

***STREET HAWK:
RESURRECTION PROTOCOL***

BY LEE TYERS

STREET HAWK: RESURRECTION PROTOCOL

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And finally, to anyone who ever looked at a quiet road at night and wondered what it would be like to chase justice at 300 miles per hour—

Ride on...

PROLOGUE



Los Angeles, September 1986

Los Angeles shimmered beneath a hard blue sky, every building a blade of glass, every shadow a line drawn in heat. The city's pulse throbbed just beneath the surface—sirens drifting, engines snarling, a thousand stories simmering behind sunbaked concrete. Somewhere, a train howled, and for a moment, the world held its breath, waiting for the day to crack open. From above, the sprawl stretched for miles: glass and steel, sunbaked concrete, graffiti-tagged overpasses. Traffic crawled through the haze, inching west.

For a moment, everything seemed frozen in the heavy air.

Sirens drifted. Life moved slow.

Then, out of nowhere, engines shattered the stillness.

At street level, Jesse Mach waited in the shadows of an empty loading bay, visor down against the glare. Sweat trickled beneath his collar, but he barely noticed. He watched the city, always reading its rhythm—waiting for the

right kind of trouble to break the day open.

He ran his gloved hand over the bike's fairing—felt the subtle warmth of the engine, the tautness of the new suspension. HUD optics gleamed behind armoured glass. Each switch thrown, each cable locked, every movement was muscle memory. Diagnostics blinked green: turbine charge 100%, comms live, armour seals tight. Street Hawk was ready—if only he was.

For a moment, memory tugged at him—a flash of Marty's laughter on a long-ago night patrol, the clatter of a badge tossed onto the dash. He blinked the past away, jaw tight. Out here, ghosts rode with you, whether you invited them or not.

The two silver Broncos tore through the warehouse district like they owned it. Big, square-bodied monsters — military surplus, probably. The windows were blacked out, the plates pulled. One had a dented fender, the other rode higher than legal. Neither one belonged in the civilian world.

They were fast.

But Street Hawk was faster.

"You sure about this?" Norman's voice crackled through the comms, lower and rougher than Jesse remembered.

Jesse paused, thumb hovering over the ignition. "Doesn't matter if I'm sure. It's got to be done."

Silence, a breath. Then Norman: "Be careful, Jesse."

He wanted to say something back—something light to cut the tension—but all that came was:

"I'll see you at the other end." He hoped it was true.

The Broncos roared past, and Jesse launched from the loading bay, slotting in behind them. He dropped low over the bike, heat radiating up through the seat, the machine vibrating with barely restrained power. Asphalt streaked by under his wheels.

Then the city hit him: a wall of light and movement, sirens echoing through the canyons of glass. The machine vibrated with anticipation, reading his every twitch, ready to leap. With his head tucked down in classic racer's posture, Jesse scanned the street ahead, eyes sharp behind the visor.

Norman's voice came through, crisp in his ear. "You're outside LAPD's

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operational zone. Units are not cleared to pursue.”

Jesse grinned behind his helmet, the thrill of the chase sharpening his focus. “Lucky for me, I’m not a bike cop anymore,” he said, throttle opening as he closed the distance.

“Jesse, you need to understand—this isn’t a routine pursuit. The girl in that truck is Commissioner Steele’s daughter. That means every decision we make tonight is going to be scrutinised, by the department and by the media. If anything goes wrong, it’s not just our reputations on the line—it’s her life, and a lot of very powerful people are watching. We have to do this by the book. No stunts, no shortcuts. We bring her home safe. That’s the only priority. Got it?”

Jesse’s tone shifted, just a shade more serious. “Understood, Norman. I’ll keep it tight.”

He eased forward on the throttle, a wry grin flickering beneath his visor.

“No pressure, right? Just the Police Commissioner’s daughter and half the city watching. Piece of cake.”

He weaved around a stack of parked semis, skimming the side mirrors.

Sparks flew from the footpeg as he took the next curve too tight, too fast — just how he liked it.

For a split second, as the bike crested a rise, Jesse flashed back—Marty riding shotgun on patrol, laughter bouncing off alleys, LA Control cursing their names. Those days felt impossibly far away now, sepia-toned and already half-forgotten. But he carried them with him, every time he rode.

Jesse snapped back into the moment.

“They’re moving heavy,” he said. “I saw movement in the back of the second truck. Passenger compartment. Rear right.”

“You’re not cleared for this, Jesse,” Norman warned. “Right now, you’re running on instinct and racking up violations by the mile.”

Jesse’s grin was audible in his voice. “Wouldn’t be the first time, Norman. Relax, I’ve got this.”

The trailing Bronco swung wide, trying to block him in. Jesse didn’t take the bait. Instead, he rolled off the throttle just long enough to slip left through a gap between two derelict loading docks. The bike slid, caught

traction, and rocketed back onto the road ahead of the blocker.

His eyes darted down to the particle beam arming system. With a quick flick, he armed it. Even at high speed, the bike's concealed laser snapped out from its compartment, locking onto the tail Bronco's axle.

They hit another tight corner. Jesse seized his moment. The red laser lanced out, striking the axle with a burst of sparks.

Jesse felt the jolt through the handlebars—the moment the steel gave way.

The Bronco's rear end buckled, tires screaming, sending the truck into a rough spin. It skidded sideways and crunched to a stop against a stack of warehouse crates.

The Bronco was disabled, wheels twisted and engine stalled. The driver scrambled out and fled, abandoning Jessica Steele in the back seat—shaken, but safe.

A small surge of relief flickered through him—but the chase wasn't over. He pushed it down and focused forward.

Norman's voice came through, steady and focused. "Good work, Jesse. I'm alerting local units now. She'll be fine—just keep moving and stay out of sight."

One down...

The lead vehicle was headed for the freeway ramp, already threading through a hole in the chain-link fence at the service access.

He opened the throttle. The bike answered with a deep snarl, the smell of hot rubber filling his helmet.

"Jesse," Norman's voice crackled in. "You've got a news chopper moving in over Sector 7. They've got you on camera."

"You want me to smile, Norman?"

He leaned into the climb. The turbo hissed.

And Street Hawk leapt for the ramp.

The ramp crested into a narrow overpass, cracked and littered with the kind of debris nobody ever cleaned — broken reflectors, soda cans, a torn up muffler. Jesse stayed low, arms locked, the wind punching across his visor as Street Hawk flew off the ramp and hit the surface hard and clean.

The remaining Bronco weaved through a snarl of traffic ahead. Brake

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lights flared. Horns blared. The silver truck didn't flinch. It bounced over the divider onto the opposing lanes and tore a path through stopped cars like a battering ram with a gas pedal.

Jesse followed.

The smell of overheated engines and scorched concrete filled his helmet as he split a pair of sedans, ducked past a garbage truck, and clipped the edge of a tow hitch on a Chevy.

"Come on," he muttered. "Show me something."

The Bronco jack-knifed right, clipping the mirror off a passing taxi before surging ahead.

Then it happened.

Desperation crept in—and the Bronco driver snapped. He gunned it too hard, lost control, and slammed straight into the back of a red compact—a battered hatchback with peeling decals and a crushed trunk. The impact was instant and brutal. The little car spun sideways, screeching into a concrete divider. The noise was savage—metal shearing, glass bursting apart.

Jesse swerved hard.

Through the haze of debris, he caught a glimpse: a woman in the driver's seat, arms thrown up in terror, and a child in the back, frozen, face ghost white. The hatchback flipped, rolling over itself and landing on its side with a sickening crunch.

Jesse missed it by inches. His tires screamed, sparks spitting from under the fairing.

For a heartbeat, all Jesse could see was the kid's terrified face. He shoved the image aside. Now wasn't the time.

But the Bronco didn't stop. It bounced over the shoulder, then disappeared down the off-ramp, reckless and out of control.

Jesse eased off the throttle just enough to stabilise, then kicked the engine back into gear.

Above, the familiar thup-thup-thup of rotor blades.

He looked up. Helicopter. News. Long lens. Already tracking him.

The helmet, the bike, the angle — they'd get something. Maybe just a blur. Maybe just enough.

He cut left under the next overpass and dropped into shadow.

Street Hawk vanished.

He took the service tunnel at speed, the bike's frame vibrating against the rough concrete channel. No street lights down here — just the occasional amber glow of a work lamp bolted to a pillar, casting long shadows and nothing else. Jesse kept low, eyes steady.

No sirens. No engine noise behind him.

He was clear.

The comm crackled back to life. Norman's voice this time came low and clipped, like someone was listening on the other end.

"You need to get back here, Jesse. Now."

Jesse didn't answer right away. He eased off the throttle, letting his heart rate slow—just barely.

The adrenaline still pulsed through him, but now something colder pressed in. Guilt. Fear.

He couldn't shake what he'd seen. The kid, motionless in the back seat. The mother, arms flung up to protect her child. The hatchback, flipping over and over.

"Norman. The hatchback—did you see if they're okay?"

A beat of static. Norman's voice came through, tense. "I don't know yet, Jesse. I'm trying to get a camera angle, but there's too much debris. Emergency services are on the way."

Jesse exhaled, jaw tight. The images stayed with him, gnawing at the edge of his focus.

A moment later, Norman came back on the line, voice softer. 'Paramedics are on scene. They're alive, Jesse. Shaken, but alive. Focus on getting clear.

Jesse guided the bike through a narrow off-ramp, tires echoing on wet pavement. Ahead, the tunnel widened, opening into a section of old storm infrastructure. There were no cameras here. No power, either. Just the hum of the bike and his own breathing.

He pulled to a stop beneath a defunct freeway spur. Rebar poked out from the concrete above like ribs. A distant freight train howled, its low rumble vibrating in his chest. He was out of sight, but with enough room to let him

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take a breath.

"Norman. I was on camera," he said. "They'll have footage. You saw the chopper."

"I saw it."

"Street Hawk causing civilian casualties will be all over the TV in minutes."

"I've already flagged the optics suppression protocol."

"That won't be enough."

"I know."

Jesse opened his visor and took in the fresh air. The cooling engine ticked and groaned. Wind scraped through the broken drain grates above. In the distance, a freight train howled.

"They're gonna shut us down," he said quietly. There was no reply.

The Command Center was dark when Street Hawk rolled in.

No overhead lights. Just the low blue glow of monitors on standby, and the metallic click of Jesse's boots as he dismounted and crossed the floor. The bike hissed behind him, the motor winding down, frame still twitching from heat.

Norman stood by the central terminal. Jacket off. Tie loosened. He looked like a man bracing for a funeral — someone else's, if not his own. He avoided Jesse's gaze, fingers drumming an anxious staccato against a cold mug. He looked not just tired, but gutted—as if something inside him had already been dismantled, piece by piece.

Jesse pulled off his gloves and dropped them on a workbench.

"They're here already, aren't they?"

Norman didn't answer. Just nodded toward the far end of the room.

Three men in suits stood by the main access door. No uniforms. No IDs. Government types — straight from some alphabet agency no one talked about in public. The tallest of the three gripped a clipboard—not an electronic device, but old-fashioned paper. He tapped his thumb against the metal clip, a steady, almost impatient rhythm. His voice, when he finally spoke, was soft and unhurried, with an accent that slipped through the cracks of region and time.

“Mr. Mach.”

Jesse didn't respond.

“We're going to need the equipment powered down.” Jesse looked at Norman.

“He told you about the TV chopper?” Jesse asked.

“He did,” the agent said. “We've reviewed the footage. And we've already begun working on a suppression narrative. Unfortunately—” Jesse cut him off.

“You don't get to use words like that. Not with injured innocents on I-10.”

“We'll handle the civilian fallout,” the man replied, calm. “Your concern is containment.”

The third agent, still silent, moved toward the bike.

Jesse stepped in.

“You touch that machine,” he said, “you better be ready to ride it.” The agent stopped.

The room froze for a second, thick with bad options.

Norman cleared his throat.

“They're not here to argue, Jesse.”

“No kidding.”

The first agent offered a pen, his tone almost gentle—too gentle for what they were asking.

“This is non-negotiable,” he said quietly.

Jesse stared at the clipboard. His hands curled into fists. “You want me to sign away everything we built?” Norman looked stricken, silent.

Jesse set the pen down. “No.”

The silence cut deep. The agent didn't flinch.

“So be it,” the man said, and gestured to his team.

In that moment, Jesse knew this was how legends ended—not with a chase, but with a checklist.

The next morning, a private tech crew came in — not government, but close enough. No badges. Just white coveralls and tool crates marked with serial numbers and tape. They didn't ask questions, and Jesse didn't offer any.

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The bike was dismantled first.

They started with the fairing — front shell off, HUD panel stripped, cabling snipped like it never mattered. The internal boosters came next, the mounts unbolted from the frame while the cooling fans were sat on the deck next to the stripped shell. When they removed the pulse module, the technician glanced at Jesse, hesitated, then kept going.

Jesse stood motionless, every bolt and panel cut from the machine like a nerve severed. The hiss of hydraulics, the whine of a power tool biting into frame—all of it etched itself onto his memory. It wasn't just a machine. It was years, sweat, hope, failure—all unmade, piece by piece, until nothing was left but empty space and echoes.

The helmet was last. Lifted from its dock like a relic, wiped down, sealed in a crate with a government label and a strip of black electrical tape across the visor.

The computers went out in racks. Power cut. The room got quieter by the hour, like someone was pulling out its heartbeat piece by piece. Jesse stood by the wall and watched the guts of the operation packed into foam and steel. No ceremony. No recognition.

Just a job, reversed.

Norman hadn't said much since the night before. He was different now — stiff, cold, distracted. Distant in a way that didn't feel like nerves. Jesse caught him at the far corner of the room signing a second set of forms.

One of the agents stood beside him.

Jesse didn't move.

When Norman finished, he approached slowly, a blank envelope in his hand. He didn't offer it—just stood there, heavy with words unsaid.

"This wasn't my decision," Norman said quietly.

Jesse met his gaze. "But you signed it."

"I had to."

"You could've fought back."

"I did. Before you ever got back here last night. This was a high stakes mission. High risks."

Jesse said nothing. He didn't reach for the envelope.

Norman shifted, uncertain. "You need to let it go."

Jesse shook his head. "You let it go."

Norman swallowed, the words catching. "After this, I can't talk to you. I'll be sealed—NDA, formal lockout. That's it."

Jesse gave a half-shrug. "Figures."

Norman's voice cracked as he tried one last time. "I just wanted to—"

Don't," Jesse cut in. "Goodbye, Norman. Enjoy your peace."

The last crate snapped shut behind them with a hollow metal thud.

Jesse took one look back at the shell of Command Center. His eyes drifted to where Street Hawk used to rest. "You got me home more times than I deserved," he whispered. "Guess it's my turn to ride this out alone." For a heartbeat, he let himself remember it all—the roar, the speed, the sense that he was something more than flesh and regret. Then he let it go.

A forklift rolled the crate out across the garage floor and into the back of a flatbed trailer. The door clanged shut. The deep engine rumbled, and then the red tail lights faded into the morning glare.

Jesse turned away, in the shadow of the side entrance into the cold, smog-choked morning. The Command Center loomed behind him, lifeless—a relic now, as hollow as he felt inside.

In just twenty-four hours, his whole world had come apart. The name—Street Hawk—no longer fit. He didn't know who he was anymore.

The fading red tail lights blurred through the haze, the distant drone of machinery echoing in an empty garage. Each step felt heavier, slower, as if the city itself was swallowing him up—just another shadow in its uncaring breath.

Memories pressed in, sharper than ever. The electric rush of his first mission. Street Hawk's turbines howling as he tore through downtown. Street Hawk's black frame melded into the memory of his old L.A.P.D. patrol bike, Marty's laughter beside him, reckless and alive. Marty's fall. The silence that followed—total and unrelenting.

Jesse's fists clenched at his sides. He looked up, the sunrise barely a glow above El Sereno, but it brought no clarity.

He walked into the uncertain gray of morning, not a hero, not even a

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rider—just a shadow swallowed by the city.

Behind him, the Command Center was silent, the last echoes fading into history.

1

THE EDGE OF THE NIGHT



Los Angeles, May 2025

Nearly forty years since LA lost its ghost, and the city had changed in all the ways cities do—skyline jagged with new towers, drones skimming glassy air, electric cars ghosting silently down old boulevards. But the air still hummed with something restless.

Every block seemed sharper now. The stories about Street Hawk were just that: stories. Some called him an urban myth; others remembered the roar of the bike, the black flash vanishing into smog. But those were old days—ancient history to a city that only looked forward.

On Figueroa, a mural clung to a battered wall: Street Hawk in profile, helmeted head painted by someone who believed. The paint was faded, eyes scrubbed out by time. A boy tugged his mother's sleeve. "Who was that?" "Nobody," she lied, hurrying him past.

News feeds blared warnings about a "new threat of syndicate activity." In bars and cabs, people talked about the old days, when a streak of light and a scream of engines made the night feel less alone.

Now, there were only the hungry and the hard. The city was a hunting ground again.

Nighttime Los Angeles pulsed around him. Neon reflections shimmered in oil-slick puddles; basslines bled from passing cars. Midnight heat rose from the pavement like breath.

Jason Nolan shifted his weight, rolling his shoulders to ease a tension that never quite left. He was here for reasons even he couldn't explain—habit, maybe. Or the faint hope that racing against the city's shadows would burn something restless out of him.

He straddled a white Yamaha at the edge of an underpass below the 7th Street Bridge—one boot on cracked concrete, the other on the rear peg. His helmet was down, visor mirrored, face hidden from a world he never truly fit.

Across the underpass, three bikes idled in a loose V. LED halos shimmered at their wheels, engines growling like wolves scenting blood. Beyond them, an open service road snaked along the L.A. River—cracked, unpoliced, forgotten.

Jason wasn't here for pride, money, or pain. He raced for something harder to name—a need to prove he still mattered, if only to himself.

He flexed his gloved fingers around the throttle. The Yamaha growled back, hungry. His heart ticked fast, matching the machine's pulse. This was where he felt most at home—right on the edge, alive in the risk.

A fourth rider—Diego, one of the locals who ran this circuit—turned in the saddle and lifted a flare gun.

"No interference," he called, voice muffled by his helmet. "Clean run. First

to the red line under the Sixth Street Viaduct. No take-backs.” A chorus of engines revved in response.

Jason said nothing. He didn’t need to.

The flare arced up—red and screaming.

They launched.

The first few seconds were chaos—tires spitting gravel, shocks compressing hard, every rider fighting for control on a surface built for maintenance trucks, not speed. Jason cut left, sling-shotting off the broken median—engine screaming through second, then third.

He surged ahead, the Yamaha roaring beneath him, alive with nervous energy. Each bump translated through the frame, through the grips, into his bones. This was his world—pure, loud, alive. Where skill meant survival.

The engine’s growl was the only thing that shut out the noise—the bills he couldn’t pay, the memory of fists and asphalt, the voice on the phone that used to call him home. Tonight, he didn’t want to be a hero. He just wanted to disappear into motion.

One rider pulled alongside—Vince, riding a tricked-out KTM with blue chrome fairings. Jason clocked him, waited for the flick, then baited him wide at the turn. Vince bit.

Jason cut inside, tight and ruthless, shaving a drainage grate by inches.

The KTM clipped a rail. Sparks flew.

Jason didn’t look back.

They passed the first checkpoint in a blur, city light blooming across broken concrete. Sirens howled in the distance—not for them, not yet—but close enough to feel.

He smiled behind the visor.

This was the part of the night that belonged to people like him—too fast for the system, too smart for the street gangs, too broken for anything in between.

But then he felt it.

That itch between the shoulder blades.

The one that came when something didn’t track.

Across the street, a woman in a grey jacket watched, unseen. Sasha Lin

thumbed a note into her phone: Nolan: skilled, reckless, dangerous edge. Potential?

She smiled faintly, vanishing into the crowd before anyone noticed.

Jason's gaze flicked to his left mirror. Vince was gone. So was Diego. No headlight. No shadow.

Only a single beam behind him.

Wrong shape.

Wrong sound.

Jason leaned forward, a cold jolt tightening his gut. Every instinct screamed that something was off—like an old fight he'd forgotten, suddenly replaying in real time. He tasted adrenaline, sharp as copper.

Someone else was on the course.

And they weren't here to win.

Its engine had a snarl Jason didn't recognise. Low, guttural. Not the high-pitched whine of a track-tuned machine or the heavy rumble of a cruiser. This was something else—compact, engineered, mean.

Jason cut hard under the 6th Street Viaduct, skimming the rusted underside of its arches. His tires barely held the grip, but the Yamaha responded. The sound of the other bike stayed with him—closer now, threading the same line, mirroring his every move with uncanny precision.

Who the hell was this guy?

He risked a quick glance over his shoulder—brief, careful. No plate. No markings. The bike behind him was low-slung and angular, wrapped in matte grey with no visible branding. Not a civilian ride. Too clean, too deliberate. Professional.

Jason opened the throttle.

The city blurred—trash, concrete, and the flicker of street lights all melting into a tunnel of speed. The other rider held close, the Yamaha's tail twitching in the slipstream as pressure built behind him.

Whoever this was, they weren't just chasing.

They were hunting.

Jason dropped two gears and slammed the throttle. The Yamaha bucked, then found its line. He veered off the service road, ripping through a fenced

utility easement, the chain links rattling in his wake. Downtown lights glimmered ahead, but he wasn't headed for the city.

He was headed for the riverbed.

The other rider followed without hesitation.

Jason weaved through a broken gate and dropped into the concrete channel of the L.A. River. His wheels thudded as they hit the slope, tires chirping on the descent before gripping again.

Now it was open space. No cover.

He punched it.

The grey bike followed, maybe ten meters back—flawless lines, no wasted motion. Whoever was riding wasn't just good. They were trained.

Jason gunned it for a rise in the embankment, hit the lip at speed, and launched into the air. The landing rattled his spine, but he held on. The tires gripped. He didn't slow down.

Neither did his pursuer.

The matte-grey bike soared over the rise after him, locked in tight.

Jason's breath quickened. His options thinned.

This wasn't a race anymore.

It was a warning.

Jason knew the riverbed by heart—every turn-off, every hidden ramp, every sudden dip in the concrete skeleton. But none of it gave him an edge. The rider behind matched everything—move for move, second for second.

No matter what he threw at the rider behind him—sharp turns, sudden acceleration, dirty tricks—nothing worked. The grey bike matched him move for move, as if the two of them were reading from the same script. Was this just a message, or a challenge he couldn't afford to ignore?

He fought down the urge to look back again. His knuckles were white on the grips.

Jason spotted a rusted service stairway rising to street level. He cut the throttle, pivoted, braked into a hard slide, and kicked the Yamaha up the incline. Metal screamed beneath his tires, sparks trailing behind like fireworks.

He cleared the top and burst out onto Alameda, cutting between a pair

of box trucks. Horns blared. A side mirror shattered against his leg—pain flashed hot and sharp, but he kept moving.

No time to check, no time to bleed.

He pulled hard into a loading dock alley, tires scraping wet pavement. He braced for the sound of the other bike behind him.

But nothing came.

Just silence.

Jason exhaled, engine idling now, pulse hammering against the inside of his helmet. He rolled a few more feet, turned into a blind spot between two dumpsters, and killed the engine completely.

His hands trembled on the grips, sweat cooling beneath his jacket. He looked up, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, grounding himself in the present, counting each shaky moment until the fear faded into stubborn resolve.

Breath came slow. Controlled. He listened.

Nothing but distant sirens and the tick-tick-tick of his cooling engine.

Jason popped the visor and pulled off his helmet.

The night air brushed across his face, carrying the sting of sweat and street grit. He yanked off his helmet, running a hand through his dark, overgrown hair—strands falling over storm-gray eyes that never quite lost their wary edge. A thin scar above his right eyebrow caught the street light. He was lean, wiry, with the kind of face that wore fatigue like a shadow and stubble that always seemed a day late. You could mistake it for recklessness, but really it was survival. He looked, as ever, like a man halfway out of his last fight.

Jason stepped off the bike, one hand instinctively reaching for the wrench stowed beneath the seat. Not much for a weapon, but it beat empty hands.

The shadows stirred behind him.

“Not bad,” said a voice—female, low, unshaken. “You pushed that bike harder than most would’ve dared.”

Jason turned fast, wrench half-raised.

She stood five paces away, next to a black Chevrolet Suburban. Slim, in a dark tactical jacket and black cargo pants. Boots made no sound. She had

a small white scar along her jaw, barely visible beneath the street lights—a detail that said she'd seen more action than her calm voice let on. A simple silver ring flashed on her gloved hand. Her posture was relaxed, but Jason didn't buy it. Her eyes—cool, precise, calculating.

She raised both hands. Not surrender—invitation.

“No need for that,” she said, nodding at the wrench. “If I wanted to hurt you, I'd have let the other bike finish the job.”

Jason didn't lower it. “Who are you?”

“Someone who thinks your skill set is being wasted.”

“Try LinkedIn,” he muttered, stepping sideways, back to his bike.

She just smiled. “Not our style.”

“You're quick. Adaptable. You ride like you don't know how to lose.” Jason kept silent.

She stepped closer, confident but cautious, as if approaching a wild animal. “You're not the only one out here doing things that never show up in public records.”

Finally, Jason broke his silence. “So what do you want with me?”

Sasha held his gaze. “That rider isn't just another street racer. His bike's something special, too. Once we saw him tailing you, you got our attention.”

Jason hesitated, eyes flicking down to the riverbed before meeting hers again. “All that, just because he followed me?”

“Not only that,” Sasha replied. “He started tracking you a couple of weeks ago. That's when you landed on our radar. We dug a little deeper, started a file—and so far, we like what we've found.”

“People talk about a ‘ghost bike’ around here,” Sasha added, voice lower. “Nobody's ever seen it up close, but they say it saves lives, wrecks gangs, vanishes before the cops can catch a glimpse. Most think it's a myth.” Jason arched an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe in ghosts?” “Just believe in second chances,” Sasha replied.

She reached into her jacket, slow and deliberate, and produced a small metallic card—unmarked except for a single name etched in crisp lines: Sasha Lin.

She held it out between two fingers.

"You've been watched, Jason Nolan. Tracked, timed, analysed. You're not a criminal, despite your best efforts to convince the world otherwise. You're something else. Something useful."

Jason took the card but didn't look at it. "Useful for what?"

Sasha tilted her head. "Ever hear of a ghost with wheels?"

Jason spent more time studying the woman—Sasha Lin—than the card she'd given him.

He knew her type. People like her never asked a question they didn't already know the answer to. The whole thing—the chase, the timing, her waiting here—felt like a test. And he hated tests.

Sasha nodded toward the battered Yamaha. "That bike wasn't meant to take the punishment you just put it through. You bent the frame and kept it upright. Most riders would've wiped out in the first slipstream."

Jason didn't answer. His breath was slowing, but his pulse still hadn't settled.

Sasha watched him, then continued, "You didn't just outrun that interceptor—you survived it. That's not nothing."

"To you, maybe," Jason said, his voice flat. "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

Her smile held steady. "That's exactly why you're viable. You're not in this for the spotlight. You're chasing something else—distance, control, maybe freedom."

"What's the worst thing you've ever done on a bike?" she asked suddenly, eyes intent.

Jason hesitated, then shrugged. "Whatever it took to get away." She nodded, as if that was exactly the answer she wanted.

Jason tossed the card into his jacket. "Whatever you're selling, I'm not buying." He'd learned the hard way that every offer came with a price—and the fine print was always written in blood.

"Not yet."

She studied him, eyes sharp and searching. Jason had the unsettling sense she could see straight through him, weighing her next question before she even spoke.

"You ever heard of a program called Vault-Twelve?" Jason said nothing.

But he didn't blink.

Sasha nodded. "Didn't think so. That's the point. Off-grid, off-books, and officially non-existent."

She stepped a little closer, dropping her voice.

"Once, there was a man on a bike—faster than any squad car, smarter than any drone, and invisible to every camera in the city. He didn't answer to the law. He was the line between order and chaos."

Jason frowned. "You telling me bedtime stories now?"

"I'm offering you a choice," she said. "Come with me. No commitment. You'll walk in free, and you'll walk out the same way."

"And if I say no?"

She didn't blink. "Then you sign an NDA, someone else rides the machine. Someone slower. Someone sloppier. Someone who'll hesitate at the wrong moment—and die for it."

Jason let out a slow breath, scanning the darkness around them.

He wasn't one for fate, but none of this felt accidental.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Who do you work for?"

Sasha shook her head. "I can't tell you that. Not yet, anyway. As much as I hate to lean on clichés—it's classified."

Jason lowered his head, a faint smirk tugging at his lips as he sighed.

"Say I do go," he said. "Where does it start?"

Sasha turned away, heading back to the waiting Suburban. The quiet confidence in her stride said more than any explanation. At the vehicle's door, she paused, glancing back over her shoulder.

"It starts beneath the city," she said. "Where ghosts are built."

With that, she slipped inside the Suburban and was gone, vanishing into the night.

Jason stood in the alley, the silence folding in around him like fog. The Yamaha ticked beside him—cooling metal, spent fuel, blood still thumping in his thigh.

He flexed his fingers.

Still trembling.

Still alive.

He pulled out the card again and studied it.

Vault-Twelve.

Sasha Lin.

A ghost on two wheels.

Whatever this was—it wasn't over.

Not even close.

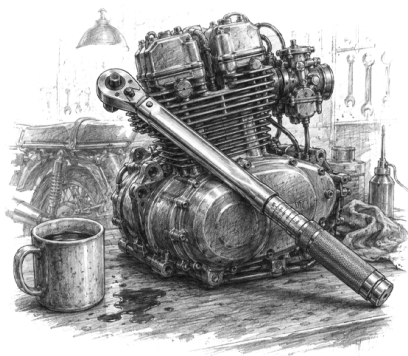
He tucked the card away, a fresh edge settling under his skin. A distant engine echoed through the alley—just far enough to make him tense. Jason closed his eyes for a second, breathing in the city's diesel stink, letting the restlessness settle in again. The night wasn't done with him yet.

At the city overlook, Jason let the wind cool the sweat on his skin. LA sprawled beneath him, sharp and restless, alive with a thousand stories—and no legends left.

For a heartbeat, he let himself imagine what it would feel like to matter. But heroes were old news in this city. He gripped the railing beside him, knuckles white, and watched the lights blur into the dark.

2

ASHES AND OIL



The sun hadn't yet crested the hills behind El Sereno, but the air inside the hangar was already warm. Jesse Mach stood at the wide-open doors, coffee in hand, letting the stillness settle over him. No engines. No voices. Just the quiet pulse of a city not quite awake.

The faint, oily tang of old fuel hung in the stillness, grounding Jesse in a way nothing else could. The soles of his boots pressed into the cracked hangar floor, cool and solid beneath him—a private ritual before each day began. His right leg ached in the early warmth, a small pain that had become as much a part of his morning as coffee.

Beyond the cracked tarmac, Los Angeles stirred — the distant cough of

traffic, the low wail of a siren somewhere east, the hum of air thick with diesel and old heat. It used to mean something to him.

Now it was just background noise. Ordinary. Forgettable.

Inside, the hangar was a shrine to machines long since passed over by the modern world. Bikes, cars, and engines of all sorts in various stages of undress filled the shadows — a Triumph Bonneville with its side covers off, a '76 Honda CB stripped to frame and wheels, even an old radial aircraft engine mounted like sculpture on a crate. Every project was mid-sentence, paused, waiting for the rest of the story to be told.

He moved slowly, deliberately. His limp was faint now—no longer a reminder, just a rhythm his body had learned. He set his old thermos down and knelt beside the Norton Commando 750 parked closest to the bench. This was his favourite. Big, sturdy, and unrelenting. Its black paint was dulled from years of quiet defiance. The seat was cracked. But it was honest. Honest in a way people rarely were.

He ran his fingers along the frame, eyes narrowing slightly as he traced a weld line near the exhaust manifold. Imperfect, but solid—someone had cared enough to do it by hand. That meant something.

