me.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no internal bleeding, we’ve checked. A few broken bones are minor in the grand scheme of things. I’ll send someone in to bandage you up.”

Edward chuckled before walking out.

“Asshole.”

The asshole laughed even louder from down the hall. Ghost lay back, exhaustion covering him like a scratchy horse blanket. I just need to rest a bit. Then I’ll figure things out...

The next time Ghost woke, a young woman was kneeling over him with scissors.

“Back off,”

Ghost growled as he tried to push himself back against the wall, pain making him groan.

“Easy, you’ll hurt yourself further,”

she said. “I’m not here to hurt you. I’ve come to clean and bandage your injuries.”

Ghost took a closer look at the woman. She had oddly colored eyes, more purple than blue, and wore a thick metal collar around her neck.

“You’re one of us,”

Ghost stated, knowing the truth immediately.

She nodded but remained silent. Ghost didn’t pull away when she reached for the bottom hem of his jeans this time. Carefully, she cut his jeans up to his knee, revealing his mutilated right leg. The bone hadn’t broken through his skin, but the wounds and lump bulging out the side of his calf were evidence enough of the break.

“I’m sorry, this’ll hurt, but I must clean the wounds and attempt to set the leg.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“I was a nurse before I was taken, but I’m capable of performing what is necessary.”

“Okay.”

Ghost watched as she removed bandages, a splint, and antiseptic from her bag.

“I don’t have anything to give you for the pain. I’m sorry,” she said.

“None of this is your fault,”

Ghost said. “What’s your name?”

“Rose.”

Ghost braced as she reached for his leg. His scream was the last thing he heard until he regained consciousness. Rose was finishing bandaging the cut on his left arm.

“You passed out from the pain. That was best. Your leg is set, but it’ll take months to heal properly. I’ve cleaned your other injuries and bandaged what I could. Are there any other wounds that worry you?”

“My ribs are killing me,”

he answered honestly.

“They’re bruised but not broken. They’ll heal in time.”

“How do you know?”

Ghost hadn't seen an X-ray machine kicking around.

She took a few seconds before answering as if deciding how much to reveal. Ghost understood that more than most. “I can see inside people to find any injuries and illness, but I can't heal them.”

“I imagine that made you a great nurse.”

Being able to diagnose the problem with one hundred percent accuracy was handy.

“Yes, I enjoyed helping people,”

Rose said, her eyes tearing up momentarily before she blinked the tears away.

“That collar controls you?”

Ghost guessed, remembering the wristbands used on him the last time he'd been taken. He was getting damned tired of being kidnapped by these fuckers.

Rose lightly touched the metal around her throat and nodded.

“How long have you been Edward's prisoner?”

“Nine months.”

“Someone has to be looking for you.”

“I don't have any friends or family. I was afraid to get close to anyone.”

“I understand. My friends’ll come for me. We’ll get out of here. I promise.”

“They brought you in on a plane. You’re not in the same place they took you from.”

“It won’t matter. They’ll come.”

Ray

Ray was instantly on the move when they landed, leaving Rocko to keep up. Ghost had been missing for over twelve hours. There was no time to waste. They found Brick and the team waiting for them when they arrived.

“Let’s move out,”

Brick said as he jumped into one of the SUVs. “Ray, Rocko, you’re with me.”

Ray respected the team leader for not wasting any time. When he hopped into the back, Conor was in the passenger’s seat, looking ready to grill Rocko at the slightest provocation. It didn’t appear anyone was ready to forgive the idiot for his drunken entrance that’d facilitated all this bullshit.

“We have anything?”

Ray asked.

“Nothing,”

Brick answered from the driver’s seat. “It’s as if he disappeared into thin air. We’ll start where we found Ghost’s shoe and blood.”

Ray couldn't contain his growl at the thought of Ghost's blood. How badly had he been hurt? Did whoever took him give him medical care, or was he lying somewhere suffering in pain? He'd end anyone who got in his way of finding and freeing Ghost.

"We're coming up to the scene,"

Brick said, and Ray noticed Fletcher, Harris, and Shaw parked on the side of the road ahead.

"You better be as good as you say, Rocko, or friend of Ray's or not, Ghost's abduction is on you,"

Conor said, pulling no punches.

"I know. I honestly didn't know about him when I entered Ray's room, but I was still out of line, getting drunk and doing what I did. I promise to do everything in my power to find him."

Rocko looked gutted, but it made no difference to Ray. Nothing did until Ghost was found.

They pulled over and got out of the truck. Ray wasted no time and descended into the ditch. He saw Ghost's right shoe lying on the ground and several dried bloodstains. Time was of the essence, and Ray turned to Rocko.

"Do what you do and make it quick. Ghost could be gravely injured; that's quite a lot of blood there."

"Mrs. Greer will be joining us in case Ghost needs to be healed quickly, depending on how grave his condition is,"

Brick said.

Two more vehicles pulled up. Elias and a deputy in his cruiser, and Gunner, Gator, and Stryker in the second vehicle with Mrs. Greer. Jason and Spencer were waiting with the airplane in case they needed to use it if Ghost was taken far.

Rocko moved closer to the bloodstains and knelt on one knee while concentrating on the location. The team watched as he touched the spot with his fingertips and closed his eyes. Ray wasn't sure how long they stood in silence, but suddenly Rocko's eyes opened wide, and he looked out across the pasture land.

"I've got him. We're going to need the plane,"

Rocko said.

Brick got on the phone as Conor took over driving duties, and their caravan of trucks moved out.

"Did you bring any gear?"

Ray asked. He didn't want to stop to pick anything up.

"We're loaded for any eventuality,"

Brick said before speaking into the phone. "Spencer, we're on our way."

A few moments later, Brick looked back at Rocko. "Where are we headed?"

"Arkansas,"

Rocko said.

“Can you be more specific?”

“No, not at the moment. The closer we get to the state border, the better idea I’ll have of the direction we’ll need to go.”

“You’re sure it’s Arkansas?”

“Certain,”

Rocko answered, meeting Brick eye to eye.

Brick nodded and continued talking to Spencer. “Arkansas. We’ll know more as we go.”

“This isn’t the time to second-guess,” Ray said.

“I never do,”

Rocko confirmed. “Your man is in Arkansas, and as we get closer, I’ll be able to narrow down the location.”

“Good. We need to find him quickly.”

Who knows what’s happening to him right now, Brick thought.

“Will we be able to get the local authorities’ assistance?”

Rocko asked.

“Leave that to Brick. It won’t be a problem,”

Conor said.

Rays nerves remained on edge as their truck ate up the miles of the Texas Hill country.

We're coming for you. Just hold on, baby.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Ghost

“Show me what you can do,”

Edward ordered from across the large wooden desk.

“Fuck you,”

Ghost spat out.

“Wrong answer,”

Edward chuckled before pushing the button again.

Pain shot through Ghost’s body as the metal collar around his neck came to life. The electric shock collar worked the same as the bands the previous division of the group had used on him in his prior detainment. Don’t do what you’re told and zap; lightning bolts of pain shot through his body.

His broken bones vibrated inside the splint Rose had placed on it. Ghost’s wheelchair shook, and he was thankful the brakes were on, or he’d be rolling all over Edwards office like a boulder down a mountain.

The shock slowed, and soon he was left gasping for air, his vision blurry, his ears ringing yet again. HeGhost was being pushed closer to the edge, and it wasn’t his going ghost that worried him. It was his other ability. The one he’d only unleashed once before and refused to ever use again. If he released it now, he’d still be screwed.

He'd still be stuck in this chair, unable to walk or escape. Ghost had noticed over a dozen Noah Group goons wandering around the farm fully armed, and he knew he'd never get past all of them. Besides, he'd promised Rose he wouldn't leave without her and intended to keep that promise. He hadn't seen any other survivors aside from Rose, but he doubted they were the only two here.

"How long do you think you can hold out?"

Edward asked, sitting back in his leather chair and taking another drag of his cigarette.

"Smoking is not good for your health, but in your case, motherfucker, I'm all for it, so suck it up, smoky."

Edward's smile grew, and Ghost fought the urge to let his power loose.

"Think you have balls of steel? I've broken bigger and badder than you, pretty boy. It's simply a matter of time."

"Why bother? Your predecessors tossed us aside, but now you new assholes act like we're indispensable."

"The scientists that came before were short-sighted. They didn't see the big picture."

"And you do?"

Here we go. The justification for doing terrible things to good people.

"Yes. Power. You mutants have it but fail to use it to its full potential. People like me will tap into it, control it, and use it to bring those in our way to their knees."

“Blah, blah, blah. World domination bullshit. People like you spew bullshit like it's nuggets of gold. You're not the first, and you won't be the last limp-dicked fucker with dreams of grandeur. In the end, you're all the same, pathetic, sniveling cowards, hiding behind others when shit goes down. Letting your minions fight your battles while you prey on the weak and hide in your bunker. Men like you go down in history as the example of how pathetic an ego-ridden megalomaniac can be.”

The pain was instantaneous as electricity shot through his body, and Ghost did his best to hold eye contact and smile at Edward right up until he passed out from the pain.

Ray

Two hundred meters outside the Noah Compound

“Don't do it,”

Brick ordered. “Not yet. Everything isn't in place.”

“Fuck. You expect me to sit here and watch Ghost being tortured without doing a thing?”

Ray snarled before looking through the binoculars again. A young woman with the same collar as Ghost rolled him out of the office, unconscious, while the Noah Group goon raged and threw the controller across the room. Ghost wasn't making it easy on the guy.

“We all feel the same way. We want to bust in and rip the place apart, but we're almost set to take the farm. It has to be done right, or people will be killed, and so

will members of this team. You need to pull on your training as a Marine and look at this through a critical eye. I swear this will be the last time that asshole has a chance to interrogate Ghost,”

Brick swore. “That guy with the remote is all yours.”

“With pleasure.”

Ray cracked his knuckles. “He’s gonna have his ass kicked to hell and back.”

“How much longer before we have control of the airwaves and systems?”

Brick asked. “I don’t want them able to use those collars when we take the farm.”

Spencer didn’t bother looking up from his laptop. “Max fifteen minutes.”

His fingers flew across the keyboard.

“It’ll be dusk in thirty. We’ll move out at sunset. I want every prisoner found and released. All hostiles are to be dealt with with extreme prejudice. I’m done with these fuckers popping back up. Once the farm is cleared, burn it to the ground, leave nothing to be used against us or anyone else in the future.”

“Hooyah,”

the team shouted.

Ray was ready to go. He wore black tactical gear, bone mics in his ears, night vision goggles at the ready, along with his Glock and an Mk 48. His training and years in the Marines had prepared him for all situations except this one. He’d never had someone he cared about in the line of fire and being held by the enemy. For him, it

was the most important and urgent mission he'd ever had.

"Ghost and I may not have always been close, and he may think he's not as strong as the other team members, but he's proven he can stand toe-to-toe with anyone. I'd be proud to serve alongside him any day,"

Gunner said as he came to stand beside Ray.

"I never took you for the reflective type."

"I'm not,"

Gunner growled as he rechecked his rifle. He'd be stationed on top of the barn, keeping watch and taking out anyone who got too close to the team.

Ray couldn't help but grin at the typically stoic and irritable sniper. Ghost had managed to even break through his tough exterior. The man didn't realize the power he held over the team. They'd adopted him as their own.

"Let's move out,"

Brick commanded. "No theatrics. We go in, do what needs to be done, and come out the other side. Understood?"

"Hoo-yah."

Ghost

He'd been moved from the barn to a room deep beneath the farmhouse. It seemed this

was where they kept their prisoners and carried out their genetic experiments. He hadn't physically seen any other mutants other than Rose, but by the size of the facility, there had to be more. Either way, he knew the team would be here soon. Ghost was as sure of that as he was of anything. He simply had to hold out long enough to be freed.

Which in itself might be harder than he'd imagined if Edward continued along his button-pushing happy ways. Fuck, the last round had almost brought him to the edge of letting loose his full potential, but that would still leave him stuck in the wheelchair, unable to walk. It would also bring that ability to the light of day, and the proverbial Pandora's box would be opened for others to know the truth about what he could do.

Ghost worried it was inevitable. The time would come when he'd have no choice but to expose himself, and he couldn't help but wonder if this was that time. And if that did happen, would the team want him back? Would they trust him around the people at the lake house or the ranch? Or would they exile him to a life alone yet again?

His mind was playing a continuous loop with ever-worsening scenarios coming to life, but no matter how hard he tried, Ghost couldn't get the one man who never wanted him out of his mind. Ray. Ghost imagined him sitting poolside in Vegas with this mystery man, drinking and sharing intimate looks and touches.

"Why are you growling?"

Rose asked as she walked into his room carrying a tray.

"Sorry, didn't know I was."

He had to get control of himself.

“I understand. I know the pain these collars bring, and on top of your injuries, it’s so much worse. I wish there was something I could do to help,”

Rose said as she set the food tray on his bedside table. “I’ve often wondered what it would be like to have a useful mutation instead of being able to see inside people.”

“You are useful. You help people. You save lives by finding the problem so that it can be fixed. Don’t ever think you’re less because you don’t have a more physical ability. Trust me when I say it’s not all cracked up to what you think it is.”

“I’ll have to take your word for that. I’ve brought you something to eat. You need to keep your strength up so your body can heal the damage.”

“Yeah, so Edward and I can go another round.”

