



Harris (Fire Lake #8)

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Description: UNDERCOVER LOVE

Harris and Woodley have the best kind of relationship. Neither wants a partner, commitment, or any of the boundaries that come with it. For them, it's all about great sex and a little companionship.

Until Harris decides to make himself bait for the nefarious Noah Group who'd captured and performed experiments, including genetic manipulation, on Harris and his twin sister, Jennifer.

Woodley's pissed off at the members of the Fire Lake team for allowing Harris to put himself in such extreme danger, and finds he has an unknown deep and wide protective streak, which angers him even more.

Now he's a love-struck sap, not the former US Marine and detective who'd volunteered for, and enjoyed the hell out of, the most perilous assignments.

And he's scared to death he's going to lose the man who's made him feel this way.

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CHAPTER ONE

Harris

As the sun rose on another idyllic day on a ranch set in the picturesque Texas Hill Country,

Harris wondered how many more he'd be able to watch before his inevitable departure from his new family.

Each sunrise seemed more beautiful than the one before. This was the life he wanted his sister and the others to have, and he was betting his life on ensuring that it continued to happen. He would sorely miss it.

The damned Noah Project had a lot to answer for. For over three decades, a group of scientists and underground politicians, all of whom possessed an overinflated sense of self-importance with a we know better than everyone what the world needs attitude, undertook genetic manipulation of fetuses and babies in an attempt to make the perfect weapons.

When things went south, they attempted to make the project and the test subjects disappear in various ways. However, nothing stays a secret forever, and now a battle was being waged between those inside the Noah Group attempting to capture survivors and those who sought to protect them and their freedom.

As was the case with Harris and his sister, both were Noah experiments on the run and the Fire Lake Team—a group of retired Navy SEALs who had an elite private

investigation firm and lived and worked out of a lake house on Fire Lake— made it their mission to protect the survivors, whose numbers were ever-growing. And the stronger the team became, the more threatened the Noah Group behaved, to the point of sending a bomb to the team's home to take them out. Which, of course, pissed them off, causing them to redouble their efforts, and making Harris's decision easier.

Strong arms wrapped around him from behind.

“It's early, come back to bed,” Woodley said.

His detective's voice was so damn sexy when he first woke up, all rough and deep. The rest of him was equally as alluring: broad shoulders, washboard stomach, and a face that would tempt angels to sin. Especially those lips.

Detective Woodley, a survivor determined to make the Noah Group pay for his father's death, had entered their lives when he was investigating the deaths of his father's former colleagues, all of whom had sought to shut down the Noah Project, and paid the ultimate price. Now Woodley was part of their team. At least for the time being.

“I will, but I didn't want to miss this.”

“I know how much you love seeing the sunrise.”

“There's nothing quite like it.”

“There's no one quite like you.”

Harris spun to face his lover. “You're not turning into some lovesick poet on me, are you?”

“ Me? Never.” Woodley grinned before kissing Harris like a starving man about to feast.

Yeah, there’d be many things he’d sorely miss if his plan worked.

“ What’s got you all tied up in knots this morning?” Woodley asked as he led Harris back to bed.

What could he say? The truth? Not likely, so he went with distraction. Woodley’s lips parted as Harris reached down and cupped the man’s balls.

“ I was wondering what it would take to get my cock back in that gorgeous ass of yours.”

“ Again? You’re turning into a nympho on me?”

“ Turning into? Around you, I have to keep myself under control most of the time, or we’d never get out of bed.”

“ Bed? Since when has the availability of a bed ever stopped you?”

“ True, but not the point,” Harris said with a grin as he backed Woodley against the nearest wall. “Now, where were we?”

Before Woodley could ask anything else, Harris took his lips in a commanding kiss that left them both breathless. He’d never get enough of this amazing man, though their time together was drawing to an end. If he were a stronger man, Harris would never have started anything with Woodley, but the man had worked some kind of magic on him, and without much of a resistance, they’d fallen into bed together.

Was he sorry? Hell no.

Woodley took advantage of his momentary distraction and easily twisted Harris around, lifted him into a fireman's carry, and headed for their bed. After unceremoniously dumping him onto the mattress, Woodley dove on top of Harris and pinned him down. The strong bastard had that sexy grin glued to his face, and Harris was well and truly under his spell.

If things could be different, Harris could imagine a lifetime of moments spent just like this, but that was a luxury he had no right to even entertain in his fucked-up thoughts. His path had been determined long ago in some damned petri dish.

“Where's the condoms and lube?” Harris asked.

Woodley leaned over, opened the side table drawer, and pulled out a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube.

“Will these be enough?” Woodley teased.

“For now,” Harris growled before flipping Woodley over and pressing him into the mattress. “My turn.”

Harris took the lube and wasted no time in preparing his lover while pushing any thoughts of the future to the back of his mind. Woodley's needy moans drove Harris to the brink, but he was able to stave off coming with a quick pull on his balls. He'd never lost control, but the man underneath him pushed Harris further than anyone.

With a few practiced moves, Harris ripped the condom package open, rolled it down his hard cock, and applied more lube before lining up with Woodley's hole and sliding deep. They both groaned as their bodies joined together, and Harris's heart raced as the tight heat pulled him in. When he bottomed out, he watched Woodley closely to make sure his lover was comfortable before pulling back.

“ Fuck, you drive me crazy,” Harris groaned as he snapped his hips and set a furious pace.

“ You were already crazy before I arrived,” Woodley panted.

Harris laughed softly and increased his speed, pistoning in and out of Woodley like a man on a mission. Their lust-filled moans filled the bedroom, and the bed shook as their desire for each other took over, driving Harris closer to coming.

In a move fueled by need, Harris leaned forward and captured Woodley’s right nipple with his lips, sucking harder as his lover’s groans increased. With carefully measured pressure, Harris bit Woodley’s swollen nub before licking away the slight pain he’d caused.

That was all he took as his lover’s tight ass clamped down on Harris’s cock, making it almost impossible to move, and he groaned as Woodley’s cock exploded between them. A few moments passed, and Harris could no longer stop himself, coming hard before collapsing onto the muscled, gasping man under him.

Their ragged breathing was the only sound in the room as both struggled to calm their racing hearts. Feelings that would never be spoken or see the light of day rushed through Harris, but he quickly stamped them down—as he usually did. Emotions weren’t part of his genetic makeup.

“ Shower?” Harris asked.

“ That works,” Woodley agreed.

“ Take another condom,” Harris chuckled.

“ You’re fucking insatiable.” Woodley laughed as he left the bed and walked toward

the bathroom. Harris noticed with a grin his lover had the necessary items in one hand.

Yes, there would be many aspects of this new life that Harris would miss. Woodley was high on the list.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Woodley

Woodley wasn't fooled. Harris was hiding something. As a detective, Woodley had spent his life unraveling other people's mysteries, and his gut was telling him something was up with his lover.

From the ranch, he stood, hands on the wooden guardrail, staring out at the scenery, tuning out the chatter from around him as the other occupants of the house jibed and teased each other. He smiled at their antics, then delved back into his dark thoughts about his upcoming personal mission. One that was sure to have ramifications for everyone he loved and respected.

When Woodley was a kid, his father had been killed while away on a mission of his own. Recruited to be part of a specialized tactical team of former Noah Project subjects, the sole goal was to take down the Noah Group for good. His father had been doing just that until he was murdered by the very same group he was pursuing.

They were eventually shut down, the subjects dispersed globally, and the project wiped from records. Only that wasn't the end.

With the Noah Group now splintered into multiple factions, each vying for superiority by collecting test subjects in a fucked-up form of an arms race, no one was safe.

Not only was the Fire Lake team of highly trained Navy SEALs knees-deep in ending

the Noah Group's reign of terror, but they had a win with former subjects working alongside them. The team was off the charts regarding tactical ability and experience by nature of them being operatives. If anyone could stop this dangerous and out-of-control group, it was his Fire Lake team. So Woodley had taken leave from his position back in Hood River PD to remain here and help take down those he believed responsible for the defining moment and greatest sorrow in his life—his father's death.

The squeaking of the board on the deck made him turn around to face a grinning Kyle. "How long are you planning on standing there staring at the gravel?" his friend asked as he stepped out of the house, leaning on his cane to join him on the back deck. "Harris and Jennifer left for the lake house over twenty minutes ago."

"I'm not staring," Woodley was quick to point out. "I was thinking. Can't a man have a moment to stare off into the distance?" Okay, yeah, that sounded weird even to him.

"Thinking, sure. Anything I can help with?" Kyle asked, looking all kinds of amused.

"I'm good, thanks."

The last thing he needed was to air his suspicions that Harris was keeping something from him. Especially when neither he nor Harris made it known they were lovers. They weren't hiding it, but it wasn't a topic of conversation either.

"Okay, well, breakfast is ready if you've had enough of staring longingly...I mean thinking," Kyle said with a wide grin.

The guy was as good a person as they come. He was Fletcher's brother, rich as sin, with a philanthropic streak as wide as the Mississippi. He'd suffered traumatic abuse

at the hands of their parents, hence the limp and the cane.

“ Think you’re funny, eh?” Woodley growled in amusement.

“ I know I am. You two aren’t fooling anyone. You’re way more than friends. Everyone knows it. I don’t understand why the two of you aren’t open about it. Especially around here, considering the ratio of gays to straights is ever growing.”

“ Everyone knows what exactly?” Woodley wanted specifics. He always worked better with details.

“ That you and Harris are knocking boots, doing the horizontal tango, bumping uglies, getting jiggy, boinking, doing the humpty hump, being freaks between the sheets.”

“ Okay, okay. Are you finished?” Hell, he felt like he might be back in high school.

Kyle grinned and glanced upwards as if considering his answer. “Yeah, I think you get the point.”

Woodley knew denying it was useless, so he went with another version of the truth.

“ What good would it do?” he asked in all seriousness.

Kyle looked at him strangely. “What do you mean?”

“ What good would it do acting like we’re some damn couple or some shit like that? We ain’t. We both know the ground rules. One way or another, it’ll end. Either by one of us leaving or being killed. This ain’t no fairy tale, kid.”

“ Shit. That’s morbid,” Kyle whispered.

“Morbid or not, it’s the truth, and the truth sucks sometimes. Why throw useless emotions into a lost cause? It’d just screw everything up. So we like fucking, big deal. If it wasn’t me, I’m sure Harris would find some cowboy to bend over for a time, but that would be destined to end just the same.”

Kyle’s all-too-inquisitive eyes felt like they were trying to bore a hole into Woodley’s mind, but he’d find nothing but the truth in what he’d said. He and Harris knew the score. They’d have their fun for a time, and there’d be no hard feelings when that time was over. Point blank. Nothing more to see here. Move along, folks.

“I’m sorry,” Kyle said.

“Sorry? For what?” Woodley’s head snapped back in shock. What was this guy sorry for? He had nothing to do with it.

“That the two of you have been so badly hurt that neither of you thinks you’re fixable.”

Woodley felt the blow as if he’d been hit with a sucker punch, but Kyle hadn’t moved. What the fuck? Where did the guy get that from? Fixed? He wasn’t looking to be fixed. He was looking for his father’s killer. That was his life now. That was his mission. There was no other part left of who he was before.

As Woodley was about to respond, young Freddie ran out of the house. “Isaiah said to tell you two that the bacon was getting cold, and if you weren’t going to eat it, we were.”

Isaiah was Bryan’s grandfather. Bryan was the ranch owner in a throuple relationship with Kyle and one of the Navy SEALs, Shaw. Though Isaiah was in his late seventies and confined to a wheelchair, he was as tough a rancher as any man in Texas.

Woodley took this opportunity to duck out of answering Kyle. “Okay, okay. We’re coming,” Woodley said as he followed the young boy back into the kitchen without looking back at his friend.

There would never be a happily-ever-after for him and Harris. He lived in a world of facts, not fiction, and that was where he’d stay.

Harris

“No way in hell is this happening,” Jennifer growled as she stood from the kitchen table in the lake house. “Have all of you lost your damn minds?”

“Sis, calm down,” Harris said as he closely watched the laptop floating a couple of feet above the table. “You can’t allow your emotions to get the better of you. Take a deep breath.”

“To hell with that, and easy for you to say,” she growled as good as any SEAL. “What if I told you I was willingly taking off to become a prisoner of the Noah Group again? That I was headed back to California, to the cult? Would you be calm? Would you sit by and let it happen?”

Rick, Spencer’s boyfriend, walked around the kitchen table, refilling coffee cups as if the sight of a hovering laptop and yelling people were nothing new.

“Would you like more cream, Jennifer?” he asked calmly.

“No, thank you, sweetie,” Jennifer answered with a smile before turning her scowl back on the team.

“ Um, Jennifer, can I have my laptop back?” Spencer asked, never taking his eyes off it as it floated, responding to Jennifer’s anger. Harris chuckled. Spencer was very attached to his cherished laptop. Jennifer’s emotions sometimes caused her telekinetic abilities to appear in random ways. Then again, she could be doing it on purpose, considering all the information about their plan was within those thin pieces of metal.

“ I don’t know. Are you still planning on using it to send my brother back into hell?” she asked, tilting her head and waiting for his response.

Well, that answered Harris’s question. Levitation on purpose, for the win.

“ Jennifer, give him back his laptop before he has a heart attack. This is my choice. I’ve made the decision alone.” He had to de-escalate this situation quickly, or more objects would fly around the room.

Jennifer huffed loudly, but the laptop lowered back into Spencer’s waiting hands.

Harris continued. “I approached the team with this idea. They’re only helping me do it as safely as possible. I’d be going with or without their help. This is the only way.”

“ It’s insane. You can’t just expect to be captured back into that group and not be hurt or worse. They could kill you without a second thought. They don’t give a shit about your life or any of us survivors. We’re only good if we can be controlled and used for their benefit.”

“ I’m useful to them; they won’t kill me. At least not right away.” He was betting on that, but there were no guarantees.

“ Oh, that makes me feel so much better,” Jennifer growled in frustration. “Next, you’ll tell me that Woodley okayed this fucked-up idea.”

“ He doesn’t know yet, and what does it matter if he did? It makes zero difference.” Why would the guy care? As Woodley repeatedly said, it was only convenient sex, nothing more. Why did everyone think there was some emotional bond between them?

Jennifer looked at him like she wasn’t buying what Harris was trying to sell.

“ I realize this is a shock to you,” Brick said in an obvious attempt to bring the hostility down a few notches. “However, Harris approached us months ago with this plan, and we’ve gone over every other option, but your brother is correct, even if we don’t like it. The information he could provide us of the inner workings could lead to us shutting down at least one of the Noah Group factions, if not more.”

“ It’s either we try this method, or we wait until they come for one of us next,” Harris said, trying to get through to his sister. “What if next time it’s Freddie or Frank? They’re only children. I can’t wait around and allow that to happen. It’s past time to take the fight to them.”

Harris looked around the table at the members of the Fire Lake team as his sister slowly sat back down. He could easily discern their mixed reactions and understood why. He was a heartless criminal, after all. Why would he risk his skin for anyone other than his sister?

“ They’ve already sent a bomb to a house containing innocent women and children, kidnapped John from his own shop, and messed him up. What if John hadn’t been at the lake house the day that package arrived? Most of the people around this table would be dead had he not seen the bomb in that delivery.” He waved a hand around the room. “Nothing is stopping them from doing that again or worse.” It sucked, but it was true. “Please understand why I must do this, Jennifer. It’s truly the only way left open to us now.”

This mission required a man who'd been pushed too far, a man without fear of dying, and with the brain of a supercomputer. A hacker without constraints of rules or codes. Add a healthy dose of engineered telekinetic and telepathic ability, and the Noah Project had the exact weapon they'd been trying hard to make.

Him.

That's the thing when you rush to create a weapon of unknown strength and ability. You never really knew how or if you could control it. Attaining the necessary control was like trying to catch smoke with your bare hands. As it slips through your fingers, before you realize what's happening, that smoke invades your lungs, cuts off your air supply, and chokes the very life from its creators.

Harris was that smoke, and he'd do what was necessary to ensure the air supply was finally cut off.

“ With your heightened abilities, Harris can send vital information through your shared mental link. We'd know where he is at all times,” Spencer explained. “There's no one else with your special abilities.”

“ They're unaware of how far your skills have advanced,” Fletcher added. “That you both no longer need to be in the same location to share thoughts or touch to move objects. We can use that to our advantage.”

“ We? What 'we'? It wasn't that long ago that this team wanted my brother behind bars,” Jennifer said. “Or dead. And didn't give a rat's ass that he was trying to save my life.”

“ Well, he was selling government secrets and details of US military installations,” Shaw countered with a shrug of his shoulders and a narrowed gaze. “You can't blame us.”

“ Secrets, yeah, right. You truly have no clue,” Jennifer scoffed. “If you knew—”

“ Enough, Jennifer,” Harris growled harshly as he touched his sister’s shoulder to soften his words. He had to stop her before, in her anger, she blurted out the truth about the information he’d coaxed parties into buying to fund her cancer treatment. It made no difference he’d manipulated the data to target rebel encampments instead—it was amazing what changing a single number on a line of code could do for a targeting system—but perhaps it would be better if the team thought he was the ruthless bastard they believed him to be. “We’re past that point. There’s no need to relive it.”

Jennifer looked as if she wanted to argue but thankfully remained silent. When Harris turned back to the team, he couldn’t help but notice Brick watching them closely. The man had a habit of seeing deeper than what was on the surface. Harris had often wondered about the tough team leader, but he was all human—no enhancements, just downright talent and skill.

“ Do we have a plan then?” Harris asked, wanting to push the conversation forward. Sitting around arguing wasn’t getting them any closer to their goal.

“ Yes. As far as our intel can confirm, we might have a chance of crossing paths with members of the Noah Group based out of New Orleans or at least a faction of the main group. We still don’t know how many splintered factions of the original group we’re dealing with,” Spencer explained while keeping his left arm wrapped protectively around his laptop.

The man wasn’t taking any chances, making Harris grin, knowing that he or his sister could simply lift him along with the laptop and the table if they wished, but he’d keep that to himself.

“ New Orleans? I wasn’t aware there was a group based out of that city. The West

and East Coasts, yes, but not Southern. What do we have on them?" Harris asked. This was the first time he'd learned about this group. Who were they, and where the hell did they come from?

" They appear to be new on the scene. I'm getting feelers back that indicate they might be an offshoot of the California group," Brick said. "I've made a few calls, and we should have more information before we leave for the airport."

" The cult?" Jennifer asked, her voice raising slightly. Everyone could understand her fear of that place after only recently being freed from their clutches.

" Yes. We've noticed some similarities between the two. They may have dropped the cult front they used in California, but the backers are the same," Spencer explained. "We're following the money to make sure."

" Always follow the money," Fletcher huffed. "There never seems to be a lack of people willing to fund these extremist organizations."

" It's typically the quickest way to the people in control," Harris agreed.

" We cut off one head, and another grows back someplace else. Like a damn weed," Shaw grumbled. "Need some serious weed whacking."

" True, the roots run deep in this organization," Brick said. "And we need to find the right pesticide."

" That would be me," Harris chuckled. "Though I've never considered myself a noxious substance."

" I have," Brick said, but his grin gave him away.

“Ditto, buddy,” Harris chuffed.

“Okay, so how’s this going to work?” Jennifer asked. “We drop my brother in the middle of New Orleans and hope for the best?”

“Our plan is a bit more precise,” Spencer said without looking up from his laptop. “We’ve sent Conor and Gunner down to get the lay of the land and get eyes on the group. It appears the members work out of a building in the Mid-City area fronting as a local dive bar.”

“Is he supposed to walk in, sit at the bar, and order a drink?” Jennifer asked.

“In a nutshell, yes,” Brick said.

“Seriously?” Harris questioned. “It won’t be that easy.”

“Agreed, it won’t be, but with a few carefully planned confrontations prior to your clandestine drink, it won’t be such a leap,” Gator chuckled.

“Confrontations?” he asked.

“Yes. Your criminal past isn’t a secret,” Stryker said. “We simply run with it. Nothing like a bit of internal team drama played out in front of key players to convince them that we’ve turned our backs on you and won’t come running if you were to go missing.”

“A small group of us head down to New Orleans for a meeting where an argument breaks out, and Harris leaves the team on bad terms. If we play it right, that’s when members of the local Noah Group will move in,” Spencer added.

“And if they don’t?” Harris asked.

Previous experience suggested that even with the best-thought-out plans, nothing ever went exactly according to plan.

“ Then we have Harris hang back after the rest of the team leaves. Confirming we’ve parted ways,” Spencer added. “Regroup, pivot, carry on.”

“ It’s a fluid plan. We typically have to adjust on the fly with most plans,” Shaw explained. “It’d be more unusual for the plan to go exactly as planned.”

“ You’ll leave him there? That doesn’t make me feel any better,” Jennifer said.

“ I’m sorry, facts are facts. We aren’t here to make anyone feel better. It’s to stop the Noah Group from tearing apart any more lives,” Brick stated bluntly. “This is a military mission and will be conducted as one.”

Harris agreed. As the always logical Spock said, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one.

He waited for things to go flying. His sister wasn’t in the best mood and was protective of the people she loved. No one needed to get hurt. They were all on the same side, even if his sister’s temper may suggest otherwise.

As Brick and Jennifer faced off, the room quieted. Brick’s look brooked no arguments. He was a man used to being in charge and confident in his duty—a leader of men. Jennifer seemed to be sizing him up as the tension rose around them until she finally spoke.

“ I respect your honesty, and here’s mine. If my brother dies, nothing and no one will be able to stop me from exacting my type of justice on those responsible. Even if that includes any of you,” Jennifer stated calmly, and Harris couldn’t have been prouder. She’d never be a victim again.

“ Understood,” Brick agreed with a nod and a faint look of amusement.

Harris sighed wearily. A war was about to break out between the Noah Group and those opposed to their ideology. There’d be casualties on both sides. Wars didn’t care which side you were on when death came calling. Harris was betting on his personal sacrifice, shifting the odds in their favor. Whether he won or lost, that bet was yet to be seen.

CHAPTER THREE

Harris

Later that day

Harris wasn't sure what he'd expected, but indifference from his lover wasn't on his bingo card.

“ Good luck,” Woodley said with a shrug and no more emotion than if Harris had said he'd bought a lottery ticket.

“ Thanks,” he replied, unable to come up with anything more profound.

What the fuck?

“ When do you leave?” Woodley asked as he tied his boots.

“ We're flying out on Thursday.”

“ That's why Brick wants to speak with me.”

“ Probably setting up the final team to go,” Harris explained.

“ Fine. I'll give him a call.”

“ Okay.”

“ Okay.”

Harris had never felt so uncomfortable in Woodley’s presence before, not even when they’d first met. They stood staring at each other for a few seconds, and neither said a word.

“ Hey, guys, whatcha doing?” Bryan asked as he walked in the back door, tossing his Stetson on the kitchen table.

“ I was just leaving,” Woodley said before grabbing his keys from the hook beside the door and walking out.

“ Was it something I said?” Bryan asked, appearing as confused as Harris.

“ Nope, that was all me,” Harris replied. “Hey, while I’ve got you here, I want to thank you again for taking us in and giving my family a safe place to stay. I’ll be leaving on a mission Thursday, and I’d appreciate it if you kept an eye on everyone for me.”

Bryan’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“ You’ve thanked me several times already; of course, I’ll watch over them. When will you be back?”

“ I’m not sure.” If seemed more likely than when .

“ Not sure? Does this have anything to do with you getting yourself caught by those bastards again?” Bryan asked, but Harris suspected the man already knew the answer.

Harris shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, Bryan was one of Shaw’s boyfriends, and the other, Kyle, was Fletcher’s younger brother. Of course, considering the team

was coming along, they'd all know the plans.

“ Yes.”

“ You thought this through?” Bryan asked shrewdly. The man was the most down-to-earth person Harris knew.