Jesse glanced around at the other unfinished bikes and projects—metal frozen mid-restoration, as if waiting for a cue to move forward. He felt the kinship. Half-restored. Half-forgotten. There was comfort in knowing these machines, like him, were waiting for the rest of the story.

He reached for the torque wrench.

Outside, light crawled higher over the city's spine.

Each morning, this was how it began: silence, coffee, tools. No phones. No visitors. No missions. Jesse hadn't worn a badge or a visor in decades. The world had moved on. The program had been boxed, sealed, buried.

So had he.

He adjusted the wrench, the soft click breaking the stillness. It was a sound he trusted. Machines didn't lie. They didn't betray. They broke down, and you fixed them. Or you didn't. Either way, you knew where you stood.

With people, things were always murkier.

His hand paused, hovering over the bolt.

Somewhere in the back of the hangar, a small radio crackled to life — ancient, analogue, duct-taped around the antenna. The reception was bad. It always was. He liked it that way.

“...reports of a third sighting this week,” the announcer said through static. “Unregistered motorcycle—grey, no visible plates—moving at high speed through the downtown corridor...” Jesse turned slowly.

He felt his jaw tighten, the old itch of trouble waking in his chest. Instinctively, his free hand drifted to the faint scar above his hip—a souvenir from a night long past, before the world got quieter. He squeezed the spot once, as if reassuring himself that history was still just history.

The voice continued, distorted. “Witnesses describe it as military-grade.

LAPD has no comment at this time...” Jesse took a deep breath, walked over to his tool bench and let his hand wander up to the second shelf. He brushed his fingers over his battered police badge tucked in a coffee can—a relic he never quite managed to throw away. It was cold and heavy, the last link to a chapter he kept shut.

He turned and crossed the room in three strides and twisted the dial. The radio cut off with a dry snap.

The silence rushed back in, colder this time. He felt a chill crawl up his arms.

Jesse stood motionless, hand still on the knob. His reflection stared back at him from the dusty steel of the locker nearby—lined face, pale eyes, grey in the stubble at his chin.

A ghost in his own story.

He let go of the dial, turned, and walked back to the bike. The torque wrench was still waiting.

He picked it up. The torque wrench clicked, steady and controlled.

Jesse worked without rush, the way a surgeon might on a patient that trusted him without question. Machines were like that. You gave them consistency, and they gave it back.

He didn’t hear the footsteps at first. But he felt them—just a subtle shift in the silence. The floorboards in the back office creaked when the temperature changed, but not like this. This was weight. Familiar weight.

He didn't look up.

Cassie Miller stepped into view holding two steaming cups of coffee, her stride quiet but purposeful. She wore a navy hoodie over fitted jeans, her dark hair loosely tied back, a few strands catching gold in the morning sun.

Jesse finished tightening the bolt and set the wrench down carefully before taking the cup she offered.

"Thanks," he said. Her fingers lingered against his for a second—steady, grounding. The warmth of the mug seeped into his palms, chasing away the morning chill and something colder he couldn't name. She crossed to his side, bumping his shoulder with hers. For a second, he let himself lean into the comfort. Cassie's warmth grounded him—her touch always comforting, her presence the one thing in his life he hadn't managed to break.

Cassie leaned against the workbench beside him, wrapping her fingers around the ceramic mug. "You were already at it before dawn again."

"Couldn't sleep."

She smiled, knowing. "Do you ever?"

Jesse took a sip. The coffee was strong and smooth—worlds better than the black sludge in his thermos. Cassie always brought the good stuff. Another reason he let her through the door when few others got close.

"I heard the radio," she said after a pause.

He nodded, not looking up.

"Three sightings in a week," she continued. "That's more than coincidence."

Jesse forced a shrug, searching for a deflection. "Probably just some kid with more money than brains." But even he could hear the doubt in his voice. "Coincidence never left debris trails."

He stared at the Norton's engine block like it might reveal something simpler than the truth.

Cassie shifted closer, her voice softer now. "You ever think maybe it's time?"

He met her eyes, and for a second something unspoken passed between them. Then he looked away.

"I think about fixing what's in front of me," he said. "That's enough."

She shot him a look. "People still talk, you know. About the old days."

About what you were.”

Jesse didn’t answer. He just kept tightening bolts, a little too hard.

She gestured toward the half-covered windows. “It’s a nice morning. Sunny. You could step outside. Maybe see the city instead of hiding from it.” “I’m not hiding.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I’m choosing,” he corrected.

Cassie’s laughter was low and genuine, chasing the tension from the air. “All right, cowboy. But you’re still coming with me for breakfast.”

He shot her a look. “Right now?”

“Ten minutes,” she replied, eyebrow raised. “Unless you’re planning to weld enlightenment into that Norton by lunchtime.” A reluctant smile broke across Jesse’s face.

Cassie headed toward the rear of the hangar. He watched her go, fingers resting on the cool metal.

She paused at the doorway, grinning back at him. “And by the way, I fixed the compressor on the west wall,” she said, wiping grease on her jeans. “If you’re up past three again, I’m changing the Wi-Fi password. Even legends need to sleep.”

“Spoilsport,” he muttered, almost fondly.

Somehow, Cassie always found a way past his defences. She disappeared into the shadows, leaving him with the hush and hum of the workshop.

Sometimes, the past ambushed him—a siren in the distance, the glimmer of chrome beneath the fluorescent lights. For an instant, he could feel the helmet in his hands, Street Hawk’s power beneath him. Then reality returned, and he was just an ageing man surrounded by ghosts and unfinished repairs.

The wrench was still warm in his grip.

But something in his chest felt lighter. Just a little.

The ride to breakfast was quiet. Jesse piloted his old red Chevrolet truck through streets barely waking, Cassie beside him, the silence companionable but loaded. At a stop light, she tapped the dashboard twice—a habit from

years ago, when they'd still believed in luck.

The diner on Main hadn't changed in thirty years.

Still the same chipped counter, cracked vinyl booths, and faint smell of bacon grease soaked into the walls. A jukebox sat in the corner, blinking its lonely digital display, loaded with songs no one played anymore. Everything about the place said 'unchanged,' and for Jesse, that was a comfort.

He slouched with a busy head in the booth across from Cassie, the morning sun slanting through the window blinds in soft, golden bars. His coffee sat steaming beside a plate he hadn't touched yet—breakfast burrito, hot sauce on the side, just like old times.

Cassie was already halfway through hers. She chewed thoughtfully, watching him with a half-smile. It was the look she gave when she was deciding how much to push—a blend of affection and challenge.

"You're staring at it like it might explode," she said.

"Just trying to remember the last time I sat down to eat somewhere that didn't have a parts catalogue for a menu."

"You used to love this place."

Jesse nodded. "I still do. I just forgot."

Cassie smiled, but there was something watchful behind her eyes.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. The sound of forks, distant laughter, the clink of plates—it all filled the space between them like background music to a life Jesse had once lived.

He finally picked up the burrito, took a bite.

It tasted exactly as he remembered—eggs, peppers, something smoky he couldn't place. Real food, real place, real moment.

Cassie leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. "You ever miss it?"

For a second, Jesse's mind drifted: the snap of wind against his helmet, the blur of city lights, the engine's thunder at midnight. He remembered a night just like this years ago—one perfect line along Mulholland, the world dropping away until all that remained was speed and possibility.

He looked at her. "The diner?"

She shook her head. "Riding. The feeling of moving through the city like it belonged to you."

He didn't answer right away.

He glanced out the window. A woman crossed the street outside with two kids in tow. A delivery truck rumbled past, driver singing to himself behind the wheel. A cyclist coasted by, earbuds in, world tuned out.

"I miss the clarity," he said finally. "When you're riding... everything else falls away. It's just the moment. The line. The speed."

Cassie nodded slowly. "Then why not get back on a bike?"

Jesse opened his mouth, then closed it. He hadn't actually ridden a bike in years. In his chest, the question pressed harder than he wanted to admit. He was afraid—afraid of what he'd remember, or what he wouldn't.

He met her eyes, calm but direct. He looked as if he was going to speak, but then decided against it. As if she already knew the answer.

She didn't press him. Didn't need to.

Instead, she sipped her coffee and looked at him the way she always had—like he wasn't broken, just... tired.

Jesse returned to his burrito, appetite returning with each bite. A strange peace settled over him—soft, unfamiliar. He set his hand flat on the table, Cassie's fingers brushing against his. The touch was small, but it steadied him. For the first time in a long time, Jesse let himself just be—no past, no ghosts, only sunlight and the clatter of forks.

Across the table, Cassie smiled quietly.

Progress didn't always roar.

Sometimes it was a quiet booth, a warm light, and someone willing to share the silence.

3

VAULT TWELVE



Jason Nolan lingered in the alley long after the Suburban disappeared, the metallic card cool in his palm. He turned it over, searching for instructions—a number, a code, a hidden chip. Nothing. Just the name: Sasha Lin. Vault-Twelve.

He could have tossed it. He should have. He didn't.

He thought of all the times he'd stood on the edge of something—fights, races, bad decisions—and chosen to walk away. This time, the line felt sharper. Like a dare he couldn't ignore, no matter how much the old survival instinct urged him to keep out of sight. Maybe he was tired of running, or maybe he was just tired of never seeing what was on the other side of the

dare.

The city's sounds folded back in: the hush of early morning traffic, a dog barking three streets over, the pulse of his own blood in his ears. For a while, he just stood there, caught between inertia and something he couldn't name.

He wasn't one for fate. But he'd learned to recognise when the universe pushed.

Tonight, it felt like a shove.

Jason pulled out his phone. No number on the card, no code—just a name. He remembered Sasha's words: It starts beneath the city.

He thought of the old storm tunnels that threaded through downtown—the kind of places you didn't walk into by accident.

He hesitated, then thumbed a message to a number he hadn't dialled in months.

"Need a ride. 4th & Alameda. Don't ask."

A friend from the old days. No questions, just wheels.

The friend—a bearded man named Lenny—didn't ask why Jason was jumpy, just nudged a battered thermos his way. "You look like you need it," Lenny grunted. Jason took a sip, grateful for the silence between them. With Lenny, trust was always a given, never discussed. He tried to focus on the passing streets, but his leg bounced restlessly, nerves on edge. Lenny noticed, shot him a look, but kept his mouth shut.

After a brief ride, Lenny eased the truck to a stop where Jason had told him. Without meeting his eyes, Jason muttered a distracted, "Thanks," and stepped out. He crossed to a side gate by the river—one of those forgotten corners the city pretended didn't exist, but never fully erased.

Lenny sighed, a slow exhale of something unspoken, then shook his head and let the truck roll forward—tail lights fading as he left Jason standing alone in the hush of the river's edge.

He waited. Five minutes. Ten.

Long enough to feel the decision settle in his gut.

Just as doubt started to dig in—whispers telling him this was all a mistake—Jason heard it: the faint approach of something cutting through the quiet.

The black Suburban pulled up with silent authority. The window rolled

down. Sasha Lin's face appeared in the dim light, her expression unreadable.

"Ready?"

Jason glanced down at the card, then back at her.

"As I'll ever be."

Sasha allowed the hint of a smile. "You made it. Most people don't get this far."

He climbed in. The door closed with a heavy, final sound. The world outside vanished behind tinted glass.

Jason didn't speak for the first half of the ride.

The car was blacked out—windows tinted darker than street legal, the kind of tint that suggested clearance levels and sealed records. The driver said nothing. Sasha sat beside him in the back, a tablet in her lap, fingers occasionally swiping through files Jason couldn't see.

He didn't ask.

She didn't offer.

Instead, the silence between them hummed with expectation.

Outside, the city blurred past in abstract shapes—overpasses, distant cranes, chain-link fences bristling with barbed wire. They crossed beneath a freeway interchange and plunged into a subterranean stretch of road flanked by ageing concrete walls. Cameras lined the corners. Most were broken.

Jason shifted in his seat. "You always pick people up with expensive black cars, or am I just lucky?"

Sasha didn't look up. "You're here, aren't you?"

He grunted. "So is every red flag I was taught to avoid."

"You're not under arrest."

"Yet."

That earned the faintest smile.

The car banked left into a restricted access tunnel sealed by a rusted maintenance gate. It should've been impassable, but as they approached, the gate retracted into the floor without a sound. Jason blinked.

No security badge. No swipe. Just silence and a green light.

"What is this place?"

Sasha finally looked at him. "The beginning."

The tunnel narrowed, then opened into a wide, yawning chamber beneath the city. The roof arched high overhead in segmented concrete ribs, spotted with leaks and power conduits. A loading dock to the left looked long abandoned, but overhead floodlights blinked to life one by one as they passed—pale blue-white, too clean for decay.

They were being expected.

The car rolled to a stop beside a steel door inset into the wall, flanked by an old keypad and a face scanner. Sasha stepped out first, gesturing for him to follow.

Jason paused. “No waiver? No NDA?”

“You’re still in the part where you get to walk away,” she said, already moving toward the door.

“You just won’t want to.”

Jason followed without a word.

Sasha keyed in a code. The door groaned open, old hinges giving way to something deeper. Beyond it, an unmarked elevator waited—tucked between slabs of concrete, half-swallowed by shadow. No buttons. Just a single scanner pulsing faintly. She stepped in without hesitation.

Jason followed as the doors sealed shut behind them with a hiss of pressurised air—cool, sterile, and final.

They stepped inside.

The elevator sealed with a hush, and a subtle tremor passed beneath their feet as it began its descent—smooth, silent, and fast. No floor numbers. No indicator lights. Just downward motion, like falling through the city’s spine.

Jason stood still, arms at his sides, eyes fixed on the seam where the doors had closed. Beside him, Sasha remained motionless, hands clasped loosely in front of her, expression unreadable.

The hum of the machinery filled the silence.

Jason glanced at her—just for a moment. Not a question. Not yet. Just curiosity wrapped in caution.

She didn’t return the look, but the corner of her mouth twitched—barely perceptible. As if to say, Yeah. It’s a lot.

He shifted his weight, trying to read the space between them. Not quite

trust, but not hostility either. The air felt denser the deeper they went.

Still descending. Still no end in sight.

After a few more heartbeats, Sasha finally spoke—quiet, almost absent.

“Most people start talking by now.”

Jason let the silence hang a second longer before answering.

“I’m not most people.”

A hint of something passed between them then—not warmth, not yet. But recognition.

The elevator slowed. The descent was over.

When the door opened again, Jason found himself standing at the threshold of something vast, hidden, and alive. The Vault.

The Vault didn’t look like a military installation.

It looked older. Stranger. Like it had started life as something else—a Cold War relic, maybe, or a power substation buried deep when the freeway system grew teeth. The walls were concrete, but reinforced. The lighting was recessed, cold and clean. Everything felt... retrofitted.

Jason followed Sasha through a series of long, windowless corridors. Every door they passed was sealed. Some hummed with power. Others were completely silent, like the rooms behind them had been dead for years. Tiny lenses tracked their progress—Jason felt the prickle of surveillance, each camera blinking awake as he passed. Somewhere in the distance, a mechanical thunk echoed—a door locking behind them. The chill in the air wasn’t just recycled AC; it was the kind that seeped up from old concrete, full of secrets.

Finally, she stopped in front of a sliding panel with no handle.

She turned to him. “What you’re about to see isn’t a pitch. It’s history. You decide what it means.”

Before he could answer, the panel split down the centre and retracted into the walls.

Jason stepped in, letting the recycled air settle on his skin. The place felt colder than he expected—not just in temperature, but in memory.

The room inside glowed with low blue light. A semi-circular workstation dominated the space, ringed with monitors — some live, some looping

through encrypted video feeds. Racks of hardware flanked the walls: drives, processors, cooling towers. Not military issue. More... bespoke.

At the centre stood an older man in a worn utility jacket, sleeves rolled, collar open. His hair was mostly grey now, swept back with practical discipline. He looked up as Jason entered — sharp eyes beneath thick brows, framed by years of unsaid things.

Sasha spoke first. "Jason Nolan, meet Norman Tuttle."

Jason blinked. The name echoed somewhere distant in his memory. Old news footage. Fringe reports. Urban legend stuff.

Norman offered a hand. "You've got good instincts. And a dangerous disregard for your own safety."

Jason didn't shake it at first. He was busy studying the room.

"This place looks like someone tried to rebuild NORAD in downtown L.A."

Norman chuckled. "That's not far off." Sasha closed the door behind them.

Norman moved to a terminal and tapped a few keys. A personnel file appeared on the nearest screen—Jason's own face looking back, details scrolling beneath.

Norman didn't look up as he read: "Jason Nolan. Age thirty-two. Born in Torrance, raised in San Pedro. Parents divorced, mother deceased. No military record, but two years of unsanctioned urban racing, four misdemeanours, no convictions. Expelled from Cal State Long Beach for 'reckless endangerment' after the Edison Plant incident."

He glanced up, eyebrows raised. "You made a bit of a name for yourself in the east harbour after that."

Jason's jaw tightened, remembering how that file had nearly closed a door he'd never admit he wanted open.

Norman continued, "Nine citations for street racing—never stuck. Four different motorcycles registered in the last decade, all custom builds. You did a stint as a bike messenger. Then vanished for a while. Rumours you worked salvage with a crew in Long Beach."

Jason's jaw worked as Norman read out the low points of his resume. He remembered the Edison Plant incident—the taste of burnt ozone, cops

yelling, his own fists bleeding. Funny how the worst nights always stuck around the longest. But he kept his face unreadable, refusing to give Norman—or anyone—the satisfaction of seeing him flinch.

Norman paused. “You never did like authority. Even your high school guidance counsellor wrote, ‘Jason thrives on pressure, but not on rules.’”

He turned the monitor so Jason could see his own record—flashes of old arrest photos, DMV files, a blurry shot of him airborne over the LA River.

Jason felt a prickling at the back of his neck. He wondered how long they’d been watching.

“We’ve had eyes on you for a while, Mr. Nolan. You’re good, but more importantly, you’re stubborn. You tend to go left when everyone expects right. And you don’t stop just because it gets dangerous. I’ve seen too many talented people burn out or sell out. You didn’t. Not all the way. That’s why you’re here.”

Norman let the silence hang.

Jason watched the screen, jaw set. He’d been profiled before. Never like this.

“That’s a lot of digging for a job interview.”

Norman smiled thinly. “We don’t do interviews here.” One of the overhead screens shifted, displaying a grainy still-frame — Jason, helmeted, caught mid-turn from that night’s chase. The angle was aerial. Drone footage.

Jason crossed his arms. “I knew you were watching me. Didn’t know you were studying me.”

Norman nodded. “That’s how the last one started too.”

Jason looked over. “Last what?” Sasha answered this time. “Rider.” Jason frowned.

Norman gestured to a console. It came to life with a hum and an image that filled the main screen.

A motorcycle—sleek, black, low-slung and brutal. Shiny bodywork, unfamiliar contours, no visible intake or exhaust ports. It didn’t look street legal. It didn’t look legal, period.

Jason stared.

“That’s not a bike,” he said.

Norman's voice dropped. "That's Street Hawk." Jason didn't say anything at first.

He just stared at the screen. At the silhouette. It looked like it had been designed by engineers with no budget and no mercy. Aerodynamic down to the bolts. Predatory in profile. It didn't resemble anything on the market—not Ducati, not Yamaha, not military recon units. It was something else.

Something purpose-built for one thing: domination.

"You're serious," Jason said. "This thing exists?"

"It did," Norman replied. "And soon... it will again."

Jason stepped closer. "So this is what you're selling me? A black project motorcycle? I didn't realise DARPA was taking volunteers." "We're not DARPA," Sasha said from behind him.

"Then who are you?"

Norman didn't blink. "That's complicated."

Jason turned. "Try me."

Sasha folded her arms. "Vault-Twelve was never on the books. Not in any meaningful way. It was born from the ashes of something they tried to kill in the mid '80s—a special operations prototype that got too much attention and not enough control."

"The man who rode it," Norman added, "wasn't supposed to become a symbol."

Jason narrowed his eyes. "You're talking about the original Street Hawk. The stories. Urban legend crap. A Lone Ranger style vigilante. Took out gangs, drug runners, even a rogue DEA cell. Then vanished."

"Not vanished," Norman said. "Erased."

Jason looked between them. "And you're telling me that was real?"

"Real enough that half the agencies in the Western Hemisphere signed suppression orders to keep it buried," Sasha replied.

Jason paced, absorbing it all. "So what—this is some resurrection project? You want to bring it back?"

Norman's eyes darkened. "No. I want to finish it." Jason stopped pacing.

Norman moved to a console and keyed in another command. The lights dimmed. A series of files appeared across the wall of monitors — surveillance

footage, intercepted transmissions, names with entire dossiers blacked out.

"There are forces in this city—organised, armed, and patient—who are building something in the cracks of the system. I've been tracking them for years. I can't fight them with subpoenas. But I can fight them with this." He tapped the screen. The image returned to the bike.

Jason exhaled. "And that's where I come in."

Sasha nodded. "You've got instincts we can't train. Reflexes we can't replicate. You're fast, you're smart—and you don't flinch."

"And if we fail?" Jason asked, more out of defiance than curiosity.

Sasha's answer was curt: "Then the city keeps burning. And we're all out of legends."

Norman hesitated, fingers tracing the edge of an old Street Hawk schematic. "It's not just the city at risk," he said quietly. "Sometimes the walls aren't thick enough to keep the wrong things out—or in."

Jason stared at the silhouette again, his own reflection ghosted in the glass.

"I don't do uniforms," he said finally. "And I sure as hell don't do chain of command."

Norman offered a faint smile. "Good. The last rider didn't either."

Sasha leaned forward, arms crossed. "The city's changed, Norman. So have the rules."

"The city always changes," Norman replied, glancing at Jason. "But the people who fight for it—those haven't changed so much."

The silence that followed was thick with old grudges and new ambition. Jason glanced at Sasha. "What happened to him? The last rider?" The room fell still.

Norman's voice was low. "He rode until he couldn't anymore." Jason glanced away. Even legends had expiration dates.

Whatever this was—it wasn't just a mission. It was a burden. One passed from shadow to shadow.

And they were offering it to him.

The far wall opened with a mechanical hiss.

Jason turned as recessed panels slid away to reveal a second chamber—larger, darker, colder. Fluorescent strips hummed overhead, their light

cutting through the dim like surgical blades. The room beyond smelled of ozone and steel, like a server farm had been stitched into the bones of a bunker.

Sasha led the way inside.

Jason followed—and stopped dead.

There, in the centre of the room, stood the machine.

It wasn't the finished bike from the monitors. Not yet. This one was stripped to its skeleton—frame exposed, armour plates half-mounted, internal systems hanging open like the guts of some black metal predator being built from the inside out.

Even incomplete, it radiated menace.

Twin forked air channels along the front. Carbon-fibre panels draped over an experimental chassis. Cables the width of his fingers snaked down into reinforced ports at the engine cradle. The tires were thick, grooved like military run-flats, but had no manufacturer stamps.

It didn't purr.

It waited.

Jason moved slowly, walking a slow arc around it. "How close is it?"

Sasha folded her arms. "Weeks. Months, if we want full systems integration. Norman's handling the legacy firmware. I'm adapting it for remote overlay."

Jason arched an eyebrow. "Remote?"

"You won't be operating it alone," Norman said, stepping into the light. "That was never the design. The bike takes a rider—but the program takes two. One behind the visor. One in the chair." Jason stood in front of it, arms crossed.

"I don't suppose this is the part where I get to take it for a spin."

Sasha almost laughed. "You're not riding anything yet."

Jason turned. "You brought me in. What's the hold-up?"

Norman's tone was even. "This isn't a job. It's a trust fall. And right now, you're not cleared to fall."

Jason looked at the machine again. Something in him itched—something old. The rider's hunger. The need for speed that had carried him through

races, through ambushes, through every dumb decision that should've killed him but didn't.

"Then what am I doing here?" he asked.

Sasha answered. "Learning. Testing. Earning the right to suit up—if that day ever comes." Jason didn't flinch.

He just stared at the bike.

And the bike, unfinished and silent, stared right back.

Like it knew he was there.

Jason's pulse kicked up, an old thrill and a cold dread fighting for space in his chest.

4

IRON TESTAMENTS



Norman's voice echoed in the corridor, low and patient.

"Street Hawk was never just about the machine. The rider's reflexes have to outpace the tech. You're not just steering—you're making choices under the kind of pressure most people never experience."

Jason frowned, glancing at the armoured glass overlooking the bay. A line of mechanical drones lined the far wall, like crash test dummies with an edge. "I thought I was here to ride, not to spar with robots." Sasha stood beside Norman, arms folded, her gaze steely.

"You'll ride when you're ready. First, we need to know you can read threats at speed, improvise under fire, and get up from hits that put most people in

the hospital. The street doesn't give second chances."

Jason looked from one to the other, scepticism written across his face. "Pretty sure motorcycles don't punch back." Norman allowed himself a faint smile.

"The street does, Jason. And so do the people waiting for you out there."

As Norman spoke, for just a moment, a memory surfaced—Jesse Mach, younger, haunted, pushing himself past exhaustion in a very similar place. He pushed the thought away.

The doors hissed open, bright light flooding the mat-lined bay.

Jason squared his shoulders, stepping inside.

The training bay floor was padded, sectioned into squares—a chessboard for bruises.

Jason stood at the centre, breathing through his nose, hands loose at his sides. Across from him, a sparring drone unfolded with a hiss—six feet tall, composite frame, no face, just a smooth obsidian dome where a head should be.

No crowd. No rules. Just pressure, sweat, and expectation.

Jason forced himself to breathe steady, tasting the sharp tang of ozone and old sweat. His pulse hammered—a cocktail of nerves and anticipation. Sasha's voice came through the overhead speaker. "Begin simulation." The drone lunged.

Jason sidestepped and caught it with a sweep to the knee, pivoted, and threw a quick elbow to the torso—but the strike barely registered. The drone spun, caught his shoulder, and sent him skidding backwards across the mat.

He rolled to his feet.

"Faster this time," Sasha said. "It learns."

He didn't answer. Reset his stance. Dropped low. Dodged the drone's strike. Slammed his fist into its midsection—twice, then a third time. Vaulted off its shoulder, landed behind, finished with a heel-kick to the actuator housing.

The drone collapsed with a crunch of metal.

Silence returned.

The speaker clicked. "Again."

Another drone stepped out from the far wall.

Jason exhaled, sweat stinging his eyes. "You're not exactly easing me in."

Sasha's voice stayed flat. "Street Hawk doesn't get eased in."

He shook out his arms and rolled his neck. Bruised. Winded. Alive.

His shoulder throbbed from the impact; a bruise was already blooming under the compression shirt. He relished it—pain was proof he could still get up.

The second drone charged.

Behind the glass, Norman watched in silence.

Jason Nolan moved with raw efficiency—unrefined, but adaptive. Not graceful, but quick. Where instinct fell short, experience filled the gaps. That mattered. It always had.

"Six drones, twelve minutes," Sasha said at the console. "Sustained output. Heart rate dropped once. No neural over-stimulation."

Norman didn't reply right away. His eyes stayed on the monitor. "He holds his breath when he pivots. Loses rhythm."

"Which he compensates for by over committing. But his recovery curve's faster than anyone we've seen. I've run the profiles. He even outpaces Walker."

Norman's jaw tightened. For a flash, he saw Walker's file on the console—another name that never lived up to the promise. Then, just as quickly, his mind conjured Jesse: battered but unbroken, defying limits with every run.

"Walker never touched the bike," he muttered. "Because I couldn't risk it."

Sasha's reply was low and pointed. "Maybe sometimes you should."

On the monitor, Jason landed hard after a vault, stayed down two seconds too long.

"Too many shortcuts," Norman muttered. "Instinct over structure—that works until it breaks under pressure."

Sasha leaned against the console, arms crossed. "So fix it."

Norman finally looked at her. "That's not how this works."

"Then teach him," Sasha shot back. "You want another rider? Let him become one."

Norman didn't answer. In his chest, something shifted—old echoes: Jesse in the Command Center, young and wild, carrying pain he refused to share. Norman had trained him anyway. Pushed him past the limits. Watched him disappear into the machine until there was no line between man and myth.

It had taken everything.

And it still hadn't been enough.

Now another name sat on the roster. Nolan.

The question wasn't whether the kid could ride. It was whether he could survive.

Jason stood in front of the suit.

It looked like it had stepped out of time.

Jet-black, form-fitting, with crisp white racing stripes down the arms, thighs, and calves. The material wasn't bulky—sleek, lean, aggressively minimal. No plating, no moulded plastic. Just matte-black fabric over reinforced composites—functional elegance, wrapped in nostalgia.

"Tell me that's not a costume," Jason said, circling the mannequin.

Sasha smirked. "It's not. Gen Five Rider Interface Suit. Modelled after the original prototype.

Nearly identical outside."

Jason raised an eyebrow. "And inside?"

"That's where it gets interesting. Kevlar weave, adaptive poly-thread, nano-capacitive mesh for impact dispersion. Stripes are circuit pathways—they feed sensory data to the HUD."

Jason whistled. "Classic outside. Ghost tech underneath."

"Exactly."

He reached out, fingers brushing the sleeve. It felt lighter than it looked. Durable, but flexible.

Like it was meant to move fast and hit hard—without looking like it needed to.

"It was built to blend in," Sasha said. "Back when Street Hawk operated in plain sight. The suit had to look like gear, not gear disguised as armour."

Jason nodded slowly. "Smart."

She walked to the nearby helmet, resting in its custom cradle—black, gloss

finish, identical to the original model. “Same visor shape. Same contours. But this one runs on quantum-filtered optics. Multi-spectrum capability. Full HUD overlay. And remote uplink to Vault-Twelve’s neural system.”

Jason whistled. “You kept the look. But under the hood, it’s an entirely different animal.”

“That’s the point,” Sasha said. “It’s not for intimidation. It’s for precision.” Jason moved back to face the suit. “So who wore it last?” Sasha didn’t answer.

He turned. “Let me guess—you can’t tell me.”

For just a heartbeat, something softened in Sasha’s expression—a hint of the weight she carried for those who came before.

“He wore it till the end. Then it all went into the dark.”

Jason stared at the suit again, that sense of legacy pressing in. No badges, just the stripes—history, not heroics. Just those racing stripes—stark against the black.

“It’s not just a uniform,” he said.

“No,” Sasha agreed. “It’s a memory. One we’re resurrecting.”

He stepped forward, closer to the mannequin now. The suit wasn’t imposing. It didn’t need to be. It didn’t scream power.

It whispered history.

He didn’t touch it. Not yet. But the weight of what it meant pressed in—a future that, for the first time, felt just out of reach.

He stood in silence, the presence of the suit lingering in the air.

Sasha moved to a nearby console, flicking through digital schematics on a touchscreen. “Before you ever touch the bike, you’ll run a full spectrum of simulations. Reflexes, threat recognition, tactical overlays, split-second recovery. All of it logged, all of it measured.”

She looked up at him, her expression giving nothing away. “The tech inside that suit isn’t just armour. It monitors everything—your reactions, your blind spots, your worst instincts if you let it. We need to know how you perform at the edge, not just on the road. The simulations get harder. So does the judgment.”

She paused, letting that sink in.

“You’ll hate some of it. Doesn’t matter. We’re not here to break you. Just

to make sure you won't break when it counts."

Jason nodded, jaw set. He'd have to earn every step.

The test rig looked like a flight simulator chair rewired by someone who trusted solder more than blueprints. Coils snaked from the base, connecting to biometric pads and monitoring leads. The helmet sat on its pedestal, glossy black, hiding any hint of humanity—shining like a question nobody wanted to answer.

Jason wore compression gear for flexibility—the official suit wasn't ready yet.

He dropped into the seat without asking.

Sasha keyed in a series of commands from the workstation nearby. "Telemetry sync first. Then ocular calibration. Don't fight the lag—it'll self-correct."

"Comforting," Jason muttered.

Jason picked up the helmet and slid it on. At first—blackness. Then, the visor display flickered to life: compass, heart rate, ambient temperature, street map overlay—all layered in blue-white lines, a fighter jet HUD inside a biker's dream.

The data flickered once, then stabilised.

Jason blinked. "Feels like I just stepped inside someone else's skull."

