

CHAPTER 2

12:20 a.m. Monday, 29th October

The relentless easterly winds stabbed at Herrick's face like a thousand sharp pins as he continued to walk down the long road toward the town of Mill Willow. The open countryside was close to pitch-black, save for the moonlight. The silence and tranquility of the surrounding area greatly disturbed him. Something Herrick was not used to after living so long in the city of perpetual noise and light. The marshland stretched far beyond the fringe of what little starlight and moonbeams were cast onto the desolate countryside. The overgrown fields swayed solemnly in the steady winds and seemed alienating and hostile to Herrick. Searching his strange new surroundings, which could easily have been some remote African plain akin to the Serengeti, Herrick couldn't gauge where he was in the world. It was a fever dream. The sole purpose behind his quick and lively, albeit hesitant stride, was to keep on the move. The further away he could get from the danger of a Tetro-ambush, the hellish little girl, or the suspicious hotel owner, the better. He also needed to burn through any of the self-inflicted toxins still circulating in his system. Maybe then, the company he kept would begin to improve.

Though the straight path was yet to offer a single fork in sight, the journey was still aimless, his footsteps unsure, and his true destination unknown. The noise of the wind surrounded Herrick in a bedlam of airy white noise. The scurrying sound of the loose autumn leaves scratching across the road startled him on more than one occasion.

His body was numb. His expensive silk Armani suit flapped about manically, barely trapping any heat in the harsh country air. Herrick scoffed to himself at the thought of the cost of the tailored jacket alone.

The first person that drives by can have the shirt off my back for a ride with central heating.

Hitchhiking would be a pointless endeavor on the empty road. Even if a single car passed and he wasn't a dangerous fugitive on the run, Herrick stood well over six feet tall and openly displayed a collection of frightening scars on his cheeks and forehead. Herrick knew he wasn't the type of person someone would pick up.

Over the course of his journey walking into town, he developed a system to avoid the cold as best he could. Tucking his hands into his armpits and holding his chest tightly, he walked backward to protect his naked face and hands from the piercing wind. He only faced the direction of the chilling autumn torrents to check his trajectory and any obstacles that blocked his path. Herrick could see the warm glow of civilization roughly two miles ahead. The indirect light was hidden behind the low infrastructure of the town, outlining only the outer perimeter of the buildings. As he grew closer, the contours gradually developed more detail, but he was still far from any terminus. The end of the dark road behind him and the ocean of tall phragmites swaying in unison to his left and right posed a threat. He kept his position somewhere in the middle of the road to keep his options open for a potential retreat. After gauging the distance to Mill Willow, Herrick turned his back to the wind again, leading with his heels and looking down at the road with his chin pressed tightly against his trachea.

Then suddenly, his shadow steadily came into focus, shrinking in size under his feet against the dark asphalt from a new source of light in front of him. A car was approaching Mill Willow. He raised his chin

from his chest to face the distant set of headlights. Now panicking, he moved toward the sanctuary of the swaying phragmite reeds, stumbling and losing his balance along with one of his brown leather shoes in the process. Herrick darted to the side of the road. The bright headlights grew larger and nearer. Herrick continued to awkwardly hobble to the field, trying his best to keep his socked foot from touching the cold, wet mud along the side of the road. He jumped into the tall grass, stooping behind a log and facing back out to the road. Herrick looked down at his muddied sock, then over to his two-thousand-dollar Paolo Scafara shoe that now lay aimlessly on the road. The one he was wearing was worthless to him without the other one. Growling under his breath, he became convinced the longer he waited in hiding, the more foolish his actions seemed. *It couldn't be Tetro's men. It's the wrong direction.*

Then suddenly, something unexpected happened.

The passing patrol car swerved across the road, attempting hopelessly to regain control of its direction. Its headlights strobed manically across the road until it slid to a screaming halt. The patrol car idled for a few moments in a smoky huff, then a uniformed young man who was no older than thirty climbed out of the driver's side. The colors of his clothes, dull khaki and faded green, matched his vehicle. Herrick could just make out the words and insignia on the side of the driver's door.

Mill Willow Sheriff's Department.