“ From every angle possible.” And a few that were impossible. That's what happened when your high-IQ brain behaved like a supercomputer.

“ Then I'll see you when you get back. We'll crack open a couple beers out on the back deck.”

Harris respected the rancher and the fact he said when and not if.

“ Not that crappy lite beer I've seen in the fridge?”

Bryan grinned. “No, I'll pick up the full-throttle version. Don't tell Kyle. He's got me on a diet since the doctor said I need to watch my cholesterol.”

“ Your secret's safe. I'll see you then.”

Harris took the opportunity to head back to his bedroom and pack. He wouldn't need much. He'd be heading out in the morning and spending his last day at the lake house preparing for the mission and stripping all thoughts of Woodley from his mind.

Woodley

His anger rose as his truck ate up the miles, taking him closer to the lake house. Who

in their right mind thought that sending Harris back into the belly of the beast was a viable idea? Was Harris trying to get himself killed?

The Noah Group had murdered his father, and others. For reasons known only to Harris, he wanted them to capture him. It was a suicide mission, plain and simple. This shit made absolutely no sense.

At least he knew what the man had been keeping from him, for good reason. There was no way in hell he'd sit back and allow this shit show to go down. No way.

Woodley had worked up a good head of steam over the twenty minutes it took him to drive across town and out to Fire Lake. When he pulled into the driveway leading up to the lake house, he spotted Brick sitting on the porch. Good. He had a few things to say to him.

Woodley barely shifted the truck into park before he was out the door and headed straight for the guy he deemed responsible for this misguided mission.

Brick hadn't moved, but Woodley wasn't fooled. He knew the team leader was on alert and probably expected the visit. The man was never switched off.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Woodley growled as he took the stairs two at a time.

Brick stood and met him head-on. Woodley grabbed Brick's collar and shoved him back against the wall. The team leader grinned. Confident fucker.

"I see Harris told you of his plans," Brick stated calmly before flipping Woodley back over the railing, but he held on tight to his opponent and took Brick down with him.

Woodley could taste blood, knowing his lip was split from the impact with the hard Texas dirt, but it'd be healed before he blinked. His healing superpower was good for a lot of things.

“ I see you didn't try to talk him out of this suicide mission,” Woodley growled back as he flipped Brick up and over his back and dropped him to the ground.

Woodley wasn't stupid. The fact no one was coming out of the house or cottages to check what the hell was happening was telling. He'd been expected. Also, no one feared for the boss's safety.

“ Can anyone talk Harris out of something when his mind is set?” Brick asked before kicking Woodley's feet out from under him and jamming his elbow into Woodley's back on his way down for good measure.

Woodley groaned at the impact and felt all the air rush out of his lungs but had no intent of stopping.

“ Why are you supporting him?” he gasped. “Do you honestly hate him as much as I'm led to believe that you don't give a damn if he dies?”

In a practiced move, Woodley launched his knee up and connected with Brick's rib cage, returning the favor and knocking the wind out of the other man. However, any thought of taking advantage of that moment ended when the leader shook it off, flipped with more agility than a man of his size deserved, and locked his legs around Woodley's neck, slamming him down and squeezing tight. He'd be unconscious in a matter of minutes. Shit.

“ I don't hate him. I'm damn impressed with his behavior and willingness to sacrifice himself for others.” Brick grunted as he tightened his grip. The bastard wasn't kidding around.

“That’s the problem,” Woodley gasped. “He’s too damn willing to die.”

Brick’s leg hold tightened impossibly further as Woodley searched for any weakness and found none.

“Are you done?” Brick asked, his voice calm and measured as if this was just another typical day for him. Maybe it was; after all, he was the team leader for a group of deadly Navy SEALs.

Woodley had to give it one more shot at loosening Brick’s hold, but it was useless. The hard-as-nails leader was a pro and had Woodley dead to rights. He’d even venture to say the SEAL had allowed him to get as far as he had.

“Yeah,” he groaned as he tapped his hand on the hard ground in surrender.

Brick immediately freed him and sprang to his feet fresh as a damn daisy before holding out his hand to help Woodley stand up.

“Been itching for a good workout,” Brick said. “You ready to talk through the plan?”

Woodley knew he was beaten, took hold of Brick’s offered hand, and was pulled to his feet. His anger had disappeared, leaving him no worse for the wear as all his wounds and bruises had already healed, and only the dirt on his clothing gave what occurred away.

“I hope it’s a solid plan.”

“It’s as solid as we can make it,” Brick assured. “Shit, you don’t have a mark on you other than some dried blood. Fuck, I could use that ability. I’m getting tired of patching myself up.”

Woodley couldn't help but chuckle. "Yeah, yeah. Looks appealing from the outside but try hiding that shit from outsiders. There's only so many times you can come up with a plausible excuse before regular folk start getting suspicious."

"You got me there, that would suck," Brick said before slapping him on the back. "Come on in. I'll grab you a beer, and Spence can go over the details."

"I could use a beer," Woodley agreed.

Harris

It had been almost twenty-four hours, and Woodley had yet to utter a single word to him or be alone in the same space. The man he'd thought he knew had turned into an asshole overnight, further confirming that sleeping with someone meant nothing in the end.

They were both out at the lake house preparing for the mission along with Jennifer and the rest of the Fire Lake team. Jennifer would be coming along as the only direct line of communication with Harris, but she'd sworn not to leave the rental house they'd secured. There was no chance he'd risk her being seen by the Noah Group. They'd love to get their hands back on her, and he'd sworn never to allow that.

"Man, I think he's even more pissed than I am," Jennifer said as she walked into the temporary bedroom Harris had been given in the lake house.

"Do I want to know?" Who else was angry? Or maybe a better question was, who wasn't pissed?

"Woodley, of course," Jennifer said as she fell back onto the bed as if she were

falling into the lake, arms wide, not a care in the world.

“ About what?” And do I even care? Nope, I don’t.

Jennifer rolled over and looked at him like he’d sprouted horns and a spiked tail. Some might consider Harris the devil, but his appearance hadn’t changed the last time he’d checked.

“ You’re joking, right?” she asked, one eyebrow raised.

“ No, I’m in the dark as to why Woodley is pissed. Oh, and also, I don’t give a shit.” Take the hint: he didn’t want to discuss Woodley.

Jennifer cocked her head to the left and said, “Are all men this dense?”

“ I’m just special. Is there a reason you’re bothering me?” He’d had enough of thinking about Woodley and his issues. Harris had more important events in his future to prepare for, like getting up close and personal with the Noah Group all over again. Oh, and staying alive while doing it.

“ Seriously, Woodley is angry you’re doing this.”

“ What? Woodley wasn’t even bothered when I told him. Hell, he barely said two words to me about it other than wishing me luck.” Asshole.

“ Was that before he came here and got into a fistfight with Brick?” she asked.

No one in their right mind picked a fight with Brick. That information had Harris turning to look at his sister. She had to be wrong because Woodley would be in traction in the nearest hospital if he’d fought the retired SEAL.

“ Why the hell would he pick a fight with Brick? Are you sure?”

“ Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s for the same reason I wanted to smash Spencer’s laptop against a wall before you made me give it back.”

“ As I’ve already said, Woodley had zero reaction to my telling him about my plans. We don’t have that kind of relationship. Maybe he and Brick have their issues, but I can assure you that their fight had nothing to do with me. Now, if there isn’t anything else, I’d like to continue reviewing these reports Gunner and Conor sent back from their stakeout of the dive bar.”

“ Fine, believe what you want. You two are fubar anyway,” Jennifer said as she stood, dusted off her clothes from some imaginary dust, and headed for the door.

“ Fubar?” What the hell did that mean?

“ Yeah, fucked up beyond all reason,” Jennifer said before walking out and slamming the door behind her.

Great.

Harris had to get his head on straight. He settled in to review his plan, and not ten minutes later, there was a knock on his bedroom door.

“ What now?” Harris groaned as he threw the file he’d been reading down on the desk. “Come in.”

In the blink of an eye, his night went from bad to worse as Woodley strolled in like he owned the joint, closing the door behind him. Now what?

“ You lost?” Harris asked, not bothering to hide the edge in his voice.

“ I deserve that,” Woodley said as he walked farther into the room.

“ You deserve an uppercut to the jaw, but I hear Brick took care of that.” Though he was considering giving the jerk another just to ensure he got the point.

Woodley ran his hand through his short blond hair, stopping to squeeze the back of his thick neck as his cheeks tinged red.

“ You heard about that.”

“ Yeah, I heard. What I don’t understand is why you suddenly have a death wish or the reason you’ve decided to go mute on me.”

“ I’m not the one with the death wish, you bastard. You’re taking off on a suicide mission like it’s just another day.” Woodley’s hands cut through the air as he spoke, revealing his anger.

“ Why attack Brick if you’re pissed at me?” That made no sense.

“ Because I thought he was facilitating this clandestine mission. As it turns out, this shit show is being run by the lunatic. You.”

“ Hell, tell me how you really feel,” Harris snarked. “You’re tap-dancing on my last nerve, fucker.”

Woodley charged forward, causing Harris to stand, unsure about his intent and preparing for anything. The way the guy had been acting recently made him a loose cannon. He found himself pushed back against the wall as his lover fisted his shirt in one hand.

“ You want to know how I really feel? Well, hold on to your balls, motherfucker,”

Woodley spat. “I think you’re in a hurry to die and rushing headfirst into this insane plan to facilitate that happening. You’re allowing yourself to be recaptured by a group of psychotic scientists and their god-complex followers. You think you can take them on all by yourself when, in reality, once they discover you’re not going to flip to their side, they’ll dispose of you. It’s a no-win situation. Have you thought about what this will do to your sister and Freddie, or do you plan on visiting the poor kid as a ghost?”

“ Low blow, asshole. I can’t help it that Freddie can speak to the dead, and my sister is strong enough to carry on without me.”

“ Yeah, like she has before, trapped in that cult, helpless and at the group's mercy?”

That was it. Harris had enough. He grabbed onto Woodley’s shirt and pivoted him back against the door.

“ You want to fight? You’re going about it the right way.”

“ What I want is for you to rethink this mission.”

“ Why? It’s the best plan we have. Are we just supposed to sit around and wait for the next bomb to arrive or kidnapping? Why the hell do you care anyway? What’s between us is nothing but physical, right?”

“ Right,” Woodley growled, pushing Harris back into the center of the bedroom.

Harris’s foot caught on the corner of a chair, knocking it over and him off balance, sending both men crashing to the floor. Harris landed on his back with Woodley splayed across his chest. Before either could stop and think, they dove in for a passionate kiss full of fury and longing. Nothing had ever felt so necessary and right in Harris’s life, and he’d be damned if he’d stop.

Woodley pressed his hard body into Harris, sending his desire and need soaring, at least until someone banged on the closed bedroom door.

“ You two better not get any blood on the carpeting, or you’ll wish you’d never walked into this house,” Julia yelled before storming down the hallway. No one messed with Julia. Brick may have been the team boss, but Julia was the caretaker of its heart and soul.

They pulled apart but only by an inch. Harris concentrated on the chair, and it floated back onto its feet.

“ We are so screwed,” Woodley groaned. “What are we going to do?”

“ At this moment, I say we carry on with this,” Harris stated before recapturing Woodley’s lips and commanding his body until it molded against his own.

What were they going to do about their crazy-as-fuck relationship?

Hell if he knew, but like most things in his life, Harris made it up as he went along. He wasn’t a fool; there was more going on between him and Woodley than amazing sex.

It seemed neither wanted to admit they were tied to one another. Two men unable to commit but equally unable to walk away. Well and truly screwed, as Woodley so eloquently put it.

Time for thought is over.

More pleasurable pursuits were taking over his attention. The feel of the muscled man draped over him was a happy distraction Harris wasn’t positive he’d ever have the pleasure of feeling again.

Without much force, he rolled Woodley over onto his back and plundered his hot mouth. As their tongues dueled, Harris rocked his hips against Woodley's hard-on pressing through his jeans. His moans were music to Harris's ears, and his strong arms wrapped tightly around Harris's back. If this was the closest he ever got to heaven, he'd gladly take it.

The feeling of Woodley's touch and the sound of his moans captivated Harris, and he was quickly discovering that no one else would ever do. They were bonded as strongly as any two people could be, right down to Woodley's sexy, spicy scent that filled Harris's senses and made his soul soar.

Without stopping to unbutton Woodley's shirt, Harris pulled it out of his jeans and shoved the offending fabric over Woodley's head. Harris needed skin-to-skin, and he needed it now. The fabric tore. But he didn't give a damn. All that mattered was getting the two of them naked as quickly as possible.

"Should we move this to the bed?" Woodley asked when they finally broke apart to breathe.

"You read my mind."

Harris jumped up and pulled Woodley to his feet. Within moments, they were naked, in bed, and wrapped around each other once again. If Harris had his way, this was where they'd stay, but morning would arrive, and they'd have to part ways again, but this time without the guarantee of returning.

He'd take what he could get right now.

CHAPTER FOUR

Woodley

New Orleans sucked. Who gave a shit about the Big Easy, with its nightlife, beignets, live music, Mardi Gras, restaurants, and steamboats.

Admittedly, the city was perfectly fine, even above average, but this mission skewed his view of the place, and for good reason. Last night might be the last time he and Harris ever saw each other in person if the mission went to hell.

Half the team was headed to the secret rental house, while the other half was headed for their very public hotel in the Mid-City area. Woodley, Jennifer, Spencer, Stryker, Gunner, Conor, and Jason flew into New Orleans in their private plane without using the regular channels and would be staying at the rental. Harris, Brick, Fletcher, and Shaw flew in on a commercial flight out in the open to appear as normal as possible in case they were being watched, with Elias, John, and Gator staying back in Fire Lake to watch over those left behind.

Both teams constantly communicated, sometimes through Jennifer and Harris's mental link, but Woodley was still anxious. He had to get his head in the game and detach all emotion if he was to be of any use during this mission.

"We're here," Spencer announced as they pulled up to a two-story brick house at the end of a long lane surrounded by a tall chain-link fence and hulking oak trees.

"Looks like a fortress," Jennifer said from the backseat.

“ It’s not yet, but it will be when we’re finished,” Gunner stated.

“ We’ll have comms up and running within the hour,” Spencer said.

“ The place will be wired and covered in surveillance before nightfall,” Stryker added.

“ Shit, you guys are always on, aren’t you?” Jennifer asked.

“ We train for war and fight to win,” Stryker stated without a hint of doubt.

Jennifer looked around the vehicle at the men gathered. “My brother just might have a fighting chance, after all.”

“ That’s the plan,” Woodley replied. “Everyone gets out of this in one piece.” Otherwise, he’d be sure to burn the place to the ground and wouldn’t need Gator’s explosive knowledge.

Harris

“ Four o’clock,” Brick whispered as they unloaded their luggage from the Uber and walked into their hotel lobby.

They didn’t usually take public transit, preferring to rent their own vehicle in advance, but they needed to be as visible as possible for this mission. That way, the men they were trying to attract would have a better-than-average chance of seeing them.

“ Got him,” Fletcher answered.

Harris had noticed the guy the moment they got out of the car, and he couldn't help but notice their Uber driver had sent off a quick text when they were picked up at the airport. Hmm. Seemed the powers that be knew they were in town as they'd suspected and counted on. The Noah Group likely had people stationed around the city to keep an eye on things.

“ Might as well have a neon sign hanging over his head,” Shaw chuckled. “‘Thug here.’”

“ They're not very good at this,” Harris agreed.

“ Should we start the show?” Fletcher asked. “You know, lay some groundwork.”

“ No better time than the present,” Brick agreed.

Harris sped up his pace and intentionally slammed his duffle bag into Brick's thigh.

“ Hey, asshole. Watch where you're going,” Brick growled on cue. “Did they add the clumsy gene into your DNA, or do you come by it naturally?”

“ You don't always have to be a hard-ass, you know,” Harris shot back.

Brick stopped mid-stride and turned to face Harris. The look on his face was deadly.

“ You're standing on my last nerve. I'm beginning to regret letting you tag along.”

“ I'm not some lost puppy,” Harris argued.

“ Then stop acting like one,” Brick shot back.

“ Okay, okay,” Fletcher said as he stood between them, acting as the peacemaker.

“You two gotta learn to get along.”

“ Not likely,” Brick growled before turning and heading straight toward the elevators at the other end of the lobby. They’d already done the online check-in and could use their phones to unlock the door.

When the sliding doors opened, the four of them got on and hit the button for the sixth floor. Once the doors closed, all their demeanors relaxed.

“ You think he bought it?” Harris asked.

“ Oh yeah,” Shaw said. “The dude was enjoying his front-row seat, that’s for sure.”

“ Good,” Brick said. “Let’s get to the room. Once we sweep it for bugs, we’ll bring the rest of the team up to speed.”

“ Already done,” Harris chuckled while tapping the side of his head. “My sister’s got her own front-row seat.”

“ That’s going to come in handy,” Fletcher said.

“ I’m counting on it,” Harris agreed.

The elevator chimed, and as the doors opened, they took defensive positions out of habit, always prepared for every eventuality. They reached their two-bedroom suite and immediately swept through all the spaces, searching for listening devices, cameras, and other hidden equipment. Once they were satisfied the rooms were secure, Harris set up his laptop and connected it to Spence at the comms in the rental house.

“ That didn’t take long,” Spence said. “Already got a tail.”

“ Yeah, we got lucky,” Brick chuckled. “Though the dude sucks at his job.”

“ It feels odd to say we’re lucky we’ve got a tail when, typically, we’re trying to stay off the bad guys’ radar,” Shaw commented.

“ True, but I think it won’t be the last time we do things out of character on this mission,” Harris said. “As long as we remember the long-term goal is stopping these groups from harming anyone else.”

“ Agreed,” Brick said. “How’s the rental?”

“ We’re all settled in,” confirmed Spencer. “Sensors and cameras are up and operational, and the perimeter is secure. Information is still coming in from my contacts regarding the makeup of this group, but so far, it appears likely this group is an offshoot of the California cult. There are ten to fifteen individuals involved in operating the dive bar as their front.”

“ Do we know who’s in charge?” Brick asked.

“ Not yet, but I should have a better idea before the end of the day,” Spencer answered.

“ Good. We’ll be heading out for chow soon.”

“ Let me double-check to make sure all your trackers are working properly,” Spencer said before facing something off-camera.

Woodley came into view when Spencer moved, immediately capturing Harris’s attention. Neither said a word, but there was no need. The angry look on Woodley’s face and his furrowed brows indicated that he still wasn’t happy about the mission.

Spencer came back onto the screen. “Okay, I have all four of you tracked, and your hidden cameras are recording.”

The trackers weren’t attached to them or their clothing. They’d been implanted using a special needle that hurt like a son-of-a-bitch when shoved under the skin. For him, they’d done it twice as a precaution in two different areas of his body. Harris wouldn’t be going anywhere without the team knowing. It was reassuring but creepy at the same time. The cameras were no bigger than the head of a needle and attached to their watches, sunglasses, and buttons on their shirts. The team would be able to see and hear everything they did.

“ We’ll be in touch,” Brick said, and the transmission ended.

“ Wow, he’s pissed, eh,” Shaw said, followed by a long whistle. “Woodley’s still not on board with this mission.”

“ No,” Harris said, hoping that would end it.

“ You can’t blame the guy,” Fletcher chimed in. “I wouldn’t be too impressed if Elias went out on a dangerous police call without any physical backup.”

“ You idiots are my backup,” Harris said.

“ Yeah, but we won’t be in there with you,” Shaw said.

“ It doesn’t matter. We aren’t in the same type of relationship you have with Elias; hell, the two of you are engaged,” Harris stated.

“ I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Shaw said.

Before Harris could argue, Brick spoke up.

“ Let’s go make an appearance at the restaurant downstairs. I’m sure the first guy has called in some of his friends by now, and they’re ready for Act Two.”

The four men stood and headed out. Harris tried to clear his mind of Woodley, but it was useless.

When they arrived, the restaurant was half full, and the waiter seated them in a semicircular booth in the back, as Brick had requested. This position gave them the perfect view of the entrance and the rest of the restaurant so they could keep tabs on the place.

Brick fell into his role the minute they stepped out of the elevator, acting agitated and scowling at Harris. Fletcher and Shaw placed themselves between them to make it appear they were still trying to keep the peace between the other two men.

“ Six and eight,” Fletcher whispered, indicating where he’d spotted their potential audience.

“ Got ’em,” Harris answered. Jeez, whoever was in charge of this faction of the Noah Group needed to invest in some training for its goons. They stuck out among the other restaurant guests, and anyone with a trained eye for their surroundings could have picked them out.

The first guy looked to be in his early twenties, while the second was closer to fifty. The younger man sat at the bar, and the other sat alone at a table, each with a glass of beer sitting untouched in front of them. Harris snorted. The idiots should at least order some food or something to make it less obvious. Newbies were playing spies .

Brick handed out the menus, chucking one at Harris with more force than the others, and he wondered if the leader was enjoying this game a bit too much. Harris was oddly enjoying himself and fought not to smile and give them away. He felt more like

part of the team, despite Brick giving him death stares.

“ You better have brought some cash, dude. I ain’t paying for you,” Brick said to Harris.

“ Don’t worry about me. I can take of myself, asshole,” Harris huffed.

“ I doubt that, or we wouldn’t be stuck with your useless ass this long.” Good one.

“ Okay, you two. Can we have one meal without this shit,” Fletcher growled. “I’m losing my appetite.”

They all returned to their menus and pretended to ignore each other but continued their conversation in code. The waiter came and went, and all four ordered beers; two got burgers, one steak, one fish, and all with chips. Harris was hungry and downed his burger in record time when their meals arrived. Once he was taken, Harris doubted he’d get fed like this if he was lucky enough to get any food. He sat waiting for the other three to finish when he got an idea.

“ I’m going to the john.”

“ Do I care?” Brick shot back.

“ Doubt it,” Harris said before standing and heading toward the sign indicating the men’s washroom. When he shut the door behind him, he quickly checked the stalls to ensure he was alone. He was.

“ Let’s see how long it takes before I have company,” he said, knowing the team would be listening.

He was zipping up his jeans when the door opened behind him, and the younger guy

of the two watchers walked in and sidled up to one of the urinals. Harris turned and began washing his hands as if unconcerned, but it didn't take long for the man to take the sink beside him and initiate a conversation.

“ Hey,” he said.

“ Hey,” Harris replied.

“ In town for business or pleasure?”

“ Both.”

“ You?”

“ Same,” he said. “Can I buy you a beer?”

That was fast.

“ Look, I'm not looking for a date,” Harris wouldn't make it too easy.

“ No,” the guy said and stood back with his hands up. “I didn't mean that. It's just that I'm here alone, and I thought it'd be cool to have someone to sit and have a beer with. No strings, man.”

Harris took his time and gave the guy the once-over for good measure.

“ I'm here with some people, but maybe if you're around later, I'll take you up on the offer.”

The young man smiled. “Sure, I'll be staying at the hotel for a couple of days; I'm sure we'll cross paths again.”

“ Sure,” Harris said with a nod before walking out of the bathroom and back to his booth.

He knew the team had heard the entire conversation, and thanks to the hidden cameras, Spence got a good visual ID of the guy and was probably already tracking down his information. Mission complete, first contact made.

Now on to step two.

CHAPTER FIVE

Woodley

A fucking date.

Woodley held tight to his anger as the dude followed Harris out of the washroom. Buy him a drink? I'll bury the asshole.

He understood this was a necessary part of the operation, but it didn't make it any easier. Woodley knew he had to shove his jealousy shit down.

"It sucks," Conor said as he joined Woodley on the back deck of their rental. The massive oak looming over the backyard stood in silent vigil to their conversation.

"What sucks?" Woodley asked.

"Watching your loved ones in danger."

How did he answer that question? Whatever Woodley said, Conor would discern the truth anyway. His gift guaranteed that.

