



Boroughs
Publishing Group

GATOR

FIRE  LAKE

M. TASIA
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

In a life full of twists and turns, Gator never looked for or expected to find “the one.” Actually, he wasn’t sure he believed there was such a thing. After years of being a bar owner and hearing too many sad tales of love gone wrong, he knew he had no patience for the ups and downs of a long-term committed relationship.

Though, he had no trouble lending a helping hand to a person in need.

Which is how Jason wound up living in the apartment over Gator’s bar. Now there’s a guy who needs to disappear for a while.

When trouble finds him anyway, Jason’s life is on the line, and somehow Gator becomes the man he never thought he’d be: a life-long partner.

GATOR

Fire Lake – Book 6

M. Tasia

ALSO BY M. TASIA

The Boys of Brighton series

[Gabe](#)

[Sam's Soldiers](#)

[Rick's Bear](#)

[Jesse](#)

[Coop](#)

[Travis](#)

[Grady](#)

[Vincent](#)

[Shadow](#)

[The Holidays](#)

The Gates series

[Saint](#)

[Finn](#)

[James](#)

[Joey](#)

[Bradley](#)

[Carlos](#)

[Sawyer](#)

[Trey](#)

Fire Lake series

[Brick](#)

[Fletcher](#)

[Shaw](#)

[Spencer](#)

Gunner

READERS ARE WILD ABOUT FIRE LAKE

“What a great beginning to a series! Brick and Roman are perfect together. Add in the murder factor and some well trained military men and you have the makings of an awesome series. It was a well written story that kept me engaged from the first page. Cannot wait for Fletch, Spencer, and Shaw’s book.”

~I Love Books 2005 on *Brick*

“Fletcher is the latest in M. Tasia’s Fire Lake series, a lineup of action-packed M/M romances that I LOVE. Fletcher Daniels is a retired Navy SEAL - handsome, brave, and loyal to the military brothers with whom he has formed a security company, and he finds himself drawn to the local sheriff. Elias Cooper is as sexy as he is protective, and he wants Fletch just as much. Just when they decide to see where this burning attraction will lead them, the new couple, along with Brick and the other guys, become immersed in a missing persons case that hits really close to home. Fletch and Elias are equally strong, passionate men with their own demons, and it makes them one hell of a fierce couple. The respect with which Tasia treats these super steamy love stories gives me all the feels, and those heart-tugging aww moments, the sexy bits, and the suspense make it REALLY difficult for me to wait for the next installment. Once again, such amazing work, M. Tasia!”

~Shannon Williams on *Fletcher*

“I am really enjoying this series and I look forward to more books to come. I like the nature of these stories. A suspense story along with a romance. I like that the romances are low angst and missing the usual miscommunication or martyr tropes a lot of suspense romances seem to have. I think this author may have created a new sub-genre...a light and fluffy suspense romance if that’s possible! The suspense part of the story has enough intrigue to keep you guessing and the teensiest bit anxious while the romance part of the story is pretty instalove and mostly smooth sailing without cliched

complications. We get a loving, caring relationship that we see gradually develop into more. The emotions are always a key part of the developing relationships helping us to see the men. We have new characters added in this book so I look forward to seeing how they fit in with the group and what their stories are. Looking forward to the next book”.

~Beth I-L on *Shaw*

“The men of Fire Lake are embroiled in several mysteries at once. What starts as a simple case of a missing girl turns into shadowy characters and government secrets. Once again, the team works well together providing help to the innocent and finding love in the process. Rick’s past was heartbreaking, but his relationship with Spence was sweet as they worked together. I loved how the team accepted him and his quirky behaviors.”

~Book Addiction on *Spencer*

“I’ve thoroughly enjoyed meeting these men, watching them find their matches, and along the way make the world a safer place. Gunner, and the adorable Ben, could not have chosen anyone better than Conor. He’s a treasure and the more I learned about him, the more I adore him. I think my favorite part of their relationship is how they believe in the other and trust. I can’t wait to until the next time we get to visit Fire Lake, and hope it’s a long stay.”

~DevotedReader on *Gunner*

EVERYONE LOVES THE BOYS OF BRIGHTON

“I loved this book and I love this town. I hope there’s going to be more.”

—Melissa Lemons on *Gabe*

“An amazing read that was filled with lust, love, crazy hot sex, danger, action and so much more This is the first book I have read in this series but I will definitely be reading more in the future.”

—Gay Book Reviews on *Sam’s Soldiers*

“I was crazy impressed that the author made me teary over the ending of a relationship that I shouldn’t have even been invested in. I didn’t yet know these characters yet the author made me hurt for them. That takes some mad writing skills!”

—Love Bytes Reviews on *Rick’s Bear*

“Jesse and Royce together have my heart. Jesse has it all by himself.”

—The Book Junkie Reads on *Jesse*

“So much action, intrigue, drama and angst for the long awaited story of Grady and Ben. This was worth the wait. Sexy and sweet. I can’t wait for the next.”

—SamD on *Grady*

“I knew this one would be my favorite to date! There was something about Vincent that said awesome then came Tristan.”

—Booky on *Vincent*

“This installment of the Boys of Brighton was so good! I loved Shadow and Randy ‘s story I was hooked from the first page to the last. This book was definitely worth the wait!”

—AG on *Shadow*

“I have loved this series from the very first story and this holiday novella is simply perfect. We get a glimpse of all our couples and what is happening in their lives while the holidays explode around them. I cannot wait for more!”

—bookobsessed on *The Holidays*

ANOTHER BIG LOVE – THE GATES

“Ms. Tasia has done it again! This is Saint’s story, for readers of the Brighton Boys, you’ll know he needs a break! After

being forced to become a plastic surgeon by his father, he rebels by assisting people in 3rd world countries, which puts him in the position to be kidnapped and tortured. You really feel for him, that's for sure! Max is the perfect man for poor Saint's battered soul, not that he doesn't have his own issues! Overall, this was engaging, steady paced and chock full of all the feels!"

—Avid Reader on *Saint*

"Finn and Miguel stole my heart. This is a great Sunday afternoon read. Finn's character jumped off the page as his story developed through each chapter. I loved reading his truth and watching him and Miguel find their home in each other."

—K.A. Brown on *Finn*

"This is really a great series and I def recommend it. I loved James and Ross, it was a rough start for the two, but they worked it out. I can't wait for more, love everything M. TASIA writes!"

—TammyKay on *James*

"I may have my new favorite book couple of the series. Joey and Sam just have that something special. At one point I was ugly crying but it was a good ugly cry if that makes any sense. I really love the series and I can't wait for her next installment!!"

—Vine Voice on *Joey*

"This author is really talented and I love her series, this one and the Boys of Brighton. Her characters are so well drawn and I can really get into the stories. I especially loved Eric in this particular book. I'm hoping Clay the rookie will be the next book. Keep 'em coming!"

—Rosemary on *Bradley*

"Two men with damaged souls come together and find love. A tried and true formula that works well here, especially when working with two lovable characters like Carlos and Clay. Carlos especially was interesting to me - the contrast of his appearance to his gentle nature, a true gentle giant. And Clay being all protective of the much larger, but more gentle man -

so sweet! I really liked this story and am looking forward to more of The Gates now.”

—Valeen on *Carlos*

“Sawyer is the newest addition to The Gates series. The book is very emotional, sweet, funny, romantic, and these two are great together. I look forward to every book in this series.”

—Elaine Gray on *Sawyer*

“This book has all the feels and pulls the reader right in. It was wonderful to see how the two of them went from adversaries to respect to falling in love. You won’t want to miss their story to see the path they travel and if there is a HEA waiting at the end. There is much more going on here, but hopefully this is enough to convince you that you will not want to miss this one.”

~Emily Pennington on *Trey*



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GATOR

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*To my family for their unwavering support.
I love all of you to the moon and back.*

GATOR

Contents

[Also By M. Tasia](#)

[Praise for M. Tasia](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

About the Author

About the Publisher

CHAPTER ONE

Jason

Jason liked the bar most when it was like this. Quiet with the wood gleaming in the setting sun, all the tables clean and ready for the doors to open and for neighbors to walk in. Jason had been working on a new piece of furniture designed to add more shelving behind the bar, and it was coming along nicely.

Gator had been a wonderful host while Jason was hiding out. His psycho parents were still on the loose, and he wanted to make sure he never saw them again.

Gator had given Jason the spare bedroom in the two-bedroom apartment above the bar. By way of thanks for taking him in, Jason occasionally helped around the bar.

The apartment was large and relatively modern compared to the bar. Gator said it was because people felt more comfortable in a space they recognized. They knew what to expect and could settle in and relax, which were only two of his reasons for not remodeling the downstairs.

Over the past few weeks, Jason had the opportunity to visit with Ben at Fire Lake, and he treasured every moment. He never thought he'd have a relationship with his son, but thanks to Gunner and Conor, he was now part of Ben's life.

Jason looked down at the tan leather bracelet Ben had made for him. Ben had etched "DAD" into the leather, and Jason had cried when his son gave it to him.

Ben was an amazing kid. Smart and kind like his mother. It was still hard to believe Mandy was gone. But he saw her in their son whenever he looked at Ben.

Jason knew when Ben got older, he'd learn and understand what really happened, and why Jason gave up his parental rights. It wouldn't be easy for the boy to look past what Jason had done, but he hoped someday he'd find it in his heart to forgive his father for taking what would seem like the easy way out.

Of all the surprises that'd changed Jason's life, Gator was one of the biggest. He was an amazing man who helped people around town, and always had a minute to stop and talk to someone. He always made the person he talked with feel like they were the only one in the world, and many people came to him for advice. He never turned anyone away.

Jason had caught himself more than once wishing Gator was gay. The fact he had an ex-wife didn't nix the possibility, but it lowered the likelihood by a lot.

Jason had met a lot of men who were gay but had married for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which was to cover their truth. From what Jason could see, the small Texas town of Marshall wasn't what he'd call forward thinking or liberal. Some people were, but most, not so much. But there was a level of tolerance that made living here doable. It wasn't the East or West Coasts, but he'd met many fine, decent people.

As for Gator, it didn't matter if he was gay. The guy was great, and Jason would make sure the piece he created for the bar fit the unique man it was being made for.

He'd used black walnut to build the shelving unit. It was strong and had a dense grain, which made it perfect for the bar. The dark chocolate color would make quite a statement at the back of the bar, with bottles of the finer liquors stored and displayed on its shelves.

What had first begun as a couple of extra shelves had turned into a full-fledged installation at the end of the bar with shelving, cabinets, an inlaid mirror, and intricate carvings. It was going to be stunning when completed.

He had to admit, it felt odd being in the bar by himself. Gator had gone to pick up a beef delivery from Bryan for the bar's restaurant. The cook was amazing and came with the

place when Gator had bought it. Six employees worked at the bar. Jason had met and liked them all. It felt like a family of sorts.

He took one final look at his work in progress and began packing away his tools. Various chisels, carving knives, gauges, a hand saw, clamps, a smoothing plane, and more filled the old leather doctor's bag he'd found at a swap meet years ago. It was large, black, and worn around the edges, which was perfect for his needs. People threw too many things away these days, even when there was lots of life left in them.

He didn't have all his tools, they were back in Hood River, but he'd had a few things shipped down he'd needed to complete the project.

John, his best friend and business partner, was running the furniture store while Jason was away. Soon he'd be moving to Marshall full time to be near Ben, and he'd asked John if he wanted to relocate the store or have him ship pieces back to Oregon.

Jason was still waiting for an answer. He knew it was hard for his friend, having lived in Hood River all his life, but Jason was determined to be near his son, and nothing would keep him from Ben.

Of course, he'd never leave his friend high and dry, and assured John that no matter what he decided, Jason would continue to make pieces for the shop.

As he was about to put the last chisel away, he heard the floor creak and spun around to find his father standing on the other side of the bar. How the hell had he gotten in?

"Hello, son," the old man said.

Though the urge was strong, Jason stopped himself from shouting. He knew it would get him nowhere. He was alone. He had to buy time, and slid the chisel up his sleeve.

"Hello, Frank." *You crazy bastard.*

His father looked different from when he saw him in the courthouse. He was thinner, and looked a little pale, and a whole lot crazier.

“It took me some time to track you down,” Frank said. “It was almost as if you were hiding from your father.”

Okay.

“I’ve been working on a new project,” Jason said, waving at the shelving unit behind him. *I need more time.*

“Well, I’m glad I found you. We need to talk, son,” Frank said as he crossed his arms over his chest as he typically did when he was pissed off. *Shit.*

“Where’s Mom?” She had to be around here somewhere. They’d run together.

“She couldn’t handle the stress, buddy. You know your mother wasn’t stable.”

“Where is she?” Jason had a bad feeling, worse than the usual one he had when around Frank.

“All the running and hiding in cheap motels became too much for her,” Frank said as if he were talking about the weather.

“Did Mom commit suicide?” Jason asked in a shaky voice.

“No. No, son.” He shook his head.

Okay. He didn’t want anyone to die. All he wanted was to be left alone.

“I put her out of her misery.”

“What?!” Jason wasn’t sure he’d heard him correctly.

“You see, the bed linens were too scratchy, the room next door was too loud, the air conditioner was too cold, and the food was too basic for her. Your mother reminded me again and again how unhappy she was. So, being the good husband I am, I had to end her suffering.”

Jason felt like throwing up, but he forced himself to remain still.

“What did you do?” he asked.

Frank couldn’t be serious. Maybe she turned herself in, or he sent her away.

“She was in the bath, the water wasn’t hot enough, and I put my hands on the top of her head.”

“That’s enough.”

Jason was right. *A whole lot crazier.* The fuckin’ bastard had lost his mind. He’d always been nuts, but after what happened in that courtroom, he must’ve felt unrestrained and unafraid to allow the real man to come out.

Whatever the case, odds were Jason was the next victim.

“Now we are here.”

“Um, yeah, we are.” Jason began backing out of the bar and toward the front doors. If he could get outside, he’d have a better chance of finding help.

Frank moved around the outside of the bar. “You should have listened to me,” he said. “None of this would’ve happened if you’d been a normal boy.”

“I am normal.”

“Gay isn’t normal,” Frank yelled.

Right. Don’t anger the crazy man.

“Would you like a drink? I could make you one.” He didn’t know the first thing about bartending. Maybe he should’ve grabbed a bottle as a weapon.

“Alcohol won’t fix this, son.”

“What will?”

“You, joining your mother. Don’t worry. I’ll be along shortly behind you. I’m sure the good lord will understand and forgive you your sins.”

My sins? He was going to need some serious therapy after this.

“How about you go first?”

Jason was out from behind the bar and backing toward the front when he took his eyes off his father for a flash of a moment to check behind him for tables. When he glanced back, the psycho was gone.

Jason froze. Where was he?

For a fraction of a second, he thought maybe stress had gotten the better of him, and his brain had made the whole thing up. He immediately nixed that idea. The man was real, and he was in the bar somewhere.

Jason had to get out of here.

He turned to run for the doors when Frank came around the front, forcing him to turn back. He was facing his father again, but still backing away.

“Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“Because I have to save you. I love you, son,” Frank said with a toothy smile.

And here I thought he couldn’t get creepier.

“The police will find you.”

“It won’t matter.”

Right. Kill the son before the suicide.

He’d been living upstairs, and though he’d been in the bar quite a bit, he didn’t have the layout down yet. He knew he was getting close to some tables, but wasn’t sure where they were.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be. I promise to make it quick, but I doubt it’ll be painless.”

Jason was terrified.

His father wasn’t a big man, but from experience Jason knew maniacs got a strength surge when they were rampaging,

He also knew time was running out.

Gator, where are you?

CHAPTER TWO

Gator

Something was off. Gator could feel it the moment he stepped through the back door and into the bar's kitchen. He couldn't place his finger on it, but the feeling grew the longer he stood there. He set the box of beef on the counter and took a quick scan of the area. Nothing. Nothing was out of place, and there weren't any unusual noises.

What the hell's got me on alert?

He listened closer, but there wasn't so much as a peep from the bar's front room. Then it occurred to him that Jason had been working in the bar today on the installation he was creating as a thank you for giving Jason a place to hang out while his parents were apprehended. Gator didn't need any thanks, it was the right thing to do, but he was stoked about the addition to his bar and the opportunity to get to know Jason better.

However, he'd never admit the latter.

Jason was a mystery Gator wanted to piece together. A retired Army Ranger with the skill to immobilize an enemy without much force, lethal accuracy, and the precision and graceful touch needed to create the most intricate carvings. A walking, talking contradiction.

Gator had enjoyed having Jason in his space and would be lying if he said he was looking forward to being alone again when those bastard parents of his were finally captured. Jason had awakened a part of him he'd figured died long ago. From the first moment he'd laid eyes on Jason, something snapped into place when he walked into the courtroom.

This wasn't some sexual awakening or some shit like that. Gator had known he was bisexual since high school. In his former military unit, no one cared who he fucked, and years later, his fellow MC members were equally indiscriminate.

Since his divorce, life had become predictable and structured, reverting to a time when he was in the military, and even the MC. His schedule kept him on track and left him little time to think, which was good. Thinking caused too many problems.

Gator lifted the edge of his shirt to scratch an itch on his abdomen and looked down at his alligator tattoo. Hell, he'd had that for over ten years. That, along with an incident from years ago, was one of the reasons for his nickname.

He cocked his head, certain he should hear some sort of woodworking noise. Sure, when Jason was working on a precision piece or carving a design into the wood, he was quiet as a mouse. But something felt different, off somehow.

The phone ringing broke his concentration. It was coming from the bar area. A couple of strides later, Gator walked through the swinging kitchen door into the empty space.

The ringing was coming from the bar-top, where Jason's cell was sitting beside the beat-up old doctor's bag filled with his tools. There was no sign of Jason anywhere.

Gator grabbed the phone and answered.

"Yeah, what?"

"Gator?"

"Sheriff. What can I do for you?"

"I was trying to reach Jason."

"Same."

"Look, we've received some news from the Arkansas state police. They found Mrs. Wells's body this morning in a run-down motel close to the Texas border."

"What happened to her?"

“Looks like she was drowned in the bathtub. Coroner estimates she’s been dead going on four days.”

“Jason’s father?”

“Nowhere to be found, but he left all his clothes behind.”

“Think he off’d his old lady?”

“Looks that way.”

“The state line?” Gator was getting a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Yeah. The bastard could be getting closer, figuring Jason might be near Ben.”

“The fucker’d have the address from the court documents,” Gator said.

The floorboard creaked behind him and Gator knew he wasn’t alone. “Elias, I’m going to have to let you go.”

“Elias? Since when do you call me—”

Gator didn’t hear the rest as he returned the phone to the bar-top.

He hoped the sheriff got the message loud and clear.

The floorboards groaned again, only closer this time. His muscles flexed and coiled as he readied to spin around and strike.

A childhood spent alone in the mountains and forests, along with his adult life trained in the art of war, and then a different kind of war as a member of an MC, had him ready when he had to deal with unexplained noises.

If that bastard had somehow made it inside his bar, Gator would be sure to show him the errors of his ways.

In one practiced move, Gator spun to face his opponent head-on while pulling the knife from his belt and preparing to kick the shit out of whomever he faced.

But what he found wasn’t remotely close to what he’d expected.

Jason's bloodied body stood several feet away as if he'd walked out from the bowels of hell. His clothing was ripped, and Gator could make out several nasty gashes across his chest and arms.

But the look in Jason's eyes was way more concerning. He'd seen that look on the battlefield during his time in the army. The hundred-yard stare.

They used to call it shell shock during the World Wars and the Korean War. Now it was better known as PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder triggered by a horrifying event or series of events.

Jason's blank stare said it all. He was functioning on autopilot.

"Jason?"

Silence.

Jason continued to look straight through Gator as if he were invisible.

A chill worked its way down his spine, and the silence stretched on.

Blood dripped from Jason's fingertips onto the hardwood floor.

Gator slid his knife back onto his belt and took a single step forward, eliciting an instantaneous response from the traumatized man. Jason brought up his fists, and he crouched low into a fighter's stance, ready to take on all comers.

Gator lifted his arms in the universal sign of surrender. "Hey, man, chill. We're all good here. I mean you no harm. We're friends."

There was a slight ease in Jason's stance. A good sign, but not capitulation by any means. Gator knew one wrong move could end with them locked in battle.

"Jason, it's Gator. Remember. We're in my bar, man." He tried to bring Jason back to the here and now.

“Bar?” Jason’s voice was scratchy, but at least he was talking.

“Yeah, in Marshall. Remember, buddy? My bar, and you’re staying upstairs. Come on, buddy, remember. It’s all good here.”

“Gator?” Jason blinked a couple of times and glanced around the room then turned back to stare at Gator.

“Yeah, it’s me, man. It’s okay now,” he said as he moved another step forward.

When Jason didn’t react, Gator continued to get closer to Jason. Fuck. His wounds were worse than Gator had thought. His chest looked hacked up, and blood was still seeping through his clothes. Gator had to get him to a hospital right away.

“He came to kill me,” Jason growled and tensed. “I didn’t want to fight him, but he tried to kill me.”

Gator didn’t bother to ask who. “Where’s the fucker?” Frank Wells had to be around here somewhere.

Jason’s eyes widened briefly before he gestured with his jaw toward the darkened and silent dining room. *Shit.*

Slowly and cautiously, Gator stepped past Jason on his way to the other room. The bastard had better be dead or Gator would make sure he wished he was.

A trail of Jason’s blood led the way until Gator turned the corner to see what was left of his dining room.

Tables were overturned, chairs splintered into pieces lying across the floor, and Frank Wells was crumpled in the midst of it all with a chisel sticking out of his neck and a pool of blood expanding around him.

A large hunting knife lay several feet away and was covered in what Gator figured was Jason’s blood.

The fucker was dead. The chisel had to’ve severed an artery or vein, and his unblinking eyes stared at Gator from across the room. It looked like they’d had one hell of a fight. The room was trashed.

“I didn’t want to kill him, but he wouldn’t stop coming at me,” Jason whispered. “I tried to stop him, but he kept getting back up.”

Jason’s voice trailed off and was almost inaudible from where he stood still facing the bar. Gator now understood how the former Ranger had gotten his injuries. If he’d fought like he’d been trained, Frank Wells would’ve been dead immediately, but since Jason was desperately trying not to kill his father, he left himself open to attack and obvious injury.

“I believe you, man. This isn’t the way you wanted things to end up. We need to call—”

Whatever Gator was going to say was cut off by a loud crash that had them both turning toward the kitchen door as the sheriff and two deputies charged in with their weapons drawn.

Shit. “Wait,” Gator yelled, but it was too late. It was like watching a disaster happen in slow motion.

That’s when all hell broke loose.

Jason

The clang of metal handcuffs attached to his bedrail rattled every time Jason moved his wrist. Though he had trouble remembering everything that’d happened earlier today, he knew he was in a world of trouble. He’d killed his father, no matter how hard he’d tried not to. But the rest of the day remained a blur.

He remembered two prison guards and two deputies posted in the infirmary even though he’d been sedated and strapped to the bed while he’d been x-rayed and stitched up. Two huge knife gashes were the source of most of the blood on his clothes: one over his heart, the other on his stomach. The stiches prevented the doc from wrapping his ribs, which were bruised, not broken. There were four cuts on his neck and face

that were taped closed, and with all that the doc had said, “You’re lucky it wasn’t worse.”

Lying in his blood-spattered jeans and a hospital gown, waiting in what he was sure was a locked room for whatever came next, he didn’t feel particularly lucky.

Jail time seemed more than likely.

His memories were muddied after his psychotic father had slashed a Bowie knife across Jason’s stomach, leaving him on the floor gasping for air. The pain only added to the ringing in his head as visions and remembered torture flooded back, clouding his reality.

One moment he was facing off with his father, who was yelling about how he wanted to save Jason, the next, he was sixteen and was being held at the last camp his parents had sent him to. A cattle prod seared the flesh along his spine as he fought back the urge to scream, knowing it would only earn him more time in the hole.

Act like a man, they’d repeatedly yell until he could hear nothing else. Lash after lash, blow after blow, until the darkness would come, and peace followed him into unconsciousness.

How long would they keep him cuffed to what he guessed was a four-hundred-pound hospital bed? Jason knew he could’ve slipped the cuffs long ago, but what would that get him? More trouble, which he clearly didn’t need.

He’d heard arguing in the hallway earlier, but it was eerily quiet now, and had been for what had to be an hour. No one came to check on him, but it didn’t matter. While he’d been a bloody mess and he hurt like hell, none of his injuries were life-threatening. Bruised ribs, courtesy of his father breaking a chair against his side, hurt as much as cracked ribs, and they both took a long fucking time to heal.

Jason had done what he’d had to do in self-defense. They’d have to know that.

But maybe not, considering he was cuffed to a bed in a detention facility.

He wasn't so much worried about himself, but he couldn't get how this would affect Ben out of his mind. Slowly, they'd begun building their relationship, and all the care and work over the past weeks were probably down the toilet due to his crazy-as-shit father.

He was sure the old man would be happy if that was the result.

In all likelihood, Gunner wouldn't allow Ben to visit him in prison. A kid shouldn't be anywhere near a prison. There was nothing anyone could do to him that would be worse than what Jason had done to himself. He'd screwed things up in a way no one could fix.

Just when he thought his life was improving, everything he'd hoped and worked for had slipped through his fingers like sand.

He heard heavy footsteps coming down the hall toward his closed door. Three people, all wearing boots. One had a slight limp, while the other two marched in unison. Most likely, the police were there to transfer him to a cell at the Marshall County jail. Time for him to face the music. He'd killed his father, and there was no going back from that, no matter how hard he'd tried to stop it from happening.

The lock turned, and the sheriff walked in, followed by Brick and Gunner. Jason had expected the lawman, but not the other two.

Given the stone-faced expressions and stiff demeanor of the three men, Jason figured his situation would get even worse.

He was wrong, and he was right.

CHAPTER THREE

Gator

Gator waited in his truck for the others to arrive. He didn't agree with this, but he also had no choice in the matter. One could say he was along for the ride, and it was no damn pleasure cruise by a long shot.

The stubborn sheriff wouldn't listen to reason, but he had an injured deputy to deal with, and a dead body on his hands. What Jason did when Deputy Reynolds rushed him was a gut reaction, nothing more. The deputy's injuries were minor, but the sheriff was pissed, so now here Gator sat outside the lake house waiting for Jason to be delivered like some common criminal.

Everyone agreed, killing Frank Wells was an act of self-defense, but the sheriff refused to accept that Jason wasn't a threat to anyone else due to his reaction to the deputy.

After a lot of shouting, and threats from both sides, the sheriff agreed to release Jason into Brick's custody instead of leaving Jason in a jail cell pending a psychiatric evaluation. The sheriff was holding off on charging Jason for assaulting the deputy until the psychiatric results were presented.

The sheriff acknowledged Jason wasn't a threat to his son, Ben, so there'd be no separating the two or interruption to their visitation schedule. Which, obviously, was a big ask, but Brick and Gunner had pushed hard for that give. If anything, having that connection with his son would help Jason heal.

Gator had to give the sheriff props for accepting Brick and Gunner's word that all visits with Ben would be supervised. It would've killed Jason not to see Ben, and the kid would've suffered too.

Talk about a clusterfuck.

Gator's attention was drawn to the lake house as Julia emerged from the garden doors carrying a laundry basket and heading straight for his truck. He exited the vehicle and leaned against the door, waiting for her to arrive.

"You gonna sit out here all day?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm waiting on the sheriff to arrive."

"Elias and everyone are on their way. Let's go get you two set up."

Julia turned with her basket of what looked to be linens and towels before Gator could lean forward and take the basket from her. He leaned into the truck bed and pulled his and Jason's duffel bags out, and then followed behind her to one of the completed cottages.

This would be their home for who knew how long.

Gator rushed onto the front porch to open the door. Several other cottages were still under construction, and he'd helped build the other completed three. He knew each of the cottages had been spoken for, and wondered who was forgoing their move from the lake house into their cottage to allow him and Jason to stay there. Gunner, Conor, and Ben had one of the three completed cottages, and Julia and Sammie had the second.

Initially, it was supposed to be only Jason staying here, but there was no way in hell Gator would allow the guy to go through this alone. He'd been alone dealing with this shit long enough. It was time someone had his back.

"There isn't much furniture in here yet, but the rooms are built, and the kitchen is complete," Julia explained as they walked in.

"Don't need much, ma'am."

"Julia."

"Okay, Julia," he agreed. "Whose cottage is this anyway?"

“It was intended for Elias and Fletcher, but they’ll stay in the lake house for now.” Julia turned away, but not before seeing the corner of her lips turn up.

Of all the people who Gator expected her to say, that shocked the shit out of him. The sheriff was giving up his digs for Jason. Elias was a complex and difficult man to read. For whatever reason he agreed to give up his new digs, Gator was grateful.

“We won’t be much of a bother, Julia,” he said, hoping she wasn’t worried about having Jason around Sammie.

With a soft huff and shake of her head, Julia placed the basket on the kitchen counter and turned to face him.

“Look. No one here blames Jason for what he’s been forced to do. That bastard deserved what he got, but that’s not what this is about. Jason has been through a lot of trauma at the hands of that psycho, and Jason attacked that deputy on instinct. With his Ranger training, he could be dangerous if he snaps. You know that, and so does everyone else. This isn’t about blame but about getting him the help he needs before it all goes so far south he’ll never be able to come back from it.”

Gator looked at the young woman, who’d been through her own pile of shit. Respect for someone who had compassion and insight into other people’s pain.

“Thanks for saying so. Jason’s a good man dealt a lousy hand.”

Julia walked closer to Gator and placed her small hand on his forearm. “Let’s see if we can change his path before it’s too late. We’ll give it all we’ve got. Family is family.”

“Family?”

Julia’s smile said it all. He’d been part of a military team, and in an MC. That’s as close as he got to family. Before he could dwell on that, the sound of vehicles pulling into the driveway caught both of their attention.

“Looks like everyone’s here. We might as well go greet them.”

Gator took a deep breath. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Jason

It wasn’t as if this were the first time Jason had been out to the lake house, but this was the first time he’d been sequestered here. He was thankful for one thing: Ben wasn’t home. He and Sammie were at a birthday sleepover with a friend in town. Jason was fucking glad his kid wouldn’t see his father’s shame.

Of all the options, this wasn’t the worst that could’ve happened. At least he wasn’t behind bars. At least for the time being. He’d assaulted Deputy Reynolds.