Ghost grinned. He didn’t enjoy the pain, but the satisfaction of driving that asshole into fits of rage was worth anything he had to go through.

“Why don’t you do what he wants to avoid the pain?”

Rose asked as she absently adjusted her collar.

“I’ve never been good at doing what I’m told,”

Ghost joked, making Rose smile as he’d hoped. “Truthfully, I’ve been bullied my entire life for being different. I never knew who I could trust and who’d turn their backs on me. Sad to say, but Edward’s simply another bully in my eyes, and I’d sooner die than submit to one more asshole. I’m done.”

“You trust this team you talk about?”

Rose asked.

“Yes,”

Ghost answered without question.

He thought about the fact he hadn't told them the whole truth about the extent of his power and made a life-changing decision. He'd come clean when he got out of this. It was time to tell them the truth about exactly what he could do.

Rose smiled and lifted the soup off the tray, but the power went out before he could reach for the spoon. The team's arrived.

“My friends are here,”

he warned Rose. “Stay by my side, and we'll get out of this together.”

Rose set the soup down and touched her collar. “It's not humming anymore,” she said.

Ghost touched his own collar and smiled wide. “They've shut them down.”

“Your friends must be very powerful.”

“You have no idea. Stay close.”

Rose helped Ghost off the bed and back into his wheelchair. It would be easier to move him. The first few rounds of gunfire made Rose jump, and Ghost reached for her hand.

“It'll be okay. I promise.”

People were running up and down the hall outside his room. Ghost heard someone yelling orders, followed by more gunfire. Would they be able to find him? Did they know he was underneath the farmhouse? What if one of the team got hurt trying to save him? Ghost felt the blood drain from his face at the thought of one of the team being shot.

More boots ran by outside his door, and suddenly, someone stopped. Shit. This could be his friend, one of the guards, or even Edward. Rose's hand squeezed him tight as her fear spiked along with his. Ghost's other power built around him. He needed to protect Rose at any cost.

The doorknob turned, and the door flew open. The doorway was empty for a split second before a familiar face glanced inside.

"Shaw, thank god,"

Ghost whispered.

Shaw came in and shut the door behind him.

"This is your friend?"

Rose asked.

"Yes, he is."

Shaw flashed his megawatt smile and spoke into the comms. "I've found Ghost. Hone in on my location."

"Good to see you, Shaw."

“Hey, buddy. How are you doing?”

Shaw asked as he set his rifle over his shoulder and began cataloging Ghost’s injuries.

“Better now. I knew you guys would come.”

“Nothing would stop us,”

Shaw assured.

“This is Rose. She’s a prisoner as well, a nurse who can see inside people and diagnose their illnesses or injuries. She’s been taking care of me.”

“Thank you, Rose, for helping our friend,”

Shaw said as he shook her hand. “Can you be moved, Ghost?”

“Yes, please do. This place needs to be wiped off the map.”

“Oh, it will be, buddy.”

The doorknob turned again, and Shaw instantly reacted, bringing his rifle up and placing himself between the door and the two of them.

The door reopened, and the one person Ghost had never expected to see stood in the doorway.

“Ray? What the hell are you doing here?”

Ghost asked.

“I’ll explain once we get you out of here. Let’s move,”

Ray said as he flipped his rifle onto his back and bent to pick up Ghost from his wheelchair.

“You don’t have to carry me. I can be moved in the wheelchair.”

It was silly, but the last place he wanted to be was a victim in Ray’s arms in this situation. He’d another much more pleasant scenario in mind.

“We’re not using the elevator,”

Ray responded before sliding his arms underneath Ghost and easily lifting him.
“Time to go.”

Moments later, they were on the move and in the hallway headed for the stairs. Rose stayed by their side as Shaw led the way, watching for any guards.

“We have Ghost and one other prisoner,”

Ray announced into the comms. “We’re on our way up.”

Ray glanced down at him. “I’m sorry if I’m causing you pain. Mrs. Greer is waiting to heal you.”

“You have a healer?”

Rose asked.

“Yes,”

Ray answered.

“Thanks for coming for me.”

Ghost couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Always,” Ray said.

“We have company,”

Shaw said as he pressed his back against the wall.

Footsteps headed their way as Ray set Ghost on the ground, brought his weapon forward, and placed himself in front of both him and Rose. The guards began firing as soon as they rounded the corner, and both Shaw and Ray returned fire. Bullets ricocheted in the small space, but neither Ray nor Shaw gave up any ground.

Within moments, the firefight ended, and Ray bent to pick Ghost back up. He noticed the blood the moment he was back in Ray's arms.

“You're hit,”

Ghost gasped. “How bad?”

“It's a through and through in his left bicep,”

Rose answered first.

“How did you know that?”

Ray asked.

“It’s what I do.”

Rose gave him a small smile. “No major arteries were hit. You’re not in danger of bleeding excessively.”

“Hmm, good to know,”

Ray said. “That’s a handy ability you have there.”

They were on the move again, and Ghost felt horrible Ray had been shot protecting him.

“Mrs. Greer can heal you,”

Ghost said.

“You’re going first,”

Ray said in a tone that brooked no arguments.

Soon, they reached the farmhouse’s interior and met up with Brick and Stryker.

Brick gave Ghost a quick once-over. “Who’s bleeding?”

“Me, but it’s nothing,”

Ray answered.

“Good, let’s move out. The cells have been checked, and we found no other prisoners.”

“They were in the gearing-up phase. I heard them talking about a shipment expected next week,”

Rose said.

“We’ll have to track that shipment down later. First, let’s get back to the vehicles and let Gator do what he does,”

Brick stated. “There’s still a few enemies outstanding.”

“Gator?”

Rose asked.

“He’s our explosives expert,”

Shaw answered, making Rose smile even wider.

“Couldn’t happen to a better place,”

she said quietly. “This place deserves to be destroyed.”

They moved as a unit through the farmhouse and went out a side door into the darkness of the night. The yard looked like a war zone. Burning vehicles, bodies of guards lying on the ground, and more fires burning in the distance.

A high-pitched scream stopped them in their tracks as they took a defensive position behind a panel truck.

“Where did that come from?”

Brick asked. "Gunner?"

"Searching,"

Gunner's voice crackled over Ray's comms. Ghost's position in Ray's arms left him close enough to overhear. "Twenty-six degrees due south of your current location. I don't have a clear shot."

Ghost looked to where Gunner had directed to see Edward headed toward a truck with a child in his arms, gun pointed at their head. Shit.

"Does anyone have a clear shot?"

Brick asked.

Ghost could hear the negative responses coming back over the comms.

"Shit,"

Brick growled before stepping forward. "Freeze, motherfucker, and put the kid down."

Edward skidded to a stop on the gravel, his back against the truck. He spun to face them as he pressed his gun into the little girl's temple. She was about six years old and wore a collar like Rose and himself.

"That must be why Edward left earlier today. I didn't know another survivor was brought in,"

Rose stated. "He must have hid her."

“Let her go,”

Brick repeated.

Shaw and Stryker stood beside him, guns raised, while Ray protected him and Rose.

“Back off, or I’ll kill her,”

Edward yelled.

“Anyone have a shot?”

Brick asked again.

“None without risking the little girl,”

Stryker answered.

“Same,”

Shaw said, as did the remainder of the team.

“I’m leaving here, and if you try to stop me, I will kill her,”

Edward said as he inched his way toward the open door.

Ghost watched the poor girl, her face a mask of fear. Now is the time. Let it bring what may.

He raised his arm, palm out, catching everyone’s attention. He concentrated on Edward with every fiber of his being. Edwards left arm slowly relaxed, releasing the

girl, who quickly ran behind a nearby tree. Edwards other arm shook as blood began flowing from his nose, mouth, and, finally, eyes. A gurgling scream was the last sound he made before the man fell to the ground, dead. Ghost couldn't have used this murderous power before because of the toll it took on his own body leaving him vulnerable, but with the team around him it was now possible.

Ghost's head throbbed, and a trickle of blood ran from his nose at the focus he'd used. As the team watched, Ghost turned to Ray and, with his remaining strength, said, "Sorry."

Everything went dark.

Ray

Ray sat quietly, watching Ghost sleep. He'd been unconscious for over two days, and no matter how many times Mrs. Greer and Rose assured him Ghost was fine, Ray wouldn't feel better until he woke up. His own injuries were healed, and the collars removed from all three prisoners. They were now in the hands of Spencer and Harris, the resident technology gurus, who were determined to find a way of disabling the devices from a distance without having to shut down the entire electrical grid.

He had to admit that initially, he'd been stunned by the extent of Ghost's secondary power, the one he'd been afraid to share, and Ray could understand why. Ghost had the ability to fry someone's brain without ever touching them. When they'd reached Edward, the top of his skull had caved in, and the contents had been squeezed out his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

However, the toll it took on Ghost's body to save the girl was substantial. Ray also understood the man's fear of anyone knowing his secret. Two options would occur. Either people would fear or want to use him as a powerful weapon. Ghost would have been surprised if he'd been conscious of how the team reacted. Instead of fear and judgment, they were concerned for Ghost's health and safety. No one was angry he hadn't shared his secret. If anything, they understood, and no one was afraid he'd use it against them.

Gator had done what Brick wanted and blown the farm to bits. Nothing there would ever be used against anyone again. With the help of the team leader's contacts, the whole incident was attributed to a natural gas explosion. As far as anyone knew, no one was home when it occurred; the bodies had been secreted away, and the animals

were out in pastures, far away from any danger. Ray had to admit he was impressed by both Brick and the team's abilities to manage a dangerous situation and clean up the aftermath.

He'd extended his leave; after all, they still had Sophia's mystery and the Berry family's involvement to figure out, but he wasn't going anywhere until Ghost was awake. There hadn't been any movement from the Berry family since the hardware store, and they figured Jackson had listened to the old veterinarian's warning.

"You're being creepy,"

Ghost's voice cracked as he spoke.

Ray crossed from the window to the bed, knelt, and held Ghost's hand.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"A whole hell of a lot better than the last time I was awake,"

Ghost said as he slowly moved his arms and legs, likely testing his healed body.

"Good. Mrs. Greer and Rose have been keeping a close eye on you."

"They don't appear to be the only ones."

Ray could feel his cheek warming. "Well, you know. You're very important to me."

"I am? But I thought... you know."

Ghost looked honestly confused.

“That was Detective Rocko Owens being an idiot. Yes, we used to hook up whenever we were in the same town, but that was all, and definitely not since meeting you. I told him about you once he sobered up, and he feels like an ass for what he’d done. In fact, he’s a survivor as well, and he used his ability to find you.”

“Really?”

“Really. It appears I’ve known a Noah Group survivor for quite some time but never knew it. He has the ability to track anyone, anywhere.”

“Oh. Good to know. So my bugging out and being captured was for no reason.”

“Well, we did manage to shut down another Noah Group compound.”

“True. Oh shit.”

Ghost’s face fell.

“What? Are you in pain?”

Ray asked while carefully touching his arm.

“No, but I...imagine everyone knows about me now?”

“About your ability? Yes.”

“Okay. Do you understand why I hesitated to share it with anyone? I have the touch of death.”

“I do. Is that why you hesitate touching people?”

“Yes.”

Before Ray could reassure Ghost that everyone understood, there was a knock on their bedroom door.

“Hold that thought,” he said.

He answered the door and was surprised to find Brick waiting on the other side.

“How’s Ghost?”

Brick asked.

“He woke up moments ago, come in,”

Ray said, moving out of the way

“Thanks.”

Ghost

Ghost tried to sit up straighter but was still weak from the recovery process. He knew what was coming. They knew he was a threat, and he’d have to leave.

“No, don’t try to move,”

Brick ordered. “Rest.”

Rest? Maybe he’d have a few days’ grace before being forced to leave.

“How are you feeling?”

Brick asked.

“Much better. Mrs. Greer’s a miracle worker.”

“Good. Thought you’d like to know both Rose and Amy are fitting in well at the ranch,”

Brick said.

“Amy?”

Ghost was still a bit groggy and didn’t immediately recognize the name.

“Yes. The little girl you saved. She’s become attached to Rose and the horses over there.”

“Good, she’s safe.”

Ghost said and decided to cut to the chase. “How long do I have?”

Brick glanced over at Ray, who was hovering nearby. “How long for what?”

“Until I need to be gone.”

“Where are you going?”

Brick asked.

Now, Ghost was confused. “I’m not sure, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Ghost,”

Ray said. “Do you think Brick is here to tell you to leave?”

“Yes. Of course. I’m a threat now.”

“Do you plan on using your ability against us?”

Brick asked.

“No. Hell no.”

He’d never do anything to harm the people here.

“Then you’re no more a threat to anyone here than you were before. Besides, I was aware of the previous incident,”

Brick divulged.

It took Ghost a few moments to process what Brick had said. “Y-You knew?”

“Yes. I make it my job to know everything about the people I trust with my team and my life,”

Brick said with a grin. “Now we’re clear on this matter; rest and finish healing. We’ll need you for the Berry family case.”

Ghost couldn’t help but replay what Brick had said. They needed him for the case.

“Yes, sir,”

Ghost said with renewed enthusiasm.

Once Brick had left, Ray didn't bother returning to the bedside. Instead, he took off his boots and crawled into bed beside Ghost.

"Now rest,"

Ray said as he gently pulled Ghost closer.

As Ghost laid his head on Ray's broad chest, he had to ask. "Don't you want to know about what happened before? The incident Brick was talking about?"