So, silence was his best play right now.

"Don't worry," Conor said. "I'm not judging you or trying to trap you."

"Then why does it feel that way?" Woodley asked.

“ Because you’re caught in the middle. To leave yourself open and love someone or not. It’s not an easy position to be in; trust me, I know.”

“ Yeah, Gunner doesn’t seem like the mushy type to me,” Woodley chuckled, imagining the hulking beast of a man any other way. “I’ll have to agree with you.”

Conor laughed, easily setting Woodley at ease. The man had a talent that Woodley believed had more to do with him as a person than what the scientists spliced together. The man might be a human lie detector, but that didn’t make him the good person he was; that was all Conor.

“ He wanted to knock my block off the first time we met,” Conor said. “I don’t blame him, though; I was responsible for leading his horrible in-laws to him.”

“ Yeah, they tried to take Ben away from Gunner.” Woodley remembered being told the story. “That sucks.”

“ True, and thankfully, that never happened,” Conor agreed.

“ Ben looks happy with Uncle Gunner and his dad Jason. Fire Lake has certainly become home to a wide range of people,” Woodley commented.

“ It’s unique, that’s for sure. Makes you forget the shit going on outside the town limits. The discrimination and violence found in other places toward the LGBTQ+ community feels distant at times, though we can never allow ourselves to become complacent.”

“ Complacency is the quickest way to ensure death to freedom,” Woodley said. One fact he truly believed and strived to fight against.

“ So true,” Conor agreed. “I guess that’s why Harris has decided to take the bull by

the horns.”

“ Why do you say that?” Woodley asked. That was a new take on this screwed-up endeavor.

“ Now that he has his sister back, he could sit back safe and allow the group to carry on unchecked, becoming complacent. Instead, he’s taking steps to stop them. To ensure continued freedom for those already affected by their cruelty and who’ve escaped and for those who have yet to be touched by their violence and pain. But they could be in the future. It’s a fight for their freedom, even if they don’t know it yet and never know who to thank. It’s a fight many people have fought for the LGBTQ+ community over the decades.”

Woodley sat back in his chair, shocked. He hadn’t thought of it that way. Was what Harris attempting to do likened to the fight against discrimination and for freedom of that diverse community? True, Harris was risking his life to protect people he didn’t even know, people tied together by one defining factor.

The existence of the Noah Group.

Harris

“ Time to take that guy up on his offer,” Harris said as he rechecked the camera embedded in the second button of his shirt.

Be careful, brother. Jennifer’s voice floated through Harris’s head.

I will. Try not to worry.

Her laughter was the only reply to that impossible request.

“ We’ll be watching,” Brick said. “If anything goes south, give the signal, and we’ll be down in seconds. Fletcher will be stationed in the stairwell one floor above to have a direct shot into the restaurant if necessary.”

“ Got it, but isn’t it the point they try to recapture me?” Harris asked with a knowing chuckle.

“ Capture, not eliminate,” Brick stated.

“ Gotcha,” he said, and because he couldn’t help himself, he followed it up with. “I always knew you cared.”

“ Don’t push it,” Brick said. “We’re more concerned about Jennifer and Woodley burning down the city.”

Harris laughed and grabbed a twenty out of his wallet before throwing it back onto the desk. He didn’t need to carry ID; they knew who he was. As he waited for the elevator, his cell phone began vibrating. When he saw the name on the screen, he debated on whether he should answer, but the part of him that missed the man won out even though he knew Woodley was likely pissed.

“ What’s up?”

“ My blood pressure.”

Harris could hold back his chuckle. “I figured.”

“ Does the asshole want to fuck you or capture you?”

“ I’m going with capture,” Harris assured. “You’re the only man I fuck.”

Harris could hear Woodley let out a long hiss of breath, likely calming himself, so he waited. Letting the guy come to his senses without forcing the issue would be best. Worry and jealousy were a volatile combination.

“ Damn right. Asshole’s got a death wish.”

“ Easy, dude. This is all part of the plan.”

“ I get it.”

“ Do you?” Harris had to ask.

“ It still sucks.”

“ A means to an end.”

“ Just as long as it’s not your end,” Woodley said with a bit of a growl in his deep voice.

The guy didn’t have a clue how damn sexy he was.

“ I hate to cut this short, but the elevator is almost to the ground floor.”

“ Fine, just be careful.”

“ I will,” he said. “You too.”

“ Listen, Harris. Um, I—”

“ I know,” Harris said before Woodley could say something more.

The last thing he wanted was words forced out due to conditions beyond their control.

The elevator dinged its arrival, and Harris disconnected the call. That could be the last time the two of them spoke. Reality sucked, but nothing he did would change what was about to happen. As he walked back into the restaurant and up to the bar, that reality hit as Harris saw his mark in the same seat as he was earlier. Showtime .

“ Here we go,” he whispered, knowing the team could hear and see what he saw.

It was time to draw the fly into his web; however, exactly who was the fly and who was the spider was still up for debate, and which side of the equation you were on.

As he sat down at the bar, a couple of stools over from the guy, Harris noticed a giant of a man sitting at the far end of the bar who he hadn't seen before. The dude didn't acknowledge either of them, so he could be a civilian, but Harris would keep his eyes on the guy until he was positive.

“ Hey,” his “date” said, smiling widely.

“ Hey.”

“ Where are your friends?” he asked.

“ Don't know. Don't care,” Harris grumbled, retaining the storyline of the disgruntled team member.

“ Ah, got it. How about a beer?”

“ Sure, why not? Budweiser.”

The guy motioned the bartender over. “Two Buds. I’m Joe, by the way,” he said, holding his hand out.

“ Harris,” he replied, shaking Joe’s hand. No need to lie about his name—the guy likely already knew it.

“ Nice to meet you,” Joe said. “I’m glad you had the chance to come back for a drink.”

“ Yeah, well, I had nothing else going on.” He was still going with the not-too-eager persona.

The bartender brought over their beers, and Harris took a swig. He wanted to remain aloof. He might give himself away or raise the guy’s suspicions if he seemed too into him.

“ That makes me lucky, then. So, what brings you to town, Harris?”

“ Friends of mine had business in town. You?” That was vague enough while still being plausible.

“ Service call. I work in IT, and my boss sends me out when shit hits the fan. However, I don’t mind; New Orleans is a great place to visit,” Joe said before drinking his beer.

“ Yeah, seems like the place has a lot to offer visitors,” Harris replied. Yep, he sucked at small talk.

“ Have you ever been to Bourbon Street?”

“ Nope.”

“ You’d like it. All the music, bars and restaurants. If it’s a party you’re looking for, that’s the place to find it.”

“ Maybe I’ll check it out.”

“ I could show you around. I come here for work often and have gotten to know the place well,” Joe offered.

“ Maybe. I don’t know how long we’ll be in town.”

Joe nodded and took another drink. A football game was on the television above the bar, and Harris made it appear like he was watching it. The giant at the end of the bar had a plate of wings in front of him and was watching the game as well. Harris could almost see the wheels turning in Joe’s head, likely trying to devise a reason to keep him engaged.

“ Two more Buds,” Joe said to the bartender. “You hungry?” he asked Harris.

He had to throw the guy a bone. “I could eat.”

Joe’s relief was palpable. Woodley wondered if Spencer was getting anywhere with identifying the men who’d been following the team so far. Harris hoped he was having better luck than him. This division of the Noah Group appeared to be scraping the bottom of the barrel.

CHAPTER SIX

Woodley

The more this Joe character spoke, the less threatened Woodley felt about the guy trying to take advantage of Harris and make a move on him. Joe was not a player; hell, he wasn't even in the same ballpark.

Woodley sat with the rest of the team at the rental, watching as Harris endured what might be considered the roughest pseudo- date ever. He was beginning to feel like an idiot for being jealous in the first place. Smooth.

“ Okay, am I the only one having a hard time believing this guy is a threat in any way?” Gunner asked.

“ I was about to say the same thing,” Woodley agreed.

“ It's not him I'm interested in,” Spencer said. “Conor, do you get anything from the other guy at the bar?”

“ That fuckin' giant dude?” Conor asked.

“ Yes. He strikes me as out of place,” Brick stated from the hotel room.

“ He'd be more in place at a bodybuilding competition,” Shaw quipped.

Conor moved closer to the screen as two plates of wings arrived for Harris and Joe.

Woodley watched as Conor homed in on the mystery man. It was fascinating watching Conor switch on and concentrate on the muscled stranger. The guy never glanced Harris's way but kept his eyes on the game on the television. At points, he even cheered when one of the teams scored and groaned when a whistle blew. The guy seemed oblivious to anyone else in the bar. Too oblivious, perhaps.

"He seems to be forcing himself not to look across the bar," Woodley commented.

"Agreed," Spencer said.

"Something's off." Brick's voice came across the comms. "What are you getting, Conor?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Brick asked.

"Absolutely blank. That's impossible," Conor said as his eyes widened.

"Impossible?" Woodley asked.

"Yeah, I always get something. A feeling, a stray thought, but this guy's a ghost."

"I don't like it," Jennifer said. "I've relayed everything to my brother. He's aware of the situation."

"Could it be the distance or something blocking you?" Spencer asked. "You might be too far away from the hotel."

"I don't think so. I can get a read on that Joe guy, but as I've said, Joe isn't his real name. He's easy to read. Full of deceit and a bit fearful of Harris."

“ Likely because he knows my brother’s a former test subject and has abilities.”

“ True enough,” Woodley agreed. “Civilians fear what they don’t understand.”

“ It’s human nature to avoid or destroy what scares them,” Conor said.

“ Like us,” Jennifer said, her tone expressing her sadness.

“ I know which side this Joe is on, and it’s not avoiding,” Conor stated.

“ Jennifer, can you let Harris know I’m sending Fletcher in and to play along,” Brick said.

“ Done,” Jennifer answered.

The mundane conversation continued between Harris and Joe as Fletcher’s camera came online on the second screen. He entered the restaurant, made an appearance of looking around until he spotted Harris, and headed in that direction.

Woodley kept his eye on the stranger as Fletcher sat on the barstool beside Harris. The guy didn’t react, which was odd, considering the big redhead always got looks wherever he went.

“ Found you,” Fletcher said.

“ I wasn’t hiding,” Harris said, acting annoyed. “What’s up?”

“ Brick wants us back in the suite.”

“ He’s not my boss.”

“ Man, do you always have to do shit the hard way?” Fletcher asked, falling into his role as peacekeeper.

“ It’s part of my sparkling personality.”

“ Let’s go before he comes down here looking for us.”

Harris huffed, pulled out his twenty-dollar bill, and looked at Joe. “Thanks for the conversation, Joe.”

Joe waved off Harris’s money. “It’s on me. Maybe we’ll have a chance to talk again.”

“ Yeah, maybe,” Harris said with a nod before standing and following Fletcher out of the restaurant and up to the elevators.

Both men visibly relaxed once the elevator doors shut behind them, and they were alone.

“ Any idea who the new guy is, the one who looks as if he could bench-press a bridge?” Shaw asked.

“ Working on it,” Spencer said, and Woodley watched as the information specialist went to work on his tweaked-out laptop.

He couldn’t help but wonder if the guy was a friend or foe and what the hell he was doing there in the first place. The last thing they needed was another unknown, in this case, filled with unpredictable variables. This was his idea of hell, absolute hell.

Harris

“What the hell,” Harris growled as he entered the hotel room. “He could have made a move to capture me tonight.”

“Believe me when I say that guy has no moves.” Shaw laughed.

Harris couldn’t help but chuckle. “Fine. What’s going on?”

“Unknown individual is in the mix,” Brick stated.

“Are we sure the guy is even part of this?” Harris asked.

“No. However, if Conor can’t get a read on the guy, something’s up in my book. It’s not worth the risk. Better to regroup with more information.”

Harris couldn’t argue with that and sat down at the table with Brick and turned to look at the monitors. Spence was off to the side working away, and Jennifer, Woodley, Conor, and Gunner sat around the table at the rental with the rest of the crew milling around in the background.

“I’ve hacked into the hotel security cameras,” Spencer stated. “Putting visuals up on screen now.”

The left-hand monitor flickered to life as Harris secured the transmission, and the hotel lobby appeared on the screen. People mingled, employees carried on behind the registration counter, and hotel porters wheeled luggage carts in and out of the building.

“Let’s have a look in the restaurant and bar area,” Spencer said before the picture changed again.

They watched as the camera panned around the empty restaurant and zeroed in on the

bar. It was close to eleven in the evening, so only a few people were left scattered around the area.

Joe and the stranger were still sitting at the bar, and another couple was on the opposite side of the room, unable to keep their hands off each other.

The stranger had yet to attempt to approach Joe in the five minutes it took them to return to their room and didn't appear to be in any hurry to do so.

“Do you think we could be wrong?” Jason asked from the other screen at the rental. “They're still not looking at each other.”

“Are you getting anything, Conor?” Harris asked.

“Still a blank. I can feel Joe's disappointment at Harris leaving and the couple's hormones raging; they'll likely leave for their room within minutes. However, the stranger is still a mystery.”

As if on cue, the couple stood; the man threw some bills on the bar, and they quickly exited.

“Well, when you're right, you're right.” Gunner laughed.

“That didn't take a lot of power to figure out.” Conor laughed. “I'll be surprised if they make it to their room with all their clothes on. I feel bad for their respective spouses back at home.”

Cheaters, great. Sometimes, Harris envied Conor's ability, but then he was reminded how horrible it would be to see into certain people's depraved minds.

“Big guy's getting his bill,” Brick said, and everyone turned back to the monitor.

“ Maybe he’ll pay with a credit card,” Spencer said.

“ I can hack into their accounting system if he does and get his details,” Harris agreed as he changed screens on his second laptop.

They watched in anticipation as the man reached into his wallet, only to deflate when he pulled out cash.

“ Shit,” Harris groaned.

He slid the cash under his bill and turned to leave without giving Joe a second glance. Whatever they’d been waiting to see wasn’t going to happen. It was anticlimactic, and Harris couldn’t help but feel a bit disappointed. He’d hoped to have confirmation that the stranger was part of the Noah Group.

“ This doesn’t remove him from being a person of interest,” Brick stated. “I want more information on him by daybreak.”

“ On it,” Spencer said. “I’ll start with the facial recognition software.”

“ I’ll start with the hotel records,” Harris said. “In case he’s registered in this or any nearby hotels.”

“ We’re off to do more recon on the dive bar across town,” Gunner said. “We’ll report in later.”

With plans in place and another long night of work ahead, Harris watched Woodley work in the background at the rental. The man represented everything Harris swore he’d never allow himself to crave, let alone possess.

As if sensing Harris’s eyes on him, Woodley turned to look at the monitor, and

though they were miles apart, the heat of his gaze had the same effect on Harris as if they were mere inches apart. His pulse sped up, his mouth went dry, and he wanted nothing more than to hold the man down and kiss the hell out of him.

He wasn't sure how long they stared at one another, but it wasn't until Fletcher dropped his bottle of water, spraying water down the front of himself and swearing loudly, that their connection was broken and Harris forced himself to concentrate on his laptop. He didn't have time to be sitting around making fuck-me eyes at Woodley. What was he thinking? Days away from one of his most dangerous missions, and he couldn't keep his head on straight.

He stood with his laptop and went to his bedroom, as far away as possible from the monitor. This wasn't getting any easier; he hadn't expected it would, but this obsession surpassed what he'd prepared for. Woodley's words vibrated through his memory; they were well and truly screwed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Woodley

“ Why don’t you come along with us on this stakeout?” Conor asked Woodley as he and Gunner headed for the back door of the rental. “We could use an extra pair of eyes.”

“ Sure,” Woodley agreed. He needed to get out and clear his head. Things were changing too fast, and he needed a moment to step back and breathe.

He grabbed his jacket and followed Gunner and Conor to their heavily tinted older SUV parked out of sight out back of their rental. The drive to Mid-City from the Gentilly area took them close to the French Quarter through the Esplanade Ridge area. There wasn’t much to see so late in the evening, but the crowds were still out on the town enjoying the city. Woodley couldn’t remember the last time he’d gone out for drinks without a care in the world or the need to drown out the memory of a particularly brutal case.

Had he ever not had something to worry about? |Were fears of discovery, past suffering, pain, or anger driving him to work harder? Of course, they affected every aspect of his messed-up life. Peace had always been hard for Woodley to come by.

Anything remotely close to contentment would be a luxury he couldn’t afford. His and Stryker’s boyfriend, John’s, life stories took the same course. Their fathers were test subjects in the Noah Project. Check. Spent their later years working together on a specialized task force attempting to shut down the Noah Group. Check. Both fathers

killed by that group . Triple fucking check.

Now, that mission fell to him and this unconventional team from Fire Lake. A mission that would likely end with more than one ally paying the ultimate price to protect the world. It was unlikely many people would ever know what they'd gone through to protect them; it was much the same in many aspects of the military. The general population expected law, order, and safety but didn't think too hard about how it was attained.

Woodley rolled his neck, trying to loosen the tight muscles, and began noticing the slight changes in the neighborhood as they got further away from the rental. There were fewer trees and more concrete buildings. Rougher roads, overflowing garbage bins, and flickering streetlights rounded out the growing picture of neglect.

“ We're getting close to the bar,” Gunner announced from the driver's seat. Woodley remembered them referring to the place as a dive bar, and that description fit in with the looks of their new surroundings.

Several older vehicles were parked on both sides of the streets leading to the bar. Their strategically borrowed older SUV, with its rust and darkened windows, wouldn't stand out. Gunner pulled over and parked between a rusted-out Ford without plates on cinder blocks and a later-model Buick sedan with a missing headlight and dented passenger's door.

Woodley had been on many stakeouts as a cop and detective, so he settled in the backseat for what would likely be a long night.

He'd never doubted his decision to stick around after John was rescued from the Noah Group's clutches, and no one had ever called him out on it. Woodley admitted he was beginning to enjoy the camaraderie of this team—however long it might be, because no doubt once the mission was done, this partnership would end. Much like

his relationship with Harris.

For now, he'd enjoy the luxury of allowing his real self out, mutations and all. Here, there was no need to hide. They all knew the truth and lived with their scars openly. He'd never have thought it was possible, but Fire Lake had proven to be a haven for those desperate for shelter from the coming storms and the endless fear. How a retired team of Navy SEALs accomplished what seemed more like a miracle in a matter of a few short years would remain a mystery for which many survivors would be thankful.

"Looks the same as it always does," Conor said. "Dark, dingy, and dangerous."

The bar was little more than a gloomy, worn, nondescript door with boarded over windows on either side. There'd be no peering through these windows, as was surely intended by the owners. They might as well put a sign on the door that stated, "Go Away."

"How positive are we about this place?" Woodley had to ask. It didn't look like much, but looks could be deceiving. They knew that better than most.

"Spencer's information is typically spot-on," Gunner said. "He's not in the habit of making mistakes. He confirmed it was a recently relocated division of the Noah Group originally from California."

"Got it. Have we been able to get a look inside?" Woodley asked. It would help to get a lay of the land.

Conor pulled a small monitor from the glove box and held it between the front bucket seats. He adjusted a few knobs and flicked a switch on the side.

"We had an associate stumble in for a drink with a group of partiers weeks ago,"

Conor explained. “He left a few items behind.”

The screen came to life. It was a bit grainy at first, but it soon cleared to provide a black-and-white picture of the inside of what he assumed was the bar. It appeared as if the transmitter was located in the corner of the room facing the bar top, along with two pool tables and a few sets of tables and chairs. A handful of people mingled around the pool tables, shooting a game; three men sat at the bar, and a couple sat at one of the tables.

Woodley could see what he believed was the front door in the distance and a swinging door he thought might lead to a kitchen or backroom. What I’d give to have a look back there. By the size of the front bar area, a large portion of the remaining building appeared to be hidden from view. That was where Harris would come in, getting a look behind the scenes when he was captured, something which still rankled Woodley.

“ Our associate was able to place two transmitters,” Conor explained. “The one we’re seeing is near the old jukebox, and the second is on a ledge in the hallway leading to the bathrooms.”

“ He did a great job,” Woodley said. “At least now we can ID some regulars and the owners.”

“ Yeah, Spencer’s already got a handful of names from these two cameras alone. They’ve paid off,” Gunner said.

Woodley watched as customers came and went, with multiple criminal offenses taking place out in the wide open. Drug deals, prostitution, weapons offenses, and gambling. It was a cornucopia of sin and indulgence. His life enforcing the law urged him to do something, but his common sense won. They were here for a larger purpose than busting a few lowlifes.

“ The bartender goes by the name Jaws. His real name is Frank Spelt from Anaheim, California,” Gunner explained.

Woodley watched the tall, slender man pour another draft beer and hand it off to a man who could barely stand for being drunk. Overserving and cleanliness didn’t appear to be a concern here. However, when the bartender opened his mouth to speak, Woodley discovered the real reason for his nickname. His teeth were covered in silver metal, and the light from the overhead lighting reflected off them, giving the guy a predatory appearance.

“ Charming,” Conor chuckled. “Bet it’s a bitch getting through airport security with those chompers.”

“ Hell, does he go to the dentist or a blacksmith?” Woodley laughed.

Gunner’s chuckle was cut short when he homed in on someone coming down the sidewalk. He went on alert, as did Conor.

“ Hey, isn’t that the Joe guy from the bar back at the hotel?” Gunner asked.

Woodley and Conor concentrated on where Gunner was staring.

“ Shit. It’s him,” Woodley agreed. “No doubt, coming to report in.”

“ I’ll get the boss on the line,” Conor said as he pulled out his cell phone.

“ Well, well, well. Looks like the chickens come home to roost,” Gunner said.

“ More like a snake slithering back to its hole,” Woodley commented, causing Conor and Gunner to laugh.

“ Don’t like the guy moving in on your territory, dude,” Gunner said.

“ He’s part of the Noah Group,” Woodley shot back. Besides, the guy didn’t have a chance to pick up Harris. He’d had zero game.

“ Sure, sure. That’s all it is,” Gunner agreed in amusement.

Seeing the big sniper wearing a grin was odd, and Woodley decided not to bother arguing. Let him have the win.

Conor hung up his call just as Joe opened the door to the bar and walked inside. They watched his progress on the monitor. Joe nodded at the bartender on his way past the bar top and headed through to the hallway, but instead of entering the men’s restroom as they’d expected, he stopped in front of a brick wall at the end of the hall, looked around, and pushed on one of the bricks.

All three men gasped when a portion of the brick wall slid aside, and Joe bent over and walked through the opening before it closed again and disappeared seamlessly into the background.

“ Holy shit,” Woodley huffed. “That’s some serious spy shit.”

“ A bolt-hole,” Gunner said. “We need to get our eyes back there.”

“ Agreed,” Conor said. “By the way, the guy was scared.”

“ Joe was scared?” Woodley asked.

“ Yes, the moment he walked into the bar, it spiked. Like he was dreading going in.”

“ I wonder if that’s because he failed to bring back his prisoner,” Woodley said, the

word “prisoner” raw in his throat.

“ Likely,” Conor agreed. “He has to answer to someone.”

“ I’d like to know who that someone is,” Gunner said.

“ Me too.”

“ Look,” Gunner said.

All three directed their attention to the screen and watched as the wall reopened, and Joe, followed by two more men, emerged into the hallway. None acknowledged the bartender as they walked by, out the front door, and onto the sidewalk. All three headed to an old van parked down the street with the name Fether’s Electrical painted along the side. Likely another cover business for the Noah Group.

“ Should we follow them?” Woodley asked. All his instincts said they should.

“ Definitely,” Gunner stated as he reached for the key.

He started the truck and put it into drive. They stayed well back from the van but never let it out of their sight. The way the guy was driving showed he was agitated. He swerved in and out of traffic, changing speeds and cutting other vehicles off. They’d get pulled over before reaching their destination if they weren’t careful. More than likely, in the wee hours of the morning, the cops had bigger issues to deal with in a town known for its party-hearty atmosphere.