His voice didn't sound like his own. Modulators distorted it to sound electronic. Disguised.

Sasha: "You did. Neural overlay. The HUD reads your vision and augments what you miss."

Jason scrolled his eyes left—digital prompts followed his motion. A dot appeared at the corner of his vision, tracking his breathing rate. When his pulse spiked from surprise, it flagged him in red.

"I didn't flinch," he muttered.

The system disagreed.

Norman entered quietly, watching Jason in the cradle of the system.

The helmet looked too big on him. Maybe it was just the weight of the role.

He stepped closer. "It'll take time. The system's adaptive. But it doesn't

forget.”

Jason raised the visor, one eyebrow arched. “That supposed to be comforting?”

“It’s supposed to be true.”

Norman walked a slow circle around the chair, examining the helmet’s outer frame as if checking the seams. Jason followed him with his eyes.

“You ever wear it?” Jason asked.

Norman shook his head. “I built it. Modified it. Oversaw it. But no—I was never the one behind the visor.”

Jason studied him for a beat. “But you knew the guy who was.”

“I trained him,” Norman said softly.

Something flickered across his face then—too quick to name. Regret. Pride. Maybe both.

Sasha watched from behind the workstation, saying nothing.

Jason looked forward again. The visor snapped shut. The HUD pulsed, waiting for input.

“What happened to him?” he asked.

Norman didn’t answer immediately. His eyes stayed on the helmet.

“He stopped riding,” he said finally. “And the city got quieter. But not safer.”

Jason didn’t press further.

Some silences didn’t need filling.

Instead, he focused on the HUD. Shapes danced across the overlay, feeding him data. Street grids. Wind projections. Collision alerts.

One section stayed dark—tagged: HYPERTHRUST – SYSTEM LOCKED.

He pointed. “What’s that?”

Norman: “Not yet.”

Jason: “But it’s in there.”

Norman nodded. “Only when you’re ready.”

Jason leaned back, feeling the system’s hum settle into his bones.

Outside, the city moved on.

Inside, the future waited—behind locked prompts and the ghosts of men who rode before.

5

ECHOES IN THE CITY



The city's pulse always quickened after midnight.

It began with the staccato bark of gunfire outside a Koreatown pawn shop—old neon buzzing, the streets slick with new rain. Two men in black hoodies burst from the doorway, duffel bags swinging, pistols flashing under street light. Their getaway car idled at the curb, engine revving, a third man hunched behind the wheel.

The night should have swallowed them whole. Instead, the city blinked—caught in the headlight's glare.

A motorcycle—matte grey, low-slung, brutal in silhouette—roared into the intersection, tires scattering puddles, headlight burning cold and blue.

No plates. No markings. Just a black-visor helmet and a rider hunched like a predator loosed from its cage.

Officer Gutierrez, rolling backup on a routine patrol, watched from half a block away. He saw the bike streak toward the fleeing robbers. For a heartbeat, it looked like a vigilante intervention—the kind of street justice that used to haunt radio waves and backroom legend.

The criminals froze as the bike slid sideways, blocking their escape. For a split second, confusion flickered across their faces—hands white-knuckled on their pistols, breath fogging in the cold. One nearly stumbled, casting a wary glance back at the silent rider—half-expecting a trap, unsure if they were about to be shot or saved. The moment stretched thin—heavy with a kind of permission.

Then everything went sideways.

Instead of stopping them, the grey bike swung wide and opened the lane. The robbers sprinted past, clambering into their battered sedan. The engine shrieked, tires spinning, and the car fishtailed into the night—vanishing into a maze of side streets.

Officer Gutierrez radioed for pursuit, heart pounding. But before backup could converge, the bike pivoted back toward the pawn shop. For one surreal moment, the rider lifted a gloved hand—a gesture that felt less like mockery and more like a performance, staged for the squad car, the dashcams, and the watching city. The visor turned deliberately toward the police, as if acknowledging anyone tuned into the city's secrets, then gunned the throttle.

The engine's howl went ultrasonic as the bike rocketed forward, leaping the curb and shattering the pawn shop's front window. Inside, sparks arced. The bike looped through the gutted store front, tires biting deep into tile, knocking over glass display cases and sending shards spinning. As alarms screamed, the rider planted a small, gunmetal canister on the floor—its casing etched with a symbol: half-mask, half-bird of prey, the lines sharp and deliberate, stamped deep in custom metal with no maker's mark.

The canister detonated in a burst of light and sound—non-lethal, but savage. Shelves collapsed, security monitors fizzled, the remaining inventory destroyed in a rolling wave of concussive force.

By the time the dust settled, the bike was gone—vanished into the arteries beneath the city, sirens still chasing its echo.

The blast left a ringing silence, a storm of dust swirling in the ruined shop. Somewhere in the haze, a single coin spun on the tile. It clicked to a stop. The air stank of scorched circuits, hot metal, and burning plastic. Display cases crackled as their contents fizzled and died. Outside, sirens warred with car alarms. A pale rain spattered through the smashed window, washing glass and pawned dreams out onto the gutter.

The canister rolled to a stop amid broken glass and ruined watches, the gunmetal symbol catching the emergency lights—a mark that felt both new and ancient, and utterly out of place.

Later, police cordoned off the site, snapping photos, bagging the canister in an evidence pouch.

No one recognised the emblem—half-mask, half-bird of prey, too clean to be gang work, too brazen to be random. ‘Gang thing?’ an officer muttered. ‘Not any I know,’ Gutierrez replied, watching as forensics tried to match the metal’s make. No luck.

Within minutes, shaky cell footage and wild theories lit up the city’s social feeds. Within hours, #GreyGhost was trending. Armchair detectives dissected every dashcam frame. Some called the rider a hero. Others called it staged—an attack meant to shame the LAPD.

By morning, news anchors speculated. “A warning to the city? Or a new player on the streets?”

What does this symbol mean?” One channel splashed the emblem across the screen. “Is this the return of Street Hawk, or something else entirely?”

**MASKED MOTORCYCLE “SAVES” CRIMINALS, DESTROYS PAWN
SHOP—POLICE STUNNED. GREY GHOST OR STREET HAWK?
URBAN LEGEND RIDES AGAIN.**

“I saw the whole thing,” one bystander told Channel 8. “It was like the old days—only this time, the hero let the bad guys go.”

“We’re seeing a copycat with a new paint job,” said one online commenter.

“Street Hawk never let the crooks go.”

Rumours of a vigilante war raced through city message boards. Was this a challenge, a warning, or the start of something worse?

Gutierrez replayed the dashcam footage on his phone, rewinding the final seconds again and again: the grey bike, the false rescue, the calculated destruction. The symbol on the canister—a message, meant for someone watching.

In a hangar across town, Jesse Mach sat in silence, staring at the same grainy still image from the news.

A grey bike, chaos in its wake, a city’s story twisting in the dark.

He clenched his fist on the workbench, knuckles going white. His other hand drifted—without thinking—toward the battered scanner he’d used for years to monitor police calls. Every instinct screamed to move, to act. The city’s story was twisting—and it was twisting for him.

It was calling his name.

He watched the shaky footage again, shoulders tight with a tension he hadn’t felt in years—a sense of déjà vu and unfinished business. He’d seen violence wear many masks—cops, gangs, heroes, ghosts. But never one so deliberate, so public, so pointed.

The city had always called out for a saviour. Now it was calling for something darker.

Whoever wore that helmet knew exactly who they wanted to reach.

As if the city itself was daring him to ride again.

6

FROM THE ARCHIVES



The fluorescent hum of the precinct felt louder tonight. Officer Luis Gutierrez stepped into the squad room like a man returning from a battlefield that no one else had seen. His boots tracked soot. His face was pinched with thought. The buttons on his uniform glinted faintly beneath the dried smear of smoke from the East Florence fire.

Nobody stopped him. A few heads lifted. Most didn't. After all, this was South Central—explosions happened. Gangs escalated. New turf, new tech. Another late-night footnote for the overworked board.

But Gutierrez moved differently. Like someone who'd walked away from something he couldn't explain.

He dropped into his chair without taking off his coat. The fibres were still singed at the elbow where he'd ducked behind a Dumpster moments before the pawn shop erupted in flame. He'd watched the blast consume the store front like it had been waiting for the right moment to die.

But it wasn't the fire that stayed with him.

It was the sound—or the absence of one.

No rev. No roar. Just a whisper of motion. A blur of grey and speed and deliberate escape. Then nothing.

He pulled up the local intersection replay feed, fingers methodical despite the itch in his skull. The rooftop camera feed from a building two blocks east had captured part of it. He skipped back, frame by frame, until he found the moment.

There.

A flash of movement through smoke—lean, aggressive. The silhouette of a motorcycle sailing across the rooftop gap like it had leapt off a comic book page. A rider dressed in grays and black, helmet low, body tight to the frame. The machine itself was stripped-down and muscular—bare wheels, exposed pipes, an aftermarket front suspension that suggested heavy urban modification.

Gutierrez froze the frame and leaned in.

It looked like the legends. It had moved like the legends.

But something was off.

Too loud in the landing. Too much recoil in the suspension. The machine didn't glide; it grunted. It lacked the silence, the surgical grace of the stories he'd heard. The machine he'd just seen was fast, brutal, and built for showdowns—not escapes.

Still... there was something in the silhouette that clung to the edges of memory. The angle of the rider's spine. The controlled chaos in the jump. Almost like someone trying to ride like Street Hawk, without quite knowing how.

Gutierrez opened his notepad and jotted a quick line:

Grey bike—unregistered. Explosive device launched. Exit via rooftop. Posture familiar, but unconfirmed.

He tapped the stylus against the desk once. Twice.
Then opened the official incident report window.

**Incident ID: 2084-619A – Arson/Vandalism, East Florence &
Carmona.**

Suspect vehicle: Unknown motorcycle, grey, compact.

Rider: Unidentified. Helmeted. Armed.

**Summary: One precision micro-explosive deployed. Pawn shop
destroyed. No fatalities. Rider escaped via elevated structure. LAPD
units did not pursue.**

He hovered over the “Submit” button, frowning.

Officially, this was just another gang stunt, another DIY rocket on another junkyard bike. Unregistered machines ran through this part of L.A. every other night. Nobody built them to last—they were fast, hot, and gone in the morning. Disposable power. But this one... this rider...

He hadn’t come for a scare.

He’d come for a statement.

Gutierrez stared again at the frame—the grey bike leaping across the rooftop, swallowed by smoke and sky. It looked almost theatrical. Calculated.

He typed one more note.

Silhouette resembles legacy case “STH.” Unconfirmed.

The abbreviation sat on the page like an echo.

STH.

He’d heard it only once, years ago, whispered in a late shift briefing as a joke from a retired detective. A ghost story for rookies. The bike that moved without sound. The man who rode for justice long after the badge let go.

Street Hawk.

Gutierrez leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Whatever this was, it wasn’t that.

But it was trying to be.

And that—more than the fire, more than the weapon—was what chilled

him.

Someone was playing ghost.

"You look like you saw the devil."

Gutierrez didn't glance up. Officer Mendez stood a few feet away, balancing a tray of synthetic burritos and a coffee that steamed like it had something to prove. Young. Restless. One year on the street, three months off probation, and already carrying the swagger of a man who thought history started with him.

"Explosion on Florence?" Mendez offered. "Heard you were ground zero. Whole building's ash now."

"Yeah," Gutierrez murmured. "Saw it happen."

Mendez whistled. "Any bodies?"

"No."

"Gang hit?"

"Doesn't feel like one."

Mendez took a bite of burrito and chewed with theatrical gusto. "Got your mystery tone going. Bet it's one of those biker cliques. That new one—Phantom Cutters or whatever? Some of those guys run low-slung bikes, real Mad Max stuff."

Gutierrez clicked through freeze-frames in silence. The pawn shop. The grey bike. The launch arc between rooftops.

"You ever hear of Street Hawk?" he asked without looking.

Mendez laughed, burrito halfway to his mouth. "What? Like the old TV show? My dad mentioned it once. Some '80s vigilante ninja on a bike, right?"

"Not the show," Gutierrez said quietly. "The sightings."

"Urban legend, man." Mendez grinned. "Guys like you tell it to rookies so they piss themselves on their first night shift. A black motorcycle, faster than sound, dodging bullets, leaping freeways... come on." Gutierrez said nothing.

"Wait." Mendez lowered the burrito. "Are you telling me that thing you saw tonight was him? Like, actual Street Hawk?"

"No," Gutierrez answered. "It wasn't."

"Then why bring it up?"

He paused before answering. “Because someone out there wants us to think it is.”

That shut Mendez up. The younger man raised an eyebrow, then gave a half-shrug and walked off, muttering something about “Boomer Ghost Riders.”

When he was gone, Gutierrez returned to his terminal. The city hummed just outside the windows, neon reflected in dark glass. Somewhere, that rider was disappearing into the night, leaving behind a smouldering building and a trail of questions.

Gutierrez didn’t believe in ghosts. But he did believe in patterns. And the shape of that bike’s exit—the lines, the lift, the posture of the rider as they landed and kept moving like physics bent to their will—it tugged at something deeper than doubt.

He minimised the video frame and pulled open the precinct’s Legacy Incidents Directory—a cobwebbed archive most officers never touched. Cases too old, too cold, or too strange to follow up on.

The search field blinked at him.

He typed:

“Unidentified motorcycle vigilante – sightings – 1984–1986” A moment passed.

Then:

1 Result Found – Case ID SH-8607

Tag: STH (Unconfirmed Urban Activity)

Status: Closed – Classified

Access: Restricted – Level 3

Gutierrez frowned.

He wasn’t cleared for Level 3 anymore. That came with brass on your collar or a desk job upstairs.

But he still had an old workaround.

He minimised the alert, popped in a low-grade USB diagnostic drive, and used the file system explorer hidden in the forensic software. Something

he'd learned years ago from a veteran investigator who'd taught him the first rule of police work: What's sealed isn't always buried.

He cross-referenced the tag "STH" and sorted by media attachments.

A list populated.

No official case notes. No open commentary. But there were scraps—image files, a few redacted scans, even a corrupted audio recording.

He clicked one.

A black-and-white still frame from 1985. Late-night freeway. Faint image of a motorcycle blurred mid-jump over a median. Low to the ground. Sleek. The outline not unlike what he'd seen tonight—but smoother. More intentional.

He clicked another.

A bodycam shot—barely visible, overexposed by headlights—but it captured the bike streaking past a cruiser at a speed no regular street bike should manage. The next frame was empty.

Gone.

Gutierrez sat back.

The grey bike he'd seen tonight had the outline, sure. The stance. The defiance.

But it had been raw. Noisy. Brutal in its power.

This bike—this Street Hawk, if that's what it had been—moved like a phantom. Purpose over spectacle.

Whoever tonight's rider was, they weren't a ghost.

They were a copy.

But it was like comparing a scalpel to a sledgehammer. Street Hawk had always been described—if you believed the old reports—as a surgical ghost. In. Out. Gone before the sirens. Clean lines, clean exits.

Tonight's rider was different. No grace. No caution.

Just fire.

He grabbed a marker and wrote above the photos:

SIMILARITY: STRUCTURAL ONLY

INTENT: UNKNOWN

IDENTITY: NOT STREET HAWK

It felt strange to write those words.

For a moment tonight, when the rooftop lit up and that silhouette flashed through the smoke, part of him—just a part—had believed it.

Believed the legend had returned. Believed that maybe, just maybe, some things didn't die.

But truth had teeth. And this wasn't resurrection.

It was mimicry.

He opened a slim file folder from his drawer labelled Cold Unsolved – Officer Notes Only. It was where he kept the cases that didn't fit the system—the weird ones. Things that didn't align with gangs, motives, or textbook psychology.

He slipped in a new page:

Case Note: 2084-619A

Suspect: UNKNOWN

Alias: "Grey Rider" (Unofficial)

Possible Moniker in Use: To Be Confirmed

Vehicle: Modified motocross hybrid. Urban mod. Loud. Crude.

Rooftop manoeuvre confirmed, though inelegant.

Notable Traits: Posture mimics historical vigilante pattern "STH."

However, lacks original's stealth, control, or tech profile.

Threat Level: Medium to High. Intentional detonation of property suggests messaging, not suppression.

Note: This is not Street Hawk. But he wants us to think it is.

Recommendation: Monitor. Investigate pattern reappearance. Watch rooftops. Log sightings. Do not pursue solo.

He capped the pen and set the folder aside.

Whatever this guy was, he had studied the myth. He knew what people remembered. The shadows. The leaps. The blur. And he'd taken it, wrapped it in raw muscle and heat, and hurled it back at the city like a challenge.

A counterfeit ghost.

Gutierrez switched off the desk lamp and stood for a moment in the quiet.

Outside, the city still flickered.

Whatever game was being played, it had only just begun. And ghosts—real or imagined—always left a second act.

He wasn't sure why, but he had the feeling this imposter wouldn't stay in the shadows for long.

The grey rider had made a statement tonight.

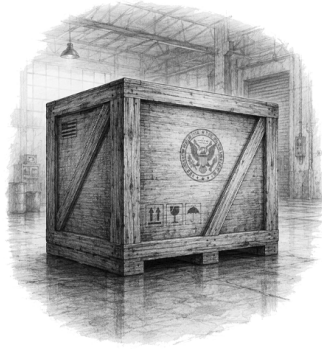
But somewhere, in some locked room or forgotten basement, Gutierrez couldn't shake the sense that the real ghost was still watching.

And if the true Street Hawk ever did come back—

The kid pretending to be him was going to learn what it meant to ride in the legend's shadow.

7

GHOSTS FROM THE PAST



Los Angeles, September 1986

One Day Later

Norman Tuttle stood in the open doorway, staring into what used to be the Command Center. The place had been a nerve centre—bright, humming, alive. Now it looked like the bones of something picked clean.

The harsh fluorescent lights overhead flickered on, too bright, buzzing like hornets. Every surface—every console, rack, and wall—felt stripped bare, wires dangling like veins torn from muscle. Even the shadows looked different, as if the room itself had shrunk from the loss.

Norman stepped inside. The echo of his own footsteps was sharper than he remembered, louder than any engine he'd ever tuned. He paused, letting the silence settle, waiting for something familiar—a whiff of burnt solder, a hint of oil, the low thrum of servers. Nothing. Just disinfectant and empty air.

He drifted further, passing workstations that once ran hot with data. Now, only the outlines of missing equipment remained—ghost marks in the dust, cables curled and dead on the floor. Every few feet, a new absence: the spot where the old soldering iron used to live, the dent in the wall from Jesse's last outburst, a scuff from an argument about protocol that ended with laughter and pizza at three in the morning.

They'd taken everything in a single, surgical sweep. Men in dark suits, voices cold and polite, boxing up history while Norman watched. The bike went first—crated up and wheeled out before sunrise, the sound of its wheels on the concrete louder than any siren. Then the files, the tools, the racks. Finally Jesse, gone without a word, like someone turning off the lights and locking the door behind him.

Norman rubbed at his eyes, suddenly tired. There was nothing left here but memory—and even that felt shaky in the stripped-down quiet.

The Command Center was hollow now, just an empty shell. But as he listened to the echo of his own breathing, Norman realised he could still hear the ghosts. Laughter bouncing off steel, quick shouts over a screech of brakes, the feverish rush of repairs under impossible deadlines. All of it, fading but not forgotten, just waiting for someone to remember.

Norman's feet carried him toward the old workbench by force of habit, as if all the routines of the past hadn't been stripped away with the hardware. It sat beneath the harshest of the overhead lights, battered and burn-scarred, flecks of solder frozen in time on its surface. He stood for a long moment, just looking—seeing not the empty bench, but the history stamped into every dent and scorch.

His hand hovered over the edge, fingertips grazing the metal, reading the scars like braille. Here, a gouge where Jesse's wrench had slipped and drawn blood. There, the blackened ring from the time the charger had blown and

nearly set his notes on fire. Norman almost smiled at the memory—he could still hear Jesse’s voice, laughing at the mess, insisting it would make a better story than a scar.

Something else waited on the far corner of the bench. Black gloves, left behind. Jesse’s—no mistaking them. They were worn and shaped by countless rides, leather creased and smudged, knuckles stretched in all the places only Jesse’s hands would wear thin. Not forgotten, Norman decided. Left on purpose—a kind of signature, a silent note between two men who never said enough out loud.

He picked them up, rolling them over in his hands. They were heavier than they looked, sweat-stiff and full of stories. He closed his eyes for a second, letting the ghosts come closer. For a heartbeat, the air seemed to thrum with old energy—Jesse’s boots pounding the floor, tools clattering, arguments about telemetry and impossible upgrades echoing in the empty air.

“Norman, you really think this thing’s ready?” Jesse’s voice in his memory, cocky and bright.

“It’ll be ready when you stop breaking it,” Norman would shoot back.

A hundred moments like that, tucked into the fabric of this place. Norman, always the worrier; Jesse, always running one step ahead of fate. They’d argued, patched up, built something together that was bigger than both of them. Something the world had never seen—and probably never would again.

The memory faded, replaced by the weight of the gloves in his hand. Norman thought about keeping them, about taking some small piece of the past with him. But the idea felt wrong—like claiming credit for a miracle he’d only been part of. Carefully, he set the gloves back down, side by side, neat as blueprints. The only order left to impose on a world gone sideways.

He lingered, letting his fingertips rest on the leather, before stepping away. All he could do now was remember.

A sound—a soft mechanical ping—cut through the silence. Norman straightened, frown deepening. He scanned the empty room until he saw it: one lone terminal across the bay, its screen winking to life. Blue LED,

steady and insistent. The last survivor of the digital purge.

He crossed the floor, every step loud on concrete. The agents had sworn up and down they'd wiped everything—mainframes, backups, even the wall safes of magnetic tape. But Norman had always trusted his own redundancies, and now one of them was stubbornly clinging to life.

He reached the keyboard, knuckles tight, heart beating faster than he liked. The monitor glowed, lines of text snapping into focus:

FEED RECORD: 10.02.86 / OP-ZONE SECTOR 7
UNAUTHORIZED FOOTAGE REDIRECTED
ARCHIVE: SEALED

Norman felt his chest tighten. Was this the final ride? That was catalogued, committed to memory. This must something else, something the sweep had missed. Maybe something it was never meant to find.

His hands found the right commands without thinking. No network, no voice control, just the old-school tactile click of keys under his fingers. Muscle memory—proof that some skills never left you.

The file loaded in slow-motion. Pixels shuddered into place, picture jerky and raw, as if the machine was reluctant to cough up its secret. Then the footage rolled. Norman leaned in.

Street Hawk—unmistakable, black frame streaked with light, Jesse hunched low over the bars, riding like every second was borrowed. The camera, an overhead police chopper, struggled to keep up as Jesse banked the bike under an overpass. Tire smoke curled off the rear, painting the night in blue and grey. Speed, pure and unfiltered, even through the shaky feed.

Norman watched, breath caught. The footage looped once, twice, as if testing his resolve. He froze it on a single frame—Jesse glancing up, helmet visor catching the city's neon. For a split second, their eyes met across a cold screen.

There was no fear in that look. Not even defiance. Just acceptance. A man who knew, in his bones, that the end was coming, and who had decided to

meet it head-on.

Norman swallowed hard. The weight of all those lost years pressed against his ribs. Jesse had carried too much—always had. Too much hope, too much risk, too much faith in the machine and the man beside him. He set his jaw and let the video run one more time, burning the details into memory. There wouldn't be another chance.

He hovered for a long moment, finger poised over the keyboard. The urge to save the file was almost overwhelming—a final record that all of it had been real, that Jesse's last ride wasn't just a story whispered in empty bars and dark corners. Proof that the impossible had happened, once.

But memory, Norman knew, was both a blessing and a curse. Some things were better left unrecorded—protected, even now, from curious eyes and official records. Jesse deserved that. Maybe they both did.

He typed in the purge command, knuckles white with the effort. The monitor flickered, blue light giving way to black, as the last trace of the ride vanished forever. The terminal's LED blinked twice, then died. That was it. Nothing left but ghosts.

Norman leaned back, letting the silence close in. The world outside might have moved on, but here—inside these battered walls and scorched countertops—time felt like it had stopped. The last crate had taken the suit. The last crate had taken the bike. The government had stripped it all down to bare steel and bad memories.

But what Jesse had meant to the city, what the program had meant to Norman—that was something no government ever got their hands on.

He looked down at his own hands, studying the lines and scars etched into the skin. These were the hands that built Street Hawk, patched up wounds, steered the dream further than anyone thought possible. They shook now, just a little, with the truth of age and consequence.

Maybe, he thought, that was what it felt like to finish a story before you were ready to let it end.

He drifted back to the workbench, stopping beside Jesse's gloves. Norman picked them up, folded them neatly with a care he hadn't shown for anything in years, and set them in the centre of the bench—a memorial, a marker,

something only the two of them would ever understand.

One last look around the Command Center, letting his gaze linger on every gouge and shadow. The place was a tomb now, but it had been a sanctuary once. The memories would keep, even if nothing else survived.

Norman reached for the lights and flicked them off. Darkness swept in, thick and final.

Somewhere, he thought, someone would remember what was possible in this room.

Norman stepped outside, closed the door behind him, and didn't look back. He paused at the threshold, just for a moment, as if he could sense a spark left smouldering in the dark. The city might have forgotten, but he hadn't—not yet.

8

SHADOWS RETURNED



Sasha Lin hunched over three glowing monitors, the only light in the Vault's auxiliary analysis suite. The hum of processors filled the small space—a digital heartbeat that, tonight, felt far too loud. On each screen: Jason Nolan. Three feeds, three ways to measure a stranger.

Helmet-cam footage from the alley simulation. Bio-telemetry from his last ride. Psychological overlays—stress responses, decision branches, moments of hesitation rendered in crisp data spikes.

It wasn't the numbers that shook her. It was the shape behind them—a shadow on the wall.

A memory tugged at her. A secure file she had stumbled upon months ago

whilst researching potential rider profiles.

She called up the old file. Access required two layers of clearance and Norman's long-ago override.

Label: MACH.

The system ran the overlay, and Sasha's stomach tightened. There it was, impossible and undeniable.

Jesse Mach, rendered in behavioural algorithms, mapped over Jason Nolan.

Not a match by blood or neural signature—no secret program, no sci-fi miracle.

It was the patterns.

Instinct.

How they handled chaos—how they reacted when the world came off the rails.

Side by side, the overlays pulsed, too close for coincidence. Every critical decision, every split-second gamble. The way they processed risk, the exact rhythm of their throttle hand.

On paper, it was a statistical fluke. In her gut, it felt like fate reaching across the years.

Sasha scrubbed through Jason's dossier—foster care, military training, government contract. Everything tidy, every gap papered over. But there were holes. Questions that didn't line up, moments that read more like camouflage than character.

She recorded a voice note, her tone flat:

"Vault Log. Operator Lin. Pattern resonance between Subject Nolan and Jesse Mach at 80%. No biological or technological link. Reviewing candidate selection. Flagging for consult." She exhaled, the knot in her chest tightening.

This wasn't a glitch. It wasn't a system echo.

It was a ghost—alive in flesh and muscle, walking around with a legend's instincts and none of the context.

And Norman had said nothing.

Sasha copied the mapping profile to a portable data drive and shut down

the suite. She pocketed the drive, and strode out into the corridor. This conversation had waited long enough—and it wasn't going to be quiet.

Norman Tuttle was right where she expected—alone at his battered desk in the Vault's upper mezzanine, surrounded by stacked screens and the low blue glow of standby monitors. The bunker felt more like a war room at the end of a siege than a place where miracles once happened. A mug of cold coffee sat next to a heap of untouched reports. The air tasted of ozone, old electronics, and things left unsaid.

Sasha didn't bother with pleasantries. She let the data drive drop onto his desk, the clatter loud in the stale air.

Norman didn't flinch. He'd been waiting for this.

"You saw it?" he asked, voice rough and low.

"I built the system," Sasha shot back, arms folded tight. "Of course I saw it. MACH. Your secret file. You want to guess what the overlay showed?" Norman nodded, slow, resigned. He looked older than she remembered—eyes shadowed, shoulders sagging with more than just exhaustion. Maybe the years caught up with everyone, eventually.

Sasha let the tension fill the space. "Eighty percent pattern overlap, Norman. Not genetics. Not implants. Instinct. Street logic. That's not something you fake."

He looked out at the Vault's shadowed depths, searching for answers in all that silence. "I'm not hiding anything, Sasha. I picked Jason because I saw something in him—something I recognised. Something I couldn't let the system filter out."

She shook her head, lips a hard line. "That's not the job. We built the protocols so we wouldn't fall for ghosts and gut feelings. You bypassed all of it. You chose him because he reminded you of Jesse."

Norman's answer came after a long pause, heavy with history. "We could've run scans on every candidate in the country. It wouldn't have mattered. Street Hawk was never about just checking boxes." He gestured vaguely, as if the old bike was still there beside him. "I watched Nolan. I watched him handle trouble in ways I'd only seen once before. He looked at the city like it was a puzzle he'd already solved."

Sasha stepped closer, voice hardening. “So you gambled it all. Again. If he cracks, if this goes sideways, it’s on us.”

Norman’s expression softened—just a flicker, but enough. “It always was. That’s the job, Sasha. First time or last.”

Sasha dropped her arms, all the fight suddenly draining away. The numbers didn’t lie, but neither did the years etched in Norman’s face.

For a beat, no one spoke. the Vault hummed quietly, old machines keeping secrets.

Finally, Sasha said, “You ever think you’re chasing a ghost, Norman? No one can be Jesse Mach.”

Norman managed a tired, wistful smile. “No one will be. But maybe—just maybe—someone else can be Street Hawk.”

That was all there was to say. Sasha turned on her heel, leaving Norman alone in the blue-lit gloom, his hands clasped over the silent drive, history pressing in from every angle. For a long moment, he didn’t move—listening to the echo of engines and arguments that would never fill these halls again.

In the corridor, Sasha stopped for a moment, her back pressed against the cold concrete. She let out a long, shaky breath, listening to the distant hum of the Vault. For all the digital noise, it was the silence—the legacy—that pressed hardest. She steeled herself before heading down the stairs, trying to remember whose side she was really on.

Jason Nolan drifted down the lower corridor of the Vault, boots echoing off the concrete, every step a reminder he wasn’t supposed to be here. Down here, away from Sasha and Norman, the Vault felt more like a crypt than a cutting-edge lab—a hush broken only by the faint buzz of machinery and the soft, electric thrum behind the walls.

Curiosity had gotten the better of him. Officially, his clearance didn’t reach this far, but nobody was looking and the lockdown was sloppy after the last security drill. Besides, tonight he needed answers—needed to feel something other than the weight of everyone else’s expectations.

His hand hovered over the lock on ARCHIVE BETA, a battered grey locker with more warning stickers than actual security. He swiped his card. The

reader blinked green, surprising him. He let out a slow breath. Sometimes, the world wanted you to find what you were looking for.

Inside: hard drives lined up like relics, stacks of old folders with Sharpie scrawls fading on their spines. He thumbed through, the edges catching on calluses he didn't remember earning. One folder stood out—MACH/LEGACY.

He pulled it free, flipping open the battered flap. A stack of after-action reports—typewritten, annotated in red, timestamps from another era. Diagrams, tactical maps, field notes in a spiky, hurried hand. Then, a photo slipped free—creased, battered, obviously cherished and cursed at the same time.

The man in the picture could've been anyone—lean, wary, a shadow behind the eyes—but Jason recognised something. The posture, the tension, the defiance. Jesse Mach, the label read on the back, as if the name alone could explain the myth.

Jason studied the photo. He glanced at his own reflection in the locker's glass—saw the lines in his brow, the restlessness in his stare. Not a ghost, not a copy. Just a man with too many questions and not enough answers.

His fingers tightened around the edge of the folder, a pulse of something cold running through him. It wasn't fear—not exactly. More like vertigo, a sense of looking down from the edge of something too big to measure. For a split second, he thought he could feel the weight of someone else's story pressing into his own skin.

He remembered Norman, a few days back, watching him finish a training run. "You ride like you know what's coming before it happens," Norman had muttered.