"Right now, it's more important for you to regain strength. I trust you; I'll still trust you if you choose not to tell me. Let's worry about that later."

"Okay,"

Ghost agreed. "Thank you."

He was relieved he didn't have to relive that time in his life right now.

"You're welcome. Now sleep,"

Ray ordered, his voice deep and soothing.

Ghost curled his body against his lumberjack and was struck he'd never felt more secure and wanted in all aspects of his life than he did at that moment. Tomorrow would be his new beginning. No more secrets from his friends and team, and the man who meant more to him than anyone had in his entire life.

"Night."

“Night.”

Ray

He was having the best dream, and if anyone woke him, he'd shoot them. The feel of Ghost's hands roaming over his chest and his fingers carding through his chest hair was heaven. Ray couldn't have stopped the groan of pleasure from escaping his mouth if he wanted to. Everything Ghost was doing felt so good. How could a dream feel so real?

Ray cracked open his eyes and realized immediately he wasn't dreaming. Ghost was straddling his waist and running his hands all over Ray's chest. His shirt was unbuttoned, and Ray had no idea how he had slept through that.

“Good, you're awake,”

Ghost said, and Ray noticed his hair was wet.

“Did you have a shower?”

Ray asked.

“Yes. You must have been exhausted not to hear the water running in the ensuite.”

“I haven't slept well over the last three days. Too busy looking over you.”

“Well, you'll be happy to know I'm back to one hundred percent. Not a twinge of pain or nagging sore spot. I feel like a new man.”

His muscled man was wearing only a towel across his waist, and Ray lay mesmerized by the water droplets slowly dripping down his chest from his still-wet hair. Fuck. Had anything ever looked more appetizing? Ray wanted to taste to find out.

“You’re sure you’re fully recovered?”

he asked sultrily.

“Yep.”

Ghost grinned.

That’s all Ray needed. He grabbed Ghost by the hips, easily lifting him, and spun him so he was underneath Ray and at his mercy. First, he wanted that taste. Ray traced the path of one water droplet with his tongue, down Ghost’s neck to his chest. Tasting his salty skin only increased Ray’s hunger for the man below him.

“Damn, you taste good,”

Ray growled before taking Ghost’s lips in a punishing kiss full of need.

Ghost’s groan was incentive enough for him to continue his exploration. No one had the right to be this sexy. Ray allowed his hands to roam as Ghost stretched and was entranced by the difference between his large, tanned hands covered in scars against Ghost’s smooth, pale skin. He traced the valleys between Ghost’s lean muscles as his lithe body pressed into Ray’s palm, begging for more touch and taste.

Ray had never been so preoccupied with the sensual aspects of mapping the body of his soon-to-be lover. In the past, it was all about the search for satisfaction, fulfilling a basic need. Now, he wanted to spend his time exploring, touching, and tasting the man he intended to make his for the rest of their days, no matter how long that may

be.

“You’re wearing entirely too much clothing,”

Ghost moaned as he reached for Ray’s belt.

Ray didn’t have to be told twice and began to strip his shirt off before unbuckling his belt. It wasn’t long before he crawled back into bed wearing only his boxer briefs, and as he pulled a naked Ghost closer, he reveled in the feel of being skin to skin.

“Why do you still have your boxers on?”

Ghost asked as he curled in closer to Ray.

“Because I wanted to give you one last chance to change your mind.”

“I don’t plan on changing my mind,”

Ghost chuckled. “Now get naked.”

“Okay, but if we do this, you’ll never get rid of me. You’ll be mine alone.”

“And you’ll be mine alone.”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you waiting for? It’s naked time,”

Ghost cheered, making Ray laugh.

Ray slid the remaining fabric out of the way and pulled Ghost over him.

“Much better,”

Ghost moaned.

“Oh shit,”

Ray said, remembering something extremely important.

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot about supplies.”

“The bonus of being in a house full of gay men is supplies are easy to find,”

Ghost said while pointing toward the bedside table.

Ray looked at the box of condoms and the new bottle of lube. “Where did you get those?”

“They were in the bathroom.”

“Convenient,”

Ray agreed. “Now, where were we?”

“Right about here,”

Ghost said as he rubbed his hard cock against Ray’s thigh.

“Ah, yes,”

he said before diving in for another kiss filled with hunger and promise.

There was no stopping him this time. He'd make Ghost his. Nothing else mattered. Ray reached for the lube and went to work preparing Ghost for the hours of exploration ahead of them. Every moan drove Ray forward until both were desperate for each other. Ghost grabbed a condom and ripped it open with his teeth before handing it to Ray.

"No more waiting,"

he growled. His eyes were dilated, and his breathing rough.

Ray slid the condom on, added more lube, and lifted Ghost until he was straddling Ray's waist once again.

"You control how fast this goes, babe. We'll take this first time at your pace,"

Ray instructed.

"First time?"

Ghost asked with a smirk and raised eyebrow.

"Once will not be enough,"

Ray said with a growl. "I'll never have enough of you."

"Fuck, you're one hell of a sexy lumberjack,"

Ghost said as he ran his hands through Ray's thick chest hair and tugged on his beard.

Ghost lined himself up with Ray's hard cock and slowly inched his way down until his ass cheeks were resting on Ray's thighs. He was tight, hot, and driving Ray out of his mind. Both groaned as Ghost leaned forward, and Ray reached up, cupping the back of Ghost's head, and dove in for a much-needed kiss. Their bodies were joined and nothing had ever felt so right to Ray.

He needed Ghost like he needed air. Life couldn't continue without him; he knew that with every fiber of his being. When Ghost flexed his hips and raised his body up, Ray couldn't help but grab onto his hips and help guide him back down. He knew he'd said they'd go at his lover's pace, but it took every bit of his self-control to stop himself from plunging deep inside Ghost. This was heaven and hell combined.

Ghost increased his pace and soon had both of them groaning and gasping as sensations raced through their bodies. Ray held on as long as he could, flipped Ghost onto his back with a carefully calculated move, and hovered over him.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

"God, yes."

Ray didn't need any more words. He pistoned his hips at a furious pace, changing his angle to hit Ghost's prostate with every thrust. Ghost's arms fell back onto the bed as he lost himself in the pleasure, and Ray lifted the sexy man's hips and held him in place as he rammed his cock in deep, causing Ghost to reach for his own cock and pump it furiously until he exploded all over his stomach and chest. His hole clamped down on Ray's cock, making it almost impossible for him to move as he buried himself deep inside Ghost and came in a flood of almost pain-filled ecstasy, and colors danced behind his closed eyelids.

Fuck, it felt like part of himself left his body and now belonged to Ghost. He would never be the man he was before now, a better man, complete and whole.

There could never be another for him, and he opened his eyes to take in the crystal blue eyes staring up at him.

“Does this mean we’re life partners now?”

Ghost said lazily, and laughed when Ray’s mouth found his, shutting him up for the next half hour.

Ghost

“What do you mean, missing?”

Brick asked as he sat beside his partner, Roman, at the kitchen table.

“No one has seen Mr. Cross for over two days now,”

Elias said.

“The veterinarian is missing?”

Ray asked as he walked into the kitchen and over to the coffee machine. Ghost smiled at him. Despite their varied activities last night, both he and Ray had had a good sleep and were ready for a dose of caffeine.

“Yes,”

Elias answered. “He hasn’t reported to his clinic for two days. His receptionist called us this morning to report him missing. We went by his house, but no one’s home, and his truck is gone.”

You think he might have taken off?”

Ghost asked as Elias’s phone rang, and the sheriff answered.

Ray brought over two cups of coffee and set them in front of himself and Ghost.

Julia came in with a wide smile on her face. “It’s good to see you up and around, Ghost.”

“Thank you, Julia. I feel completely healed.”

“Good,”

she said. “Are you all hungry? Breakfast is all ready.”

“I could eat,”

Ghost said. The others echoed that sentiment.

“Thanks, deputy,”

Elias said before hanging up. “Mr. Cross’s truck was found a few miles from the town limits. It was empty. To answer your question, Ghost, he could have gotten spooked when you started looking into Jericho Miles’s death.”

Julia and Rick, Spencer’s partner, brought over platters with eggs, turkey bacon, toast, whole wheat pancakes, and fresh fruit and set them on the table with a stack of plates and utensils.

“Dig in,”

Rick said, and these men didn’t have to be told twice. All discussion stopped until most of the food was eaten—which didn’t take long.

“That was great, thank you,”

Brick said.

Thanks and compliments came from the team sitting around the table.

“We’ll go out and have a look at Mr. Cross’s house,”

Brick said. “Will the truck be brought into the station?”

“Yes, we’re having it towed,”

Elaïs said as he stood. “I’ll meet you at the vet’s house around ten.”

Brick nodded, and Elias walked out the front door, likely on his way to the station. Ray took Ghost’s empty cup and refilled it with coffee.

“Thanks,”

Ghost said. It felt so good having Ray beside him.

It’d been one hell of a night. A night Ghost wouldn’t likely forget for a long time, if ever. They’d gone three rounds before both passed out from exhaustion, and Ghost was surprised he was walking straight this morning. He was enjoying the looks and touches Ray was giving him. That thought brought up another. What would happen when Ray returned to Seattle? He couldn’t stay at Fire Lake forever. Before he could get too caught up in that thought, the back door opened, and Shaw walked in with another man. This had to be Detective Rocko Owens, the man who’d helped track Ghost down and Ray’s former hookup buddy.

He was strikingly handsome. His blond hair was cut high and tight, and his green eyes scanned the room, like the other team members, looking for threats. He was tall, muscular, and tanned; no secret there. The man lived in Florida, the Sunshine State. Ghost noticed the tattoo on his left bicep. It had a skull wearing a beret with a knife in the background, and a banner that read, “RANGER AIRBORNE.”

A military veteran made sense given how he behaved, always on guard.

Normally, Ghost wouldn't have been sure how to act around this man, but after recent events with the team, he didn't have an ounce of uncertainty. By the look on Rocko's face, the man didn't feel quite the same.

"Hey, have you eaten?"

Julia asked the new arrivals.

"Yes, thanks. We're good,"

Shaw said.

Ray stood and placed his hand on Ghost's shoulder. "Ghost, this is Detective Rocko Owens."

Rocko stood beside the table, looking unsure if he should sit or stand. Ghost knew too well what it felt to be the outsider, and it sucked. He stood, and everyone at the table quieted as he crossed the kitchen to stand in front of Rocko and held out his hand.

"Thank you for helping track me down, Rocko."

The relief on the man's face was evident as he took Ghost's hand and shook it.

"I'm glad I could help in some way, and I want you to know how sorry I am for the confusion I caused."

"It all worked out. We were able to shut down another one of those damn Noah Group compounds."

“Thanks,”

Rocko said with a grin. “You’re letting me off easy.”

“What’s the use in making it difficult? Welcome to our strange and crazy world of mutants the Noah Group created and continues to hunt. We need everyone we can get to stop them from taking over and hurting anyone else. We’re all in this together.”

“I see what Ray was talking about; you are one of a kind.”

“And he’s all mine,”

Ray said as he came up behind Ghost and wrapped his arms around his waist.

Rocko put his hands up in mock surrender. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Brick laughed, then grew serious. “We have thirty minutes before we move out. I want Spencer, Shaw, and Rocko to head to the station to check out Mr. Cross’s vehicle for any clues. Rocko, see if you can pick up a trail we can follow. Ray, Ghost, Conor, and Gunner are with me to search his house. Stryker, Harris, Woodley, and Jason, I want you to have another look around that barn that got the veterinarian upset in the first place.”

“Oh yeah. Did you ever receive that picture I sent you?”

Ghost asked Ray.

“Sorry, what picture?”

Ray asked.

“The one I took in the barn before falling through the hayloft.”

“Right,”

Ray said, pulling out his phone to review his messages. “The one with the heart carved into the barn beam?”

“Yes. You said no clue was too small. So I took a picture.”

“A.M. and S.M. Hmmm...wait,”

Ray said, and Ghost watched him flip through his pictures until he came to the ones he took at the cemetery. “Shit. No way.”

“What?”

Brick asked.

“Jericho Miles’s legal name is Allan Jericho Miles,”

Ray said. “And your great-aunt.”

“Sophia Matthews,”

Brick said.

“You mean Jericho Miles and Great-Aunt Sophia were the ones who carved that heart?”

Spencer said before opening his laptop and typing like a madman.

“They must have been lovers,”

Ghost said.

“Jericho went off to the Korean War in 1951 and returned right before the war ended in July 1953. Then there were incidents of Jericho hanging around the lake house and Sophia’s parents calling the sheriff to have him removed,”

Spencer said.

“My grandfather,”

Ray confirmed.

“He was reported to be the town drunk after he returned from Korea, and he was discharged from the Army after having a mental breakdown,”

Brick said.

“However, until then, Jericho was considered an outstanding soldier,”

Ray added.

“We need to dig deeper into what happened to send Jericho over the edge,”

Brick said.

“And what happened when he returned to Marshall to be reunited with Sophia,”

Julia said. “If they were lovers before he went off to war, do you think he was so different when he came back that Sophia didn’t want to take him back?”

“You were right,”

Ghost said to Ray.

“Right about what?”

“That no clue is too small. We wouldn't have put it together if I hadn't taken that picture. That is if they were indeed lovers,”

Ghost said.

“I believe we're on the right path,”

Brick said. “Follow it. Good job, Ghost.”