“ If we get a chance, I’d like to place a tracker on the van,” Conor said. “Learning where else they go besides the bar would be helpful.”

The van continued east, and when they entered a familiar area, all three knew where

they were going.

Woodley asked. "Get the feeling we're headed back to the hotel?"

"Yes. Get Brick on the line and have him turn on the video feed from the truck," Gunner said. "The shit is about to hit the fan."

Conor pressed a button on his phone and put the call on speaker.

"Whatcha got?" Brick asked. As usual, ready for any eventuality and getting down to business.

"Company," Conor said. "We're following Joe and two other men from the dive bar, and it appears they're headed back toward the hotel. We have video up."

"Got it. I'm bringing up the screen now," Brick said, and Woodley could hear rustling in the background over the phone.

"Do you think they'd try to kidnap Harris with all four of you in that suite?" Woodley asked. "That's insane."

"You never know when it comes to this group," Brick answered.

"Or they could wait to find Harris alone," Conor said. "Either way, they're here for a reason."

Woodley had to agree. Sometimes, the Noah Group seemed to be flying by the seat of their pants, making things up as they went along. That's what happened when a group splintered and there was no clear leader. Until one person was strong enough to regain control, nothing would remain constant across the board regarding game plans. The only thing that seemed to be a priority was recovering assets, survivors to be

used as weapons.

“ Okay, we have the video link up. Is it the white delivery van?” Brick asked.

“ That’s the one,” Gunner answered.

They turned right and were only six blocks away from the hotel. Every passing second brought them closer back to Harris, and Woodley’s gut churned. This was what the team wanted, for Harris to get a look at the inner workings of this group, but that still didn’t mean he had to like it.

They were within two blocks now, no longer doubting where the van was headed. When they got to the same block as the hotel, the van pulled over onto a small side street while Gunner continued to drive by, not wanting to alert them to their tail.

“ We’ll go to the west side parking lot and find a spot with a view,” Gunner explained as he maneuvered the SUV into a nearby lot.

“ They’re staying in the van for now,” Woodley said as he turned to watch them while Gunner parked

Once stationary, they adjusted the video feed to zoom in on the van to get a closer look and waited for the goons to make a move.

“ Should we send Harris out for a midnight run?” Conor asked after thirty minutes of inactivity.

“ Perhaps it might speed things along,” Gunner agreed.

“ Has anyone identified the other guy from the bar earlier?” Woodley asked, not wanting to consider what would happen if Harris took a midnight stroll.

“ Still working on it,” Spencer stated. “Right now, he’s a ghost on all levels. However, this Joe character is Antonio Spregga from Newport Beach, California. He attended Concordia University and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in journalism. After that, he worked as a freelancer for various newspapers and magazines. Obtaining information on Antonio was easy enough compared to the giant.”

“ We haven’t spotted the big guy since, but I have a feeling it isn’t the last time he’ll be around,” Conor said.

“ I wonder how a journalist got tangled up with the Noah Group?” Woodley asked.

“ How does anyone?”

“ Touche.”

The streams of people enjoying a night on the town began to thin as the hours wore on, and he wondered if they would try anything or simply give up and leave.

“ We’re going to try something,” Brick announced from the speaker. “Eyes on Harris as he exits.”

Woodley hadn’t expected that announcement and wasn’t sure he would like this, but he had little say in the matter.

Harris

The elevator doors opened, and Harris stepped into the lobby dressed in his joggers. He gave a quick look around, noticing it was completely empty other than the guy behind the check-in desk, who nodded at him in greeting.

With a quick nod in return, he walked straight to the front doors. Time to take a run. Either this worked, and they attempted to kidnap him while he was on his own, or he'd have to think of something else. It shouldn't have been this hard to get abducted as a Noah survivor, but here they were.

I don't like this, Jennifer said through their link.

What else is new, Harris teased back to his sister.

Just be careful, butthead or nothing will stop us from tearing this city apart.

I'm sure you and the team will come get me if I need you.

I wasn't talking about the team. Me and Woodley ain't afraid of setting a few fires in the right places to get our point across.

The muggy nighttime air swallowed him as he stepped outside onto the empty sidewalk. He didn't bother looking left. He knew the van was sitting there in wait, so he made a show of trying to decide which way to go and decided on left. He stretched out his arms and legs in a show of preparing for a run. After rolling his shoulders, he re-tied his shoes, giving them the perfect opportunity to do a grab-and-dash. If they didn't take the bait this time, Harris wasn't sure what he'd have to do other than throw himself in front of their damn van.

He could feel everyone watching him, friend and foe, as Woodley, Gunner, and Conor were also out there keeping track of him. He knew his lover was likely cursing him at that moment, but he had to do what needed to be done. He had to get on the inside so they could shut them down before they could do any serious damage, and if they managed to get more information on other cells located across the country, that would be a bonus.

The van is on the move, Jennifer said, transferring messages from the team to him through their link.

Got it. He could feel his pulse accelerating as he started a slow jog; at the same time his adrenaline spiked. He felt the change in the air and knew the action was about to start.

Harris prepared himself for the squealing tires, the rough grab and shove into the back of the van. It was a strange situation knowing you were about to be abducted and not only preparing for it but wanting it.

Woodley was right. This was fucked up.

He heard an engine roar and tires squeal as his gut clenched in anticipation, but then he heard the unmistakable crunch of metal and a horn blaring as vehicles collided. Harris spun around to see a late-model Ford sedan's passenger door now molded to the van's front bumper. Moments later, the van hit reverse, sheering its bumper off before swinging around and taking off down the street.

What the fuck was going on? Hell of a time for a fender bender. The roads had been empty, so where did the Ford come from? People began to converge on the scene as the driver of the sedan opened his door, and the moment he stepped out, Harris knew the shit was about to hit the fan.

What the hell was the giant doing here? Did he show up to save him? Or was he part of another group that was after them? Too many players were on the field to get a clear feel for what would be the next move.

Brick, Shaw, and Fletcher came running out of the hotel, and he knew not to expect Woodley, Gunner, and Conor because they weren't supposed to be in town, so they'd stay in their vehicle and watch from a distance.

“ Stay on alert,” Brick ordered as the team joined him on the sidewalk. “We don’t know what this guy wants.”

Harris didn’t miss the slight bulge from guns under the team’s clothing. They were prepared for any eventuality. The stranger’s long stride was eating up ground fast as he headed their way, and the team immediately fanned out into defensive positions. It was so subtle, but Harris believed the guy noticed the maneuver because he casually lifted his shirt to show he wasn’t armed.

Military or law enforcement, for sure. He was a few feet away before he stopped.

“ It would be best if you weren’t running around alone,” he stated. His voice was gruff and deep. “Our kind never should.”

Brick took a few steps forward, and Harris could feel the alphas squaring off. No one who wanted to walk away unscathed would want to get between the two at that moment.

“ Who the fuck are you?” Brick growled, getting straight to the point. Why waste time?

“ Name’s Apollo.”

“ That supposed to mean something to us?”

“ Your team helped my little sister a few years back.”

“ Who’s your sister?”

“ Ellen Hammon,” Apollo said before offering his hand to Brick. “I owe your team and a man named Rick a debt I cannot repay for protecting her and getting her to

safety.”

With a shrewd look, Brick took his offered hand and shook it. “You’re the missing brother. The one they said died at birth.”

“ Reports of my death were greatly exaggerated.”

Harris could have been knocked over by a stiff wind as the shock set in. The Hammon kidnapping case was the team’s first brush with the Noah Group and their genetics project. Spence and Rick had led that case involving Commander Rask, a man from Spence’s past. The case ended with a pile of bodies and a new mission for the Fire Lake team.

“ How are Ellen and Rosaline?” Brick asked.

“ Alive and safe, thanks to you and your men, but to put it frankly, shouldn’t you guys know better than to have this guy wandering around like this even if the two of you have a hate for each other? Those guys in the van were about to abduct him,” Apollo said while looking between Brick and Harris.

“ That was the plan, asshole,” Harris said, unable to remain silent any longer. “And you just screwed that up.”

“ What?” Apollo stared around at them. “What kind of a fucking plan is that?”

Woodley

“ Did I hear him right?” Woodley said as he reached for the door handle. “He’s trying to help us?”

“ Stay put,” Gunner growled. “You’ll blow our cover.”

“ Shit. He’s a project survivor, Ellen’s brother,” Conor said. “That must be why I couldn’t get a read on him. Apollo’s mutation must be able to block me from accessing his mind.”

“ I wonder if that’s why he’s such a big fucker?” Gunner asked.

“ Likely has something to do with it,” Woodley agreed. “This staying out of sight sucks.”

“ Figured you’d be used to it, being a cop and all,” Gunner said.

“ Yeah, I am, but this is different.”

“ Cause someone you care about is in the line of fire,” Conor said.

Harris and the team walked back into the hotel as the police arrived. They didn’t want to be involved in this hit-and-run, leaving Apollo to deal with them.

“ Okay, guess we head back to the rental to figure out our next step,” Woodley said once Harris was out of sight. “This plan is officially a bust. We’ll need a new one.”

“ Agreed,” Gunner said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Harris

“ You’ve got to be shitting me. Long lost brother.” Shaw said as they packed up the hotel room. “You think the guy’s been tracking us?”

“ Don’t doubt it,” Harris agreed. “Can we trust him? That is the real question.”

“ When we meet with the rest of the team again, we’ll have to discuss how much we share with this Apollo. Spence is digging as we speak, but I doubt there’ll be much on file,” Brick said. “The Noah Group covered its tracks, and if this guy did manage to break free, he’d stay deep underground.”

“ We were able to get the license plate of the car he was driving, but then again, I doubt he used his actual identification,” Fletcher said. “Be surprised if he did.”

“ If he has any,” Harris added. “The guy would want to stay off the radar, and I don’t believe the Noah Group was handing out birth certificates at the facility.”

“ Conor can’t get a read on him,” Brick said. “I don’t like it. We’ll leave for the airport to head home to Fire Lake, then have Jason pick us up and return to the rental. That way, the members of this cell of the Noah Group will believe we left town and won’t suspect anything. Then we’ll regroup and decide on a new plan of attack because this one is dead in the water.”

“ Shit,” Harris grumbled. “That opportunity would have been perfect. Hell, they were

about to make their move, and then this giant came along to screw the entire mission.”

The team might never get another chance at these assholes. Now what? Wait until they made another move on a survivor? Not likely. There was no way Harris would allow this chaos to continue as long as he drew breath.

So far, this Apollo wasn't winning any points with him, even if the guy thought he was saving Harris from being abducted. Everything was a mess because of him, and they were no closer to shutting these assholes down. A plan that took months to create was single-handedly destroyed by some guy playing hero. Harris knew he was being irrational, but he'd put everything into this plan and had been willing to risk his life in the process.

It was a dumpster fire now. That was the only way to describe this shit show.

Over twenty-four hours and hundreds of miles of flying, they were finally reunited with the rest of the team back at the rental. Harris couldn't help but zero in on Woodley when they entered the house. Who knew being apart from the guy for less than a week could affect him viscerally? He gravitated toward the man, not bothering to hide his intentions.

“Damn, you're a sight for sore eyes,” Woodley drawled low enough for only Harris to hear, and hell if it didn't take him from zero to one hundred in two seconds flat.

“Keep it up, and I'll be bending you over the nearest flat surface.”

“Won't hear me complaining,” Woodley growled low.

“ Yeah, but I think the rest of the team might have a few words to say on that.”

Brick tossed his duffle bag on the couch and looked over at Spencer.

“ Report.” The man didn’t mince words.

Without missing a beat, Spencer spun his laptop around and began his breakdown.

“ Tom and Elise Hammon, daughter of Commander Rask, had two children. The youngest is Ellen, who’d be nineteen years old now, and an older boy who reportedly died at birth. Now, that fact comes into question with the surfacing of Apollo, who claims to be the dead boy in question. If it were him, he’d be twenty-eight years old. Without a DNA test or Apollo allowing Conor into his mind, we have no way of knowing. Any record of Hammon’s firstborn child was erased from all the Noah Project records we were able to save from the flames of the storage unit arson. Still, there’s a vague mention of a subject’s multiple mutations that veered outside all spectrum results and followed the same timeline.”

“ What the hell does ‘mutation outside spectrum results’ mean?” Jason asked.

“ Good question,” Spencer said. “And I wish I had an answer.”

“ How would they even identify such a thing in a newborn?” Jennifer asked. “It’s not as if he could have popped out and begun talking. Right?”

The team looked back and forth at one another, but no one bothered to answer, mainly because they didn’t have answers.

“ Did anyone else notice the bright blue veins that seemed to shine in the guy’s irises?” Fletcher asked. “Reminded me of lightning.”

“ Yeah, keeping that mutation under wraps without tinted glasses or contacts would be hard. Perhaps he was wearing contacts back in the bar,” Harris said.

“ How tall do you think that guy is? Seven, seven-eight?” Jason asked.

“ I’ve seen some tall people in my day, but none could pull off this guy’s muscled physique. Typically, they were tall and lean,” Shaw said.

“ The bigger question is, what now?” Woodley asked. “Do we trust him enough to allow him to participate in this plan, or do we cut ties? And will he keep following us either way?”

“ All good questions that we need to discuss,” Brick said. “I have Apollo’s contact information. I say we plan a meetup on neutral ground and ask if he would allow Conor into his thoughts to confirm he is who he says he is.”

“ And if he refuses?” Woodley asked.

“ Then we leave,” Brick stated without compromise or discussion.

“ What!” Harris exclaimed. “We walk away and leave this offshoot to carry on unchecked? I can’t do that. You can leave, but I’m sticking around. If I have to, I’ll figure out how to take them down myself.”

“ Hell, you’re not staying alone. I’m staying with you,” Woodley stated.

“ Calm the fuck down. I’m not suggesting a retreat,” Brick growled as if the mere thought pissed him off. “But even the best plan requires regrouping and reevaluation when the variables change. Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Harris nodded but refused to take back what he’d said. He wasn’t veering from this

path, no matter the roadblocks and variables thrown up on his way.

Woodley

Neither he nor Harris questioned sharing Woodley's bedroom at the rental. What was the use? After all, everyone appeared to have declared them a couple, even if they weren't. They weren't. Couples plan futures together. Couples talk about what they mean to each other. Couples share their lives. He and Harris did none of that and never would.

It didn't take Harris long to have Woodley wrapped up in those strong arms and pressed against the nearest wall. The bulge pressed up against his thigh matched his own; it had been a long week apart, and now that they were alone in the same space, nothing would get in their way.

"Damn, you feel good," Harris said before capturing Woodley's lips in a commanding kiss full of promise.

He loved it when Harris stopped thinking and just went with it. Everything got screwed up when they stopped to think about the future or what the hell either of them wanted out of this. Enough was enough. They'd be fine if they could stay in the here and now, but that wasn't as easy as it sounded.

He wouldn't lie and say he was sorry the plan went to hell. Woodley had never liked it from the beginning, and now that it was a wash, his blood pressure had drastically lowered. As his lover's strong hands worked their way down Woodley's body, he couldn't help but moan in need. He wanted so much more.

CHAPTER NINE

Harris

Harris didn't like this.

Surprisingly, Apollo had agreed to meet, and now here Harris stood, his senses open as he scanned the area of the abandoned junkyard. One wrong move, and he'd crush this Apollo dude under a pile of rusted-out and flattened vehicles. Mountains of rusted pieces and parts of old junkers filled the landscape like some macabre horror movie. Claws made of rusted sheet metal, and gaping eyes formed of broken glass stared out as silent sentinels ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

It might be weird to some that Harris felt right at home among the surrounding castoffs. The worn-out and deemed worthless seemed the perfect place for a group of Noah Project survivors to meet. When the project was originally shut down decades ago, they were thrown to the wind into orphanages, foster care, or abandoned on the streets. It's funny how they'd suddenly become a hot commodity to those who shouldn't still be in business. A fucked-up form of recycling of human assets.

The rest of the team was scattered throughout the darkened labyrinth of the yard, with only their gear and the moonlight to guide them. If Apollo expected them to show up without being prepared, he was na?ve. And Harris doubted that. He figured the guy expected it. How he would respond was still up for debate.

The thick gravel crunched under Brick's boots and seemed to echo through the quiet. The team leader wasn't hiding his location. If anything, he was announcing it by

standing out in the middle of a path between two dismantled cube vans without an ounce of fear. The man had balls, no question, but the team was standing at the ready with conventional weapons and special abilities ready to be used at a moment's notice, and without hesitation. Apollo wouldn't get far if the guy tried to harm the boss.

Conor remained hidden until Apollo agreed to be read, his ever-protective sniper boyfriend high in the nearby metal stacks zeroed in on various targets, ensuring their continued safety. Woodley was on the far side of the junkyard covering Brick's back while Fletcher, Shaw, and Stryker spread out to complete a ring around the area. Spencer and Jennifer remained at the rental and were on the comms waiting while Jason was stationed near their SUVs in case they had to make a quick getaway. Everything was set; their guest of honor was all that was needed now to get this show on the road.

Would he show? Would he be alone?

As the hours ticked by, Harris had to admit he was losing faith that the guy would show up until his bone mic crackled to life.

"I have two approaching from the east," Gunner's voice came across clearly as if he were standing beside him.

"Got them," Fletcher said.

"Drone is airborne," Spencer added.

With silent eyes in the sky, they could follow all the heat signatures in the area to ensure no new parties randomly appeared to crash their party.

"Confirmed only homing in on one individual," Conor said. "Apollo is still a

mystery and unreadable to me.”

No surprise there. What would truly be shocking was if he allowed Conor into his thoughts. In the meantime, Harris kept his full attention on Brick, ready to react and send things flying so the team leader could make his getaway. Lifting a wrecked car would take hardly any effort after all the training he and his sister had put in over the past several months. Brick had instructed him to let chaos reign if the plan went to shit, and that’s exactly what he planned to do.

“ In my sights,” Brick stated as Apollo and a second man came into view.

Harris got his first look at the new guy Apollo had brought along. He was shorter than Apollo—hell, most people were—and he had short black hair, a full beard, and his neck and arms covered in tattoos. He appeared to be in his forties and walked with a slight limp on the right side.

“ Reading the secondary target now,” Conor announced. “He’s angry at being here. Doesn’t trust us and is prepared for an ambush. He feels this is a waste of time, that they don’t need our help for something. I’m not sure what that something is; I’m trying to dig deeper.”

Both men stopped and scanned the area as the duo came within five feet of Brick. A knowing look passed between the two.

“ How many men you got out there?” Apollo asked.

“ Enough to keep you honest,” Brick responded with his usual grin. “Did you expect any less?”

“ We’re not the ones who requested this meeting,” the second man said.

“ And who the hell are you?” Brick asked. “I sure as shit didn’t invite you.”

“ That’s none of your business,” the stranger growled.

Brick shook his head and said, “Good luck, asshole.” He began walking away as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

“ Wait,” Apollo said. “This is Griffin, my second-in-command.”

Game, set, match.

Brick turned slowly.

“ Second in command infers a military operation. Is that what you are, military?”

“ Some of us,” Apollo answered. “Others are simply survivors looking for safety and peace.”

“ Speaking of safety, before we go any further, I require something from you,” Brick said.

“ What do you want?” Apollo asked as his eyes narrowed.

“ Our man can’t get a read on you for some reason. We assume it has to do with your mutations.”

“ A read?” he asked.

“ Yes. He can look inside your thoughts and see what you’re hiding. Check to make sure you’re on the up-and-up.”

“ One of their group is missing,” Conor said over the comms. “I’m picking up on thoughts from Griffin. They believe the Noah division at the bar has them.”

“ For example, he knows you’re missing one of your group members,” Brick said. “And those goons at the dive bar might have something to do with it. Your second is readable.”

Griffin’s eyes widened. “What the fuck?” He scanned the area as if searching for the others.

“ And if I refuse?” Apollo asked.

“ That’s your choice. I won’t force you,” Brick made it clear. “We’ll leave and chalk this up to another dead end. However, I’d advise you not to get in our way if we ever cross paths again.”

Apollo searched Brick’s face, probably looking for any sign that he was bluffing. He wasn’t.

“ We’ve got nothing to hide,” Griffin said.

“ If so, prove it,” Brick stated. “We’re not looking to uncover that you were a thumb sucker or some shit, just that you’re trustworthy.”

Apollo thought it over for a moment before saying, “Fine.”

“ Send in Conor,” Brick ordered.

Moments later, Conor came walking out from behind a burnt-out Kenworth and up to stand beside Brick.

“ I’m Conor, a fellow survivor. After the Noah Group was dismantled, I was dumped off in an orphanage.”

The blue streaks in Apollo’s eyes shone even brighter as he stared at Conor. Instinctively, Harris hovered a nearby Buick into the air as a clear warning.

Griffin crouched low, and his hands began to glow, preparing for the attack. Apollo’s eyes returned to normal—well, relatively normal.

“ Don’t even think about trying anything,” Brick growled as he stood protectively in front of Conor.

“ I wasn’t trying to hurt him,” Apollo stated.

“ You were scanning my abilities to confirm what I can do,” Conor said. “Not quite like my mutation, but you can pick up on my differences. That’s one of your mutations.”

“ That’s how you knew about Harris,” Brick said. “You could tell he was different.”

“ Yes. I scanned him back in the hotel bar when I was tailing that Noah associate you also happened to be following. I can pick out any mutation.”

“ And hide your own. Well, other than the eyes,” Brick said.

“ Dark glasses or contacts help with that,” Apollo answered.

“ We’re after the same people,” Brick stated.

“ Yes. It appears we are.”

“It’s okay, Harris. You can put the car down,” Brick ordered.

Harris slowly lowered the wreck back onto the ground, happy his warning was clear. Mess with my friends, and I’ll flatten you.

“Okay, I’ll allow you to read me,” Apollo said before closing his eyes.

Conor moved closer to the large man with Brick staying by his side, and likely Gunner zeroed in on Apollo through his scope.

“Thank you,” Conor said. “I won’t cause you any harm either.”

“Thank you.”

Conor was quiet momentarily before saying, “You want revenge.”

“Who doesn’t,” Apollo replied with a grin that reminded Harris of Brick.

“True enough,” Conor agreed. “You knew about a group working to shut down the new Noah offshoot groups, but you didn’t know it was us here in New Orleans. Not until the night you thought you were saving Harris and met Brick face-to-face.”

“Yes. My sister mentioned him and his team at L. H. Investigations, the men who saved her. I had investigated him and came across a picture, but it wasn’t until he came out of the hotel that night along with the rest of the team that I put it all together,” Apollo explained.

“After you escaped the group, you began tracking down other survivors,” Conor continued to read Apollo.

“Someone had to,” Apollo answered.

“ Until we showed up,” Brick said.

“ True. That’s when I knew I wasn’t alone in my quest to free as many as possible from this division,” Apollo said.

“ Are you Ellen Hammon’s brother who reportedly died at birth?” Brick asked.

“ Yes.”

“ Truth,” Conor confirmed.

“ Why were you listed as dead?” Brick asked.

“ They were too afraid to allow me to go home with dear mom and dad,” Apollo said calmly. “Might blow the whole hidden agenda thing if I was let out into the normal world.”

“ Truth.”

“ Why didn’t you reach out to us?” Brick asked.

“ It was too risky. You’ve attracted some attention from the Group. We can’t risk being found.”

“ Truth.”

“ Why bother now? I understand thinking Harris was a free agent in trouble, but you agreed to this meeting even after knowing who we are?” Brick asked.

“ You need our help,” Conor said before Apollo had a chance.

“ We don’t need your help,” Griffin hissed. Shit, this guy has an anger problem.

Apollo laid his hand on Griffin’s shoulder.

“ Yes, we do. One of our people has gone missing.”

“ Truth,” Conor said.