Jason had shrugged it off then, but now it felt like the oldest truth in the world. He slid the photo back into the folder and replaced everything as he'd found it. No answers tonight—just a heavier sense of responsibility. He closed the locker and turned back down the corridor, the silence even thicker now, pressing in on his ears and bones.

He felt the history in these walls—a pressure that wanted him to measure up, to live up to something he barely understood. Every step toward the

surface felt like walking through a museum built on secrets and second chances.

As he turned away, the locker's LED flickered once—just enough to make him glance back. For a heartbeat, Jason could have sworn he felt another set of footsteps echo his own, a presence in the corridor that vanished as quickly as it came. He shook it off, but the feeling lingered—like history itself was walking out beside him.

He climbed the stairs, each footfall an echo of someone else's story, and didn't look back.

Norman was waiting in the main chamber—a glass-walled mezzanine filled with the blue glow of old monitors and the hum of too many backup drives. The place looked more war room than workshop, all hard edges and sleepless hours.

He didn't say a word as Jason entered. Just nodded toward the reinforced door at the far end—a slab of steel and carbon composite, built to keep secrets in as much as threats out.

Norman walked across the room to meet him. He keyed in a code, palm resting on the scanner until the lock chimed. The door slid open with a hydraulic sigh, cold filtered air spilling out. For a moment, the room beyond seemed almost sacred—a deep-blue vault, surgical lights overhead, the concrete floor polished to a mirrored shine.

But all Jason saw was the bike.

The completed Street Hawk sat in the centre, gloss black and predatory, angular as a fighter jet, coiled with silent potential. Even parked, it looked fast—faster than anything that belonged on city streets. The gold glint of brake rotors, the silver ribbing of turbine vents, the cockpit wrapped in smoked glass. Every detail screamed purpose. Every line was memory made metal.

Jason took a slow lap around it, careful not to touch. He drank in the twin cluster pod lights, the broad-shouldered stance, the scars along the swingarm that spoke of hard miles and narrow escapes. There was no nostalgia here—no comfort. Only the sharp promise of unfinished business. Norman's voice was quieter now, respectful. "Every panel, every weld—

from the original blueprints. Upgrades under the skin, but the soul... that's the same machine that burned the streets all those years ago. We did it right."

Jason nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He could feel the weight of the legend, a gravity that pressed on his chest as he circled back around.

Norman's eyes lit up as he continued, a rare spark of enthusiasm breaking through his usual reserve. "This iteration of Street Hawk has everything the original boasted—vertical lift, chain gun, particle beam, hyperthrust—the works. But trust me, there's a lot more happening beneath the surface this time."

"It's a hell of a thing," Jason finally managed, his voice half-lost in the chamber's hush.

Norman studied him, expression becoming more serious. "It was never just about the bike. It was always about the one who rode it. The risks they'd take. The promises they'd keep." He paused, letting the words settle. "I picked you, Jason. I know what I'm doing."

Jason nodded again, feeling the challenge and the burden in equal measure.

Norman turned away, but not before Jason caught the shadow in his eyes—a mix of pride, worry, and old grief.

Before anything more could be said, the comm unit at Norman's side gave a sharp, urgent chime. He frowned, checking the screen, and Sasha appeared at the top of the stairs, tablet in hand, already scanning the feed. Something was happening. The night was shifting.

A sense of history and expectation filled the air as they moved to the next crisis, the bike glinting under the blue-white light like a promise waiting to be kept.

Norman's comm unit chirped, slicing through the blue-lit silence. He checked the alert—an emergency push from the city's shared feeds, flagged high-priority. Sasha was already halfway down the steps, her tablet throwing cold light onto her sharp features.

A few feet away, Jason looked up from the bike, tension clear in the set of his shoulders. "What's going on?"

Sasha barely glanced at him, eyes on the scrolling data. "Koreatown. Structure collapse—pawn shop. Police, fire, bomb squad—whole circus.

Evidence of explosives and a custom bike, grey, in the mix. Surveillance flagged some unusual activity. Whoever did this is long gone.”

Norman toggled through the city’s camera feeds, catching the edge of a police cordon. The pawn shop’s roof was a wreck. Neon signs busted, glass everywhere, smoke still drifting across blue-lit asphalt. It looked like a war zone—one only a certain breed of troublemaker would dare crash.

Jason’s had followed Norman over to review the screens. His jaw tightened as he took in the blurry ATM stills—just a shadow of a motorcycle vanishing into LA’s after-midnight traffic.

“That’s our guy, isn’t it? The grey bike,” he said, voice low.

Sasha scrolled, pulling up heat signatures and street cam overlays. “It’s the best lead we’ve had. But this is recon only, Nolan. You’re not cleared for fieldwork, and we haven’t finished baseline diagnostics. The bike isn’t ready.”

Jason bristled, voice controlled but insistent. “Ready or not, nobody else will get there before the evidence is gone. If we wait, we lose him.”

Sasha’s lips compressed into a thin line. “It’s too soon. If you get burned out there, we’re done. No comms, no backup—”

Norman interrupted, his voice flat and decisive. “The city doesn’t wait for our checklists, Sasha. Never did. Sometimes you have to let the program breathe.”

He turned to Jason, eyes searching for any sign of hesitation. “No heroics. Get in, get out. If anything feels wrong, you abort. Understood?”

Jason nodded, pulse thundering in his ears. “Understood.”

Sasha hesitated, then pressed a comm earpiece into his palm, voice softer but urgent. “No improvising. No cowboy stunts. Recon only, Nolan. You stick to that or I pull the plug.”

Jason managed a faint, grateful smile. “Just recon. I promise.”

He slid into the sleek black race suit. It hugged his frame with engineered precision—light, taut, built for velocity. Norman looked over, just briefly. In that glance, he saw a flicker—an echo of the man who once wore it, and the unmistakable shape of what the project was becoming.

Norman ran the final system checks. “All systems green. Launch protocol

engaged. You'll have partial remote support, but you're on your own once you're out."

Jason hesitated just a moment longer, staring at the bike. Was he ready? Were any of them? He forced his doubts aside, letting the old, familiar thrill settle into his bones.

He swung a leg over Street Hawk, the synthetic seat cradling his weight. For a moment, the tension melted away. It was just him and the machine—one man and one legend, ready to face whatever the city threw at them.

Jason reached for the helmet—gloss-black, visor down, its surface catching the low light like obsidian glass. He paused, just for a breath. Then lowered it over his head.

The world narrowed.

The HUD blinked to life, casting soft blue light across his vision—data streams, targeting overlays, heartbeat metrics dancing at the edge of awareness. It wasn't just a helmet. It was intention, sealed in steel and code.

He straddled the bike. One man. One machine. One mission.

In that moment, Jason Nolan wasn't just wearing the suit.

He was Street Hawk.

The Vault doors unspooled with a heavy, hydraulic groan. Night air swept in, thick with rain and the promise of danger. Jason tightened his grip on the bars, feeling the low rumble of the engine beneath him—an old heart beating in a new body.

Sasha's final checklist came through his earpiece, nerves just barely masked by her professionalism. Norman's eyes met his in the dim blue, and for a heartbeat, Jason saw not just worry, but hope.

"Street Hawk, you are go," Norman said, voice steady.

Jason pulled his visor down, the HUD flickering alive. Data ghosted across his vision—routes, police chatter, the city's pulse mapped in cool blue lines. He twisted the throttle.

The bike surged forward, swallowing the launch tunnel in a blur. Jason felt the world compress as the machine hurled him onto the city streets—fast, controlled, impossibly smooth. He landed hard on midnight tarmac, power and grace fusing beneath him.

STREET HAWK: RESURRECTION PROTOCOL

The city's lights washed over the Street Hawk's black paint, blue and gold and dangerous. Somewhere in the engine's thunder, Jason thought he heard the echoes of every ride that came before him.

For the first time, the legend was his to write.

9

FIRST ASCENT



Jason's heart hammered in his chest. The HUD flickered data across the inside of his visor—routes, police frequencies, encrypted Vault channels. His earpiece buzzed with Sasha's clipped voice, threading urgency into every breath.

"Keep it clean, Nolan. This is recon only. No engagement, no heroics. If you even smell trouble, you turn back—understood?"

He thumbed the comm in silent acknowledgment, trying not to sound out of breath. Already, the streets blurred around him, city lights smearing into bands of blue and gold. Every instinct screamed at him to open the throttle, to see what the machine could really do—but he held back, just as Sasha and

Norman had drilled.

A citywide alert lit up on the HUD, guiding him south-west—Koreatown, less than two miles. Police perimeter, fire on scene. Jason let the bike flow between traffic, the engine's muted growl barely audible over his racing pulse. He'd ridden fast bikes before, but nothing like this; Street Hawk didn't just respond to input—it anticipated, correcting his line before he could even think.

Rain flecked the faceplate, distorting the world in ripples. He felt like he was skimming the edge of something unreal—a legend with a heartbeat.

As he neared the block, he cut the lights and let Street Hawk's stealth systems take over. The city's noise faded, replaced by the low whine of emergency vehicles and the static of police radio.

He pulled up short, one block out. The pawn shop's roof was half-collapsed, neon sign canted and sputtering. Blue lights strobed against shattered glass. Smoke drifted across the scene, heavy with the tang of burnt plastic and old dreams.

Jason edged closer, keeping to shadows, every sense straining. He toggled the bike's visual suite—thermal, zoom, night-vision overlays flickering across the HUD. Police and fire crews clustered near the entrance, but a blackened patch in the alley caught his eye: melted rubber, fresh scrape marks, an impression in the debris that could only have come from a heavy, high-performance bike.

His heart jumped. The grey bike had been here.

"Sasha, I've got tire marks—fresh. Too heavy for a stock model. Pattern matches what we picked up on the freeway cam last week."

Sasha's voice was tight. "Copy, Nolan. Don't get cute. Local units are sweeping side streets. Keep your distance."

"Understood."

He scanned the alley, tracking faint heat signatures. A patrol car rolled past at the end of the block; Jason ducked lower, pulse pounding. For a split second, he thought he saw another figure—helmeted, lurking in the deep shadow between two dumpsters. But when he zoomed in, there was nothing but flicker and smoke.

A siren screamed closer. Jason froze, watching the police lights splash over the alley's mouth. He waited, breath shallow, willing himself invisible.

For a moment, he was sure he'd been seen.

Then the cruiser rolled on.

Jason exhaled, tension draining from his shoulders. He edged forward, sensors pinging for data. The HUD spat out a brief report—explosive residue, high-velocity shrapnel, one security cam melted and half-buried in brick dust.

He knelt by the scorched pavement, reaching for a fragment—then remembered Norman's warning: No evidence collection, no contact. Recon only.

He snapped a series of images and fed them to the Vault. His fingers trembled—half adrenaline, half disappointment.

"I've got what I can. Pulling out."

Sasha's reply was relief wrapped in irritation. "Good. Head east, avoid the main roads. If anyone's watching, we don't want to lead them back."

Jason mounted up, but as he throttled out of the alley, his nerves jangled—a second patrol was swinging wide. He took a wrong turn, almost running headlong into their lights.

For a split second, he froze—caught between instinct and uncertainty. The HUD flickered, AI routing options flashing across the visor, but every path glowed red, blocked or boxed in. Rain hammered the asphalt, reflections twisting the world into chaos.

Jason's grip tightened on the throttle. He remembered the stories—the impossible escapes, the legend that said Street Hawk always found a way.

With a shout, he snapped the rear wheel in a violent arc, the bike fishtailing across the rain-slick street, nearly pitching him into the curb.

A young officer leaned out the patrol car window, voice sharp and urgent. "Hey! You—hold it right there!" he shouted.

Sasha's voice cracked through the comm, steady and urgent. "We're pulling you back, Jason. Brace yourself!"

Norman's countdown echoed through the headset:

"Hyperthrust cleared and counting. Five... four... three... two... one..."

The world narrowed. Tires screamed. For a heartbeat, the bike slid completely sideways—until, impossibly, the grip returned and the machine launched forward, engine howling with that signature Street Hawk snarl.

Jason clung to the bars as the city blurred past, sirens and shouts vanishing behind him—just a streak of black vanishing into the storm, legend reborn on neon streets.

His heart hammered against his ribs as he aimed for home, the night swallowing him whole—one more ghost in the city’s endless chase.

The Vault swallowed him back in silence. The entrance sealed behind the bike, the world outside cut away with a hydraulic sigh. Jason let the engine idle down, gloved hands shaking with the afterburn of fear and adrenaline. The inside of his helmet smelled like rain, sweat, and static.

Jason let his head rest against the bars for a moment, eyes squeezed shut. The afterburn of adrenaline left him shaky and hollow—he wanted to feel proud, but all he felt was exposed. The city hadn’t welcomed him; it had spat him out, chewed-up and unsure. In that moment, he knew he was still a rookie at the edge of something bigger than himself.

He climbed off, boots heavy on the concrete. For a second, he stood there—just breathing, fighting the urge to tear off the helmet and throw it against the wall. Instead, he unclipped it and held it at his side, sweat cooling on the back of his neck.

The comm crackled with Sasha’s voice before he’d taken three steps. “Secure the bike and come up. Now.”

Jason rolled Street Hawk into the bay, plugged in the diagnostics port, and tried to make sense of what he was feeling. Triumph? Relief? Embarrassment? It was all tangled up in the memory of almost losing control, of the cop’s shout echoing behind him, of hyperthrust. The mission had been survival, not mastery.

He unplugged the diagnostics, running a hand along Street Hawk’s cold frame. It didn’t feel like a partner tonight—it felt like something wild he’d barely managed to ride, something that could just as easily have thrown him if he’d let down his guard.

He entered the main ops suite to find Sasha hunched over a bank of

monitors, footage from the ride already looping. Norman stood at the back of the room, arms crossed, eyes shadowed.

Sasha barely glanced up. "Report."

Jason recited the facts: his route, his observations, the tire marks and blast residue, the surveillance sweeps, the escape. He tried to keep his voice steady, but it shook once or twice. Norman watched him with an unreadable expression; Sasha's jaw set hard.

She cut him off midway through a detail about the alley. "You were spotted. Twice. The second time, you nearly led a patrol right back here."

Sasha's gaze lingered on him a beat longer than necessary—sharp with worry, but unwilling to give ground. Underneath her frustration, there was a flicker of something else—a stubborn, reluctant admiration for the way Jason had survived. She hated that she needed him to be both careful and bold, and hated even more that the program forced both at once.

Jason bristled. "I doubled back. They didn't see the bike, not really."

"You can't know that," Sasha snapped, pushing back from the console. "This isn't some urban game, Nolan. If they get even a trace, if they start looking for a blacked-out prototype in this part of town, we lose everything. You lose everything."

He bit back a retort. She was right. the Vault's survival was built on invisibility.

Norman finally spoke, voice measured but heavy. "You improvised. It saved your skin, but it could have gone wrong. That's the difference between making it and making history."

Jason looked from one to the other. "I was out there alone. It felt like there was a target on my back the second I stopped moving."

Sasha's features softened, but only a little. "You're not wrong. But we have protocols for a reason. You stick to them, or you put us all at risk."

Norman uncrossed his arms and stepped forward, his gaze steady. "You did well for a first field test. But it showed us how far we have to go. This city doesn't forgive mistakes, and the people chasing us don't play by old rules." He hesitated, then said more quietly, "I put you out there too soon.

That's on me."

Jason stared at the floor. “So what now? More tests?”

Sasha closed her laptop. “We’ll review everything. See what the sensors caught, what we can salvage. Next time, you’ll be better. We all will.”

Norman hesitated before speaking again, the weight of history pressing in. “I keep thinking I’ve learned enough from the past,” he admitted quietly. “But every time we try to do better, the stakes get higher. That’s what this job does—it punishes you for every lesson, and every lesson comes at a price.”

He lingered as Sasha left the room, tension swirling in his posture. He looked at Jason, eyes tired but kind. “You did the best you could. Sometimes that’s enough for the day. Get some rest. Debrief again in the morning.”

Jason nodded, relief and disappointment warring in his gut. He wanted to argue, to demand another shot—but he knew he needed sleep, and distance, and maybe a day when his hands didn’t shake so much.

Shame burned in his chest. He’d wanted to be the legend—had wanted to feel it in his bones—but all he felt was exposed, raw, and lucky to have made it home at all. Tomorrow, he promised himself. Tomorrow, he’d do better. He had to.

He walked out, leaving Norman alone with the glow of monitors, the low hum of machines, and the heavy silence of responsibility.

Norman sat alone in the dim glow of the Vault, Jesse Mach’s file spread open on the console before him. Outside, the city was winding down, but inside, the silence pressed heavier with every passing minute. The night’s failures replayed in his head: Jason’s close calls, Sasha’s sharp words, the cold realisation that instinct and data alone weren’t enough. Not for this city. Not for this legacy.

He traced a finger over an old photo—a younger Jesse leaning on the original Street Hawk, both looking like they’d just outrun the world. Norman’s throat tightened. This wasn’t just about protocols or pride. It was about survival.

If he reached out electronically, it could be intercepted, flagged, or traced. Too many eyes were watching for Street Hawk’s shadow already. No, this called for something slower, something almost forgotten.

He stared at the blank page for a long minute, wrestling with the impulse

to go it alone—wanting to prove he could guide a new rider without leaning on the past. But the night’s events had shown him how little had changed, how easily old ghosts haunted new blood. It wasn’t just protocol at risk. It was everything Street Hawk had ever meant. This wasn’t just reaching out for help; it was admitting the program’s future still needed the wisdom—and scars—of its past.

Norman opened a battered drawer and pulled out a small notepad, the kind he used before emails and encrypted texts. With a careful hand, he jotted down a message, keeping it brief and impossible to misunderstand.

**Jesse,
I need your help.
— N.**

He folded the note, slid it into a yellow Western Union envelope, and scrawled Jesse’s last known post-office box—an address in faded ink that Norman had kept for just this sort of emergency.

On his way out of the Vault, Norman’s footsteps echoed with resolve. He drove through the quiet city to a corner post office, where the late-night clerk gave him a curious look but asked no questions. The telegram would be delivered by morning—quiet, untraceable, just like old times. For just a moment, as he handed over the envelope, Norman thought he could almost hear Jesse’s voice—dry, sardonic, alive with the easy confidence of another era. “If you’re reaching out by telegram, Norman, things must be truly dire,” the memory teased. He almost smiled, letting that old ghost steady him as he stepped back out into the night.

Standing in the fluorescent light of the lobby, Norman felt the old, familiar tension between hope and dread. The message was out there now, a lifeline cast across the years. All he could do was wait—and pray that Jesse would answer.

Back in the Vault, the machines hummed and the city slept, but Norman knew that, one way or another, change was coming.

The bunkroom lights were low, the air heavy with machine oil and filtered

ventilation. Jason sat on the edge of his cot in the corner, half in shadow, still suited down to the undersuit and boots. His helmet rested on the floor like a fallen crown, visor dark, streaked with city grime.

He hadn't said much since the debrief. No one had forced him to.

He flexed his gloved hand, opening and closing it slowly. The shaking had stopped, mostly. But something deeper hadn't—something below the skin. It wasn't fear, exactly. More like dislocation. He'd been out there, in it, riding the most advanced machine on the planet, and the entire time he felt like a kid holding a lightning bolt by the wrong end.

His reflection in the black visor stared back at him. Not the man from recruitment posters. Not the ghost in the streets.

Just Jason Nolan. Almost caught. Almost crushed. Almost... The door slid open with a gentle hiss.

Sasha stepped in quietly, a tablet in one hand, two mugs in the other.

"I brought caffeine. You looked like you were trying to disappear into the walls."

He gave her a weak smile. "That obvious?"

She handed him a mug and sat on the opposite cot, legs crossed. "You're not the first rider to come back feeling like a fraud."

He raised an eyebrow. "You mean Jesse?"

"I mean anyone who ever put on that helmet and expected the world to clap when it didn't."

Jason took a sip. Burnt roast. Just bitter enough to make him feel real.

Sasha glanced at him sidelong. "You didn't screw up tonight. But you felt like you did. That's the Street Hawk tax."

"Because it's not a suit you wear. It's a weight you carry," he said quietly.

She nodded once. "You'll learn to balance it. Or drown under it."

Jason rubbed the back of his neck. "You ever wonder if Jesse felt like this after his first mission?"

"All the time," Sasha said. "He never talked about it. Not directly. But Norman caught him once—sitting alone in the original Vault, staring at his gloves like they'd betrayed him."

Jason looked down at his own. "I thought I was ready."

"You were," she said. "You just weren't finished."

They sat in silence for a moment, the hum of systems pulsing through the walls.

Then Jason looked at her, something raw behind his eyes. "Was it like this when he rode? This much pressure?"

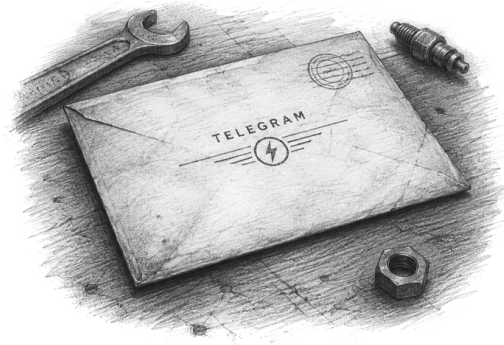
"No," Sasha said. "It was worse. He didn't have a team. Just Norman, a prototype bike, and the ghost of an idea."

Jason exhaled. "Then maybe I'm not the second Street Hawk. Maybe I'm the first of a new kind." A beat passed.

"That," Sasha said with a nod, "is a good start."

10

CROSSROADS



The rain had finally stopped, but the world outside the hangar still gleamed with the afterglow of a storm. Jesse Mach stood by the battered workbench, coffee cooling in his hand, the yellow Western Union envelope lying unopened next to a jar of loose bolts.

He'd found it that morning, wedged under the hangar door—a ghost from another life. The handwriting on the envelope was unmistakable: blocky, impatient, pressed hard into the paper—a little too neat for anyone but Norman Tuttle. The last time Jesse had seen that name on a piece of paper, everything he'd cared about had been boxed up and hauled away.

He hesitated, thumb tracing the edge of the envelope. In the background,

the radio crackled to life, distant voices reporting on a “possible vigilante sighting”—just another rumour, just more noise. Jesse didn’t listen. He broke the seal, unfolding the single sheet inside.

Jesse,
I need your help.
—N.

No preamble. No details. Just four words that felt like a punch to the gut.

He stared at the message, jaw clenched, fighting the urge to crumple it and throw it in the trash. Why now? After all these years—after the city had moved on, after Jesse had clawed out a life in the margins—why did Norman think he could just reach out and pull him back in?

A gust of wind rattled the hangar door. Jesse crossed to the window, staring out at the oily puddles reflecting the last traces of daylight. The city beyond was waking up for another night of restless business—sirens, engines, the dull hum of lives moving on.

He pressed the telegram flat on the workbench, weighing it down with a wrench. He’d already decided—before even reading the words—that he wouldn’t answer. Still, something about the silence in the hangar unsettled him. But as the night deepened and the shop emptied of its usual noises, Jesse could feel something shifting inside him—a restlessness he hadn’t felt in years.

He moved to the old Norton, running his hand along the cold metal. He felt every imperfection in the handlebars—the sort of wear only time and a hundred thousand miles could leave. There was nowhere he needed to be, no trouble calling his name. But the world outside had started to feel tight, like a jacket a size too small.

He shrugged on his leather jacket, tucked the telegram into his inside pocket, and swung a leg over the bike.

He paused by the open door, listening to the quiet outside—the city not quite asleep, not quite awake. The storm had passed, but something charged lingered in the air.

Just a ride, he told himself. Just to clear his head.

But even as he rolled out into the midnight streets, Jesse knew the past was already in motion—and he was chasing its shadow. Headlights shimmered in the rain-polished street as he slipped into the dark, tires hissing on wet concrete. He let the engine's steady thrum steady his thoughts.

The city at midnight was a different creature—quieter, rawer, its scars less hidden. Jesse guided the bike down the empty industrial stretch, engine burbling low, the tires humming over slick pavement. The last neon traces of downtown flickered in his mirrors, distant and indifferent.

He kept his eyes forward. Every block carried a memory: a long-ago bust, a back-alley pursuit, the brief flash of glory before it all fell apart. He rode not for speed, but for clarity, letting the hum of the engine and the rhythm of the street loosen the knots that Norman's telegram had tied in his gut.

The rain had washed the city clean, or as close as it ever got. Puddles mirrored passing headlights, broken fences, the odd stray cat darting out of the darkness. Jesse kept the throttle easy. It was too late for commuters, too early for trouble.

He cut through Chinatown, the scent of old oil and steamed rice drifting through the open visor. He stopped at a red light under a sagging billboard, letting the moment hang—just a man on a motorcycle, invisible and anonymous. Nobody here remembered Street Hawk. Nobody cared who he'd been.

The light changed. He rolled on, heading east, away from memory.

The city opened up ahead: bridges crossing the concrete veins of the river, rows of warehouses shuttered for the night, shadows layered thick across the asphalt. Jesse found himself drifting toward familiar ground—places where he'd once ridden as both cop and something more.

He passed a row of burned-out store fronts. At the far end of the block, two patrol cars idled, officers slumped over paperwork, the city's pulse barely flickering. Jesse kept his head down, blending into the silence, just another old biker with nothing to prove.

But under the surface, nerves tightened. The telegram was still there—an itch he couldn't scratch, a call he couldn't answer. Not yet. Not until he

knew why Norman had come looking.

He throttled down, pulling into a deserted lot under a rusted overpass. The hum of traffic faded, leaving only the ticking of the engine and the rush of blood in his ears. He killed the lights, letting the darkness settle.

Somewhere, a freight train wailed in the distance. Jesse listened, eyes shut, letting the weight of the city press against him. For a few breaths, he felt the old clarity return—a world reduced to engine, asphalt, and the steady certainty that he was still alive.

A phantom echo flickered in his memory—sudden sirens, a spotlight arcing overhead, the ghost of a chase that once left half the city breathless. It faded, but not entirely.

Then the wind shifted. Somewhere out there, the city waited for an answer.

Jesse opened his eyes, the telegram a hard edge against his chest. He was no closer to a decision, but he knew the past wasn't done with him.

Not tonight.

The ride home was slower. Jesse drifted through the half-lit grid of warehouse streets, letting the city bleed past him. By the time he pulled into the hangar, the sky had started to pale at the edges, bruised with the promise of dawn.

He rolled the Norton inside, shutting the big steel door behind him. The echo of the engine died away, replaced by the faint drip of water and the ticking of cooling metal. Jesse parked the bike, kicked off his boots, and crossed to the workbench. He pulled the yellow telegram out his pocket and threw it down, the folded edge worn soft by the pressure of his thumb.

He stared at it a long moment, feeling the old, stubborn ache in his leg—the one that never quite went away, no matter how many years passed. He'd lived a lot of lives in this city: cop, rider, ghost. Norman's message threatened to drag them all back out of the dark.

Jesse sat heavily on the stool, elbows on his knees, the telegram balanced in his hands. The air in the hangar felt heavier now, charged with expectation. On the battered radio, a late-night DJ muttered something about new beginnings before signing off. The static buzzed like old memories.

He ran his thumb over the letters—

**Jesse,
I need your help.
—N.**

—as if by touch alone he could unlock their meaning.

For a while, he just sat there, listening to the city wake up outside—the distant grind of a garbage truck, a radio playing three blocks over, the faint thud of early traffic on Alameda. He could pretend, for a few minutes more, that the world was simple, that he was just a mechanic in an old hangar with nothing more to answer for than a row of stubborn engines.

But the telegram cut through that illusion. Jesse felt it deep in his chest: this wasn't just about Norman. It was about unfinished business—about a legacy that refused to stay buried, no matter how hard he tried to walk away.

He drew a deep breath and reached for a pen. The act felt both final and futile. He hesitated, the words in his head jumbled and raw.

Jesse wrote, on the back of the telegram.

**Norman,
You want my help now, after forty years of silence? After leaving me
to carry the fallout while you vanished? Find someone else to fix
your mistakes. The answer is no.
—J.M.**

He slid the telegram back into its envelope, scrawling "Return to Sender" across the front in firm, final strokes. Setting it down on the bench, he flexed his fingers—like working out the memory of an old break—shoulders taut with a tension that hovered somewhere between relief and something heavier he didn't want to name.

But he knew there would be more to this exchange.

Morning seeped into the hangar in grey increments. Jesse hadn't really

slept—he'd stretched out on the cot in the corner for a while, but his mind never left the telegram on the bench.

He was lacing his boots when Cassie's footsteps creaked on the old floorboards. She was still in pyjamas, a faded T-shirt and shorts, hair pulled up, eyes sharp despite the hour. She caught him standing by the workbench, one hand hovering over the yellow envelope.

"Can't believe you're up before me," she teased softly, voice still husky with sleep. "Couldn't shake the ghosts?"

Jesse tried for a smile. "Something like that."

Cassie glanced at the telegram, then at Jesse, reading the set of his shoulders and the pinch of fatigue around his eyes. She set a mug of coffee at his elbow, steam curling in the chill air, and brushed his fingers—a small, steadying touch, grounding him in the present.

"That thing still bothering you?" she asked, nodding at the envelope.

He hesitated, then offered her the briefest of explanations. "Old friend. Old mess."

Cassie nodded, not pressing. She trusted him enough to let the silence do its work.

"You going to answer it?" she asked.

Jesse looked at the envelope. "Yeah. Think I have to."

She reached out, laying a warm hand over his. "Whatever it is, don't let it eat you alive, Jess. You're not the only one carrying weight."

He squeezed her fingers gently, grateful for her calm, for the ordinary comfort of her being there. "I'll be back soon," he promised, not really sure what he meant by it.

He shrugged on his jacket and slipped the telegram and his reply into the pocket. The world outside the hangar was washed clean by an overnight rain, puddles reflecting a pale, uncertain sky. Jesse crossed the street to the corner mailbox—the same one he'd used for years for bills, small parts, postcards to nowhere.

He slid the reply in, letting his palm rest on the icy metal for a beat—grounding himself before the envelope dropped with a final, echoing clatter.

Turning away, Jesse let out a long breath. The city felt different—less

distant, more alive. The telegram was gone, but the consequences of answering it were just beginning to unfurl in the morning light.

He walked back to the hangar, the decision now made. Cassie waited in the doorway, arms crossed, a small, worried smile on her lips. Jesse didn't say anything more. He didn't need to. She let him be, understanding that some journeys had to start alone.

Inside, the hangar's quiet returned, thick and watchful.

For the first time in years, Jesse Mach stood at a crossroads—not sure if he was ready, but certain he couldn't turn back.

11

TUNNEL VISION



The rain came down in slick sheets, smearing the city's lights into a watercolour of neon and shadow. It was the kind of night when every corner looked like trouble and the only things moving were desperate or dangerous. A matte grey motorcycle—its fairings still marked by fire and shrapnel—carved a path through the industrial wasteland on the east side. The engine snarled as the rider guided it off the main drag and down a service road, weaving between dumpsters and broken pallets. Steam curled up from storm drains, cloaking the bike as it slid beneath the rattling door of a lock-up wedged between a condemned warehouse and a wrecker's yard.

Inside, the lock-up was dim and narrow, cluttered with the detritus of

a dozen illegal enterprises—stacked crates, a rack of battered handguns, a folding table lined with tools, burner phones, and a battered laptop looping muted news footage. A bare bulb threw a circle of light over a rough concrete floor pocked with oil stains. The smell was gasoline and damp wool.

As the door rattled shut behind him, the rider killed the engine and swung off the bike, boots hitting the ground with a heavy thud. He was built thick through the shoulders, his riding leathers streaked with rain and dirt. For a second, he just stood there, helmet on, visor hiding his face. Breathing hard, adrenaline not quite spent. Razor had completed his task.

Two people watched from the far side of the room. One—a woman with a long black braid and knife-sharp eyes—sat perched on a crate, knees drawn to her chest, tapping at the laptop. Her gaze flicked from the screen to the rider, measuring him. The other—a wiry man in a threadbare jacket, fingers stained with grease—leaned against the workbench, arms crossed. Both waited in silence, the air tense as a drawn wire.