Ghost looked around the table at the team and was struck by how much he felt like a part of them and L. H. Investigations. As Ray wrapped his arm around him, Ghost knew he'd found his home. Now, all he had to do was convince Ray to stay here and not return to Seattle. Hmm, how could he do that, knowing how much his lover hated the small-town life? He guessed he'd have to put his all into making it impossible for Ray to leave him.

And I have a few ideas about that.

Ray

When they pulled up to the brick two-story house that belonged to Mr. Cross, nothing appeared off. Brick had given them a rundown on the person of interest on their drive from the lake house. They'd left Julia and Kyle rifling through boxes of files Sophia

and Ray's family had kept for any mention of the Berry family or Jericho's time in the Army.

Spencer and Harris managed to dig up information on Mr. Cross and, more specifically, his father, the former mayor of Marshall. As it turns out, during the time when Jericho was shot, Ronald Cross was mayor, and Ray's grandfather was sheriff. It was 1954, a year after the Korean War had ended, and Jericho Miles had become notorious for drinking himself into a stupor daily and turning up at the lake house.

Father Henry Jones joined the community and took over the local congregation from the retiring priest. Life appeared to be normal enough, but only a few short months later, Jericho would be dead, and Father Jones would be in a Marshall police cell, arrested by Ray's grandfather for the murder.

How the hell did they get to that point, and how were the previous mayor, missing vet, and Berrys family involved?

"Looks like every other house in this neighborhood,"

Conor said. "This is an older part of Marshall, right?"

"Yeah,"

Ray replied. "Some of these houses have been here since Marshall was founded. This one's probably been renovated a few times over the years, but the original framework should still be in place."

He remembered biking through this neighborhood when he was a kid and how some of the older residents watched him go by like he didn't belong. Being the poor kid with the law as his family sucked. Being the sheriff provided Ray's grandparents and parents with a home, but it wasn't nearly as nice as the ones in this area. His family

may have represented the law in this county, but no one ever mistook them for upper or middle class. They weren't landowners or ranchers. They weren't part of the original settlers or had the money for the best things. It always surprised Ray how little law enforcement was paid for putting their lives on the line daily.

"Apparently, this is the Cross family home. They've lived here for several generations,"

Brick said.

"I wonder what those walls have seen?"

Ghost asked.

"Considering the local veterinarian was concerned about us snooping around the old Miles family barn, and his call caused us to be shot at,"

Ray summed up, "I'd say they've seen their share of shady shit."

"Well, let's look around and see if he's left anything behind that'll be useful,"

Brick ordered. "Gunner and Conor, have a look in the garage and around the exterior."

"On it,"

Gunner said.

They stepped out of the SUV as Elias pulled up in his cruiser.

"Cross kept a spare key in his office at the vet clinic,"

Elias said while holding up a key. “Saves us having to break in.”

“We could have picked the lock, but have it your way,”

Brick said, sounding disappointed, as if Elias had taken the fun out of it.

The team leader was one of a kind, and Ray had quickly figured out why Brick held the position. He was always in control, but carried an edge that reminded all those who came in contact with him how badass he was. The SEAL could hand you your heart still beating and never look back or wonder whether he'd made the right decision.

He was intelligent, skilled, and deadly, and held a firm sense of duty, especially the difference between right and wrong even when that line grays. Ray would, and had gone to battle with Brick without question. He brought out excellence in others and trusted them to get the job done. If anything, people wanted to prove Brick's belief in them was warranted. The perfect Navy SEAL team leader.

“Cameras,”

Gunner said while pointing up at the corner of the house.

“There's another one on the far side,”

Elias added.

“Hmm, was he concerned about people breaking in here in Marshall?”

Ghost asked. “Not exactly the hotbed of criminal activity.”

“Says the man who was shot at and kidnapped,”

Conor joked.

“Good point.”

“Maybe he was watching for someone specific,”

Ray said. “The man might have enemies.”

“The Berry family, perhaps,”

Brick added.

“Could be,”

Ray answered.

The group split into respective teams, and Elias, Brick, Ghost, and Ray entered the house through the back door and directly entered the kitchen area. Ray immediately noticed the stale air that permeated abandoned places and homes of elderly individuals who tended to use only a few rooms of their homes, leaving the rest to collect dust.

“He lived here?”

Ray asked.

“Yes. Though it appears a bit...”

Elias said.

“Barren,”

Brick provided.

“Yes, exactly,”

Elias said as he opened the fridge.

Ray glanced over, noting it contained milk, butter, coffee creamer, eggs, and a half-full jar of dill pickles. He scanned for the date on the side of the milk carton, which expired two weeks ago. Pickings were slim around here. He walked to the cupboards and opened the first one he came to. Inside was as empty as the fridge. Only a couple plates, bowls, and glasses.

“Being a bachelor is one thing, but this surpasses that,” Ray said.

“I was thinking the same thing. Let’s take a look around,”

Brick ordered.

The group separated. Ray and Ghost headed toward the living room, which appeared to be in the same state as the kitchen. Furniture was arranged around the room in a normal fashion. The couch, wall unit, television, side tables, coffee table, and chair all sat in place, but Ray had the distinct impression no one had sat there for quite some time.

“This place is giving me the creeps,”

Ghost said. “It feels dead in here.”

“Makes you wonder where the man spent his time.”

Ghost opened one of the side tables to find it empty, and Ray opened the other with

the same results.

“This is getting stranger and stranger,” Ray said.

He could hear Elias and Brick down the hall looking through the bedrooms. “This place is empty.”

What the hell is going on here?

Ray went to a door set at the back of the living room. Opening it, he found a closet with a couple of coats hanging that looked like they’d never been worn. A thick layer of dust lay on the fabric, but Ray noticed the rod holding the coats was clean, not a speck of dust.

“Look at this,”

Ray said to Ghost.

Ghost came over to look inside. “A closet?”

“Yes, or that’s what it appears to be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatcha got?”

Brick asked as he entered the room.

“Just a suspicion, but something’s not right about this closet. The coats are new but covered in dust, and the rod is dust-free as if the coats had been slid aside regularly.”

Ray pushed the coats aside to get a better look inside. He felt around the walls for anything that stood out but found nothing. Ray turned and ran his fingers along the inside frame of the door, where his fingers caught on a switch.

“What do we have here?”

Ray flipped the switch, and the wall at the back of the closet popped open, leading to a set of stairs and a light turned on.

“Holy shit,”

Ghost gasped.

Ray pulled out his Glock, as did Brick and Elias. No telling who or what was down there.

“Ghost, I want you to stay here for now,”

Ray said. Ghost didn’t have a weapon and wasn’t military-trained. At that moment, Ray decided he’d make it his mission to teach his lover how to use a gun and protect himself. Then it occurred to him that Ghost could, in fact, fry someone’s brain, but it still put Ghost out of commission, leaving him unable to protect himself. So that ability was more of a last-ditch effort when all else failed.

“But—”

Ghost began, but was cut off quickly.

“No buts. Wait until we clear it.”

“Fine.”

Ray chuckled at Ghost's pouting tone.

Elias stepped forward and took the lead as the local lawman.

"Sheriff's office. If you're down there, announce yourself now,"

he ordered.

Nothing.

"This is Sheriff Cooper. I'm coming down. Don't shoot anyone."

Elias led the way down the stairs with Ray on his heels and Brick covering the rear. This situation wasn't on his bingo card for today, but Ray could roll with it. He'd spent his life pivoting and changing directions. Why stop now?

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Ghost

Ghost watched as the three descended into the hidden basement. The back door opened, and before Ghost could worry, Conor announced themselves.

“It’s us. Where is everyone?”

“Some down below, and the others in the living room,”

Ghost answered.

“Looks like you guys did better than we did,”

Conor said.

“Ray found a secret entrance to the basement,”

Ghost explained.

Gunner pulled out his gun and began down the stairs.

“Coming down,”

the big sniper warned the men below.

Conor stayed with Ghost, which he appreciated.

“Weird, there weren’t any exterior windows indicating a full basement. Someone put a great deal of effort into hiding it,”

Conor said.

“Did you find anything outside?”

Ghost asked.

“Nothing. The place was bare. Garage empty. The shed contained a riding lawnmower, but other than that, it was empty. Much like this house appears to be on the surface anyway,”

Conor said while pointing toward the secret passage.

“There’s a lot more going on here than a missing baby, Great-Aunt Sophia, and whether the priest shot Jericho,”

Ghost stated.

“Agreed.”

“We’re all clear down here,”

Elias announced from the basement.

Ghost didn’t wait to be told twice and immediately started down the stairs, his curiosity peaked and imagination working overtime. When he reached the bottom, he first noticed a completely separate living area with a couch, television, single bed, kitchenette, and bathroom.

“Is this some type of bomb shelter? Was Cross a doomsdayer?”

Ghost asked.

“Not as far as we know,”

Elias answered.

“Looks like he lived down here,”

Conor said.

“Explains a lot about the state of the rest of the house. But why?”

Gunner asked.

“The fridge is fully stocked, all fresh stuff,”

Ray said from the kitchen.

“No windows,”

Elias pointed out.

“Look at this,”

Brick said from what looked to be the office. “The place has video inside and out. Cross could see everything in and around the house from down here. Explains those cameras.”

“Was he hiding?”

Ghost asked 'cause it sure looked like it.

“And from who?”

Ray added.

“Better question,”

Conor said. “What does this map mean?”

They all converged on a table Conor was hovering over. Ghost looked down to find what looked like a map of Marshall with different colors shading certain areas and names attached. He wasn't familiar with all the people who lived in Marshall, but he did recognize the Matthews lake house, downtown, and the Berry farm.

“Why does he have a map of the county?”

Ghost asked.

“Along with the exact boundaries of each landowner's property,”

Elias pointed out.

“There's Bryan Murray's ranch,”

Conor said, motioning toward the map.

“Isn't that the barn we were in, Ray?”

Ghost asked.

“Yes. It’s shaded red along with this property here.”

“That’s the Berrys’ land,”

Elias said.

“That makes sense ’cause Cross said the Berrys bought the Miles property. So all this over here belonged to Jericho Miles’s family.”

Ghost pointed at the large area surrounding the barn.

“Yes. The house is long gone; only the barn remains, and the land is being used for pasture,”

Elias said.

“What’s this other outline?”

Brick asked, pointing to an even larger area circled in yellow.

“Looks like it covers the entire southwest portion of the county, including the Berry farm, the old Miles property, and even part of Bryan’s ranch and a few other properties,”

Elias answered.

“Does anyone else get the strange feeling there’s shit going on here that goes beyond what we’re investigating?”

Ray asked.

“Yes,”

Brick said. “And I don’t like it. I want pictures of everything. Tear this place apart if you have to. I need to make a few calls.”

“On it.”

“I think shit is about to hit the fan,”

Conor said.

“Agreed,”

Ghost responded.

Ray

They returned to the lake house later that evening to find Julia and Kyle waiting for them with the information they’d found in the boxes. Rocko, Shaw, and a few deputies were still out following Rocko’s lead to Mr. Cross after searching his truck.

The younger boys were asleep on the couch after what appeared to have been a fun movie marathon, so the team stayed in the kitchen to review the documents. It was truly a family atmosphere among the team, and Ray was constantly reminded of a large part of his life that was missing. Would life in Marshall still be hell now that he’d grown?

“We found these buried deep in one of Sophia’s boxes wrapped in a silk scarf,”

Julia said as she handed the papers out. “There are eleven letters in total from Jericho to Sophia while he was away in the Army. They date between 1952 and 1953 and get progressively less often as time passes.”

Ray felt odd about reading private letters between lovers, but it had to be done if it shed any light on what occurred all those years ago.

“They begin normal enough. Details of basic training and then being deployed and flying out to Korea. Life in a war zone, basically, and we only have one side of the conversation, considering we don’t have Sophia’s letters to him. However, by how he speaks to her, you can tell how much he misses Sophia, and he writes that they’ll be married as soon as he returns to the States. There’s even one where he laments not marrying her before shipping out.”

“So our suspicions were correct. They were a couple before he left,”

Ghost said.

“Yes. I wish we had Sophia’s letters to get a full picture,”

Julia said. “But by all indication, their love was shared.”

“We began this investigation trying to find the line that connects Brick and Stryker,”

Ray said as he put the pieces together. “I’m throwing this out there as a possible scenario, and we’d need even more extensive DNA testing to prove it, but what if Sophia got pregnant before Jericho shipped out?”

“If so, what happened to the baby?”

Ghost asked.

“It was a different time back then. Single mothers were taboo, a family embarrassment, and were hidden away or sent away to have their babies in secret. The woman would return after acting like she’d been on holiday, but everyone knew the truth,”

Julia explained. “Sex before marriage wasn’t accepted as proper behavior and looked down upon as a family disgrace.”

“That child could have been my mother or father?”

Stryker asked. “I never knew my father, and my mother traded me in for her rich new husband.”

Stryker’s partner, John, reached over and took hold of Stryker’s hand at the sign of his sadness. Ghost had heard how Stryker’s mother dumped him because her new rich husband didn’t want the lowly serviceman in the family. Years later, she left all the money to Stryker, millions of dollars, as some sort of apology. Stryker immediately donated every last penny to the Wounded Warrior Program.

“Yes, and that’s how you and Brick are related. Brick’s grandfather was Sophia’s brother,”

Ray explained. “This is all conjecture at this point.”

“My father, William Matthews,”

Brick said, “would have been first cousins with Sophia’s child. Making Stryker and I second cousins.”