Jason didn’t remember doing it, but that wasn’t a surprise in the state he’d been in at the time. Thankfully, he’d managed to stop himself before seriously damaging the lawman, but the fact remained Jason had hurt an innocent person.

For that alone, he’d never forgive himself.

After being informed of the state of play, the sheriff uncuffed him from the bed. Jason understood why he’d been under such close supervision and had been restrained. After his years of military training, he could’ve unknowingly done some serious harm, and still could under the right, or more accurately, the wrong conditions.

He’d blacked out fighting his father. His past had taken over and he was in what he’d heard the military called a fugue state. Apparently it happened a lot in the field of battle.

The biggest problem: there was no guarantee it wouldn’t happen again.

He never wanted to hurt anyone, but now his greatest fear was blacking out when he was with Ben. Jason never wanted to find out if he was capable of hurting his son.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked as Brick turned off the truck’s ignition. “I don’t want to put anyone at risk.”

“You planning on doing anything dangerous?” Gunner asked, stone-faced.

“Of course not,” Jason assured. “But recent history can’t be ignored.”

His guilt felt like a lead weight crushing him. He’d killed his father and hurt an innocent person. He had no tether to guarantee he wouldn’t do it again.

“You planned on killing that asshole?” Gunner continued.

“No. Hell no. I tried everything to avoid it. Then the deputy —”

“Shouldn’t’ve advanced on an injured, traumatized person with a gun drawn,” Brick stated.

“It doesn’t change what I did. What if I black out again?” His life was spiraling out of control. Was it only earlier today he thought he was finally getting his life together?

“Someone will always be with you until we figure this shit out,” Gunner assured.

“Your first appointment with Dr. Ramsey is scheduled for thirteen hundred hours tomorrow. We’ll go from there,” Brick said.

Jason glanced out his backseat window to see Julia and Gator headed their way.

“What’s Gator doing here?” If Jason was in Gator’s shoes, he would’ve done everything he could to put this nightmare behind him.

At Gunner’s raised brow, Brick said, “Let me quote. ‘You’re a crazy sonofabitch if you think you’re taking Jason anywhere without me.’”

“Really?” For the life of him, he didn’t know why Gator would say that, but it felt good to know someone had his back.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much word for word,” Gunner confirmed.

Brick chuckled, opened his door, and stepped out.

“How the hell did you guys convince the sheriff to release me to the custody of the team?” Jason asked. The hard-nosed lawman had made it clear he wasn’t willing to cut Jason a break.

Gunner grinned before saying. “Brick isn’t what you call a normal guy.”

“That goes without saying,” Jason agreed. He’d never met someone quite like Brick.

“You have no idea, man. When the boss wants something, nothing gets in his way. I’ve seen four-star generals cave after one meeting with our Lieutenant Commander. I’ve seen it happen time and again. If he takes an interest in you, there’s no stopping him.”

“Should I be flattered?”

“Nope. You should be scared shitless.” Gunner turned and looked Jason straight in the eye. “Besides, Elias wants to help you and trusts us to keep an eye on you. Hell, we’re Navy SEALs. If we can’t keep you in check, who can?” Gunner leaned in. “Don’t screw this up.”

Before Jason could respond, Gunner opened his door and exited the vehicle.

Discussion over. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Time to get this show on the road. The sheriff’s cruiser pulled up behind the truck, and Jason opened his door and stepped out into the late afternoon heat.

The summer temps would’ve felt oppressive at any other time, but right now, he hoped it would warm his chilled body. He doubted he’d be warming up anytime soon. His guilt felt like ice in his veins.

He didn’t miss the once-over Gator gave him as he drew closer. Jason knew he had to’ve looked like he’d gone a few rounds with a heavyweight boxer and didn’t appreciate being reminded of it, but he let it go.

The remainder of the team filed out from various locations around the property and joined them.

“Well, since everyone’s here, let’s review the ground rules,” Brick stated, the unmistakable ring of authority in his voice. “Jason remains on the property unless he’s accompanied by one of us, and only after I’ve cleared it. He’s escorted to his therapist’s or doctor’s appointments, but his medical privacy remains in place. In an emergency, standard relays apply, and all communication will be monitored and at the first sign of ___”

“Me losing my shit,” Jason added.

“Concern,” Brick continued as if Jason hadn’t spoken. “We’ll regroup and discuss alternative measures.”

“Like locking my ass up.”

“If need be,” Elias said. “You’re still considered a criminal.”

“Easy, Sheriff,” Gator grumbled. “Don’t need to be pulling out the big guns just yet. If someone staying out here were to be locked up in town for having PTSD or fucking up, it’d be an awfully empty yard.”

“One of my deputies—”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him,” Jason interjected. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, one of your deputies held a gun on an injured man,” Spencer stated from behind Fletcher. Surprisingly, Fletcher didn’t argue the point to defend Elias.

“He was doing his job,” Rick, Spencer’s boyfriend and Roman’s assistant, said while looking at Spencer as if he’d grown a second head.

“You have to admit, it was a stupid move charging an injured, obviously traumatized former Army Ranger,” Gunner rejoined.

“If I’d done something that stupid, Brick would’ve beat the shit out of me himself,” Harris, the latest arrival at the lake house and former criminal, jumped in. “But he’s a lawman, which makes this different and even more wrong.”

“Suddenly, the hacker selling out his country is all law and order,” Gunner quipped.

The only people remaining silent were Brick and his boyfriend, Roman. It was getting easier to see where the lines were drawn.

Elias, Rick, and Harris were against having Jason and Gator there. Gunner and Spencer were for giving Jason a chance. Fletcher, Conor, and Shaw remained outliers.

Jason knew his presence here would cause even more harm than he'd originally thought by pulling the team in opposing directions. He couldn't do that. They needed to remain a cohesive unit, especially for the kind of work they did.

“Maybe I should stay somewhere else,” Jason suggested. “I don't want to cause problems between you guys.”

“Seriously, men are idiots,” Julia snapped, catching them off guard. “All the damn posturing and testosterone-laden macho bullshit isn't going to help Jason, and that's what we're here to do. Help Jason. Because all of us have been hit by trauma at some point in our lives, and every single one of us has made stupid, lousy, and dangerous decisions in desperation.”

She stopped to look at each man, daring them to argue the point. None did.

“Hell, I propositioned Brick so my boss, who was working for Roman's father, could cheat him out of this land all out of fear of losing my job and having no money to raise my son.

“Harris stole military secrets to raise enough money to save his sister from cancer. Oh, and how many laws would you say were broken in order to save Kyle from his captors, Sheriff? You were there. I'm positive you'd know.

“And how often has each of you relied on information Spencer dug up without asking him how or from whom he'd gotten it? Rick lied to almost everyone who cared about him out of fear. Gunner was ready to disappear with Ben to keep him away from his grandparents, and there's so much more none of us want up for public debate.”

The group's tension drained right out of each of them before Jason's eyes. Several men had taken deep breaths before nodding in agreement.

"I've always liked the saying, people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. We are here to save our friend, not nail him to the wall." The five-foot-nothing young woman stood dead center of a group of deadly ex-military hard-asses, and growled louder than Jason thought anyone that small could. "Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yeah, Julia."

"Yep."

"Sorry, yes."

She waited for each of them to agree before turning to Jason and tucking her small arm around his elbow. In a voice devoid of anger and sounding much like her usual self, she said, "Now, let's give you a tour of your new home."

Jason led her away from the group, Gator being the only person to follow.

Jason needed to get his head on straight for himself and his son. This was his only chance, and he'd be damned if he blew it.

The newly built two-bedroom wood cottage was a dream come true. On the outside, it looked like something out of a picture book, with its sturdy walls and inviting porch that seemed to be begging for visitors. Inside, the cottage felt warm and cozy, with its rustic décor, hardwood floors, and natural light streaming in from every angle.

As soon as they stepped through the front door, Jason took a deep breath, and for the first time today, felt relief. Working with wood for much of his life gave him a deep respect for the effort they put into every part of the cottage. Though he'd been out to the lake house to visit with Ben, he'd never stopped to look at the ongoing construction several hundred yards away from the main house. His only concern was, and always would be, his son.

Jason could see how people would find a place like this tranquil. But he was so far from normal feelings he could only give a detached assessment of how living in a place like this would feel.

Being a former Ranger, he could understand why the team set up here of all places. With the stress and danger ever-present in their past, and surely in their current profession, this place had to give them a respite, and the peace to regroup and carry on as normally as possible.

Walking through the rooms, he felt an overwhelming sense of awe wash over him; it was almost like stepping into another world entirely. Every detail from each beam to each window frame seemed tailor-made for this place, each one possessing its own unique character yet fitting in flawlessly with everything else around them.

The wooden porch wrapped around the entire house invitingly and provided an ideal spot for relaxation while admiring nature's beauty at any time of day, sunrise or sunset alike. A gentle breeze blew through his hair as he took a few steps closer to an open window. He could already feel himself being drawn in farther toward this magical forest mere feet from his temporary home.

The two times he'd been there before, Jason had been so consumed by his amazing son, he hadn't taken time to appreciate his surroundings. His affinity for wood carving and nature had always been a large part of his life, but now it felt like things were ticking into place, even for a short time.

He opened both doors on either side of the hallway, which led into two separate bedrooms; both were filled with sunlight streaming through large windows, giving them a cozy atmosphere even without furniture yet added inside them. The rooms held so much potential. As if they were waiting for someone to come along and fill them up with life. He wondered who would be lucky enough to live here once he was gone.

He could imagine this little cabin quickly becoming a safe haven, where time stood still and allowed him to be truly

happy without distractions from everyday life. That had to be the reason the team was doing this. They, of all people, knew that having a place like this was something special to return home to and would help soothe away their troubles.

Wasn't that what everyone needed? Somewhere safe and welcoming where a person could decompress while being surrounded by love and acceptance.

As with almost everything in his roller-coaster life, Jason never expected to find that kind of equilibrium.

He knew he'd be headed for jail, or, if he was truly fortunate, he'd be looking for somewhere to live in Marshall. He'd always intended to stay close to Ben and hoped those chances hadn't been annihilated by everything that'd gone down today.

After Julia gave them the walk-through, she left Jason to settle in with standing orders to show up for dinner in the main house at six sharp. When Jason tried to back out of it, not wanting a repeat performance of the earlier disagreement, Julia gave him a look that brooked no arguments. The woman was formidable indeed.

When the cottage door closed behind Julia, Gator said, "Might as well get some of this furniture assembled, or we'll both be sleeping on the floor tonight." Jason nodded. "How's the pain?"

Jason ran his hand over his bandaged torso. His wounds were aching, but he refused to take anything stronger than ibuprofen.

"I'll be fine."

Gator gave him his all-knowing look. "Sure. How about you unload the groceries I picked up? They're in the back of my truck."

"Look, you have a perfectly good bed back at your apartment above the bar. You don't have to do this. I'll be fine," Jason said, feeling guilty for pulling Gator away from his home. As if he didn't already have enough guilt to choke a horse. He sure as hell didn't need more.

“I’m staying. Get used to it,” was all Gator said before pulling out his knife and cutting into the large box. By the diagram on the outside, it looked to be a king-size bed.

“Do we know where the mattress even is?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, it’s being stored in the main house,” Gator said with a chin lift in that general direction.

Jason looked around but didn’t see another box. “Is there another bed to set up?”

“Nope.”

Nope. Gator had always been a man of few words, but Jason needed way more information.

“Where are you sleeping?”

“Right here.”

“With me? In the same bed?”

“Unless you want to sleep on the floor,” Gator stated distractedly as he pulled out the first piece of the bedframe from the box.

For quite some time, Jason had known he was attracted to Gator, but he was almost positive the man was hetero. He sure as hell didn’t get any bi vibes, and the man had an ex-wife. If everything was going to be purely platonic, he guessed he could handle sleeping in the same bed with Gator, but the situation wasn’t ideal.

Talk about understatement. Jason couldn’t recall having been in an ideal situation in his entire life.

Best to go with the flow. The sooner Gator returned to his own life, the better. Jason didn’t want to be more beholden to the man than he already was. Shit. If he had a choice, he’d cut and run in a heartbeat.

“I could,” Jason replied to Gator’s alternative sleeping arrangement.

Gator shot Jason a look that could melt steel.

Welp. That was decided.

Fuckin' hell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gator

Every time Gator glanced over at Jason, he saw the guilt and remorse hovering around him like a fat dark cloud. Shame was in that mix, and the odor of Jason's misery had a stench that reminded Gator of death.

All the consoling in the world wouldn't make Jason feel any better, and, as much as Gator hated to admit it, making it all go away was a bullshit fantasy, and Gator lived in the real world. There was nothing imaginary about his hold on reality.

Everyone knew there wasn't much they could do except to try to help Jason move forward with his life as best he could. Therapy would help, but only time would tell if Jason could pull his shit together and make peace with everything that'd happened.

"Listen. I promise to stay put. You don't need to keep an eye on me."

"Do yourself a favor and remind yourself of the chain of command you lived under in the military. Elias is the off-site general, and Brick is base commander. I'm just following orders, man."

"Great. Thanks for the analogy."

Gator shook his head. "You were way less argumentative yesterday."

"I was less of a criminal yesterday."

"You're not a criminal."

"Yeah? Wasn't that me in handcuffs?"

"It was a precaution," Gator said, pissed off he had to state the obvious.

“Because I went batshit crazy,” Jason yelled. “I killed a man and assaulted another.”

“It wasn’t your fault.

“Really? Was someone else in the room who did that shit I don’t know about?”

Gator moved closer to Jason, who took a couple of steps back. Well, shit. What’d he think? That Gator was going to hurt him? Fuck. The guy was past fucked-up.

Using his *get your head outta your ass* tone, he said, “You aren’t responsible because you didn’t have a choice.”

His voice became increasingly loud until it echoed off the walls like thunder shaking up a stormy sky above them moments before its rain came pouring down.

The two men stood facing each other locked in an intense stare.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Gator said firmly. “Your past traumas combined with PTSD from childhood, as well as years of military service, made it impossible for you to control yourself in a beyond-tense situation where the perpetrator was off his mind and there was no reasoning with him. Man, you know this, if it’s between you and him, you choose you. You don’t let him win when your life’s at stake.”

Jason shook his head like a kid who wouldn’t accept what he was being told. “Okay. I’ll give on Frank, but I hurt an innocent because of my fucked-up brain.” His voice was low and trembling. “You know better than to say it’s not my fault.”

Gator stepped closer, slowly placing his hand on Jason’s shoulder, and he didn’t move away or shake him off.

A start.

“I know how hard it is living with something like this,” Gator said softly but firmly, looking straight into Jason’s deep brown eyes brimming with emotion. “But what happened with the deputy isn’t on you. That guy was trained to know how to behave in volatile situations. He had no business coming at you with his weapon drawn. Your reaction wasn’t unexpected

by anyone who's dealt with a person who'd been in the kind of battle for their life you'd been in. The cop fucked up, not you."

Jason continued to stare, and Gator couldn't tell if he'd gotten through or was wasting his breath.

He paused, then continued more determinedly. "You're strong enough to overcome anything that comes at you. Even if it means struggling through moments like these where all seems lost. You never gave up, and I'll be damned if you will now." As he placed both hands on either side of the taller man's face, Gator tried to make his tone sound softer. "You'll get through this. I'm here to help you get where you need to go."

For some time, neither spoke, and Gator wondered if he'd pressed too hard.

After taking several deep breaths in silence, Jason nodded before leaning forward communicating he appreciated Gator's support.

Which was all Gator could offer, and knew was all Jason would accept.

Gator wasn't going anywhere, and he hoped, with time, Jason wouldn't be so eager for him to leave.

Jason

Jason sat in the shrink's waiting room for his turn to spill his guts. Dr. Ramsey's office wasn't anywhere near as clinical as Jason had imagined. Located on a neighborhood street, in an old Victorian home a bit outside Marshall, the entrance an addition built off the right side of the house led them to the reception area/waiting room. The door to the left had to be the doc's office, and the door down a short hall had to be the entrance to the doc's house.

Gator was sitting by Jason's side, as he'd been since waking this morning to find Gator dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed putting on his boots.

Jason had helped Gator put the bedframe together and helped carry the mattress from the main house. After they put on the bedding, Gator disappeared in the bathroom, came out in a pair of unevenly cut shorts made from old sweatpants, pulled back the covers, grabbed a pillow and a blanket, turned, and walked to the couch, where he went to sleep.

After Jason got over his surprise he wasn't going to have a bedmate, he'd done much the same as Gator, though he wore long sweats to bed. He stared at the ceiling a long fucking time before exhaustion overtook him.

They'd stopped at a small café in Marshall and got coffees. Gator had a bagel with a wodge of cream cheese so thick it looked like a third slice of bagel, and Jason had a corn muffin the size of Rhode Island.

Gator sat silently, which Jason appreciated as his mind churned with possible outcomes from his initial visit with the shrink. In his heart, he knew the doc could take one look at him and declare him a lost cause, in which case a cell would be his new home. That thought terrified him. Life in prison wasn't what he wanted for himself, but more importantly, the bond he'd been building with his son would shatter.

Losing Ben would shrivel his soul, and his will to live would crumble.

As kids had a tendency to be, Ben'd been happy when he came home to find Jason had moved into one of the cottages near him, Gunner, and Conor. He didn't question it too much, and Jason explained away his injuries in a way that made sense to his boy without alarming him.

All Ben seemed to care about was that the people he loved were all around him. Jason knew Ben losing his mother had been painful and confusing for a little boy. Having everyone close helped heal those wounds.

With the little left in him to hope, Jason clung to the possibility that he'd be able to stay at the lake near Ben and would always be able to keep his son close.

The receptionist looked up as the office door opened, and he saw a young woman walking out red-faced, dabbing her wet cheeks with a tissue as she pushed the door closed behind her.

Fucking great.

"I'll fix you a tea, dear," the lady said as she stood and wrapped her arm around the younger woman's shoulders. "Jason, dear, my husband will be out to see you in a moment."

Husband. Huh. The receptionist was Dr. Ramsey's wife.

Jason felt his anxiety reaching critical mass as his heart slammed against his chest so hard he thought it'd jump out of his body.

He glanced at the entryway and knew the safety of Gator's truck was less than thirty seconds away. He could make it out before the doctor even saw him.

Nothing good could come from this situation. Cut and run was best.

"Don't make me chase you," Gator grumbled without looking at Jason, and continued turning the page in some fishing magazine he'd picked up off one of the waiting room's side tables. "I haven't had to hog-tie anyone in a while, might be a bit rusty, but sure as shit, I'll do it."

Jason looked at his heavily tattooed babysitter, whose jaw was set and muscles were coiled, readying for the chase that might've come had Jason bolted.

He acquiesced with a loud sigh, laying his head against the wall with a definitive thud, deciding it would be best to stay where he was.

Gator was tougher than almost anyone Jason had served with. He proudly wore his hardened exterior, which dared anyone to take a shot, as if he wanted that little workout before he got on with the rest of his day.

Contrary to his scary and hardened exterior, the people of Marshall loved the guy. As insane as it sounded, in many ways, Gator was the heart of the town. Jason had seen the way folks were with him. He'd become the gruff and steadfast bar owner who had time for anyone who wanted to bend his ear.

With a sigh of resignation, Jason kept his head against the wall, and his hands gripped to the arms of uncomfortable chair.

The office door opened and a short, older man wearing one those long professor sweaters walked out. The house had air conditioning, but it was summer in Texas, the last place Jason would expect to find anyone wearing a sweater.

"Mr. Wells," the man said as he held out his hand. "I'm Gordon. Nice to meet you."

"Gordon Ramsey. Really?" Jason blurted out before he stood and quickly shook the offered hand. "Sorry. Yes, nice to meet you too."

Well done, asshole. Great way to start.

"My wife only wishes I could cook that well, but truth, I can't boil water without setting off the fire alarm," the doc replied good-naturedly.

Under other circumstances, Jason would've even liked him.

The chuckle from behind Jason didn't go unnoticed. Fuckin' Gator.

"Sorry. I shouldn't've said that."

"You're not the first, and you won't be the last." Dr. Ramsey laughed. "My age makes me the original by at least thirty years."

Now that Jason had completely embarrassed himself, making a break for the door looked more appealing than before. But one look at Gator had him rethinking that plan.

Like he read Jason's thoughts, Gator squinted then jerked his chin toward the doc's office.

“Good to see you, Clancy.” Dr. Ramsey nodded in Gator’s direction. “I’ll be seeing you next Wednesday?”

“Yep,” Gator said without hesitation.

Was Gator in therapy?

“Mr. Wells, would you please follow me?”

“Jason, please.” Mr. Wells was a reminder of the recently deceased head of Jason’s messed-up family.

“Understood,” Dr. Ramsey said before gesturing him forward into his office.

Faced with a less-than-ideal situation, reluctantly, Jason stepped into the office.

Instead of what he’d anticipated, he found himself in a room, with a desk and chairs, a rug with a fair number of frayed edges, along with the comfort provided by a sleeping black lab draped over a dark blue plaid blanket on its dog bed.

“Have a seat,” the doc said from behind him.

Jason knew this wasn’t going to be pleasant. He took another deep breath before settling in for whatever awaited him.

Go ahead, Doc. Let’s crack open my melon and see if the fucked-up shit crawls out.

“Let’s talk.”

Yep. In this situation, no worse words had been spoken.

And no matter how cozy the room, this was heading straight to bad.

“Sure.”

Let the shitshow begin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gator

He tossed the magazine on the table and glanced around for something else to read. Several pamphlets were arranged in a rack hanging on the wall, so he plucked one out randomly. When he looked at the title, he figured it was apropos: *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and You*.

Gator had spent his life trying to outrun the specter of PTSD—something with which he was all too familiar. Coming from Beattyville, Kentucky, an impoverished town whose former thriving industry lay in ruins resulting in poverty and quantum drug abuse, he'd had a daily reminder he'd been born in one type of war zone and had spent the better part of his adult life in another.

His parents were no exception to the suffering: victims of their addiction, which many called “hillbilly heroin.” Yet another backward glance into his history strewn with pain and heartache.

Eastern Kentucky was part of the Appalachia that came to represent the white underclass. When Lyndon Johnson sat on a porch in the small town of Inez, not far from where Gator grew up, and declared his War on Poverty right then and there, the world learned what Gator knew: life there sucked large.

Growing up with less than nothing, Gator knew pain and hardship all too well. Winter days spent collecting water in buckets was the reality behind the romantic visions outsiders might have had about getting away from the rat race to live amongst these Eastern Kentucky log cabins nestled deep within the woods.

On his seventeenth birthday, Gator had enough of the misery and dejection he'd lived with in spades. With no good education to speak of, and no money to start a life somewhere else, he marched into a recruitment office and left for military service and a different kind of war zone, determined to get something more out of life.

For two decades, he endured training and sweat-drenched treks through foreign lands, learning structure and camaraderie, which molded him as new horizons opened up before him wherever he went.

But after returning from overseas with medals on his chest, he had no idea where home was. He searched for one across eighteen states until finally finding refuge in Louisiana amid an unlikely twist of fate that had been waiting for him all along. A place where he came face to snout with the reason for his moniker, solidifying it for all time. A life was lost and saved as his new life began with the MC that became his new family for many years.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a serious mental health condition that affects individuals who have survived or witnessed a traumatic event, such as violence. It can cause symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares, emotional numbness, and detachment from family and friends. It can also lead to physical symptoms such as difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and muscle tension.

Gator read the first paragraph of the pamphlet and couldn't contain his chuckle. Traumatic events. His entire existence was one traumatic event after another. From being born and unwanted to his life spent trying to outrun his poor, underclass persona.

Life had been one hurdle after another. Maybe that was the reason he related to Jason so well. Mutual self-loathing and all that shit.

From an early age, he'd learned that people looked down on him, pitied him, and wanted him to disappear. Being a constant reminder of society's shortcomings tended to bring out the

worst, and rarely the best, in people. Some were driven by the need to help, while the rest were quick to look the other way or blame those unable to put their lives right. The burden of generational poverty a yoke too heavy to lift off their shoulders.

Someone with PTSD from violence must be provided with a safe, nonjudgmental environment to discuss the traumatic events they experienced.

Social service personnel who never arrived, but doctors with prescription pads at the ready were plentiful enough. No wonder those towns and communities could not often rally the strength to raise themselves out of the pits of despair. No one wanted to hear their neighbors' problems when they were full up with their own.

For many, the escape came in prescriptions and alcohol bottles to dull the reality of their endless suffering. For Gator's parents, that was their lot in life. He didn't know where either of them were, and he had no inclination to go looking. When he left, it was for good.

For a long time, he wondered if they'd noticed he was gone.

He gave a mental shrug and put the pamphlet back on the rack with a shake of his head.

He'd been in therapy for a while, but it didn't take away the realities of his past, no matter how far he ran from them, or tried to work them out with the doc.

Gator hoped Jason had more luck killing his demons.

Jason

“So, how's this supposed to work?” Jason asked, unable to stand the silence.

This man had the power to change the course of his life, and he needed to know the rules so he could follow them.

Dr. Ramsey smiled reassuringly. “It’s not all doom and gloom, Jason.”

“Not from where I’m sitting.”

“I suppose not, but I’m here to help.”

“Help prove I’m not a threat to society.”

“Under the right circumstances, we’re all capable of being a threat to society.”

“Yeah, but no one’s suggesting throwing you in jail and forgetting where the key is.”

“True, but we’re nowhere near making that decision.”

“How long will it take?” Was he supposed to live in limbo, not knowing when he’d be ripped away from Ben again?

“As long as it takes.”

So the answer was yes.

“Are you intentionally being ambiguous?” He was drowning, and the guy wouldn’t throw him a life preserver.

“No,” he said without losing his small smile. “Therapy is a complex undertaking and not a quick fix.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that.”

“Have you ever talked to anyone about what you’ve been through?”

“No. Everyone’s got their demons to deal with. Mine are no more important than anyone else’s.” Albeit a bit more violent.

“What if I told you your thoughts, feelings, and concerns are important?”

“I guess now they are.” Especially considering the situation he now found himself in.

“You mean due to what happened the other day,” the doc wanted clarification.

“Yeah. I lost control. I hurt someone and, well, you know what happened to the other guy.”

“Yes, your father. You need to understand they were important long before that. Your upbringing didn’t provide the healthy environment you needed to thrive and grow.”

“By all accounts, we were the model upper-middle-class family. For years all I heard was how people wanted to be us. How fucked up is that?”

“People saw a choreographed illusion of the perfect family. It seems that’s what your parents wanted most of all.”

“Perfect. Yeah, I’d say that’s about right. Anything crossing that imaginary line was dealt with.”

“Dealt with? Can you clarify?”

“Yeah. I’m sure you know what happened when I came out to them.”

“I’ve been given a brief history.”

“Well, perfection was called for in all aspects of my life. School, sports, grades, friends. It all mattered, but my father especially. He took it like a personal blow if I didn’t live up to what was expected. So I gave them what they wanted, and they left me alone for much of my younger life.”

“That changed when you came out.”

“Yeah. Absolutely. The gloves came off, and persuasion became persecution.”

“I understand they sent you away to several conversion therapy facilities.”

“All across our great country,” Jason said without trying to hide his sarcasm.

“I’ve had a few clients tell me that after the first facility, they pretended to be hetero to avoid being sent back. Why didn’t you do the same?”

“Young. Stupid. Headstrong. You name it.”

“You refused to give in.”

“I guess you can say that.”

“Do you view yourself as a strong person?”

“I do now. As an adult. Or at least I thought I was before losing control.”

“Yet, as a young teenager, you fought back.”

“Aren’t all teenagers full of bravado and stupidity?”

“So you view your acts of defiance as illogical.”

“Well, logically, I should’ve known better than to try to change their minds. Instead, I pushed until I ended up in the last facility they ever sent me to.”

“Walker’s.”

“You’ve done your research.”

“Like to be prepared. After that, you left for the Army.”

“Yeah. The old man saw it as a victory. I was going to be a real man. Go kill some commie bastards, as he put it. Something he could be proud of.”

“Was it his victory?”

“Hell no. But I was safer donning camouflage and a rifle in some godforsaken desert than sleeping in my bedroom at home.”

“I see.”

What the hell did that mean? *I see. I see you’re psycho? I see you’re a coward and ran away? I see straight through you?*

What would the doc think if he knew Jason’s guilt came from hurting the deputy and not from killing his father? He’d keep that shit to himself unless he wanted to be sent to a padded room.

“I want you to think long and hard about something for me.”

“Sure.”

“What do you want to get out of therapy? I don’t mean the same old answer, to stay out of jail. Dig deeper. If you could

achieve one thing throughout our sessions, what would that be?”

Jason thought that was obvious, avoiding jail time and a criminal record that might keep him away from Ben. What else was there? But he couldn't choose that.

“How about we meet every Tuesday and Thursday to start and see where that takes us.”

“Whatever you say. You're the boss.”

“It's funny how many people think that at first.” Dr. Ramsey laughed. “Stop by my wife's desk. she'll set you up with a time.”

Jason stood feeling a bit unsure. “That's it?”

Dr. Ramsey set his pen down and looked at Jason. “Yes, for today.”

“No digging into my brain or ink spots you want me to look at?”

“No. There won't be any Rorschach testing. I have other things in mind.”

Jason stood there for a few moments, unsure what to think, but when Dr. Ramsey didn't elaborate, he figured it was time to leave.

“Okay.”

“I'll see you on Thursday.”

“Thursday, got it.”

Jason could see it now.

He was going to need therapy to help with his therapy.

Jason

“Are you ready?” Jason asked as he held the ball high in the late afternoon sunlight. “Hold your hands out.”

“Okay,” Ben said with his small arms open wide. It amazed him how trusting the little guy was even after being missing for most of his life.

“Okay, here it comes.”

Jason tossed the soft rubber ball into the air toward his boy.

Just as the ball was about to land gently in the little guy’s hands, he closed his eyes, allowing the ball to fall between his arms. When Ben opened his eyes, he looked down at the ball lying in the grass, and his bottom lip began to tremble.

Oh shit.

Jason ran to his son’s side and knelt. “It’s okay. We’ll try it again.”

“No, I’ll never catch it,” Ben whispered as tears began to form in his eyes.

“Oh buddy. Sure you will. It takes practice. Next time try to keep your eyes open.”

“I can’t,” Ben whispered in embarrassment.

“Why?”

“I’m scared,” he admitted without looking up.

“Of the ball?”

“It can hit me.”