The rider peeled off his helmet, dropping it onto the bike's seat. Blond hair plastered to his scalp, face pale and drawn with leftover nerves. He looked at the woman, then the man, jaw clenched tight.

"It's done," he said, voice gravel. "They were closer than I expected. I almost got boxed in."

The woman—Angel—smirked. "But you didn't. That's what counts."

The man—Oscar—snorted. "You got lucky. That black bike was out there tonight. Saw it on the street cams, same as you. Whoever's running that thing isn't local."

Razor wiped rain from his eyes, defiant. "Didn't matter. I lost them."

"Yeah, for now," Angel replied, scrolling through fresh news clips. On-screen: police lights, a burning pawn shop, a half-glimpsed motorcycle ducking into the rain. "But everyone's looking, and your face is all over the city's surveillance grid. Sooner or later, someone's gonna make you."

A low voice cut through the argument—measured, cold, tinged with quiet authority.

"Enough."

Both Angel and Razor fell silent, their attention snapping to the back of

the lock-up, where a shadow lingered beyond the reach of the single bare bulb. The presence was palpable—commanding, patient, and unmistakably in control.

In the flickering half-light, the mastermind watched the monitors, the city's chaos reflected in his eyes. He didn't need to raise his voice. He owned the room the moment he spoke.

The shadow stepped into the light. He was younger than his voice implied—mid-thirties, broad-shouldered, crisp dark hair slicked neatly back from a high brow. There was an unhurried precision to the way he moved, as if nothing could surprise him, as if every inch of this moment belonged to him.

His suit wasn't expensive, but it was immaculate—a cut above the working-class grit of the room. The only concession to the night's business was a pair of black gloves, still damp from the rain, which he peeled off and laid on the edge of the table. The man's eyes were a grey that could pass for blue or steel, depending on the light, and tonight, under the harsh bulb, they looked almost colourless.

He paused beside the battered laptop, glancing at the footage looping on the screen. Police at the pawn shop, first responders, yellow tape flapping in the storm. In the corner of the frame, a glimpse of the black motorcycle—sleek, feral, barely more than a rumour even to the city's rumourmongers.

A thin smile touched his lips.

"So," he said, voice smooth, each word weighted just enough, "our guest has arrived."

Razor tensed, standing a little straighter. "Whoever's on that bike, they know what they're doing. I thought I lost them, but they were on me the whole way out. Not police—something else. The tech, the way he rode..."

The man in the suit nodded. "Street Hawk," he said simply. "Or a ghost wearing its skin."

He watched the screen a moment longer, the headlines scrolling by in frantic fonts.

POLICE HUNT 'PROTOTYPE MOTORCYCLE' AFTER

KOREATOWN FIRE. CITY ON EDGE AFTER PAWN SHOP BLAST.

One clip replayed shaky phone footage—a shadow whipping through the smoke, vanishing before the camera could focus.

Angel frowned, pulling up a grid of surveillance stills. “The cops have nothing. No plates, no ID, not even a clean shot of the bike. But the old-timers are talking. Stories about a vigilante on a black motorcycle, back in the eighties. Like someone’s trying to resurrect an urban legend.”

The man in the suit turned to her, his eyes glittering with something that was almost amusement—and something colder, deeper. “That’s exactly what I want them to think. The more they chase shadows, the less they see what’s right in front of them.”

Razor shifted, anxious. “So what now, boss? Lay low?”

The man ignored him. Instead, he picked up a remote, flicking through the news feeds, watching the city react—panic, rumour, speculation. It was all fuel for his real project, all smoke to cover the fire he was about to start.

He addressed the rider, his tone calm but heavy with expectation. “You did good work, but next time, you don’t bring the party back to my front door.”

The rider nodded, abashed, and wheeled the grey bike to the back of the lock-up. The others watched, waiting for the real verdict.

The man in the suit lingered over the footage. He let his fingers rest on the keyboard, the city’s chaos mapped out in lines and numbers. For a long moment, he said nothing.

Then, softly, almost to himself: “If that doesn’t bring you out of the shadows, Mach... nothing will.”

Angel’s head snapped up. Oscar raised his eyebrows. Razor stiffened, recognising the name at last.

But the man only smiled—a slow, dangerous smile, as if savouring a secret he’d carried for years.

Not yet, he thought. Not quite time for masks to come off.

But soon.

The rain rattled harder against the high, narrow windows. Angel glanced

sidelong at the man in the suit, her curiosity getting the better of her usual reserve. "You keep chasing this Street Hawk myth like it's personal. Even Razor says you're obsessed. I think it's time we got the story, boss."

Razor shot her a warning look, but the man only laughed—a low, even sound that cut through the anxious energy in the room.

He didn't answer at first. He moved to the workbench, wiping a small, faded photograph clean of dust. The image, just visible in the flickering light, showed two men—one older, the other barely out of his teens—standing beside an old Ducati, the LA skyline distant and blue behind them. The younger man's eyes were unmistakably the same hard, intelligent grey.

Angel waited, uncertain. Razor fidgeted, pretending to check his phone but watching every move the boss made.

The man placed the photograph back on the shelf. "You want the story? Fine." His tone turned flat, controlled. "Decades ago, my father tried to change this city. He believed in power, in legacy. Someone took everything from him. A man on a black motorcycle, hiding behind a badge and a cause." He let the words hang. Angel's eyes widened as she understood.

He continued, softer but no less dangerous. "I grew up hearing about the man who killed my father. Not in a fair fight, not with honour. With fire. With lies. They called him a hero. I call him a thief."

He turned, and the light caught his face—lines carved by anger and ambition, mouth drawn tight, eyes glittering with history. "That's why we're here. That's why none of you say my name unless I tell you."

Angel nodded, slowly. Oscar kept his head down. Razor swallowed, suddenly realising how deep he was in.

The man's lips curled into a final, satisfied smile. "If Jesse Mach is still out there, I want him to see what I've built. I want him to remember my family name. I want the city to choke on it." He paused, savouring the silence.

"My name is Corrido," he said at last, every syllable clear and cold as a bullet. "Victor Corrido."

Thunder cracked outside, loud enough to rattle the windows. In the moment that followed, nobody in the lock-up spoke—not Angel, not Oscar, not Razor, the anonymous rider wheeling the grey bike into the dark.

Only the rain answered, drumming steady and relentless, as if the city itself had finally heard the name it hoped it had forgotten.

The silence lingered long after Victor Corrido left the lock-up.

Razor remained in the shadows near the back, crouched beside the grey bike, wiping down the frame with a rag that did little to soak up the rain still dripping from the engine casing. The others had drifted to their corners—Angel clicking away at her laptop, Oscar lighting a cigarette by the service door—but Razor stayed where he was, letting the steady rhythm of the rain fill the gaps in his thoughts.

Corrido's name had landed like a thunderclap, but Razor had known. Not the full truth, not until tonight—but enough to put the pieces together. The way Corrido moved, the careful control, the obsession with Street Hawk—it all pointed to a past that had never stopped bleeding. And now, Razor was tangled in it.

He ran a hand through his soaked hair, eyes scanning the tool rack. He found what he needed—a small socket wrench—and tightened the front fairing where it had shaken loose from the impact with the alley gate. The grey bike was temperamental. It wasn't built for stealth; it was built to chase, to corner, to break through lines. A creature of fury, not finesse. Just like him.

He exhaled hard through his nose. "Street Hawk," he muttered. "The ghost that won't die."

A footstep behind him made him flinch. Angel stood there, arms folded, expression unreadable.

"You okay?" she asked.

Razor looked up, wiping grime from his fingers. "You think Corrido's the only one with a vendetta?"

Angel tilted her head, curious.

"My father didn't make headlines. He didn't die in a newsworthy fire. He just disappeared one day. Caught between some gang's crossfire and the LAPD's silence. The cops said it was a mistake. Said he shouldn't have been there. But people like Corrido—people like him—they make the rules that decide who matters and who vanishes."

Angel softened, just slightly. "And you think helping Corrido gives you justice?"

"No." Razor stood slowly, tossing the rag into a bin. "It gives me a shot to survive justice. That's the difference. I don't need this city to remember my name. I just need it to forget I was ever here."

She studied him a long moment. "Then why take the grey bike out tonight? You could've let someone else run that fire distraction."

"Because I wanted the Street Hawk to see me." His voice was flat, but laced with something dangerous. "I wanted him to think I was him. I wanted to feel what it was like to be the one they feared. Even just for a night."

Angel blinked, surprised. "That's a hell of a reason to draw heat."

He shrugged, stepping around her. "Isn't it? Guess we've all got ghosts."

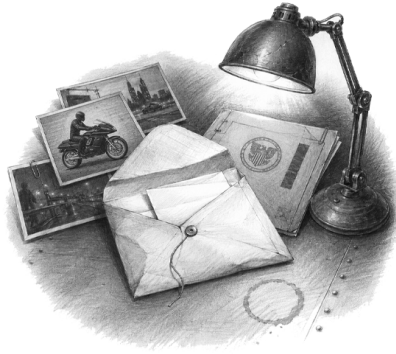
He stopped at the door and looked back. "Just make sure Corrido never forgets I'm not one of his foot soldiers. I ride alone. I bleed alone. If this empire of his goes down in flames—I don't plan on being inside when it does."

Angel gave a faint nod, respect flickering behind her guarded eyes. Razor pulled the door open, the rain washing over him again like absolution.

As it slammed shut behind him, Angel turned back toward the workbench, brows furrowed.

Oscar looked up from his cigarette. "What's with him?"

Angel didn't answer right away. Then: "He's the only one in this room who knows he's on borrowed time."

DELAYED RESPONSE

The city was washed in a pearlescent haze as the sun clawed its way up behind the towers of downtown L.A. From the admin wing of the Vault, Norman Tuttle watched the morning creep in—a new day, a new set of questions. He stood by a narrow window, eyes narrowed, tracking a boxy white van as it rolled to a stop at the end of the block. There was nothing remarkable about it: no decals, no government tags. Just the kind of service vehicle you'd forget two seconds after seeing it.

Except Norman never forgot those little details. The van's logo was fake, slapped on crooked. He scanned the grainy lobby feed, noting the courier's military cut and the way he kept one hand free—habit, not show. The

license plate had changed since yesterday. And the route it had taken, cutting through back streets and avoiding cameras, told him everything he needed to know.

He turned from the window before the driver's boot touched the curb, a dull ache of anticipation rising in his chest.

Norman rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the weight of years in every tendon. He walked the concrete corridor past Jason's quarters—empty, bed unmade, duffel tossed aside. Good. The fewer people who saw this handoff, the better. Jason didn't need to see the world's temperature rise just yet.

At the entry chamber, the air was sharp with ozone and polish. The courier was waiting on the threshold, posture perfect—ex-military, eyes flat, all unnecessary humanity scrubbed out. No badge, no smile, just a slim black case tucked under his arm.

"Tuttle," the courier said, voice clipped.

"Yeah." Norman didn't move to shake his hand.

"Return to sender."

The exchange took less than two seconds: the courier passed over the envelope, spun on his heel, and disappeared down the ramp. The van rolled off without a single brake light flash. No signature required. No words beyond necessity.

Norman sealed the Vault's outer doors with practised ease, then slipped into the records room, closing the thick steel behind him. For a long moment, he just stood there, eyes fixed on the envelope in his hand. Plain. Unassuming. But heavy with everything he thought he'd buried.

No chip. No trace. Just paper and ink—the same envelope he'd sent to Jesse.

He opened it slowly, fingers steady, and unfolded the thick, watermarked sheet inside. A return telegram. Old school. Deliberate..

A memory flashed—another envelope, long ago, opened with shaking hands in a motel room two days after the program shut down.

Norman's thumb left a faint crescent on the watermarked page, a reminder that even the oldest ghosts leave their mark. He unfolded it, the paper crackling under his fingers. Four lines. No date. No sender's address.

Norman,
You want my help now, after forty years of silence? After leaving me
to carry the fallout while you vanished? Find someone else to fix
your mistakes. The answer is no.
—J.M.

That was it. Just four lines and a dead channel.

Norman read it twice. The words hit harder than he'd expected—not for their bite, but for what they didn't say. Jesse hadn't sent this unless he meant it. He'd chosen the oldest method he knew—hard to trace, harder to intercept. It was as much a message as a shield: stay away. Don't push.

But underneath the anger, Norman could hear it—the old cadence, the edge of hope that always ran through Jesse Mach's voice, even at his worst.

It meant Jesse was watching. It meant, for now, he was holding back.

Norman sat for a long time, the telegram resting on his knee. Out there, Jesse Mach was still in the wind. And every instinct Norman had told him: that wouldn't last.

Jason Nolan stood alone in Bay 3, surrounded by the hush and hum of the Vault's inner sanctum. The filtered air moved overhead in slow currents, whispering through ducts and vents, a machine's imitation of breath. On the maintenance cradle before him rested Street Hawk—shut down, panels dark, every surface absorbing the pale blue glow of the overhead LEDs.

He hadn't touched the bike since that first ride. He'd spent nights replaying every second—each throttle twitch, every swerve, even waking once with his jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached. The doubts never let up. Not since he'd felt the ground drop away and the city blur past, the world narrowing to a strip of tarmac and the pounding in his chest. He'd spent nights replaying every second—each throttle twitch, every swerve, the way the HUD had flickered warnings as if the machine itself was nervous. As if it was reading him, not the road.

Sasha's voice sounded in the bay, gentle but insistent: "Jason, can you come up to Control?"

He let his hand fall away from the bike, flexed his fingers as if shaking

off a spell, and moved for the stairs. For a moment, he considered turning around—walking out, letting the project become someone else’s story. But he kept going. Each footstep echoed against the metal grates, a reminder that this place was still mostly empty—too new, too sterile, not enough ghosts to crowd out the doubts.

Upstairs, Sasha was a silhouette against a wall of screens, her ponytail caught in the pale light. She didn’t glance up as he entered, just gestured to a seat near the central console.

“Telemetry’s lagging,” she said, eyes flicking across columns of data. “Your neural response triggers are close to baseline, but the AI keeps flagging anomalies.”

Jason leaned against the edge of the desk, arms folded. “A gap in what, exactly?”

“In response conditioning. The original software mapped rider feedback—heart rate, stress, muscle tension—against behavioural data. The new system is seeing... similarities. Too many, actually. You’re not the template, but you fit the mould.”

He blinked, unsettled. “Whose mould?”

Sasha hesitated. For a heartbeat, all he heard was the click of her fingers on the keys. Then she rotated a monitor toward him. The grainy image that filled the screen could’ve been from a myth: a helmeted figure hunched over the old Street Hawk, every angle coiled and ready for violence or escape.

“Norman won’t say much,” Sasha admitted quietly. “But the original program—everything from neural patterns to tactical overlays—matches you closer than it should. It’s like the bike recognises you, even though you’ve never met. The odds of that? Almost zero. But here we are.”

Jason studied the image, the grain, the washed-out lines. He couldn’t see the man’s face, but he felt the weight behind it—pressure, legend, something sharp enough to cut.

He tried for humour, but it sounded hollow: “So, let me guess, I’m haunted. That part in the job description?” Sasha gave a faint, tired smile. “Aren’t we all?”

They let the silence draw out. Sasha watched him longer than she should,

as if weighing whether to say more. For the first time, Jason found himself wishing he could step away—not from the bike, not from the mission, but from the feeling that his story was being written by someone else’s unfinished business.

“Why was the program shut down?” he asked.

Sasha’s fingers stilled on the keys. “Something happened. Something big. Norman keeps the details to himself, but I can tell he’s still carrying it. We all are, in one way or another.”

Jason nodded, absorbing it all. Beneath the data, beneath the armour, every rider left something behind. He wondered what he would lose—what the machine would take before it gave anything back.

Down in the bay, Street Hawk waited in the dark. Upstairs, two people sat with old secrets and new fears, the future crowding in behind them.

Norman sat alone in his quarters, a converted storeroom at the edge of the Vault’s inner ring. Norman’s quarters straddled the line between museum and bunker—shelves of obsolete tech, a radio tuned to static, a faded Polaroid pinned crooked above the desk. In the low light, the place felt suspended between eras: the world of men and machines that used to be, and the world he was trying to hold together now.

He slid open the top drawer and thumbed through a stack of glossy surveillance photos. The rider of the grey bike: military posture, a shadowed face, and the same name surfacing again and again—Corrido.

This, he kept to himself. Sasha would push back—demand caution, not action. But Norman had already seen this play out before.

The telegram Jesse had sent back sat folded on the desk in front of him, creased in the centre, ink smudged where Norman had traced the signature again and again. It wasn’t just the words. It was the weight behind them. All the anger Jesse still carried, the years Norman had let pass without reaching out—now crystallised into four sentences and a final, brutal rejection.

**You want my help now, after forty years of silence? After leaving me
to carry the fallout while you vanished?**

Find someone else to fix your mistakes. The answer is no.

Norman read the lines for the hundredth time. It didn't sting the way he'd expected. Jesse's refusal was blunt, even harsh, but there was something underneath it—a note of pain he recognised in himself. Maybe even hope. Jesse hadn't thrown the past away, not really. He was guarding it. Guarding himself. Sometimes, Norman wondered if the most dangerous wounds were the ones you kept closed too long.

He reached for his old laptop, kept offline and encrypted for moments like this. He opened a private log—no date, no header, just raw memory.

**LOG: SHADOW MESSAGE RECEIVED.
RESPONSE: NEGATIVE. OUTLOOK: CAUTIOUS.
ACTION: MONITOR.**

Norman saved the entry, fingers lingering on the keyboard. For a moment, the room seemed to contract, as if all the air had gone thin. He stood and crossed to the wall where an old photo hung—sun-faded, the colours bleeding into the frame. Jesse was there, young and fierce, helmet under one arm, grinning at some half-heard joke. Norman stood beside him, a decade leaner, looking at the future as if it were a puzzle he still had time to solve.

He straightened the frame, letting his hand rest against the glass. The Vault was humming with new life now—new rider, new threats, new hope—but in this quiet, Norman felt every minute of the years that had passed. The world outside might have forgotten, but in here, ghosts lingered on every surface.

Linked to Victor Corrido.

Norman didn't have proof the connection was direct—yet. But he'd seen enough to know this wasn't random. Corrido was circling closer, and whoever was riding that bike, they were part of his war. The stakes had changed. That knowledge was what drove Norman now, made every hour feel stolen and every hesitation a risk they couldn't afford.

But he didn't dare tell Sasha. She'd argue, press for more tests, push back against bringing Jesse in before they were ready. She didn't know what it meant to face a Corrido in the open—she hadn't been there when the first

one tried to burn the city to the ground. Norman knew the signs. He knew the cost.

He returned to the desk, folding the telegram one last time and placing it in a drawer with the rest. Jesse wasn't ready to come back—not yet. But he was watching. And that, Norman realised, was all he could ask for right now. The rest—the real fight—was coming faster than anyone knew.

Jason stood on the Vault's upper gantry, elbows braced against the cold railing, eyes tracking the lines of shadow and light that criss-crossed the floor below. The chill of the metal railing seeped into Jason's forearms. A server fan whined in the background, the coffee's warmth an anchor in his cold hands. The bike sat quiet in its bay, every curve and edge gleaming in the blue twilight of the overhead strips. Even now—especially now—it looked untouchable, armoured in legend and silence. He hadn't ridden since the last mission. He'd barely slept.

The Vault was never truly quiet, not with servers cycling and the faint pulse of cooling fans humming through the walls, but this hour—just before morning, just after the city's chaos had faded—felt as close as it ever came. The kind of quiet where you could hear your own heartbeat and not much else.

Footsteps padded up the metal stairs behind him. Jason didn't turn until Sasha was at his side, the soft scrape of her boots familiar, almost comforting.

She carried two mugs, steam curling in the chill. Without a word, she handed one to him. It was black, strong—he could taste the caffeine and the care beneath it. Jason took a long sip, letting the heat settle his nerves. They stood together, leaning against the rail, surveying the realm they were both still learning to rule.

For a while, neither spoke. Down on the bay floor, the bike's outline was a shadow—still, but never entirely at rest.

Finally, Jason broke the silence. "You ever get the feeling this whole thing's bigger than you thought it would be?"

Sasha's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Every day since I got here."

He nodded, fingers tight around the mug. "I keep thinking—maybe I'm not the guy for this. Maybe they built the bike for someone else, and I'm

just... filling space.”

Sasha leaned in, her voice low. “You’re not the only one with doubts, Jason. But Norman chose you for a reason.” Sasha’s voice dropped, a trace of something raw in her tone. “I joined this project after losing a friend to something not unlike this. Norman’s not careless—but he’s not always right, either.”

Jason watched the blue lights ripple across Street Hawk’s armour. “Feels like there’s a ghost in that machine. Like I’m never really alone when I’m riding.”

She didn’t dismiss it. “You’re not. Nobody who sits on that bike ever really is. There’s always someone before, or something left behind.”

Jason glanced at her. “You know who it was, don’t you? The original rider?”

Sasha hesitated, then nodded. “I’ve seen the files. Some of them. Not enough to tell you everything, but enough to know he left a mark. Norman doesn’t talk about it, but it’s in the way he watches the garage doors, the way he checks the logs twice before going to bed. He’s still waiting for something, or someone, to come back.”

Jason absorbed this in silence, the knowledge settling on him like another layer of armour. He didn’t know if it was comfort or a warning.

Sasha finished her coffee first. “We’ll run another simulation tomorrow. Real streets, but only with support. No solo missions for a while.”

Jason nodded, grateful. “I’ll be ready.”

She paused at the top of the stairs, looking back at him. “No one expects you to be a ghost, Jason. Just yourself. That’s enough for now.”

She disappeared into the lower levels, boots echoing in the steel ribcage of the Vault.

Left alone, Jason looked down at the bike once more, tracing every detail, every scar and polished edge. He didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, but for the first time, he felt the city’s pulse lining up with his own—a sync, however fragile.

Somewhere beyond the reinforced walls, a city waited for judgment.

Inside, the machine—and everyone tied to it—waited for the first real test.

13

EYES ON THE STREET



The evidence locker at LAPD's downtown precinct smelled like musty cardboard and ghosts.

Officer Luis Gutierrez hunched over a folding table lit by a single buzzing strip light, two open folders spread out before him. One bore the yellowed label:

STREET HAWK INCIDENTS – ARCHIVE: 1984–1986.

The other was stamped

**CURRENT CASES: FIREARMS & ARSON –
KOREATOWN.**

Between them lay a tangle of printed CCTV stills, faded Polaroids, grainy scans of old press clippings, and notes in pencil where ink had long since faded to grey.

Gutierrez dragged a finger across the images, one after another, side by side. In one, a blurred figure on a black bike tore down Wilshire in '85, caught in the moment between two neon signs. In the other, a sleek silhouette banked through Koreatown smoke just weeks ago—the same lean posture, the same impossible balance.

He knew it wasn't possible. But it wasn't impossible either.

"Looks familiar, doesn't it?" he muttered to no one, tapping the blurred edge of the older photo. "Same angles. Same arrogance."

The department had buried the Street Hawk file decades ago. Most officers wrote it off as vigilante myth—something between RoboCop and Bigfoot. But Gutierrez had grown up on those whispers. His older cousin, Manny, swore he'd seen the bike fly—fly—over the Santa Monica Freeway in the mid-'80s. Said it sounded like a jet engine crossed with the devil's laugh.

Back then, Gutierrez thought it was a bedtime story in reverse. Now, he wasn't so sure.

He pushed the folders into his backpack, straightened his jacket, and left the locker behind. He wasn't ready to believe in ghosts. But he was ready to ask questions.

Chief Tom Calder didn't keep officers waiting, especially not ones like Gutierrez. When Luis knocked twice on the smoked glass office door, Calder's voice called from within almost immediately: "Enter."

The chief's office was high above the bullpen, with its glass wall offering a commanding view of the department's pulse—desks, detectives, coffee pots, and conflict. Calder stood behind his desk, sleeves rolled, reading a digital briefing with his usual calm intensity. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered, early fifties, hair more steel than salt-and-pepper now, but still carried himself like someone who could cuff you before you blinked.

Gutierrez stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Got a minute, Chief?"

Calder didn't look up. "For you, I've got five. What's on your mind?"

Gutierrez placed the backpack on a corner of the desk and withdrew the two folders, setting them side by side.

"Been digging through old case files—Koreatown incident a few weeks back. Found something that might be... relevant."

Calder arched a brow, eyes finally lifting. He flipped one folder open. His expression didn't change, but his voice cooled.

"You pulled Street Hawk files?"

Gutierrez nodded. "With permission, through cold case access. I didn't tamper. Just... noticed something I can't ignore."

He tapped the two images—one from the '80s, the other from last month. "This was the original Street Hawk. Vigilante, government tech, buried in layers of classified hush-ups and denials. And this—this is the grey bike we caught on camera outside the pawn shop in Koreatown. You see what I'm seeing?"

Calder folded his arms, looking between the photos. A long pause stretched between them.

"Silhouettes are similar," Calder said flatly. "But that's not evidence."

"It's more than just silhouettes," Gutierrez pressed. "Look at the lean. The centre of mass. The flare of light on the front end. It's custom bodywork, Chief. Something about the shape—streamlined, tactical. Like someone meant for it to be seen and not seen at the same time."

Calder sighed and stepped around the desk. He glanced once more at the images, then closed the folders with a soft, deliberate motion.

"Luis... what exactly are you hoping to find here?"

Gutierrez hesitated. "The truth. Maybe the old Street Hawk was real. Maybe he's back. Or maybe someone wants us to think he is."

Calder studied him carefully. "You're good at your job, Gutierrez. Sharp instincts. But this? This is the kind of rabbit hole that derailed better officers than you. You think the brass wants to hear Street Hawk theories again?"

Gutierrez didn't flinch. "I'm not saying we hang up wanted posters. I

just think we shouldn't ignore the pattern. Whoever's behind that grey bike—he's dangerous. Could be connected to Corrido. Could be something bigger."

Calder turned toward the window, watching the precinct floor below.

After a moment, he said, "Keep your eyes open. But keep your nose out of it unless you're ordered in. You see something, you bring it to me directly. Clear?"

Gutierrez nodded. "Crystal."

Calder looked back at him, the faintest glimmer of conflicted respect behind his measured expression.

"Sometimes the truth's not buried because it's lost," he said quietly. "Sometimes it's buried because someone needs it to stay that way."

Gutierrez left Calder's office feeling neither dismissed nor endorsed. It wasn't a green light—but it wasn't a shutdown either. In cop terms, it was a quiet "do what you have to, but don't make me answer for it."

He returned to his desk, the bullpen alive with chatter and keyboards, and sank into his chair with a slow exhale. The folders were still under his arm, heavy with implications. He didn't open them again—just stared at the edge of the desk for a long moment, letting Calder's words settle in.

Sometimes the truth's not buried because it's lost...

He glanced up. Across the room, a junior officer cracked a joke over by the coffee machine. Somewhere, a phone rang. Another arrest coming in. The city didn't stop because of ghosts.

Luis flicked open his screen and tapped into the secure precinct database. He began cross-referencing street cam footage near the Koreatown pawn shop with recent reported sightings of a dark, unmarked motorcycle—anything with an anomalous heat signature, anything that moved like it shouldn't. He filtered out scooters, delivery bikes, street racers.

Within minutes, three hits surfaced. One in South Park, near a warehouse district. One near the canals. And one in East L.A., tailing a suspect who never filed a report.

Gutierrez leaned in, muttering under his breath. "You're still out there..."

He clicked open one of the feeds and paused it on a blurry frame. The

grey bike again. A blur of motion between two vehicles. No license plate. No visible face. But it was him. Or someone pretending to be him.

He ran the footage through enhancement filters. The AI sharpened the image as best it could. Not Street Hawk—not quite. This bike was meaner. Rougher around the edges. Like someone had built it with less precision, more rage.

And the rider? He zoomed in. The helmet was full-faced, matte grey like the bike, but bulkier than the one in the archives. Not military issue—custom work, maybe ex-motocross. Whoever this was, they weren't playing hero. They were surviving the streets with something that looked like justice but moved more like revenge.

Gutierrez's fingers hovered over the keyboard. He started a personal log file—encrypted, hidden under a junk case title—and began tagging entries: GREY RIDER SIGHTINGS. He added time stamps, locations, footage links, common escape patterns. No report filed. Not yet. But if this escalated...

He reached for his notepad and scribbled one line across the top of the page: Who rides like a ghost, but isn't Street Hawk?

He didn't have the answer. But instinct told him the city might be caught between two legends—one rising from memory, the other from menace.

And Luis Gutierrez had just become the only cop in the department willing to track both.

Two hours passed.

The precinct dimmed as the late shift took over, but Gutierrez stayed at his desk, lit by the glow of his monitor and the pool of yellow light from the swing-arm lamp overhead. Outside, the rain returned—softer now, a misty drizzle whispering against the windows. It reminded him of that night outside the pawn shop, the smoke curling, the bike a blur in the chaos. The moment had stayed with him—etched into the back of his brain like a scar.

He leaned back, stretching his shoulders, and caught his own reflection in the dark glass. Eyes rimmed red. Shirt creased. A man pushing against the edge of something bigger than procedure.

He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a thin folder marked Mach, Jesse – LAPD (Inactive). Calder hadn't said the name. But Gutierrez

had heard the old rumours. Years ago, buried beneath whispers and case transfers, there'd been a motocross cop injured in the line, reassigned quietly. Mach had vanished from the roster, no fanfare, no badge ceremony. Just gone.

And now someone else was riding like him.

Gutierrez flipped the folder open. The personnel file was mostly redacted—health clearance, incident reports, vague notes on reassignment. But there was one old photo: a younger man in uniform, smiling like he didn't know the city could break you. Gutierrez studied the face, then slid the image next to a still from the grey bike footage.

Not a match. Different body type. Different era.

But the style...

He ran a hand over his face, suddenly tired. There was a legacy at work here. Somebody new was picking up where Street Hawk left off—or worse, someone was imitating him with just enough skill to fool people. Either way, if Corrido's name was coming back into circulation—as the chatter suggested—then this wasn't just vigilante cosplay.

This was war.

A quiet knock interrupted his thoughts. Officer Brynn, one of the night clerks, leaned in.

"Chief Calder said you're working something sensitive," she said, nodding at the folders. "You need anything pulled from archives before they lock up?"

Gutierrez hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Yeah. Two things, actually. I need all files related to Street Hawk. And I need everything we have on Anthony and Victor Corrido—senior and junior. Cross-reference known aliases, any recent flagged comms, street surveillance hits."

Brynn blinked. "That's... a lot. Old ghosts."

"Yeah," Gutierrez murmured. "They don't stay buried long in this city."

She gave him a look—half curiosity, half concern—but didn't push. "I'll get what I can before the system locks. You'll have it within the hour."

He nodded. "Thanks."

When she left, Gutierrez turned back to his screen. The rain outside had

STREET HAWK: RESURRECTION PROTOCOL

picked up. Somewhere across the city, another bike engine might've roared to life. Another street lit by thunder and memory.

He leaned in again, typing a final line in the log:

STREET HAWK SIGHTINGS – INCONCLUSIVE.

Further monitoring required.

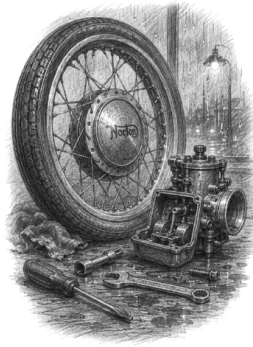
Awaiting confirmation... or resurrection.

He saved the file, encrypted it, and shut the screen off.

Then, quietly, he looked back out at the wet streets beyond the glass—watching, waiting.

14

MEMORY LANE



The hangar was quiet. Too quiet—even for Jesse Mach.

The only sound was the ticking of cooling metal and the faint, hissing echo of rainwater draining from the gutters. Jesse stood in the grey quiet, city noises reduced to a far-off hum. He lingered by the wide roll-up door, watching a thin band of sunlight bleed into the gloom. Coffee cooled in his grip.