“Yes.”

They still needed to prove it, but all indications led in this direction. The only question was, did Sophia have a boy or a girl?

“So, if that’s true, Jericho Miles was my grandfather, and Sophia was my grandmother,”

Stryker said, and Ray could see the realization dawning in his expression.

Brick looked over at Stryker and stood to pull Stryker from his chair, hugging him tight.

“I always knew we were brothers in arms, but now we know our blood came from Marshall, from the Matthews family. This place is as much yours as mine,”

Brick said as Stryker hugged him back. Everyone knew Brick had a close relationship with his great-aunt, and knowing Stryker was her grandson must have been life-changing.

Family.

Ghost

The touching moment sent chills down Ghost's spine, and the hair on his arms stood on end. It felt almost as if Great-Aunt Sophia was in the room with them, blessing this reconnection of the Matthews family tree after decades of loss. Ghost couldn't imagine what it had been like for poor Sophia, pregnant and alone. Jericho was fighting in a war a world away with the possibility of death high, and likely, there were unsupportive parents more concerned with their family reputation than the young unmarried woman caught in the middle carrying the child of the man she loved.

Ghost's heart went out to Sophia and the choices she was forced to make. If only Jericho had married her before shipping out, who knew how the family dynamic might have played out.

His musings were cut short as Brick's phone rang. Reluctantly, Brick released Stryker, and Ghost watched Julia wipe a tear from her eye before the team leader answered the call.

"Brick here,"

he said as he stepped away from the table.

"So now we need to find out what happened after Jericho returned,"

Ray said as Brick continued his quiet conversation over the phone. "And where Sophia might have been sent to have her baby."

“Do we know how long he’s been dead?”

Brick asked, catching everyone’s attention and changing the mood instantly. “We’re on our way.”

Brick hung up and faced the table.

“Cross is dead. Rocko was able to lead them to his body. Ray, Ghost, Stryker, and Conor, you’re with me. The rest can keep digging through the files. Spencer, you and Harris have a special job. I need everything you can dig up on land transfers, purchases, and inquiries on any properties within Marshall County. Hell, I want to know the who and why for every acre of land that’s changed hands in the last eighty years. If someone so much as sneezed in the direction of Marshall, I wanna know about it.”

“On it,”

Spencer said.

Ghost stood as Ray pulled out his chair and he couldn’t help but soak in these little shows of care. After years as an outsider in a world where Ghost never fit in, he now had a team, a family, and a man who cared for him. It was one of those proverbial pinch-yourself-to-ensure-it-was-real moments.

They loaded into one of the several SUVs the team had acquired over the years, and Stryker drove, allowing Brick to make more calls. It never ceased to amaze Ghost how many contacts the man had.

“Do you think that guy from the hardware store killed Mr. Cross?”

Ghost asked.

“Jackson? He’s high on the list,”

Conor said. “Or someone from the Berry family.”

“What would they have to gain?”

Ray asked. “Or perhaps Cross was about to do something to jeopardize whatever they’re planning.”

“Every time I think we’re clearing things up, more shit happens to muddy the water,”

Ghost said.

“The trick is adding the new information without losing track of your original mission. Pivot without losing track of the starting line,”

Ray said. “In this case, our original mission was to find out if the priest truly killed Jericho Miles and what happened to Sophia’s baby.”

“Okay,”

Ghost said. “We now know that Jericho was the likely father of Sophia’s baby and that while he was off at war, her parents forced her to leave to save the family reputation.”

“Yes,”

Ray agreed. “Of course, we’ll have to confirm all this, but it stands to reason this is why Sophia kept all the information. Perhaps she wanted to track down her child someday, or she knew something about what was happening in Marshall but didn’t have enough proof. Leaving the trail for Brick to come along and put the pieces

together. She left the lake house to him, and those boxes were hidden there.”

“What about Jericho?”

Conor asked from the backseat. “Who would have a reason to kill him, and why would a priest take the blame for it? Especially a priest who just arrived in the community.”

Ray grimaced.

“I’ve learned over the years of working homicide investigations that if it wasn’t a crime of passion, self-defense, accidental, or misadventure, the easiest answer is typically looking at who would gain from his death.”

“How would a priest gain from his death?”

Ghost asked.

“He wouldn’t. Unless we’re unaware of something that has yet to be uncovered. We can also cross out misadventure because, as far as we know, Jericho wasn’t doing anything dangerous like playing Russian roulette with a revolver. That leaves us with a crime of passion, self-defense, or accidental.”

“Why would Jericho attack a priest? Self-defense seems unlikely,”

Conor said.

“We’re nearing the location. I need eyes open to anything that might have been left behind,”

Brick said as the SUV slowed.

Ghost could see the flashing lights from one of the cruisers pulled off into a clearing past the old mill on the outskirts of Marshall.

“How far away was the truck from the body?”

Ray asked.

“The truck was on the opposite side of town,”

Brick said.

“Someone drove him across town to kill him?”

Ghost thought that sounded odd.

“Unless he was already dead, and they wanted to buy some time,” Ray said.

“They weren’t betting on us having Rocko on hand. It would have been near impossible for anyone to find the body out here so far away from the truck,”

Conor said.

“Wait, a deputy came out here with Shaw and Rocko, right?”

Ray asked.

“Yes.”

“Can the deputy be trusted knowing how Rocko was able to find Cross’s body?”

Ray asked.

“Yes. Elias had a discussion with the four deputies a while back. They’ve been vetted and can be trusted,”

Brick answered.

“Let’s do this,”

Stryker said as he shut the engine off and opened the driver’s door. Ever the man of action.

Ghost followed Ray out and up to the crime scene. A sheet covered Cross’s body while Rocko and Shaw leaned against the cruiser, and the deputy stood talking to the coroner. Elias was pulling up as they approached the team.

“Good work, Rocko. What do we have?”

Brick asked.

“Single shot to the back of the head close range,”

Shaw reported. “No ligature marks on his wrists or ankles.”

“He knew his killer and allowed them to get close before the fatal shot,”

Brick said.

“Likely,”

Ray answered. “Let’s have a look.”

Ray walked through the long grass and down into the hollow. Ghost looked around,

not a building in sight, confirming that the odds of finding Cross's body were slim and if he hadn't been found the animals would've gotten to the body first, destroying any clues and compromising evidence.

Watching Ray pull the sheet off the body without emotion reminded Ghost of how the life of a detective involved situations like this regularly. He imagined Ray had seen worse a time or two before. Seeing a man he'd known with half his face missing was much more jarring for Ghost.

He'd seen enough and decided to have a look around the area. The farther away from the body, the better. He wondered how people like Ray dealt with such violence day in and day out without breaking. He guessed, based on Stryker's generous gift of the millions his late mother left him, donated to The Wounded Warrior Program, that mental trauma and scars abounded and support was difficult to find.

In Jericho's case, it seemed he'd returned a changed and traumatized man. He'd likely suffered from PTSD in some form, and it was well recorded he'd drowned himself in alcohol on the daily, maybe to blur the memories and pain. All they could do was speculate at this point, and Ghost hoped they would soon get some definitive answers and lay the poor man's memory to rest.

Ghost wandered through the long grass, aimlessly lost in his thoughts, until something caught his attention. At first, he dismissed it as nothing, but as Ghost got closer, the reality of what he saw shocked him. A wallet?

"What the hell?"

Ghost walked over to the worn, black leather wallet and knew better than to touch it. It lay partially behind a rock, and he couldn't help but wonder if perhaps it fell out of someone's pocket when they were out here dumping Cross's body. That would be too easy, but he could hope.

“I’ve got something over here,”

he yelled.

Ghost turned when he heard footsteps coming up behind him. Brick, Elias, Ray, and Rocko joined him and surrounded the find.

“Hell, they couldn’t have been this dumb,”

Ray said. “Could they?”

“Considering that Jackson guy from the hardware store took shots at us for a very vague reason,”

Ghost said, “I don’t think we’re working with the cream of the crop here. He seems more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants kinda guy to me.”

“Could be Cross’s,”

Rocko said.

“Checked already,”

Elias said. “Still on the body.”

Ray pulled out a pair of gloves and carefully picked up the wallet. Ghost vibrated with nervous energy as he watched him open it to find the owner's identity before turning it to show Elias, whose eyes widened upon seeing the name.

“Well, holy shit.”

Ray

“You want to tell me why your wallet was found near the body of Mr. Cross?”

Elias asked, his tone deadly. He wore an earpiece to hear Conor, who was watching through a live feed in another room.

“Lost it months ago,”

Jake growled from across the table in the interrogation room.

“Lie,”

Conor reported.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,”

Elias huffed. “Your time spent behind bars for the shit you pulled around here years ago hasn’t seemed to have knocked any sense into you.”

Jake Gerard used to run the local real estate agency in Marshall, and Julia was his secretary until the day Jake sent the single mother out to seduce Brick into selling his property. He’d threatened her with being fired, with no way than to care for her young son. Brick ensured Jake never had the chance to take advantage of another person, and Julia and her son were made safe, with him giving her a job and a home with the team.

“What were you doing out in the middle of nowhere?”

Ray asked.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Jake huffed.

“I see your manners haven’t improved,”

Brick said as he entered the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Jake asked.

“Detective Ray Sommers is working on this case to answer your first question,”

Elias said.

“And for your second,”

Brick growled as he leaned over the table, invading Jake’s space. “I heard you were in town and wanted to get reacquainted. My team and I look forward to spending time with you.”

Jake’s tough demeanor melted like ice cream in the hot sun.

“Do I need to ask you the question again?”

Ray asked.

“I was out there taking pictures for a possible buyer,”

Jake grunted.

“Partial truth, there is a buyer, but he’s hiding something,”

Conor reported into their earpieces.

It didn’t escape Ray’s notice that the property was within the yellow area on Cross’s map they’d found in his basement.

“What the hell are you doing in real estate again? Your business was shut down,”

Elias asked.

“Yeah, thanks to you, asshole,”

Jake spat out in Brick’s direction.

Ray could use this idiot’s anger at Brick to his advantage. He’d wait for his moment.

“You have no idea what I’m truly capable of, Jake.”

Brick smiled wide. “But you’ll find out soon enough.”

“You can’t threaten me in front of the law.”

“I didn’t hear anything,”

Elias said casually.

“It’s on camera.”

Jake motioned to the camera set up in the corner.

“Those,”

Elias chuckled, “haven’t been turned on.”

Jake’s expression changed as realization began sinking in, and Ray made his move.

“This is my case,”

Ray announced. “Back off, the man has rights.”

Elias and Brick easily slipped into this new scenario. They would have been great at improv.

“Fuck you, Sommers. This asshole is the scum of the earth,”

Brick growled.

“I’m going to have to ask you both to leave. This is my case, and I’m pulling rank. You two are too close to the individuals involved to have a clear and unbiased opinion.”

“You can’t pull rank on me.”

Elias feigned shock.

“Yes, I can. Take it up with the State.”

Ray had no idea if he could, but he had to get Jake to believe he was on his side.

“Fine, but this isn’t over,”

Elias said before shoving a chair with a good amount of force across the room.

Elias grabbed Brick’s arm and dragged him from the room, slamming the door behind them. Damn, their Oscars were in the mail.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,”

Ray continued. “Let’s start again. I’m investigating the death of the town veterinarian, Mr. Cross, and while I was on the site where his body was found, your wallet was found, which you’ve got to admit is very suspicious. Can you explain why it was there?”

Jake looked around the room as if deciding on his best course of action, so Ray hedged his bets.

“I can only help you as much as you help me,”

Ray said. He knew bigger fish were in this pond, and Jake was a minnow doing what he was told.

“None of this is on me,”

Jake said after a moment. “I didn’t kill no one.”

“Truth.”

“I believe you. Your previous issues with the law don’t lead me to believe you’re a

cold-blooded killer, but you've gotta see how bad this looks for you. If we can't find any other viable answers, that leaves me with no other choice but to charge you with the murder and let the courts decide your guilt. However, with your history, I honestly can't see a judge and jury siding with you."

"I didn't do it."

"Truth."

"Then who did? You gotta give me something to go on. No one is going to be able to reach you here. We'd keep you safe in a cell while we find the real murderer."

Jake's eyes shifted from side to side, and this time Ray remained quiet. Letting the guy work himself up until he spilled something useful.

It didn't take long.

"There's shit going on in Marshall, and Cross was no angel."

"What was Cross up to?"

"When I said I was out there taking pictures for someone interested in the land, I wasn't lying. You need to look into who's buying up the land around here."

"Truth."

"Is this something new?"

Ray asked, already knowing the answer.

"No. It's been going on for generations. When land came up for sale, they bought it,

and when the owners weren't willing to sell, other things happened."

"Truth."

"What do you mean by 'other things,' and who is they?"

"That's all I can say. Look into it."

Jake was getting progressively more nervous, and Ray knew he was nearing the end of getting any usable information.

"Do you know why they want this particular patch of land?"

Ray asked, attempting to get one more question answered.

"No, but it's gotta be big."

"Truth."

"Okay. We're going to keep you here in a cell for your own safety until we have those responsible. It's likely whoever this is knows you've been brought in by now, and if they're willing to kill Cross, they won't think twice about killing you."

Jake's face paled. The gravity of the situation finally hitting home.

About damn time.

Ghost

Later that evening...

“That was one hell of a performance,”

Ghost said as he and Ray crawled into bed. He never wanted to take these moments for granted.