Jason sat down on the grass and took Ben in his arms. Once the little guy calmed down, Jason set him on his knee and dried Ben’s cheeks with his sleeve.

“Buddy, it’s okay to be afraid.”

“You’re not, and Uncle Gunner’s not afraid of anything.” Ben looked up at him with those innocent eyes ripping open Jason’s heart.

“Ben, me and your uncle get scared by things constantly.”

“You do?” Ben asked, his head tilting to his shoulder.

“Sure. I promise, I’m telling you the truth.”

“When?”

“All the time, but especially when we’re worried about you.”

“Me?”

“Of course, you. You’re the most important person in the world to us. You’re Uncle Gunner’s only nephew. You mean everything to him. As for me, I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have you. You’re my son, and I love you.”

“I love you, Dad.”

Jason hugged Ben closely. How had he stayed away from his son for so long?

His job was to make sure no one took him away from Ben.

Gunner walked out of the lake house and changed directions when he saw them sitting on the grass.

“Hey, guys. Whatcha doing?” He folded his big body and sat on the grass with them.

“I was afraid the ball would hit me,” Ben said while looking at the rubber ball on the ground. “But Dad said you both get afraid sometimes like me.”

“Afraid?” Gunner smiled wide and flexed his muscled arms, making Ben laugh. “Your dad’s right. I’m afraid sometimes.”

“But you’re big.”

“It doesn’t matter how big you are, fear is something you’ve gotta face or it’ll stop you from doing things you want.”

“Like catch the ball?” Ben asked.

“Like catch the ball.”

Jason hoped Mandy looked down at them and was happy to know they were trying their best to raise Ben into a happy, well-adjusted person.

Ben stood. “Okay. Can we try again?”

“You bet,” Jason said. “As often as you want.”

CHAPTER SIX

Gator

After dealing with a few last-minute issues, the bar was finally quiet. Rob, the local mechanic, was desperate to get the grocery store's checkout girl, Rachel's, attention. The problem was Rachel's father wanted her to date only professional men with high-paying jobs and "a future."

It didn't matter that Rob owned the garage. He was considered blue collar with no prospects. Seeing the guy so dejected killed Gator and reminded him of what people thought of him when he was growing up. They both knew there wasn't much Rob could do about the father's views, but Gator reassured him not to give up if she was truly who he wanted since it was her opinion that counted. If she couldn't get past her father's edicts, then she wasn't the girl for Rob.

In the back of his mind, Gator calendared a conversation with Rachel's father the next time he came into the bar. He was a regular beer-after-work guy, and Gator knew him well. He didn't begrudge the father for wanting the best for his daughter, but sometimes it took a helping hand for someone to see what was best was right in front of them.

Shortly after Rob, the mechanic, left, Ms. Janet Carver came in for a coffee and a chat while one of her two daughters was at school basketball practice. The Carver family had been delivered a nasty blow when her husband had been gored by a bull while out working his herd of cattle. Ranching wasn't an easy life and was often dangerous.

Thankfully, he wasn't killed, but it'd be months before he was able to walk again, let alone ride and care for the ranch.

The men from the lake house, Bryan and his father, along with other ranchers in the area, were pitching in to keep the family afloat. But even with help, Janet appeared exhausted from picking up the slack and caring for her children, while aiding her husband's recovery.

Gator went back to the kitchen and had the cook whip up a big family meal for Janet to take home. It wasn't much, but at least she wouldn't have to cook dinner when she got home. Gator could see the confusion and relief in her eyes when he brought out the to-go containers. He shook his head when she tried to pay.

He made another mental note to check with the basketball coach about the schedule so he could prepare dinner for the family on practice and game nights. It was the least he could do to help.

Gator took advantage of the quiet time to think. After Jason's first session, he'd been silent the entire ride back to the lake house. Beginning therapy wasn't easy for anybody, but considering the skeletons hanging in Jason's closet, it could be a brutal process reliving many of those experiences.

Gator had absentee parents, but compared to Frank and Lisa Wells, Gator's folks were up for parents of the year.

He couldn't help but stare at the unfinished cabinet, half covered by a tarp, at the end of his bar, and wonder if Jason would ever return to this place to complete it after what he'd been forced to do only a couple of steps away from where Gator stood.

They'd managed to repair or replace most of what had been broken in the bar's dining room, and all signs of damage and blood had been scrubbed away, but he wondered if it would be enough for Jason to walk through those doors again.

Gator didn't know, and his growing attachment to the damaged man could further complicate his bar ownership. If the bar would be too much of a traumatic memory for Jason, would Gator be willing to keep it if it was? And why was he even considering that shit?

Life was too many questions without answers.

Things were much easier when all he had to worry about was the local yahoos getting drunk on a Saturday night and starting a fight.

He could walk away. No one would blame him. He'd made no promises. Hell, they were roommates at the cabin. Even though he threatened to sleep in the only bed in the place, Gator decided to bunk on the couch.

It'd been three weeks since Frank was killed, and Jason had been to see Dr. Ramsey five times and still refused to talk about his sessions.

But, on the bright side, life at the lake house had taken on a routine of sorts. Jason and Gator helped with the cottages as the team constructed the remaining buildings. Jason dug out a spot for himself in an old tractor shed where he worked on furniture for his store back in Oregon, which his business partner, John, continued to run in his absence.

From appearances, it seemed Jason and John had a healthy business between walk-in customers and commissioned pieces. For the moment, it worked. But Gator wondered how long before the distance between Texas and Oregon became a problem, and they'd have to relocate the business or shut it down.

Jason had made it clear that he had no plans to leave Ben ever again.

Ben had taken to his father living at the lake house like it'd always been that way, and spent much of his time with his dad in his woodworking shed. It felt like both had been missing a part of themselves when they'd been separated. Gator had to admit, he'd expected Gunner to get his nose out of joint at the change, but the dude surprised him by encouraging Ben when it came to his father.

Respective viewpoints of those living at the lake house had simmered since the butting of heads on that first day, and everyone seemed to accept Jason and Gator staying there until the doc rendered his opinion to the DA's office.

The sheriff received weekly reports on Jason's progress, which sparked Gator's anger every time the subject came up. It was like having an anvil hanging over Jason's head even though Deputy Reynolds had long since healed and was no worse for the couple of punches he took that day. The idiot deserved it for pulling a gun on a man who'd been in a battle for his life.

Gator wasn't sure if Elias was more pissed at how quickly Jason had disarmed his deputy, that the guy had been knocked out, or that it shouldn't've happened in the first place.

"You just going to stand there or pour me a beer?" a gruff voice asked.

Gator shot a look over at Jeff Walton, retired Army and part of what Brick liked to call *the fishing crew*. Gator glanced over the bar, and sure enough, Molly, Jeff's chocolate lab, was sitting at his feet.

"What's got you in such a damn hurry?" Gator grinned before grabbing a glass mug hanging from the railing above the bar and pulling the stick to set the draft beer flowing from the tap.

"Ain't got all night for you to get your shit together, now do I? You staring off into space is a new one, but I guess that's what emotions will do to a man," Jeff grumbled while trying unsuccessfully to suppress a smile.

Bastard. "Emotions? Yeah, right. I don't have them," Gator huffed as he slid the glass down the bar, strategically stopping in front of his latest visitor.

He then grabbed a metal bowl he kept behind the bar for such an occasion, filled it with fresh water, and handed it to Jeff, who set it on the ground for Molly.

Within minutes, the quiet turned into a dozen or so other townspeople who sat across the bar talking, eating, or drinking alone, which hadn't bothered Gator before but suddenly felt off somehow. *Shit. No emotions.*

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you say." Jeff chuckled before tipping his glass back and taking a long swig of his draught.

“Damn right.” Gator grabbed a towel and wiped the bar top with a bit more force than necessary.

Emotions? He hadn’t been born with any, and if he had, the cold reality of his life soon drained them out of him. Nothing would ever change that, not after all this time.

A growl rumbled its way through his chest at the thought. He might be getting used to Jason hanging around, but that was it. A kind of familiarity.

His growl deepened.

Why am I getting angry?

“I don’t know. You tell me?” Jeff asked.

Wait a minute, had he asked that out loud?

“What?” Gator played possum.

“I don’t know why you’re growling over there, but I bet it has something to do with a certain woodworking Army Ranger.” He widened that damn grin.

“It has nothing to do with Jason,” Gator denied straight out.

“Denial is to be expected.”

“Expected. What the hell are you going on about?”

“It’s difficult for some men to talk about their feelings.”

“Bullshit, old man. We’re not going there.”

Jeff laughed deep and long, annoying Gator more.

“Glad to see I amuse you.”

“At my age, it’s good to know some things still do.”

“Can’t you just drink your beer in silence?”

“Not when things are so out of whack around here.”

“Nothin’s out of whack. Marshall is the same today as it was yesterday and the day before. Things don’t change around here.” That’s why Gator liked it so much.

“I’ll have to disagree with you on that, old friend. The place is practically a hotbed of activity since Brick and his team

moved into town.”

“I thought you liked that team?”

“I do. The place could do with a little excitement to shake things up.”

Gator wasn't sure where this conversation was leading, so he headed back to safer waters. “Speaking of teams, where's the rest of the fishing crew?”

“Tuck and Andy went to visit Andy's mom over in Austin.”

“And Wreck?”

“Don't rightly know.”

Wreck was a case onto himself. He was a former Air Force, missing his left arm due to cancer, and wore an eye patch, though he had two fully functioning eyes because he liked to keep people off balance. He was a character, but solid.

“Waiting on the sheriff to call you?” Gator asked.

“I suspect Elias or one of his deputies will find him sleeping it off under a tree somewhere.”

“Wouldn't be the first time.”

“Doubt it'll be the last, either.”

Surprisingly, Wreck didn't get his moniker from his appearance. No, it came about due to his penchant for crashing anything with wheels. Anything really, no matter how it was powered. The guy had a knack for disaster.

“Nice try.” Jeff laughed.

“Nice try?”

“Yeah, we're talking about you, not the motley crew of beer-drinking, combat-hardened imbeciles.”

Gator had to laugh. Jeff could talk shit about his own crew, but if you weren't military and talked shit, you'd better be ready for the beatdown coming your way. A code all military personnel, active duty or retired, lived by. If you didn't live through the shit they had, then no matter how fucked up the former member was, you didn't say shit.

They were a family. A messed-up, hardened, torn-up, hardcore brotherhood of lethal men and women with a slightly askew sense of humor and moral ambiguities.

“We aren’t talking about me,” Gator persisted.

“Sure. So, how’s playing house out at the lake suiting you?”

“We’re not playing house,” Gator growled.

“So you say. And Jason’s recovery?”

“Coming along fine.” Nothing was private in a small town.

“Have you fucked him yet?”

Gator chucked the cloth he held across the bar and straight into Jeff’s face. “Do you have a death wish, old man?”

Jeff chuckled without fear as he tossed the towel back onto the bar top. “Old man, hell, I’m only six years older than you. Your time is coming. That touch of gray hair you’re sporting ain’t no dustin’ of snow.”

Without thought, Gator ran his hand through his short hair as if trying to erase the silver creeping in since turning forty.

“I’ve earned every single one of those little fuckers.”

“Haven’t said you didn’t, but time catches up with all of us sooner or later. Why not enjoy the bounty lying right in front of you?”

“Bounty?”

“Jason Wells. The handsome and talented former Ranger currently living under the same roof as you. Unless you’re truly not interested, perhaps he needs a more mature hand to guide him,” Jeff said while holding his hand up for examination.

“Back off.”

“Why should you care if you’re not interested?”

“The guy’s been through enough. He doesn’t need a horndog lookin’ for a piece of ass messing with him. If you know what’s good for you. Leave. Jason. Alone.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Better, a promise.”

Instead of his threat having the desired effect, Jeff’s smile grew even wider.

Well, shit. Gator was being played.

“Think you’re smart, don’t you?”

“Never been accused of being slow on the uptake,” Jeff said.

Gator raked his palm down his face.

“Why are you being a pain in my ass tonight?”

“Because if I leave you to your own devices, the opportunity of a lifetime will pass you by. As your friend, I can’t allow that to happen.”

“You can’t, can’t you?”

“Nope.”

“Well, shit.”

“Yep, so either toe the line or prepare yourself for the pestering to end all time.”

“Why me?” Gator asked with a huff, not expecting an answer.

“Because this town kinda likes you for some unknown reason.” Another voice spoke up from the other side of the bar.

Gator turned to find Ms. Marie, the sheriff’s assistant, sitting on a barstool. She’d kept the sheriff’s office running for as long as Gator could remember, even before Elias Cooper came to town. The woman would always be the keeper of the town’s secrets and the direct line to the sheriff.

“Please tell me you’re not subscribing to this fantasy Jeff’s got going?”

“Fantasy? No, but there is a real honest-to-goodness man who deserves a bit of good luck to come his way.”

“I’ve never been considered anyone’s good luck, and I don’t believe it applies now.”

“More like a curse.” Jeff laughed.

“Hey, I thought you were on my side,” Gator grumbled.

“Sorry, couldn’t help myself. You left it wide open.”

“Great, with the two of you, what could go wrong?”

“Exactly,” Marie agreed.

“I was being facetious.”

“Big shock,” Jeff chimed in.

“Look, I don’t need any help with my love life, now or ever.”

“Elias was the same way when it came to Fletcher,” Marie said.

“Don’t be bringing the sheriff into this conversation. The man would have Jason behind bars if he had his way.”

“You so sure about that?” Marie asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Gator asked.

“That he gave Jason a chance after attacking a deputy,” Jeff countered.

“The deputy shouldn’t have rushed into the situation like that in the first place.”

“Gee, a man covered in blood didn’t deserve a once-over by law enforcement?” Marie asked, playing innocent.

“Jason was obviously traumatized.”

“He was crouching, ready to fight,” Jeff added.

“Jason stopped himself from seriously hurting the man,” Gator defended.

“Yeah, he did, and that’s to be commended. But will he be able to next time?” Marie asked.

“There isn’t going to be a next time. Frank Wells is dead.”

“No, the next time something traumatic happens?” Marie continued.

“You can’t be so sure,” Jeff said.

“Elias wouldn’t be doing his job if he allowed that to go unchecked,” she added.

Gator knew they were making sense even if he didn’t want to hear it. “It’ll take a lot more to convince me of the sheriff’s ‘good intentions.’”

“Jason is getting the therapy that he, by all accounts, needed for some time,” Marie said as Gator set a glass of beer down in front of her.

“I agree therapy is perhaps the only positive outcome to this.”

“Oh, I think there’s more than one positive aspect to this situation.” Jeff chuckled.

“Really? I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“It allows you and Jason time.”

“Time?”

“Yeah. Without rushing or looking over your shoulder like before. Now you two can get to know each other in a much more relaxed environment,” Marie explained as if it were common sense.

“You consider being confined to lake house property with the ever-present threat of being locked up in a relaxed environment?”

“Is he in jail?” Jeff asked.

“No.”

“Why not use this time wisely?” Marie asked.

“You two are insane. Perhaps the two of you should be the ones pairing up.”

“What makes you think we haven’t?” Marie raised her eyebrows in question.

Jeff chuckled into his beer.

Gator raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Why me?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” Marie answered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jason

Jason looked at the ordinary chisel in his hand. It wasn't the first time he'd fumbled and shaken when holding it. The new piece would have to be reworked if he was to save the design. He sat back in his chair and studied his hands as if they'd reveal the problem, but there was no injury or visible cause for his mistakes.

He knew he had to get his shit together or his commissions would dry up, and the business he'd worked so hard to establish would fail.

But, and this was a big but, he didn't know how to fix his grip, which slipped at the most inopportune times, causing damage instead of precision art. Thankfully, it only happened when he was using the chisel, and it wasn't lost on him that he'd used one similar to end his father's life not so long ago.

If John, his business partner, noticed his slow recovery rate, he hadn't said a thing, but Jason was sure John had to've noticed by now. Only months ago, what had felt like second nature felt as daunting as climbing Everest barefoot.

Dr. Ramsey had assured him this was part of his healing process, but Jason didn't internalize the doc's confidence. If he couldn't recover his ability to create the intricate carvings that distinguished him from other woodworkers, he'd be SOL. He'd become another broken Army Ranger forever with a serious case of PTSD and no prospects.

He felt like his life was in limbo. He seemed unable to move forward, which would mean he'd be doomed to be stuck in the horrors of his past.

He hated being in his head like this. Going in circles without answers. All he wanted was to live a normal life. Have normal friends who barbeque on the weekends and bitched about taxes and regular life shit. He had to face the fact that normal couldn't be used to describe him or his screwed-up life.

He took one final look at the cabinet he was working on and tossed the chisel back on the table in frustration. That was enough for today. He'd likely mess up the piece beyond repair if he kept pushing. It was time to cut his losses. He stood and stretched out his cramped back before covering his work with a tarp, then he headed to the door of the two-bay shed.

The moment he cracked the door, the bright Texas sunlight blinded him as the heat swamped him. Another hot, muggy summer's day at the lake house, and, curiously, he didn't hear the din of hammers or saws blaring. The quiet was so complete, he could hear the water lapping at the shore.

Where was everybody?

It wasn't unusual for members of the team to be called away for one reason or another. Typically, a new mission would crop up and varying members would take off for a few days. LH Investigations, the team's company, seemed to be in demand all over the globe. Cases ranging from theft, missing persons, bodyguard duty, all the way to espionage were within their realm of work.

Considering they were all retired Navy SEALs, they were more prepared than almost all run-of-the-mill security firms to handle the tougher cases.

He'd become accustomed to one or more of them being away at a moment's notice, and recently Spence and Harris had been using their extensive computer hacking skills in an attempt to find Harris's missing sister, from whom he'd been separated several years earlier. Brick had sworn to help Harris find her after he'd saved the team's lives by warning them of an upcoming attack during a mission.

Jason walked to the lake house and crossed the back porch. He'd become more comfortable living here over the past couple of months, especially since the choices were here or

jail. He now felt comfortable opening the screen door and walking into the kitchen as if he had the right to be here.

Brick, Fletcher, Shaw, Spencer, Gunner, Conor, Harris, and Julia were sitting around the kitchen table, which was covered in documents, maps, and three laptops.

“And how do you suppose we’ll fly there without a pilot? I think TSA might throw up a few red flags when our gear gets x-rayed, and I don’t think our government contact would give us a lift for a unsanctioned operation,” Shaw said before everyone turned to look at Jason as the screen door slammed shut behind him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he said, suddenly feeling like the odd man out.

“No worries.” Brick flicked his hand. “We’re reviewing the details of our latest lead on Harris’s sister.”

Gunner had told Jason about Harris and his sister, who’d had cancer, which was why Harris had hacked military information and tried to sell it. He’d needed money for her chemotherapy and all the other treatments the doctors ordered.

After he’d been caught, he was recruited to work for the good guys, but learned he wasn’t exactly playing for the right side and his true boss was a low-life US Senate hopeful who’d been selling government secrets using high-end software.

Harris had been told his sister had died, but later discovered she was alive. Talk about a mindfuck. Harris started working with LH Investigations, and their resident computer genius, Spencer, at the same time he was trying to track down his sister.

“Wait,” Julia said as she riffled through the top drawer of a four-door file cabinet until she pulled out a file. “Here it is. Jason, you’re a licensed pilot, right?”

Jason felt the eyes on him change from acknowledgment to curiosity. “Yeah. I was an Army aviator. I used to fly Ranger teams on their missions. My current business partner, John, and I met at an airfield.”

“What can you fly?” Brick asked.

“AH-64 Apache, EH-60 Black Hawk, UH-60 Black Hawk, C-20 Gulfstream, and C-26 Metroliner. But I’m sure you have that intel in your handy-dandy file.”

“We all have files,” Spencer stated. “Deal, man.”

“We do?” Harris asked.

“Especially you, asshole,” Brick answered.

Jason chuckled. Under other circumstances, he would have enjoyed the camaraderie. It reminded him of being part of a Ranger team.

“Problem solved.” Gunner nodded. “Spencer can get us flight clearance.”

“Problem?” Jason asked.

“We can’t trust him,” Harris argued. “What if he loses it at twenty thousand feet? My sister’s life depends on someone who’ll get us on the ground in one piece. I won’t risk Jennifer.”

“Unless you plan on morphing into my father and slicing me open with a Bowie knife, I think we’re good.”

For someone who had no problem hacking into government mainframes and selling state secrets, Harris acted like he was more law and order than the sheriff. For some reason, Jason been on Harris’s shit list for attacking the deputy. He’d only lost it once, months ago, under extreme and different circumstances.

Dr. Ramsey hadn’t advised the sheriff to lock Jason’s ass up, which boded well for his sanity. Yeah, he knew he wasn’t even close to being fully recovered, but with every passing day and session, he grew more comfortable with who he was, and had begun to deal with what he’d been through.

Jason’s snap at Harris received varying degrees of laughter. Harris huffed and returned to his computer screen, pretending Jason wasn’t there, which suited him.

“Elias isn’t going to like this,” Fletcher reminded everyone.

“What if Dr. Ramsey gave us the all-clear?” Gunner suggested.

“Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? Jason hasn’t even agreed to help,” Spencer reminded everyone.

Brick stood with a folder and approached Jason, holding out the file. Brick asked, “Want in?”

Jason thought about how his life had been circling the drain only a few months before, but thanks to Brick and most of the team, he had another chance.

More important was how well they’d cared for his son. Jason owed Brick and the others, and even if he didn’t, he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t itching to have a chance to fly again.

“Hell yeah,” he uttered, unable to hide his growing grin.

Gator wasn’t going to like this.

Gator

“No way in hell.”

“Glad you took a moment to think it over.” Jason chuckled as he cut the mushrooms and threw them into the sauce bubbling on the stove. “I don’t need your permission.”

“I don’t need to think about it. It’s a shitty plan,” Gator argued.

“Why? I’m more than capable of flying the team across a few state lines to California.”

“I don’t doubt your ability.”

“Only my sanity,” Jason snapped.

“Don’t go jumping to conclusions. You’ve been through several high-stress situations over the past couple of months,

and the combination of grief and trauma is enough to mess up even the toughest of us.”

Jason turned, pointing a wooden spoon at Gator, and scowled. “Do I need to remind you I’m a highly trained professional who’s survived multiple combat situations over many years as a Ranger?”

“No, you don’t.”

“Good,” Jason muttered and turned back to the stove.

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Then tell me, wise one, what this is about,” Jason demanded as he set down the spoon.

Gator shrugged. “Fuck if I know. It’s...a feeling.”

“A feeling?”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Harris’s sister has been secreted away for years. Who knows what she’s like, who she believes, and whether she’d even go with her brother.” Which was true enough but not the real reason for his second-guessing the plan.

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. And wasn’t that a good look. Tempting.

“She lives on a commune, not under the watch of a team of enemy guerillas who have her hidden in a jungle where they brainwash their captives.”

“You say commune, I say cult. There are more than a few extremist cults out there. Heaven’s Gate, the People’s Temple, the Mansons. Ring any bells?”

“Fuck, man. You’re bringing up shit from over twenty-five years ago. The sixties for Manson. Shit. She was given to a nice couple who raised her where people grow organic produce.”

“They took her to keep Harris cooperating with them. Which means they were in cahoots with someone.”

“Cahoots? Really?” Jason laughed. “We need to get her back to find out if she’s okay, and if she knows her brother thought she was dead.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“I don’t know. We’re going down to assess the situation for ourselves.”

“Something’s not right about the whole setup. I don’t like it.”

“Gee, I’m shocked.” Jason groaned as he poured pasta into a large pot of boiling water.

“What about the sheriff? He can’t be on board with this.”

For once, Gator might agree with the lawman, which was a scarily shocking thought.

“Dr. Ramsey has given me the all-clear as long as we continue our sessions online. The sheriff is fine with it,” Jason said with that sexy grin of his.

Does he have to be so damn handsome?

Gator was hitting a wall. Seeing no other options, he stated, “I’m coming with.”

“What?” Jason’s eyes were wide.

“You’re not the only one with a military background.” Gator pointed to his chest. “Army, remember? Besides, my years as a member of an MC gives me an edge regarding the seedier side of life.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Jason argued.

“Consider it backup.”

“What about the bar?”

“That’s what I have a manager and staff for.”

“Brick’ll never agree.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Asshole.”

Gator chuckled. “Damn straight. How much time do I have before dinner’s ready?”

“About twenty minutes,” Jason grumbled, tossing the dishcloth on the counter.

“Good, I’ll be back,” Gator said before heading to the front door.

Crossing the yard to the lake house took him less than a minute. He didn’t bother knocking on the screen door on his way in. He found Brick and Roman on the couch in the living room, watching some crappy TV show. When the team leader looked up, he didn’t seem surprised.

“Was wondering how long it’d take you to get your ass over here,” Brick said with one brow raised.

“I want in.”

Brick reached between the couch cushions, pulled out a file folder, and tossed it on the coffee table.

“I expected nothing less. We’re wheels up in forty-eight.”

“Roger that.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gator

As Gator adjusted his seatbelt, he scowled at the roar of the six-seater twin-engine Cessna as it took off. They'd left the lake house well before dawn, and the one coffee he'd managed to get down before liftoff was wearing thin. Since owning a bar, Gator had a low-key schedule: wake up late morning, take an hour to shake off the cobwebs before going downstairs to stock the bar before the doors opened.

Intentionally, he'd opted for a laid-back lifestyle. Life in the military was anything but, and as a member of an MC, he had days when he could chill, but on the whole, his brothers were not what anyone would call easygoing.

Now he was back in the thick of it. Between Jason's problems, and the life the team led, he was on high alert most of the time.

The file he'd read had been missing key information, like who owned the property the Once Removed Commune lived on, where their money was coming from, and exactly what edict they lived by. As far as he could tell, the group of over fifty individuals remained secretive and apart from the small surrounding community of Chalmers, California.

The fenced-off Once Removed compound encompassed roughly thirty-five acres and included housing, farmland, a large communal building, a park, and what the team figured was a school. Over the years, several complaints had been lodged by their neighbors regarding inappropriate water usage, wandering livestock, construction at all hours, and various zoning violations. It appeared the commune wasn't living in harmony with the adjoining communities. As was usually the case, what was on paper rarely was the full story.

The commune members typically remained behind locked gates and tall fences, which further encouraged animosity between them and the townsfolk. The few pictures the team had showed only parts of the buildings, and rarely had individuals. What they could see reminded Gator of early American settlers without modern conveniences, and clothing that seemed more in tune with the early 1900s than today.

Harris's sister, Jennifer, had been twelve when she was removed from his custody. Soon after, he was told he would never see her again, and if asked, Jennifer was dead. Harris had to keep up the ruse if he wanted her to continue receiving cancer treatments. This had been over six years ago, and Gator doubted she'd still be receiving treatment in the more colonial surroundings she lived in.

"We should be landing in forty-five minutes," Jason announced from the pilot's seat. Gator had to admit, seeing him in command of the aircraft did things to him he didn't want to examine too closely.

Spencer was acting as copilot after taking a crash course before they left. Spence was crazy smart, but it still didn't give Gator confidence knowing if something happened to Jason, it'd be up to Spencer to get their asses back on the ground in one piece.

Up 'til now, the flight had been smooth, though the cabin was made to feel smaller than it was due to the size of the team members. These guys ate nails for breakfast and shit bullets before dinner.

Given he pushed his way into going on this wild-goose chase, he couldn't complain. He was along for the ride in, at best, a supporting role. It wasn't as if he hadn't been a grunt before, but that was a long time ago, and he'd paid his dues. But if he could provide support or back up Jason, Gator'd suck up taking orders.

"You specialized in explosives, right?" Brick asked Gator from his seat across the narrow aisle.

"Yeah. Had a knack for it. Interested in how they work, how to defeat them, and for blowing up shit without too much

collateral damage.”

“Your file states you were part of the Fifty-Second as an explosive ordnance disposal specialist.”

“Sounds about right.”

“True you backed up several units in Afghanistan and a handful of hot spots across the globe?”

“Again, sounds right.”

Gator didn’t talk much about his past. The shit he’d done, and the body parts he’d been sent in to retrieve from lesser-skilled individuals when things went south, were matters for him and Doc Ramsey to discuss. He’d done his job, set and disabled ordnances all over this fucked-up world, so what?

He turned his head and asked Brick, “You have a point?”

“It pays to know what resources are available if and when needed,” Brick stated.

“You planning on blowing up shit?” He could get behind that.

“You never can be too prepared.” The grin on Brick’s face didn’t give him a good feeling, but maybe he was feathering his nest just in case. “Having an explosive expert on hand can’t hurt.”

“Anyone ever mention you’re a little OCD?”

“You’d be surprised.” Brick chuckled.

“Doubt that.”

Forty-five minutes later, they pulled into hangar sixteen at a private airstrip ten miles from Chalmers. Spencer, the master of procurement, had arranged everything, and the team began unloading their gear into the backs of two black SUVs. They were on the road to a house they’d rented in the nearby hills.

Spencer and Harris were busy on their laptops while Fletcher drove the first SUV and Brick talked on his cell in the passenger seat, leaving Gator and Jason alone in the second vehicle. As Gator drove, Jason stared silently out the passenger window. The guy seemed a million miles away.

As the silence stretched out, Gator grew concerned and was moments away from asking what the hell was going on when Jason finally spoke.

“My hands shake.”

“What?”

“My hands shake when I’m working on a piece. Specifically, when I use a chisel.”

“Understandable.” Considering he’d used one to kill Frank Wells.

“I worried they’d shake today when we were flying.”

“Did they?”

“Nope.”

“Have you talked to the doc about this?”

“Yeah, and now you. I prefer to keep it private.”

“Anything you say to me is kept between us. I’d never betray your trust.”

Jason moved his gaze from the surrounding landscape and looked at Gator. “Why do you care?”

Gator had to take a moment before answering that one.

Why did he care so much about Jason? Why was he ready to put his life on hold for this man, especially when others fell by the wayside throughout his life?

“Because...I do.” He shook his head. *Shit*. “I feel a connection to you, okay?”

“A connection?”

“Yeah, since I first saw you in that courtroom. I haven’t been able to shake it. I know it doesn’t make sense, but there it is.”

Jason stared, which made Gator feel fidgety.

Did he sound like an idiot? He's certainly beginning to feel like one.

Then Jason did something Gator didn't see coming: he reached over and took hold of Gator's hand, which had been lying on the center console.

Warmth and sparks were instantaneous, as it had always been the few times they'd touched. An awareness washed over him, and he couldn't have torn his hand away, even if he'd wanted to, which he didn't.