Brick looked Apollo straight on and asked.” Do you plan on harming any person on my team or associated with me?”

Without missing a beat, Apollo responded, “No.”

“ Truth,” Conor confirmed.

“ Then I believe we can assist you, but let’s continue this conversation in a more secure location. I’ll forward the address to you later this evening,” Brick said. “We’ll arrange a time.”

Apollo reached out and shook Brick’s and then Conor’s hand. “Thank you.”

“ We’ll be in touch,” Brick stated.

Woodley

The team loaded back into the two SUVs and headed toward the rental. There was no more undercover work tonight, so the vehicle wasn’t needed. Woodley sat in the middle row directly behind Brick in the first vehicle's front passenger seat. They were crossing through Pines Village around three in the morning when a jacked-up and

smoked-out Lincoln pulled alongside them, and years of police work had bells ringing for Woodley as the back window rolled down.

“To the right,” Gunner said.

Everything happened so quickly after that, and Woodley lunged forward just before the first flash, placing himself between Brick and the exploding glass of the passenger window. The bullet impacted his back and sent Woodley forward and partially onto Brick before his body slid back between the middle seat and the floor.

Tires squealed, and the SUV veered as more shots rang out, but Woodley was quickly losing consciousness; he couldn't keep track of the action. The burning pain was familiar; after all, he'd been shot before, but that time, it'd been his arm. Now, it was his chest. His mutation gave him a direct line to the functions in his body, and now he could feel his right lung filling with fluid as it got progressively harder for him to breathe.

His tissues rushed to heal the damage, but he'd never tried to heal this type of extensive damage before. Would it work? Hell, the boss wouldn't have survived if it'd been him. That would have meant irreparable harm to their fight against the Noah Group, and preventing that from happening was worth his life.

“Fuck, talk to me,” Harris ordered as he pulled him back into the seat and began applying pressure to the hole in Woodley's back.

“No hospitals,” he groaned. They didn't need the attention with his healing abilities and the Noah Group in town.

It was all he could think to say before the darkness took over and nothing remained. The last thing he saw was Harris's concerned face fading away, and for the first time in Woodley's life, instead of wishing his mutation never existed, he wished he'd heal

even faster.

CHAPTER TEN

Harris

“What do you mean there’s nothing we can do?” Harris asked edgily. “We can’t sit around and do nothing while he bleeds out.”

“We have no choice but to allow his body to heal itself,” Jennifer said. “Other than keeping him comfortable and watching over him, we must wait. If we take him to the hospital, they’ll know something is different about him when his wounds start healing on their own.”

“Will he be able to heal an injury as serious as this?” Brick asked as he paced the floor.

“I’m not sure. Has he ever been so severely injured before?” Jennifer asked as she laid another cold cloth on Woodley’s forehead.

“From his own account, the worst he’d suffered was being shot in the arm,” Spencer said.

No one could hide their concern. How much danger was Woodley in? Was he strong enough to heal himself? Harris knew his sister was right; there was nothing more they could do until Woodley began healing on his own. One good sign was the fact that he wasn’t getting any worse; the bleeding had slowed, and his breathing had evened out, but he still hadn’t regained consciousness.

“ Fuckin’ gangbangers,” Stryker growled.

“ When we tracked them down, they claimed they thought we were a rival gang moving in on their territory,” Fletcher said. “That’s what they wanted us to believe.”

They’d been in the second SUV and took off after the Lincoln as the first raced back to the rental with a wounded Woodley.

“ Pines Village has the highest rate of gang violence in the entire city,” Spencer stated.

“ Yeah, it would make sense, but upon further questioning, it became clear that they’d been hired,” Fletcher snarled.

“ It’s obvious someone from the Noah Group has eyes on Apollo. They have one of his members, and must’ve followed him to our meeting site,” Spencer said.

“ They took the opportunity to send a clear message about fucking with the group, not expecting it to backfire on them like it did.”

“ I want to burn this group to the ground,” Jennifer said, her voice vibrating with anger.

“ When will Jason be touching down with Mrs. Greer?” Harris asked, desperate to get their healer here as soon as possible to help Woodley.

“ They're still over an hour out,” Spencer said.

The second they made it back to the rental, Jason left to fly to Fire Lake to pick up Mrs. Greer from the ranch.

“ Will he make it that long?” Brick asked.

“ He’d better,” Harris stated for multiple reasons, the least of which was his plan to spend time over in Pines Village clearing out a few hot spots and make them think twice about working for the Noah Group ever again. Hell, he still might either way. They’d hurt the man he cared about. He just hoped Woodley survived so he could tell him.

Brick’s phone rang, and he looked down at the screen. “Apollo,” he mouthed at the rest of the team as he answered his cell and placed it on speaker. “This isn’t a good time,” he stated.

“ We can help,” Apollo said.

“ Help with what?” Brick asked.

“ Your man’s injuries.”

Harris frowned. How the hell did they know about the shooting? Were they involved? Did they know they were being followed? Why wouldn’t they warn us?

“ What injuries?” Brick hedged.

“ Do we really want to go down this road? I have the ability to monitor any other test subject I come in contact with. I know one of your men is hurt; I could feel Conor’s concern loud and clear.”

“ What can you do to help?” Brick said curtly.

Hell, Harris thought, they might not be ready to trust the guy completely, but if Apollo could somehow come to Woodley’s aid, he was willing to listen.

“ We too have a healer who’s saved multiple team members. She’s available right now. We need to know where to take her.”

“ I’ll send you the address,” Brick said without a moment's hesitation. “You should know, the tail was following you before taking us on.”

If their healer was anything like Mrs. Greer, they could reach the rental long before Jason could fly back. Every minute, every second right now, counted.

“ Appreciate it,” Apollo said. “We’ll keep our eyes open and arrange for an alternate safe house for our other members to be moved to.” The line went dead.

With all things considered, this was the best plan to save Woodley’s life. Harris hoped Brick wasn’t proven wrong or there’d be even more blood spilled that night.

Everyone was on edge when the perimeter sensors sounded, and a car pulled in. Apollo had arrived in under fifteen minutes from when Brick had sent him the address. The team didn’t bother to hide the weapons in their shoulder holsters; if this was an attack, they’d find some heavy resistance.

Harris truly hoped this was legit for Woodley’s sake. Jason and Mrs. Greer were still forty minutes away, and Woodley wasn’t healing as quickly as they’d hoped he would.

“ Vehicle up on screen,” Spencer announced as the monitors homed in on their new visitors. Harris turned to look at the screen and watched an older-model Chevy pull up to the back of the rental. It moved at a slow, methodical pace that he thought was intentional so as not to alarm anyone. Four people got out of the vehicle: Apollo, Griffin, and two smaller women.

“ We’ve got four, no other heat signatures in the vicinity,” Spence said.

“ I’ve got a read on three of them. Griffin is still on the fence about us and is concerned this is a trap. One of the women is excited to be here, and the other is concerned about Woodley. Apollo is back to being a mystery,” Conor said, filling in the rest of the team.

“ Okay, we play this calm and methodical for Woodley’s sake. No snap decisions, but don’t let your guard down. If things go south, we’ll deal with them accordingly,” Brick ordered.

“ Wait, is that Ellen?” Shaw asked as he leaned in to the screen for a better look.

Spencer zoomed the monitor onto the two women.

“ Holy shit, she’s all grown up,” Spencer said. “Rick is going to be so pissed he missed this.”

It had been several years since the team had taken on the Hammon missing person’s case. In the end, Spencer and Rick set Ellen Hammon and her nanny up with a new identity so she could disappear and escape the Noah Group.

“ Well, that confirms what Apollo said at least,” Shaw said. “Ellen’s here in the flesh. Hard to deny that.”

As the four approached the house, Apollo stepped forward and knocked on the door. He strategically placed his large body in front to cover the women behind him, and Griffin scanned the area from the back.

“ They seem to be well trained,” Stryker said. “And armed.”

It was easy to make out the bulge from guns under their jackets. Harris wasn't shocked, considering they were as well. Can't blame them for being prepared to enter a possible hostile situation.

Brick scanned the room before opening the back door. It was natural for the Navy SEAL to get a lay of the land before any possible engagement. The rest of the team was strategically placed throughout the living room and kitchen, while Harris had placed himself in front of the door leading to the bedroom where Woodley and Jennifer were waiting.

Brick took the same position as Apollo as the door opened, and the two team leaders stood like warriors facing each other while protecting their people.

"Apollo," Brock said in a way of greeting.

"Brick," Apollo replied. "You gonna let us in?"

"Depends. Are you planning on using the heat you're packing?"

"We've learned never to travel without protection, not specifically because we were coming here."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the best one you're going to get."

"Holy shit. Why do men have to be so difficult," a woman's voice growled from behind Apollo. "Get out of my way, you big oaf. There's an injured man in there that needs my help."

The small woman they'd seen on screen pushed her way past Apollo, who rolled his

eyes, and she stood toe-to-toe with Brick.

“ I’m here to help. Deal with it quickly so I can get started healing him,” she said without an ounce of fear.

There was laughter behind Apollo, and when Harris glanced at the screen, he could see Ellen Hammon covering her mouth in an attempt to stifle her amusement.

“ Renee, you’re amazing,” Ellen said.

“ You remind me of someone I know. Her name is Julia,” Brick said.

“ She must be one hell of a woman. I’d love to meet her, but first move so I can help your teammate,” Renee said.

Brick did the one thing Harris hadn’t expected tonight; he smiled and backed out of the way, allowing her and Ellen to enter. Apollo and Griffin hovered close by.

“ Spencer,” Ellen cheered before heading in his direction. “I never thought I’d see you again. Is Rick here?”

Spencer stood and hugged Ellen as she went to him without fear.

“ You’re a sight for sore eyes. Rick’s back in Fire Lake. He’s going to be pissed that he missed seeing you. Maybe we can call him,” Spencer suggested.

“ That’d be great,” she agreed.

“ Where is your wounded man?” Renee asked, cutting to the chase.

“ This way,” Harris said, gesturing toward the closed door behind him.

Renee crossed the room toward him, Griffin close behind, a personal guard.

She looked at Harris closely. “He is important to you. I’ll do everything I can to help, I swear.”

For the first time, Harris didn’t even bother to argue. “Thank you, ma’am.” He opened the door, and his sister immediately stood and moved protectively to the foot of the bed.

“ It’s okay, Jennifer. This is Renee and Griffin. She’s here to help heal Woodley,” Harris explained.

Jennifer returned to Woodley’s side. “He hasn’t regained consciousness, but the bleeding has stopped.”

“ This is my sister, Jennifer,” Harris explained.

“ Hello, Jennifer,” Renee said. “May I approach the bed?”

“ Yes.”

Harris appreciated Renee’s approach. She may have been forceful with Brick, but the team leader respected that. With Jennifer and himself, she’d been caring and almost gentle. It was as if she knew what each person needed. Perhaps that was part of her ability as well.

Renee walked to the other side of the bed across from Jennifer while Harris stood guard at the foot. He’d never felt more useless in his entire life. Ask him to hack into the most secure server or lift a truck into the air with only his mind, that he could do, but save the man he’d fallen in love with, and he had nothing to offer.

Stop it, Jennifer's voice drifted through his mind. No one person is capable of everything. The best we can do is be there for the people we care about and give them all of ourselves while there's still time.

Renee placed her hand on Woodley's chest, and her hand began to glow within moments. She closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate while moving her hand from side to side as if searching. Moments later, she opened her eyes and looked at Harris.

"We need to roll him onto his side. I want to get a better look at the wound."

Harris moved around the bed, and Griffin came forward to assist him without saying a word. He didn't like the other man touching Woodley but understood moving him with the extra help would be safer. Slowly and with as much care as possible, they turned Woodley, allowing Renee to pull back the bloody bandages and take a better look. He would have used his power to move the injured man, but he wasn't certain about how gentle he could be given his heightened emotions.

He'd seen the wound left by the bullet when he'd tried to stop the bleeding, but that had been hours ago. Harris wasn't sure what he'd expected, but the still gaping hole he saw wasn't on the list. His hope quickly faded, and he prayed Renee could perform a miracle.

"Okay, hold him there," Renee said. "And try not to move."

Woodley's breathing became labored, causing Harris to question whether they were doing the right thing by moving him. He was about to ask when Renee's hands began glowing again, and she placed them directly over the wound.

"Hold him still," she said as Woodley's body began to shake violently.

Jennifer braced her hands on Woodley's arm to help as he and Griffin tightened their hold. Renee's hands glowed even brighter, and Woodley's shaking slowed slightly. Harris could see beads of sweat forming on Renee's forehead, and he could see the physical toll it was taking on her as she worked on Woodley.

This gave Harris the best indication of how dire Woodley's situation was. Real fear, like he'd only ever experienced with his sister, filled him, making every breath Woodley took more important than the last.

How had he fooled himself into believing that he'd ever be able to walk away from this man? If they made it through this, Harris swore he'd stop living like a man without a future and allow himself to plan for that future. A future that included the lover currently fighting for his life.

Harris wasn't sure how long they'd been in the bedroom working on Woodley, but the sun had risen when they emerged. Woodley's condition was stable, and poor Renee was pale and exhausted even though Mrs. Greer had arrived and joined in the healing half way through.

Jason, and Darren had returned from Fire Lake with Mrs. Greer and were seated by the window. Harris wasn't sure why Darren had come along; he was one of the survivors rescued along with Mrs. Greer, a young woman named Lydia, and the boy Frank that John and Stryker had adopted. He was too exhausted from worry to bother asking.

It wasn't long before Renee and Mrs. Greer were in deep conversation about their shared abilities, and Harris didn't miss the older woman's glowing hands resting on Renee's arm as color returned to the younger woman's cheeks.

Brick and Apollo had gone to the office for a private meeting once they knew Woodley was on his way to recovery. Spencer and Ellen were on a video call with

Rick, and he could hear the dude's excitement all the way from Fire Lake. Griffin seemed to be hovering nearby, but never becoming part of the group for some unknown reason.

All Harris wanted to do was crawl back into bed with Woodley.

He quickly gave everyone a rundown on Woodley's vastly improved condition before returning to the bedroom and taking over from his sister. Once alone with the man he now freely admitted he loved, Harris carefully crawled back into bed and held Woodley in his arms. Having the man by his side felt right, and he intended to make it permanent.

It wasn't lost on him that it took almost losing this man for Harris to realize how much he meant to him. He should have never allowed it to get to such an extreme, but now that he knew the truth, nothing would stop him from building a future with this man. Not even Woodley himself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Woodley

Birds were singing. That had to be a good sign.

Woodley's eyes burned as he struggled to open them. How long had he been out? Not long enough if the pain radiating from his back was anything to go by. When he shifted on the bed, a large arm wrapped around his hips, keeping him still.

“Don't move too much. Your wound isn't completely healed just yet, and I don't want you to start bleeding again.”

Harris's voice washed over him, sending warmth through his chilled body. When his vision finally cleared, he found himself in his bed at the rental, with Harris beside him. He was a sight for literally sore eyes.

“Hey,” Woodley said, his voice cracked as he spoke.

“Here, drink this,” Harris said, holding a straw to Woodley's chapped lips. “Not too much at first.”

The cold water soothed his parched throat, but he was careful not to overdo it and choke. Once he was done, Woodley took stock of his aching body. He was still in the middle of healing. His lung was mostly healed, but his ribs, muscles, and skin were still pretty raw. That's when he noticed a slight difference in the typical way he healed.

“ Something's different about how I'm healing,” Woodley stated. “What happened?”

“ We had a little help,” Harris said. “Or should I say a ton of help?”

“ Mrs. Greer?”

It would make sense, considering her ability to heal injuries. After all, she'd saved Stryker's life when he'd been shot rescuing John.

“ No, someone else got here first,” Harris said with a sexy grin. Woodley was happy and relieved to see it again. Then what he'd said registered with Woodley.

“ Someone else? Who? I don't know anyone else with that ability,” Woodley said, unsure if he'd heard him right.

“ Her name is Renee, and she's a survivor like us but from Apollo's team. She has the same mutations as Mrs. Greer, so she helped speed along your healing ability. Mrs. Greer and the others arrived afterward, but we were in a hurry, and Apollo reached out to help.”

“ How did Apollo know anything happened?” Woodley didn't think Brick would allow for outside help.

“ He could sense Conor's concern and your injuries. Turns out the big dude can keep track of all survivors he comes in contact with.”

“ That's impressive and a bit concerning. If Apollo can track us, are we ever safe?” Woodley asked.

“ You're right. I'm also worried, but we should be fine as long as Apollo stays on the right side of this fight against the Noah Group.”

“ Considering he used his ability to help me, I’d say he’s on the right side, at least at the moment. Let’s hope it stays that way, or we could be screwed.” The big dude had more abilities than they knew about. Abilities that caused the Noah Group to keep him hidden and tell his parents he’d died at birth. Worried about what may come was just the tip of the iceberg.

“ True,” Harris agreed. “How are you feeling?”

“ Considering I was shot in the back, pretty good for a person who should be dead. I still have a bit of healing to do, but I’m out of the woods.”

Woodley hadn’t honestly known when he threw himself in front of the window whether his mutation was strong enough to heal a wound that severe. Now, though, he was fairly sure he would’ve been able to heal himself, but the extra help was appreciated, and sped things along.

“ Good. You scared the hell out of me. Next time you decide to be a hero, give me a heads-up, ’k?”

“ You were scared?” He had to be kidding. Harris didn’t do emotions. Even fear seemed to be outlawed in his physical and mental makeup.

“ Of course I was,” Harris said. “I care about you. Hell, you should know that much by now.”

Woodley studied Harris in confusion. “Should I?”

“ Look, Liam,” Harris said as he glanced away.

“ Liam? You never use my first name,” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“ Nothing’s wrong. I’ve finally come to my senses.”

“ Okay, I’m sore and still healing, so either get to the point or stop confusing the shit out of me.”

“ I was confused for a very long time. I believed that my past made it impossible to have a future, but you changed that.”

“ I did?”

“ Yes. It’s all your fault.”

“ Are you sure I didn’t smash my head on something? I think I could have a concussion.” He might be hallucinating.

Harris grinned even wider, sexy bastard, and cupped Woodley’s jaw. Harris’s calloused hand felt amazing against his skin and almost distracted him from their strange conversation.

“ I know it’s hard to believe, but I’m finally seeing clearly now. Even if you might not agree with me, I’m willing to wait until you figure it out in time.”

“ How kind of you. Figure what out exactly?” Woodley asked. Yep, he was definitely hallucinating.

“ That we’re perfect for each other and no one but you will do for me. Let’s face it, there’s not a single person who’d have a hope in hell of understanding us and our hang-ups.”

“ Sorry, but that’s no reason to be together, just because no one else will want us.” Was it? And if it was, how sad is that?

“It’s not only that. Cut me a break. It’s not like I have any experience with this shit. I’m doing my best here,” Harris said as he ran his fingers through his short, dark hair. “This is also strange for me; it’s not like I know what the hell I’m doing.”

“Wait, is this some kind of epiphany because I was shot?” Things were becoming clearer.

“I don’t think epiphany is the right word. More of a punch to the gut.”

“Nice analogy.”

“You don’t get flowery words with me.”

“No truer words have been spoken.”

“Fine, let’s cut to the chase. I want you in my life permanently.”

“Holy shit. Am I dead?” Woodley asked as he checked his pulse.

Harris rolled his eyes and let out a loud, drawn-out moan. He’d never seen the guy frustrated before. He liked this new side of the man. Made him more real somehow.

“Don’t push it. Is it always going to be this hard talking about real shit with you?”

“Likely,” Woodley said with a grin. “But I’m worth it.”

Harris’s eyes got impossibly darker as he ran his thumb over Woodley’s bottom lip. “Yes, you are.”

He moved to wrap his arm around Harris, but the motion had him hissing in pain.

“ Easy, there’s plenty of time.”

“ Why? Are you not planning on sacrificing yourself to the Noah Group?”

Why plan a future if the guy was going to throw himself to the wolves?

“ You done throwing yourself in front of bullets?”

“ Touche. I’ll try to control the urge, but you know Brick wouldn’t have been able to survive that shot. What other choice did I have? The team and this crazy-ass mission would’ve been irreparably scuttled. We can’t afford to lose anyone in this fight, especially not a leader like him.”

“ Yeah, I get it. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll try to stop putting myself in danger if you do, but with the caveat that it doesn’t count if it’s in the line of duty,” Harris said.

“ Sounds fair. I’m unsure if I can change gears as quickly as you have. Let’s see where this goes,” Woodley said, still having reservations about this sudden shift. “It’s not like we’re getting married or something. A trial run couldn’t hurt.”

“ I’ll take it.”

“ You are aware that relationships fostered due to a traumatic event have over an eighty percent chance of failure?” Facts were facts, and they weren’t in their favor. When had they ever been?

“ Still leaves a twenty percent chance.”

“ You’ve lost your damned mind.”

“ It’s possible.”

“ We’re doomed.”

“ Way to stay positive.”

“ I still have a hole in my back.”

“ Point taken. Rest for now. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Woodley took him at his word and let his tired eyes close. He’d had his fill of revelations for the time being. For now, he needed rest in order to heal fully. Until then, he was useless to the team and didn’t want to be in that position for long.

He’d give Harris a couple of days to rethink things and change his mind because this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn could easily hit a dead end, leaving him high and dry once again. He wasn’t a fool, and as a detective, logic always won out, so he’d wait and see if Harris’s epiphany faded as quickly as it arrived.

That would suck, but it wasn’t entirely unexpected.

He lived in a world full of harsh realities and even harsher outcomes.

Fairy tales were only that, tales.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Harris

Harris knew Woodley didn't believe him, at least not completely, and he was waiting for Harris to change his mind. That wasn't going to happen. He'd finally figured out what he'd been missing, and it was this handsome, stubborn detective all along.

“ Why are you grinning?” Jennifer asked.

“ Can't a guy grin?” Harris asked back.

“ Not you,” she said. “What are you up to?”

Before Harris could skirt the answer, Brick and Darren walked into the living room; the boss was holding a stack of files.

“ Fall in,” Brick ordered, and the entire team converged on the large dining room table. “Have a seat. We have a few items to discuss.”

Eleven members were in attendance: Brick, Fletcher, Shaw, Spencer Gunner, Conor, Jason, Stryker, Jennifer, Darren, and himself. They each sat at various positions around the table, with Brick at the head and Darren at his side.

“ First, Darren would like to share what he's discovered,” Brick announced.

That had more than one person looking around in confusion. Darren hadn't been part

of the in-field team before after being rescued from a Noah Group holding facility.

“ I realize that all of you are wondering why I returned with Jason. I’ve figured out my mutation, or at least what it is now. I’m unsure if it’ll change in time or progress further, and I wanted to join the fight against the people who made me the way I am.”

He looked over at Brick, who nodded in what appeared to be encouragement.

Darren placed his pale right hand on the wooden tabletop and seemed to concentrate on the table itself. A few team members leaned forward to get a better look. After a few seconds, the tips of Darren's fingers began disappearing. Harris shook his head and looked again. The longer he watched, the further up Darren’s fingers went until most of his hand was gone.

“ You’re fucking invisible,” Shaw shouted enthusiastically. “You’re a ghost.”

The sudden response must have scared Darren, and his hand immediately became visible again before pulling it back against his chest as if protecting himself.

“ It’s okay. He didn’t mean it in a derogatory way,” Brick said to Darren.

“ No, man, it’s so cool,” Shaw said. “Sorry if it came out wrong. I was surprised, but I shouldn’t be anymore. I think that’s the best mutation I’ve seen yet. Well, in truth, they’re all amazing.”

Darren seemed to calm at Shaw’s explanation. “I’m not invisible, or have become a ghost. Though it’s cool to think I could. It’s more like the pigment in my skin changes to match its surroundings. It blends in until you can’t see where my skin begins and ends.”