“Thank you,”

Ray chuckled as he pulled Ghost close. “I’ve often found if you can appeal to someone’s sense of self-preservation and show understanding, they’re more likely to take the easiest way out to save their skin. Unless they’re a psychopath, then there’s no reasoning with them.”

“Spencer and Harris are still digging into the land purchases, but it appears Brick’s intuition is leading him in the right direction,”

Ghost said.

“Something tells me your team leader is typically a step ahead of most. I guess that’s what makes him the best.”

“After watching you work today, I’d say you’re the best at what you do.”

Ghost had been truly impressed by Ray’s ability to get Jake to cough up information when it was obvious the man didn’t want to.

“You’re biased,”

Ray chuckled.

“It’s true. You got Jake to talk. No one else in that room would have.”

“Thank you, but I’ll be happier when we know what’s really going on around here. It seems we’ve gone down a damn rabbit’s hole, and whatever’s happening has been well planned out for a very long time.”

“Me too,”

Ghost said, then he remembered something important. “Once we solve this mystery, what are your plans?”

“Plans?”

Ray looked honestly confused by the question. Had he not thought this far ahead?

“Yeah. Like returning to Seattle kinda plans,”

Ghost explained.

Ghost hadn’t realized until then how nervous he was about Ray’s possible answer. Would he stay even if he didn’t like living in a small town like Marshall, or would Ray want Ghost to move to Seattle? Could he move to Seattle after finally finding his home among the Fire Lake team? For Ray, he’d try to do anything.

“I told you, you’re never getting rid of me. I’ve already decided to give my notice back in Seattle,”

Ray said easily, as if this was a given.

“You’re moving back to Marshall? But you don’t like it here. I don’t want you to resent me for making you live somewhere you’d hate,”

Ghost said. It would be worse if, after everything, Ray grew to regret his decision.

“That was back when I was younger. I never felt like I fit in here, especially with your family being the law. Friends were hard to find, but judgment from everyone was readily available. However, Marshall has changed over the years I’ve been gone. It’s much more open and accepting, and I believe you’re happy here, right?”

“Yes. It feels like I finally have a home.”

Ghost’s heart was bursting with happiness.

“Well, then it’s decided. We live in Marshall somewhere,”

Ray declared with a grin. “We could live in a hut, and I’d be happy as long as you’re with me.”

“Thank you, baby.”

Ghost dove in for a kiss. “But I believe we’ll have better options for living accommodations.”

“I would never do anything to hurt you, ever. I mean...”

Ray fell quiet, and when he looked down, the look on his face rendered Ghost speechless. “I think I love you. You’re the first man I’ve ever said those words to, and you’ll be the last. You and me, we’re forever, babe,”

Ray said, running the palm of his hand along Ghost’s jaw. “You’ve made my world better. Hell, you are my world. I’m a very selfish man, so there’s no way I’m letting you go.”

Ghost had never been someone's whole world before; it was an odd and exhilarating feeling. He straddled Ray's waist and hugged him close.

"I love you too. I've always believed I was better alone, but now I know how empty it would be without you."

"You'll never have to find out,"

Ray assured before pulling Ghost in for a long, lazy kiss that quickly turned heated, and soon both were lost in their need for each other as hands roamed freely over their heated bodies. Nothing had ever been so right. Ray was his, and no one would take him away.

That night, they spent hours expressing their love for each other in multiple ways until both lay exhausted and satiated for the moment.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 4:16 pm

Ghost

“We need to head out to Bryan’s ranch,”

Brick announced at the breakfast table the next morning.

“We looking for anything specific?”

Ray asked.

“Spencer and Harris were able to narrow down a group who’s been busy buying up land around Marshall, and I want to look at the patch of Bryan’s property that fell within the yellow-shaded area of Cross’s map.”

“It wasn’t easy,”

Spencer said. “They had the information buried so deep we had to create a virus to bring down a few security walls so we could get a peek inside. The group is named Ever Clear Investments and is out of Dallas. Before that, Riverside Developments was originally incorporated as Cross and Berry Inc., but names were quickly changed. The original company came into existence back in the forties. The principles were Ronald Cross and Prosper Berry.”

“The former mayor who was the vet’s father, Ronald?”

Ghost asked.

“One and the same. Along with the former patriarch of the Berry family, Joe Berry’s father, Prosper,”

Harris answered without taking his eyes off his computer screen.

“Okay, now that we know that the Crosses and Berrys have been buying up land in Marshall for over two generations, the question is why?”

Stryker asked.

“That’s what we need to find out,”

Brick said.

“Wait,”

Ray said. “Jake mentioned that some of the land wasn’t willingly sold and that, in those cases, things happened. Can we look into each specific land deal? Get a better picture of what exactly went down.”

“Yes. We can search out the how now we have the who,”

Spencer said. “It’ll be much easier now that the groundwork is done.”

“Good. You two carry on with that while we go have a look around the ranch,”

Brick said. “Bryan and his grandfather are expecting us.”

“Before you guys go, I have something interesting we found in one of the boxes yesterday,”

Julia said as she pulled out a faded file. “It’s Jericho Miles’s will.”

“Why would Sophia have Jericho’s will?”

Ray asked.

Brick opened the file and scanned the pages while the team waited.

“It appears to be dated before Jericho shipped out to Korea. It names Sophia as his sole beneficiary.”

“He was trying to make sure she was cared for if he didn’t make it back,”

Julia said with a slight hitch in her voice.

“They were in love. It makes it even more confusing that they didn’t end up together after his return. What happened?”

Ghost asked.

“War affects people. You see and do things that you never thought possible. It’s ugly and violent, leaving its mark on the people involved,”

Brick explained. “If Jericho returned a different man, then all bets are off, and Sophia might not’ve been prepared to handle that.”

Ghost wanted more than ever to know the full story, and he hoped if there was an afterlife, Sophia and Jericho would find each other there.

Ray

“This is the area they’d marked off on that map you showed me,”

Bryan said as he drove Brick, Ray, Ghost, Shaw, and Isaiah, Bryan’s grandfather, across the ranch.

“What’s special out here?”

Brick asked.

“This is the back forty, as we like to call it. There’s not much here. It’s rocky and has a few sharp elevations. Not good for pasture lands or buildings,”

Isaiah said. “We don’t come out here too often.”

“Have you ever had any incidents out here?”

Ray asked.

“No,”

Bryan said.

“Wait,”

Shaw said. “Remember when we first started dating? You had some action back here. At the time, we thought it had something to do with Kyle and the traffickers he’d help stop wanting revenge.”

“Right. Yeah,”

Bryan said. "I found tracks back here, and then there was that day when Kyle and I were out for a ride, and we came across some men with binoculars. They took off before we could identify them."

"Can you take me to where you found the tracks?"

Brick asked.

"Sure."

Bryan changed directions and headed toward a much hillier area covered in rocks and a large grouping of trees that stood out among the more barren grasslands.

"Why are there so many trees in this one area?"

Ray asked. He'd grown up in Marshall but wasn't a farmer or rancher.

"There's a natural spring that begins over there and feeds a couple of ranches in the area,"

Isaiah said. "It's a major source of water in these parts."

Bells began sounding in Ray's mind as his instincts kicked in.

"How far does this spring run?" he asked.

"It's never been fully mapped, but I'm guessing thousands of acres of land are fed by it,"

Bryan answered.

“What are you thinking?”

Ghost asked Ray.

“It’s only a thought, but what’s more important than crude oil in Texas?”

“Water,”

Brick answered. “Shit.”

“We need to have Spencer dig into the records on these freshwater springs because whoever controls the water controls the county. Has anyone ever come round wanting to buy this parcel of land?”

Ray asked.

“Yeah, a few over the years,”

Isaiah said. “But we sent them packing. Our land’s not for sale.”

“Do you have any records of those offers?”

Brick asked.

“Well, Bryan’s grandmother kept pretty strict ranch records over the years. God rest her soul. Especially after Bryan’s dad and mom passed.”

“I’m sorry about their passing,”

Ghost said.

“It was a long time ago, but thank you. Bryan was nine years old at the time, and thankfully, he and his grandmother stayed home from the auction that one time or the whole family would have been wiped out. As it was, they passed, and I was left in my wheelchair.”

Brick turned to look at Ray. They were on the same page.

“I’m sorry to bring up bad memories, but may I ask what happened?”

Ray asked.

“We were on our way back from the livestock auction, and I was asleep in the backseat of the truck, so I can only tell you what the authorities told us after I woke up in the hospital. They said it was a drunk driver. He crossed the line and hit our truck and trailer head-on.”

“Did they identify the other driver?”

Brick asked.

“I don’t remember. At the time, we had other priorities.”

“Of course,” Ray said.

“Here we are,”

Bryan said as he pulled the truck to a stop. “Tell me straight, what are you thinking?”

“It’s conjecture at the moment, but we’re starting to realize that those buying up all the land in certain areas of Marshall have a master plan, and those who didn’t sell willingly—”

Ray stopped short of making the full accusation, not wanting to hurt Bryan and his grandfather.

Bryan took over. "Were eliminated."

"Shit,"

Isaiah growled. "You think the accident wasn't an accident?"

"Let's go have a look around the spring,"

Brick said, his voice solemn. "When we return to the ranch house, we'd appreciate seeing those records."

"I'll call Kyle and have him start digging them out of the office,"

Bryan said while picking up his phone. "Wait, do you think my family is still in danger?"

"It'd be the last mistake they ever made,"

Shaw growled.

They searched around the entrance to the spring and found new tracks made within the last two weeks.

"What's that?"

Isaiah said from his wheelchair.

"Where?"

Ray asked.

Isaiah pointed. “There.”

Ray caught the glint of something shiny in the sunlight and went to investigate.

“Well, what do we have here?”

Shaw said as he came to stand beside Ray.

“Looks like one of those GPS/GNSS handheld portable land meters. It sends out a signal to a receiver so that an area can be mapped,”

Bryan said from Ray’s other side. “We use it for projects around the ranch.”

“I don’t suppose that one belongs to you?”

Ray asked.

“Nope.”

“Yep, didn’t think so.”

“We need to get Spencer and Harris on this,”

Shaw said. “Leave it where it is, and they’ll be able to track the signal to the receiver. Then we go hunting.”

Ray could tell Shaw wasn’t messing around. He would hunt those responsible down along with the rest of the team. Whoever was messing with this town and these families was about to get a rude awakening about true power and fear.

Ghost

Unsurprisingly, Riverside Developments and Ever Clear Investments were the first to offer to purchase that portion of the ranch. The first offer came in the fifties after Cross and Berry Inc. changed its name to Riverside and again years later, mere months before Bryan's parents' car accident.

Once Bryan had taken over the ranch, Riverside changed its name again to Ever Clear Investments and again offered to purchase the land. With each offer, the amount increased, but as Isaiah had said, their ranch wasn't for sale.

Ghost was getting a sick feeling in his gut that the Cross and Berry families had been working together for generations buying up land when it became available, and when an owner refused to sell, accidents began happening.

If Bryan and Isaiah's wife had gone to that auction as well that day, the entire family would have been killed.

"What happens to the land after if all the beneficiaries are dead?"

Ghost asked.

"They'd search for any next of kin, blood relation, but if not, the estate escheats to the State of Texas, meaning the government takes ownership,"

Conor explained.

“In this case, Cross’s father was still mayor, and as the local government, he’d sell it off,”

Gunner said.

“Then his and Berry’s company would swoop in and buy it without anyone knowing they were Riverside Developments. That’s why they were so quick to change the name of their company from Cross and Berry Inc.,”

Spencer said.

“Damn,”

Ghost said. “This goes so much further than the Sophia and Jericho mystery.”

“Perhaps not,”

Spencer spoke up from the other end of the kitchen table.

They’d all gathered at the lake house to piece together the information they had so far.

“Explain,”

Brick ordered.

This case had taken on a more lethal element, and it seemed he was now treating it like a military operation for the team.

“You mentioned the Berrys had purchased Jericho’s parents land after Jericho’s death, but when I dug deeper, it turns out that both John and Vera Miles died less

than one year after Jericho was shot in 1954,”

Spencer explained.

Ray pulled out his phone. “Holy shit, it’s right here on their headstones. I took this picture back in the cemetery before we were shot at.”

Ray turned the picture to show everyone. “At the time, I didn’t realize that the together in death was so literal.”

“How did they die?”

Stryker asked. This was his family, after all, if their research was correct. John and Vera would have been his great-grandparents.

“House fire,”

Spencer said sadly while looking at Stryker. “With Jericho already gone and no living relatives left, the estate went to the government to be sold off.”

“And Riverside Developments to buy,”

Stryker growled.

“Yes.”

“But Sophia was Jericho’s beneficiary,”

Julia said. “We found the will.”

“It wouldn’t matter since he died first. Since he and Sophia never married, his

property would have gone to his parents,”

Ray explained.

“Okay. Time for a rundown of what we know,”

Brick ordered. “Let’s start at the beginning.”

“We began this investigation looking into if the priest actually shot Jericho and what happened with Sophia’s baby,”

Ray began to summarize.

“Now we know that Sophia was likely pregnant when Jericho shipped out and sent away by her parents,”

Ghost added.

“And that child is either Stryker’s father or mother,”

Conor said.

“Then, thanks to Ghost, we found out the town vet and the Berrys were up to something dubious, and they tried to scare Ray and Ghost off by shooting at them,”

Gunner mentioned.