"This okay?" Jason asked.

Gator squeezed Jason's hand tight, causing him to smile for the first time in days.

They didn't say another word, but this time there was nothing uncomfortable about the silence.

Jason

When they pulled into the dirt drive of their rented digs, Jason thought it looked like any other ranch-style house they'd passed on the road on the way up here. Surrounded by trees, their neighbors were out of sight and miles away. Surely something Spencer found attractive about the place. They'd been driving up a steep grade for some time, and when Gator stopped, they released hands before the man turned off the ignition. They broke apart and exited the vehicle to walk to the edge of a drop-off where they took a long look at the town of Chalmers, which covered the valley floor below. They had uninterrupted sweeping views that looked like a picture you'd see on touristy websites.

Spencer grunted and pointed at open garage doors. Gator got back in the SUV and pulled in beside the other vehicle. A

closed garage door kept looky-loos from learning anything about them.

“Nice rental,” Gator said, and Spencer chuckled. “Gotta hand it to you. View’s perfect.”

“Thought we’d get the lay of the land without being too obvious about it. We should be able to take a look inside the compound without much fuss. We brought along the best surveillance equipment available.”

“Let’s look around before we get unloaded and set up perimeter sensors and cameras,” Brick ordered before heading for the door leading from the garage into the house.

“When do you expect Gunner, Conor, and Shaw?” Jason asked.

“A couple of days,” Brick answered.

The other team members were tying up loose ends on another case before joining them. Breaking up the group was a smart way to keep people from wondering what was going on in the house at the end of the road.

Jason followed the team into the house, which had them standing straight in a large kitchen. The property wasn’t estate sized, but it was plenty big. This place had enough room to keep the team from tripping over one another.

Though the front of the house looked much the same as any other ranch, once inside, he could see it was markedly different. Floor-to-ceiling windows ran the length of most of the west walls, and they could clearly see the town of Chalmers. If anyone wanted the perfect view of the goings-on in the small community, this house gave it to them in spades.

“I’m appreciating your abilities, brother,” Fletcher said as he slapped Spencer on the back. “Front row seats to all the action.”

Jason had to agree. Being in this house was like striking gold. When he turned to the living room, he caught Harris looking down at the town, his face a study of raw emotion. He moved over a couple of feet and caught Jason staring at him. In a blink, Harris hid behind his usually cool demeanor.

“We’ll find her,” Jason said.

Harris turned away without saying a word. Not that Jason had expected him to say anything. Harris hadn’t tried to hide his feelings about Jason from the moment he’d moved into the cabin.

Jason could feel Gator’s comforting presence at his back. He wondered how long he’d been able to sense the man’s presence so easily.

“Let’s get unloaded,” Gator suggested.

“Yeah. Okay.”

He followed Gator to the SUV and grabbed the first few duffles. The hard plastic cases holding their weapons were next, followed by their personal belongings.

“What room you wanna take?” Gator asked.

Jason walked down the hall and took the first open room he came to. He didn’t care where he slept, and it didn’t matter that the room had one queen-size bed. He dumped his bag on the floor and turned to find Gator following him in and dropping his bag.

“You want this room?” Jason asked.

“I don’t care. Whichever room you’re in is where I’ll be,” Gator stated as if what he said wasn’t a big deal.

“You’re staying with me?”

“Where the hell else would I be staying?”

“Fine. Here’s good.”

“Agreed,” Gator said before walking out of the bedroom as if this was the way things had always been and always would be.

CHAPTER NINE

Gator

When Gator had agreed to bunk on the floor, the carpeting looked a hell of a lot softer. He punched his pillow, and for the fiftieth time rolled over in his sleeping bag, trying to find a comfortable position. Nothing helped.

“You done?” Jason asked from what looked to be a comfortable bed.

Gator turned to find Jason lying with his head propped up on his hand, staring down at him with his grin looking all kinds of hot and tempting.

“Done?”

“Yeah. With suffering.”

“I’m not suffering,” Gator growled before punching his damn lead-filled pillow. Where the hell did they find this shit?

“Sure, you’re not.”

“Asshole.”

He had the nerve to chuckle in that damn sexy way that made Gator’s balls ache.

How the hell was he supposed to pretend he was giving the guy space if he kept looking that delectable?

“Get up here already,” Jason huffed before rolling over onto his back.

Gator knew when to suck it up, even though sleeping beside Jason would be equally as painful as the floor, but for different reasons.

“Fine,” Gator snapped, throwing his sleeping bag open with much more force than was necessary before crawling out.

Jason moved to the other side of the bed, allowing Gator to slide in beside him. Torture of the best variety.

Gator had to get control of himself. Jason wasn't anywhere near the head space needed to have some guy all hot and heavy for him. Gator rolled over to face the opposite wall, figuring if he couldn't see the object of his desire, he wouldn't be tempted to touch it. Shit. Kids thought like that. Not grown-ass men.

“This so bad?” Jason asked. “You don't need to stay in here, you know.”

“No, it's not bad. It's the opposite, and that's the problem.”

“Problem? So I'm the problem? I thought we'd worked this out in the SUV.”

He could feel Jason turning to face him, but Gator remained on his side staring at the damn wall.

“Yeah, problem might not be the best way to describe it.”

“I didn't ask you to hang around. I even told you to leave. I'm not some fragile nut case about to lose his shit without constant supervision.”

Gator could hear the anger and pain in Jason's voice, and that was the last thing he wanted to cause.

“I'm not here to supervise you.”

“Then why the hell are you here?”

“Fine,” Gator muttered and turned over to face Jason. “You want the truth?” Jason nodded. “I'm attracted to you. There. You happy? I can't stay away even though a horny old Army dog ex-biker is the last thing you need. I know you're going through shit. Hell, I can relate. But every time I try to put some distance between us, it feels like shrapnel is tearing through my body. And yeah, I know what that fucker feels like from experience.” Gator was breathing heavily while desperately trying to keep his voice down so as not to share

the shit going on in his fucked-up head with the entire lake house team.

Though, undoubtedly, they already knew. The team always seemed to know shit.

Jason's eyes were wide, and his mouth hung open. Great, now he'd get himself kicked out of the bedroom.

Before Jason had a chance to deny him, Gator reached for the edge of the covers to retreat, but Jason surprised him when he said, "I didn't know you were gay."

"Bi," Gator told him while sitting back and looking him right in the eye. "I go for the person, not their equipment."

"Um." Jason sort of shrugged. "That works."

Gator grinned, and Jason's slow, sexy smile spread wide. Then faster than Gator tracked,

Jason reached around the back of Gator's head and pulled him into a kiss that sent him reeling.

Desperate and rushed, for a moment Jason overwhelmed Gator, but once he regained his senses, he took control, easily pushing Jason against his pillow and commanding the kiss to a deeper, more intimate level.

This was where he'd dreamed of being.

Holy hell, the man tasted good. His lips were soft, and his body hard. Gator would love to spend hours exploring every muscle and crevice of Jason's body, but Gator knew this wasn't the time to start a physical relationship with a man recovering from a horrific trauma.

Gator had been honest when he told Jason he was going through some heavy shit. So he slowed the kiss. He'd take his time with this man. Getting to know each other on more than a lust-filled haze was important.

And for once, Gator wanted to do what was right no matter what his dick was telling him.

The groan from Jason's lips was almost Gator's undoing, but he soldiered on and pulled himself back.

Jason watched him closely, his deep brown eyes looked like melted chocolate. But before he could get any more foolish ideas in his head, Gator decided he had to put a stop to it.

“Don’t freak. I’m not rejecting you. I want you, and I’m barely hanging on to my self-control. But I don’t want to rush this. We need to learn about each other before we make the choice to go forward. I’m a possessive man, and once you’re mine, you’re never going to be able to get rid of me. So you need to make sure it’s what you want.”

Jason blinked as if trying to clear his vision and took a moment before responding. “I accept your terms, but know this: once I have you, there’ll be no talk of getting rid of anybody.” Jason’s words were backed by the steel in his voice.

Gator could feel his heart rate picking up impossibly faster. Who knew something so easily given could make the biggest impact?

He rolled onto his back, taking Jason with him, tucking the man to his side. It’d been a long time since he’d shared a bed or felt the warmth of a body next to his own, but when Jason laid his head on Gator’s chest, he felt his world shift into place like a crack in the earth’s crust resealed tightly until it was as if the gap never existed.

Jason

Several spotting scopes had been set up along the west-facing glass wall, all aimed at the community below. The comings and goings at the commune were logged as individuals were identified, and as they went about their daily lives unknowingly under the watchful eye of the team.

The main industries in this area were ecotourism and agriculture. A large avocado farm employed many of the

townspeople, along with a citrus farm a couple of miles outside of town. The semi-desert conditions made this region popular with fruit producers.

As with many Californian agricultural communities, hardworking families supported the industry that produced over a third of the country's vegetables, and nearly three-quarters of the country's fruits and nuts.

Jason respected the hard work that went into farming. With climate change adding to the unpredictability of the weather, farmers had to roll with the punches and be prepared for the worst.

The commune sent a select number of individuals out each day to work in the fields and orchards. They had their own bus to ferry the workers to and from each farm, and by all accounts, there was little interaction between the commune members and the other farm workers.

The commune's women appeared to shop freely in the stores throughout the town, but remained apart from others in the community. They dressed as if they were early settlers in long skirts, blouses, and wore hair coverings, while the men wore hats, trousers, suspenders, and button-down shirts. They stood out among the locals who wore contemporary streetwear, jeans, t-shirts, and sundresses.

"At least it's not going to be hard to figure out who's who down there," Fletcher stated as he leaned back and stretched after hours of looking through one of the scopes.

"True, but I'm having more of a difficult time distinguishing between the individual commune members with their hats and bonnets," Jason said while rubbing his tired eyes.

"The ladies don't take off their bonnets until they're back behind the commune gates," Gator added. "And they have a serious amount of roofs and other cover created in common spaces, as if trying to block views from above."

"We've noticed. We'll have to find a way to get a closer look," Spencer said.

“I have an idea,” Jason announced, which drew a huff from Harris.

Before Jason could say another word, Gator was out of his seat. “I’ve had just about enough of your attitude, fucker. We all came out to help you find your sister, and you’ve been a bastard to Jason from day one. What’s your malfunction?”

Jason waited for another team member to step in to de-escalate the situation, but, surprisingly, no one said a word.

Harris looked around the room, perhaps hoping for backup, and found none.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing,” Fletcher stated. “While I’ll admit I wasn’t happy Jason went after a deputy, we’ve all learned the deputy shouldn’t’ve pulled a gun on someone who’d just fought for his life.”

That was the first time Fletcher shared how he felt about Jason being a member of the lake house community. It gave him hope knowing that the sheriff’s partner had reserved judgment until he knew the whole story. Perhaps the sheriff felt the same way.

“If he’d had a gun in his hand, would that’ve made a difference?” Harris shouted as he opened his shirt to reveal the scar left by the bullet he’d taken for his police officer partner. “I’m all too aware of how shit goes down in extreme circumstances.”

“Man, you can’t compare hardened criminals about to execute Officer Devon with what Jason did. They are two different situations,” Spencer stated.

“Can’t I?” Harris growled as he stood. “I don’t trust him.”

Brick stood, catching everyone’s attention and forcing Harris to back down. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you trust him. I decided.” Brick leaned forward. “If you don’t think I can read a man’s character, we’ve got bigger problems than you transferring your history onto Jason.”

Brick shook his head. “Damn, man, he’s on the team trying to find your sister. You’ll work with him like a professional or you’ll leave.”

“You saying you won’t help me find my sister?” Harris asked, looking more like a lost boy than the angry man he was moments ago.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying, but if you push this, we will be forced to continue this mission without you. Your attitude could jeopardize my team, and that’s one thing I won’t allow. I gave you my word we’d do everything to find her, and I never go back on my word.”

Brick and Harris traded stares until Harris looked away. “Fine. I’ll treat him as I do any other teammate. But I’m not looking for any new buds.”

“I’ve got enough buds.” Jason groaned, imagining them sitting together BSing over a beer. Never going to happen.

“I’ll hold you to that, Harris. This is your only warning.” Brick turned and left the room.

Later that night, as the lights of Chalmers began to glow, Jason noticed a vehicle pulling up to the commune.

“They’ve got visitors,” he announced, causing a few other scopes to change trajectory.

“Who do we have here?” Spencer asked.

A woman got out of the car and went to the trunk. She scanned the area before opening the lid and pulling out a large black duffle bag.

“More like, what do we have here?” Fletcher asked as he turned the control knobs on his scope.

The bag was zipped shut but looked to be heavy by the way the woman struggled to carry it. A man came out from behind the compound’s gates and took the bag from her. Both disappeared inside a building near the front of the commune.

“She looked nervous,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Fletcher agreed. “Wonder what a commune member in the middle of farm country has to worry about someone seeing?”

“Whatever it is, it can’t be good,” Gator said.

“Agreed.” Fletcher nodded.

CHAPTER TEN

Gator

Jason's idea sounded a whole hell of a lot better back at the rental house. Now that Gator was standing outside Chalmers City Hall wearing mirrored sunglasses and carrying a clipboard and camera, he felt like a fool. Sure, posing as location scouts for an upcoming movie was plausible. SoCal was the backdrop for any number of locations. *M*A*S*H*, which was set in Korea, was filmed in Malibu Creek State Park in Calabasas. But being the focus of hormone-fueled teenage stardom dreams was downright creepy.

The mere mention of movie scouts in the community brought out all the crazies who had dreams of making it big in Hollywood. Gator, Harris, and Fletcher stood waiting like they had targets on their foreheads for a county official to join them and show them around the town. Spence had arranged everything beforehand, ensuring everything looked the part.

"This better work," Harris grumbled as he adjusted his glasses.

"Stick to the plan," Brick's gruff voice came through their tiny embedded earbuds.

The rest of the team was back at the rental watching their every move through the array of scopes pointed at different locations in town.

"Got it," Harris grumbled.

"Maybe we'll get the grand tour, including the commune," Fletcher said.

"Odds are slim, but if we put enough pressure or incentive on the town official, we might get closer than we ever could have without the cover of night," Jason added.

“Most of all, I hope we get a glimpse of Jennifer,” Harris whispered.

“Remember to keep your shit together if we do. The last thing we need is for you to start yelling her name or something equally idiotic,” Gator warned. Harris would be the likely cause of a clusterfuck.

“I’m not some newbie,” Harris sniped.

“You even saying the word newbie makes me nervous.” Gator shook his head.

A big unknown was how Jennifer would react to seeing Harris. Their ruse could be over before it started if she ran away from or to him. The plan was to get Jennifer out of the commune silently.

“Do you know Brad Pitt?” a young blonde woman asked from Gator’s left. They were hanging around like a swarm of flies. “I hear he’s single.”

“No.”

“That sucks. But you’ve got that sexy older man vibe with all those muscles and a touch of gray in your hair.” She was flirting unashamedly in front of the growing crowd. “I bet you could teach me a few tricks.”

He could hear Jason laughing with the other team members. When he got back to the rental, they were going to pay. Gunner, Conor, and Shaw had arrived earlier that morning, which meant more ribbing. *Fuck.*

“So, you got some girl back in Hollywood waiting for you?” she asked, seductively flicking her blonde hair back over her bare shoulders. Her tube top hid nothing, and he doubted she was trying to.

“That’s a hard no.” Even though he’d been married to a wonderful woman many years ago, now he had his eyes on a handsome Army Ranger.

“Maybe we could meet for drinks later,” she suggested, casually rubbing her breasts against his crossed forearm. She

flashed a megawatt smile that assuredly got her what she wanted with guys her age but was sorely wasted on him.

Gator uncrossed his arms and backed up. “Look, lady—”

“Here comes our tour guide,” Fletcher said in the nick of time. Gator was one breath away from telling the blonde she didn’t stand a chance, and to find some self-respect.

“Good afternoon,” an older man with a protruding belly waved and hollered from the steps of City Hall. “Hope I haven’t kept you three waiting too long. Had to check in with your studio before we began.”

Knowing Spencer and his long list of talents, Gator had no doubt they checked out and came with excellent references.

“You know,” the guy leaned in conspiratorially, “you can’t be too careful. You’d be surprised. We get fake scouts out here from time to time. But I spot ’em.” He touched the side of his nose. “We’re not country bumpkins, ya know.” The guy shook his head as if it happened every day.

“We understand your concern,” Harris said with a smile. “Some people are always looking to take advantage of kind and hardworking folks like yourself.”

The town official seemed to stand a bit taller at the compliment. “Name’s Manuel and I’m the permit officer for Chalmers. All movie locations must be cleared through my office before filming begins.”

“Then you’re the perfect man to tour us through your beautiful town,” Fletcher said.

Gator wondered if the man had ever worked in the fields and orchards surrounding him, which paid his government salary. When Manuel held out his hand, and Gator shook it, he figured if the guy had worked in the fields, it was years ago. He had baby-soft skin and manicured nails, not a callus or speck of dirt to be found.

“Now, are there any locations you men would like to tour specifically?” he asked while adjusting his overtaxed belt and shooing away the last of the hopefuls.

Harris opened his mouth, but Gator knew what the idiot was about to say, so he jumped in before mentioning anything about the commune.

“We understand the movie *The Unholy* was shot out here a few years back. Maybe we could start with those locations,” Gator suggested.

“You’ve done your homework. I like that. Follow me. I have a golf cart on standby for such occasions. Oh, and if you’re looking for a little companionship while in town, you let me know.” Manuel winked and turned his head in the direction of the blonde. “What happens in Chalmers stays in Chalmers.”

Asshole.

This moron having a side gig as the local pimp made Gator cringe. And a golf cart on standby?

Gator wasn’t shocked that the portly man wouldn’t walk around town, so the three of them followed Manuel to the parking lot beside City Hall and loaded into a six-seater golf cart before pulling out onto the road. The thing had bucket seats made in leather, a cooler stocked with Bud, a radio, a roof, fans, and even a GPS. Why the hell would he need a GPS in a town as small as Chalmers?

Gator took the opportunity to glare at Harris in the backseat, to which the man was smart enough to look away. Maybe Harris had caught on that they thought he was the weak link. They would’ve preferred to leave him back at the house, but without a current photo of Jennifer, they needed him to ID his missing sister.

Jason

Although he’d laughed along with everyone else, Jason couldn’t say he was thrilled someone was hitting on Gator.

What surprised him most was being jealous over a man he'd thought would never be more than a friend. With all the shit he'd been through, Jason knew his emotions were all over the place. But about two things he was absolutely clear: he wanted to be stable and centered for his son, and that he was never going to leave Ben. This mission highlighted what Jason had known in his soul. Tending to the people you love was the single most important thing in the world.

Which was why Ben was staying with Julia and Sammie out on the ranch with Bryan, Kyle, and Bryan's grandfather. Leaving the three of them at the lake house alone wasn't an acceptable option, even though they'd probably be fine. But given all the horrors that could befall a small child, Jason wasn't taking any chances.

For the kids, this was a vacation. They'd spend their time riding horses and running around a working ranch. Plus, Bryan's granddad loved seeing kids again on the land. A win-win, and at least one thing rolling around Jason's head was eased.

"So, this is where you're hiding," Conor said as he walked into Jason and Gator's bedroom. Jason had heard footsteps long before Conor appeared in the doorway.

"I'm not hiding. I needed some downtime, that's all."

The guys were on their way back from Chalmers after the first day of their tour, and Jason was trying to get his emotions in check. The whole nature of this op hit him in a deep place he'd kept sheltered. The dark place he wouldn't visit where his guilt lived for leaving Ben.

"I respect that. Talk to Doc Ramsey since you've been here?"

"Yeah, last night."

"Good. So wanna tell me what's got you bothered?"

"I'm fine."

"So what's eating you?" Conor asked.

“You’re not going to let this go, are you?” Jason asked, already knowing the answer.

“Not likely. I’m not fond of watching people suffer.”

Conor was a straight-up good guy, and Gunner’s man. If there was one dude you didn’t want to cross, it was Gunner. The guy was terrifying and a highly trained Navy Seal sniper. However, with Conor, the guy was a teddy bear, even though Jason would never say those words out loud for fear of getting pummeled into the ground.

“I’m just wondering what the hell I have to offer anyone?” Jason admitted.

“Not just anyone, Gator, right?”

“Yeah.” Perceptive fucker.

“The blonde, she got you thinking,” Conor said while crossing his arms.

“Is this your ability to figure shit out, or am I that bad at hiding it?”

“I’d say a little of both; let’s leave it at that. What makes you think you have nothing to offer him?” Conor asked.

“Seriously? I’m steps away from jail, my issues have issues, and I don’t even have a home or security. Who knows what would’ve happened to Ben if it weren’t for you and Gunner? I fail at the things that matter most, and my prospects are slim to none.” Maybe his father was right. Jason would never be a real man.

Conor sat back in the chair and said, “Frank Wells has never been right a day in his miserable life, and now’s no time to start thinking he was.”

“Did you just read my mind?” Jason asked, freaked the hell out.

Conor smiled wide. “It doesn’t take a mind reader to know you have those thoughts going through your head. You’re a good man, dealt a shitty hand. You’ve fought since day one in those horrible facilities your parents sent you to when you were young.

“You’re a stand-up guy who did the one thing to assure Ben’s safety: you hid him from your family’s reach. The first time I met you, and you found out what your parents were threatening to do, you fought back again. You didn’t stand idly by. You followed me across state lines to the courthouse, and you stood up, spoke the truth, and bared your wounds, all in an effort to protect your son.

“You didn’t do all this because it was easy, but because it was the right thing to do. And now, you need to do the same thing. It’ll still be hard, but remember, it doesn’t matter what anyone says or how often you’re told you did the right thing and that you’re a good man. You won’t believe it until you accept who you are, scars, fuckups, PTSD, and all the rest. Once you’ve done that, you have to forgive yourself.”

“You make it sound so simple. I don’t even know where the hell to start.” Jason ran his hand through his hair. “How can I forgive myself when I don’t expect anyone else to?”

“You start with me.” Gator’s deep voice came from the doorway. “You let me in to help you find a way. You trust me not to run at the first sign of trouble. We face it together.”

Jason hadn’t heard the team return, but as Conor stood to join Gunner in the hallway, Jason wondered if the gifted man knew how much Jason needed Gator by his side, but never could find the strength to start the conversation.

Thanks to Gator, it was out in the open, and the conversation had begun.

Jason would have to decide whether he’d take a leap of faith and begin down the long road of forgiving himself, or if he would crawl back into his shell to protect himself from the world.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gator

After Conor cleared out, Gator shut the bedroom door and turned to see Jason sitting on the edge of the bed they'd shared the last few nights, his eyes wide and filled with apprehension. Before Gator could find a way out of this long overdue conversation, he started talking.

"You're going to have to trust I'm not going anywhere even if you tell me to go to hell. See, you'd have to be there first for me to make the trip."

"I think I already am." Jason groaned, falling back on the bed, and stared at the ceiling.

"Then let's find a way out together," Gator said as he walked to the bed and straddled Jason so they were face-to-face.

"I'm a wreck," Jason muttered.

"Nothing wrong with a fixer-upper."

"I've got nothing to offer anyone."

"I'd disagree."

"You might need to get your head checked."

"I do that regularly. Remember?"

With each response, Gator moved closer.

Jason kept his gaze averted. "I'll fuck this up somehow."

"Let me worry about that."

"What if I'm never normal again?"

“Who’s to say what’s normal? I’m far from what folks consider normal, and yet people seem to like me.”

“This could end badly.”

“Or it could be the best decision we ever make.”

Jason’s gaze fixed on Gator. “Are you going to find a positive spin on everything I say?”

“I’m not sure. This shit’s new to me. I’m just rolling with it.”

When they were inches apart, Gator leaned forward, his resolve firm, and waited for Jason to make his choice. Now or nothing. Either they faced what was coming, or it ended here.

By way of an answer, Jason closed the distance between them and took Gator’s mouth in an eager kiss.

The tight band of apprehension nearly crushing Gator’s chest dissolved, and for the first time in days, he took in a full breath.

After Jason lowered his head to the bed, he said, “It’s not going to be easy.”

“Perfect. I don’t want shit to start changing now. Anyway, easy is overrated.” He dropped a quick kiss on Jason’s lips. “We’ll talk more, but we’ve got a debriefing to attend,” Gator said as he jackknifed off the bed, and then held out his hand.

“Lead on,” Jason said as he adjusted the bulge in his jeans.

Gator turned and grinned.

“What do we have?” Brick asked the group.

“The city inspector’s a greedy bastard,” Harris stated the obvious.

“What else?”

“The compound doesn’t seem to have stationed guards,” Gunner said. “I thought there’d be some sort of security.”

“Maybe they think they’re safe here in Chalmers,” Jason said. “Out of sight.”

“Or they have buried sensors around the perimeter. We need to find out what we can detect,” Brick countered.

Spencer tapped away on his laptop before spinning the screen around for all to see.

“In the last decade, the town of Chalmers has had three movies and one network series shot within the town’s limits.” The graph on the screen showed the size and cost associated with each.

“Given the revenue, I took a deeper look into the inspector’s finances,” Spencer explained.

“And?” Brick asked impatiently.

“Manuel accumulated a disproportionate nest egg for a small-town public official,” Spencer told them. “I found nothing to indicate his family had money, or his wife came from money.”

“How much?” Gunner asked.

“About one point five mil.”

Jason shook his head. “Bastard’s on the take.”

“Clearly,” Gator agreed. “But who’s paying him and why?”

Brick nodded. “We need to know where the money comes from before the team returns to Chalmers tomorrow.”

“That’s not all,” Spencer said.

“Why am I not surprised?” Conor asked.

“The town of Chalmers is skating on the edge.”

“Huh. From all its appearances, it looks prosperous,” Shaw said as he glanced out the nearby window at the glowing lights.

“Their accounting has them at barely scraping by,” Spencer said. “They’ve been running at the bare minimum for the past

few years.”

Brick pointed at Spencer. “I want a breakdown of every city official and employee. I don’t care if they make the rules or mop the floor. Then I want a rundown of all the businesses and farms in the area, big and small. We have to get a picture of all the players.”

“There’s still nothing on the Once Removed community. No bank accounts or public records,” Harris stated. “Which isn’t possible. There has to be records of who sold them the land, the permits they needed to build structures, and all the other shit we know leaves a paper trail. What the actual fuck?”

“Obviously, they’re getting money and supplies from somewhere,” Gunner said. “We need to find out how, and who from.”

“I need to make a few calls.” Brick stood, and as he was leaving the room, he shot out, “I want answers before dawn.”

“This is bigger than rescuing Harris’s sister from a cult,” Jason stated.

Spencer nodded. “Yeah, it is.”

“Damn. Why does this keep happening?” Conor asked as he leaned back in his chair.

From the little Gator knew, the last few cases LH Investigations took on had turned from run-of-the-mill stuff to missing persons and dirty businesses.

Apparently, they were on a roll.

Jason

“Where’d Gator come from?” Jason asked as they lay facing each other in bed.

Jason compared his one tattoo on his upper shoulder area—the red lightning bolt of the Army Rangers, and a green and navy crest depicting a white sun and star—against the myriad of tattoos all over Gator. Most notably the huge alligator across his torso.

Jason was muscled, but unlike Gator, the skin on Jason's back and abdomen wasn't smooth, but marbled with scars left by whips, knives, and that damn electric cattle prod.

He wondered if that was why he stopped himself from touching Gator because he feared Gator would want to touch him back.

"I used to wrestle in high school, and then a chance meeting later in life solidified the name," Gator explained as his hand absently brushed over the tattoo.

"I bet you were good at wrestling." Jason couldn't imagine Gator being bad at anything he put his mind to.

"Thanks. The part where a guy couldn't shake me off once I got ahold of him was how the name got started."

"Clamped down on him like the jaws of an alligator."

"Damn right. Although instead of using teeth and jaws, I used my arms and legs."

"I can imagine you hanging on until the other guy surrendered."

"I had a lot of aggression to work out, and wrestling gave me the controlled environment to do it in."

"Really? How come?" Jason asked but caught himself before Gator had a chance to respond. "If you don't want to talk about it, no worries. There's a lot of shit I find hard to talk about."

Gator pulled Jason closer. "Considering I know so much about your past, I think it's only fair for me to share a bit of mine." Jason nodded. "I come from poor white people who lived in fetid conditions without any hope of bettering themselves."

"Well, that had to suck."

“It’s a part of my life I’ve come to terms with. I had no control over the behavior of the adults in my life. I wanted more. They didn’t.” He shrugged one shoulder. “I was born in a small town in the backwoods of Kentucky. The town had given up long before I was born, and my parents went right along with the downturn. Without the logging industry, there weren’t many other ways to make a buck besides government assistance. If you were hungry, you hunted your food, and if you were thirsty, you lugged pails of water up from the stream.”

“You did what you had to do to survive.”

“Yeah, and to dull the pain of their existence, many turned to drugs and alcohol. Before I left for the Army, I’m not even sure my parents realized I was even there. They were so far gone for so long, I pretty much raised myself. The only reason I graduated high school was because of wrestling. School requirement: we had to have passing grades to stay on the team.”

“Why didn’t you pursue wrestling after high school?”

“You mean like professional or Olympic shit? Babe, people like me don’t end up on the National team or posters. Men like me are more likely to carry an M4 in some desert than an American flag in a stadium.”

People could be so cruel. To peg a child’s worth on their birth location or their parents was biased and shortsighted.

“You ran away from your past and signed up like I did. We were both running, only from different things. Me from a life of loathing and hate, and you from a life of neglect and hopelessness.”

“We are a lot more alike than we are different. Though you grew up with money and I grew up dirt poor and penniless, the results were the same. Kinda puts a whole new spin on the nature/nurture argument.”

“Do you know what happened to them?”

“My parents?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Do you wanna find out?”

“I don’t know anymore. At first, I didn’t give a rat’s ass what happened to them. I was angry and alone. Now that I’m older, I’ve seen how the world can chew you up. I’m not sure, but I’m not angry anymore.”

“I get it. If you ever do, I’ll go with you. You’re not alone anymore either,” Jason said as he leaned on his elbow to look down at Gator. His tanned skin starkly contrasted the white pillowcase and bedding.

Gator winged up his brow. “Didn’t I say the same thing to you earlier today?”

“Yeah, but that was before I realized we both were lost.”

Gator lifted his hand and snaked it around the back of Jason’s head, pulling him closer and into a fiery kiss that had him moaning.