Herrick stayed quiet in his grassy refuge and observed the uniformed man. His complexion was clean and shaven, his blond hair neatly slicked to one side, his posture stiff and alert. *Hardly a Tetro man, too clean-cut. Too much of a boy scout.* The uniformed officer rigidly marched back to the point where he'd lost control of his vehicle, grumbling incoherently under his breath.

“Damn animals,” the officer muttered to himself, before coming to a halt and looking down in confusion at the helpless leather shoe resting on its side. His eyes followed the progress of the winding tire marks leading up to his patrol car. “What the hell?”

Herrick stooped further down into his crouching position, making his way slowly and gently back, and trying not to make a sound. The road’s pebbles bit painfully into the palms of his hands; Herrick steadily crawled back out of the officer’s line of sight. With his next cautionary step back, he gently pressed the inner arch of his shoeless foot into a sharp twig sticking up from the muddied ground. The sharp, stinging pain bit at every nerve in his body, but he successfully managed to suppress a scream. He tightly clenched his jaw and groaned behind a tense grimace. But the low growl was enough to stand out in the high easterly winds of the otherwise quiet countryside.

The officer turned quickly toward the faint moan, pulling his bulky flashlight from his left hip and a standard-issue SIG Sauer from his right. He crossed his arms in one swift move. With both his gun and torch-beam trained on the area of Herrick’s general vicinity, the officer cautiously edged forward, combing through the tall field of reeds.

“Who’s there?” the officer asked in a firm, albeit shaky voice.

Herrick scoffed under his breath at his own misfortune and slipped his foot from the twig, calling out casually as he emerged from the field.

“Sorry, officer,” Herrick apologized. “Don’t shoot, I’m unarmed.”

He walked onto the road and slowly approached the officer. Shivering in the cold with his elbows pressed against his waist and hands reached up only to his shoulders, Herrick made it close enough to read the officer’s badge.

“Stop right there!” the officer called out anxiously, as the giant slender man approached from the tall dark fields like something from a nightmare.

“Nothing to be alarmed about, Lieutenant,” Herrick replied, stopping and leaving a few feet between them both. “I’m just out for a stroll.”

“That’s Captain, boy,” the officer sharply corrected with stubborn pride. “Captain Monarch.”

“Well, which one is it?” Herrick kept his hands up and out, gesturing with his head to the lieutenant’s chest. “Captain Boy or Captain Monarch?” Herrick tried to joke, relaxing his shoulders and producing a quivering smirk.

“What are you, dense in the head?” The officer spoke with an air of superiority.

“What are you, blind?” Herrick replied with a relaxed chortle. “Cause your badge says lieutenant.”

“Keep those hands up!” the lieutenant barked, ignoring Herrick’s playful jeer.

Herrick obliged the nervous lieutenant and raised his hands again despite the biting cold.

“Who are you?” Monarch asked, curiously transfixed on the monstrous face that was staring back at him as the harsh light of his torch illuminated every crevice, crease, and scar. “What are you really doing here?”

“Kurt Herrick.” He tried to push out the small words through his chattering teeth. “A guest of the sheriff and the Rock Hollow Hotel.”

“Bullshit! Turn around,” Monarch scoffed. “And keep those hands up.”

Herrick grumbled under his breath and turned rigidly on the spot to face the fields. Monarch approached him carefully, tucking his

flashlight back into this holster but keeping his gun drawn on Herrick's back. With his free hand, Monarch searched through Herrick's back pockets.

"So," Monarch sneered, showing no signs of subtlety as he examined the closer detail of the deepest scar running down the side of Herrick's temple. "You're a friend of the sheriff? Is that right?"

"Well, *you* said friend. *I* said guest, but yeah, sure," Herrick replied.

"Right. Guest, is it?" Monarch humored the assumed vagrant with a cheery voice. "What have you and the sheriff got planned while you're here?"

"Maybe some fly-fishing, walks in the park, braiding each other's hair," Herrick dryly replied. He kept his upbeat attitude because he did not want to give the arrogant officer the satisfaction of submission. "You know, bro time."

Monarch finished off his quick search of Herrick's pockets and stepped backward with the only personal item he could find. A leather wallet. With the aid of the patrol car's headlights and his gun still drawn, Monarch flipped the wallet open by the flap with his free hand, searching through the pockets by tilting his head at awkward angles to look over the few cards that remained inside. Monarch smirked under his breath at the thick wad of hundred-dollar bills stuffed in the main pocket but didn't comment on his findings.