“Then Cross turned up dead, and we found all that information in his hidden basement,”

Elias said. “This led us to the company the Cross and Berry families created to buy

up land in Marshall.”

“Likely to control the freshwater spring and water in the area,”

Shaw said. “With that, they could force all the ranchers and farmers to pay for the needed water, which is currently freely shared by Bryan’s family ranch.”

“Also, if someone didn’t want to sell, they suddenly had accidents,”

Ghost said. The knowledge that this had freely been happening for generations still stunned him.

“Paving the way for the local government to sell off the property,” Ray said.

“Which was Mayor Cross,”

Harris added.

“What we still don’t know is why the priest shot Jericho or if he even did,”

Ray reminded the group.

Everyone sat quietly, processing the information. Ghost couldn’t help but feel like they were missing something, but he didn’t know what it was. Then it hit him.

“Do we know where Sophia’s parents sent her to have the baby?” he asked.

Ray and Spencer began flipping through files as Harris tapped away on his computer.

“There’s a record of her social security number being recorded in Florida in 1952. Sophia was born in 1933, so she would have been nineteen years old, and Jericho

would have left for war before that,”

Harris announced.

“Were there any homes for unmarried mothers in Florida then?”

Ghost asked.

“The Florence Crittenton Homes for unwed pregnant women was located there and required women to put their babies up for adoption before they returned to their hometowns,”

Spencer said.

“We need the fifty-two Florence Crittenton Homes records,”

Brick ordered.

“On it,”

Spencer said.

Brick looked over at Stryker. “We’ll figure this out. I swear it.”

With Stryker’s nod, everyone went back to work. Only a handful of boxes left hadn’t been opened, and Ghost hoped they had all their answers before they hit the bottom of the last box.

“I may have a plan,”

Ghost announced. “Here’s what we do.”

Ray

Jake shuffled in his chair as Ray faked looking through some papers in a file. He wanted the man to squirm.

“We’ re releasing you,”

Ray said as he closed the file.

“What?”

Jake asked, his shock evident.

“You’re free to go. Your belongings will be returned to you at the front desk.”

Ray stood and made a move to leave.

“Wait. Have you arrested someone?”

“No, but it’s been decided there isn’t enough evidence to prove you killed Cross. Thank you for your cooperation. If we need any further information, we’ll be in touch.”

Panic flashed across Jake’s stunned face. Perfect.

“But they’re still out there.”

“Who?”

“The people who killed Cross.”

“Yes, we know, but we’re at a standstill without further leads.”

“What about the information I gave you?”

“We’re still following up but have nothing so far. However, you have rights, and we can’t continue to hold you here. You’re free. Would you like one of the deputies to give you a ride someplace?”

“No. You can’t let me go.”

“Did you kill Cross?”

“No.”

“Then you’re free to go.”

“Holy shit, don’t you get it? They’ll kill me.”

“Who?”

“The people who killed Cross.”

“You keep saying that, but people aren’t a name, and under the law, as you’re aware, we can’t disregard your rights. I must let you go if we have no proof, leads, or new information. I wish you luck, Jake.”

Ray walked out of the room, closed the door behind him, and continued into the room on the opposite side of the wall. Looking through the one-way mirror, Ray watched Jake run through a gambit of emotions: confusion, anger, and fear.

“You got a mean streak in you, buddy,”

Elias chuckled as he watched Jake.

“Evil.”

Brick laughed. “I like this side of you.”

“Thank you,”

Ray said with a bow. “Now, let’s see how strong his sense of self-preservation is.”

Minutes passed and Jake still hadn’t stood from the chair. Ray was almost considering going back in when Jake finally stood and walked out the door. When Jake reached the front desk, Ray came up from a side hallway, making it seem like he hadn’t noticed Jake was still there.

“Oh, you’re still here. Was there anything else?”

Ray asked.

“You know they’ll be waiting for me.”

“Tell me who.”

“I can’t.”

“If I don’t let you go, I’d be denying you your rights. Everything has to be done by the book. You’re free to go.”

Ray grabbed a small plastic bag from the desk that held what Jake had in his pockets

when they brought him in, handed it to Jake, and slapped him on his back.

“Good luck out there.”

Jake took the bag and glanced out the sheriff's station windows. He sucked in a deep breath, took the bag, and stormed out of the door and back onto the streets of Marshall. It was sunset and would be dark soon.

All the better to hunt by in Ray's eyes.

Ghost

His arm still stung where Spencer had injected the tracker, but now it was part of his body, it vanished as he ghosted. Ghost was careful not to rub the spot because Harris had programmed it to be pressure-sensitive. If he needed help, he'd push on the spot where his tracker was, and the cavalry would come running. Lucky for him, it was a warm night, or running around Marshall butt-ass naked would have been a much chillier proposition, and his dick would have crawled back inside his body for warmth. He couldn't help but think of that Seinfeld episode when George got out of the pool and was changing when his girlfriend walked in. Turtling indeed.

Ghost followed Jake as he left the station and crossed the street, heading toward the diner. He noted the man's nervousness, glancing over his shoulder every ten to twenty seconds. As Ghost maneuvered around a shard of broken glass on the sidewalk, he'd have to remember to mention foot protection for future missions if possible.

Few people were on the street since a football game was playing on the high school field. Marshall residents loved their football. It helped to know fewer people would be in the line of fire if anything went down. Ghost easily blended into his surroundings as Jake continued past the diner and took the first alleyway that led behind the hardware store.

Great, he'd be walking through construction landmines. All he needed now was to step on a nail or get a splinter in his foot and leave a trail of blood behind him. He was cautious as he continued down the alleyway, and luckily, he didn't step on anything sharp enough to break the skin, but by the time he caught up with Jake, he

was facing off with the guy from the hardware store, Jackson. This should be interesting.

“What’d you tell them?”

Jackson demanded, his face red.

“Nothing,”

Jake growled, eyes shifting back and forth, likely looking for a possible escape.

“Lift your shirt,”

Jackson ordered.

“What?”

“Lift your shirt. I need to see if you're wearing a wire.”

“Fuck,”

Jake said but did as he was told. “See, nothing.”

“I’ll ask again,”

Jackson said as he pulled out a gun. “What did you tell the cops?”

“Nothing. I swear I didn’t give them your name.”

“Then why are they snooping around?”

“Where?”

“Cross’s house.”

“Cause you killed him. They found the body.”

“Why did they haul you in?”

“My wallet fell out there. I told you I needed help lifting the body, but you sat in the truck watching me do all the work. It was your idea to dump him out there, saying it’d be safe considering your dad was buying the land. I had nothing to do with this. All I was supposed to do was find the land to buy.”

“My father wants to see you.”

“Why? I didn’t tell them anything. I did what he told me to do. I got rid of the body.”

“Just get in the truck. You can explain it to him yourself.”

Jackson motioned with his gun toward the same truck Ghost had seen when the guy tore out of the parking lot after Cross told him off for shooting at them. As Jake jumped into the truck, Ghost gingerly climbed into the truck bed. They had to get to the top guy, but Jackson wasn’t him. Time to meet the Berry patriarch.

It was much colder riding in the bed of a truck as it flew down the road in the middle of the night, but he had to stay with Jake to get to the head honcho. Ghost couldn’t help but look out into the darkness behind them and wonder where the team was because there wasn’t a light in sight. He had to trust that they were nearby.

He knew Ray and the team would never abandon him, and this thought steeled him for the remainder of the journey. He and his ability could lead them to the person

responsible for destroying so many lives—those who thought they were above the law and entitled to steal and kill others without ever answering for their crimes.

Who knows what they had planned for the town of Marshall once they'd seized all the land containing the freshwater spring? Would they charge people for water? Would they allow farmers crops to wither on the stalk and their animals to die of dehydration? What would they make the poor townsfolk do to survive?

People like this reminded Ghost of the bullies he'd been fighting his whole life. They took and took until there was nothing left. Now that Cross was dead, only one family was left to prosper from generations of destruction and theft. They couldn't be allowed to continue.

The truck began to slow and eventually pulled onto a long driveway that led to a large ranch house set back from the road and surrounded by trees. The truck parked behind the house, and Jackson forced Jake out of the truck and onto the deck, where another man sat waiting. He was sitting back leisurely in a cushioned chair, sucking on a cigar. He resembled a mob boss, someone who belonged in a big city like New York, not the hill country in Texas. Ghost couldn't help but notice the armed men stationed throughout the area but knew the team would be prepared and ready to take them on.

"Jake,"

the man said. "Good to see you're well."

The missing part of that sentence was evident—for now.

"Mr. Berry, you gotta believe me, I didn't tell the cops nothin'. I swear it."

"You know, Jake, how I grew to be the most powerful man in this county?"

“No, sir.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. It’s too much for your simple mind to understand. It’s by calculating risk.”

“Calculating risk, sir?”

“Yes, risk,”

Joe Berry said as he stood. “Every move I make comes with a certain amount of risk.”

He lifted his fat cigar to his lips and took another drag, allowing the smoke to float up and around his head like tendrils disappearing into the darkness.

“Yes, sir,”

Jake said, looking even more nervous now that Berry had stood.

“I’m forced to judge the risk of buying land, and when that land isn’t for sale, then the risk of taking steps to ensure it comes up for sale.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cross was a risk, and when he became too much of a risk, he had to be eliminated. So, you can say I’m in the business of risk assessment.”

Berry nodded toward Jackson, and the thug immediately shoved Jake down to his knees.

“Mr. Berry, sir, I swear I didn’t tell them anything about you shooting Cross.”

“What did you tell them?”

Berry demanded.

“Nothin’.”

“I find it hard to believe they set you free for no reason.”

“They didn’t have enough evidence to charge me.”

Ghost worked his way up to the side of the deck for a better look when he heard the first growl. Shit. A dog. He may have been invisible to sight but not to scent, and the dog had a lock on him.

He turned to see a big black Doberman inching his way forward with his nose in the air, trying to identify the new scent. Ghost had a moment of fear until he heard the clank of metal, and he realized the dog was chained to the side of the house. It lunged forward, barking, only to be pulled up short of Ghost by the chain. He swore his life passed before his eyes for a moment, but the Doberman couldn’t get within ten feet of Ghost.

“Shut the fuck up,”

Jackson yelled at the dog, who whined and retreated back into the shadows of the house. “Stupid, good-for-nothing mutt. I’ll use you for target practice if you keep your shit up.”

Ghost felt sorry for the dog. He’d been mistreated for doing what guard dogs normally do: bark at intruders, invisible or not.

“Now, Jake. When I look at you, I have to ask myself what percentage of risk you

pose to me and what my plans are for Marshall.”

“Zero, sir. I’m zero threat to you and your takeover of Marshall.”

“If only that were true, Jake. Then I wouldn’t be forced to do what needs to be done.”

Shit, they were going to eliminate Jake.

Jackson raised his gun to the back of Jake’s head. A similar kill shot had been found on Cross’s body.

“This isn’t personal, Jake. It’s business, and it all comes down to risk management.”

“No, no,”

Jake cried.

Berry nodded, and a shot rang out.

Ghost stood stunned for a fraction of a second, then Jackson’s body fell to the ground. Jake looked around, confused, until another round of shots were fired. The team was moving in. Ghost wasn’t worried about being shot accidentally by the team because they were too good at this, but that didn’t count for Berry’s men, who were returning fire.

Ghost crouched down and inched his way back, forgetting about the dog until he felt its cold nose pressed against his back. He froze as bullets flew, and the dog continued to sniff his shoulder.

“Shhh, it’s okay,”

Ghost murmured, hoping to get out of this with all his body parts still attached. “It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you. Please don’t bite me.”

He slowly turned and raised his hand to the dog’s nose. When he didn’t immediately attempt to bite at what was essentially still thin air to anyone watching, Ghost felt a bit better.

Carefully, he slid the palm of his hand along the side of the dog’s muzzle and down its neck. With a small whine, the Doberman sat beside Ghost and leaned into him. He wasn’t sure if he was having an out-of-body experience, but he wrapped his arms around the dog, and they both crouched down against the side of the house, trying to avoid stray bullets.

What the hell did he do now?

Ray

Ray watched the dot on the screen, making sure Ghost was out of the way in every shot. If he was right, Ghost and the dog were crouching together at the far side of the house, staying out of the way. He didn’t want his lover to get caught in the crossfire.

“I’ve got two coming at two o’clock,”

Gunner announced over the comms from his position in a large oak tree across the clearing.

Ray turned to see two of Berry’s thugs coming around the house, rifles ready. The moment they took aim at Brick and Stryker, who were making their way behind Jackson’s truck, Ray and the rest of the team took them out.

Berry had retreated into his house, leaving his goons to fight his battle. Unfortunately, he'd dragged Jake inside with him. Gunner had managed to take Jackson out before he executed Jake, but the man was still in danger. He may have been scum, but he didn't deserve to die.

"Ghost is good. We need to get inside before Berry kills Jake,"

Ray said into the comms.

"I may not like the man, but agreed,"

Brick confirmed. "Move in on the house."

Using the trees as cover, Ray, Fletcher, Elias, and his deputies moved in from the east, while Brick, Stryker, Shaw, and Gator came from the west. They took out adversaries as they went, and soon, the gunfire died down around the exterior.

"Move in,"

Brick ordered.

Ray followed Fletcher to the garden doors and watched as the big redhead peeked inside.

"Clear,"

he announced. "Breaching interior."