With one smooth movement, and without breaking the kiss, Gator flipped them and now he was on top of Jason. His strength was a turn-on, and Jason’s cock hardened so quickly it was painful.

By the steel pipe pressed up against his thigh, Gator was in the same condition.

Jason could no more keep himself from touching and wandering Gator’s body than stop the sun from rising. He didn’t even try. In this one moment, he wouldn’t think or let his fears stop him from getting what he wanted.

Gator slept in his boxer briefs, and Jason ran his palms down Gator’s broad back before grabbing hold of his firm ass cheeks. He adjusted his position and ground their hard cocks together with only two thin pieces of fabric separating them. He was so hot for Gator, he worried he’d blow before they had time to get naked.

Jason was so caught up by the rush of need racing through his body he almost missed when Gator’s hand slipped under his shirt and across his scarred abdomen and chest.

Instinctively he froze and waited for the disgust and swift retreat of Gator's touch. When it didn't come, he waited some more.

"So help me god, if you stop now, I'm going to throw myself outta that damn window," Gator warned before taking Jason's lips in another punishing kiss.

He doesn't care. And wasn't that a revelation?

Gator kept roaming his fingers across Jason's chest until he reached his nipple and pinched it hard. Jason was surprised by the needy moan that came up his throat at the sharp sensation. He wasn't inexperienced, but his past had dictated limits in his sex life.

When the need struck, it was easy to find willing partners without leaving the lights on and baring his scars for a lover to see. In his few longer-term relationships, Jason had never fully let go of his insecurities regarding his appearance.

"We don't have to get naked if you're not ready, but I'll be damned if I can't touch what I desire. I'm a greedy, possessive man, and I want you. All of you." Gator changed direction and slid his hand into Jason's shorts.

Gator's strong fingers wrapped around Jason's hard cock, and instead of stopping him, Jason spread his legs to give Gator more room. Their mouths fused as Gator began to pump Jason's shaft faster and faster.

Jason tore his lips away and moaned, "I'm there."

Gator's green eyes seemed to glow even brighter. "Give it to me."

In that instant, Jason's brain short-circuited as his moan was swallowed by Gator's mouth. He felt like he'd never stop coming.

He wasn't sure how long he'd blanked, but by the time things started to come back into focus, he found Gator licking his fingers and staring at him possessively with those penetrating eyes.

As Gator had warned, he now owned Jason. And he was okay with that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gator

Gator watched as the secretary leaned forward on her desk as she mindlessly flipped through another magazine at the entrance of Chalmers City Hall. Her long, red dagger-like nails made it hard for him to believe she worked on a computer with speed. The fact that her computer wasn't even switched on confirmed his suspicions. They had a meeting with Manuel before continuing their tour of shoot locations.

With a slight nod, Fletcher stood and went to strike up a conversation with the woman, effectively blocking her view of Gator and Harris. Gator scanned the area, and finding no security cameras or employees in the general vicinity, he shot a look at Harris, and they got to work.

Harris headed for the bathroom while Gator casually slid the dime-size device from his pocket and attached it to the underside of the coffee table in the waiting room. He watched as Fletcher did the same under the lip of the secretary's desk while still deep in conversation with her. Harris returned moments later, and with a nod, indicated he'd set listening devices in the bathroom.

The plan was to plant as many bugs as possible before leaving City Hall. They intended to secure one on that damned golden golf cart before the day was out.

"Hello, my friends," Manuel greeted as he entered the reception area. His suit jacket barely made it halfway around his bulbous belly. "It's wonderful to see you again."

On cue, Fletcher was on.

"Manuel, so gracious of you to take time to show us around Chalmers again. We enjoyed our first visit, and our employers

are excited by our report.”

Manuel’s eyes lit up, and he practically vibrated with excitement. “That’s what I like to hear. Now, if you follow me to the boardroom, we can discuss everything in greater detail.”

He waved his arm toward the doors he’d walked through, but didn’t wait for them to stand, carrying on as if expecting them to follow.

“Will we be able to meet with the mayor today?” Fletcher asked as they passed a closed office door with a gold plate reading MAYOR.

“No. Sorry. He’s out of town for an extended vacation,” Manuel replied. “But no need to worry, I have complete authority to handle any and all Chalmers business.”

Interesting. The mayor was missing. Gator wondered where he was, and if he went there voluntarily.

Spencer and Harris had dug up a lot on all the county officials, but Mayor Drake’s returned with a squeaky-clean record. No hidden bank accounts or dubious affiliations could be found. On paper he was a model citizen, mayor, and community member.

Other than Manuel, the city planner, and the missing mayor, there were only three other city employees. Mr. Fred Rosemary, the director of the public works department; the city’s treasurer, Mrs. Anita Ratcher; and Ms. Lettie Finlay, the chief administrative assistant, who they’d already met.

The entire team found it odd that there weren’t more employees, but according to the information they’d dug up, roughly ten years ago, as people retired or were fired, they were never replaced.

Dates matched up, and Gator knew the lack of backfill coincided with the Once Removed community’s arrival in town.

It appeared a mayor, a city planner, the head of the public works department, an accountant, a lady who sat behind a desk and flipped through magazines, and Manuel ran the financially troubled town of Chalmers.

Gator could feel it in his bones: something was seriously wrong in this town. As in dead wrong.

As they walked to the boardroom, Harris stopped to admire a painting, and he appeared dazzled by it. But the team members knew he was planting another bug as Manuel took great pride in explaining its provenance.

Every chance they got, the three placed listening devices on everything from a bathroom pipe to a bust of a head that depicted some ancestor of Chalmers. When they were done, the place would be wired for sound, and the team would be able to hear every word.

The meeting was long and dragged out. Manuel wanted more specifics on the budget and plans, which Fletcher provided like a pro.

Eventually, they rode out on the bugged golden golf cart, but this time they were headed toward the secretive community. Harris kept his emotions under wraps, having been threatened to within an inch of his life by Brick. The team knew the true wild card was Harris's missing sister, Jennifer.

As far as they knew, she was living in the community, but they had yet to verify that information. This could all be a huge waste of time. Or, if the woman was there, there was no way of knowing how she'd react at the sight of her long-lost brother. If she even remembered him. For all they knew, she could be a tried-and-true member of the sect.

As they neared the compound, Manuel began his spiel. "This is a small community that Chalmers has welcomed with open arms. They're a bit odd and backward technologically speaking, which may be to your benefit regarding your second movie."

"How do you mean?" Fletcher asked as if unaware of the group.

"They don't behave as if they're part of the twenty-first century. They're more like the beginning of the twentieth

century. They shun all attempts at modernization and choose to live simply among the people of Chalmers.”

“How do the other townspeople feel about the community?” Harris asked.

“They don’t mind in the least. The people of the Once Removed community may be a bit strange, but they’re harmless and frequent the businesses in town. As long as they don’t cause a fuss, all’s good. Life here is pretty quiet, and we like it that way. Except for the filming that come to town, Chalmers is a pretty simple community.”

A markedly different read on the relationship than the team had found in the records of massive disputes between the townsfolks and the community.

“Do you think they’ll be willing to participate if, as you say, they shun most technology?” Fletcher asked. “A movie set will be rife with modern equipment, not to mention the actors and their entourages.”

“Oh, you leave that to me,” Manuel assured. “If you like what you see, I’ll work it all out. It might be tricky though.”

The man was fishing for a handout. Money to smooth the location shoot in case the sect did something to shut down the shoot.

“If they fit what we need, it’ll save the company a hefty chunk of change in hiring extras. I’m sure my employers will be thankful for all you can do,” Fletcher guaranteed.

“Then let’s stop in and say hello. The leader of the group is expecting us.”

Gator continued to take notes and pictures, as the primary location scout, and as they neared the compound, he began taking more strategic pictures.

Several of the exterior fencing, visible entry points, individuals wandering about, and curious onlookers. This might be their only opportunity to have a close look inside, and he wasn’t about to waste it.

Gator's and Harris's cameras sent immediate images to the computers at the rental house, providing a security backup in case their cameras were taken from them.

The team tried to cover all the bases, but sometimes things had a way of turning bad in the blink of an eye.

Jason

As the team neared the compound, the remaining team members at the rental went on alert. All computers and scopes were manned, collecting data as they went. All three of their men were wearing hidden cameras along with the cameras they were taking pictures with.

From the corner of his eye, Jason caught Conor speaking quietly to Gunner, which in itself wouldn't be odd, but the look on Gunner's face made Jason nervous.

"You okay?" Jason asked Conor, who was now staring down at the town.

"I don't know. Something's changed," Conor said without looking back at Jason.

"Is it a feeling?"

"Yes and no. More of a shift."

"Are they in danger?"

"Not that I'm getting, but there's something new in play."

"Okay, you three," Brick spoke softly into his headset to Gator, Fletcher, and Harris. "Stay on your toes. Conor's on edge. The first sign of trouble, make your excuses and get the fuck out of there."

Jason didn't like it, but without any obvious signs of danger, there was no reason not to continue with the mission.

“Okay, they’re at the gate,” Shaw announced from where he was sitting behind one of the scopes. “Showtime. Everybody, big smiles.”

Everybody quieted down and listened as the conversation carried on below.

“Hello there, Mark,” Manuel said. “These are the men from the studio I’ve told you about.”

A tall man with dark brown hair and a full beard appeared on the computer screens. He seemed to be assessing the team. They’d made sure to wear clothing that covered all visible tattoos, brand names, or expensive watches.

Fletcher reached out to shake Mark’s offered hand, followed by Harris and Gator.

“Welcome to the Once Removed Commune,” Mark said, but his eyes shifted quickly between the three, belying his nervousness.

“Thank you for having us out,” Fletcher said. “I hope we’re not too much of an inconvenience to you.”

“I have a few minutes to spare,” Mark said.

Okay, there was the time line. The head guy made it clear this wouldn’t be a long visit, so they’d have to get as much information as possible.

Gator snapped a picture of a building to the right, eliciting Mark’s instantaneous reaction.

“What are you doing?” he demanded before moving his body to block Gator’s view of the compound.

“Taking pictures. It’s my job,” Gator answered with all the enthusiasm of an overworked location scout.

“It’s okay, Mark. It’s normal for movie scouts to take pictures of possible locations,” Manuel told Mark in a placating tone. “They’ve been taking pictures of shoot locations all over town.”

“You mentioned nothing about the movie being shot inside our community. I was told you’d only need members as extras

in your movie.” Clearly, Mark wasn’t pleased. “We are a private community.”

As the leader talked with Manuel, the team members made sure to shift their bodies to get as much of the community as possible, all of which came through on the computer screens.

The team watched as a few community members were walking around, trying to get vids of the new arrivals. Harris seemed to hide his interest well. With his hands on his hip, he acted as if he was bored, but still scanning the growing crowd.

People came and went between the buildings, and at one point, they filmed the woman from the car with the duffle bag who’d arrived the other night.

Five young women moved closer, all wearing long skirts, blouses, and bonnets, reminding Jason of *Little House on the Prairie*. In an instant, Jason felt Conor’s body tense ever so slightly, causing him to look closer at the new arrivals.

All five women seemed curious about what was happening, but one stood with her mouth dropped open and eyes wide. She had blonde hair and big brown eyes.

Jason guessed it was Jennifer.

“Zero in on the group of women,” Jason said through his mic.

All three slowly angled their bodies, so their cameras picked up the group of women. Harris coughed his confirmation.

They’d arranged for him to give the signal the moment he saw his sister. This was the moment they’d been waiting for, and feared. How would Jennifer react at seeing Harris in the flesh standing only a few yards away?

Through the scope, Jason could make out the slight shake of Harris’s head and hoped Jennifer understood to play it cool or the whole plan could be shot to hell in a matter of seconds.

Conor was vibrating before he yelled, “Get out of there.”

Without question, Brick gave the order, “Get out now.”

Fletcher reached for the inhaler in his pocket and began faking an asthma attack, to which Gator was quick to respond. Harris was much slower.

They made their excuses and were back on the golf cart and headed to their waiting SUV. They'd be back at the house in under thirty minutes.

"What's going on?" Gunner asked Conor, who looked ready to tear into somebody.

"Harris has been lying to us."

Harris

"Don't draw attention," Harris said through his private link with his sister.

"What are you doing here?" Jennifer answered. ***"I've missed you so much."***

"I've come to get you."

"There's a lot you don't know, brother."

"You can tell me when we get you free."

"Who are those men with you?"

"They're not important."

Fletcher doubled over, gasping for air, disrupting their eye contact and cutting the link.

"What's wrong?" Harris asked.

"It's his asthma. He's having an attack," Gator shouted, and Harris knew he'd missed the cue.

"Where's his inhaler?" Harris asked.

"Pocket," Fletcher gasped as he pulled out the fake blue inhaler and brought it to his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Manuel, but we’re going to have to reschedule this meeting,” Gator said while directing Fletcher back to the golf cart.

“Of course, I understand,” Manuel said while getting behind the wheel. “Do you want me to take you to the doctor’s office?”

“No. I should be okay. Take us back to our vehicle, please,” Fletcher whispered sputtering.

Manuel spun the golf cart around and headed back to town. They loaded Fletcher into the backseat of the SUV, and Gator drove, Harris in the passenger seat.

Brick’s voice, deadly and cold, came across the comms. “Secure Harris.”

Fletcher pulled out his Glock and pointed it at the back of Harris’s head.

“Well, shit,” Harris said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gator

Gator didn't bother tempering his anger as he dragged Harris into the rental house by the front of his shirt while Fletcher held his Glock pressed against Harris's back. Brick had ordered them to secure Harris, which was enough for Gator. He trusted the leader wouldn't make a call like that lightly.

The interior door from the garage opened before he reached it, and Brick stood in the doorway looking like the harbinger of death.

"Bring him in," he ordered.

Gator pulled a pale Harris into the kitchen before slamming him against the nearest wall and bracing his forearm against Harris's neck.

Brick paced as the rest of the team gathered. Gator scanned the group for Jason and was relieved when he found him standing at the back of the group.

"When were you going to tell us?" Brick demanded. "I warned you never to lie to me."

"Tell you what?" Harris coughed out.

"Gator." Brick signaled for Gator to go harder.

Gator increased his pressure on Harris's throat.

"You and your sister are more than you seem," Conor said as he approached, vibrating with anger so intense Gator could see the waves flowing from him. "I knew something was different, and now I know what that is. You and your sister are telepathic."

“Fuck me,” Gator spat. “While we were standing there trying to convince the leader to let us in, you and your sister were chatting it up.”

Harris tried to look away, but Gator pressed deeper. Brick came over, pushed Gator out of the way, then grabbed Harris by the throat and lifted him off the ground. Gator backed off but stood ready.

“What. Did. You. Say?” Brick ground out between clenched teeth.

Harris put the team in danger, lied to them, and who knew what else.

“I told her not to draw attention,” Harris gasped.

“True,” Conor said from Brick’s other side.

“What else?”

“It’d be easier to talk if you let me down,” Harris huffed.

Instead, Brick gave him a shake.

“Answer me.”

“That we were there to free her.”

“Also true,” Conor continued. “How close do you need to be for it to work?”

“Eye contact.”

“True.”

It was an unimaginable boon to have a human lie detector on the team.

Brick released Harris without warning, sending him crumpling to the ground.

“Why didn’t you tell us the truth?” Brick demanded.

“It’s always been Jennifer’s and my secret since we were kids. It was safer that way.”

“Not a complete lie, but you’re not telling us something,” Conor said. “What don’t we know?”

Conor crouched beside Harris and stared into his eyes as if searching for something.

After a few seconds, Conor's head flew back as if he'd been hit. "You two were adopted."

"So?" Harris deflected.

"When?" Spencer asked as he pulled out his laptop.

Harris looked away. "I was four."

"I need your real birthdate and parents' names," Spencer said.

"Fine," Harris answered before providing them to Spencer.

"Shit. All this time, you suspected what you were but didn't bother to let us in on it," Conor said through clenched teeth. "Even though you knew my history and treated me like I'm a freak."

"What?" Gunner asked.

"He's a Noah Project survivor," Conor said, his voice devoid of emotion, and Gator could feel the betrayal waft through the room.

Conor stood and left, Gunner close on his heels. A door slammed somewhere down the hall.

"Am I right in assuming Jennifer is as well?" Brick asked.

"Yeah," Harris answered, leaning against the wall, his legs straight out in front of him.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"It was our secret as kids. I didn't know if it still worked. It's been a long, long time."

"You should've told us from the beginning. What else have you lied about?"

"Nothing."

"I find that hard to believe," Spencer stated without taking his eyes off the screen.

“So do I,” Brick stated. “You put this plan and my team in danger. We should pack up now and head back to Marshall without you.”

“No.” Harris moved his back against the wall to help him stand. Gator edged closer to him. “Please. We found her. She’s down there. We can get her out.”

“We can’t trust you,” Brick snarled. “You’ll be under constant supervision until I decide our next steps. Take him to one of the back rooms.”

Fletcher and Shaw grabbed Harris by his arms and took him down the hall.

“What now?” Jason asked as he came to stand beside Gator.

“We give Spencer a chance to do what he does best. Then I’ll decide next steps,” Brick answered. “I need all the information we can get our hands on.”

Gator needed some air. He nodded at Jason, who followed him onto the patio. This day had come as close to a clusterfuck as he’d been in years. He needed a minute to decompress.

“I didn’t see that coming,” Jason said as he sat on the lawn under a large oak tree with a swing attached to one of the large limbs.

“Ditto,” Gator agreed before sitting beside him. “What a total fuck-up this has turned into.”

“I was worried,” Jason admitted.

“Worried?”

Jason

“Yeah. When Conor freaked out. I didn’t know what the hell was going on. But I was ready.”

“Ready?”

“To go down there with everything we have at our disposal if you didn’t make it back to the house,” he admitted sheepishly.

“You were going to ride to my rescue?” Gator grinned wide.

“Don’t make it sound so melodramatic.”

“I wasn’t trying to,” Gator said as he stared at Jason. “I’ve never had anyone want to come to rescue me.”

“What about your Army teammates, or the MC you belonged to?”

“That’s different. It’s part of their responsibility, as it was mine, to watch their backs. I’ve never had someone take it upon themselves to do it outside obligation.”

“Perhaps I’m different from the rest.”

“You are,” Gator assured. “Entirely different.”

“Tell me about your ex-wife.”

“Talk about taking a hard left turn.”

“I’ve been curious. What happened?”

Gator lay back on the grass and stared at the sky. For a moment, Jason thought he wasn’t going to answer.

“I was fresh out of the Army, floating around the country on my bike, determined not to return to Kentucky. I didn’t have a plan or a home. I was staying in motels, and for a while, that was good enough.”

“It’s tough figuring out what to do with yourself when all that structure you’d lived with is gone.” Jason would know. When he’d retired from the Rangers, he felt lost for a long time until he met John, and they opened their business.

“I didn’t know what I was looking for until it slapped me upside the face,” Gator continued.

“The MC?”

“Yeah, but not at first. You see, I was hanging around in Abbeville, Louisiana, visiting an old Army buddy, and one day, we were fishing out in the nearby lake when we heard a

commotion on the shoreline. We weren't far away, so we went to see if anyone needed help."

"Once a soldier, always a soldier."

Gator grinned. "Yeah, some things never change. Anyway, when we got there, we found a group of bikers staying at a couple of houses close to the water, and were told that one of their dogs had gone missing."

"Louisiana, huh? I'm guessing an alligator."

"Yeah, that's what everyone was thinking. We were about to leave, 'cause we couldn't do anything if the dog was already taken under, when a massive bull gator leaped out of the water. It had to be over twelve feet. The damn thing was massive."

"What happened?" Jason turned his entire body to face Gator, who was a good storyteller.

"It got its jaws on the leg of a fourteen-year-old boy who'd been standing on the small dock beside our boat."

"Oh shit. Was it the same one that took the dog?"

"Either that or another alligator coming to check out what the first alligator was eating."

"That's so sad."

"He didn't die."

"But didn't the alligator drag the kid into the water?"

"Yeah, he was gone in a heartbeat, but I dove in."

"What?" Jason coughed in shock.

"I don't know. It felt like the right thing to do at the time. I guess I went on instinct." Gator scratched the side of his face as he thought.

"Holy shit. What'd you do?"

"Luckily, the beast didn't get too far, and I was able to wrap my legs around its throat. I had a knife on my belt, so I used it on the bastard's eyes until it let go of the kid and took off for easier prey. It all happened pretty quickly."

"Gator. The event that solidified your nickname."

“Yeah. I was Gator from that day on.”

“You saved that boy’s life.”

“There were other people in the water helping.”

“But you stopped the alligator from taking him off into deeper water.”

“I’m sure someone would’ve gotten to him if I hadn’t.”

“You ever gonna learn how to take a compliment?”

“I did what anyone would have done.”

“No, not everyone is going to jump into the water to wrangle an alligator.”

“I guess. Anyhow, that’s how I met my wife, Donna.”

“She was part of the MC that lived there?”

“Sort of. She was the boy’s aunt.”

“Why did you guys get divorced?”

“It didn’t work out. We weren’t what each other was looking for. Don’t get me wrong, Donna was an amazing woman, but after a couple of years, we realized we were better friends than anything else. We still are.”

“You talk to her much?”

“Every once in a while.”

“Do you miss being part of the MC?”

“No, not anymore. I could’ve stayed, but that part of my life was over, and I was ready to move on.”

“How’d you find Marshall?”

“Drifting along on my bike, I happened across the town and never left.”

“They’re lucky to have you.”

“I’d say I’m lucky to have found the town, them, and you,” Gator said as he reached up and ran his thumb along Jason’s jaw.

“Where do we go from here?”

“First, we need to figure out what to do with Harris.”

“No, I mean us. Where do you see us going?” Jason wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Hope maybe.

“As soon as possible, I’m getting you back in our bed. Then when this is over, we return to Marshall together.”

“What if the doctor feels I’m still a threat?”

“You’re no threat, or you’d be in jail by now. Doc Ramsey doesn’t mess around. If he thought you were dangerous to anyone, or to yourself, he’d already had the sheriff lock you up. And he certainly wouldn’t’ve let you go on a mission.”

“Then why am I still in therapy with him twice a week?”

“Because even though you’re not a danger, it doesn’t mean you don’t need help. You have to admit your life has been fucked up since you were a little kid. Your parents were pieces of shit. What you were forced to do to protect Ben, and everything you’ve gone through after is the perfect storm. Most people couldn’t live under that much weight.”

“I thought you said I wasn’t a danger.”

“You’re only a danger to yourself. And I don’t mean you’re gonna slit your wrists. You need to deal with your demons, or you’ll never be able to free yourself from them and have a life with Ben.”

“Is that why you go to see the doc?”

“Yeah. I realized this shit ain’t going to go away. What I’ve done and what’s been done to me. It’ll keep returning and messing with everything I’ve worked hard to achieve. If I don’t deal with it now, it’ll force me to sooner or later, and I’m a man who prefers things on my terms.”

“You’re a wise soul, Clancy Hutch.”

“Don’t let that get around.”

Jason's Zoom with Dr. Ramsey

“How are things in California?” Dr. Ramsey asked.

“Sunny,” Jason said.

“And the case?”

“Getting more confusing as time goes on. We came here for one reason, and now something completely different has come to light.”

“I’m sure you and the team will figure it out. How are you feeling?”

“Okay.”

“Any stress or anxiety?”

“Yeah. As I told you before, I was worried about flying again, but that turned out to be a nonissue. My hands didn’t shake.”

“No surprise there. It’ll be your association with your father and the chisel we have to deal with.”

“Makes sense.”

“Do you think you chose to end his life, or were you forced to defend yourself to save yours?”

“Aren’t they the same thing?”

“I want you to think about that.”

“Okay.”

“How’s Clancy?”

“Gator’s great.”

Jason wasn’t sure how much to tell the doc about their new relationship, and wasn’t sure Gator would want him to.

“Clancy is quite a force to have on your side,” Dr. Ramsey said.

“He is. Um.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, the opposite. See, Gator and I have moved forward in our relationship.”

“By moving forward, am I to understand it’s physical?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Is that what you want?”

“Hell yes,” Jason said.

“Then I’m happy you two are working together and on the same page.”

“You’re not worried I’m rushing into something, especially now with everything else going on?”

“Are you worried?”

“No.”

“Again, I’m happy for you.”

“Okay, doc. I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get?”

“Aren’t you the one supposed to tell me what to do, and how I fix my messed-up life? Like yes, be with Gator, or no, it’s not the right time.”

“If it were only that easy.” Dr. Ramsey chuckled. “There’s this thing called free will. I give you the tools to make those decisions for yourself and work through the parts of your life that are hurting you and holding you back from becoming the person you can be.”

“I make my own choices.”

“I can’t force you to do anything, Jason. I’m here to guide you and teach you how to deal with the trauma in your life that’s affecting the here and now.”

“Are you always so easy to get along with?”

“Ask Mrs. Ramsey and see what she has to say.” Dr. Ramsey laughed.

“Do you think I’m a bad person?”

“Why would you worry about someone thinking that?”

“I’ve done bad things in the name of patriotism and self-preservation.”

“Doing your duty doesn’t make you a bad person, and part of being human is the duty to survive. It’s in our nature to protect ourselves and others to varying degrees. Some people feel it’s their duty to protect anyone they view as weaker than themselves, while others can only handle protecting themselves, and in some cases, there are those who can’t do that. That’s when people like you step in.”

“The line in the sand keeps moving.”

“That’s because nothing in life ever stops moving. What was unthinkable fifty years ago may now be widely accepted.”

“What if I told you I didn’t feel guilty over my father’s death, but relieved? I feel guilty for hurting Deputy Reynolds. I didn’t mean to attack him.”

“I’d say you’re human.”

“How so?”

“It’s natural to be relieved when a great source of pain is removed from your life. Your father caused you a lot of pain and suffering from quite a young age. I don’t believe you went out of your way to kill him or plan his death. He sought you out, and you reacted the only way possible to save yourself.”

“It doesn’t make me some psychotic monster?”

“The fact that you’re worried about being a psychotic monster, as you put it, is a good sign you’re not one. Typically, people with psychosis don’t worry about naming their illness as it is a part of who they are. Those people need help seeing their behavior as such. They don’t find it or wonder about it on their own.”

“Okay. You’re saying because I’m worried about being a heartless bastard, that I’m not one.”

“If you were, you wouldn’t give a shit either way.”

“Huh.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gator

Spencer was working on getting answers while Brick was on calls most of the night. Harris never left the back bedroom. Fletcher was on watch, and left only to grab three plates of food to take back with him.

Gunner was performing the same task as Fletcher, taking plates to his bedroom since Conor hadn't come out of their room.

Gator understood Conor feeling betrayed. He'd shared his history and gift openly, and sometimes under scrutiny. Harris was keeping his secret the entire time he'd been with the team at the lake house, and instead of sharing who and what he was so that Conor wouldn't feel so alone, Harris hid his background and abilities.

It was a crappy thing to do to Conor, especially since he'd been helping the team since day one.

Gator heard the water turn off in the shower. It'd taken major restraint not to join Jason as visions of him soaping up under the hot water drove him insane. Moments later, the object of his desire walked out of the bathroom wearing a navy robe. Gator was distracted by the water dripping from his hair down his neck and under that robe.

"Can you turn off the lamp?" Jason asked as he crossed the room.

Gator rolled to his side and flicked the table lamp off, sending the bedroom into semi-darkness. Only the glow of the moon shed some illumination into the room.

“Thanks,” Jason said before removing his robe and crawling under the covers. Naked.

Gator damn near swallowed his tongue but quickly removed his boxers and joined Jason under the covers.

“I didn’t know we were doing naked time, but I’m all in.” Gator chuckled, trying to calm Jason’s obvious nerves, and his insecurities about his scars.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

“I like where your head’s at, as well as your delicious body.”

“I’m not normally this freaked out, but it matters.”

“Of course, it matters. You matter. Everything about you is important to me,” Gator stated as he rolled over and wrapped his arm around Jason.

His palm brushed over the rough skin he’d felt the previous night while exploring under Jason’s shirt. The man was gorgeous, muscled, and strong, but he couldn’t see that about himself. He couldn’t see past the scars his tormentors had left.

Gator decided it was his job to make sure Jason saw what he saw.

“You’re fucking hot. You need to believe me.”

“It’s difficult. After years of not caring what people thought, and turning that part of my life off, now it matters, and I’m not prepared for it.”

“You have nothing to worry about because I think you’re gorgeous. Damn. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you.”

“In court. Not exactly my finest moment.”

“I beg to differ. You got up there and stood toe to toe with a man who’d tormented you your entire life. A man who paid people to beat you, humiliate you into thinking you were a horrible human being. Your only options were to enlist and put yourself in harm’s way, even if it was safer than your home.

“You had to hide your son out of fear he’d go through the same thing, giving up years of being in his life to love and

protect him. Then, on a moment's notice, you fly half the country away from all you knew when you found out Ben was in danger. Then, in open court, you bare your scars to ensure your family never has the opportunity to strike again.

“You were courageous and heroic, and I couldn't take my eyes off you. So yeah, in court that day, I was a goner, and haven't stopped thinking about you since.”

Jason's dark gaze fixed on Gator, and for a fraction of a second, he saw the pain Jason had been through bleed through his hardened exterior, and in that moment Gator swore to spend the rest of his life helping Jason to repair those open wounds.

Jason reached up and pulled Gator closer until their lips were almost touching.

“You make me want to believe in happy endings.”

“I haven't even gotten started yet,” Gator said before diving in for a punishing, greedy kiss that had both men moaning.

Gone was the fear of rejection and the need to hide. All that was left were the two of them as they were, flawed and broken, choosing love after lives that'd been filled with ugly.

They were wrapped around each other, exploring, kissing, and needing to be closer. Neither man was holding back.

“I want to feel you inside me, but I don't have any supplies.” Jason groaned between kisses. “I wasn't thinking this far ahead.”

“Well, Gunner did us a solid,” Gator chuckled devilishly. “He gave me a few things earlier today. They might've heard us last night. These walls aren't thick.”

Instead of being shocked or concerned, Jason said, “Great. Where are they?”

Gator rolled to his side of the bed and opened the nightstand, retrieving a brand-new bottle of lube and a box of condoms.

“Yesss.” Jason smiled, and Gator got to work.

He took his time preparing Jason, interspersing kisses and soft bites between adding a finger and ensuring his lover was well-lubed. After all this time, to've found someone who made him feel this way, he wasn't going to rush. He wanted to savor every moment.