“ Like a chameleon,” Conor said.

“ I guess,” Darren said. “That’s as close as I can guess. Though I kinda like the thought of becoming invisible.”

“ Whoa, how did you figure that out?” Gunner asked. “That would come in handy, although I’m guessing you’d have to be naked for your entire body to blend in.”

Darren looked away and said, “I discovered this ability when I was feeling down last week and thinking it would be better if I disappeared. I’d never have a normal life. I’d always be hunted because somebody decided to screw with my DNA. Who’d want me? I’d be alone, unable to trust anyone.”

The sound of a chair scraping against the hardwood made Harris cringe as Conor stood from the table and walked over to Darren, pulling the much smaller man into a fierce hug.

“ You are wanted. You have a home with us, and those assholes would have to get through all of us if they wanted to harm you,” Conor stated fiercely.

“ Damn right.”

“ You got it.”

“ Hell yeah.”

The rest of the team chimed in, and a small smile slowly worked its way onto Darren's face.

“ Thank you. I’ll work hard to control it so that we can use what the Group thought they could use as a weapon against them,” Darren swore.

“ We know you will, and welcome to the team,” Brick said. “Now, if you could

retake your seats, we have more to discuss and plans to implement.”

Everyone settled down, and Brick tossed the files onto the table.

“ Grab a copy, and let’s get to work. As we are all aware, the team came to New Orleans in order to place Harris among this division of the Noah Group.”

“ You mean kidnapped,” Jennifer huffed.

“ Yes. That plan went up in smoke thanks to Apollo, but the mission to dismantle this batch of assholes is still a go. You’ll find in the file all the information Apollo and his team have accumulated on this division. Pictures of players we’ve already met and a few new ones. Familiarize yourself with each individual.”

“ There’s Joe,” Fletcher chuckled as he held up a photo. “The man with all the moves.”

“ And Jaws, the bartender,” Conor added. “Looks like he wants to tear somebody’s head off.”

“ Likely more than simply looks. I don’t doubt he’d cause serious damage to anyone who got in his way,” Brick stated.

“ There’s the two guys from the van that night they attempted to take Harris,” Gunner said.

“ Who’s the guy behind Jaws?” Jason asked.

“ That’s Soloman. It’s believed that that’s the guy running the show. Strong ties to the site in California,” Brick said.

“ The cult?” Shaw asked.

“ Yes,” Brick said. “As far as we can determine, Soloman was a backer of the cult. Another one of the money men.”

“ We took away his cash cow,” Shaw said. “He must have been pissed.”

“ I saw him before,” Jennifer said, causing everyone to turn toward her.

“ You did?” Harris asked. “What do you remember about him?”

“ He’s a grade-A asshole,” she said.

“ That goes without saying, but do you remember anything specific?” Brick asked.

“ Yeah, he likes ’em young,” she growled. “He couldn’t hide that lecherous look he gave the girls who were part of the cult. I’ve never seen him try anything, but I don’t doubt he would have if given a chance. He’s creepy, disgusting, opportunistic, and downs expensive tequila like it’s water. His liver has to be mush by now. He even had a case shipped in when he was in California, and he was there for only a week.”

“ Asshole. You don’t mess with kids,” Darren growled, making Harris wonder if there was anything behind that response other than the normal rational disgust the rest of them felt.

“ Agreed, but we need to get inside. How do we do that?” Fletcher asked.

“ Spencer, find out if there’s a supplier in the area delivering abnormally large amounts of high-end tequila to the bar and anywhere else in the city,” Brick ordered.

“ On it.” Spencer began searching as Harris opened his laptop. Being a computer

hacker might help with the digging.

“ I’ll take the out-of-country suppliers,” Harris said.

“ Thanks, man. I’ll take North America,” Spencer said.

“ What are you thinking, boss?” Stryker asked.

“ Maybe there’s a way to get closer to Soloman through his drink of choice,” Brick explained.

“ I’d love to lace his booze with an extra kick,” Stryker stated darkly.

“ If we find he’s having it delivered to his residence, that might be doable,” Brick said. “Either way, the last item on this agenda is Apollo’s missing team member. His name is Robin, and he went missing over a week and a half ago. They believe this division has him and have asked us to help find and free him.”

“ This file is thick. Apollo’s team must have been following them for a while,” Jennifer said.

“ Yes, and this Robin was tailing Jaws when he went missing,” Brick explained. “Apollo is unable to track Robin for much the same reason Conor can’t get a read on Apollo. So they have no idea where he is.”

“ Robin’s a survivor as well?” Harris asked.

“ His mutation allows him to leave suggestions in a weaker person’s mind using only his voice,” Brick said.

“ Suggestions?” Fletcher asked, with a look that was a mix of curious and concerned.

“ He can suggest they do things. Like having someone order a tea instead of coffee or jump up and down,” Brick stated.

“ Or drive off a cliff?” Shaw asked.

“ Yes. In essence. However, the person needs to be easily suggestible.”

“ Holy shit,” Shaw said while shaking his head. “The Noah Group must have some serious players capable of all these mutations.”

“ Yeah, and they’ve gone through countless bodies to do it,” Harris growled.

“ It’s not like they have to follow any ethics guidelines,” Conor said grimly. “They can collect or create human test subjects at will and toss them aside when they’re done.”

“ That’s what we’re here to stop. No one has the right to unilaterally decide a person’s existence, control over their body, or any other aspect. Screwing with a person’s DNA is a slippery slope that should only be done under strict guidance and with precautions ensuring that no harm comes to that person,” Brick stated. “The Noah Group’s experiments have gone on without checks and balances even after being dissolved by their military backers. That has to stop, and we’re here to do just that.”

“ Hooyah.”

The cheer rang out from around the table. The Navy SEALs battle cry sent chills down Harris’s spine. No one with an ounce of sense would dare get in their way. Unfortunately, the Noah Group members lacked this basic requirement, which would be their downfall.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Woodley

Woodley was sick of lying in bed all day and was thankful to be up and moving again. He was nearly completely healed and could now move without serious pain. It had taken the better part of a week, and without assistance from Renee and Mrs. Greer, that time would have tripled.

The team had been in and out all week, checking in between undercover missions and following some of the new division's key players. The rental was quiet as he poured himself a second coffee. His body was crying out for caffeine.

"You're looking much better," Brick said as he walked into the kitchen holding an empty mug.

"I'm feeling better," Woodley said. "Almost back to one hundred percent."

"Good," Brick said. "Look, I've meant to thank you for what you did. I'm well aware that I wouldn't have survived a hit like that."

"You're welcome," Woodley said. "And thank you for what you're trying to do, stopping the Noah Group. Most people will never know what's happening behind the scenes, and a lot wouldn't lift a finger even if they did."

"We've come a long way from wrestling on my front porch." Brick laughed.

“ I could still take you,” he joked.

“ Dream on.” Brick laughed even harder. “I’d have you crying for your momma in under two minutes.”

Woodley knew that was as sentimental as the hardcore Navy SEAL team leader got, at least with anyone other than his partner, Roman.

“ How is the investigation going?”

Brick placed his cup on the counter and reached for the half-full coffeepot.

“ Slower than I would like.”

“ Oh?”

“ Yeah. It appears the group has pulled back since the incident at the hotel. They’ve been keeping a low profile, and we’re finding it hard to get any real read on them. Word’s out on the street that taking on any odd jobs for the group could be hazardous for your health after what happened to the last gang members who shot at us.”

“ Good. How’s the tequila angle going?” he asked before sitting at the table.

“ We’ve followed every order above six bottles and still haven’t found Solomon’s primary residence. We’re thinking of lowering the bottle count, but by how Jennifer describes it, the dude is a heavy drinker and wouldn’t likely order only a few bottles at a time. The asshole travels below radar, and every time we think we have a read on him, he’s gone.”

“ Hmm, I’d think the same about the size of his orders, considering his love of tequila, but perhaps he stocked up before we began following him. If we’re lucky,

he'll run low soon and re-up."

" Could be. We'll stay on this course for a bit longer before making any changes."

" Probably for the best."

Brick leaned back against the counter and gulped his black coffee. He looked like he had something else on his mind but wasn't sure how to say it.

" What's up?" He cut to the chase.

Brick set his cup on the counter.

" It's about Harris."

" What about him?" he asked, hoping it wasn't some kinda intervention or warning.

" There's no denying Harris and I have a rocky history."

" You were on opposite sides of the law. I more than most understand that."

" Yeah, at the time, we were on a mission to stop him from selling military secrets that he'd stolen."

" Facts are facts." Woodley couldn't deny them.

" Those facts were more fluid than I believed."

" What do you mean by fluid?" Fluid had many interpretations, and Woodley didn't want to jump to conclusions.

“ Considering Harris’s behavior since joining our team, I have to admit I began to have doubts. Criminals don’t typically change their stripes. However, Harris didn’t fit into the mold, so I looked closer.”

“ Harris is a good person, no matter what he thought he had to do to save his sister.”

Woodley was tired of people labeling Harris because he was forced to commit a crime to save his sister. As a product of the Noah Group himself, Woodley understood the measures people like him had to take at times, even with him being a detective. Sometimes, normal routes weren’t open to them, and what worked for a regular person wasn’t an option. It could be as simple as going to the hospital when you’re sick or living a normal life without constant fear.

“ Agreed.”

“ Wait, what? I thought you had written him off.”

“ Things aren’t always black and white in my world. There are unimaginable levels of gray that vary on a case-by-case basis. Harris, for example, falls into the gray area. He has done legally ambiguous things, but who hasn’t when push comes to shove? I don’t condone what he tried to do, but I understand the reason, which places him in the gray area.”

“ Why are you telling me this?” This wasn’t exactly going how he thought it would.

“ Because since you arrived, I’ve noticed a shift in Harris. He isn’t all doom and die; he’s making plans and thinking ahead.”

“ Not so willing to die for the cause.” Woodley was happy to hear that.

“ Exactly. Even with the previous plan in place, I believe he would have fought tooth

and nail to survive. Which is in direct odds with his ‘fuck it’ attitude. I believe that this change is due to you.”

“ You give me too much credit. Harris doesn’t do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

“ I wouldn’t be too sure about that. You have a larger effect on him than you believe.”

“ Why are you telling me this?”

“ Because I know how difficult it is to believe what the guy says most of the time. However, this new version has me questioning whether we’ve truly seen the real Harris prior to this. As for me, I’m finding myself giving him the benefit of the doubt more often of late, and I think you should as well.” Brick picked up his mug. “Again, I owe you one for what you did. I won’t forget it.”

Brick left the kitchen, leaving Woodley with more questions than answers. Was Harris serious about having a future with him? Or was he being gaslit? Only time would tell.

Harris

He was chasing his own fucking tail. Nothing was happening. Nothing. At this point, Harris seriously considered walking into the dive bar to order a beer. This shit was getting old fast. It seemed that the group had gone silent. How long could this go on?

“ I say we throw a flash-bang through the door and watch what slithers out,” Stryker suggested across the comms.

“ We could disguise ourselves as part of the fire department performing standard inspections in the area,” Fletcher suggested.

“ Or SWAT,” Shaw said. “I always wanted to drive a BearCat down a city street.”

“ Hell, I would be willing to levitate the contents of the entire bar, so they think they have ghosts and go running,” Harris added.

“ There’ll be no ordinance use, impersonations, leisurely drives, or hauntings,” Brick stated through their shared mics. “But I’m not opposed to going in silent to look around the back of the bar after they close.”

“ Finally, some action,” Gunner said. It was obvious their patience had been tested.

“ You’re a sniper. Hell, you’re used to waiting around,” Harris joked.

“ I’m retired,” Gunner deadpanned.

“ Hold on,” Spencer said across the comms from the rental. “I’ve just got a read on a twelve-bottle tequila order—for a private address— being shipped to somewhere roughly ten minutes to the west of your current location.”

“ I want three on that delivery. If we can confirm it’s Soloman’s residence, we can set up a plan to go in when he’s at the dive bar,” Brick said. “This might be our chance to find out where they’re holding Robin.”

“ I’ll update Apollo,” Spencer said. “The delivery is coming through FedEx and scheduled for delivery between three and six tomorrow.”

“ On it,” Stryker said. “I’ll take Harris and Gunner to the new address and try to confirm Soloman is the resident.”

“ The rest of us stay on the bar,” Brick ordered. “We can’t afford to miss any movement.”

“ Understood.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Harris

Apollo and Griffin decided to come along on their stakeout of the new two-story brick residence. The tequila had been delivered yesterday, and they were busy attempting to get visual confirmation of Solomon's presence in the dwelling. A second man answered the door when the delivery driver arrived, and as of yet, they hadn't seen anyone else in the building.

Woodley was back to one hundred percent and was currently stationed at the northeast corner of the property under the porch floorboards of an abandoned house. Harris felt at odds with his lover's return to the field. He was having a hard time erasing the image of Woodley slumped over with a bullet hole in his back.

"I'll be pissed if this is another dead end," Harris said. "Could there be another dude this close to the bar with a taste for large quantities of high-end tequila?"

"You should know more than most that anything is possible," Apollo said across the comms.

It was still weird having outsiders on their mission, but if it led to shutting down these assholes, Harris could tolerate it. Perhaps it was his inability to trust anyone outside their immediate crew, but either way, it felt odd.

"We have movement," Gunner said from his perch in a nearby oak tree. "Two individuals."

Harris looked through his night vision binoculars to attempt to identify the subjects. He zeroed in on the driveway as a four-door Chrysler pulled out from behind the house. He gave the car a few seconds to clear the hedge, but Harris's mood improved as soon as it did.

“Confirmed. Soloman is in the driver’s seat. The second person who took delivery of the alcohol is in the passenger seat.”

“Yesss,” Stryker cheered. “Things are finally looking up.”

“I’ll let the boss know,” Gunner said.

With any luck, they’d get a look inside that house tonight. He only hoped the wait was worth it.

“It’s a go,” Gunner said. “Drone is airborne.”

They sent in one of Spencer’s drones with specialized equipment to detect any heat signatures in the residence and surrounding area. Each team member had a receiver placed on their gear, giving them a different heat signature than any possible target.

They waited for the area to be swept. Harris was anxious to get the show on the road. The sooner they got a read on Soloman, the sooner they could get the main mission on the road and shut these fuckers down.

“Area is clear. We’re a go to breach the residence,” Gunner announced.

“About time,” Harris grumbled. “Let’s go see what this fucker is hiding.”

Harris, Stryker, Woodley, Apollo, and Griffin would go in while Gunner kept an eye out for Soloman’s return. Other team members were still watching the bar and

waiting for the guy's arrival. The tracker they'd placed on the vehicle was coming in loud and clear, confirming that they were headed in the bar's direction.

Harris scanned the area before making his way across the manicured yard, carefully remaining as close to the shadows as possible. The team was wary of setting off any alarms, but found none.

Overconfident fucker.

The team converged on the back door and checked it for a security system before Woodley picked the lock with well-honed precision. While outside, they worked in absolute silence to avoid rousing a neighbor's attention. Each wore body cameras feeding back to the rental for the entire team to analyze.

Once inside, the first room they came to was the kitchen. Though it appeared neat and tidy, it seemed empty of homey touches, and a putrid smell came from somewhere inside the house.

"What the hell stinks?" Griffin asked.

"I don't know. It appears the tequila box has already been cracked," Woodley said while pointing to an opened box set in the corner by the refrigerator. "That didn't take long. Looks like two bottles are missing."

"Found one empty in the recycling," Apollo said from the other side of the kitchen.

"Nice to know the assholes are environmentally conscious," Harris said. "But they couldn't give a rat's ass for the people living in it."

"Okay, let's spread out and make this quick," Stryker ordered. "Though I'd like to have a face-to-face with this asshole, that'll have to be another time. Recon only."

“Soloman and the second man have arrived at the bar,” Gunner announced over the comms. “Conor will let us know when they make a move. Also, point of interest, the dude with Soloman has some abilities, according to Conor.”

“I wondered,” Apollo said. “I was a bit too far away, but something stood out about the guy.”

“Why would a survivor work for the enemy?” Woodley asked. “That shit doesn’t make sense.”

“We’ll have to ask him,” Harris growled.

“At least we know where they are,” Stryker said. “Let’s move.”

“Man, they need to crack a window and air this place out and get some air fresheners,” Woodley said. “This is disgusting.”

Harris and Woodley headed to the living room while Stryker, Apollo, and Griffin headed down the hall to the stairs leading to the second level, and the bedrooms. The living room had a single recliner positioned in front of a television set.

“Where the hell does the second dude sit?” Woodley asked. “The floor?”

“By the looks of things, yes, or maybe he stays in his bedroom,” Harris suggested.

They looked through the small table set beside the chair. Other than the remote and some bills, which Woodley took a picture of to record the name Soloman was using in New Orleans, there was a single empty glass that smelled of tequila sitting in the cupholder attached to the chair. It was convenient that a half-empty Jose Cuervo Reserva De La Familia bottle sat on the floor; he wouldn’t have to get up for a refill. That liquor was over two hundred dollars a bottle. You’d think it deserved to be on

the table.

“ Nothing here,” Harris announced to Woodley and the rest of the team through the comms.

Woodley stood staring at the large hutch containing the television. It stood roughly seven feet tall and at least six feet wide. The shelves held miscellaneous knickknacks, a few books on genetics—go figure—and three packages of unopened copy paper.

“ What are you thinking?” Harris asked Woodley.

“ I feel a breeze coming from behind that,” Woodley said, pointing at the hutch.

Harris bent and held his hand along the hardwood floor, and sure enough, he felt a cold breeze coming from behind the hutch.

“ Could be an air vent,” Harris said as he tried to look under the monstrous piece of lumber.

“ Only one way to find out,” Woodley said.

Harris stood in front of the hutch and Woodley stood to the other side.

“ On the count of three,” Woodley said. “One. Two. Three.”

Harris concentrated and used his powers to lift the piece of furniture without much effort, careful not to break anything or leave scrape marks on the hardwood as Woodley directed it a couple feet away from the wall so they could fit behind it, but it wasn't a wall they found.

“ Well, look at that,” Harris said. “A door.”

“ Someone doesn’t want us to look in there,” Woodley huffed.

“ There must be a basement, but I didn’t notice any windows on the house’s exterior,” Harris said.

“ They went to some trouble hiding it. It would be rude of us not to have a look around.” Woodley grinned.

“ Hell no, we wouldn’t want to be rude,” Harris chuckled.

Woodley stepped forward as Harris pulled out his Glock. Not knowing what was behind the door, he felt it better to be prepared than dead, heat signatures or not. Woodley turned the knob and flung it open, giving Harris an unobstructed shot at anything that might jump out.

Turns out there was nothing other than stairs heading into a darkened room below. He didn’t bother turning on a light; it might attract attention, so he flipped his night vision goggles down from the rim of his specially designed baseball hat. Woodley did the same.

He moved forward with Woodley at his back, taking one step at a time, gun at the ready. When they reached the bottom and scanned the first room, it became apparent they were standing in a lab of some sort. Shit.

“ I don’t like the looks of this,” Woodley said. “It gives me the creeps.”

“ Neither do I,” Harris agreed.

“ Whatcha got,” Stryker asked over the comms from the second story.

“ A hidden basement with computers, machines, test tubes, and other shit. At least

here in the first room. There's another door on the far wall," Harris said.

"We're on our way," Stryker stated.

Woodley took the lead as they made their way toward the shut door. When he tried to turn the knob, it wouldn't budge.

"Locked."

Woodley took out his lock-picking tools and went to work. Harris could hear footsteps coming down the stairs and turned to confirm it was the rest of their team. As he did, the locked door clicked and opened.

"Oh shit," Woodley said, and Harris quickly turned around to take a look inside as the stench intensified.

On a table near the back of the room lay what appeared to be a body covered by a dark sheet. This recon was going south fast.

Woodley

"I think we might have found Robin," Woodley whispered without stepping into the room.

The air around them was electrified as Apollo and Griffin stepped past Harris and himself. It didn't feel right entering the room until the other two had a chance to identify who was under the sheet.

The entire team would be watching their monitors and knew everyone was hoping

this wasn't Apollo's missing team member. Though the odds were not in their favor. Knots were forming in Woodley's stomach, and he noticed Harris moving closer to his side. This was the worst-case scenario, a result they worked tirelessly to avoid.

Apollo reached for the edge of the sheet, Griffin at his side. No one spoke. What the hell was there to say? The room wasn't large, so Woodley could see the man lying underneath when he removed the sheet. From the picture he'd been shown, it was indeed Robin; by the looks of things, he'd been dead for quite some time.

His lips had been sewn shut, likely to stop him from speaking and using his power of suggestion. Bastards. There was nothing else in the room except a folding chair.

Woodley stepped back into the lab portion of the basement, wanting to give Apollo and Griffin some time alone. Harris and Stryker followed him, and the three began searching the drawers and cupboards for anything they could use. As they came across paperwork, pictures were taken to be reviewed later. They didn't want to be here too long.

After a few minutes, Apollo and Griffin returned from the room, relocking the door as they did so as not to give their visit away. Apollo's eyes flashed with electric blue streaks, and Griffin's hands were glowing like they had back in the junkyard when he thought they were being attacked. Woodley noticed the tips of sharp canine teeth peeking out from under Griffin's top lip for the first time. Now wasn't the time to ask questions.

"Are we done here?" Apollo asked.

"Yes. We've covered every inch of the lab," Harris said.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Woodley said. "This isn't the way we'd hoped this to end."

“ Neither did we,” Griffin said. “Thank you. However, this isn’t the end. It’s the beginning of bringing the nightmare this group has created back to their doorsteps. None of those bastards will be walking away from this.”

“ Understood,” Harris said. “You have us by your side.”

Apollo nodded before heading back to the stairs. They replaced the hutch and relocked the kitchen door. Within minutes, the five left Soloman’s house and returned to their SUV. Gunner met them at their vehicle; the look of anger on his face mirrored their own. Soloman and his cohorts were going to pay. They had no idea the hell they’d brought down upon themselves. They'd know soon enough.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Harris

The mood in the rental was grim. Apollo and Griffin had returned to their own people to tell them the news, leaving with a new meeting time planned for the next day. There wasn't much conversation, and most of the team was lost in their thoughts, spending time with their partners or on calls with those left in Fire Lake.

Even though this team had never met Robin, it didn't change the fact that one of their own in this fight had paid the ultimate price. It could be any of them at any time, and that was a fact no one could deny.

Woodley rolled over, and Harris pulled him closer into his arms. It was after three in the morning, and neither were sleeping.

“How are you doing?” Woodley asked.

“I can't get the vision of Robin on that table out of my head.”

“Yeah, neither can I,” Woodley said. “I can't imagine what Apollo's people are going through.”

“This division of the group has no conscience. They need to be stopped.”

“That's the plan, but I must admit sometimes I feel like we're in a no-win situation. That it doesn't matter how hard we fight, people are still dying.”

“ I understand your frustration, but we are making a difference. We’ve already saved several test subjects and shut down multiple locations. We can’t allow them to deter us from pushing forward no matter how hard it sometimes feels.”

“ I know you’re right, and I refuse to stop, but all I want to do is blow that fucking bar to high heavens along with that house,” Woodley admitted.

“ Same, but we need to ensure no one else is being held in that secret back room in the bar first. Then we burn them to the ground.”

“ I’ll bring the marshmallows.”

Harris pulled Woodley even closer and kissed his temple.

“ What’s that look about?” Woodley asked.

“ What look?” Harris asked.

“ The contemplative one where you’re staring off into space. What’s wrong?”

“ Nothing’s wrong. Can’t a guy just think?”

“ Not you.”

“ My sister said the same thing not too long ago. Why are you two joining forces against me?” Harris chuckled. “I feel outnumbered.”

“ You’re not answering the question, smart-ass.”

“ Fine. I was thinking how it would be if you weren’t in my life.”