He sighed, eyes half-closed, when something stirred outside—a faint mechanical whine, a blur of movement through the rain. A courier drone, low and deliberate, buzzed into the frame of the hangar and dropped a small envelope into the battered steel mailbox bolted near the entrance. Then it

lifted off and disappeared into the mist.

Jesse didn't move right away. The city felt like it was holding its breath.

Finally, he crossed the floor, boots echoing against the concrete. He opened the mailbox and withdrew the envelope—same make, same weight, same ink-stamped return line. Another telegram.

He tore it open with the edge of a calloused thumb. Another yellow slip. Short. Direct.

His eyes scanned the message. His jaw clenched.

Outside, the rain kept falling. Inside, the silence deepened.

Jesse,
It's important. Shadows are looking for you.
—N.

It wasn't the words. It was the space between them. Norman never pleaded. He barely even asked. And yet, here was a message—short, clipped, nearly sterile—that ached with everything unspoken.

Jesse took a sip of coffee. It was bitter, metallic, the kind that tasted best on nights when you weren't sure you'd see morning. He stared out at the silent city, just beginning to stretch and stir, and let the memory of Norman's voice ride the silence.

On the far side of the hangar, the Norton lay in pieces again. Jesse hadn't needed to take it apart—but keeping his hands busy kept the ghosts quieter. One wheel rested upright like a forgotten coin, the carburettor left open on the bench as if mid-thought. Tools were scattered in deliberate disarray—his kind of order, the only kind that ever made sense. In a matter of minutes, he knew he could put it all back together again. His way.

Outside, the sky was the colour of bruised steel, city traffic just beginning to gnaw at the silence. He glanced at the telegram again, thumb smoothing the edge—then, on impulse, crumpled it halfway, knuckles white. For a moment, he thought of throwing it out, but his hand wouldn't unclench. He flattened it out with a sigh, as if the act itself might make a decision for him.

Jesse lingered by the window, the telegram limp in his fingers, and tried to

convince himself that he could ignore it. That the ghosts in his head would be satisfied with quiet, with unfinished bikes and the safety of anonymity.

But he already knew the truth. The letter had been enough to pull him back to the edge. Even if he wasn't ready to go back, something in him was already turning—already answering the call he swore he'd never hear again.

It was easier to hate Norman for the years of silence than to admit he missed his old friend. Easier to tell himself the past belonged in the past—except, every time he tried to let go, the memories pulled tighter.

A part of him wanted to answer, wanted to believe Norman needed him for more than just unfinished business. But the grudge—forty years old, fed by every betrayal and every quiet night—wouldn't let him reach for the phone.

Norman Tuttle stood at the far wall of the Vault, arms folded across his chest, gaze locked on the main monitor. Sasha Lin was seated at the central terminal, her brow furrowed in concentration as she guided the system through its morning loop: security sweeps, diagnostic checks, background noise analysis. In another era, the low hum of the Vault might have felt like progress. Today, it sounded like anticipation.

On the screen, Jason Nolan's most recent run played in endless loop—grainy from night-vision overlays, but clear enough to see what mattered. The Street Hawk prototype cut through the city's darkness like a blade, slicing traffic and weather as if neither existed. There was precision in the way Jason moved; not just skill, but instinct. Something Norman recognised—and dreaded.

Sasha's voice broke the silence, edged with disbelief. "Look at these telemetry curves. Throttle response, counter steer, the way he threads blind corners—he's not supposed to be this good, Norman. Not yet."

Norman nodded, eyes never leaving the playback. "That's not training. That's something else."

Sasha's voice turned brittle, the air between them tightening. "What if you're seeing what you want to see, Norman? What if we're just feeding the same fire that burned this thing the last time?"

She toggled a few keys, pulling up comparative overlays. "He didn't even

come close to this in the baseline tests. Not physically, not psychologically. Now he's anticipating the bike—feeling it, like it's reading him back. Like he already knows what's about to happen.”

A second window flashed open: an old digital archive, VHS scan lines bleeding at the edges, dust motes frozen in digital limbo. The video was nearly ancient—Street Hawk's original run, a younger rider, a different era. The figure behind the visor was Jesse Mach. His style was unmistakable.

Sasha spoke quietly, almost afraid to break the spell. “He's not Jesse... but he's close. Closer than anyone I've ever seen.”

Norman finally turned from the screen, his face older in the low light. “You want the truth?” His voice was rough, stripped of pretence. “I didn't expect him to match. Not this closely. I thought it would be different.”

Sasha glanced at him; her expression caught between awe and concern. “You didn't tell me how deep you went. About the original data. About the overlays.”

“I wasn't sure it would matter,” Norman replied, his tone weary. “The past is supposed to stay in the past.” Sasha glanced sideways, recalling half whispered stories among the old crew—a night when sirens drowned out radio chatter and everything they'd built was packed up in boxes by men with no names. The cautionary tale everyone learned by heart, but no one spoke aloud.

“But it never does,” Sasha said, half to herself.

A moment passed—a rare, unguarded silence between colleagues who'd risked everything for a program the world wanted to forget.

Norman finally moved to an auxiliary terminal and entered a code Sasha had never seen before. The system hummed, unlocking a hidden partition. On the screen appeared a stripped-down schematic: Street Hawk One, in 3D wireframe. Every part labelled, every stress fracture logged. A digital ghost, rebuilt from scraps and memory.

Sasha stared at it, awe in her voice. “You've had this the whole time?”

Norman's lips curled in a tired smile. “They took the metal. They never asked for the backups. You never really let go of something like this.”

Sasha reached out, tracing the wireframe's outline with her finger on the

glass. “So, is this what you’ve been doing? Rebuilding the man by rebuilding the machine?”

Norman shook his head. “No. I kept this for one reason—because someday, someone would come looking for a ghost. I wanted to be ready.” Sasha studied the screen, her tone shifting. “Victor Corrido.” The name hung in the air like a chill.

Norman’s jaw tightened. He didn’t answer right away. She knew.

Sasha pressed, her voice low. “You think he’s coming, don’t you? The grey bike, the cyber-attacks, the pings on our outbound feeds. Someone’s shaking old trees.”

Norman let out a slow breath, his eyes never leaving the schematic. “He’s not here yet. But the signs are there. He’s probing for weaknesses. Waiting for us to blink first.”

“You really think it’s Corrido? The rumours aren’t just rumours anymore.” Sasha’s jaw set. “If he’s coming for us, we need more than just ghosts and memories.”

They watched the two runs loop on the monitor—Jason and Jesse, new and old, echo and origin. Power and memory. The sense of a storm gathering outside the Vault, growing with every passing minute.

“You think Jason can handle it?” Sasha finally asked.

Norman’s voice was quiet, almost mournful. “He doesn’t even know what he’s up against yet.”

The monitor flickered. Outside, the city waited. And somewhere in the deep silence of the hangar, the ghosts of the past began to stir.

Jesse Mach spent the afternoon in a restless orbit around the hangar, drifting between half-finished jobs and memories that wouldn’t stay quiet. He tried to lose himself in the hum of small engines, the rhythmic scrape of steel on steel, but nothing worked. He’d answer Cassie with half a nod, pretend the radio static was news and not a distraction, but she saw through it. She always did.

Norman’s words—simple, urgent—echoed every time he tried to push them away.

He thought about what it would mean to answer. Not just for him, but for Cassie, for the fragile peace he'd managed to carve out of the ruins of his old life. He remembered the cost of the last ride: the shutdown, the government men, the secrets boxed away and buried under concrete and bureaucracy.

He didn't want to go back. But in the silence, he could admit what he'd never say aloud: he missed it. Missed the edge. Missed the clarity that came from moving faster than fear. He missed being someone who made a difference, even if it always left scars.

Cassie appeared at his side, arms folded. She didn't press, just stood with him in the hush, offering her silent solidarity. For a while, neither spoke.

Finally, Jesse broke the silence. "He never called for help, not once, all these years. Even when they tore it all down. Not until now." Cassie shrugged, soft but steady. "Maybe that's what makes it real."

He almost smiled. Almost. "You ever wish you could just turn it all off? Just... live?"

She looked at him, honest and unflinching. "Every day. But you're not built like that, Jess. You don't turn your back when someone needs you. Even if you want to."

He hesitated, voice scraping raw. "I miss it. Not just the speed—the clarity. Like I mattered. Like the city needed me, even when it chewed me up."

Cassie squeezed his arm. "Whatever you decide, Jess, make sure you're not doing it just because someone else says you should. You get to choose who you are, not just who you were."

As the rain rattled on the roof, Jesse stared out at the grey city, feeling the past pressing in. He wasn't ready to go back. But he was running out of ways to stay away. For now, he lingered in the quiet, not yet ready to open the door—but unable to walk away from it either.

The night pressed in hard and cold when Jesse finally closed up the hangar. The city outside had taken on a different kind of quiet—the hush that came before a storm, or before something else broke loose. Jesse checked the locks by habit, then stood for a long minute at the threshold, looking back at the dim rows of bikes, the cluttered workbench, the corners where memory pooled like shadow.

He still hadn't decided. But the decision was already alive inside him, creeping closer with every hour.

Up in the loft, Cassie was reading, feet tucked beneath her, a lamp burning soft against the gloom. Jesse paused in the doorway, suddenly aware of the long hours he'd spent lost in his own head. She looked up, setting her book aside. "You want to talk about it?"

Jesse shook his head, managing a small, tired smile. "Not tonight. Not yet."

Cassie studied him for a beat, then nodded. "You'll know when you're ready." She held his gaze, her quiet strength like an anchor in the drifting tide of his doubts.

He leaned against the frame, feeling the ache in his bones—a familiar ache, born of old wounds and older choices. "There was a time I thought I could just leave it all behind. Thought the world would stop needing Street Hawk, and I could just be... me."

Cassie's voice was gentle, certain. "You are you. You just don't get to pick when the past is finished with you."

He didn't answer, but he let the words settle. For the first time all day, he felt the knot inside him loosen, just a fraction. He crossed the room, dropping the telegram on the table beside her. Cassie reached for his hand, squeezing it—an unspoken promise that whatever happened, she wouldn't let him face it alone.

In the Vault, the tension was just as thick. Norman moved through the diagnostic bay, his movements stiff with fatigue and worry. The display still looped Jason's ride beside Jesse's, the two patterns so closely matched it bordered on the uncanny.

Sasha stood nearby, arms folded, silent and tight with thought. "He's not ready, Norman. None of us are."

Norman's jaw tightened. "Neither was Jesse. Not the first time. But the city doesn't wait for us to be ready."

A red notification flashed on the far monitor—an alert, subtle but urgent. Sasha moved to check it, eyes narrowing. "Outbound surveillance ping."

Third one this week. Same source. Offshore.”

Norman’s shoulders sagged, but his voice was steel. “Victor Corrido.”

The name hung in the air—heavy, electric, undeniable. Sasha’s mouth set in a grim line. “He’s making his move. Looking for holes. Testing us.”

Norman stared at the endless city lights crawling across the surveillance map. “He won’t stop. Not until he gets what he wants.” Norman stared at the screens, haunted by the memory of another Corrido—another fire they had barely survived. The scars from the last war still itched every time the city grew quiet.

Sasha glanced back at the twin rides still looping on the main screen. “Then we don’t stop, either.” Sasha met his eyes, her tone turning to steel.

“No more secrets, Norman. If we’re in, we’re all in. Jason deserves the truth.”

They stood in the blue glow, the Vault bracing for the storm, knowing the shadows were gathering closer every night.

Back in the hangar, Jesse watched the city flicker beyond rain-streaked glass. He closed his eyes, listening to the pulse of Los Angeles. Somewhere out there, the city’s unfinished business was gathering force. Inside, the past and future waited—both unwilling to let go.

15

OLD TIMES



The city was quiet in the way only a city can be after a long, hard rain—every gutter overflowing, every surface washed but not quite clean. Jesse Mach leaned against the frame of the hangar’s roll-up door, staring at the puddles catching the bruised sky, his breath steaming in the chilly morning air.

He’d been up most of the night, the old telegram from Norman Tuttle burning a hole on his workbench. He hadn’t touched it, hadn’t even moved it aside, but its presence infected every motion, every thought. The words—**I need your help**—echoed, unwanted, every time he let his mind drift.

He didn’t want to answer. He owed Norman nothing—less than nothing, after forty years of silence and government erasure. But the city felt different

this week, as if something old and mean was waking up in the alleys, something that might be bigger than even his own resentments.

Cassie caught him standing there, mug in hand, staring into the street like he was waiting for a ghost. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?” she said quietly.

Jesse didn’t answer at first. He just shrugged, jaw tight. “I don’t owe him,” he muttered. “Not after what he pulled.”

Cassie nodded. “Maybe not. But if something’s happening out there—something that needs stopping—do you trust anyone else to do it?”

That stung more than he’d admit. He took another sip of coffee, letting the bitterness bite.

Finally, with a slow, reluctant motion, Jesse reached for the old rotary phone mounted by the door. The number was still carved into his memory, no matter how many years had passed. He dialled, keeping his voice as flat as he could manage when Norman picked up.

“Mach,” Norman said, almost a question.

“We talk. Once,” Jesse replied, the words cold, unyielding. “Face to face. Not at your place. Neutral ground.”

Norman hesitated, but Jesse could hear the relief under the caution. “I know a spot. Thirty minutes. You know the one.” Jesse hung up without another word.

He stood there for a moment, fighting the urge to slam the phone back into its cradle. Every part of him wanted to stay angry, to keep the wall up. But something uglier—something like duty, or fear, or the cold knowledge that the world didn’t always let you choose—pushed him forward.

Cassie met his eyes, searching his face for softness and finding only the familiar mask. “Just... be careful,” she said.

Jesse nodded once, grabbed his jacket, and stepped out into the waking city. He didn’t look back.

He didn’t have to want this. He just had to show up.

Jesse chose to drive his old Mustang—something slow, something unmistakably his. The city rolled past in a series of half-awake blocks, puddles shining in the gutters, neon signs flickering against steel and glass. The

morning crowd hadn't filled in yet; just a few early risers hustling beneath umbrellas, every face turned away.

He found the meeting spot exactly where Norman had left it, just as he'd known he would. An all-night diner, squat and anonymous, wedged between a shuttered laundromat and a pawn shop on the city's eastern edge. The kind of place built for secrets, for deals made before sunrise and regrets stirred into black coffee.

Jesse parked out front, pausing to scan the street for anything out of place. Old habits, he thought. They never really faded.

He stepped inside, letting the door's bell jangle overhead. The air was thick with grease and old conversations. Only three people in the booths—a couple of truckers hunched over their breakfast, and Norman Tuttle in a battered windbreaker, waiting at the back with two mugs between them.

Jesse hesitated just a heartbeat, then crossed the linoleum floor, boots squeaking with each step.

Norman stood as Jesse approached, but Jesse waved him off, sliding into the booth opposite without so much as a nod. Norman sat, his movements careful—like a man handling fragile cargo.

For a moment, neither spoke. The silence between them felt heavier than the rain outside.

Finally, Jesse broke it. "You get one shot. Say your piece, and then I walk."

Norman didn't answer right away. He slid a mug across the table, but Jesse ignored it. Instead, Norman folded his hands, his eyes searching Jesse's face for any sign of thaw.

"I know you're angry," Norman said quietly. "I'd be too. I can't fix what happened. I'm not here for forgiveness."

Jesse's jaw tightened. "Good. Because you won't get it."

Norman nodded, absorbing the blow. "I'm not asking you to forgive. I'm asking you to listen. Just once."

Jesse didn't blink. "Then talk."

Norman hesitated, then leaned in, voice low. "It's happening again. It's the same feeling as when we started all this—they're back. Only this time, it's not just the city at stake. There's someone out there—someone with the

means, the money, and the motive to burn it all down. And he's already started moving pieces that we can't see."

Jesse's eyes narrowed, cold and flat. "You want help, Norman? You want me to care about a ghost story when you left me holding the bag?"

Norman shook his head, pain flickering across his features. "No. I want you to understand that you're the only one left who knows what it feels like. And you're the only one who ever figured out how to survive it."

The words hung in the air, heavy with old truths and new fears.

Jesse glanced away, jaw working, refusing to let emotion show. He was still cold. Still angry. But the sense of something bigger—something ugly stirring under the city—crept in at the edges of his resolve.

"Finish your coffee," Jesse said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Then tell me exactly what you're up against."

Norman nodded, the smallest smile flickering—sad, relieved, but wary.

The city thundered past outside. For the first time in years, Jesse Mach was back in the game.

Norman took a measured sip of coffee, steadying himself before continuing. He'd rehearsed this conversation a hundred times in his mind, but now, face-to-face with Jesse's stony silence, every word felt heavier than expected.

He slid a folded sheet of paper across the Formica, not quite letting go. "The man behind the grey bike—the one making waves all over Koreatown and downtown—he's not new blood. He's old trouble with a new face. Name's not on any official sheet, but my sources traced him back through three layers of shell companies and black-market proxies."

Jesse didn't touch the paper. He just watched Norman with a look that could've cut steel.

Norman forced himself to go on. "The rider's just muscle. The real architect? He's someone you know. Or at least, someone who's got unfinished business with Street Hawk."

He hesitated, the name a stone in his throat. "His name's Victor. Victor Corrido."

Jesse's reaction was almost invisible—a tightening around his eyes, a hitch

in his breath. But Norman saw it. They both remembered the original Corrido—what he'd done, what it had cost. Jesse had lost more than just a program that day. He'd lost friends, innocence, and any illusions that the streets could ever really be saved.

Norman kept his voice low. "He's not hiding. Every move he's made has been loud, public. He wants you to see it. Wants to drag you out of whatever hole you crawled into and settle old scores."

Jesse's fingers curled into a fist on the table. "You're sure?"

Norman nodded. "I've got proof—bank transfers, surveillance. And that bike? It's no accident. He wants the legend out in the open, wants to play this as a grudge match."

Jesse stared out the window, jaw clenched so hard it hurt. Rain streaked down the glass, city buses rumbling by, the world moving on as if nothing had changed. But inside, it felt like old wounds had just been torn open.

"I said I wouldn't come back," Jesse muttered, voice flat. "Told myself I'd never let the past drag me down again."

Norman's voice softened. "You don't owe me anything. But this city... The people... they still remember you, even if they pretend not to. And this isn't just a job, Jesse. It's a warning."

Jesse was silent, wrestling with the truth. In that moment, he saw it clear: the past wasn't done with him. Not yet. And Victor Corrido, son of the man who started it all, wasn't just chasing shadows—he was coming for the real thing.

Norman reached into his jacket and slid a small envelope across the table, leaving it atop the other paper. "If you change your mind, here's where to find me now. It's a new facility—nobody but you gets this address. I've given you an entry code if you want it" His tone was gentle but firm, as if handing over a lifeline.

Jesse eyed the envelope, still not picking it up, but he didn't push it away either.

Norman stood and reached for the bill, leaving enough cash to cover both mugs. "You don't have to decide now. But if you do... you know where to find me."

Jesse didn't answer. He stared at the paper and the envelope, the name burning a hole through the cheap napkin beneath it. When he finally looked up, Norman was already halfway to the door, his shoulders hunched, moving like a man who'd gambled everything on a single, desperate hand.

For a long time after, Jesse sat in the empty booth, rain pounding against the windows. Victor Corrido. The city. The ghosts. The legend he never wanted to carry.

He closed his eyes and let the storm rage, knowing he'd already made his choice—even if he couldn't say it yet.

Jesse sat alone long after Norman left, the echo of the door's bell fading into the low hum of rain and distant city traffic. The coffee in his mug had gone cold. The envelope and folded address sat untouched on the table, weights that pulled at his conscience.

He turned the envelope over in his hands, thumb tracing the careful block lettering of the Vault's address. The thought of returning—of stepping even a toe back into Norman's world—sent a knot through his chest. He'd told himself for years he was done. That he was nobody's hero anymore. The city didn't need a legend; it needed survivors. But here he was, staring at the coordinates to a place that might just need him, whether he liked it or not.

He forced himself to look at the evidence Norman had left: surveillance photos, blurry shots of the grey bike, stills from security cameras—each marked with date and time, each a silent dare from Victor Corrido.

Underneath it all, the thinly veiled challenge was clear: Come and get me.

Jesse exhaled, rubbing his temple. The years hadn't made any of this easier. The ghosts were always loudest when the rain was falling, and the city seemed washed of its sins. He saw Marty's grin in the back of his mind, heard the whine of the old Street Hawk as it rocketed down forgotten alleys. It wasn't nostalgia. It was unfinished business—bleeding into every promise he'd made to himself about letting the past stay dead.

He thought of Cassie. Of the quiet life they'd built together, stubborn and ordinary. He tried to picture himself telling her he was going back. Tried to imagine the way she'd look at him—not with blame, but with the hard,

honest understanding she always brought. She'd say what needed saying, even if he didn't want to hear it: If you're still this torn up, Jesse, maybe it's because you never really left.

He pushed away from the table, envelope still clutched in his fist. His boots thudded heavy on the diner's tile floor as he stepped out into the wet morning. The city's cold air slapped him awake, sharp with the scent of ozone and rain. For a moment he just stood there, the address burning a hole in his pocket, the world feeling both impossibly wide and far too small.

He started walking, the decision not yet spoken but already written in the set of his shoulders. He didn't know what he'd say to Cassie. Didn't know how he'd explain the ghosts he could never outrun. Maybe he wouldn't. Maybe she'd already understand.

By the time Jesse reached the hangar, he was already rehearsing what he'd say to Cassie. How he'd tell her the world needed fixing, and maybe—just maybe—he was the only one left stubborn enough to try.

And somewhere, deep down, the old engine inside him rumbled back to life. Quiet at first, but growing, fuelled by memory, regret, and a stubborn hope that maybe, even now, he wasn't done.

Across the street, Officer Luis Gutierrez watched.

16

TRIGGER POINT



Cassie Miller didn't see the van until it was too late. She was just locking up the hangar, hands full of paperwork, the storm still lingering overhead. The air tasted of oil and ozone. She glanced up as a rumble passed down the street—just a white panel van, nondescript, crawling through the puddles. The kind of vehicle she'd learned to ignore.

That was her mistake.

She didn't register the figures at first—dark shapes moving with careful, predatory grace. Rain battered the metal roof. Cassie pressed the lock on the roll-up, wrestling with a stubborn latch, when a shadow detached itself from the alley. A sharp prick—needle or dart, she couldn't tell—bit her at

the base of her neck. Her breath caught. Her mug slipped from her hand and shattered, coffee bleeding out across the wet concrete.

The world spun. Two figures caught her before she hit the ground. Voices murmured in a language she almost understood—cold, clinical, not meant for her. Hands gripped her shoulders and ankles, efficient and impersonal. Her vision tunnelled, the storm dissolving into a grainy blur. Cassie fought to focus, lungs straining, but her limbs refused to obey. Something cold and plastic pressed over her nose and mouth. The chemical taste was sweet and wrong.

She heard the van's side door slide open, the slap of boots on wet asphalt.

The last thing she saw was the white ceiling of the van and the reflection of her own wide eyes in the rain-slick metal. Then darkness rolled in, heavy as a wave.

Even in the void behind her eyelids, Cassie heard the hum of tires on wet asphalt, the creak of shocks as the van hit potholes, the muffled rhythm of rain on metal. Somewhere nearby, a low radio squawked in a foreign tongue—too fast for her groggy mind to decode. Her body was sluggish; arms and legs numb as if submerged. But her mind was clawing upward, dragging her toward lucidity one breath at a time.

She surfaced slowly, each breath like breaking through a layer of tar. Her mouth was dry, her tongue thick. Whatever they'd used to knock her out was wearing off, but not fast enough.

She was lying on her side. The floor beneath her vibrated with every bump in the road—bare metal, cold and sharp at the edges. Her wrists were bound in front of her with plastic ties, tight but not brutal. Her ankles too. A blanket or tarp half-covered her, likely an afterthought to keep prying eyes from spotting a body if the van passed a checkpoint.

Cassie flexed her fingers—tingling but not broken. Her head throbbed, a dull pulse at the base of her skull. She focused on her breath, slow and deep. Don't panic. Don't give them what they want.

A voice—male, sharp—snapped from the front of the van. She couldn't make out the words, but the tone was clear: angry, impatient.

Cassie opened her eyes.

Dim interior lights gave her just enough to see the van's cargo space: metal shelves bolted to the walls, some kind of electrical equipment stashed in cases, and two men sitting across from her. One was tall and broad-shouldered, the other wiry with a shaved head and a long scar across his temple. Both wore dark clothes and combat boots—paramilitary types, not gangbangers.

The scarred one noticed her staring. He smirked.

"Well, look who's awake," he said, tapping the wall behind him twice.

The driver grunted in response. The van swerved slightly, slowing.

Cassie didn't speak. Not yet. She studied their faces, their posture. The big one looked bored, almost indifferent. Scarface was the problem—he enjoyed this too much.

"You're tougher than you look," he said, leaning forward. "Didn't expect you up for another hour."

Cassie forced her voice through cracked lips. "You know, if you wanted a coffee, you could've just asked."

Scarface chuckled, genuinely amused. "Feisty."

The big one rolled his eyes. "Just shut her up, man."

Cassie swallowed back fear. She couldn't show weakness. Couldn't let them see the panic behind her eyes.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Scarface smiled wider. "Somewhere nice. Private. Boss wants a word."

Boss. The word landed like ice down her spine. She knew what this was now. It wasn't about money or luck. It was about Jesse.

She closed her eyes briefly. So, this was it. She'd always known Jesse's past would come for him. She just didn't think it would come through her.

Cassie shifted her weight, testing her bonds. The zip ties were tight, but there was a little give. If she could get one hand free—maybe dislocate her thumb, or snap the corner of that shelf for leverage—she might be able to—

The van turned sharply, tires crunching over gravel. The motion flung her into one of the shelves. Pain flared in her shoulder. She hissed, but bit it down.

Scarface was watching her now, more curious than cautious.

"You got guts," he said. "Shame we're just supposed to keep you breathing. I bet you'd be fun if we had a little more time."

Cassie stared him down. "I bet you'd still disappoint me." That made even the big one laugh.

But in that exchange, she learned something else: they weren't planning to kill her. At least not yet. That gave her time—and time meant options.

She took a slow breath, steadying herself.

You've worked engines half your life, Miller. You know how to strip something down and build it again. This is no different. Strip down the situation. Find the faults. Build your escape.

She glanced toward the door. One lock. Manual. If she could get free before they reached their destination—if she could cause enough of a scene—maybe there was still a chance.

Cassie closed her eyes again, tuning out the motion, the men, the fear.

Not today, she thought. You don't get to be the reason he falls.

Across town, the Vault was coming to life.

Norman Tuttle stood by the big board, watching security feeds scroll past in silent sequence. Sasha was at the main console, reviewing the morning's data. Jason Nolan was in the exercise bay, sweat gleaming on his brow as he cycled through combat drills.

Norman didn't see the abduction, not live. It hit the system as a flagged alert—motion in the hangar perimeter, a security anomaly logged and instantly dismissed by the city's overtaxed dispatch AI. But Norman had built his own hooks into the network, a private layer of silent alarms tracing every place that mattered.

When the ping came, Norman felt it in his gut before he saw it on the screen. He clicked through the feeds, heart hammering as he caught the last frames: the van's tail lights, the spill of broken ceramic, Cassie's silhouette disappearing into the shadow. There was no gunfire, no struggle—just a surgical, practised extraction.

Norman froze for a heartbeat. Then all his old instincts flared. He called up the Vault's comm grid, voice steady but cold. "Sasha, bring Jason to

Control. Now.”

Sasha heard the edge in his tone and didn’t question. She keyed the override and watched Jason jog up from the lower levels, hair damp, fists still clenched from the punch bag. Norman didn’t wait for the door to close.

“Cassie’s been taken,” he said, voice stripped to the bare essentials.

Sasha was already pulling up maps, tracing the city’s grid for anything unusual. “Who would go after her?”

Norman’s jaw clenched, knuckles white on the console. “Corrido. He wants to draw Jesse out. And now—” he locked eyes with Jason “—he’s got his leverage.”

Jesse Mach drove through the city in silence; the address Norman had given him burning a hole in his jacket pocket. The meeting had left him raw and unsettled—a thousand old grievances scraping against the cold edge of new danger. He told himself he was going home to forget the whole damn thing. To bury Norman’s warnings with the rest of his regrets.

But as he pulled up outside the hangar, the feeling in his gut told him something was wrong. The rain had stopped, leaving the air washed and tense, like the world was holding its breath.

He cut the engine, stepped out. The roll-up door stood half open, the lights inside flickering. There was no music, no hum of the kettle, none of the ordinary sounds that meant Cassie was at work. The silence was total, almost oppressive.

Jesse called her name—twice, then a third time, louder. No answer.

He walked faster now, searching every corner. The bathroom was empty. The supply closet, dark and undisturbed. Out back, the alley was deserted except for a single set of fresh tire tracks vanishing into the street, water still beading in their grooves. Her ceramic coffee mug was in pieces on the floor at the entrance of the hangar.

He fumbled for his phone, thumb trembling as he dialled her number. Voicemail. He tried again, and again—each call going unanswered. A hollow panic started up in his chest, growing louder with every empty ring.

On the workbench, he found her bag—wallet inside, keys missing. The

unease sharpened into certainty. This wasn't a morning errand or a walk for air. This was something else.

Jesse's breath came shallow and quick. He saw it all in his mind's eye: the van, the struggle, Cassie forced out the door, maybe fighting, maybe shouting his name. He pressed his fists to the table, knuckles whitening, every muscle in his body wanting to break something, to do something.

He knew—somehow, without needing proof—that Norman's warning hadn't been paranoia. This was a message. Someone had reached right into his life and taken the one person who mattered. They were making it personal.

He picked up the phone again, but instead of dialling Cassie, he scrolled to Norman's number. His voice was flat, barely controlled. "Norman? It's Jesse. They have her. I'm coming in. Don't do anything stupid until I get there."

He hung up before Norman could answer, grabbed his jacket, and strode out into the cold, wet morning—old fears and older instincts roaring back to life.

The past wasn't finished with him. And now, he was done running from it.

Jesse didn't remember the ride across town. He barely registered the stop-lights or the city's waking traffic. His mind was a looping reel of Cassie's empty chair, her abandoned mug, the tire tracks in the alley. By the time he hit the industrial outskirts, the world had narrowed to a single, burning point of focus.

He pulled up outside the anonymous, windowless building Norman had described—no signage, no hint of the secrets inside. He keyed in the code, waited for the heavy security doors to unseal, and stalked into the corridor without looking back.

Inside, the Vault's lights were stark and bright, humming like a hive. Norman met him halfway down the hall, already tense, Sasha flanking him with her tablet clutched tight.

"She's gone," Jesse said, no need for preamble. "You know who did it."

Norman's face was grave. "It was a message. Victor Corrido's people are making their move."

Sasha's eyes darted between them. "How do you know it's Corrido?"

Jesse gave her a look that brooked no argument. "Because that's how he works. You want someone's attention; you take what they can't afford to lose."

Norman nodded grimly. "He's escalating. We had chatter on the grey bike returning to his base this morning. Cassie's abduction is his way of forcing us into the open. He wants you, Jesse."

Jesse's jaw clenched. He scanned the bank of monitors, the scrolling feeds, the digital city splayed out in lines and numbers. "Then we give him what he wants. But we do it my way."

Sasha opened her mouth—uncertain, maybe ready to argue—but thought better of it. "We're pulling street cams now, running facial rec on all industrial corridors, traffic feeds—nothing yet. But if Corrido wants you to see it, he'll leave a trail."

Jesse's eyes were flat and cold. "He already has. That van left tracks out back—wet treads, big block pattern. Commercial rental, probably changed plates, but it's a start."

Norman stepped closer, lowering his voice. "I know what this means to you, Jesse. But if we go after Cassie without a plan—"

Jesse cut him off. "I'm not waiting around for another briefing, Norman. You want me involved? You get me access to every piece of tech you've got. I'll find her."