Jason was moaning and panting his need as Gator located his prostate and rubbed it mercilessly, making him writhe on the bed. Had anything ever been so seductive as watching Jason's muscles flex as his body opened up to him?

Gator rolled the condom down his hard shaft and added a generous layer of lube because there was no room for pain in what they were about to experience.

He lifted Jason's legs and lined up his aching cock.

"Ready?"

"Hell yes. Do me before I explode," Jason begged.

Slowly Gator sank balls deep into Jason's tight, hot hole, moaning at the fire racing through him. This was what making love should feel like: all-encompassing with his full body crying out in need of more.

Jason grabbed Gator's hips, holding him tight while grinding his ass against him and sending Gator damn near over the edge. He got ahold of himself and fought off the impending explosion. There was no way in hell he'd come before his lover.

Taking back control, Gator pulled out until only the head of his cock remained inside Jason before sliding back in. The appreciative groan he received spurred him on until he set a blistering pace, unable to silence his moans of pleasure.

The entire house would know what they were doing, but he didn't care as he drove Jason closer and closer to the edge. With his right hand, he took hold of Jason's hard cock and began pumping in time with the thrusts of his hips. Before long, Jason's back bowed off the bed, and at the last moment, Gator buried his face in the pillow and hollered his release.

Jason's hole clamped down hard, making it almost impossible for Gator to move. Two strokes later was all it took

as lightning shot through his body, down his spine, and into his balls, until he saw pinpricks of light floating through his vision.

Fuck, Jason damn near killed him, and he couldn't wait to do it again. A life filled with this man was more than he'd ever hoped for or thought he deserved, but he wasn't lying when he said he was a greedy, possessive bastard.

There was no way he'd ever give this gift back.

Jason

The next morning, the team gathered around the kitchen and were on their second cup of coffee when Spencer entered, with Brick right behind him. The door down the hall opened, and Harris, Shaw, and Fletcher joined the group.

Harris didn't look happy, but he wasn't any worse for the wear. Jason couldn't help but wonder what else the man was hiding from them.

"Sit down," Brick directed, and Harris took the open seat at the table.

Spencer sat across from him and opened his laptop, and Conor stood off to the side, staring at Harris without moving a muscle in his body.

"It took me most of the night, but I found the information buried in some of the files we'd managed to save from the storage unit Dr. Isabelle Noah tried to torch before she took her own life," Spencer explained.

"Isabelle Noah took an interest in you and your sister, didn't she?" Brick asked, but Jason knew it was rhetorical.

"Yeah," Harris answered anyway.

"You're twins."

“Fraternal.”

“You kept saying younger sister,” Gunner stated.

“By two minutes.”

“They had you set up living with two of the former lab technicians from the Noah Project, but they weren’t your real parents. Right?”

“Right.”

“And the two of you ran away.”

“We started a new life.”

“How?”

“As you already know, I have a way with computers. It wasn’t hard to set up new identities and cover our tracks from two lackeys. Neither cared once Noah cut them loose.”

“Cut them loose?” Spencer asked.

“Yeah, in one day it all stopped. No more calls, no more money. They got nervous.”

“Was the cancer diagnosis real?” Jason had to know if something that horrible was a lie.

“Yeah. I think that’s how they found Jennifer.”

“What do you mean?” Spencer asked.

“While I was trying to raise the money for treatment.”

“By selling out the military,” Gunner reminded everyone.

“Yeah. That is what I tried to do. It was the quickest way to raise that much cash. Medical care doesn’t come cheap.”

“So you were trying to find buyers,” Brick said, moving the conversation forward.

“Yeah. I put the word out. A few days later, Jennifer was called back to the hospital to get some lab results, and I was to meet her there.”

“What happened,” Gator asked.

“Jennifer’s blood must have set off alarms. When I got to the hospital, it was crawling with Noah agents. Of course, they were under the guise of the FBI.”

“FBI?” Shaw questioned.

“Yeah, the Federal Bureau of Investigations.”

“I know what the FBI stands for, asshole. How are they related to this?” Shaw snapped.

“The Noah Project ran deep across many levels of government. You don’t honestly think the Navy was the only branch involved?”

“Fuck.” Shaw groaned.

“What’d you do next?” Spencer asked.

“I took off to regroup and figure a way to get Jennifer out of there, but some hotshot Navy SEAL found me first,” Harris said, looking directly at Brick. “I was handed over to Commander Rask and taken away. That day in the hospital was the last time I saw my sister.”

“Rask? The same Commander Rask who hated Spencer, and his daughter was part of the Noah Project?” Gunner asked.

“The missing person, Ellen Hammon’s grandfather,” Fletcher stated.

Brick crossed his arms. “One and the same.”

“How’d you end up working for Detective Damini on the West Coast?” Spencer asked while typing away.

“That was the slimeball who’d been working for a senate hopeful who was using his computer systems to steal government information,” Fletcher said while looking at Jason and Gator. “Rask’s family was elbows deep in the Noah Project bullshit until one of them threatened to spill their guts and release a book. People started disappearing real quick after that.”

“Something went down with the Noah people,” Harris said. “I don’t know what it was, but I was passed around from agency to agency until I was ordered to work for that scumbag

or Jennifer wouldn't be getting the help she needed. You know the story after that.”

“Why didn't you tell us who you and your sister are?”
Conor asked.

“I'm sitting in a room comprised of mainly Navy SEALs. The Navy started the Noah Project and took my sister. The Navy handed me over to Rask, who handed me over to Damini.”

“You couldn't trust the Navy and anyone associated with it,”
Conor surmised.

“How was I to know the minute you knew the truth I wouldn't be locked up again and have zero chance of ever finding my sister?”

The room grew quiet. Jason realized the last few cases LH Investigations had taken on, though unrelated on the surface, brought them to this point.

“I read a file that the two of you showed what was referred to as ‘great promise’ according to the Noah Project notes,”
Spencer continued. “They knew about your telepathy, but it also mentions another so-called *gift*.”

Holy shit. Jason wondered what else the siblings could do.

“Yeah,” Harris answered, but before he could continue,
Conor cut in.

“That's enough.”

“What?” Gunner asked, looking confused.

“If they have another ability, it is theirs to keep. They've been used by enough people. They deserve to keep what's left of themselves private.”

“What if it could harm someone?” Gunner asked.

“If he wanted to harm someone, he would've done it already,” Conor stated.

“My head hurts,” Shaw groaned. “What else is going to happen? We keep running into Noah Project survivors. We have to do something to help.”

“First, we get Jennifer away from the compound,” Brick said, causing Harris to stand and a few team members to step forward.

“You mean it? We’re still going to rescue my sister?”

“Don’t mistake my decision,” Brick snapped. “You’re a long way from being trustworthy.”

“I should’ve been upfront, but I never would’ve hurt anyone.”

“If you do,” Brick growled as he towered over Harris, “you’ll have to deal with me.”

Harris’s jerky nod had Brick turning and pulling out his cell.

Then he left the room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gator

Chalmers always looked the same, though their three-man crew had changed composition. Instead of Fletcher returning with Gator and Harris, Brick stood beside them as they waited for Manuel to arrive.

Brick was serious when he said he'd be keeping an eye on Harris. Gator hoped Brick was as good an actor as Fletcher, or this would be a bust.

"Hello, my friends," Manuel said as he walked into the reception room they'd bugged yesterday. "I see we're missing someone."

"Yes. Unfortunately, he took sick after his asthma attack and had to return to LA. I'm his boss, Brick. I've come to see if we can finalize this deal."

Brick turned on the charm like a switch was flipped. Gone was the serious scowl he'd been wearing all morning, replaced by a friendly smile and welcoming demeanor.

Did all these guys take acting classes or something? What the hell did they teach them in the Navy SEALs?

"I'm sorry to hear your colleague isn't doing well," Manuel said while giving Brick the once-over.

"He'll be fine after some rest, but we can't postpone the final site visit any longer, or we'll have to consider another town."

"Of course, time is of the essence in these things. However, the commune leader, Mark, is concerned about your people taking pictures of their property."

“I heard, and as far as I’m concerned, we don’t need the location, only the people. So, if he’d like to meet somewhere else in town and bring along the possible extras, that should nullify his concerns.”

Manuel looked like he wanted to cheer. “Yes. I’m sure that’s more than acceptable. Let me go talk to him and make those arrangements. In the meantime, how about you three enjoy lunch at the hotel on me? I shouldn’t be too long.”

Brick made a show of thinking about it, which kept Manuel right where they wanted him. Somewhere between nervous and desperate.

“That sounds acceptable. I’d like to have this wrapped up before the end of the week.”

“You have my assurance everything will be ready.”

Brick nodded, and Manuel took off for his golf cart.

The bugs hadn’t revealed much from the previous night. Only run-of-the-mill conversations that confirmed the assistant was sleeping with Manuel, the mayor was still MIA, and the accountant had two sets of books. None of what they heard were surprises.

Maybe the rest of the team would get some juicy tidbits if Mark and Manuel had their conversation near the golf cart. They’d have to wait and see.

Jason

The whine of the golf cart engine was wearing on Jason’s nerves. They needed something solid to go on, and unless Manuel started talking about whatever the hell he was up to, they’d be in the dark for another day. They were running out of time. They could drag it out for a couple more days tops,

but they'd have to make a move on the commune and get Jennifer out within forty-eight hours.

"Just a couple more deals, and you can kiss this pissant town good-bye, Manuel."

The team looked at each other as Manuel's voice came over loud and clear.

"Is he talking to himself?" Jason asked.

"It would appear so," Gunner answered.

"Get the money and get gone before anyone's the wiser." Manuel sounded damn near celebratory.

It seemed Manuel was giving himself a pep talk of sorts. Now if he'd cut to the chase and tell them what he had planned, they could shut this shit down.

"Drinking pina coladas all day around my pool while some sweet thing in a bikini refills my glass. That's what's coming my way, and nobody is stopping me. I've worked too hard. Mark better hop on board if he knows what's good for him."

The cart engine was slowing down.

"He's approaching the commune," Gunner reported from his spot at the window. "Mark's walking over to Manuel."

"Great. Maybe we can hear them talking," Conor said.

"Mark, my friend. Good to see you." Manuel had used the same tone and words to welcome the three team members.

"Manuel," Mark said, but Jason saw he didn't shake his hand. "What do you want now?"

"Don't be that way. Haven't we always had each other's backs?"

"Some of us more than others."

"If it weren't for me, your little commune would be finished, but if you want to drink the Kool-Aid, go right ahead," Manuel suggested.

"Manuel's a real piece of work," Fletcher muttered. "Remind me to send the bastard a box of Kool-Aid."

“It doesn’t get funnier every time you say it,” Mark said.
“What do you want?”

“Those movie people are back.”

“I told you I don’t want them coming onto the property.”

“That’s why they’ve agreed to meet you in town. They only need the extras for the movie, not your location.”

“How much?”

“We’re still working out the details, but it should be a tidy sum to keep your little operation running for quite some time.”

“My operation benefits both of us, and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do we have a deal?”

“Fine. When?”

“Bring your members to the park in front of City Hall tomorrow around noon. Then these idiots can get a good look at the movie extras they’ll pay a pretty penny for.” Manuel laughed. “We both know none of your members will see a dime of it.”

“Fine, noon. I’ll have them there.”

“Nice doing business with you, pal,” Manuel said as he got in the golf cart and turned it around, then headed back to the town center.

“Manuel, you are a genius. Before Mark sees a cent, I’ll be lying back relaxing on the Mediterranean. This is too easy. Now to take care of Mrs. Ratcher. The old bird won’t see it coming.”

Jason looked away from his scope. “Does that mean what I think that means?”

“He’s going to off the accountant,” Fletcher confirmed.

“Shit.”

Gator

Gator ducked behind the two-story bungalow before the headlights from the oncoming car reached him. Jason, Gunner, Shaw, and Conor moved through the shadows of the small subdivision a few blocks outside of Chalmers.

“In place,” Shaw said through their comms.

“I’ve got a clear shot,” Gunner stated.

“In position,” Jason said.

“I don’t sense anyone else in the house. There’s only one person,” Conor said as Gator watched him touch one of the first-floor windows.

“Okay, move out. Silence is key,” Brick commanded from his post down the street with Harris and Spencer waiting in their SUV.

Gator rounded the back of the house and quickly looked in the kitchen window.

“Kitchen is empty.”

“I see her in the living room. Ratcher’s sitting in a recliner. She looks to be asleep. The television is on, the remote in her hand. No pets that I can see,” Shaw reported.

Gator was surprised Brick had decided they had to save the old accountant, even though she was likely dirty as hell. Manuel was going to kill her to cover his tracks and so he didn’t have to share any of the proceeds of their crime. Same as he planned not to share with Mark.

Gator climbed the back stairs and let himself into the old lady’s house.

He agreed she’d be a great witness if they could turn her once she learned about Manuel’s plans. He was positive the attorney general would love to hear her story of how they conned the town of Chalmers out of most of its money. He hoped they weren’t lenient with her since she ripped off a hardworking community.

Silently, he shut off the lights in the kitchen as he went. They all wore masks to avoid being identified, but darkness was their friend, and would help hide them from curious onlookers. Even if it was two in the morning, you never knew when someone might be walking their dog.

Conor was at his six as they made their way down the hallway to the living room, and Gator caught sight of Jason coming down the stairs from his entry point on the second level.

Gunner was outside somewhere with a clear view, his sniper rifle at the ready. And Shaw was stationed in front of the house.

They didn't know how Ratcher would react to their unannounced visit. As always, they needed to be prepared for all eventualities. Hell, Manuel could show up to off the accountant, figuring no one was out doing anything at two in the morning.

They didn't need to get caught in that crossfire.

They extinguished the lights as they went, until the entire house was blanketed in darkness, except for the glow coming from the TV.

Gator neared the recliner as Conor reached down for the remote. The moment he turned off the television Gator covered Ratcher's mouth with his gloved hand.

Her eyes flew open, and she attempted to reach for Gator's hand, but Jason already had her hands locked together with a thick zip tie.

"Shhh. Don't worry. We're not here to hurt you," Gator whispered.

Mrs. Ratcher's eyes flew between the three masked men, but she nodded.

"We're here because somebody is planning to kill you," Gator continued.

Her eyes widened.

“Manuel, your partner in crime, is planning on cutting you out of the equation before taking off for greener pastures.”

It took a nanosecond before her eyes narrowed.

“Now you have two choices. Either you come with us, and we protect you on the condition you tell the authorities everything about embezzling city funds, or we leave you here and let you wait for Manuel to arrive.”

Jason pulled out a small tape recorder and hit play.

“Now, to take care of Mrs. Ratcher. The old bird won’t see it coming.” Manuel’s voice echoed through the room.

“You have five seconds to decide.”

It only took two. Mrs. Ratcher nodded her head.

“You want us to protect you?”

She nodded her head again.

“Okay. I’m going to take my hand off your mouth, and then you will answer me with your words.”

They needed her to speak so Conor could tell if she was lying.

Gator slowly removed his hand and waited.

“Yes, I’ll help the police,” she said almost instantly.

“Truth,” Conor announced.

“Okay, let’s get you out of here before Manuel arrives.”

Conor left the room and returned with shoes and a purse. He pulled out her cell and dropped it on the floor, crushing it under his boot. She wouldn’t need that. Thankfully, she wasn’t in her nightie, but wore a hideous orange tracksuit.

“Let’s go,” Jason ordered.

Gator took one arm while Conor took the other, and they lifted her from the recliner. Jason scanned the area to ensure it was clear before leaving through the back door and disappearing into the night.

They rendezvoused with the SUV a few blocks away and loaded Mrs. Ratcher inside.

Later that night, Mrs. Ratcher's two-story bungalow mysteriously caught fire and was burned to the ground.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jason

Jason watched Mrs. Ratcher write out the details of what she and Manuel were up to. Since she'd agreed to cooperate with their investigation, the masks were no longer needed. She was no angel, but she knew she wouldn't last long without agreeing to help them take down Manuel. A two-minute pit stop at City Hall had secured the sets of books the accountant had been doctoring for the city and commune, and Spencer was currently reviewing both.

Of course, they didn't let her in on their plans. As far as she was concerned, the team was there to bust the theft ring and save Chalmers, and that's what they intended to do. But not all they intended to do.

Jason'd had another Zoom with Dr. Ramsey before they'd gone to collect the accountant. Jason wasn't as nervous or guarded talking with the doctor as he had been. It'd been a couple of months, and as Gator had said, it would've already happened if the man wanted him locked up.

Jason was beginning to understand how his brain had rewired itself as a form of protection from the traumas in his life. It amazed him how the brain would go to great lengths to maintain self-preservation.

The doc was patient, and most sessions moved at Jason's pace, but it wasn't long before he realized a statement Dr. Ramsey made that first visit rang true:

“How about we meet every Tuesday and Thursday to start and see where that takes us.”

“Whatever you say, Doc. You're the boss.”

“It’s funny how many people think that at first.” Dr. Ramsey laughed. “Stop by my wife’s desk. She’ll set you up with a time.”

How on the money the man had been. Dr. Ramsey never pushed, but provided answers to questions Jason never knew he had. Events that he’d locked away for decades seemed clearer somehow. Though he knew he was far from being recovered. His relief at having an unbiased sounding board was a gift. Someone who didn’t judge him for his past or his thoughts.

Maybe the sheriff knew what he’d been doing all along, forcing him to go to therapy, but letting him live at the lake house.

After his meeting with Dr. Ramsey, Jason, Gator, Gunner, and Conor had a Zoom with Ben, who was having the time of his life riding his new pony. Apparently, Uncle Bryan and Uncle Kyle had bought Ben and Sammie their own ponies. The love and care for those two young boys made Jason’s heart swell. At least his son would grow up knowing what being loved felt like.

They heard about their trip to the local county fair, and the rodeo Uncle Bryan had competed in, winning second place in the bull riding. Of course, Ben asked when they’d be home, and they promised it’d be soon.

At times Jason had to remind himself this wasn’t all a dream. His son was in his life, and he could be the father he’d always wanted to be.

The team at Fire Lake had given this to him. It was a treasure he could never repay, but he would work tirelessly to be deserving.

As the sun began to rise, Brick said, “Let’s go over this again.” He pinned the accountant with his glare. “You and Manuel have been embezzling money from the city for the past eight years.”

“Yes. It started small. A couple of thousand dollars here and there.”

“Who approached who?”

“Manuel caught me in a compromising position. My husband had died, and I didn’t have enough money to make my mortgage payments.”

“You were skimming money first, and when Manuel found out, he wanted in,” Brick said.

“Yes.”

“What does the commune have to do with any of this?” Harris asked from his spot at the kitchen bar.

“What makes you think they do?” Mrs. Ratcher countered.

“Don’t start covering shit up now. Either you’re honest with us, or we drop you off outside City Hall,” Conor told her.

“It shows payments right here made to the city by the commune,” Spencer said, looking up from the accounting ledgers. “But they aren’t recorded on the official books. What were they for?”

“Hush money,” Ratcher deflated as she answered. The weight of everything was finally setting in.

“Why does the commune pay hush money to Manuel?” Brick asked.

“So Mark and his group leaders can continue to traffick drugs up from Mexico under the guise of humanitarian efforts,” Ratcher said.

“There’s the rub.” Gunner chuckled. “Commune my ass.”

“What do the members know about drug smuggling?” Jason asked as Harris looked too shocked to speak.

“As far as I know, the basic members know nothing. They’re unknowing mules and do whatever the leaders tell them. Only the top officials know the truth. Some of them actually believe they’re doing good works.”

“Mark is a leader. Who else?” Brick asked.

“There are three individuals. Mark, and Francis and Cassie are his seconds-in-command.”

“Wait, what is N Corp?” Spencer asked, looking away from the screen and pages in front of him. “It shows hundreds of thousands being paid out quarterly from the commune’s accounts to N Corp.”

“Please tell me that isn’t who I think that is,” Shaw spat from his post at the window.

“I’m not sure. The payments began a couple of years after the commune arrived. I wasn’t privy to that information. But the one time I inquired, I was asked if my life was worth the answer. I never brought it up again.”

“How much was your cut?” Gator asked.

“Twenty-five percent.”

“Where’s the money?” Spencer asked.

“Locked in the safe in Manuel’s office.”

“We’ve seen his bank accounts, and there’s already a hefty sum in there. How much could be in the safe?” Spencer asked.

“Last count nearly seven hundred forty-six thousand dollars.”

“That would take him into the multimillions total level.” How had they thought no one would notice?

“Your cut of the safe take would be over one hundred and eighty grand.”

“Yes.”

“I can see why Manuel wanted to keep your portion.” Gator humphed. “I’d bury you too for a couple hundred grand.”

Jason couldn’t help but laugh at the shocked expression on Mrs. Ratcher’s face. Gator loved to keep people off balance.

“I find it hard to believe you haven’t received any payment yet,” Brick stated.

“I’ve received a yearly bonus of twenty-five thousand dollars cash on top of my salary.”

“To keep you working for him,” Jason concluded.

“Not a bad deal for messing with the math,” Gunner added. “Too bad for all the innocent people of Chalmers, right?”

Gunner eyed the old lady, who had the decency to look embarrassed for her part in the scheme.

“Is Ms. Finlay or Fred Rosemary involved?” Brick asked about the other two city employees.

“Finlay thinks she’s working her way up by sleeping with Manuel, but knows nothing. Fred is so close to retirement that he hardly leaves his office to notice anything.”

“What about the mayor?”

“I don’t know. He vanished several months ago, and according to Manuel, he’s on some sabbatical. I don’t believe him.”

Brick looked over at Conor for confirmation.

“She’s telling the truth. She doesn’t know where the mayor is.”

“What do you think Manuel’s going to do when they don’t find a body in the rubble of her house?” Gator asked.

“He probably already knows,” Brick said.

“Think he’ll empty the safe and make a run for it?” Fletcher asked.

“Unless there’s a reason for him to stick around,” Jason said as the first bits of a plan began percolating in his brain.

“What are you thinking?” Brick asked.

“We have Mrs. Ratcher here give him a call from an unlisted number to say she just heard about her house, and she’s rushing back all upset. She’ll say she had run out of town last night to visit a friend and left her cell phone at home. Which is where we left it.”

“Do you have friends who live out of town that Manuel doesn’t know?” Brick asked.

“Yes.”

“Perfect. Once he realizes she’s not dead, and she’s on her way back to Chalmers, he’d have to stick around to finish the job and get rid of his accomplice,” Gunner concluded.

“By then, we’ll have everything in place.” Harris looked relieved, knowing his sister had nothing to do with smuggling drugs.

The team knew what Harris meant. They’d have Jennifer away from the commune and then they’d bring in the cavalry to deal with the fallout of the Chalmers swindle and the drug smuggling.

“Okay, we need a burner phone,” Brick said.

“I’ve got a couple,” Spencer said as he stood and left the room.

Gator

Gator could hear the shock in Manuel’s voice when Ratcher told him she was on her way back to town, but he covered it with concern over her destroyed home. Shortly after, Brick called to confirm their meeting was scheduled at noon to assess the commune members as possible movie extras. To which Manuel guaranteed all would be ready for their arrival.

Brick had been on the phone for hours with his contact at the AG’s office, explaining the situation in Chalmers and arranging for backup. Conveniently, he left out the parts about the Noah Project. It never ceased to amaze Gator at Brick’s reach in multiple government and law enforcement levels.

As the three approached City Hall in their SUV, Brick reviewed the plan one last time:

Mrs. Ratcher would be arriving with her friend’s son—Conor was doing that duty—shortly after their meeting was to begin at noon. When Harris saw his sister, he was to tell her

their plan through their link to secret her away in the commotion that would follow the arrival of members of the AG's Division of Law Enforcement.

If everything went as planned, Harris and Jennifer would be back at the rental waiting for the team to return after cleaning up the mess in Chalmers and turning over the guilty parties to the authorities.

Gator liked the plan, but he knew, as they all did, things seldom went as planned.

As they pulled up in Chalmers and parked in front of the building, Gator could see members of the commune gathering in the park across the street.

"Do you see her?" Brick asked Harris, who was scanning the crowd.

"Not yet."

Gator had a moment's hesitation. What if she wasn't there? The whole plan would be shot to hell. There had to be forty to fifty individuals gathered, from those who looked older to those who couldn't be more than twelve years old. He had to wonder where they all came from, and why they were there in the first place. Answers they wouldn't have until they had a chance to speak with Jennifer.

"I see Mark. He's with two other people, a woman and a man. Do you think that's Francis and Cassie?" Gator asked.

"Could be. They look close," Brick said.

"Do you think the commune is sending money from their drug smuggling operations to the Noah Project or this N Corp?" Harris asked.

"Yeah," Brick answered. "They're probably helping fund underground activities now that the Navy shut them down, and Isabelle is dead."

"Her partner Dr. Frauste is still out there somewhere," Gator stated. "Can't forget about that fucker."

"Last known address was somewhere in North Korea, but who knows if that's true," Brick said.

“Could he be in North America continuing the genetic experiments on embryos?” Harris asked, looking disgusted by the thought.

“I’ve learned over the years that anything is possible.”

Manuel appeared at the top of the stairs leading to the building.

“Showtime, everyone. Smile and wave.” Shaw’s voice came over their comms.

The rest of the team was already stationed around the town, waiting for word to move in.

They wore their Navy SEALs tactical uniforms so that the DLE could identify them as friendlies. Brick and Gator wore a t-shirt under their clothes emblazoned with the Navy insignia so they could tear off their overshirts and be easily identifiable at the last moment.

Gator had agreed to wear a Navy insignia even though it burned his ass, considering he was one hundred percent Army, but it would lessen the confusion when all hell broke loose.

Brick opened his door, followed by Harris and Gator. They waited for Manuel to cross the street and meet them in the park. It was obvious the slimeball was nervous, and the dark circles under his eyes told a story. Good. It was time for Manuel to get what was coming to him.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it, Manuel?” Brick asked as the man drew near. Gator had to suppress a laugh.

“Um... yes. Yes, it’s lovely,” Manuel stuttered before waving his arm at the assembled group. “As you can see, the extras you requested are here.”

“That’s great. We’ll get on with the interview process as soon as possible,” Brick said. “Is there a place we can use to interview each member?”

Gator and Harris carried a stack of questionnaires to hand out to make everything appear kosher.

“We could start handing out these questionnaires, and they can fill them out while they wait,” Gator suggested on cue. “I

just have to go and grab the pens out of the SUV.”

“You didn’t think to bring the pens with you?” Brick played along.

“Ah, no, sir, I forgot them.”

“Do I have to do everything? Give me those,” Brick demanded, and when Gator handed over his stack of papers, Brick shoved them onto Harris’s pile. “You go hand out the questionnaires,” he ordered Harris, who took off like any good employee. “And you go back and get the pens.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Go,” Brick snapped.

Gator turned and beelined it for the SUV. Over the comms, he could hear Manuel talking to Brick.

“I like the way you do things. I always say you give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile,” Manuel said.

“You have to remind them who’s boss,” Brick agreed, still playing along.

Gator made a show of fumbling with the keys, giving Harris extra time to find his sister in the crowd as he handed out the questionnaires. Another car pulled up, Conor driving, and a peaked-looking Mrs. Ratcher was sitting in the passenger seat.

Things were about to get interesting.

“I found her,” Harris’s voice came softly over their comms.

Gator took a deep breath. Jennifer was there. Everything was going to work out. He grabbed the box of pens and turned to watch Manuel approach the car. Conor got out first and then went over to open the older woman’s door.

“Mrs. Ratcher, I’m so happy to see you’re all right,” Manuel gushed as he wrapped his arms around her like an old friend. She stiffened but didn’t let on.

“I can’t believe my house is gone,” she cried, and for once, Gator believed those were real tears.

“And who’s this?” Manuel asked while looking Conor over.

“This is Conor, my friend’s son. He was kind enough to offer to drive me back. I was far too upset to drive.”

“Understandable,” Manuel said as he tucked his arm under Mrs. Ratcher’s elbow. “Now that you’re here and safe, he can leave. I’ll take care of you.”

Gator was positive Manuel wanted to take care of her, but not in the way he made it seem.

Mrs. Ratcher grabbed Conor’s hand so fast it would have been funny if it weren’t for the situation.

“No. No. I’d like him to stay,” she said in a rush.

Gator left the SUV, headed to the commune members, and scanned the crowd for Harris. He found him at the back handing out the last few pieces of paper. The man tilted his head slightly, and Gator followed his direction to find the woman he’d seen the other day, Jennifer, who was holding the hand of a young boy.

“Who’s the kid?” Gator asked when he was far enough away so that none of the members heard him.

“She says she’s not leaving without him,” Harris answered. “He’s all alone.”

“Shit. We have an extra kid coming along,” Gator announced to the team.

He heard a few clicks of the comms, indicating he’d been understood. He knew this wouldn’t be as easy as they had planned.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jason

“Can I shoot Manuel if he tries to make a run for it?” Fletcher asked, eliciting a few chuckles across the comms. “Nothing deadly, maybe an arm or leg to slow the bastard down and give him a lasting memory of our time together.”

Jason concurred with Fletcher’s attitude. Surely, the rest of the team shared the feeling. Leave it to the big redheaded SEAL to lighten a tense situation.

“Me first.” Gator laughed.

Spencer came on. “The DLE are ready and in place.”

Things were coming to a head. Jason watched as several townspeople crossed the street and entered the diner. He didn’t like the free-range variables.

“There are a lot of innocent townsfolk out and about,” he told the team. “This shit could go south fast.”

“Protect all those who might accidentally get in the way,” Fletcher ordered.

“Roger.” He would do everything in his power to protect the innocent people of Chalmers.

“We can always chase down the remaining suspects after the scene is secure,” Shaw agreed.

“Got it,” Gunner said.

Jason watched Harris position himself closer to Jennifer and the boy, readying to lead them away. Gator stood a few yards in front of Jennifer to block off any attempts by the members or leaders to stop them from leaving. The team in the park was

equipped with ankle holsters and guns, and, if necessary, with larger, more powerful weapons that were stashed in the SUV.

Francis and Cassie approached Brick and Manuel while it appeared the members were reviewing the questionnaire and beginning to fill it out. Mrs. Ratcher and Conor stood a few feet back, not moving far from the car in case they needed cover.

“Everything’s in place,” Gunner announced from his perch high above on the roof of City Hall. “Cue the DLE.”

The team prepared for the incursion and waited for the stream of flashing lights to come down the main street and into town at any moment. This was it. The do-or-die moment had arrived. One way or another, Chalmers would never be the same after this day. Jason hoped it was for the better.