“ What?” Woodley asked while putting some space between them. “Planning on finding out?”

“ No. In fact, I want you to move to Fire Lake permanently. You could work on the team, or maybe Elias would hire you for the local department, but I’m unsure how many calls they have for a detective.”

“ You want me to move to Fire Lake?”

“ Yes. Like the other team members, we could build one of those cottages on the lake house property. Or we could work something out with Brian at the ranch. It doesn’t matter where we live just as long as it’s in the same place.”

“ This coming from a man who never wanted to commit to anyone. You’re sounding quite domesticated.”

“ Yeah, well, you can say I’ve seen the light. Besides, what do you have to go back to Oregon for? In Fire Lake, you don’t have to hide who you are; people accept you.”

“ So, I should move for convenience?”

“ Are you intentionally making this difficult?”

Woodley grinned. “Maybe.”

“ Fine. I want you to move to be with me. I need you by my side, and if forced, I guess I could try life in Oregon.”

“ This is a big commitment. It doesn’t scare you anymore?”

“ No. I love you, and I know that now.”

“ You love me?”

Woodley nearly fell off the bed. He looked shocked that those words had passed Harris’s lips and that the world might end.

“ Of course I do.”

Harris answered honestly and had a moment’s hesitation until a smile broke out on Woodley’s face.

“ Good, because I plan on sticking around. It’ll take a hell of a lot to make me return to Oregon.”

Harris pushed Woodley back onto the mattress and hovered over him. This man quickly turned into his everything, and Harris had no intention of fighting it.

“ It’s decided then. When we return to Fire Lake, we’ll find a place to live together.”

“ Sounds perfect,” Woodley said. “Now, if you’re done talking, can we get down to the more important stuff?”

“ More important?”

“ Yeah. Your dick in my ass.”

“ Hell yeah.”

Woodley

Woodley melted into Harris's possessive, commanding touch when he dove in for a kiss. He and Harris were equals, but when it came to what they preferred in a sexual partner, each had their own needs.

For Harris, it was control. For him, control was the last thing he desired. Woodley's entire life had been built on maintaining control in his detective work and chasing down the Noah Group.

With Harris, he relinquished that control for the first time in his life and had never experienced such intense pleasure before. Every touch felt freeing as he let himself enjoy and not get hung up on the details. As Harris's strong arms wrapped around him, Woodley basked in how perfectly their bodies fit together.

He didn't tell Harris that he loved him, and he wasn't sure why not. He felt the emotion as strongly as his lover, but some part of him still held back. Surely, his never-ending fear that everyone he loved died played a large part of his reticence.

It was fortunate that they were both already naked because things were progressing at light speed. They went from kissing and exploring each other's bodies to Harris stretching Woodley and pegging his prostate with every thrust of his fingers, driving him closer to coming. At the last possible moment, Harris pulled his fingers out, rolled a condom down his thick cock, added more lube, and lined up.

"Ready?" Harris asked.

"Hell, yes."

With a grin, Harris thrust forward and drove into Woodley's waiting hole, filling him and making him moan for more. He let himself go to the sensations, never once questioning whether this was right because he already knew. There'd be no more questions, only them together without compromise. Exactly what Woodley wanted

and needed most in his chaotic life.

“ God, you feel good wrapped around me,” Harris growled, his words sending shots of excitement through Woodley’s overheated body.

“ You ain’t seen nothing yet,” Woodley said, and with a calculated shift, he rolled Harris over onto his back and rode that big cock for all it was worth.

Harris’s eyes rolled into the back of his head as Woodley pistoned up and down faster and faster until he couldn’t hold his orgasm back and sprayed his release across Harris’s stomach. Harris gripped Woodley’s hips, flipped him over, and retook control, leaving Woodley helpless as his lover slammed into him until he roared his own release and collapsed onto Woodley’s back.

The only sound in the room was their heaving breaths as they fought for air after such a rigorous lovemaking session. Slowly, Harris slid his body to the side and gathered Woodley into his arms after taking care of the condom.

“ Holy shit, you’re going to kill me,” Harris said.

“ Can’t think of a better way to go.” Woodley laughed.

Soon, Harris’s breathing slowed and evened out until moments later, his snores echoed through the room. Woodley pulled the blankets over them and settled in with the man he intended to spend the rest of his life with, no matter how long that was.

Hell, he was in love for the first time in his life. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

The group had grown as they gathered around the dining room table. Along with their team, Apollo and Griffin, a man named Damon, and another named Hendrix joined them. Damon was tall, with jet-black hair and shifty eyes; Hendrix looked like he'd walked straight out of the sixties or seventies. Long blond hair, a bandana, a jean jacket covered in patches, and a handlebar mustache. Easy Rider junkie if he'd ever seen one.

They were two more survivors and part of Apollo's team. Though neither was too upfront about their mutations, Woodley could understand their reasoning for holding back. Trust was earned in this community, never a given.

Brick and Apollo entered the room, and everyone quieted down.

"Apollo has a few things he'd like to say," Brick said before stepping back, allowing Apollo to speak.

"I'd like to thank each of you for all the help you've given us. We know your team didn't have to risk themselves in our search for Robin. Though the search ended with the worst possible conclusion, we now have closure. Where we go from here involves both teams in a concerted effort to remove this threat from our city."

Brick stepped forward and took over.

"This division of the Noah Group has proved its willingness to kill anyone in their way. It's time we take the fight to them. In the coming days, we'll ramp up surveillance on both the bar and Soloman's residence to gather as much intel about their behaviors and schedules as possible. Tentatively, our incursion plans will center around Wednesday of next week. Midweek allows for a limited number of civilians caught in the crossfire if the Group chooses to engage us."

Spencer went around the table handing out files. "Inside, you will find your briefs and

timeline for the next week.”

“ This will be treated as a military operation; therefore, chains of command will be followed,” Brick said.

“ Meaning?” Damon asked.

Before Brick could say a word, Apollo spoke up.

“ Meaning Brick is the leader in this case. You’ll defer to him.”

“ I’m not comfortable with that,” Damon said.

Great, they had an asshole among them. This shit could jeopardize the team.

“ I don’t give a fuck if you’re comfortable or not,” Brick stated in a low, calm voice. That was never a good sign. “I’ve led countless missions into hostile territory across the globe. I spent my life taking out evil from the deepest jungle to the hottest desert without explaining why. I’m not about to start now. Leave.”

Holy shit. The look on Damon’s face said it all, shock. Making Woodley wonder if the guy had ever been put in his place.

“ But...” Damon sputtered.

“ Leave. You’re a liability,” Brick ordered.

Damon looked to Apollo.

“ I’m not risking any more of our people’s lives to satisfy your ego. Robin was butchered like an animal, and I don’t give a shit what I have to do to stop it from

happening again. Brick's experience is the best chance we have at making that happen. You can't follow orders; you can't come along."

"Robin was my lover. I'll do what it takes to stop them from doing this to anyone else," Damon said, his face bleak.

Woodley felt for the man. He couldn't imagine how he'd feel if that had been Harris on the slab.

Brick closed the distance between them and stared Damon down until the other man looked away.

"If you want to avenge the man you loved, then you, above anyone, should know that the Noah Group will do whatever it takes to destroy us, and we must be willing to do the same. Whether we have a problem with it or not," Brick stated. "I'm sorry for your loss, but we have a mission to finish."

"Yes, sir," Damon said without his prior bravado.

"That was your one and only warning. Don't give me a reason to take this chance at payback away from you," Brick said before returning to the head of the table. "Study the notes. We begin Operation NOLA at eighteen hundred hours."

As the meeting disbanded, Hendrix came forward and looked between Brick and Stryker, garnering both men's attention.

"Problem?" Stryker said.

Great, here we go again. Apollo needs to get his people under control.

"No problem, you misunderstand," Hendrix said with a deep Southern drawl that

reminded Woodley of people he'd met in Louisiana. "I see y'all's family ties."

"Family ties?" Brick asked.

"Hendrix is the resident genealogist without the DNA test, among other things," Apollo explained. "He can see your family lines."

"Yeah, we know we're distant cousins or some shit," Stryker said.

"No, man, first cousins, maybe second," Hendrix said.

"First cousins? Doesn't that mean one of each of our parents were siblings or first cousins?" Brick asked.

"Yeah, hold on," Hendrix said before grabbing a piece of paper and pen from the table and quickly scribbling something on it.

Woodley couldn't help but be curious, so he moved closer. The detective in him wanted answers.

Hendrix came back and handed the paper to Brick. "This here's the line."

Woodley couldn't see what was on the paper, but it had to be shocking because Brick stared at it and looked up at Stryker, who looked just as shocked, before shoving it in his pocket.

"Thank you, Hendrix," Brick said before he and Stryker walked away, heading straight for the temporary office set up in one of the bedrooms and shut the door.

Interesting.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Harris

As the day approached, the anticipation of the team was almost palpable. After spending long days and nights tracking this division of the Noah Group's every move, the sense of urgency rose. The group was planning something, but they couldn't determine what that was. There'd been arms deals going down, along with various drug dealers coming and going regularly. I guess that's how they're financing the operation.

It almost felt like the group was recruiting, and new faces started popping up in the background. That was never a good sign. So far, three new individuals had been appearing in the bar over the last week, and Spencer had been busy trying to identify them. If the Group felt comfortable expanding their forces, it was time to take them down before they went any further.

To that end, Gator had arrived on site. Their demolition and bomb specialist would be responsible for setting charges in the bar to destroy the Noah Group property but not the surrounding buildings. Harris had no idea how Gator would accomplish that, but he wasn't an explosives specialist like Gator. If he said there was a way, then there was a way.

The team hoped that once they got a look inside, they could determine exactly what the group had planned before blowing it to bits. Brick had been in contact with his associates in the Navy, the same ones who took charge of the criminals from the cult, and they had plenty of room in their cells for the new arrivals. They just had to

capture the fuckers.

What was more difficult to believe was that Soloman received another delivery of tequila. Harris couldn't understand how the dude still had a functioning liver. His decision-making processes had to be skewed due to the effects of near-constant drinking. The guy was on his last legs. Perhaps that's why the group had an elevated sense of urgency.

One bonus: Conor and Apollo got a good read on the guy living with Soloman when he came out to carry the delivery inside. It was true he was a test subject and working for the enemy, but the two had a familial relationship. Conor thought it was father and son but wasn't entirely sure, and Hendrix hadn't been on site to confirm it.

As for the unknown man's ability, Apollo stated that it had something to do with energy, but that was as much as he could get from a distance. With any luck, they'd have another crack at the guy. One thing that always stood out and seemed odd was the man always wore a shirt or jacket with a high collar buttoned to the top, even in the hot New Orleans weather.

Perhaps this energy mutation messed with the guy's ability to maintain a normal body temperature. Either way, he had much to answer for being Soloman's lackey against people like himself who had been victimized. Then a thought occurred to him. Maybe the guy wasn't a victim but a volunteer and wanted to be supercharged with freaky abilities? Maybe that was it.

"What's got you thinking so hard?" Woodley asked as he entered their bedroom.

His man had only been wearing a towel since he came from the shower. Tanned skin covered hard muscles as water beads dripped from his wet hair and down his pecs. Hell, do we have time for a quickie before the final meeting to prepare to take the bar?

“ Don’t get any ideas. I saw Brick heading for the kitchen. There isn’t time,” Woodley warned with a grin.

“ Damn. Put some clothes on then, or I can’t be held accountable for my actions.”

“ Smart-ass. So what's got you thinking?” Woodley asked as he reached for his boxer briefs.

“ I was wondering about that guy with Soloman.”

“ Maybe Soloman’s son?”

“ Yeah. Do you think it’s possible he chose to have his DNA sliced and diced? They’ve proven themselves to have the ability to mess with DNA and shit no matter the age of the test subject.”

“ I guess it’s possible, but it’s a very dangerous proposition because there’s no guarantee of how it will turn out. I remember being told Ellen’s mother had part of a twin growing out of her back, and she couldn’t stop growing taller.”

“ True. It could totally fuck up your body and brain. I guess we just won’t know until we question the guy.”

“ If we get to question him. He may not surrender peacefully.”

Harris knew that was a possibility. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Woodley walked over, now fully dressed, and wrapped his arms around Harris.

“ The sooner we get this over, the sooner we can go home to Fire Lake. That’s what keeps me going day after day.” He shrugged. “I guess being in love does that to a

man.”

Harris’s heart rate sped up as his mouth went dry. He’d been waiting and hoping for this moment ever since telling Woodley the truth about how he felt.

He dove in for a kiss full of promise and passion, hoping Woodley understood how much this meant to him. When they parted, the heated look on Woodley’s face confirmed he’d gotten his point across.

They stood in silence, simply holding each other. There wasn’t a need for more words. They’d said all the important stuff. For this one moment, life was perfect, and he had everything he could ever want right here in his arms.

“ You guys are way too adorable,” Jennifer said, and when he turned, Harris found his sister leaning on the door frame with a huge smile on her face. “Told you.”

“ Told me what?” Harris asked.

He liked the fact that Woodley was in no hurry to let him go even though they were no longer alone.

“ That you were going to end up together,” she said.

“ I’m not so sure you did. I remember something about men being dense and FUBAR.”

“ I have no idea what you’re talking about. Now unravel yourselves because Brick is waiting in the dining room to start the meeting.”

“ We’re on our way,” Harris said.

As Jennifer walked away, he pulled Woodley closer. “We’ll pick this up later.”

“The sooner, the better,” Woodley said.

He gave Woodley a quick kiss, slapped him on the ass, and led him toward the door. This was the life he’d been searching for, and he’d kill to keep it.

Woodley

They watched the screen as customers and members of the Noah Group left the building where the bar was located. As soon as the last person vacated the building, they’d send up the drone, check for any possible heat signatures left inside, and, if they were clear, breach the building.

“Still say a BearCat SWAT vehicle would have been more fun,” Shaw grouched like a child missing his toy.

The guy was fixated, but he did have a point. It truly would be extremely satisfying to ram an armored vehicle through those assholes.

“Fun, yes; quiet, no,” Brick said.

“One of these days, I’m going to drive one of those big bastards,” Shaw chuckled.

“Your birthday’s coming up,” Spence hinted.

“Oh yeah, I don’t want gifts. I want five... maybe ten minutes inside a BearCat, a derelict, abandoned building, and free reign.”

“Noted. Now get your head in the game,” Brick ordered. “Looks like Jaws is locking up.”

Sure enough, Jaws, the bartender with the unforgettable smile, was locking the doors to the bar. He turned and scanned the area before walking to his car and driving away.

“Tracker is online,” Spencer announced. “Jaws is headed back to his motel.”

Jaws was staying at a pay-by-the-week motel ten minutes from the bar. It was run-down, likely rodent-infested, and it appeared there were no questions asked when the dude brought hookers in at all times of night and day. Word on the street was Jaws paid in dope and liked it rough with no talking.

“Send in the drone. Let’s ensure no one is left inside,” Brick ordered.

“On it,” Spencer answered.

Woodley scanned the area. It was almost four in the morning, meaning they’d have less than three hours before the sun started rising. They wanted to be long gone before then, leaving only a burned-out shell behind. At least, that was the plan, and they all knew how quickly the best plans got screwed up in a hurry.

There wasn’t much action to be found on the streets this close to dawn. Most partiers had passed out back in their beds or wherever they ended up that night. The last of the hookers would soon give up on catching another trick for the night and head home while the drug dealers had already packed up for the evening.

In truth, most new-age dealers worked through pagers these days and delivered their dope door to door instead of hanging out on the street corner. It was less time and easier to get off with a slap on the wrist on charges carrying a smaller amount of drugs, and re-upping throughout the night than being caught with felony possession

weight. The remaining homeless were centralized in a park down the street, while a few others took a bed for the night at a local shelter.

These were the facts of the streets. It had its own ecosystem, including the hunter-and-prey dynamic. The john and hooker, the addict and dealer, the homeless and criminal preying on the vulnerable. His work as a detective had brought Woodley into the heart of the streets as its own living, breathing entity. He understood how things worked out here even if he didn't agree with it, and no matter how much he worked to change it, the criminal element on the streets thrived and always would.

"I'm not finding any heat signatures left in the bar area and the back of the building," Spencer announced. "The building is clear."

"Affirmative. You each have your orders. Thirty-second countdown begins," Brick said, and Woodley looked at his watch. "Now."

He kept count on his watch while Harris continued to scan the area. Now was not the time to run into a random drunk. They were positioned at the end of the alley to the bar's east, closest to the entrance. Shaw and Fletcher were across the street. Gunner was in his usual location, high up on the roof of the building directly north of their location. Shaw, Fletcher, and Gator would be busy setting charges as the rest searched for information. Apollo, Griffin, Damon, and Hendrix would take the front of the bar, while Brick, Stryker, Harris, and he would take the back.

They'd be entering through two exterior doors: one on the side of the building in the alley and another at the very back of the building used for shipping. Spencer was controlling the comms, and Jason manned the getaway vehicles along with Jennifer, who turned out to be an amazing driver who used her telekinesis to move objects out of their way when needed.

Woodley gave Harris one last look before the timer set on his watch kicked over.

“Go.”

As silent as ghosts, they made their way down the alley toward the side doors in full gear, ready for any eventuality. Woodley had his lock-picking equipment ready and waited for the final confirmation.

“ All building security systems are now under my control,” Spencer stated. “We’re a go for entry.”

He went ahead and picked the lock, sliding through the partially opened door with Harris at his back. Soon after, Woodley heard Apollo and his men coming in behind them. Not wanting to be bunched together outside the building while he picked the lock, they were scheduled at ten-second intervals.

“ Area is secure,” Gunner said over the comms.

Woodley loved using these bone mics. Voices were clear, and it took the lightest whisper to be heard. As they entered the front bar area, you couldn’t escape the smell of stale alcohol; they immediately peeled off from the other group and headed down the hall to the secret doorway behind the fake wall.

Harris felt around for the latch Joe used to access the back, and the wall slid out of the way as they’d seen in the video. They entered a dark room, but thanks to their night vision goggles, they could see everything as plain as day. There were stacks of boxes and random signage depicting bottles of liquor and women in various stages of undress strewn across the room. Tables and cabinets were covered with paper, bottles, empty glasses, and garbage.

When they heard the back door click, both Woodley and Harris aimed their guns at the door in case they suddenly had unannounced visitors. Standard protocol, even though they knew the odds were it was Brick and Stryker. As expected, their two

teammates came in and shut the door behind them. It was time to have a look around and sift through this mess.

“Front secure,” Apollo said.

“Charges being laid and set,” Gator announced.

The four men systematically searched the room in a grid pattern to avoid missing anything. Harris was the first to find something of interest.

“Got files over here on test subjects,” Harris announced from across the room.

“Bring them along,” Brick ordered.

“Roger,” Harris said and stuffed the files in the space between his chest and bulletproof vest. There’d be more time to review them when they were out of the hot zone.

Woodley scanned a mostly empty filing cabinet. It was likely intended to be used for new files as they acquired more test subjects. A sick thought. He found some data on Robin and another subject named Xavier. Instead of announcing it and bringing up a raw topic for the second team, he took the papers and did the same as Harris had done. They could review them later, along with the rest.

“Well, I’d say they’re ready for a war,” Stryker said. “I found the beginnings of their arsenal.”

Woodley turned to where Stryker was standing. He had opened a crate seemingly buried behind cases of beer and was holding what looked like an AK-47 assault rifle.

“There’s roughly twenty in here, along with ammunition,” he said. “This second box

contains grenades and other ordinance.”

“ Gator, we’ll need you to set explosives on those crates,” Brick stated. “We aren’t leaving anything behind they can salvage. Pull back once we sweep the room and let Gator and his team finish their work.”

“ Roger.”

With any luck, destroying the bar would shake Solomon up, and he’d lead them to any possible secondary locations. If not, they’d gather him up along with their sweep of the others and hand them over to the boss’s contacts in the military. They weren’t taking him down immediately in order to ensure there weren’t more locations they hadn’t discovered yet.

“ Found a stash of receipts,” Damon said. “Under a false bottom in a cupboard behind the bar. I’ll take them.”

“ Good catch. Might lead to persons of interest,” Brick said.

“ Roger.”

“ Other than that, some baggies of white powder and bottles of alcohol, the front of the bar is clear,” Apollo stated.

“ Okay, head out to the rendezvous point. We’ll meet you there when we’re done,” Brick ordered.

“ Roger.”

The fewer people left in the building at one time, the fewer the odds of someone being seen or hurt. Get in, get out. This wasn’t a party.

Gator, Fletcher, and Shaw entered the back room and began setting more charges. The explosives expert was calculating the distance between charges down to the millimeter. There was no mistaking the concentration on his face as Fletcher handed him material from a duffel bag. Shaw weighed every ounce of the yellow substance or TNT to Gator's specifications. He had explained that trinitrotoluene was very stable and hard to accidentally set off, which was why he preferred to use it as opposed to dynamite, which packed a bigger punch but wasn't as stable.

Like most laypersons, Woodley had never known there was a difference between TNT and dynamite, assuming they were identical. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"We've got drugs over here," Brick stated. "We'll throw it in the crate with the guns."

"Roger."

They continued to work in silence for several more minutes before Brick decided to call it. "Okay, we've cleared the building. All those not setting explosives, head back to the rendezvous point."

"Roger."

Woodley and Harris went back out the secret door, down the hallway, and through the side door. It took them less than a minute to get to the rendezvous point where the SUVs and Apollo's team were waiting. Jason and Jennifer sat behind the wheel, waiting for word from Brick.

Moments later, Gator, Fletcher, and Shaw joined them shortly after Brick and Stryker arrived. He'd heard Brick made sure he was always the last to leave. Woodley watched as Gator made some final adjustments to a control panel.

“ All lit up, boss. Waiting on the go-ahead,” Gator said.

Brick looked back from the passenger seat.

“ Spencer, alert the fire department to a building fire at this location,” he ordered.

That way, the fire department would be rolling and have a head start to be able to contain any outlying flames that might spark due to the explosion. They wanted to destroy the bar but leave the surrounding structures intact.

“ Damon, would you like to do the honors?” Brick asked.

Apollo, Damon, and Hendrix were sitting in the third row. He looked shocked by the offer but leaned forward.

“ Thank you,” Damon answered with a nod.

Gator held out the box. “All you have to do is flip this switch, and that place will be wiped off the map.” A very satisfying thought.

In the distance, they could hear sirens. The good guys were on their way. It was time to end this chapter of the Noah Group.

Damon took a deep breath. “This is for you, Robin.” And flipped the switch.

The night sky lit up like the Fourth of July. On their monitors, they watched as the building blew up and collapsed in on itself without leaving any substantial damage to its surroundings. No doubt the fire trucks would soon pull up to tackle the blaze.

They’d done it.

“ Good work, team,” Brick said. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Harris

They watched the footage of the fire on the morning news, confirming there were no injuries or extensive damage to other existing buildings, as they'd designed the explosion to be. The damage could be repaired easily. The fire marshal blamed a gas leak for the explosion at the urging of the military powers. Brick had some serious contacts when needed.

As expected, the rats were abandoning a sinking ship, and the MPs were rounding each of them up, thanks to the team's trackers making the job fairly easy. As for Soloman and his little helper, they hadn't been targeted yet. The team would be handling that job personally and with great satisfaction.

Spencer, Brick, and Apollo were reviewing the files they could recover from inside the building. Still, Harris was more interested in the papers Woodley found about Robin and a person named Xavier.

"You don't have a Xavier in your group, do you, Apollo?" Harris asked.

The team gathered around the dining table to review information and prepare for the next step.

"No, never heard of him," Apollo said. "Why?"

"This was found in the back room of the bar," Harris said as he lifted the piece of

paper. He looked over at Damon before continuing. “It refers to Robin and how a person named Xavier attempted to stop them from torturing him. They drugged the guy to stop him.”