"Fly-fishing, huh?" Monarch dryly responded. "Only thing you'll catch this time of year is a cold. Now, turn around."

As Herrick turned to face him, Monarch threw the wallet at his feet. Herrick looked over in annoyance at the cruelty of the lieutenant, then to the wallet on the road. He slowly bent down and scooped it up with a labored grunt.

"Where's your ID?" Monarch asked.

Herrick looked through his wallet, equally as shocked as his persecutor before realizing that Kieran must have confiscated it.

“I don’t have it.” Already anticipating the lieutenant’s skeptical reaction, Herrick countered, “But as I said, I’m just going for a walk. No crime in that.”

“You said you’re staying at the Rock Hollow, right?” Monarch asked.

“That’s right.”

“Well, it’s that way.” Monarch kept his gun drawn, angling his head in the direction of the hotel. “Seems like you lost your way and your ID. So, I suggest you walk back the way you came and crawl back into bed before you *do* catch a cold.”

Herrick always struggled with authority figures. All the way back to his early school days. The superior attitude of anyone ground something deep in the pit of his stomach. To him, people were a walking contradiction, and to some measure, greatly flawed and unworthy of so much confidence about anything. Herrick tried, like usual, to swallow his pride and hide his irritation behind a tight-lipped smile. Something, ironically, that Tetro taught him to do when talking to cops. *Yes, sir. No, sir. Three bags full, sir.*

In an attempt to rid his body of the aggression bubbling up in his system like a shrieking kettle, Herrick released a steady breath through his nose.

“I really don’t want to go back, Captain.” Herrick tried to command a new and humbler tone of voice, fixed with an obedient, and almost rote, delivery. “Could you give me a lift into town? It’s very cold tonight, and I need to be somewhere.”

“I don’t give a shit,” Monarch scoffed sharply. “Get moving back where you came from.”

Herrick gently sighed and made his way to the side of Monarch, moving in the opposite direction of the Rock Hollow Hotel, toward town.

“Hey!” Monarch snapped, holding his gun back up at Herrick again after a moment’s ease. “Where do you think you’re going? I said *that way!*” He gestured in the opposite direction of Herrick’s progress.

“I’m getting my shoe,” Herrick innocently replied, pointing ahead of his path.

Monarch glanced briefly at the leather shoe and begrudgingly allowed him to collect it with a stiff nod of his head. Herrick submissively sauntered back to his shoe. Monarch kept his hand on the gun’s grip and his eyes fixed on the giant vagabond. Herrick knew he couldn’t go back to the hotel. He needed a place to lie low for the night. Somewhere safe till morning.

Nothing’s getting past this trigger-happy boy scout.

Herrick bent down slowly and scooped up his shoe. He rose and walked past the officer, clumsily hopping on one foot as he slid the shoe onto his foot. He awkwardly adjusted the heel, making Monarch drop his guard. As he approached Monarch’s car, Herrick suddenly took a long, confident stride toward it and kicked the side mirror clean off. Monarch instantly drew his gun and aimed it at Herrick. The lieutenant was speechless with shock for a spell, before he managed to rally up any authority in his shaky but loud voice. “Hey! Put your fucking hands up, dirtbag.”

Herrick stayed quiet, but a thinly veiled look of satisfaction spread across his face. It was as if damaging the patrol car somehow reset the balance of power between the uptight lawman and himself. Herrick shivered in the harsh wind, but with more defiance in his calm gaze.

“How ’bout that lift, Lieutenant?”

Monarch, still scrutinizing the situation and lost for words, stared at Herrick in disbelief. Both men waited aimlessly in the strong autumnal breeze for a long moment. The patrol car's side mirror tapped softly against the side of the door. Herrick looked over the nervous officer, head to toe, who seemed frozen with shock. *Didn't see that coming.*

Herrick quickly became irritated again, this time by the lieutenant's lack of response. He drove his elbow forcefully into the passenger window and the pane shattered in an explosion of glass. Monarch flinched but didn't fire, move a muscle, or utter a single sound. Herrick casually smiled, holding his wrists out to be cuffed. "I'm sorry. How about that lift, *Captain?*"