Jason took one final look at where Gator was standing in the center of what was to become ground zero. At that moment, he knew without a doubt he loved Gator. After months of spending time together, what Jason never expected had happened. It’d been so easy falling for Gator, and now, after the fact, Jason was left wondering how he hadn’t seen it coming.

“One minute out,” Spencer announced.

Jason’s muscles clenched as he cleared his mind, ready to break cover. The world around him slowed along with the beat of his heart. He’d been trained to assess a situation and control all outcomes, but there were too many variables in this one and many innocent people. They had to move fast and hard, not giving the enemy time to cause any chaos and hurt bystanders.

“Does anyone have eyes on Mark?” Shaw asked moments before the first police cruiser raced down the street.

“Shit. Where’s the bastard?” Jason asked as he scanned the area. The guy had been there moments before. “He’s gone.”

“Go, go, go,” Brick ordered, and the team advanced.

They’d have to hunt down Mark later. The bastard may have escaped today’s bust, but they’d find him sooner or later.

Jason broke cover, heading for the park. Sirens blared and lights flashed, disorienting the people gathered. Manuel attempted to run, but Brick easily pinned him to the ground. Conor took Mrs. Ratcher behind the car to safety as Francis and Cassie took off in separate directions.

Shaw jumped out from behind a parked truck and took Francis down with one move. Cassie pulled something out of her shirt, and the unmistakable ring of gunfire confirmed Jason's suspicions. She had a gun.

As the DLE poured into the area, all the confused commune members hit the ground, making it easier to follow Cassie's retreating figure. She ducked down an alley, Fletcher and Jason on her heels. They moved in unison, clearing every doorway and vehicle before continuing down the alley.

"She hasn't come out the other side," Gator told them. "I'm making my way up from the east."

"I don't have eyes on her," Gunner stated from above. "I'm changing locations for a better angle."

Jason kept his back against the bank's brick wall while Fletcher did the same on the other side of the alley. There were a lot of places she could hide, and they all posed a threat.

Fletcher signaled with his hand for Jason to move forward while the SEAL covered him. Jason didn't hesitate when a combat brother said they had your back.

Each step was choreographed and measured down to the last detail. His eyesight and hearing were attuned to all the ambient noise and what he didn't hear, ready to pick up the slightest of movements.

He hadn't used these skills in a long time since retiring from the Rangers, but like they say, he'd been trained within an inch of his life, so it was like riding a bike. He'd never forget. Variables and options cycled through his brain without effort as he held his M4 as an extension of his arm.

He'd be lying if he said he hadn't missed this. Not the danger, but the skill and camaraderie of knowing your brothers were at your back. Training took over as his mind settled into

what must be done. There was no place for second-guessing or doubt. This was the world that provided him with the clarity he often lost in civilian life.

The sound of a shoe scuffing against pavement had him slowing and signaling back to Fletcher. There was someone up ahead about twenty yards to the right. He could hear Fletcher's whispered conversation with Gator to determine it wasn't him coming from the other direction.

It had to be Cassie, trapped like the rat she was.

A blue Dumpster and a white delivery truck were ahead. Either could be her hiding spot. Silently, Jason lowered himself to the ground to look under the van, where he saw a pair of sandaled feet. Without looking back at Fletcher, he signaled that Cassie was behind the van. Fletcher relayed the message over the comm.

As if in slow motion, a young man wearing a delivery uniform and headphones walked out of a nearby backdoor carrying two boxes in his hands, oblivious to the danger he'd walked into. Jason saw Cassie's feet move to come around the back of the van, and he took off at a dead run to protect the innocent bystander.

When Jason was only a couple of feet away, he saw the muzzle of Cassie's gun come up from behind the van. She would fire without looking at who was there. She was aiming at the sound of someone walking.

He had no choice. Jason lowered his rifle and launched himself at the delivery man, taking them both to the ground as shots rang out. He stayed down covering the man until the gunfire ceased, and he heard Fletcher and Gator yelling the all-clear.

When Jason moved to stand up, he fell back onto the ground. The delivery man looked shocked, and Jason could make out a patch of blood staining the guy's tan pants.

"Are you hit?" Jason asked. The ringing in his ears was getting louder by the second.

The man looked down at his pants and then back at Jason, who was still trying to stand, confused why he couldn't make part of his body move.

"It's not my blood, man, it's yours," the guy said while pointing to Jason's side.

Without thought, he reached down, and the moment he touched the hole in the side of his abdomen, the pain registered, delayed by the rush of adrenaline from saving the innocent man.

"Shit, I'm hit," he managed to get out before crumpling back to the ground.

"You saved my life," the man said as combat boots began running in his direction.

The ringing in his ears drowned out whatever was said over the comms.

Jason looked at his hand, which was covered in blood. Fletcher's face appeared in front of him, followed by Gator's. He hollered when something was pressed against his wound.

Logically, he knew they were trying to stop the bleeding, but the pain was near unbearable.

More boots appeared around him, and he could feel someone removing his vest. Wearing a bulletproof vest never guaranteed not getting hit with a lucky shot, or in his case, an unlucky one.

Soon there were sirens and more noise. Gator's handsome face filled his vision, making Jason smile.

"Tell Ben I love him." If he didn't make it, he wanted his son to know he was on his dad's mind until the very end. "And I love you too, Clancy."

The ringing in his ears made it impossible for Jason to hear what Gator was saying, even though he could see the man's lips moving. Those green eyes felt like they were burrowing into his soul with their intensity.

He'd never forget those eyes.

Gator

“Don’t you close your eyes,” Gator ordered. “You have to stay awake.”

Jason stared up at him, but Gator knew his words weren’t reaching him. He pressed the cloth as hard as he could over the bullet wound, but it only slowed the bleeding instead of stopping it.

“Tell Ben I love him,” Jason rasped.

“You can tell him yourself after the doctors fix you,” Gator shouted. There was no way Jason was checking out on him.

“And I love you too, Clancy.”

“Son of a bitch. You’re not saying good-bye. There is no way I’m letting you go. Damn it. Fight harder.” Gator’s mind raced with every possible scenario, and all of them were bad.

Jason’s eyes began closing as the paramedics arrived to take over. Gator was moved out of the way to allow the medical team to work. They had Jason loaded up on a gurney and headed for the nearby ambulance in a matter of minutes.

This was *not* where their story ended. Gator refused to believe that.

“Come on, we’ll meet them at the hospital,” Brick said, directing Gator to the waiting SUV. Gunner was already behind the wheel with Conor in the passenger seat.

The drive was a blur, and when they reached the hospital, they were directed to the waiting room. The team found Gator a new shirt, and now he stood alone in the bathroom, washing his lover’s blood from his shaking hands.

Everything was fucked. Jason had been rushed into surgery hours ago. Was it only yesterday they were lying in bed

planning their return to Fire Lake to begin the next part of their lives together? Finally convinced Elias wouldn't throw Jason in jail, they were free to imagine what their life could be like. They could picture an actual future together with Ben.

Now he stood staring in the mirror under a hospital's fluorescent lights, waiting to find out if the love of his life would live to see his son again.

They'd contacted Elias and Bryan with the news, and everyone agreed it was best to wait for the outcome of Jason's surgery before telling Ben anything. There was no need to worry the young boy when they had no definitive answers for him. Let the little guy have a few more hours of believing all was right with the world.

If Jason died, nothing would be right for Gator in this cold world ever again. He'd started to believe life could hold more than what he thought his destiny would be. Maybe the kid born in a cabin in the back woods of Kentucky without electricity or even a crib to sleep in could have the family he'd been denied for so long.

He dried his hands and put on his clean shirt before looking down at the bloodstained shirt he'd been wearing. With far more force than was necessary, Gator shoved the shirt into the garbage bin, sending the lid flying across the washroom and into the far wall where it landed with a loud bang.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Why had Jason taken that kind of risk? He had people who needed him. Ben needed him. Gator needed him.

He couldn't stop the anger welling inside him, no matter how illogical.

"Can I help?" Conor's voice had Gator spinning around to face the doorway.

Thankfully, it was only Conor and not the whole Fire Lake team.

Falling apart wasn't a spectator sport.

"I'm fine."

“No, you’re not.”

“Ain’t shit anyone can do about it until Jason gets out of surgery.”

“When I first began looking for Jason, I thought he’d be an asshole. I mean, who gives up their child and disappears out of his life like that?”

“Is this supposed to help?” He had no idea where Conor was going with this.

“But the moment I mentioned Ben’s name, I saw the real man behind the lies I’d told myself about who Jason was. I felt his love for Ben the moment I mentioned the kid’s name. And I saw the yearning and pain of a father who’d given everything up to do the right thing.”

“Still don’t see where this is going, Conor. I know you’re trying to help, but nothing will at this point.” *So give up and leave me the fuck alone.*

“I know you’re angry, but like before, Jason did the right thing. He saved an innocent life.”

“At what cost to his son?”

“And to you,” Conor added the part Gator had intentionally left out.

“We all know the score when we go out in the field. It’s a choice made by people called to a higher purpose. To put one’s life on the line to save someone else. Please don’t be angry with him for doing what he was called on to do.”

“Then who the hell can I be angry with? Because this feeling isn’t going anywhere fast.” He needed to vent but lacked options.

“The people who caused all this.”

“Cassie won’t be hurting anyone else ever again.” A bullet had ensured that reality. He wasn’t even sure if it came from Fletcher, Gunner, or himself, considering all three had fired.

“Not her, though she knew what she was doing, and got what she got. I’m talking about why the commune was there in

the first place.”

“The Noah Project.” Just the sound of that name spiked a wave of anger like never before.

“This has been generations in the making, with countless lives destroyed in its wake. That is what Jason was fighting against. The terror and destruction of innocent people’s lives beginning with the most vulnerable. The children.”

Gator thought about it for a moment. It was true Cassie was part of the drug smuggling ring financing a branch of the Noah Project, where they genetically engineered babies into unknowing weapons to be used by the highest bidder of the new technology.

It was all fucked up, and if people like the team didn’t stop it, who would?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jason

The beeping was driving Jason up the wall, but at least the ringing in his ears had stopped. His eyes felt like they were glued together as he struggled to open them. When he did, he wished he hadn't. The bright light burned his retinas and made him wince, which made his body move, and that hurt like a muthafucka.

“How many times do I have to tell you to warn me to turn off the lights before you open your eyes?” Gator’s raspy voice came at him. Next to his son’s laughter, it was the sweetest sound Jason had ever heard.

“At least a couple more times,” Jason answered with a soft chuckle.

The first time he’d woken up, he found Gator sitting in a chair beside his bed in the dark. He’d said the dark matched his mood. Jason could see that. The rest of the team remained in the waiting room, allowing Gator to be alone with him.

“What day is it?” Jason asked.

“Tuesday morning, the day after the takedown,” Gator said as he walked over from the light switch.

“Did I miss much?”

“Here, drink this,” Gator said, holding a straw to Jason’s lips. He took a drink that burned down his dry throat. He felt like shit, but he was alive. The rest would heal.

Jason looked around the empty room, finding it odd no one else was there.

“Everyone has been in and out all night and morning, but some things have recently come up.”

“What?”

Gator shook his head and looked away.

“What?”

“You don’t need to be worrying about this shit right now. You got enough on your plate.”

“Gator, so help me. I may love you, but it won’t save your ass, so tell me.” There was no way in hell that he’d willingly be kept in the dark after going through all this.

Gator took a deep breath. “Harris, Jennifer, and the kid never made it back to the rental.”

“Shit. Do we know where they are?”

Gator glanced away.

“What aren’t you telling me? Did they take off?” He thought the issues with Harris were finally over, but he’d been surprised by people’s behavior in the past, and Harris was a piece of work.

“No, they didn’t take off. Mark caught them when they were leaving the park.”

Instinctively, Jason tried to sit up, which proved excruciatingly painful, making him growl in frustration.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Lay your ass back the fuck down, or I’ll have them tie you to the bed,” Gator yelled, and Jason didn’t doubt for a moment he would go through with his threat.

“Fine.” Jason lay back. “How do we know that’s what happened? Where are they?”

“Harris was wearing a tracker like the rest of us.”

That’s right. Brick had each of the team wear a tracker so if anything happened, the team would be able to find its missing members. The leader of the Fire Lake team was the best tactical leader Jason had ever met. He’d never second-guess Brick’s decisions.

“Right. Where are they?”

“Next town over. Mark has them held up in a remote cabin. We think he’s waiting on reinforcements to arrive.”

“We have to get them out of there before that happens.”

“We are.”

The door to Jason’s room opened and Sheriff Elias Cooper, Julia, Sammie, and a teary-eyed Ben walked in.

“Ben,” Jason said before looking up at Gator. “Thank you.”

“Couldn’t keep them away, now could I?”

Ben ran over to Jason’s side, and Gator lifted the little guy onto the bed.

“I missed you,” Ben said as Jason wrapped his arm around his son.

“I missed you too, buddy.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yep. All better. The doctor fixed me right up.”

“Good. Can we go home?”

“Absolutely. Soon.”

“Okay,” Ben said before laying his head on Jason’s chest.

Nothing in life could or would compare to this moment.

Julia, Sammie, and Elias dropped their bags in the chairs around the room before coming to stand by his bed.

“Thank you for bringing Ben.”

“Of course. We weren’t going to sit back in Texas while you’re cooling your heels in the lap of luxury,” Julia teased. “We had to come get some of that California sunshine people keep talking about.”

Sammie handed Jason a drawing. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“It’s our ponies at Uncle Bryan’s ranch.”

“We’ll have to hang this up so all the nurses can see them.”

Sammie smiled wide. The boys were only four, so the basics of what was happening were enough for them. Everyone was fine and would be going home.

“Hey, maybe we can go see the Pacific Ocean while we’re here,” Elias said to the boys, eliciting smiles all around.

“I leave you in good hands,” Gator said as he reached down and grabbed his duffle bag.

“Leave? Where are you going?” Jason asked, feeling a moment of concern.

“I have to go retrieve our friends. I shouldn’t be gone long.”

“You’d better not be.”

“I’ll be safe. Love you,” Gator said with a grin and bent to kiss Jason good-bye. “I leave the patient to your care, Ben. Make sure he doesn’t try to do too much.”

“I will, Uncle Gator.”

“Good boy.” Gator ruffled Ben’s dark hair.

With a final wink, Gator turned, looked at the sheriff, and said, “Good to see you again, Elias.”

Jason didn’t miss the much friendlier tone Gator was now using.

The sheriff nodded and grinned back. “How could I say no to a trip to California’s beaches?”

Gator nodded and left the room without looking back.

No doubt, the team was assembling for a retrieval mission, and Jason wished he could be a part of it.

But as he pulled Ben closer, he realized this was exactly where he needed to be.

Gator

He met Gunner and Conor at a roadside rest stop outside of Chalmers. The rest of the team was already on-site, a mile from where Harris, Jennifer, and the boy were being held.

Gator left his truck parked in the lot and jumped into the SUV, thinking about what lay ahead.

“What do we got?” Gator asked.

“Spencer has tapped into communications in and out of the area. It would seem Mark made two calls. One to a person named Fornier, somewhere in Nicaragua, and the other to a location in Juruti, Brazil.”

“Do you think it was his drug contacts or the Noah Project?”

“Could be either. No way of knowing until we get to question Mark,” Conor said.

“How’s Jason?” Gunner asked.

“Better. Won’t be moving around for a while, but he’s on the mend,” Gator was thrilled to report.

“Good.”

“What’s the cabin look like?” Gator asked.

“Old, run-down, but Fletcher noticed a couple of boxes marked explosives in Chinese when he went on recon,” Conor said.

“Why the hell would the guy have explosives?”

“I don’t know, but we need to reassess our entry strategy to account for the place being wired,” Gunner advised.

“It looks like we’re fortunate to have an explosive ordnance specialist as part of the team.” Conor chuckled.

“Gee, you like me, you really like me,” Gator joked.

“Yeah, you’re indispensable, shithead.” Gunner laughed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jason

Jason woke to find the sheriff staring out the window of his hospital room.

“They’ll be okay,” he said, making Elias turn around.

“Who will be?”

“Fletcher and the team.”

Elias looked back out the window. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to him doing what he does.”

“It’s not a matter of getting used to it.”

“What is it then?”

“A matter of finding a way to accept it as part of the man he is.”

“You know, when they called to tell us what happened, for a second, I was thankful it wasn’t him.”

“I get it. If our roles were reversed, I’d feel the same way.”

“You know I wasn’t trying to be an asshole.”

“Threatening to lock me up.”

“Yeah.”

“I know. At least, I do now. Thanks to Dr. Ramsey and Gator.”

“Gator? I wouldn’t take him as a fan.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as saying he’s a fan, but he’s warming.”

“Thank fuck. Wouldn’t want to ruin the status quo.”

Jason couldn't help but laugh as he held his side, which hurt every time he laughed.

"Since the world might implode if there were two of him, I guess you can stand being around a one and only."

"Some sort of voodoo right there." Elias laughed. "He's a good man under all that bluster and his doesn't-give-a-shit attitude."

"Yeah, he is." A really good man.

"Dr. Ramsey taking good care of you?"

"I'll admit, I didn't see the point until recently. I thought nothing could change my trajectory in life." Circling the drain had become second nature after a while.

"I know what you mean. Life can lead you down some pretty dark and lonely paths."

"I'm sure you do." The sheriff was a retired Marine who saw a lot of action.

"The doc will help you get it all sorted, or at least as much of it as can be."

"I'm sorry for hurting Deputy Reynolds."

"I know you are. He's fine. Hell, he even asked if you could teach him the move you used."

"Really? I guess a little extra training wouldn't hurt the deputies."

"Agreed."

"We'll have to set something up when we return to Fire Lake."

"First, you and Gator got to build your own cottage and get the hell out of mine and Fletcher's because I'm not living in the main house with Brick and Roman and all their gooey lovey-dovey bullshit."

"Brick and gooey-lovey shit? You've got to be kidding me." Picturing the big, scary Navy SEAL commander as anything other than intimidating was a hard ask.

“I shit you not. The sooner the better, before I lose my mind.”

Jason wasn't sure if Elias was feeding him a line, but the invite was there for him and Gator to build their permanent residence by the lake. Now all he needed was for Gator to get his ass back here in one piece.

Gator

Surveillance can only get you so far. Until he was face-to-face with whatever Mark had set up inside the cabin, Gator had to be prepared for anything. Did he rig the entire place to go up at the touch of a button or simply part of the cabin? No one knew, and that was why he and the team were lying face down in the pouring rain less than one hundred yards from the cabin.

Conor was reaching out with everything he had to get a sense of what was waiting for them inside. As expected, the closer they got, the better the reception, but the greater the chance of being seen even though they wore camouflage.

The team could see perfectly in the pitch dark through specially designed binoculars attached to their helmets. Four heat signatures were coming from various positions in the cabin, and the team believed Mark had separated Harris and his sister, possibly knowing their telepathic abilities were based on eyesight. The child was still with the smaller form, which they assumed was Jennifer.

The cabin appeared to have two rooms. One they believed to be a bedroom that held Jennifer and the child, the other main area was where Mark was keeping an eye on Harris. Ideally, they'd be able to reach the bedroom first and get the first two out of harm's way, but they had to make sure the exterior wasn't rigged to blow.

So far, it appeared that Mark wasn't expecting uninvited company. He thought he'd made a clean getaway from Chalmers. Unknown to Mark, the tracker on Harris was still sending out a steady beat. Then why the explosives?

What else was he using them for if it weren't to set traps around the property?

"I've got a bad feeling about those explosives," Gator said softly through the comms. "No exterior rigging."

"Yeah, not a trip wire or IED in sight," Shaw agreed.

"What are you seeing, Gunner?" Brick asked their teammate, who was several hundred feet in the air up a tree.

"I'm coming around to the bedroom side now," Gunner said. "Two ticks."

They all stopped and waited for the sniper's report. It amazed Gator that a guy the size of Gunner could easily scale a tree, rock face, building, whatever, and move through all of it silently.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?"

"I can see Jennifer and the kid. It looks as though both are wearing vests lined with what looks like small pipes. Wires are running to a central panel on their chests."

"The fucker rigged them to explode." Gator was pissed. "We need to know how they set off. Is it a button, timer, or trip cord?"

"Moving to get a better look through the next window," Gunner said.

"Mark isn't worried about us coming to rescue them. He's worried about what the three of them could do to him," Conor surmised.

"You think the kid is from the Noah Project?" Brick asked.

"Yeah" Conor stated.

“Mark grabbed the valuable members of the commune and left the others to the cops,” Shaw said.

“It would appear so,” Fletcher agreed.

“Now he’s waiting for backup to come to take these three off his hands. And what? Pay him?” Spencer asked.

“I don’t see Mark as a major player. They’d likely dispose of him before paying him,” Brick said.

“In position,” Gunner said. “Harris isn’t wearing a vest, but he’s tied to a chair in the middle of the room and blindfolded. Mark is on a laptop in the kitchen at the table.”

“Spence, you’re up,” Brick ordered.

Spencer was roughly twenty yards away, working on a blacked-out screen he could use with special glasses. He pulled out a miniature satellite receiver and pointed it at the window closest to Mark.

“Set. Now we need him to say something,” Spencer said.

Conor inched closer to the cabin under the watchful eye of the rest of the team. The thought was that if Conor could sense Harris and his sister, there might be a chance Harris could sense Conor.

It was a long shot, but it was either that or go in blind. They’d give it one hour. If nothing came of the sound-enhancing dish they were using, they’d have to go in and hope for the best, and that no one got blown up in the process.

“Movement,” Gunner announced a few minutes later. “Harris’s head turned in Conor’s direction. It could be a fluke.”

“Conor, move ten feet to your right,” Brick ordered.

Conor slowly inched across the forest floor to the new spot and waited.

“Confirmed. Harris’s head moved along with Conor.”

“Yesss,” Conor said.

“When will the people from the Noah Project be arriving?” Harris’s voice came over the comms. Spencer’s connection worked. Harris was trying to relay information.

“Not soon enough,” Mark said.

“It’s not like I’m enjoying your company either, asshole. I can’t imagine two or three more days of this.”

“Get used to it because it won’t be in the next twenty-four hours.”

“You need to give Jennifer and Freddie some water and food.”

“I don’t have to do anything, freak.”

“They’re not going to last until your people arrive. I don’t think they’ll be happy to come all this way for nothing.”

“Shut up.”

“Or what?”

“Remember, I hold all the cards here. I don’t buy into that shit about you and those other freaks being the better race of humans.”

“Mark is standing and approaching Harris,” Gunner said, providing the play-by-play.

“We’re your meal ticket. You don’t deliver us, your bosses won’t be impressed.”

“Who says I have to hand over all three of you? Remember, I’m wearing the monitor.”

“He’s pointing at a small black box attached to his belt, left hip.”

“Ah yes, the ever-present threat of blowing up Jennifer or Freddie.”

“Hell, I could nuke both of them and still hand you over.”

“I hope someone shoots you right between the eyes.”

“I wouldn’t be in too big a hurry for that. Did you forget? If my heart stops beating, the timer starts.”

“You’re a sick bastard. Who’d rig the detonator to himself so that if you remove the device or someone kills you and your heart stops beating, the explosives are triggered to a sixty-second countdown?”

“I’m no fool. These Noah Project fuckers think to come in and take what’s mine without paying, they got another thing coming. If they try to kill me, their assets and them will be blown into tiny little pieces.”

“Why did you even bother putting the sixty-second delay on it if you want us all to blow up?”

“Fail-safe, you freak. If the trigger disconnects by accident, I have sixty seconds to get far enough away from the cabin not to be hurt by the explosion.”

“You’d just leave us here to die.”

“In a heartbeat.”

“That asshole needs to be buried.”

“Agreed. We have to wait until Gator can disarm those explosives,” Brick said.

“Are you at least going to give Jennifer and Freddie some water? It’s been almost thirty hours.”

“No.”

“I hope you rot in hell.”

“You first, freak. God don’t let your kind of genetically engineered bullshit into heaven.”

“Mark is returning to the kitchen. He’s sitting down again and typing on the laptop.”

Gator wanted to stuff the black box down Mark’s throat, but first, he needed to get at those vests.

“Okay. Jennifer and Freddie might be weak due to lack of food and water,” Brick explained. “Be ready to carry them.”

“Roger.”

“Gator, have you ever disarmed an explosive attached to a person?” Conor asked.

“I’ve disarmed one attached to a bus full of children, but no, never on a person.”

“Who the fuck put a bomb on a bus carrying children?” Shaw asked.

“Some dead muthafucka, I assure you.” Gator’s team had seen to that.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gator

Gator went through his kit. He needed to find a way to shear, jam, bind, or remove parts of the bomb's firing train. He needed to render the fuse safe so the explosives could be removed from Jennifer and Freddie. Severing the detonating connections fast before the connection or fuse could react was key.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded, and was why many bombs were detonated or remotely rendered safe using a wheelbarrow: a remote-controlled robot that typically went in first. In this case, the robot would be useless. The bombs were attached to people, requiring a hands-on method of diffusing.

"Ready?" Brick asked from Gator's right.

"Let's do this," Gator replied.

He may have never disarmed a bomb attached to a person, but he'd trained for all scenarios. He thought about Jason, knowing if he knew what Gator was about to do, he'd never hear the end of it. But Conor had been right. It took a certain type of person to put themselves in harm's way to save someone. Jason would understand more than most why there was no way Gator could walk away. It *was* a damn calling.

"Okay. You'll breach the cabin through the bedroom window and diffuse the bombs while I cover you," Brick explained. "Once we have Jennifer and Freddie clear, the rest of the team will storm the cabin's other room to get to Harris before Mark has any other brilliant ideas."

"Roger."

Brick looked Gator in the eyes. “I have faith in you to get this done.”

“I’ll do my best not to disappoint.”

“See that you don’t.”

Gator knew that was as close to wishing him good luck as he was going to get. Luck was a fickle beast, and they all knew it, and rarely factored. Training was the only true guarantee, or as close as people like them could get to one.

“Move out,” Brick ordered.

It was now or never.

As they strategically crossed the distance to the cabin, Gator hoped Jennifer recognized him, or this could be over before it began.

The rain was coming down in sheets, and visibility was limited. The first crack of lightning was followed shortly after by rumbling thunder. The storm wasn’t far off. Instead of being an issue, Gator thanked Mother Nature for being on their side. The extra noise would drown out any slight sounds they might make during the rescue.

Conor followed Brick as the three of them went to one side of the cabin, and the rest of the team went to the other. They were hoping Conor’s presence would further assure Jennifer and Freddie while at the same time giving Harris an idea of where they were located, and perhaps, what they were trying to do.

Gator reached the window and pressed his back against the cabin wall. Slowly he peered around the sill to look into the bedroom. A small table lamp reflected off the two figures sitting in the room huddled close together on a single bed.

He brought his hand to the window and lightly tapped the glass with one finger. Jennifer’s head popped up immediately, and they locked eyes. For a second, she reared back and pulled Freddie closer, but as soon as Gator removed his helmet, she recognized him.

She pointed down at the vest they were wearing, and Gator nodded his understanding. Freddie hadn't moved an inch. He stared at Gator. The poor kid had to be scared out of his mind. Conor placed the glass cutter against the window's edges, and Gator secured the glass with two suction cups.

"Cutting," Conor announced into the comms.

He followed the line of the wooden windowpane, which had to be three feet by four feet. Brick stood a couple of feet away, continually scanning the area for any threats, though Gunner confirmed Mark was still sitting in the kitchen watching something on his laptop. He noted that Harris's head had turned slightly toward the bedroom.

As the cut neared completion, Gator braced his shoulder against the sill and pulled back gently on the suction cups holding the glass. A slight tink was all the sound they made, and with the amount of thunder in the area, their presence seemed to've gone unnoticed.

He set the pane of glass out of the way, leaning it against the side of the house, and continued through the now open windowpane.

Jennifer and Freddie moved closer as Gator placed his finger over his lips, reminding them of the need for silence.

They both nodded as Gator reached for his kit attached to his thigh. He pulled out a small flashlight and took his first look at the vests they'd been forced to wear. Conor followed him through the window and handed each prisoner a bottle of water, which they took and cracked open immediately.

Gator inspected Jennifer's vest first. He followed the multicolored wires through the maze of tubes containing C-4 explosives. The tubes were clear, and his flashlight caught a glint of the metal ball bearings stored inside.

Using the comms, Gator said in a voice below anything audible outside the room, "He's rigged them so that if they blow, the ball bearings will act like shrapnel, taking everything out in the general vicinity. A wire connects the vest at the front and closes the circuit around the body. If they tried to remove

the vest, it would set it off. I need to disarm it before it can be removed.”

“Bastard. Can you defuse them?” Brick asked.

“We’re about to find out.”

Gator motioned for Freddie to come forward. The boy looked up at Jennifer, who nodded. Gently he spun the boy around to get a look at all sides of the device, confirming both vests were identical. Okay, figure out one, and you’ve got both.

On the front was a flat rectangular panel to which all the wires led. This would be where the fuse was set, and the sixty-second time delay would start if Mark activated the box on his belt. Gator focused his breathing and cleared his mind. Schematics flipped through his mind like a projector reeling a spool.

He put the small flashlight in his mouth to free up both hands and unscrewed the panel. Slowly, one by one, he removed the four screws holding the front plate onto the vest and set it on the floor. Now he could see the internal workings and how the fuse was tripped.

His mind moved ever faster, honing in on the right combination by rejecting one sequence after the other. Pictures and codes sectioned off in his mind from what was hypothetical and what was the reality in front of him. Gator followed the path of the firing train until he came to the connection for the ignition point.

Gator wasn’t sure how long he’d been working, but this couldn’t be rushed. Once he figured out the one device, the second could be done at a much higher rate of speed. He studied the mechanics until he was positive he could reproduce the action and reverse-engineer the process until he came to the part that stopped it all without setting the system into motion.

“I got it,” Gator stated. “I’ve identified the section that will render the mechanism inert. Proceeding with removal.”

This moment needed to play out precisely for them all to walk out of there.

“Freddie, I need you to stand absolutely still until I tell you to move. Can you do that for me?”

The boy looked Gator in the eyes and said, “I promise.”

Gator couldn't help but smile. “You're a brave guy, Freddie. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Gator reached into his kit and took out a pair of specialized tweezers and a modified metal cutting shear. With one precisely placed cut, Freddie would be free of the vest, and then Gator could concentrate on freeing Jennifer.