It stated that Robin had refused to cooperate, which was likely why they got rid of him, but it also mentioned that Xavier’s powers attempted to obstruct their questioning of the subject. At one point, it stated that Xavier was heavily sedated to prevent him from interfering. It specified the amount and drug used on him along with frequency for future reference. It appeared that they intended to drug him regularly.

Damon held out his hand, and Harris didn’t hesitate to hand over the information. Without emotion, Damon reviewed it and turned to Apollo. It was plain to see the guy buried his pain deep.

“ We need to find this Xavier and free him. He tried to save Robin,” Damon said.

“ We’ll try to track him down, my friend, I promise,” Apollo said.

“ He might be stashed in a secondary location. We have eyes on Soloman, and if he takes off, we’ll follow him,” Brick said.

“ Let’s hope he isn’t already dead as well,” Griffin said from his position beside Darren. The raw pain in his voice was unmistakable; they missed their friend.

Darren sat quietly as he typically did, taking everything in. He had been working hard to control his ability to camouflage himself or, as he liked to call it, go ghost, and could now master his change for up to five minutes at a time.

Harris had the crap scared out of him when he walked into the kitchen, thinking he was alone, only to have Darren appear from part of the wall. Jennifer had run in and

yelled, “Found you.” Apparently the two had been playing a modified type of hide-and-seek as she helped him hone his skill.

That incident had him checking every room thoroughly and sometimes asking outright if Darren was in there with him. The dude was cool. He’d never intentionally tricked anyone and always outed himself when someone walked in on him while he was practicing. After a while, having Darren pop up unexpectedly became more common and less terrifying.

Brick’s cell phone rang, and he answered it.

“ Got it, thanks. Hendrix reported Soloman is on the move and alone this time. Fletcher, Shaw, Gunner, Harris, and Apollo meet up with Hendrix and look in the house for any reference on this Xavier. Woodley, Griffin, Damon, Stryker, and I will follow Soloman’s tracker and see where he’s headed. Gator, be ready to move if we find ourselves in need of your talents. The rest of you remain here and watch the comms. With luck, we end this today. Darren, do you feel ready for a little action?”

“ Hell yes,” Darren said. “I’ve been practicing.”

“ Good.”

“ On it, boss,” Spencer said while pulling up the tracker on his screen. “I’ll send you the coordinates.”

“ Move out.”

They arrived at Soloman’s house as the sun was setting, and Hendrix met them a few blocks over. They were going in with the same plan as the last time they were at the

house but with slightly different players. No one wanted Damon to have to come back to the place where Robin had been killed and his body found, so he'd been sent with the team to follow Solomon.

When they entered the house, the stench was gone, likely meaning they had removed Robin's body. They'd still have to check down in the basement to ensure they didn't miss anything in this second round of searching.

Harris, Apollo, and Hendrix took the upstairs bedroom, while Shaw and Fletcher took the basement, and Gunner kept watch. Harris had no desire to go back down there again either. Silently, they made their way through the kitchen, down the hallway, and up the stairs to the second level.

There were four doors; if the schematics were correct, three were bedrooms, and one was the bathroom. Methodically, they made their way from one bedroom to the next. The first room on the right was empty, followed by a sparse bathroom on the left with only the basics. Soap, comb, towel, and an electric razor, no blades.

They reached the third door and the first one that was closed; all the others had been open. When he went to turn the knob, it was locked, and he realized that this was the only door that had a keyed lock, meaning it was locked from the outside.

"Anyone know how to pick a lock?" Harris asked. "Woodley usually does this."

"Yes," Apollo said just before lifting his foot and slamming his boot into the door, crashing it open.

"Effective but definitely noticeable," Hendrix said.

"I don't care anymore," Apollo said. "I'm done sneaking around. That bastard has been fucking with us long enough."

The big guy was past his limit and Harris understood that feeling all too well. Harris led the way into the room, Glock at the ready. The room was dark, and wood planks covered the lone window. Hendrix flicked on his pocket flashlight and swept it across the room. There was a single bed with blankets balled up in a pile at its center. At first, Harris thought the room was empty until he noticed a slight movement under the blankets.

“Come out,” Apollo ordered.

Nothing.

Harris moved forward, and Hendrix mirrored him on the opposite side of the bed. With a nod, Hendrix tore the blankets off the mattress, and Harris immediately lowered his gun. Lying under the blankets was the man they’d seen with Soloman, the traitor, but he was unconscious and chained by one of his hands to a large eyebolt screwed into the floor.

Apollo reached down to check the mystery man’s pulse, and when he moved the shirt out of the way, Hendrix gasped.

“What the fuck is that?” Hendrix asked.

“A shock collar,” Apollo answered with a growl. “I get the feeling this guy wasn’t so much of a follower of Soloman than a prisoner.”

“Fuck,” Harris growled as he noticed the burn marks around the guy’s throat.

“He’s Soloman’s son,” Hendrix said. “I can see the line.”

“Let’s get him out of here,” Harris said as he holstered his gun. “The cuff is locked with a padlock. We need a key.”

“ No, we don’t,” Apollo stated before he reached down and grabbed the chain.

Within seconds, the links touching his palm disintegrated into dust. Then he reached up and did the same thing with the metal collar. That was a handy ability to have.

“ I can also disrupt the molecules that make up any object and break it down to its base elements,” Apollo explained.

“ Cool. Hendrix and I will check out the last room,” Harris said. “Can you stay here with this guy?”

“ Yes,” Apollo said.

Harris returned to the hallway with Hendrix on his six. It didn’t take long to clear the last room, considering it was as empty as the first one. When he returned to Apollo, he had the stranger in his arms, still unconscious.

“ Let’s get the hell out of here,” Apollo said.

“ Agreed.”

By the time they made it back downstairs, Shaw and Fletcher were waiting for them.

“ Is that the guy working with Soloman?” Shaw asked.

“ More accurately, prisoner,” Harris said while holding up what was left of the chain.

“ Fucking asshole,” Fletcher said. “He had the guy chained?”

“ And wearing a shock collar,” Apollo said, turning so they could see the burns on the guy’s throat.

Harris now understood why the guy always wore high-collared shirts and jackets. It was to hide the shock collar used by Soloman to control him.

“ Let’s go. Brick and the other team are on Soloman’s trail,” Shaw said. “They’ve cleaned everything out of the basement. There’s nothing left.”

“ Was Soloman planning on leaving his son here chained to the floor to die?” Hendrix asked. “That’s messed up.”

“ We better get Spencer to check his blood to determine what drug was used on him, just in case,” Harris said.

“ Agreed. Let’s go.”

Woodley

They’d tracked Soloman to a warehouse outside the city close to the port. It was only minutes before midnight, and the way the guy had been driving around the city aimlessly led him to believe he was wary of having a tail or perhaps waiting for a call with directions. Since they had a tracker on his car, it was unnecessary to come within visual range and risk spooking the guy.

Brick, Stryker, Damon, Darren, Griffin, and he had done a couple hours of surveillance. They’d split up into two teams to make their way inside the warehouse and have a look around as silently as possible before taking Soloman down.

He, Stryker, and Damon would take the east side of the building, while Brick, Darren, and Griffin took the north. Woodley couldn’t help but hope Harris’s mission was a success. The area around the warehouse was littered with derelict shipping containers

and forklifts. It was a graveyard of rusted metal with broken glass sprinkled in like confetti.

They had to be careful not to step on or run into random pieces of metal scraps that would give their location away and ruin the elements of surprise. The building was in the same condition as the shipping containers, with gaping holes everywhere from disrepair or previous visitors.

Accessing the building wouldn't be too difficult, but doing it without making a sound would be more challenging. They approached the first opening large enough to fit through and Stryker took a quick look inside.

With a nod, Stryker went through as he and Damon stood guard. They waited a few seconds, and then Woodley and Damon followed. Once inside, they used their night vision goggles and moved farther into the building. The interior appeared to be the shell of some old processing plant. Considering their vicinity to the port, Woodley assumed it was for fish.

"We're in," Stryker said through the comms to the other team. "Looks deserted, but the guy's got to be here somewhere."

"Roger, still making our way across the side of the building," Brick responded. "Reports in that the other team found Solomon's son unconscious and chained to the floor."

That wasn't what Woodley had expected. Maybe the guy wasn't working for the psycho.

Stryker motioned for them to move forward. Woodley pressed his back against the wall as they approached an opening with the door lying a couple feet away. In one synchronized move, Woodley turned the corner, and Stryker followed him in while

Damon remained in the hallway as a lookout. Hard and fast was the name of the game with these smaller rooms. They had to keep the element of surprise on their side.

The room was empty, covered in dust and cobwebs. No one had entered in a long time. They continued down the hall, repeating the process at every door they came to, but still came up empty.

“ In,” Brick announced. “Working our way east.”

“ Roger.”

Woodley looked back at Damon, who shrugged, wondering the same thing. Where the hell was Soloman? They passed large machines with old conveyors running almost the length of the building, and just when he was about to suggest turning in another direction, a faint glow spread out from behind a large stamping press.

He didn't like it. There wasn't a sound. Were they being set up?

In the next second, he had his answer.

“ You might as well come out. I know you're there,” Soloman's voice broke through the silence. “I've been waiting for you and don't get any ideas; I'm rigged to blow this entire building to bits. Make me wait too long, and I might do it for the hell of it. There's enough explosives to take you freaks along with me just like you did my bar. There's no way in hell I'm being taken in.”

They couldn't see him just yet, but Woodley imagined the fucker standing on the other side of this machine, holding a detonator and grinning wide. God, he'd never wanted to put a bullet into someone more in his life.

Stryker moved forward, rifle up and at the ready. If anyone had a chance of taking out the asshole before he hit the button, it was Stryker. The man never missed. Woodley followed him out but motioned for Damon to stay behind, out of sight, in case Soloman didn't know how many people were on the team.

When they rounded the machine, they found Soloman sitting on a folding chair like he didn't have a care in the world. Under the chair sat a package no bigger than a shoebox with wires running up and under the seat. That's when he realized Soloman wasn't holding the detonator. The fucker was sitting on it. If he stood up, it would blow. If someone shot him and he fell off, it would blow. Stryker's talent was neutralized, and they were well and truly screwed.

"Welcome," Soloman said. "Come on over."

Gator's voice came through the comms with absolute calm. "You need to pull the wires free from the box under his chair before he has a chance to stand."

That was when Woodley remembered they were wearing cameras with a live feed leading back to the rental, where the rest of the team was waiting. Sure, remove the wires. The next question was, how did they get close enough to do that?

"Right about now, you're wondering if there's really enough explosives in the box to do what I claim," Soloman said before leaning down and tipping it in their direction.

"Shit, C-4," Gator said. "Enough to take out the entire block."

Soloman set the box back down, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms.

"Do I have to ask the rest of you again to come out? You're trying my patience. If you think you can outrun the explosion, I assure you, you're wrong."

There was a slight movement to Woodley's and Stryker's right, as Brick and Griffin walked out, followed by Damon at their back, all guns pointed at Soloman. Darren was nowhere to be seen.

“Your guns are useless. You might as well put them down. You know if you shoot me, I'll fall off this chair and boom. There'll be nothing left for the coroner to identify.”

Brick lowered his rifle. “What the fuck do you want?”

“To talk. I'm curious about the team that thinks it's capable of taking down the far superior Noah Group.”

Check your ego, asshole.

“The Noah Group will be taken down. If not by us, others know of their existence and will take up the cause after our deaths,” Brick said. “You accomplish nothing by doing this.”

“That's where you're wrong. I get the satisfaction of killing all of you as a warning to the others that if they fight us, their lives will end in the same fate.”

“You'll never win,” Griffin growled.

“I already have. Did you like the gift I sent to your home, Brick?” Soloman asked.

“Figured you were responsible for that bomb, but again you failed. I guess we hit a nerve when we took down the cult,” Brick said with a confident grin.

Soloman's face twisted in anger. “It took me over two decades to set that operation up, to control the entire town.”

“ Yeah, that had to sting,” Stryker chuckled.

Woodley had to wonder what the hell they were doing, antagonizing the guy, but figured if they were going to die, why not go out in style?

“ Then we come here and blow up your bar,” Stryker continued along the same theme.

Perhaps they were all crazy.

“ The freaks you’re trying to save are a dime a dozen and are easily disposed of like your friend Robin,” Soloman cackled. Yep, insane.

“ You fucker,” Damon hissed before taking a couple steps forward.

Woodley blocked his way, stopping him from charging Soloman and blowing them all to bits of fish food.

“ That’s what he wants,” he said. “Soloman thrives on causing pain.”

“ Ah, I touched a nerve there. Was he more than a friend? Hmm, maybe your lover,” Soloman chuckled. “Ultimately, his ability was no match for some fishing wire and a sewing needle. Stitched that mouth up before he could utter a word. I must admit it wasn’t as satisfying not being able to hear his screams, but it was necessary.”

Woodley could see Damon’s eyes changing color and the tips of his fingers turning red. Shit was close to going nuclear.

“ We have your son,” Brick said, effectively changing the topic. “He’s free now.”

Soloman’s face went white, but he didn’t say a word.

“ Yes, we’ve been to your house. The chains you had tying him down were easily removed, and his shock collar is long gone. You fucked with your own son’s DNA. Were you going to leave him there to die?” Brick asked.

“ He could’ve been my greatest achievement. He had unimaginable power but refused to use it no matter what I tried, and he became as useless to me as the rest of you. Why wouldn’t I leave him to die? He’s nothing,” Soloman roared. “And neither are any of you. My legacy will live on in infamy, and my name will be talked about in circles of power as the facilitator of a new world order.”

“ Yeah, your name will be talked about in medical journals alongside the terms insane egomaniac with delusions of glory,” Brick chuckled.

Woodley thought he’d caught movement behind Soloman, but when he looked harder, he saw nothing.

“ I’ve had enough of you,” Soloman said as he uncrossed his arms and pulled his legs back from his lounging position, as if preparing to stand. “Rot in hell.”

Soloman stood, and time stopped. Woodley braced out of habit, but knew none of them would survive the blast. Even with his healing ability, he was as dead as everyone in the building, and likely several buildings on either side of them. He waited as the rest of them did, but nothing happened. Had Soloman been lying?

Suddenly, out of thin air, Darren appeared behind Soloman, holding the wires that had been connected to the box of explosives in his hand. He had stripped naked and used his chameleon-like ability to go ghost and blend in with his surroundings, enabling him to sneak up behind Soloman and pull out the wires as Gator had instructed.

Holy shit. Woodley would have passed out in relief if Soloman hadn’t spun around to

attack Darren. Woodley wasn't certain what happened after that, but one moment, Griffin stood beside Brick, and the next, something flashed across the room, and Soloman and Griffin were gone.

“What the fuck just happened?” Stryker asked while scanning the area.

“It's okay,” Damon said. “Griffin took care of the bastard. He won't be able to hurt anyone anymore.” He walked over to Darren and held out his jacket. “Best cover yourself up,” he said with a smile. “You deserve a lot more for saving our lives like that.”

Darren pulled on the jacket, which didn't cover everything but gave him some privacy. “Happy to be of service,” he joked. “Soloman has gone.”

Woodley stared round at the others. Where exactly the man had disappeared to was a mystery.

He supposed some things were unexplainable and should remain that way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Harris

“ That’s twice now I almost lost you. First, when you were shot, and second, when Soloman almost blew you up. Being back at the rental and watching that shit go down was a living hell,” Harris said as he pulled Woodley close. “You’ve got to stop doing that to me.”

“ Trust me, it’s not intentional. If it hadn’t been for Darren, we’d be part of the New Orleans waterfront.”

“ Don’t say shit like that,” Harris said, not completely over the recent events.

“ Sorry,” Woodley said. “How’s Soloman’s son doing? Do you think he’s the Xavier from the notes?”

“ We won’t know until he wakes up. He’s still in a coma. Whatever Soloman dosed him with that last time has had some serious side effects.”

“ I can’t believe a father would do that to his son. I hope the asshole’s rotting in hell.”

“ Hell might be too good for Soloman.”

They’d returned to Fire Lake late last night and were back in their room at the ranch. It felt good to be away from New Orleans.

“ Have they been able to round all the other members up?” Woodley asked.

“ Yeah, everyone but Jaws. The crazy bastard drove himself off the Maestri Bridge and straight into Lake Pontchartrain when the state troopers tried to arrest him.”

“ That makes two fewer psychos in the world. Sounds like a good result to me,” Woodley said.

“ I’ll tell you what an even better result would be,” Harris said.

“ What’s that?”

“ If you told me where you wanted to live permanently. The ranch or the lake house? I want to make this official and break ground.” Harris was ready to make some solid changes in his life.

Before Woodley could answer, there was a knock on their bedroom door.

“ Get dressed, you guys, or you’re going to miss it,” Jennifer said from the other side of the door.

“ Miss what?” Harris asked, but Jennifer was already gone.

“ Come on, let’s see what the excitement is all about,” Woodley said with a chuckle.

They dressed and walked through the ranch house to find everyone on the back deck.

“ What’s going on?” Harris asked.

“ Wait and see,” Jennifer said as three trucks approached the ranch house. One of the trucks was towing something big on a trailer, but it was covered.

It was the Fire Lake team, and as they parked, Brian and Kyle came out of the barn, leading a blindfolded Shaw. They led Shaw to whatever was under the tarps and removed his blindfold.

“What’s going on?” Shaw asked, looking around.

Brick walked over to the trailer and pulled on a rope hanging down from the top of the tarp. As the fabric gave way, a cheer rose up.

“Happy birthday.”

“Holy shit. Is that what I think it is?” Shaw yelled.

“It is,” Brick confirmed.

“A BearCat Assault vehicle.”

Harris watched as Shaw hugged and kissed his lovers, shook hands, and hugged his teammates as the beast of a vehicle was rolled off the trailer. He couldn’t help but feel at home with these people. They were as crazy as he was, but in all the right ways.

“You see that old shed over there?” Bryan asked Shaw, pointing toward what looked to be a thirty-foot single-story shed that used to hold those huge round bales of hay.

“Yeah,” Shaw said.

“Have at it.”

“Really? Really, really. Oh shit, yesss,” Shaw hooted and hollered as he got in the driver’s seat and took off across the pasture.

He didn't even slow down as he drove the BearCat through one side of the shed and out the other to the cheers of all. Harris pulled Woodley into his arms. He'd never felt complete happiness before now, and it was thanks to his tenacious detective.

"I love you, Liam."

"I love you too, and as for breaking ground on our place, is that broken enough for you?" Woodley asked as he pointed to where Shaw was making quick work of the former building.

"You mean?" Harris asked in shock.

"Yep, that's where our new home is going to be built," Woodley said.

Everyone on the deck turned and cheered, this time for them.

"Welcome home."

Jennifer had tears in her eyes as everyone clapped.

"You planned all of this for me?" Harris asked.

"Nothing less would do." Woodley grinned before pulling Harris close and kissing him.

Harris wasn't sure what he'd done in his life to deserve all this, but he thanked the heavens for this chance and swore never to take it for granted.

As the group watched, Shaw flattened the shed; everyone cheered him on as bottles of beer were handed out and a large birthday cake appeared. Where the hell had they been hiding all this?

Weeks from now, they'd be busy digging the first hole to lay the footings as he and Woodley watched while making those future plans that once scared him, and they'd never look back.

Lake House

Brick

He walked into the kitchen to find Julia busy making her weekly grocery list. The place wouldn't be able to run without her, and Brick appreciated everything she did, but he needed something specific right now.

"Hey, do you need anything special at the grocery store?" Julia asked.

"No, I'm good with the usual," he said. "However, there is something you can help me with."

Julia put down her pen and looked at him.

"Sure, what's up?"

Brick pulled the crumpled piece of paper Hendrix had given him back in New Orleans from his pocket and placed it on the table. Julia took the paper and flattened it out. He waited patiently as she read it.

"How did you get this?" she asked.

"One of Apollo's men has the ability to see a person's history and family lines. He gave that to me."

Julia looked back at the page and shook her head. “Does this mean what I think it means?” she asked.

“ Yes. Great-Aunt Sophia had a baby.”

ARE YOU READY FOR THE LAST BOOK IN THE FIRE LAKE SERIES?

TURN THE PAGE FOR A PEEK AT GHOST

GHOST

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 he went to school there, and the main street still resembled small-town America with its flags, flowers, storefronts, and wide sidewalks. A place where you could raise a family in peace and relative safety, at least from all outward appearances.

He'd promised Elias he'd come back for a visit after they'd found Fletcher's brother, Kyle, and had shut down the human trafficking ring in Seattle that their parents had been involved with.

Sheriff Elias Cooper and he served together in the Marines before returning to civilian life, if being a sheriff or homicide detective was considered normal to anyone outside law enforcement.

So here he was, back in the town he'd grown up in. Where he'd been expected to take over as sheriff someday like his father had, after he'd retired from the Marines.

But that never happened due to a twist of fate and a few well-intentioned offers. This stop was little more than a quick visit on his way to a law enforcement conference in Las Vegas. A way of keeping a promise to his old Marine buddy, Elias, without being forced to stay too long. He was expected to attend the conference in four days and couldn't miss it. A win-win in his books.

As he drove through town, old memories crept up as they always did. The street he grew up on to the left, the park he used to play basketball in, the corner store that sold all 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 could feel the imaginary hands circling his neck, growing tighter by the moment. He pulled at his shirt collar for relief, but finding none, he sped up.

Once he made it outside the town limits, he felt those fingers loosen, and his breathing even out. A town shouldn't have this kind of visceral effect on him after having spent so many years hundreds and thousands of miles away first as a US Marine, and then a homicide detective.

But it did. And it still sucked.

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

It'd been a couple years since the case involving Kyle, Fletcher's brother, had been closed, and Ray had run out of excuses for not visiting his old friend and hometown. So here he was, though reluctantly, and dreading every moment while already planning his immediate escape.

He knew the area well and didn't require directions, but Sophia had owned the lake house back when he'd lived in town. Sophia's older brother and Brick's father had moved away years before Ray was born, and his father took over as sheriff. Their parents were elderly and under Sophia's care. It was a lifetime ago, a past he'd preferred to stay that way, or at least he hoped it did.

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 earlier. The house looked shiny and new, and the new cottages dotting the property between the large oak trees reminded him of one of those idyllic setups in 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 up to a large dock, and Spencer, whom he’d met on Kyle’s case, was fishing off to the side while a smaller man sat in a lawn chair reading a book by his side. 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 just hop on a plane whenever they want,” Ray joked 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 as he brought him in and slapped 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.

“ You got me there. How are you, Brick?” Ray asked, shaking his offered hand.

“ Keeping busy. You know how things go.”

“ Yeah, I do. I hear those missions have you guys pretty tied up lately.” Elias had mentioned a bit about Fletcher being away on jobs, but had never gotten into specifics.

“ Come on in, we’ll grab a beer and getcha caught up,” Brick said with a welcoming smile.

“ Sounds great.” He could use a beer or two. This town gave him stress like no other location he’d ever been in.

Ray followed them into the lake house and couldn’t believe how nice the place was for a bunch of men living there. There wasn’t even 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 stunning.” 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 from Elias,” 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 from them.

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

“ What the fuck was that?” Ray shouted before taking a few steps forward to place himself in front of Julia to protect her.

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

Julia pushed past Ray, and she and Fletcher ran to the man, who was now lying unconscious on the floor.

“ Oh shit. Darren, Darren, talk to me,” Julia said as she lifted his head off the hardwood.

Ray had no idea what the hell was going on and turned to Elias for answers.

“ You forget to tell me something?” Ray asked.

“ Yeah, we need to talk,” Elias said.

Ray turned back to the man still crumpled on the floor to see crystal-clear blue eyes staring at him in abject fear.

As if a gust had whooshed through Ray’s body, he was overcome with the most unexpected and unwelcome feeling: the absolute need to ensure he never saw that expression on Darren’s face again.

Shit .