Fletcher turned the knob and slowly opened the door. When nothing happened, they quickly moved inside, taking up positions around what was the kitchen. It was empty.

“Coming in the front,”

Stryker reported.

Elias motioned with his hand for Ray to start making his way down the hall as they covered him. He did it without question. That was what being part of a team meant. You trusted them with your life, and they trusted you with theirs. Inch by inch, they made their way across the house, clearing room after room, eventually joining up with the other half of the team.

They tried the handle of the closed double doors at the far side of the house. They were locked. Brick nodded, and Fletcher stepped up quickly, kicking the door open with the sole of his boot and taking one off the hinges. They moved as a unit and fanned out into the room.

Berry stood with his back against the wall, using Jake as a human shield.

“Don’t come any closer, or I’ll kill him,”

Berry yelled, ramming the barrel of his gun into the side of Jake’s head.

Brick moved forward with his rifle pointed directly at Berry.

“You know there’s no way out for you. Let him go,”

he ordered.

“No. If you don’t stay out of my way, I’ll end this asshole,”

Berry warned as he inched his way toward the open back door. “It won’t matter to me whether I go down for another death. Add it to the list.”

“Crazy fucker,”

Stryker growled.

“I don’t have a shot,”

Gunner announced over the comms.

Jake looked ready to pass out as the standoff continued. The team matched Berry’s every move closer to the door.

“You won’t get away,” Ray said.

“Fuck you,”

Berry growled. “I can be soaking up the sun in some tropical oasis without extradition back to the States before sunrise.”

Ray wanted to wipe the smirk off the bastard's face, but there was no way to get to him without risking Jake.

The tracker on their wrist pinged as the growls started. The Doberman came inching in through the open doorway, baring his sharp teeth.

“Finally, I get some use out of this dumb dog,”

Berry chuckled before ordering. “Attack those fuckers.”

“I don’t think so,”

Ghost appeared, holding the dog’s collar. “Get him, boy.”

“What the fuck?”

Berry yelled.

The dog charged, but it wasn't at the team. Instead, it lunged forward and latched onto Berry's arm. He let go of Jake in the ensuing scuffle to get the dog off him. A shot rang out, and the dog yelped before falling. Berry raised his gun at Ghost.

The team let loose, sending Berry flying back as bullets tore into his body. When the smoke cleared, Ghost held the dog in his arms on the floor.

“We have to help him,” he said.

Ray rushed over to have a look at the dog's wounds. There was one bullet wound to its right haunch. Fletcher came forward with bandages and began wrapping the wound.

“He'll be okay, Ghost,” Ray said.

“Promise?”

“Promise. It looks like it's strictly a muscle injury, with no organs or internal bleeding. He'll walk with a limp, but that should be about all.”

“He's a hero,”

Ghost said.

Ray looked at his lover and cupped the side of his face. “You're a hero, babe.”

Ghost

Their cottage was beginning to take shape, and Ghost's happiness meter rose with every plank of wood installed. It had been almost two weeks since Berry was taken down and a lot had happened in that time.

Ray had left his position in Seattle to work with the Fire Lake team. He and Ghost were building their own cottage beside the other cottages containing team member families on the lake house property. This was a family, his family, and he'd never ask for more.

"Ghost, can we throw the ball?"

Sammie, Julia's son, asked.

He and Ben, Gunner's nephew and Jason's son, Freddie, Frank, and Amy, child survivors rescued from the Noah Group, were playing in the yard with Gracie, Kyle's golden retriever, and Hero, Ghost's new Doberman he'd brought home with him from Berry's house.

"Sure, here you go,"

Ghost said, handing over the yellow tennis ball.

Both dogs' ears perked up, and their eyes followed the ball until Sammie threw it across the yard. Gracie raced forward, and Hero limped after her, his tail wagging. Gracie reached the ball first and grabbed it in her mouth. When she turned, she

walked up to Hero and dropped the ball in front of the injured dog. Hero happily took it and chewed on it happily. He hadn't figured out that he had to bring it back yet.

"We need to teach Hero how to play fetch,"

Freddie said.

"Yeah, you will. I don't think he's had much time to play fetch before, but he'll learn,"

Ghost said, and the kids ran off to play.

It had been quite the mess to clean up once all the shooting had stopped.

Thankfully, with Elias being the sheriff along with Brick's contacts, their story about how Jake, their key witness in the murder of the old veterinarian, Mr.

Cross, had been abducted at gunpoint shortly after being released was enough to explain why they'd followed the kidnapper out to Joe Berry's farm.

Of course, the fact Brick and his team played a major role was downplayed, leaving the sheriff, Detective Sommers, and the deputies as the ones saving the day.

Records found at Joe Berry's spelled out the plan the bastard had for the town and the key players.

Stryker's truck pulled in.

He and John had been away most of the morning to finish signing all the paperwork at the lawyer's office.

After it was determined Stryker was indeed Sophia's and Jericho's grandson and records indicated that Sophia gave birth to a baby boy, all Miles's land was returned to their only living blood relative, Stryker.

One hell of a turn of events.

Stryker's father had been adopted by a couple in Florida and never left the state.

That's where Stryker's mom met him on spring break, and their love affair turned into Stryker.

Unfortunately, his father had passed away from prostate cancer over fifteen years prior, and no one was sure he even knew he had a son.

As far as Jericho's death was concerned, it was discovered Father Henry Jones had been the priest at The Florence Crittenton Homes for unwed pregnant women when Sophia was there.

They had become friends, and the priest supported her while she went through her pregnancy and the eventual adoption of her son.

They reconnected as friends when he took over the congregation in Marshall.

By all indications, Jericho suffered from serious PTSD and, left untreated, became a violent drunk, often reliving events that took place in the war, though he was back in Marshall.

Ghost couldn't imagine how hard it must have been on Sophia to have the man she loved back but not truly the same man and knowing she'd been forced to give up their child while they were away.

As Julia was rifling through the last of the boxes, she found an old notebook that belonged to Ray's grandfather, the sheriff at the time of Jericho's death.

His handwritten notes on the events of that evening stated that Jericho had become incensed by Sophia's close relationship with Father Jones, likely not knowing the truth of why they had such a strong friendship due to him helping her through one of the toughest moments in her life.

In a drunken rage fueled by his untreated PTSD, Jericho attacked Sophia, and Father Jones was forced to shoot him.

In the end, the truth was Father Henry Jones did shoot Jericho Miles and killed him, but it was to protect Sophia.

Ray's grandfather put the incident down to self-defense and hadn't intended to charge the priest.

However, Father Jones couldn't live with what he'd done, taking a life, though he was protecting another, and forced the issue.

A neighboring prosecutor took the case and, with Father Jones's confession, held a trial ending with him going to jail.

Had they begun with that box, it would have saved a bit of time, but the team would never have gotten the complete story.

It was as if Sophia doled out information as necessary so they could reach the proper conclusion.

It was a sad ending for two people who loved each other, but life wasn't a fairy tale; in reality, bad things happen to good people.

It was a harsh truth, and the only consolation was that Sophia's grandson was found, the Miles family lands returned to their rightful owner, and an evil man's obsession with controlling Marshall through their water supply had been ended.

The town of Marshall was stronger and safer now as the Fire Lake team moved into the county and protected it as their own.

Many townsfolk had been by to thank them, and as in their typical style, they welcomed all with a beer and barbeque while assuring all that they hadn't done that much.

Ghost looked toward the lake house as the back door opened, and Ray and Rocko walked out.

Rocko was carrying his suitcase.

His flight left later today.

It never ceased to amaze Ghost how things managed to work out.

A man Ghost had initially hated turned out to be one who saved him and helped solve this mystery.

Rocko was a survivor of the Noah Group, like himself, and like Ghost, Rocko was looking for the place to which he belonged.

Ray wrapped his arms around Ghost as he joined the two on the deck.

"Off already,"

Ghost said.

“Yes. My flight to New York takes off at three, so Jason’s been kind enough to give me a lift to the airport,”

Rocko said.

“New York? You’re not going back to Florida?”

Ghost asked.

“No, not yet. Brick’s told me about a group of survivors out there led by Apollo. They were originally located in New Orleans but moved locations around one year ago. I thought I’d go out and meet more survivors like us before returning to the police station in Florida,”

Rocko explained. “Who knows, maybe they could use a detective in upstate New York with a knack for finding people.”

Ghost chuckled. “Maybe they do. I hope you find your place.”

“Me too,”

Rocko said.

“You can always come back here,”

Ray said. “There’s always room for one more.”

“I second that,”

Brick said as he joined them. “Anytime. You don’t need to call. Just show up.”

“Thank you, Brick,”

Rocko said, shaking the team leader’s hand. “For everything.”

“Apollo and his team will be expecting you,”

Brick said.

Ray shook Rocko’s hand. “Thanks for helping us find Ghost, buddy.”

“This new settled persona looks good on you,”

Rocko said. “Don’t screw it up.”

Ray pulled Ghost closer. “I don’t intend to.”

Ghost stood in Ray’s arms as they watched Jason and Rocko jump into the truck and drive out of the lane. Brick went to join Roman, and the team, hovering around the barbeque. Ghost didn’t miss the smile on the team leader’s face as the man looked around the yard and the home he’d made. Pride and satisfaction radiated from his expression.

“Family,”

Ghost said.

“Family,”

Ray agreed.

Apollo

“You sure about this?”

Griffin asked.

“Yeah,”

Apollo stated without an ounce of uncertainty.

“Okay, let’s get started,”

Griffin announced, and the team spread out to survey the area.

Apollo looked at his ancestral land, the land bequeathed to him by his Iroquois grandmother, and felt at peace for the first time. This was where he’d create a safe space for his people, beyond the clutches of the Noah Group, so they could continue their mission to end their reign of terror. He watched his younger half-sister Ellen run into the long grass. Her arms opened wide, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Thanks to her Navy grandfather’s involvement, they shared the same mother, another involuntary Noah Project subject. However, their fathers were as different as night and day. Apollo’s father was a service member, a full-blood Iroquois, and with the thanks of Hendrix’s ability to map one’s family tree, Apollo had tracked them down years later. On the other hand, Ellen’s father was an asshole who wanted to gain fame for writing a book about the Project until the Noah Group came knocking and started killing family members. Thankfully, their new friends, Brick and his team, made it to

Ellen before the Group did, and she was secreted away.

The Noah Project's mission was to use genetic manipulation to create the perfect warrior without any concern for how they accomplished that. After the Project was shut down by the Navy, the test subjects were sent to foster care and orphanages worldwide without the knowledge or assistance to deal with their changing abilities. The survivors had mutations that crossed the spectrum from physical to mental and to what could be best described as supernatural.

Those wishing to use these abilities, especially the Noah Group, began collecting them years later to gain control and amass power. This needed to end. The fear, pain, and destruction caused by this group were immeasurable and crossed all lines: geopolitical, economic, age, and location. All were fair game and in extreme danger.

For years, the crew thought Apollo and his team were alone in this fight until recently, they learned of another group led by a retired Navy Seal named Brick. They'd run into each other in New Orleans during a recovery mission in which a member of their crew was executed by the Noah Group followers, and now the two teams kept the other in the loop from that point forward. The more people they had fighting against the Noah Group, the better.

Though Apollo worried about what public knowledge of their abilities might cause, he understood that the day was drawing closer. For now, their fight was held in the shadows, away from the general public's knowledge. However, an invisible timer had already started ticking down the days, hours, and minutes before their anonymity was destroyed either by those in power or a survivor unable to control their abilities.

This raised another question plaguing Apollo: how many more survivors were waiting for help? He'd dedicated his life to this one quest after escaping and gaining his freedom and had been picking up survivors and team members ever since. Some in his group came from labs they'd closed down. Others were former military, commandos, and security-for-hire personnel due to their inability to function outside

structured boundaries in normal society.

Their new start and continued mission would begin from this remote location owned under his given Iroquois name, Calian Brant, to keep it off the Noah Group's radar. Still, Apollo and his team first needed to bring this land up to livable conditions. The lone cabin had no electricity or running water, but what the property didn't have in amenities, it had in space, and that's what they truly prized above all. Until basic structures and facilities were constructed, they'd stay in large fifth wheels and camping trailers that could temporarily provide them with what they needed.

They'd begin to source materials from contractors in Ticonderoga while performing the work themselves. In remote areas like these, it wasn't uncommon for people to build their own compounds from the ground up. That way, their group wouldn't stand out among the many in upstate New York hidden away in the tall forests, full of oaks, balsam, spruce, cottonwood, pine, cedar, and wildlife, along expansive waterways. This location provided them direct access to Lake Champlain, which ran one hundred twenty miles north to south from Whitehall, New York, to the Richelieu River in Quebec, Canada.

They had the makings of a safe home where their team could find solace, protection, and peace after years of being hunted, and Apollo swore he'd fight to the death to keep it that way.

I want to take a moment to thank all of you for following along on this journey with my team from Fire Lake and me. The team stood strong through the ups and downs, surprises, battles, mysteries, struggles, love, and redemption.

Along the way, we found stories of resilience, understanding, acceptance, and compassion, as I hope each of you finds in your everyday life. As I end this series, it is with great enthusiasm and excitement that I announce my new series, which will

follow Rocko to New York, where we join Apollo's team as they build a new home and double down on their efforts to stop the Noah Group from destroying any more lives.

I hope to see you all soon, beginning with Apollo, book one in The Noah Project series.

M. Tasia