He let out a long breath and stilled his mind. In his eyes, he already saw where the cut would be, and unerringly he placed the tweezers around the piece of metal and moved in with the shears.

Click.

Nobody moved until Gator pulled back with the tiny piece of metal between the tips of the tool.

“One vest disarmed,” Gator announced.

Conor moved over to help Freddie remove the vest while Gator went to work on Jennifer's.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Let's get you out of this thing before we celebrate, okay?”

“Okay.” She smiled.

As fraternal twins, Harris and Jennifer looked nothing alike. Harris had short dark hair and blue eyes, while Jennifer had long blonde hair and brown eyes.

Conor removed Freddie's vest and went to pick him up and transfer him out the window to Brick when the boy flung his arm out in an attempt to stay with Jennifer. The back of his hand hit the small table, sending the lamp crashing to the floor.

“Shit.”

Gator heard a chair move in the other room.

“Mark’s on the move heading to the bedroom,” Gunner warned.

Brick jumped into the room and went to stand in front of the bedroom door. Gator didn’t stop what he was doing. He unscrewed the last two screws to remove the outer panel.

“Ten feet and closing,” Gunner stated.

“Move in,” Brick gave the order, and before Mark could reach the door, Brick flung it open and pointed his M4 at Mark’s chest. Conor covered Freddie with his body, protecting the boy as the other door in the cabin crashed in and windows smashed in the outer room. The team had arrived.

Gator hadn’t stopped working through the chaos as Jennifer stood motionless. He had to disarm the bomb before Mark had a chance to set it off.

“What the hell,” Mark growled. “I’d put that gun down if I were you. One wrong move, and I’ll blow us all up.”

Gator blocked out everything around him, knowing Mark wouldn’t get anywhere near them.

“Take your hand off the box, Mark,” Brick ordered. “You set it off, you die along with us.”

“Are you guys from the Noah Project?” he asked. “You can have them, but you gotta pay me first. When I’m far enough away, I’ll turn off the bombs.”

“Hell no,” Fletcher said from somewhere in the other room. “Fuck the Noah Project bastards.”

Gator moved the wires aside and followed the firing train to the ignition point. Things started getting heated, and he knew time was running out.

“No. Fuck you,” Mark yelled, and Gator heard something hit the ground.

A light began flashing in the center of the panel.

“It’s activated. Sixty seconds. Get everyone out,” Gator ordered.

“Grab the kid,” Brick ordered, and Gator assumed Conor had done so, but couldn’t afford to take his eyes off what he was doing. “The rest of the team, get yourself and Harris out of here.”

“I’m not leaving without my sister,” Harris argued, sounding much closer now.

“Gator, report,” Brick ordered.

“Forty-eight seconds,” Spencer announced from the other room. It didn’t appear any of the team was leaving, only Conor, who had to save the kid.

“Almost got it.”

“He’ll never disarm it in time.” Mark’s laughter was cut short by a thud.

Shut up,” Shaw growled.

“Forty seconds.”

“Get your team out of here,” Gator growled as he followed the firing train down the small metal pin to the ignition point.

“We’re not going anywhere.”

“Thirty-five.”

He measured the distance of the pin and lined up the tweezers and shears.

“Twenty-five.”

Gator’s vision zeroed in on that two-millimeter pin, and he gently squeezed the shears.

“Twenty.”

Click.

The light stopped flashing, and Gator let out a deep breath.

“Disarmed.”

“Holy shit,” Fletcher said, followed by a few low chuckles. “That was a close one.”

Gator undid the vest and freed Jennifer, who ran into Harris’s arms.

“Thank you,” Harris said as he held his sister tight.

Brick slapped Gator on the back before walking out of the bedroom and into the second room with everyone else.

Gator set the vest on the bed in disgust and turned to leave the bedroom when Mark reached for his pant leg, pulled out a gun, and fired a single shot straight at Gator’s head a moment before Shaw knocked the gun out of the psycho’s hand.

Gator closed his eyes. He didn’t need to watch death come for him.

Then silence. Nothing. Was he dead? He doubted he’d have time to feel the bullet that killed him.

Gator opened his eyes to find a bullet floating in midair an inch away from his forehead. In front of him, Harris and Jennifer stood hand in hand while their free hands were raised and pointing straight at Gator.

“Could you move? We can’t hold it much longer,” Harris said, his voice tight with strain.

Gator hit the ground. The bullet released and slammed into the wall behind where Gator had been standing.

Everyone in the room fell silent for several moments.

“Telekinesis. That was the other mutation along with telepathy,” Brick said.

“Yeah,” Harris answered, looking a bit worse for wear. “But we must be touching for it to work most of the time.”

“Thank you,” Gator said as he stood.

“You saved my sister. I’d say we’re even.”

“I don’t know about you,” Fletcher said. “But I could use a drink.”

“I happen to know the perfect place.” Gator chuckled. “First round’s on me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jason

From the comfort of Gator's arms, Jason listened as they all sat on the deck at the lake house as Jennifer recounted what she'd seen and heard since being separated from Harris. They'd all been in such a hurry to return to Fire Lake that they didn't bother debriefing until now. He was still recovering from the gunshot wound, but there'd been no complications, so time and rest were his healing instructions.

"After my chemo, I was shipped off to the commune. Without my brother, they didn't view me as a threat," Jennifer explained.

"Is the cancer in remission?" Rick asked.

"Yeah. They caught it pretty quickly."

"I wonder if the genetic manipulation caused it," Roman said.

"Could be. Remember how Elise Hammon had that growth appear on her back?" Gunner said.

"Yeah, she called it Isabella." Rick shook his head while remembering.

"That was messed up," Fletcher agreed.

Children's laughter could be heard inside the lake house, where the three boys were playing. Freddie had fit in nicely with Ben and Sammie even though he was eight years older. The younger boys looked up to him, and they all spent most of their days playing on the property. It was good to hear all three were happy.

"We still have to track down Elise's other child," Brick stated.

“The boy she was told died at birth?” Roman asked.

“Yeah. He’s out there somewhere, and there has to be a reason they kept him from her.”

“You see any other Noah Project survivors at the commune?” Jason asked.

“Other than me and Freddie, no.”

Freddie was part of the project, but had yet to show any signs of mutations and abilities. Maybe he never would.

“They used to come every once in a while to check on the two of us.”

“The scientists?” Harris asked his sister.

“Yeah. To see if anything had changed.”

“I wonder how many other Noah survivors they have stashed around the country,” Gator said.

“Hell, it could be all over the globe for all we know,” Spencer muttered.

“Since nothing changed with Freddie and me, we were pretty much left alone to be watched by Mark and his people.”

“What about drug smuggling? Did they discuss that?” Brick asked.

“The two of us weren’t allowed to go on humanitarian missions to South America. We had to stay in Chalmers and be guarded. However, I found it odd that the group was doing anything as a form of charity, knowing what I knew about them. It made sense when you told me they were smuggling drugs and sending proceeds to the Noah Project.”

“How are things working out in Chalmers?” Julia asked.

“From the last report, Manuel and Mrs. Ratcher are safely in custody while the city tries to recoup all the embezzled funds. It shocked the community, but they are rallying to save the town,” Brick said.

“What about the commune?” Jennifer asked.

“It’s been disbanded. The leader who’s left will face several felony charges and years in prison.”

“Were we able to track the money to the Noah Project?” Harris asked.

“I’m still working on that,” Spencer said. “They covered their trail well, but it’s only a matter of time before I find it.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Harris chuckled.

“Did anyone find the mayor?” Jason asked. Before they got to Chalmers, the man had been missing for a long time.

“Yeah,” Brick said. “They found his body in a freezer in Manuel’s basement.”

“Shit. No wonder he had no problem getting rid of the accountant. He’d already killed the mayor,” Gator said.

“So, what will you and your sister do now?” Kyle asked from where he was sitting between Bryan and Shaw.

“I honestly don’t know,” Harris said. “I didn’t plan this far ahead. All that mattered was getting Jennifer back.”

“Well, we have a proposition for you,” Bryan said. “Considering things are getting a mite crowded out here at the lake house with the cottages going up and all.”

“We thought you, Jennifer, and Freddie could come out and stay on the ranch,” Shaw continued. “We’ve got lots of space and fun things for Freddie to do.”

“Besides, my grandad has gotten used to having Julia and the boys around these past few weeks and would love to have the extra company,” Bryan explained.

Jennifer’s eyes lit up. “We’d be able to stay around here in Marshall?”

“If you want to,” Shaw said.

Harris looked at his sister and her inescapable joy. “Sounds good to me. Thank you, but I’d like to discuss it with Freddie first. We still have no idea where his family is.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re his family,” Jennifer stated.

“We’ll help you with that,” Spencer said. “All three of you are going to need new IDs so the Noah Project group doesn’t come looking for you.”

“True. Burning down that cabin Mark had us held in will delay them for only so long,” Harris agreed.

The screen door opened, and Freddie, followed by Sammie and Ben, walked out. Freddie had a file folder in his hands and walked up to Julia.

“Ms. Julia,” he said.

“Yes, honey.”

“I think this is what you were looking for,” Freddie said as he held the file out to her.

Julia took it and flipped it open. Her eyes got big.

“Where did you find this, honey?” she asked.

“In one of the boxes upstairs,” he said.

“What is it?” Brick asked.

Freddie went over to sit with Jennifer as Julia flipped through the pages.

“It’s a file from your Great-Aunt Sophia’s boxes. But I’ve never seen this one before.”

“Is that the mystery you were telling about that involved a priest named Father Henry Jones, who shot a man and is still in prison?” Jason asked.

“That’s the one. Jones is in his eighties now,” Julia said.

Conor stood and came over to her side. He, Kyle, and Julia had been trying to uncover the truth behind the case. Sophia had kept every scrap of information and even visited the priest regularly in prison. They were friends. The man who’d been shot was the town’s local miscreant, and no one ever saw the priest shoot him. The priest came forward and confessed the next day.

They’d even gone to the prison to ask the priest, but he refused to shine any light on the mystery or why he’d shot the

man, saying things were better off this way.

It was obvious there was more to this story, but without the priest's help, they'd pretty much given up ever finding the truth.

Everyone waited as they went through the file. How would Freddie know anything about this or where to find what Julia was looking for?

"It's a police report from nineteen-sixty-three," Conor said while examining one of the pieces of paper from the file. "It appears Aunt Sophia's parents had gone to the sheriff and filed a complaint about one Jericho Miles."

"That's the guy who got shot," Kyle stated.

"Seems Sophia's father found him lurking around the lake house on a few occasions."

"Why would he be out here?" Brick asked. "From what you told me, he was the town drunk, in and out of jail his entire life until the priest shot him."

"How old would Sophia have been back then?" Gator asked.

"Young. Late teens, early twenties," Julia answered.

"You don't think Sophia and this Jericho were an item, do you?" Jason asked while glancing back at Gator. From what he knew about Sophia, her having a relationship with someone like Jericho would be completely out of character.

"Sophia and the town drunk? I can't see it," Brick said.

"What if it was one-sided?" Gator continued.

"One-sided?"

"Yeah, what if Jericho had a thing for Sophia?"

"Holy shit. And Sophia's parents chased him off," Jason said, following his lover's thinking.

"Then how did he end up dead?" Brick asked. "We're still at more questions than answers."

"There are more pages in this file. We need to go through it thoroughly," Julia said.

Conor looked over at Freddie. “Thank you for finding this for us. It will help us figure this out. Can I ask you how you knew where to look?”

Jason waited along with the rest of the team. How did this twelve-year-old boy who’d never been in the lake house before, much less knew anything about Sophia and the mystery, know exactly what Julia needed?

Freddie smiled wide. “The lady told me.”

“The lady?” Jennifer asked.

“Yeah. The one in the picture.” Freddie pointed into the house.

Brick stood and walked into the lake house, returning moments later with a frame in his hand. He turned it to show Freddie.

“Is this the lady?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Brick was holding a picture of himself with his Great-Aunt Sophia when he was a young teenager. It’d been hanging in the living room.

Gator’s arm tightened around Jason. It would appear Freddie did have an ability or mutation caused by the genetic experiments on his DNA.

“Thank you, Freddie. You did really well,” Brick said, making the young boy smile even wider.

“I wanted to help. You helped us get away.”

“You’re a smart boy. Are you sure you’re only twelve?” Brick asked.

Freddie laughed. “I’ll be thirteen in three months.”

“We’d better start making party plans now. We’ll have a teenager in the family,” Julia said, smiling wide.

The boy settled back in Jennifer’s arms. The team accepted him as he was, the same as they’d done with each of them.

Mutation, ability, PTSD, murky history, and whatever else people carried around in their souls.

You couldn't ask for much more from a family.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Gator

His body was strung tight as a bow as he worked his way down Jason's gorgeous body. His lover's side was still bandaged, and he was careful to keep his weight off that side of Jason's body, but neither could wait another day to be together again. They longed for each other, and tonight was the first night they were alone in over a week and a half.

Ben insisted on staying beside his father until he felt he was healed enough. Tonight, Ben was with the other two boys, having their first sleepover in Julia's cottage. The community they were building here at Fire Lake was one of a kind, and he felt privileged to be considered part of it.

The day had been filled with revelations, the least of which was still being investigated by the team. Would Brick finally get an answer to why his great-aunt had left all these clues behind?

They'd have to wait and see.

Freddie wouldn't be pressured into explaining more of what he'd seen and been able to do. In time the boy would feel secure enough to share more about his ability with the rest of them.

But tonight belonged to Gator and his Jason, who moaned, and for the first time neither tried to stifle the sounds they were making. They were alone in their cottage, not in a house full of people. They were free to be as loud as they wanted, and Gator looked forward to making Jason shout to the heavens.

He licked and nibbled across Jason's chest, stopping to pay extra attention to those delicious nipples, sucking and licking them into hard peaks before moving on to his abdomen.

Gently, he kissed the bandage that stood as a reminder of how close he'd come to losing the man he'd finally found. Their happiness and future almost cut short.

"Promise you'll never get shot again," Gator demanded.

"You know I can't promise you that, but I'll do everything in my power to avoid it at all costs."

"I'll have to accept that. I can't lose you."

"And I can't lose you," Jason stated. His lover had been informed about how close Gator had come to having a bullet end him, and was equally shaken by the thought.

Gator licked his way across Jason's muscled abs, over the scars of the past, and onto his prize.

In one swift motion, he swallowed Jason's hard cock down his throat, bringing his hips off the mattress. Gator held him in place and lavished Jason's thick cock with attention. Sucking and licking until he was moaning nonstop.

That's exactly where he wanted him, at the brink, before pulling off and listening to him beg for more. Gator did this repeatedly until Jason was writhing on the bed. He reached over to the side table and grabbed the lube to get his lover ready.

"Hurry up, I'm going to explode before you get that gorgeous dick inside me," Jason panted.

"Bossy bottom, aren't you."

"Hell yeah. I'm ready. Get the condom."

Gator chuckled at his lover's insistence and decided he'd waited long enough. The moment he rolled the condom down his shaft, Jason was already reaching for him.

"Slow down, roll over onto your side. It'll be easier on your injury this way," Gator said.

It didn't matter how much of a hurry Jason was in. There was no way Gator would cause him any pain. As soon as Jason rolled onto his side, Gator angled his body behind him and lined his cock up with Jason's lubed hole.

With more restraint than he thought possible, Gator slowly slid into Jason, careful not to press or push on his injured side.

“Oh hell yeah,” Jason groaned as Gator’s balls rested against Jason’s tight ass cheeks. “Nothing can compare to this feeling.”

Gator wrapped his arm around Jason’s chest, and they joined hands as he slid his cock as deep as possible. The wet, tight heat was almost his undoing, but he pulled back and set a slow pace.

A few strokes later, Jason reached back, trying to grab on to Gator’s hips and take over.

“More. Give me more. I need you.”

Gator’s control snapped as his hips started pistoning until both of them groaned with pleasure. Gator angled his hips to ensure he brushed against Jason’s prostate with every thrust as desire rushed through them.

Soon Jason was panting. “Close.”

Gator reached down and grabbed onto his lover’s straining cock and pumped in time with his thrusts.

“That’s it.” Jason groaned moments before his body stiffened, his ass clamped down on Gator’s dick, and Jason’s cock exploded his release onto the sheets.

It didn’t take Gator long before following his lover over the edge and into his release as that all-consuming fire raced through his body, setting every nerve ablaze.

Nothing could compare to sharing that feeling with Jason, and Gator planned on doing it as often as possible.

“Hell, you’re going to kill me.” Jason chuckled.

“What a way to go,” Gator said before slapping his lover on his gorgeous ass.

Three days later

Jason

According to Jason's doctor, it'd be a few more weeks before Jason could resume his woodworking, but his side was healing well, and he should fully recover. To fight the boredom and fill his time when he wasn't with Gator or Ben, Jason decided to help Julia, Kyle, and Conor with their mystery boxes from Aunt Sophia.

Freddie had shown them the box in which he'd found the file that contained the report of Jericho trespassing on the lake house property. They'd each taken a portion of the box and spread the paper reports, news clippings, pictures, and whatever else they found across the lake house's living room.

The rest of the team was busy constructing more of the cottages, and they didn't wait long to add another cottage to the plans for Jason and Gator to be close to Ben. The little boy enjoyed spending time between Gunner, Conor, Jason, and Gator, and could be found sleeping at either of their cottages.

With all the love around Fire Lake, Jason felt certain Ben would grow up to be a well-adjusted adult. The loss of his mom was something that could never be repaired, but he hoped they were doing their best to fill such a large void in his life.

"Hell, it looks like a paper bomb went off in here." Gator laughed as he and Brick walked in.

"Now that we have a direction to go and an extra pair of hands, I intend to take advantage of it," Julia remarked from behind a pile of empty banker boxes.

Gator navigated through the piles and approached Jason before leaning down for a quick kiss.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good. A little stiff, but I'm getting up to stretch and loosen up." The stitches had come out, and now all that was left was

the muscles healing enough so he could work again.

“Do you think you can stop for a minute for us to show you something?” Gator asked.

“Sure.”

Jason stood and followed Gator and Brick out of the house and over to the construction site. The sound of power tools filled the area as they walked by the buildings already on their way to completion.

“It’s over here,” Gator said as he led him past Gunner and Conor’s cottage.

Not far away, he saw stakes lined up in the ground. It was close to Gunner and Conor’s cottage and was backed up to a stand of trees next to the water’s edge. It was stunning and peaceful.

“What do you think?” Gator asked as Brick went to stand a few feet ahead.

“Is this the site?” Jason asked.

They’d been going back and forth on where to build their cottage for a while now, and to see it all staked out like this did something to Jason that made him feel settled in a way he’d never felt before.

So this is what home feels like.

“Over here, we figured could be the back porch looking out over the water,” Brick said as he pointed at a few lines drawn in white chalk on the ground. “And the front door could be there.” He pointed behind where they were standing.

“Is this a good place for Gunner and Conor?” he asked, considering they were so close to their cottage.

“They suggested it. Figured it’s perfect for Ben when he wants to run between the two,” Gator answered.

“Is this okay with you, Brick?” After all, this was his property, and by his good graces, they all lived here.

“I can’t think of a better place,” Brick said. “I figured you could get inspiration for your furniture by looking out at the

forest and water.”

Jason looked at Gator and Brick, unable to communicate fully what this meant to him.

“Thank you.” He felt an odd sensation in his throat. He’d never choked up before, and he wasn’t going to start now. “This is perfect.”

Brick smiled before walking away. The man was tough as nails, the leader in all things. The man who held all the responsibility for the team with gravity and a protectiveness unmatched by any other Jason had known. And, he’d learned, was a softy.

“You really like it?” Gator asked, standing in the middle of the chalk outlines.

Jason approached his lover and wrapped his arms around Gator’s neck.

“Everything is perfect. Thank you for being in my life. For accepting me as I am. For being an amazing stepfather to Ben and giving us this home, a real home. The first I’ve ever had. I couldn’t imagine anything better. You’re my everything. My family, my peace, my joy, and my co-parent to the best little boy in the world.”

Gator smiled and squeezed Jason’s shoulder. “This is our home. The one I’ve dreamt of all those times I hid in the woods of Kentucky. Every time I wished for hope that things would be better, that I’d be more than what my heritage had in store for me. This right here is what I dreamt of. You and Ben. I could never ask for more.”

Jason tried to hold back the tears that blurred his vision. Life had taught him the here and now meant everything, and he was going to embrace it.

He grabbed Gator by the neck and went in for a kiss that poured all the love and hope he had stored inside him into it. This man was his future, his world, and he’d make his life around him. There was nothing else he could ask for, nothing else he could dream of.

He’d been gifted with it all.

Jason returned to the lake house and the piles of paper he'd accumulated in the search for a decades-old answer. After congratulations were given on the upcoming new home, he returned to work. He owed these people everything, and if Julia and Brick wanted an answer to the mystery of what happened between Sophia, Jericho, and Father Henry Jones, he'd help them find it.

"Does anyone else wonder what would drive a priest to kill someone when they believe it's a sin that would send them straight to hell?" Kyle asked.

"It'd have to be life or death, I'd think," Jason said. "Nothing else makes sense."

"I've found paperwork indicating Jericho was brought in by the sheriff to discuss the trespassing allegations," Julia said.

"What did Jericho have to say for himself?" Kyle asked.

"The notes state that he'd been invited," Julia said.

"Invited by who?" Jason asked.

"Sophia."

"No way in hell that happened," Kyle said. "Sophia and Jericho never happened."

"We don't know that for sure," Conor said. "It was a long time ago, and the only people with the answers are dead."

"How do you figure the priest plays into this?" Jason asked.

"Maybe he knew," Conor said. "Maybe he was privy to information we'll never have."

"You mean like in the confessional?" Kyle asked.

"Maybe. What if one or both had confided something to Father Jones?" Conor opined. "And he was forced to act based on what he heard?"

“Why wouldn’t he go to the sheriff if he knew something was going to happen?” Kyle asked.

“It’s against their vows to repeat what is said in confession,” Julia said. “Holy shit. Sorry, but do you think Father Jones knew something bad would happen or someone planned on doing something illegal?”

“I think we need to dig deeper before we make those kinds of assumptions,” Jason said. “I mean this is a priest. And if he was so worried about breaking the confessional, why wouldn’t he be more concerned about taking a life?”

“You’re right,” Julia said. “None of it makes sense. I can’t help but wonder if Sophia was in the middle of this, or was she collateral damage?”

“We can agree she knew something and wanted us to find what it was. If anything, the moment with Freddie proved it,” Julia stated. “Sophia will not rest until we uncover what happened that day.”

“Agreed. So we keep digging,” Kyle said.

“I don’t think we can stop now,” Julia agreed.

“Roger,” Jason said without thinking.

“We’re not on a mission.” Kyle laughed.

“Aren’t we?” Jason countered.

“Maybe we are,” Julia said.

Jason watched as a truck pulled into the driveway. He’d been working most of the morning on a new piece in his woodworking shop, and things were coming along nicely now that he’d gotten his shaking under control. Dr. Ramsey had been exactly what Jason needed, and there was no point in denying the fact that Elias had saved him from himself by forcing him to get help.

The driver's door opened, and Jason had to do a double take at the man who stepped out into the noonday sun.

“John?”

Jason stood and headed in his friend and business partner's direction while other team members appeared across the property.

Brick walked up to John and shook his hand.

What was John doing here? They talked yesterday and discussed a commission they'd received a couple of days ago, and now he was here without letting Jason know he was coming.

“Holy shit. Look what the cat dragged in,” Jason said as he neared his friend.

John smiled wide. “Couldn't let you lounge around here in Texas without me.”

Jason hugged John as only two old friends could. They'd been through their fair share of shit over the years, and Jason would be lying if he said he wasn't happy to see his good friend and partner in the flesh.

“I knew you missed me,” Jason joked. “Why didn't you tell me you were coming?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Well, you've accomplished that.”

Gator came over and wrapped his arm around Jason before holding his hand out to John. “Good to see you again, man.”

“Thanks, you too. I'm even happier knowing he's got you to look out for him now.”

Gator squeezed Jason close. “Forever.”

John laughed.

Ben came running over with the other two boys.

“Ben, I'd like you to meet my good friend and business partner, John.”

Ben held out his hand like a big boy, and John shook it with a smile.

“I’ve heard a lot about you over the years. It’s nice to meet you finally.”

“Hi. Do you have any kids?” Ben asked, obviously looking to add to the pack they already had.

“No, I don’t. It’s just me.”

“That’s okay. You might find one,” the young boy said, making everyone chuckle.

“If we get any more kids around here, we’ll have to open a day care,” Julia laughed as she joined them. “Hello, John. It’s good to see you again.”

“You too, ma’am.”

“Well, let’s go get some cold iced tea and get out of this sun,” Julia suggested, always the welcoming force in their group.

“Thank you, that’d be great,” John said.

Jason couldn’t help but wonder if John had come to a decision about their partnership. They still had the custom furniture store in another state, and while Jason continued working on pieces here in Texas, it wasn’t a permanent solution.

It wasn’t long before the group was sitting on the back porch sipping iced tea and laughing about something Jason had done years before when he and John first met.

“I swear.” John chuckled. “That student never flew again after Jason took him out for a lesson.”

“The guy was doing it to impress girls. He had no love for flying. He would’ve been dangerous out there showing off.” Jason defended himself.

“Yeah, right. That’s why you barrel-rolled him and made him throw up in one of those barf bags.” John laughed. “Or was it because he asked you if you got it on the regular for being a pilot?”

The whole team roared with laughter, and so did Jason. The kid had needed a lesson, and he gave him one.

“That’s when I decided I wasn’t cut out to be a flight instructor,” Jason admitted.

“No shit. I doubt the airstrip would’ve had you back.”

“How’s business going?” Brick asked. “Any decision on where to set up shop?”

Leave it to the team leader to cut to the chase. He knew how much this meant to Jason and decided to start the conversation.

“Well, honestly, that’s one of the other reasons I’m here in Marshall,” John explained. “I thought we could have a look around at possible locations for the new store.”

Jason nearly jumped out of his chair. He might have if it hadn’t been for Gator’s hand around his waist.

“You’ve decided to come to Texas?” Jason asked.

“Like I said, I couldn’t let you have all the fun,” John said. “Besides, I understand and respect your reasons for wanting to stay here. If it were me, I’d do the same.”

Jason let out a long breath. “Thank you, buddy.”

“Hey, don’t be thanking me too soon. We still need to find a place for the store and workshop, move the entire store a couple of states over, and I’ll need a place to live. There’s a lot of work to do.”

“How do you feel about living above a bar?” Gator asked.

Considering he and Gator would be staying out at the lake house, Gator’s old apartment was sitting empty.

“I don’t mind where I sleep as long as the bed’s comfy,” John assured them.

Jason couldn’t believe it. Things were coming together. He had his son back in his life, a man who he loved and loved him back. Friends who had his back, and a business partner with a heart of gold.

Life was good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He adjusted his scope and zeroed in on the row of cottages being constructed a hundred or so yards away from the main lake house. Nice-looking setup by all appearances, but appearances could be deceiving. He'd learned that the hard way.

The fire pit burned bright as a few men gathered around, drinking beers and laughing. Looked like most of the team and a few new members were there. He'd done his research and knew who each of them was. He watched Gunner laugh at whatever Spencer was saying while the big sniper pulled another man close. That had to be Conor, Gunner's man and a Noah Project survivor.

Fletcher came out of the house with a couple of bags of chips and tossed them around the group. A smaller man grabbed one of the bags and proceeded to read the ingredients before nodding and opening the bag. That had to be Rick, the health nut and Spencer's man. Fletcher sat beside Sheriff Elias Cooper, former Marine, and the law in these parts.

Shaw was nowhere to be seen, but he'd done a bit of recon earlier and found the man at the ranch with his two men, Kyle and Bryan. Considering his philandering history, it figured it'd take two men to tie Shaw down.

There were no signs of the kids, likely already in bed or playing in Julia's cottage. Gator and Jason were in town at Gator's bar, likely working until later tonight.

Roman, Brick's man and a successful businessman from Dallas, was busy on his laptop as he usually worked whenever he had a free moment.

That left one person unaccounted for, and he knew why as he set the scope down.

“Hello, Brick.”

“How long are you going to sit up here?” Brick asked from behind him.

“As long as needs be,” he replied.

“It’s been a long time.”

“Too long, apparently. You’ve had time to set up house.”

“Time carried on for all of us.”

“Not for all of us.”

“I suppose not.” Brick’s voice was closer now.

He judged him to be under six feet thirty degrees to his right. “We going to do this?”

“Did you ever have a doubt?” Brick asked.

Without warning, he sprung to his feet and dove farther left to put some space between them. When he looked up, he found Brick in a full Navy SEALs kit, just like he was.

“Good to see some things don’t change.”

“The important stuff never does,” Brick agreed.

Brick charged, swiping his leg out in an attempt to knock him off his feet. He easily sidestepped the move and brought his elbow down on Brick’s shoulder before moving several feet away.

“You’re going to have to try harder than that.” He laughed.

Brick stood and rotated his shoulder.

“Not bad for an old man.”

“Old man. I’ll show you which of us is the old man,” he rasped before diving at Brick.

They used a combination of Muay Thai for close combat to disable their opponent through vicious strikes, and Krav Maga, a form of street fighting, to disarm. Then there was grappling or ground fighting to bring your opponent to submission.

Both men were masters. Both men refused to yield.

The air around them filled with clouds of dust kicked up by their sparring. When it seemed one had the upper hand, the other twisted away or changed tactics, sending the other back several steps.

There was no more talking, only grunts and growls of two men locked in a battle neither wanted to lose. They broke apart and eyed one another from a distance.

“You haven’t changed one bit, Stryker,” Brick said with a grin, which morphed into a chuckle.

“Neither have you, cuz,” Stryker said as he wiped the sweat from his face.

“How about we go down and grab a beer?” Brick suggested.

“I could do that.” Stryker slapped Brick on the back.

Both men stood and closed the distance between them before hugging tight.

“Are you getting tougher with old age?” Brick asked.

“I should be asking you that,” Stryker said.

“You know you could’ve just driven up to the house.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Tasia is a M/M romance author who lives in Ontario, Canada. She's is a dedicated people watcher, lover of romance novels, 80's rock, and happily-ever-afters (once the MCs are put through their paces, of course), who grew up with a love of reading.

She's a firm believer that everyone deserves to have love, excitement, and crazy hot romance in their lives. Love should be celebrated and shared.

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