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. Sasha looked to Norman; Norman gave a small, weary nod. "It's your call, Mach."

Jesse turned to Sasha. "Pull everything you have on Corrido's safehouses, known associates, vehicle records. I need the last hour of traffic cam footage on every arterial road west of here."

Sasha was already moving, fingers flying over her tablet. "On it."

Norman gestured to the operations suite. "We'll set up in here. Full access. Whatever you need."

Jesse spun on Norman as the Vault's alarms faded, his voice sharp with

old command. "Tell me where she is. I'm going after her."

Norman held his ground, hands raised to calm. "Jesse, you can't."

Jesse's glare was pure fire. "Don't try to sideline me. Cassie's out there—I'm not standing down for protocol, or for ghosts."

Norman shook his head, sadness and resolve etched deep in his features. "This isn't about protocol. It's about what Corrido wants. He wants you in the open. You walk into this, he wins. We can't afford to lose you—and neither can she."

Jesse's fists clenched at his sides, jaw rigid. "So what? We wait? We do nothing?"

Sasha, who'd been quietly queuing up a mission briefing on the wall display, turned to Jesse, her eyes steady. "We're not doing nothing. But you're not the one going after her."

He shot her a look—disbelief bordering on anger. "If not me, then who?"

Sasha tapped a comm switch, her voice echoing through the Vault. "Nolan, you're up. Briefing, ops suite. Now."

A moment later, footsteps sounded down the hall, deliberate and fast. A young man stepped in, dark-haired, athletic, sharp eyes flicking from Norman to Sasha, then settling—uncertain—on Jesse. He carried a helmet, the black suit fitting him like a second skin. Everything about him was taut, ready.

Jesse's brow furrowed, suspicion giving way to confusion. "Who the hell is this?"

Norman drew a slow breath. "Jesse—this is Jason Nolan. He's... he's our new operator. He's the one riding Street Hawk now."

The words hit Jesse like a punch. He stared at Jason—measuring, judging, refusing to let his shock show.

Sasha closed the distance, handing Jason a mission tablet, her tone all business. "Jason's the only one who can go in clean. Corrido won't recognise him. He's trained, he's ready, and he's the only shot we have of getting Cassie back without tipping our whole hand."

Jason met Jesse's gaze, nervous but determined. "I know you don't know me, sir. But I'll bring her back. I promise." For a heartbeat, the room was

silent.

Then Jesse said, "No."

The word was quiet, but it cut through the operations suite like a blade.

Jason's expression shifted. Not anger yet. Something harder to name. A tightening around the eyes. A man used to being judged and already tired of it.

Norman turned toward Jesse. "Jesse—"

"No," Jesse repeated, sharper now. "Absolutely not."

Sasha looked up from the mission tablet. "We don't have time for this."

"We're making time." Jesse's gaze never left Jason. "You don't put some kid in that suit, hand him my machine, and call it a rescue plan." Jason's jaw flexed.

"I'm standing right here," he said.

"I can see that."

"Then talk to me like I am."

The room went still again, but this silence had teeth.

Jesse took one step closer, not enough to threaten, but enough to make the old force of him fill the space. Jason did not back away. That, Jesse noticed. He hated that he noticed.

"You have any idea what you're wearing?" Jesse asked.

Jason looked down briefly at the black suit, then back at him. "Something that gives me a chance of getting Cassie back."

"That suit has buried better men than you."

"Did it bury them," Jason said, "or did they climb inside already carrying the grave?"

Norman's face tightened. "Jason."

"No," Jason said, not looking away from Jesse. "If he's got something to say, I'd rather hear it now before I'm out there with his voice in my ear."

Jesse's eyes narrowed. "You think this is about ego?"

"I think you walked in, saw me in the suit, and decided I was a mistake." Jesse opened his mouth.

No answer came quickly enough.

Jason gave a small, bitter nod. "That's what I thought."

Sasha stepped between them before the silence could turn into something worse. Not physically enough to stop either man, but enough to drag their attention back to the screens.

"Cassie does not have time for the two of you to decide which one of you owns the legend." That landed.

Jesse looked at the wall display. Traffic lines. Camera hits. Last known route. Corrido's shadow moving through the city one stolen frame at a time.

Cassie was out there.

Cassie, who had pulled him back from the edge more times than she knew. Cassie, who had looked at his ghosts and never once asked him to pretend they weren't there. Cassie, whose name was now a blinking marker on a screen because a dead man's son wanted to hurt him through anyone close enough to matter.

Jason's voice came again, lower this time.

"I'm not asking you to like me," he said. "I'm not asking you to trust me. But Corrido is waiting for you. He planned for you. He wants you angry, exposed, predictable."

Jesse looked back at him.

Jason swallowed, but kept going. "He doesn't know me."

"Neither do I," Jesse said.

"No," Jason replied. "But I'm still the best chance she has."

Norman looked between them, the old guilt in his eyes sharpened by present danger. "Jesse, he can do this."

Jesse gave a humourless laugh. "That's what you said to me once." Norman flinched.

The words hung there, ugly and true.

Sasha's voice softened, but only slightly. "This isn't 1986."

Jesse turned on her. "You think the year matters? You think the city cares what date's on the calendar when it starts taking pieces out of people?"

"No," Sasha said. "I think that's why we need everyone in this room doing their job instead of bleeding on the floor."

Jason looked at Jesse again. "Tell me what you're really afraid of." Jesse's expression hardened.

"I'm afraid you'll think the bike makes you untouchable."

"I don't."

"I'm afraid you'll mistake speed for judgment."

"I won't."

"I'm afraid you'll hear someone scream and chase the man who caused it instead of saving the person still breathing." Jason said nothing.

That silence mattered more than the answers.

Jesse studied him for a long moment. Not the suit. Not the helmet. Not the impossible shape of the old life standing in front of him.

The man.

Young. Scared. Angry. Determined.

Too familiar.

Not familiar enough.

Finally, Jesse stepped back.

"Alright," he said.

Norman exhaled quietly.

Jason did not move.

Jesse pointed toward the mission display. "You listen to Sasha. You listen to Norman. If Cassie gives you an opening, you take it. You don't chase Corrido. You don't chase pride. You don't improvise unless standing still gets someone killed."

Jason nodded once. "Understood." "And Nolan?" Jason looked at him.

Jesse's voice dropped. "Don't try to be me." Jason held his gaze.

"I wasn't planning to."

For the first time, something like approval moved through Jesse's expression. It was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

"Good," he said. "Then maybe you've got a chance."

Jason nodded, eyes steady. "Understood."

Sasha stepped in, voice softening. "We'll guide you every step. You're not alone out there."

Jason pulled on his helmet, the visor snapping down—a transformation from stranger to legacy. The launch bay doors rolled open, the city's lights beckoning beyond.

Jesse watched as Jason swung onto Street Hawk, the engine's low growl rumbling through the Vault.

For the first time in years, Jesse Mach wasn't the one answering the call—but he realised, maybe, that was the only way any of them would survive.

Jesse lingered at the edge of the bay as Jason mounted up, his presence a living shadow in the blue glow of the Vault. The hum of the bike filled the silence, a pulse from another lifetime.

He stepped forward, catching Jason's shoulder before he could lower the visor.

"Listen," Jesse said, voice low but steady. "It seems I have no choice but to put my faith in you. Out there, the city's going to throw everything it has at you. Don't trust luck. Trust the machine, trust your instincts, and trust the people guiding you. Cassie's stubborn. She'll give you a chance. Just bring her home."

Jason nodded, eyes wide, understanding the weight of the trust being placed in him.

"And Nolan?" Jesse added, letting the old hardness slip just a little. "Don't try to be me. Just be the rider she needs tonight."

Jason nodded, the helmet suddenly heavier. "I won't let you down," he said, voice muffled but certain.

Jesse let go, stepping back as Jason slid the visor down and gunned the engine.

As Street Hawk roared into the darkness, Jesse watched the tail-light fade. In that moment, for the first time in years, he allowed himself to hope that maybe—just maybe—the legacy was in the right hands.

And with that, Jason became the only thing standing between the woman Jesse loved and the darkness waiting outside.

17

THE RIDER'S CODE



The Vault felt like the inside of a pressure chamber.

Every sound was too sharp. Every breath too loud. The pulse of cooling fans, the faint electrical whine from the wall of monitors, the low mechanical murmur of Street Hawk's departing engine still vibrating through the launch bay doors long after the bike had vanished into the underground tunnel system.

Jesse Mach stood motionless at the edge of the operations platform, one hand closed around the railing so tightly the tendons stood out beneath his skin.

On the largest screen, Street Hawk's beacon cut south through Los Angeles,

a blue-white pulse moving through a digital map of alleys, storm drains, restricted access roads and city arteries that most people would never know existed. Beside it, biometric readouts tracked Jason Nolan's heart rate, respiration, grip pressure, reaction time. Numbers instead of a man. Data instead of fear.

Jesse hated it.

He hated that Cassie was somewhere out there in the dark. Hated that Norman had built another command centre beneath the city. Hated that the machine he had buried in memory was alive again, black and shining and hungry.

Most of all, he hated that someone else was riding it.

Norman Tuttle sat forward at the central console, shoulders hunched, eyes darting between telemetry feeds and police chatter. Age had slowed his body, but not his mind. His fingers still moved with the same restless precision Jesse remembered from the old days, dancing between keys, pulling order from chaos one command at a time.

Sasha Lin stood beside him, tablet in hand, jaw set. She was all controlled urgency, the kind of calm that only existed because panic had already been locked somewhere deep and told to wait its turn.

Jason's voice crackled through the speakers.

"Vault, I'm on Alameda. Traffic's light. Visibility's bad."

Sasha leaned into the mic. "Copy that. Keep your lights low. You're two point four miles from the last confirmed signal."

"Any movement from Corrido?"

"Not on open feeds," Norman said. "Which means he's either gone quiet or he wants us to think he has."

Jesse's eyes stayed fixed on the map. "He wants us watching the wrong thing."

Sasha glanced over her shoulder. "You think this is a trap?"

"I know it is."

Nobody argued.

The map refreshed. Jason's beacon accelerated, slipping beneath a freeway overpass and threading through a service road that ran parallel to the river.

Jesse stepped closer. "He's coming in too fast."

Sasha's expression tightened. "Jason, ease off ten percent. Your entry window narrows if you hit the junction at that speed."

Jason gave a short, breathless laugh. "Good to know everyone's relaxed." "Not the time," she snapped.

"Copy. Easing off."

The speed marker dropped. Barely.

Jesse heard it in the engine before the sensors flagged it. A second sound beneath Street Hawk's controlled turbine growl. Rougher. Dirtier. Lower down in the chest. The kind of mechanical snarl that came from a machine built for punishment instead of precision.

On the screen, a new heat signature appeared behind Jason.

Sasha saw it at the same moment. "Contact. Rear approach. Two hundred meters and closing."

Norman pulled up the feed from Street Hawk's rear optics. The image snapped onto the main monitor.

A motorcycle. Matte grey. Low-slung and angular beneath a shell of smooth, predatory bodywork. No plates. No visible manufacturer marks. Its headlamp burned cold through the rain, a hard white eye fixed on Street Hawk's tail.

Jason's voice sharpened. "I see him."

Jesse felt something cold settle in his gut. "Razor."

Sasha checked the matching profile. "Signature confirms. Same grey bike from the Koreatown incident. Same rider posture." Jason exhaled through the comm. "Guess he missed me." "He's not there to play," Jesse said, voice low.

Jason heard him. The silence that followed was half a second too long. Then: "Neither am I." Street Hawk surged.

On the screen, the two bikes became streaks through the wet city. Jason cut between two delivery trucks, skimmed the edge of a bus lane and dropped into a narrow industrial corridor lined with chain-link, loading bays and shuttered warehouse fronts. Razor followed without hesitation, matching the line, taking the same risks, always just far enough back to force pressure

without over committing.

"He's herding him," Jesse said.

Norman frowned. "Toward what?"

"Toward a mistake."

Sasha keyed in a route overlay. "Jason, do not let him push you east. Stay on the planned line. Repeat, stay on the planned line."

"He's blocking the turn."

"Then make a new one," Jesse said.

Jason's response came quick. "Now you're speaking my language."

Street Hawk's front wheel dipped. Jason braked hard, too hard, sending the rear wheel into a controlled slide across rain-polished asphalt. Razor lunged to close the gap, committing to the inside line. At the last possible second, Jason snapped Street Hawk out of the slide and fired through a maintenance gap barely wider than the bike itself.

Sparks spat from the footrest as he clipped the edge of a rusted barrier.

Razor followed.

Almost.

The grey bike slammed its left side into the barrier. A strip of bodywork tore free, spinning away into the street. For a moment the shell buckled, flexing in a way no advanced composite should have done.

Jesse leaned forward.

On the monitor, Razor recovered, but the damage had exposed the frame beneath the grey fairing.

It was not advanced.

It was not military.

It was a stripped-down motocross chassis, reinforced and modified, brutal and clever, but nowhere near the technological ghost it had pretended to be.

Sasha stared. "That's impossible."

Norman's eyes narrowed. "No. It's theatre."

Jesse's mouth tightened. "All of it. The silhouette, the shell, the posture. He wanted us to think we were looking at another prototype."

Jason's voice came through, breath tight. "So what is it?"

"A bluff," Jesse said. "A damn good one."

Razor was still behind him, but the illusion had cracked. The grey bike snarled and shook now, its false armour flapping loose along one side, the exposed frame juddering under the strain. It was fast, but not graceful. Dangerous, but not surgical.

Street Hawk was surgical.

Jason saw the difference. Felt it through the bars. The machine beneath him stopped feeling like something he was borrowing and started feeling like something that trusted him to finish the sentence.

He dropped low, eyes tracking the flooded curve ahead.

"Tunnel entrance in thirty meters," Sasha said. "Left side. Old drainage cut. It'll take you under the target block."

"Razor's still on me."

"Not for long," Jesse said. "He's overcorrecting on the damaged side. Make him lean left."

Jason's grip tightened around the bars.

"Is that an instruction," he said, breath tight, "or are you trying to ride through me?"

The operations room went silent for half a second.

Rain hammered against Street Hawk's visor. Razor's headlight bounced in the mirror, wild and hungry.

Jesse leaned closer to the mic. "It's experience."

"It sounds like control."

"It sounds like the reason you're still upright."

Sasha cut in, sharp. "Both of you, clean comms."

Jason ignored her. "I've got him."

"You've got a rider behind you who wants you angry," Jesse said. "You've got a hostage ahead of you who needs you thinking. So stop proving you're not me and ride the damn road."

The line hit harder than Jason wanted it to.

For one flashing second, he saw not the street in front of him, but the operations room below the city. Jesse watching every movement. Norman measuring every pulse. Sasha analysing every mistake before he had finished making it.

The bike under him suddenly felt crowded.

"I'm not proving anything," Jason snapped.

"Yes, you are," Jesse said. "So did I. That's how I know."

Razor surged closer, front wheel kicking spray across Street Hawk's rear sensors.

Sasha's voice came through, clipped and urgent. "Jason, damaged side is confirmed. Jesse's right. Force him left or he boxes you before the tunnel." Jason's jaw clenched.

He hated that they were right.

He hated that Jesse was right most of all. "Fine," Jason said. "But I'm choosing the angle." Jesse's answer came low, almost approving.

"Then choose it fast."

Jason didn't ask how Jesse knew.

He just did it.

Street Hawk drifted right, inviting the chase. Razor took the bait, accelerating into the gap. Jason snapped back left and cut across the front of him, forcing Razor to counter lean on the weakened side of the bike. The damaged fairing tore completely free. Razor's machine wobbled, front suspension bucking as the exposed frame caught the impact of a pothole hidden beneath standing water.

The grey bike kicked sideways.

Razor fought it, boots scraping the asphalt, one knee striking the road hard enough to throw sparks. For a second he held the machine upright through sheer rage.

Then the back wheel lost grip.

The bike slid out beneath him, skidding across the road in a storm of sparks and shattered plastic. Razor rolled clear, hit the kerb, and disappeared behind a spray of rainwater.

Jason didn't look back.

Street Hawk plunged into the drainage tunnel and the city vanished behind him.

The underground swallowed sound differently.

Above, Los Angeles roared, argued, bled and burned. Down here, beneath

the concrete skin of the city, everything became echo and shadow. Street Hawk's engine dropped into a low, controlled growl as Jason guided the bike through the old service channel, its tires hissing through shallow water.

His HUD adjusted to the darkness. Lines appeared across the visor: structural supports, heat pockets, elevation shifts, old utility access points. The world became blue wireframe and cold geometry.

And somewhere above him, Cassie Miller was waiting.

Or dying.

Jason forced the thought away before it could grow teeth.

"Vault, I'm under the target block."

Sasha's voice responded instantly. "Confirmed. I'm piggybacking your feed onto city maintenance records. You've got three access points. North stairwell is too exposed. East hatch is welded shut. There's a service ladder ten meters ahead on your right. That should bring you up into the storage corridor."

"Should?"

"Would you prefer I lie?"

"Honestly? Little bit."

Norman cut in. "No chatter now. Razor's down but not out. He'll be calling Corrido."

Jason slowed Street Hawk to a stop beneath an overhead access shaft. Rainwater dripped through a rusted grille above, pattering against the bike's fairing like nervous fingers. He killed the engine. The sudden silence pressed against him.

For a moment, all he could hear was his own breathing.

Then Jesse's voice came through, quieter than before.

"Jason."

He paused, one hand on the ladder. "Yeah?"

"You're not going in there to win a fight. You're going in there to bring her home."

Jason looked up into the dark.

The words landed somewhere deeper than strategy. They cut through the machine, the myth, the pressure, the terrible eight-letter name he had been

wearing like armour since he first lowered the helmet.

Street Hawk.

He thought of Sasha's numbers. Eighty percent. Pattern overlap. Instinct match. The file he wasn't supposed to see. The way Norman watched him sometimes, like a memory had learned to breathe again. The way Jesse's old pain seemed to recognise him before Jesse himself ever did.

Maybe they had not chosen Jason Nolan.

Maybe they had chosen the nearest thing to a ghost.

His fingers tightened on the ladder.

"Copy," he said.

But his voice sounded thinner than he wanted. He climbed.

The storage corridor smelled of damp cardboard, rusted metal and old smoke.

Jason emerged through the floor hatch inch by inch, keeping low, letting the helmet optics map the hallway before he committed his weight. Two heat signatures glowed through the wall ahead. One pacing. One seated.

His pulse kicked.

Cassie.

He eased himself up and slid behind a stack of broken office furniture. Somewhere deeper inside the building, voices carried through the walls: one male, one female, both sharp with impatience. A third voice barked something in Spanish over a radio and was answered by static.

Jason moved.

Every step was measured. Every breath deliberate. The suit dampened the sound of his boots, but the building itself seemed determined to betray him. Loose grit shifted underfoot. Pipes knocked in the walls. Rain beat against the sheet-metal roof hard enough to cover some noises and sharpen others. He reached the corner and angled the helmet camera through the gap.

Cassie sat tied to a chair in the middle of what had once been a dispatch office. Her wrists were bound, her lip split, one cheek bruised dark beneath the eye. But her chin was high. Her gaze was clear.

Defiant.

Jason understood immediately why Jesse loved her.

A woman stood near the desk with a pistol hanging loose at her side. Angel. Jason recognised her from the surveillance captures. Long braid, knife-sharp stare, the posture of someone who was never as relaxed as she wanted you to think.

Oscar stood by the window, one hand pressed to an earpiece, eyes flicking toward the loading yard below.

Cassie was talking.

Jason almost smiled.

Of course she was.

"I'm just saying," she said, voice rough but steady, "for a criminal organisation with this much dramatic flair, your hospitality is terrible."

Angel looked over slowly. "You talk a lot for someone tied to a chair." "I'm nervous. It brings out my charm."

Oscar muttered something under his breath.

Cassie shifted her wrists behind the chair. Jason saw what she was doing. She had found a sharp edge on the metal frame and was working the plastic tie against it, one tiny movement at a time.

Jesse had been right.

Give her an opening.

Jason scanned the room again. Door behind Angel. Window to the yard. Cabinet against the far wall. Loose bolts and rusted tools on the floor. The old building was a graveyard of useful things.

He reached down, picked up a small metal washer, and waited.

On comms, Sasha whispered, "Jason, Razor is moving. He's alive. Limping, but mobile. He's two blocks out and angry."

"How long?"

"Two minutes, maybe less."

Norman added, "Corrido's signal just lit up. He's nearby." Jason's eyes stayed on Cassie.

Jesse came through again, barely audible. "She'll know when to move." Jason threw the washer.

It skipped across the concrete floor, struck the leg of a metal filing cabinet,

and rang out sharply.

Angel turned, pistol rising.

Cassie moved.

She threw her weight sideways, chair and all, slamming into Angel's knees. Angel swore and stumbled. Oscar spun from the window, reaching for his weapon.

Jason burst from cover.

He hit Oscar first, shoulder driving into the man's ribs, carrying him backwards into the wall. The pistol clattered away. Jason pivoted, ducked Angel's wild shot, and drove his elbow into her wrist hard enough to make the gun drop.

Cassie twisted, kicked out, and hooked Angel's ankle as she tried to regain balance.

Angel went down.

"Nice timing," Cassie snapped.

Jason pulled a tactical cutter from his belt and sliced through the ties at her wrists. "You always criticise during rescues?"

"Only sloppy ones."

Her hands came free. She hissed as blood returned to her fingers.

Jason cut her ankles loose. "Can you run?"

Cassie stood too fast, swayed, caught herself on his shoulder, and shoved the weakness down with visible fury. "Try keeping up."

Behind them, Oscar groaned. Angel rolled toward the fallen pistol.

Cassie saw it first.

She kicked the weapon under the desk, grabbed a heavy wrench from the floor, and backed toward the door.

Jason's HUD flashed.

MOVEMENT: SOUTH CORRIDOR.

Razor appeared at the far end of the hallway, helmet gone, face bloodied, eyes burning with humiliation. He had a pistol in one hand and murder in the other.

“You,” he snarled.

Jason put himself between Razor and Cassie.

For one cold second, the hallway collapsed into a straight line: Razor, Jason, Cassie, escape.

Then Razor charged.

The fight was ugly.

There was no elegance in it. No clean choreography. No heroic rhythm.

Razor hit like a man who had built his whole life around impact. His first punch caught Jason across the side of the helmet and drove him into the wall hard enough to blur the HUD. Jason answered with a knee to the ribs, but Razor absorbed it, snarled, and slammed him through a half rotted office partition.

Cassie swung the wrench at Angel, who had recovered enough to come at her with a knife pulled from her boot. Metal cracked against bone. Angel screamed and dropped the blade.

“Jason!” Sasha shouted through the comm. “Get out now!”

Jason heard her, but Razor was on him again, one hand gripping the front of his suit, the other hammering into his body armour. The suit took the worst of it. His ribs took the rest.

“You think that bike makes you him?” Razor spat.

Jason drove his forearm up, breaking the grip. “I’m getting tired of people asking me that.”

Razor swung again.

Jason ducked, caught his arm, and twisted hard, using Razor’s momentum to send him crashing into the steel frame of an old loading door. Razor staggered, but didn’t go down.

He laughed instead, blood on his teeth. “You don’t even know what you are.”

The words hit harder than the punch.

For one heartbeat Jason saw the MACH file again. Jesse’s photo. Sasha’s overlay. Norman’s stare. A ghost-shaped space with Jason’s name written over it.

He faltered.

Razor saw it and lunged.

Cassie didn't.

She stepped in from the side and smashed the wrench into Razor's injured knee.

Razor screamed and dropped.

"Less identity crisis," she snapped. "More running." Jason blinked, then grabbed her hand. They ran.

The loading bay opened onto a maze of wet concrete, shipping pallets and rusting chain-link fences. Rain came down in hard silver lines, turning every surface slick and treacherous. Street Hawk waited fifty meters away beneath the overhang of an old vehicle ramp, black armour beaded with water, engine dormant but ready.

Sasha's voice came fast. "Direct route to bike is exposed. Two hostiles in the yard, one on the west gantry. Corrido's signal just entered the perimeter." Norman swore softly.

Jesse's voice cut through. "Jason, do you see the forklift?"

Jason's eyes flicked left. "Yeah."

"Use it."

Jason didn't question him.

He and Cassie sprinted toward the rusted forklift parked beside a stack of crates. Gunfire cracked from the west gantry, bullets spitting sparks from the concrete. Jason shoved Cassie down behind the forklift, reached through the open cab, and slammed the ignition bypass Norman had taught him two days ago.

Nothing.

"Come on," he growled.

Another shot punched through the forklift's safety cage.

Cassie ducked, then reached under the dash and yanked two wires free. "Move."

Jason stared.

"I fix things," she said.

She twisted the wires together. The forklift coughed, shuddered, then roared to life.

Jason threw it into gear and rammed the forks into the crate stack. The whole pile lurched sideways, collapsing in a crash of wood and metal, blocking the line of fire from the gantry.

“Go!” Jason shouted.

They ran again.

Street Hawk’s systems woke as Jason approached. The cockpit lit in response to the helmet, canopy sliding open, HUD syncing before he was even in the saddle.

Cassie stopped short for half a second.

Despite the rain, despite the blood, despite the terror still trembling under her skin, she stared at the machine.

“So it’s real,” she whispered.

Jason swung on. “Very.”

Behind them, a black SUV rolled slowly into the far end of the yard.

It did not skid. Did not rush. Did not announce itself with panic or rage.

It arrived like it owned the moment.

Victor Corrido stepped out beneath the harsh glare of a broken security lamp, rain sliding off his tailored coat. He held a pistol in one hand. In the other, a small black detonator rested against his palm.

Oscar limped into view behind him, blood streaking his face. Angel followed, cradling her injured wrist. Razor dragged himself from the loading bay doors, fury twisting his features.

Corrido looked past all of them.

Straight at Jason. Then at the bike.

His smile was small and satisfied.

“Mr Nolan,” he called. “I wondered if the new ghost would come when summoned.”

Jason’s hands tightened on the bars.

Cassie climbed on behind him, moving stiffly but with determination. Her arms circled his waist.

Corrido’s gaze shifted to her. “Miss Miller. I hope my people were not too discourteous.”

Cassie’s voice was cold. “I’ve had worse dates.”

Corrido's smile widened by a fraction. "I can see why Mach kept you close."

Jesse made a sound in the Vault that was almost a growl.

Jason kept the bike still.

"Let us go," he said.

Corrido looked genuinely amused. "You misunderstand. I already have."

Sasha's fingers froze over the keyboard. "What did he say?"

Corrido lifted the detonator slightly, not pressing it. Not threatening. Displaying.

"You think tonight was about keeping her?" he said. "No. Tonight was about seeing who came. How fast. From which direction. With what support. Every myth has a centre of gravity, Mr Nolan. Apply pressure in the right place, and the whole legend moves." Jason felt cold spread through his chest.

Norman leaned toward the monitor. "Sasha?"

She was already typing, pulling feeds, checking timestamps, scanning network traffic.

Her face changed.

"Damn it."

Jesse turned. "What?"

"We've been mapped," she said. "Not the Vault location. Not exactly. But our route architecture, response timing, signal relays—he used the rescue to watch how we move."

Corrido could not hear her, but he seemed to know.

"You brought me the one thing I needed," he said. "Proof that Street Hawk answers when the right person screams." Jason's pulse hammered. "You're done."

"Not tonight."

Corrido stepped backward toward the SUV.

Jason almost launched after him.

Almost.

Then Cassie's fingers tightened against his suit.

"Jason," she said, low enough that only he could hear. "Get me out." The

mission.

Not the fight.

Jason swallowed the rage.

Street Hawk roared to life.

Corrido's men opened fire.

Jason threw the bike forward, twisting through the yard as bullets struck the ground around them. The canopy shield deflected one round with a sharp metallic ping. Cassie clung tighter, breath hot against his back.

"Route?" Jason snapped.

Sasha recovered fast. "East gate. Then service ramp. I'll blind the nearest traffic cams."

"Corrido?"

Norman answered. "SUV is moving. He's not pursuing yet."

Jesse's voice was grim. "He doesn't need to."

Jason shot through the east gate, Street Hawk smashing the rusted chain as if it were paper. The bike hit the service road and surged into the rain, tires biting, engine rising into that impossible howl.

Behind them, the warehouse shrank into darkness.

For a moment, Jason thought they were clear.

Then headlights flared in the mirror.

The SUV burst from a side access road, roaring hard, far faster than something that heavy should have moved. Corrido had not stayed behind after all. He came after them with controlled aggression, using the wider streets, cutting corners, forcing civilian vehicles aside as he gained.

Sasha cursed under her breath. "He's on you. Black SUV, rear approach, eighty meters."

Jason glanced at the mirror. "I see him."

Cassie looked back and went rigid. "That's him."

"Hold on."

Street Hawk accelerated.

The city became streaks of reflected light. Jason carved through the industrial grid, using alleys and cut-throughs no car should have been able to follow. Corrido followed anyway, not matching Street Hawk's agility but

anticipating its exits. He was not chasing blindly. He had planned for this.

Of course he had.

Jason took a left so tight the rear wheel skipped over a manhole cover. Cassie gasped but held on.

Corrido's SUV overshot the turn, then corrected through a side street, reappearing ahead for half a second before dropping behind again.

"He's reading the grid," Jesse said from the Vault. "He's not chasing the bike. He's chasing the route."

Sasha's hands flew over the console. "Jason, break pattern. Ignore HUD route. Take the next drainage cut."

"It's flooded."

"Then don't drown." Jason almost laughed.

Almost.

He dropped Street Hawk into the drainage cut. Water exploded on either side of the bike, the tires slicing through the shallow channel as Corrido's SUV appeared above on the parallel road, keeping pace through chain-link and concrete pillars.

The two vehicles ran side by side through different worlds.

Street Hawk below, black and impossibly smooth. Corrido above, headlights glaring through rain like predatory eyes.

Then the road narrowed.

The SUV could not follow.

Corrido's headlights vanished behind a row of concrete supports.

Jason pushed onward until the HUD showed the Vault route opening ahead.

Cassie's grip loosened by a fraction.

"Is he gone?" she asked.

Jason checked the mirror.

No headlights.

"No," he said. "Just not behind us."

The Vault doors opened like the mouth of some buried machine.

Jason brought Street Hawk in too fast and braked hard enough to make the

tires scream against the concrete. The bike slid half a meter before settling in the launch bay, engine growling, bodywork steaming from rain and heat.

For one second nobody moved.

Then Jesse was running.

Cassie climbed off the bike on unsteady legs. She barely made it two steps before Jesse caught her, pulling her into him with a force that made forty years of restraint vanish in a single breath.

He held her like the world had tried to take her and failed only because he refused to let go.

"You okay?" he asked, voice broken down to something raw.

Cassie nodded against his shoulder. "I am now."

Jason swung off Street Hawk and removed his helmet. The air hit his face cold and stale. His hands shook. His ribs ached. Rainwater and sweat ran down the back of his neck. Somewhere near his temple, blood trickled from a cut he did not remember getting.

Norman approached first, eyes moving over him with clinical concern and something warmer beneath it.

"You brought her back," Norman said.

Jason looked past him to the bike.

The right fairing was scored from gunfire. One of the rear stabilisers was throwing sparks. The telemetry cable near the lower cradle had torn loose and dragged along the ground for the last two miles. Street Hawk looked whole from a distance, but up close Jason could see the damage.

He had brought Cassie back.

But he had not come back clean.

Sasha came down from Control with her tablet clutched in one hand. She should have looked relieved. Part of her did. But the rest of her was already inside the data, chasing the thing Corrido had left behind.

"Jason," she said quietly.

He knew from her tone.

"What?"

She turned the tablet so he could see the screen. Route lines. Signal bursts. Response times. Camera pings. Not enough to reveal the Vault, but enough

to show the shape of their hidden world.

"He used us," she said. "The kidnapping. The warehouse. Razor. All of it. He wasn't just trying to hurt Jesse."

Jesse looked over, still holding Cassie. "What are you saying?" Sasha swallowed. "I'm saying Cassie's rescue was part of the plan." The words emptied the bay.

