

## Chapter 1

Raiden Prince prowled the field on foot, a solitary figure moving purposefully in the dark through the field of tall green leafy stalks. The summer night wrapped around him like a shroud, making his eyes appear as black as pools of Texas crude oil and concealing his clandestine mission. In the velvet light, only the shape of the vegetation was visible, but the outline of the three-pronged leaves was unmistakable. He threw gasoline from a red gas can onto the field of hemp, backing up as he worked, so as not to soak his jeans or work boots with the flammable liquid. He returned the red can to the bed of his pickup, retrieved another gas can and moved to the opposite side of the field. There, he emptied the flammable liquid onto a greenhouse made of a steel frame and plastic sheeting, filled with high grade medical marijuana plants, some labeled Peanut Butter Breath, and others Blue Dream.

The silence of the night was broken only by the rhythmic chirping of dog-day cicadas, and Prince's off-key rendition of Red Headed Stranger. He did his best Willie Nelson imitation in his practiced backwoods Texas accent. He mimicked the elastic voices, that he'd heard most Texans use, by eliding certain syllables. All the vowels were stretched out in the middle of each word, and the end of them clipped, especially ones ending in ing. The music was just to set the mood for the evening's tasks. He preferred rap.

After he'd soaked the greenhouse, Prince backed toward the two lane county road as he threw the last of the gasoline. He then moved out of the field, onto the caliche roadbed, where he walked back to his old rusty pickup truck and placed the second gas can in the bed beside the first.

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Brad and Thad Lane, each on an ATV with custom paint jobs and extra-large wheels, cut across the pasture from their picturesque home on the hill above the expansive farm owned by the Lane family. They often rode late at night when they could sneak out without waking their mother, Gladys. She was a heavy sleeper, as the pure of heart often are, but she was still a protective mother and didn't like the twins roaming the acreage in the dark.

Brad, the larger of the two, now shirtless, and already tan, played defensive end on the local high school football team, the Giddings Buffaloes. Thad, three minutes younger, wearing a white wife-beater undershirt, played tight end and was the more talented of the two. He was often compared to Travis Kelce because he was fast and often carried

the ball in for the team's touchdowns under Friday night lights, a Texas passion.

Riding around the family farm was not an issue for the seventeen-year-olds, even at night. They knew every inch of the family property, as they'd been using it as their personal playground since they could walk. They had certain hiding places for their special crops. Not marijuana, there was plenty of that. Their secret was growing small patches of maize or clover near their bird blinds so they could enjoy a good season of dove hunting in the fall. It was called baiting, and was illegal, but this was their land, and they didn't follow many rules once they entered the gate to the property they called home.

The twins cut low into a narrow creek bed caused by hundreds of years of rain runoff, then peaked again at the top of a low mound overlooking the growing fields. From their vantage point atop the rise, Brad spied a solitary figure below, near the county road, his movements casting eerie shadows against the moonlit landscape.

Brad's brow furrowed in confusion as he pointed out the intruder to his brother. "Who is that?"

Thad's eyes narrowed as he squinted into the darkness, his instincts going on high alert. "Don't think I know him. What the hell is he doing?"

They watched the intruder move further onto the country road, then recede, taking a squarish object that appear to be a gas can with him. The man placed the can in the back of a pickup and returned to the edge of the field. He pulled a lighter from his pocket and just as he was about to thumb the heel, the twins came tearing down the rise, bearing down on the intruder on their ATV's, while shouting obscenities.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"This is private property, Asshole."

At that moment, Prince thumbed the wheel, sparking the flint, and tossed the flaming Zippo, lighting up the edge of the field. The fire caught and expanded flaring toward the twins. They zigged and zagged, skirting the field and avoiding the flames by driving through a wet creek at the edge of the heat. Marijuana smoke puffed out of the burning field and then the greenhouse, the plants expelling gases that smelled sweet and exotic.

Prince moved back toward his pickup, placing his right hand in his pocket and grabbing his keys to expedite his exit. He moved quickly, but the twins were quicker. Thad

bounded his ATV up out of the creek bed and headed straight for Prince. Thad knocked Prince down with the front bumper, and Brad came charging up behind Thad. Prince pulled himself up, dropping his truck keys in the onslaught, and picked up a large limb that had fallen from a nearby oak. He swung it over and caught Brad across the chest with the heavy weapon before Brad could come to a complete halt, knocking him from the ATV. The machine continued into the roadbed and across to the neighboring fence, where it was caught by barbed wire and abruptly died.

Thad did a wheelie in the road, turned back, stopped his ATV, and jumped off to help his brother. While he was bending over Brad, Prince came up behind him and slammed the same offending tree limb into the back of Thad's head, knocking him out cold. Prince went down again as his right leg gave way from the injury caused by Brad's ATV. Prince got up, limped nearer to the twins, and hit them again, although they were both already unconscious.

"Stay down."

Prince sat down on a nearby rock outcropping to catch his breath and assess the situation. The fire popped and flared as he watched and listened for fire trucks that might have been dispatched. The two young men had seen his face and his truck. He could not risk their exposing him or his employer to scrutiny. Feeling the urgency to leave the scene of his crime, he made a decision. He limped back over to the bodies and dragged each twin in turn to the edge of the flames, leaving first Brad, and then Thad to be consumed by the fire.

Prince then returned to his truck, but when he put his hand in his pocket to fetch his keys, there was nothing there. It was only then that he remembered dropping them when the first boy's ATV had taken him down. He limped back to the area where he had been hit and searched the leaves, grass, and waning Bluebonnets with the flashlight on his phone. His search was in vain, and when he heard the siren of an approaching fire truck, and the grinding sound of another ATV coming closer from the direction of the farmhouse, he jumped into his truck and jerked the wires from beneath the dashboard. He hot-wired the engine, and it sparked and sputtered to a start. Prince threw gravel on his exit from the roadside and headed down the county road, leaving a trail of white caliche dust to mingle with the smoke from the burning field.

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