Cassie pulled back from Jesse slowly. "No."

Norman's face had gone pale. "How much did he get?"

"Enough to know our operational radius. Enough to know Street Hawk responds from beneath the city. Enough to know Jason is the rider. Enough to know Jesse is connected."

Jason felt the weight of every eye turn toward him.

He looked at Jesse.

For a moment he expected anger. Blame. The old rider telling the new one he had been too slow, too predictable, too reckless.

Instead Jesse looked at him with something worse.

Understanding.

Jason's throat tightened. "I went after her."

Jesse nodded once. "I know."

"I followed the route. I did what we planned."

"I know."

"But he wanted that. He wanted me to move."

Jesse released Cassie carefully and stepped toward him. "That's not on you."

Jason laughed once, short and bitter. "Feels pretty on me." Sasha's expression softened, but she said nothing.

Jason looked back at Street Hawk. At the black armour, the torn cable, the scored fairing. At the machine that had carried him through fire and rain and still somehow looked like judgment.

"He knew I'd come," Jason said.

Norman answered quietly. "He knew Street Hawk would."

There it was again.

Not Jason.

Street Hawk.

The ghost. The myth. The old pattern with a new man inside it.

Jason felt suddenly tired in a way no sleep would fix.

Jesse stepped closer, lowering his voice. "You saved Cassie. That was the job."

"And gave Corrido a map."

"You made a choice."

"Did I?" Jason looked at him then, all the buried fear finally surfacing. "Or did I just do what your machine knew I'd do? What your old files said I'd do? Eighty percent, right? That's what Sasha found. Eighty percent match. I react like you. I ride like you. I make the same calls."

Jason stared at the route trace on Sasha's monitor until the lines blurred.

The blue path was his.

Street Hawk leaving the Vault. Street Hawk cutting through service roads. Street Hawk entering the drainage network. Street Hawk reaching Cassie. Street Hawk escaping.

Every choice rendered clean after the fact. Every instinct translated into data. Every risk reduced to a line someone else could study.

Corrido had studied it.

That was the part Jason couldn't get past.

He had brought Cassie home. She was alive. Jesse had her back. By every human measure, that should have been enough.

But the map kept glowing.

"So I did exactly what he wanted," Jason said.

Sasha looked over from the console. "No. You saved Cassie."

"And gave him our route architecture."

"You gave him fragments."

"Fragments were enough for him to plan this."

Norman rubbed at his eyes. "Jason—"

"No." Jason turned on him, the fatigue and adrenaline finally sharpening into something dangerous. "Don't soften it. Don't put a better name on it because everyone got back breathing. He pulled us out into the open, and I followed the line."

Jesse, who had been standing near the recovery-room glass, turned slowly. Cassie was visible beyond it, wrapped in a foil blanket, Sasha's medic kit open beside her. Alive. Bruised. Furious. Alive.

"That's the job," Jesse said. "Sometimes you take the hit that keeps someone breathing."

Jason laughed once, without humour. "Is that what this is? The old rider teaching the new one how guilt works?"

Jesse's eyes hardened. "Careful."

Jason stepped closer. "Why? Because I might say something true?"

Norman moved as if to intervene, but Sasha caught his sleeve and stopped him.

Jason looked between them — Norman, Sasha, Jesse — and the shape of the room suddenly made sense in the worst possible way. Everyone watching. Everyone measuring. Everyone seeing something in him that had been there before he ever walked in.

"I heard you," Jason said.

No one answered.

His gaze shifted to Sasha.

"Eighty percent," he said.

Sasha went still.

Norman looked away first.

Jason nodded slowly. "That's what I thought."

Jesse frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Jason's voice dropped, but the anger stayed. "Ask them."

The silence that followed was not confusion. It was confirmation.

Jason swallowed, the taste of smoke and rain still caught in his throat. "Eighty percent behavioural overlap. Instinct match. Pattern resonance. Whatever clean little phrase makes it easier to say I ride enough like you for the machine to feel comfortable." Jesse looked at Norman.

Norman said nothing.

That was answer enough.

Jason's face tightened. "Tell me the truth. Did you choose me because I could ride, or because I was close enough to him to make everyone feel like

the ghost still knew the way home?”

Sasha’s voice was quiet. “Jason—”

“No. I want an answer.”

Norman looked as if every year of his life had arrived at once.

“I chose you,” he said carefully, “because you survived pressure in ways most people don’t.”

Jason shook his head. “That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only honest one I have.”

Jason turned to Jesse then, and the hurt in his face was worse than the anger.

“And you?” he asked. “What do you see when you look at me?” Jesse did not answer quickly.

That hurt too.

Jason’s mouth tightened, and when he spoke again, the words came lower, almost stripped bare.

“Maybe Corrido didn’t predict Street Hawk. Maybe he predicted the ghost you all keep seeing when you look at me.” Silence.

Sasha closed her eyes briefly.

Norman looked away.

Jesse held Jason’s gaze.

For a long moment, the two men stood facing each other across the launch bay: origin and echo, past and possibility, both of them bruised by the same machine in different eras. Then Jesse said, “You’re not me.” Jason’s jaw flexed.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know exactly that,” Jesse said. “Because if I’d been out there tonight, I’d have gone after Corrido the second he stepped into the yard.” Jason said nothing.

Jesse’s voice softened. “You didn’t. You brought her home.”

Cassie looked at Jason then, and the gratitude in her eyes was almost too much to carry.

Norman cleared his throat, but his voice came rough. “We’ll deal with Corrido.”

Sasha nodded, though her eyes stayed on the data. "But not tonight. Tonight we lock down every relay, burn every route he touched, and assume anything we used during the rescue is compromised."

Jesse glanced at the damaged bike. "And repair Street Hawk." Jason looked at the machine again.

The legend had come home.

Cassie was alive.

By every simple measure, they had won.

But somewhere beyond the reinforced walls of Vault-Twelve, Victor Corrido now knew more than he had known an hour ago. He knew the ghost answered. He knew the rider could be pulled by the heart instead of the mission. He knew the old wound still bled.

Jason felt the truth settle over the room like smoke.

Cassie was safe.

That should have felt like victory.

Instead, beneath the cold blue lights of the Vault, Jason stared at the damage across Street Hawk's frame and understood.

Victor Corrido had not lost Cassie. He had let them take her back.

Across the city, in the back seat of a black SUV gliding through the rain, Victor Corrido watched the last stolen burst of telemetry flicker across a secure tablet.

A rough map. Incomplete, imperfect, but alive with possibility.

Angel sat opposite him, wrist bound, face pale with pain and fury. Razor occupied the far corner, one leg stretched awkwardly, blood drying along his jaw.

Nobody spoke for a while.

Corrido enlarged the final route trace with two fingers. A faint smile touched his mouth.

"They think tonight was the rescue," Razor muttered.

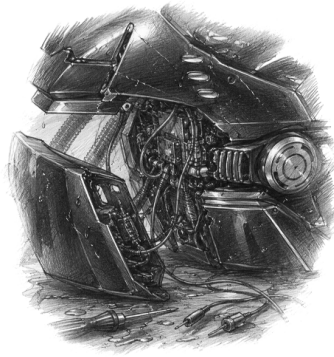
Corrido did not look up. "No."

Rain streaked the window beside him, turning the city lights into long, bleeding lines.

“Tonight,” he said, “was the invitation.”

The SUV turned west and disappeared into the storm.

COUNTERSTRIKE



The Vault did not sleep.

It only dimmed.

After the rescue, the lights dropped to their low-cycle setting, bathing the concrete walls in a cold blue half-dark that made the place feel more like a bunker after a war than a miracle hidden beneath the city. Monitors stayed alive. Servers hummed. Cooling fans breathed in slow mechanical rhythm. Somewhere in the maintenance bay, Street Hawk sat in pieces, its panels open, its black armour scored and rain-streaked from the night's violence.

The machine had come home.

So had Cassie.

But nobody in the Vault felt saved.

Cassie Miller sat on the edge of a narrow medical cot in the recovery room, a foil blanket draped around her shoulders, one hand wrapped around a mug of coffee she hadn't touched. A small cut above her eyebrow had been cleaned and taped. Dark bruises had begun to bloom beneath her jaw and around one wrist, the colour deepening with every hour. The sedative they had used on her still dragged at the edges of her body, leaving her movements slow and slightly delayed, as if the world were reaching her half a second late.

Jesse stood by the door.

He hadn't moved in nearly twenty minutes.

Cassie could feel him watching her, not in the way doctors watched patients, or soldiers watched doors. Jesse looked at her like he was trying to convince himself she was solid. Real. Still there. Every few seconds his eyes flicked to the bruises at her wrist, then away again, as though looking at them for too long might undo whatever control he had left.

"You're hovering," she said.

Jesse blinked. "I'm not hovering."

"You've been standing in exactly the same spot since Sasha left."

"I'm making sure nobody comes in."

"Jess, we're inside a secret underground facility with blast doors, facial scanners and a motorcycle that looks like it was designed by angry ghosts. I think I'm safe from random visitors." He almost smiled.

Almost.

Cassie shifted on the cot, wincing as her shoulder complained. Jesse moved instantly, taking half a step forward before stopping himself. She saw it.

His restraint hurt more than the bruises.

"Come here," she said softly.

Jesse hesitated.

Cassie raised an eyebrow. "That wasn't a tactical suggestion."

He crossed the room slowly and sat beside her, careful not to crowd her. For a man who had once thrown himself into gunfire and impossible turns,

Jesse Mach could be strangely tentative when tenderness was required. He rested his hands on his knees, fingers curled inward, knuckles pale.

Cassie watched him for a moment.

Then she reached over and took one of his hands.

The tension in him shuddered once, deep and quiet. "I'm here," she said.

His jaw tightened. "You shouldn't have been taken."

"That's not on you."

"Everything about this is on me."

"No." Her grip firmed around his fingers. "Victor Corrido did this. His people did this. Don't you dare hand him the satisfaction of blaming yourself for being loved by someone."

The words hit him harder than she expected. His eyes dropped.

Cassie softened. "Jess."

"I saw the van in my head," he said, voice low. "All night. Every route. Every place they could've taken you. Every second I wasn't there."

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have."

"Because you're Street Hawk?" He flinched.

Cassie regretted it immediately, but she didn't take it back. Some wounds had to be touched before they could be cleaned.

Jesse looked at the floor, the blue light carving shadows into the lines of his face. "Because I used to know when the city was turning bad. I used to feel it before anyone else did."

"You felt this," she said. "You just didn't know where it would land." He didn't answer.

Cassie set the mug aside and shifted closer. "I was scared," she admitted.

That brought his eyes back to hers.

"I'm not going to pretend I wasn't," she continued. "I woke up in that van and for about thirty seconds I thought, this is it. This is how Jesse's past finally cashes the cheque." His face tightened.

"But then I thought, no. Not like this. Not tied up in the back of a van while some rent-a-thug with a personality disorder makes bad jokes." She gave him a small, tired smile. "So I started looking for weak points."

Despite himself, Jesse huffed something that almost became a laugh.

"Of course you did."

"I fix things."

"I know."

She squeezed his hand. "And Jason got me out."

Jesse looked toward the wall, as if he could see through it to the launch bay where Jason had disappeared after the debrief.

Cassie followed his gaze. "He's carrying it badly."

"He thinks he failed."

"He saved me."

"He also knows Corrido used him."

Cassie was quiet for a moment. The truth of it sat between them, ugly and unavoidable. Victor Corrido had not fumbled. He had not lost control. He had set bait, measured the response, and let his enemies celebrate just long enough to realise the hook was still inside them.

"He's young," Cassie said.

"He's thirty-two." "You know what I mean." Jesse did.

Young was not age. Young was believing a clean win existed. Young was thinking that saving someone meant the story moved in only one direction afterwards.

"He needs to know it's not his fault," she said.

Jesse gave a faint, bitter smile. "You think he'll listen to me?"

"He might, if you stop treating him like a mirror you don't want to look into." That landed.

Jesse looked at her slowly.

Cassie held his gaze, steady despite the bruises, despite the exhaustion, despite the fact she had been drugged and kidnapped and dragged into the centre of a war she had never asked to join.

"You want the truth?" she said. "You're both doing it. You look at him and see the parts of yourself you lost. He looks at you and sees the parts of himself everyone expects him to become. Neither of you are seeing the man in front of you."

Jesse's throat moved.

He looked older then. Not weak. Not broken. Just worn down by the awful precision of someone who loved him enough to speak plainly. "He brought you back," Jesse said.

"Yes."

"I know what that cost."

"So tell him that."

Outside the recovery room, the Vault hummed on. Somewhere, metal clanged softly as Norman worked on the bike. Somewhere else, Sasha was tearing apart the data Corrido had stolen. The city above them kept moving, unaware that its old ghost and new rider were both bleeding in different rooms beneath its feet.

Cassie leaned against Jesse's shoulder, just enough to let him hold some of her weight.

He wrapped an arm around her carefully.

For a little while, neither of them spoke.

Sometimes survival was loud. Engines. Gunfire. Sirens.

Sometimes it was the sound of two people breathing in the dark, still here, still holding on.

Jason found Jesse in the operations room just after three in the morning. Or maybe Jesse found him.

It was hard to tell in the Vault. People drifted through its corridors like thoughts they hadn't finished having, pulled by monitors, alarms, memories. Nobody really slept. They just relocated their exhaustion.

The main lights were down, leaving the operations suite washed in blue from the wall display. Corrido's stolen route traces glowed across the city map: lines of movement, response times, camera pings, dead zones, likely observation points. Sasha had marked compromised paths in red. Norman had layered old municipal records over the top, pale grey streets beneath newer ones, the city showing its bones.

Jason stood alone in front of it, arms folded, still wearing the lower half of the rider suit. The top half hung loose around his waist, undershirt dark with sweat. He looked younger without the armour. Younger and angrier.

Jesse paused in the doorway.

Jason saw his reflection in the black glass of a dead monitor.

"You going to tell me I'm standing wrong?" he asked.

Jesse stepped inside. "Wasn't planning to." "That'll be a first."

The words had an edge, but not enough heat to become a fight. Not yet.

Jesse moved beside him, keeping a few feet between them. Together, they looked at the map.

For a while, neither spoke.

The city glowed back at them. Los Angeles reduced to angles and probabilities. Choke points. Blind corners. Escape routes. Places where people lived, worked, drove home, bought groceries, crossed streets without ever knowing that men like Corrido could turn their ordinary routes into weapons.

Jason pointed at one of the red lines. "That was mine."

Jesse followed his finger. "Your approach route."

"My instinct."

"Maybe."

Jason gave him a sideways look. "You don't think it was?"

"I think instinct sounds cleaner when it's on a screen." Jason looked back at the map. "It felt clean out there." That made Jesse turn.

Jason's face stayed fixed on the display, but something in his voice had changed. The anger was still there, but underneath it was confession.

"That's the part nobody wants to hear," Jason said. "Everyone keeps telling me what the bike costs. What it takes. What it does to you. But when I'm on it..." He stopped.

Jesse waited.

Jason swallowed. "When I'm on it, everything lines up. The noise stops. The city makes sense. For once in my life, I don't feel like I'm reacting too late to things that already happened. I see the road. I see the gaps. I see what needs doing."

He let out a small, humourless laugh. "That's what scares me." Jesse looked back at the map.

There it was.

Not arrogance. Not recklessness.

The hook.

The thing the machine gave before it took. "Yeah," Jesse said quietly. "That's how it starts." Jason glanced at him.

"Not with the bullets," Jesse continued. "Not with the speed. Not even with the first time you realise nothing on the road can catch you. It starts with the clarity. You get a few seconds where the whole world finally makes sense, and you start chasing that feeling harder than you chase the bad guys."

Jason's jaw tightened. "Maybe that's your story."

Jesse nodded. "Maybe."

"Maybe you're so afraid of what it did to you that you can't see what it could do for someone else."

"That possible too."

Jason blinked, wrong-footed by the admission.

Jesse looked at him then. "You think I want to hate this? You think I wanted to spend forty years flinching every time I heard a bike open up under an overpass?"

Jason said nothing.

"I loved it," Jesse said.

The words came out rougher than he expected.

"I loved that machine. Loved the speed. Loved the way the city looked when I was moving through it faster than fear could keep up. There were nights I felt like every broken thing in Los Angeles could be fixed if Norman gave me the right route and I hit it hard enough."

He looked at the map again, but he was no longer seeing the map.

"That's the lie," he said.

Jason's voice softened despite himself. "What is?"

"That because you can get there faster, you understand what needs saving." Silence settled between them.

From somewhere below, a tool clanged against concrete. Norman, probably, still refusing to rest. A faint murmur of Sasha's voice drifted through the open channel from the analysis bay. Jason studied Jesse's profile. "The red hatchback." Jesse went still.

Jason immediately regretted saying it, but did not take it back.

“Sasha told me enough,” he said. “Not details. Just that Corrido’s trying to recreate something.” Jesse’s face closed.

For a moment, Jason thought that would be the end of it. Another locked door. Another piece of history guarded by a man who had spent decades mistaking silence for control.

Then Jesse spoke.

“There was a woman driving,” he said. “Kid in the back. I don’t know if it was a boy or girl. I should. That’s the kind of thing a decent man would know after seeing a face every night for forty years.” Jason did not move.

“I was chasing a Bronco. Bad guy still loose. Hostage already recovered from the other vehicle. News chopper overhead. Norman in my ear. Everything moving too fast and still somehow slow enough for me to make the wrong decision with full awareness.”

“They lived,” Jason said quietly.

Jesse’s mouth tightened. “That’s what everyone told me.”

“But they did.” “Yes.”

Jason waited.

Jesse looked down at his hands.

“They lived, and I still used them as proof that I’d failed. That’s the kind of selfish guilt no one warns you about. You turn other people’s survival into your punishment because it gives you something to carry. Makes the pain feel useful.”

Jason absorbed that.

The admission sat between them, heavier than accusation.

“So your lesson is don’t chase,” Jason said.

Jesse shook his head. “No.”

“Then what?”

“My lesson is don’t let the chase choose for you.” Jason looked back at the red lines on the map.

Jesse stepped closer and pointed toward the overlapping routes. “Corrido understands pursuit. He understands guilt. He understands men who think stopping the villain matters more than asking who else is being used by the villain to shape the road.”

"He knows you."

"He knows the worst version of me." Jason's eyes flicked toward him.

Jesse held the look. "That's not the same thing." The words seemed to settle somewhere inside Jason.

"He thinks I'm close enough," Jason said.

"To me?"

"To predict."

Jesse nodded slowly. "Then don't be."

Jason gave another short laugh. "That simple?"

"No. It's hard as hell. Especially when he gives you two choices and both of them make you feel like a coward."

Jason looked at the map again. "Catch him or save someone."

"Usually."

"And the answer?"

"The answer is to stop accepting the choices he gives you." Jason stared at the glowing streets. "Find the third." Jesse looked at him, surprised.

Jason shrugged faintly. "I do listen sometimes." "Don't overdo it. People will expect growth." For the first time that night, Jason almost smiled.

Almost.

Then the weight returned.

"You know I'm still going after him," Jason said.

"I know."

"You going to try to stop me?"

"No."

"Why?"

Jesse looked at the map, at the red lines, at the places where Corrido thought old wounds could be made new.

"Because now I think you know what going after him costs." Jason nodded once.

Not agreement.

Not forgiveness.

Something more useful.

Understanding.

The operations room hummed around them, alive with sleeping machines and unslept men. Above them, the city waited. Beneath it, two riders stood in the blue light — one past, one future — neither quite ready, both out of time.

Jason Nolan stood alone in the launch bay, staring at Street Hawk's damaged fairing.

The black body panel had been removed and laid across a padded workbench beneath a white inspection lamp. Gunfire had chewed a jagged line across one edge. Near the lower curve, where the Charger's pursuit had forced him through a chain-link gate, the finish was scraped down to raw composite. Rainwater still clung in seams Norman hadn't dried yet.

Jason ran his thumb over one scar in the armour.

The material was cold.

He expected it to feel accusing.

It didn't.

That somehow made it worse.

"You planning to polish a confession out of it?"

Jason didn't turn. He knew Sasha's voice now. Calm when she was worried. Sharp when she was scared. Almost gentle when she knew gentleness would make him run.

"Depends," he said. "You think it'll talk?"

She came to stand beside him, arms folded, tablet tucked against her chest. Her face looked drawn in the inspection light. She had changed out of the tactical jacket and into a grey sweater, but she still looked like she was wearing armour.

"Street Hawk doesn't talk," she said. "It records."

Jason gave a humourless laugh. "Great. So it remembers everything too."

"Yes."

He looked at her then.

She didn't soften it.

Jason turned back to the fairing. "How bad?"

"The damage? Repairable."

"That's not what I meant."

Sasha tapped the tablet awake and pulled up a map of Los Angeles. Lines spidered across it in different colours: routes taken, false routes projected, relay pings, camera outages, dead zones.

Jason already hated the shape of it.

"Corrido captured fragments," she said. "Not the Vault's location. I want to be clear about that. He doesn't have us."

"But?"

"But he has enough to understand how we respond. How fast we deploy. Which roads we favour. Which feeds we can blind. Which municipal systems we touch when we move through the city."

Jason stared at the map. "Because of me."

"Because of us."

"That's generous."

"It's accurate."

He turned away, jaw tight. "I should've seen it."

"No, you shouldn't."

"Jesse did."

"Jesse has forty years of scars telling him everything is a trap." Jason snapped, "Maybe that's the point." The words echoed across the bay.

Sasha said nothing.

Jason dragged a hand through his damp hair. He hadn't showered yet. Hadn't slept. Had barely taken off the suit before circling back to the bike, as if standing near the machine might help him understand what he had done wrong.

He lowered his voice. "I heard what you said before. About the match." Sasha's eyes flicked to him.

He laughed again, but there was no humour in it. "Don't look so surprised. People in secret bunkers should really stop leaving emotionally devastating information on visible screens."

She exhaled slowly. "Jason—"

"Eighty percent," he said. "That's what you found. Eighty percent behavioural overlap with Jesse Mach. Not DNA. Not technology. Instinct." Sasha looked down at the tablet.

Jason stepped closer, anger rising because fear had nowhere else to go.
“Was I recruited? Or selected? Because those aren’t the same thing.”
“You were chosen because you survived situations most riders wouldn’t.”
“No. That’s the brochure answer. I’m asking you.” Her silence answered too much.

Jason nodded, a small, sharp movement. “Right.”

“It wasn’t that simple.”

“Things never are when people lie.”

“I didn’t lie to you.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Sasha met that head-on. “No. I didn’t.”

The honesty disarmed him more than denial would have.

Jason looked away first.

Sasha set the tablet on the workbench. “The system saw a pattern.

Norman saw a person.”

Jason’s mouth tightened. “And you?” She hesitated.

He turned back. “Say it.”

“I’m still trying to work out which one scares me more.”

For a while, the only sound was the soft electric pulse from Street Hawk’s open diagnostics port.

Jason looked at the bike. “Corrido knew I’d come for Cassie.”

“Yes.”

“Because Street Hawk would.”

“Yes.”

“Because Jesse would.”

Sasha’s voice dropped. “Maybe.”

He turned on her. “Then where do I come in?”

“There.”

She pointed to the fairing.

Jason frowned.

“You came in there,” Sasha said. “You had Corrido in front of you. He gave you every emotional reason to chase him. Jesse would have. Norman thought you might. I thought you might. The system assigned a seventy

three percent probability that you would abandon extraction and pursue.”

Jason stared at her.

“You didn’t,” she said. “You brought Cassie home.”

His anger faltered, but did not vanish. “And gave him the route data.”

“Yes.”

“That’s not exactly a win.”

“No. It’s not.” Sasha stepped closer, voice quieter. “But it was a choice. Your choice. The pattern didn’t make it. The machine didn’t make it. Jesse’s ghost didn’t make it.” Jason wanted to believe her.

That was the problem.

Belief felt dangerous. Belief was how people ended up carrying names that weren’t theirs.

He looked back at the black armour on the bench. “What if next time I choose wrong?”

“Then we adapt.”

“What if adapting gets someone killed?”

Sasha’s expression changed. Not much. Just enough for him to see an old hurt behind the discipline.

“That can happen even when you choose right,” she said.

The words had weight. Personal weight.

Jason let the anger drain a little.

“I don’t know how to be him,” he said.

“Good.”

He looked at her.

Sasha held his gaze. “No one needs you to be Jesse Mach. Not Norman. Not me. Not even Jesse, though he may be the last person to admit it.” Jason swallowed.

“And Jason?” she added. “Corrido is counting on you believing you’re just an echo. That makes you easier to predict.” The thought landed cold and clean.

Easier to predict.

Jason looked again at the route map, the stolen lines of their movement across the city. Corrido had not beaten them with speed. He had beaten

them with expectation. With emotional geometry. Push Jesse here, Cassie there, Jason through the middle, and watch the legend reveal its shape.

Jason Nolan had spent half his life avoiding cages.

He had not realised a myth could become one.

“What do we do?” he asked.

Sasha picked up the tablet. “We burn every path he thinks we’ll take.”

“And then?”

Her eyes hardened. “Then we build new ones.”

By morning, Vault-Twelve looked less like a command centre and more like a machine eating itself to stay alive.

Screens went dark one by one as Sasha severed access to compromised feeds. Backup relays were wiped, overwritten and physically removed. Norman and Jason pulled server blades from old racks, stacking them on rubber mats while Sasha marked each one with coloured tape: clean, questionable, burn. Jesse watched the process from the upper gantry, arms folded, his expression unreadable.

He recognised the ritual.

After a bad mission, you always took inventory.

Damage to the machine.

Damage to the body.

Damage to trust.

The machine was easiest.

Street Hawk’s right fairing had been torn down to its frame. Norman knelt beside it on a rolling stool, reading the damage like a doctor reading bone breaks. His sleeves were pushed to the elbow, glasses low on his nose, hair mussed by hours of frustrated concentration.

Jesse came down the stairs and stopped beside him.

Norman did not look up. “If you’re here to tell me I built the lower cradle too light, save it.”

“I wasn’t.”

“It is too light.”

“I know.”

Norman gave a tired snort.

For a few seconds, they existed almost comfortably inside the old rhythm: machine, problem, repair. No apologies required. No ghosts demanding speeches. Just two men who understood bolts better than feelings. Then Jesse said, "You should've told him." Norman's hands stopped.

"About the match," Jesse added.

Norman set the wrench down carefully. "Sasha told you?"

"Jason did, in his own way."

Norman looked toward the far side of the bay, where Jason was helping Sasha strip a routing console. The younger man's movements were controlled, but too tight. Every cable he disconnected was handled with slightly more force than necessary.

"I didn't want him carrying that," Norman said.

"He's carrying it anyway."

"I know."

Jesse crouched beside the exposed bike frame, wincing slightly as his knee complained. He ignored it. "You looked at him and saw a second chance."

Norman stared at the machine. "Maybe."

"That's not fair to him."

"No."

"Or to you."

Norman's mouth tightened.

For a moment, Jesse thought he might deflect. Norman had always been good at that. Turn emotion into engineering. Turn guilt into schematics. Turn grief into another system upgrade.

Instead, Norman said, "When I first saw his ride footage, I thought I was losing my mind." Jesse said nothing.

"The angle of the lean. The hesitation before a blind turn. The way he corrected at speed without looking. It wasn't identical. That would have been easy to dismiss. It was worse than identical. It was familiar." Jesse looked across the bay at Jason.

Norman continued, quieter. "I told myself the city had given us what we needed. A rider with the right instincts at the right time. I told myself it was

practical.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“No.” Norman swallowed. “Part of me wanted to believe the story hadn’t ended badly. That maybe it had only paused.” Jesse let that sit.

The old anger was still there. It always would be. The shutdown. The silence. The years Norman had vanished behind government walls while Jesse learned how to live with a life cut in half.

But anger had edges. Grief spread wider.

“You don’t get him as a do-over,” Jesse said.

Norman nodded slowly. “I know.”

“Does he?”

Norman looked at him.

Jesse’s voice hardened. “Because Corrido figured it out faster than we did. He knows exactly what story we’re afraid we’re in.”

Sasha approached before Norman could answer, tablet tucked under one arm, a bundle of severed data cables in her other hand.

“He got more than routing data,” she said.

Both men turned.

Sasha set the tablet on the tool bench. On screen, several files scrolled past: time stamps, partial video frames, acoustic readings, heat bloom maps. Each one had a red tag attached.

“Corrido’s people seeded passive listeners around the warehouse before the abduction,” she said. “Not high-end. Disposable microbursts. Most of them burned out after transmitting. We killed four during the rescue. Two completed their upload.”

Norman leaned in. “Upload to where?”

“Moving target. Offshore bounce. Then back into the city through a municipal traffic contractor.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed. “Traffic?”

Sasha nodded. “He’s not just studying our routes. He’s studying the city’s response routes. LAPD, fire, ambulance, signal timing. He wants to know what happens when pressure hits a specific block.”

Jason joined them then, drawn by the shift in tone. “Pressure?” Sasha

zoomed in on a grid near Banning and Fifth.

Jesse felt the room change before anyone spoke.

It was just an intersection on a map. Warehouses, service roads, a bridge approach, two pedestrian crossings, a school two blocks over, a hospital route less than a mile away. Ordinary enough to be invisible. Complicated enough to be useful.

Norman's voice was low. "That's near the river bridge."

Sasha nodded. "It showed up in three of Corrido's route models."

Jason frowned. "Why there?"

"Because it funnels pursuit," Jesse said.

Everyone looked at him.

He pointed at the screen. "Main road narrows here. Service road cuts underneath. Police coming from the west will set a block at the bridge approach because it looks like the obvious choke point. If you time the lights wrong, civilian traffic backs up across the crosswalk."

Sasha's eyes sharpened. "That matches the simulation."

Norman stared at the map. "He's building a kill box."

"No," Jesse said slowly. "Not a kill box."

He thought of the prologue no one in this room had lived except him and Norman. The red hatchback spinning under freeway glare. The woman. The child. The sickening sound of metal surrendering. The terrible knowledge that even a successful pursuit could leave innocent people crushed between decisions.

"Something worse," Jesse said.

Jason watched him carefully. "What?" Jesse's voice was flat. "A choice."

No one spoke after that.

Sasha looked back at the map, then at the wrecked fairing on the bench, then at Jason.

"If Corrido knows Street Hawk will always protect civilians first," she said, "he can use them as barriers."

Jason's face hardened. "That's insane."

Jesse shook his head. "No. It's tactical."

The word chilled the room more than outrage would have.

Norman removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "He's not trying to outrun Street Hawk."

"He's trying to steer him," Sasha said.

Jason's hands curled at his sides. "Then we don't let him."

Jesse looked at him. "That's easy to say in a room."

"I mean it."

"I know you do." Jesse's voice softened without losing weight. "That's what worries me."

Jason flinched, but held his ground. "So what's the move?"

Sasha looked back to the map. "We need someone inside LAPD routing. Someone who can see if Corrido starts manipulating signal priorities or redirecting units."

Norman shook his head. "We can't go into LAPD systems again. Not after last night. Too much risk." "We don't need to go in," Jesse said.

The others turned.

Jesse's eyes stayed on the map. "We need someone already there."

Officer Luis Gutierrez had not gone home.

He had intended to. At least three times.

Each time, he made it as far as closing one folder before another inconsistency pulled him back in.

Now he sat alone in a quiet corner of the precinct's traffic coordination room, surrounded by screens that nobody else seemed to be watching closely enough. Outside the windows, Los Angeles was burning through another grey morning, sunlight diffused through smog and the last of the night's rain. Inside, the room smelled of stale coffee, electronics and wet wool from jackets hung badly over chair backs.

Gutierrez had always trusted patterns.

Not hunches. Hunches got officers killed or promoted, and he wasn't interested in either. Patterns were different. Patterns had bones. They could be followed, tested, disproved. A pattern did not care whether you believed in ghosts.

And this one was ugly.

He pulled up the traffic signal logs for the industrial grid east of the river.

The first anomaly had appeared at 03:17. A signal priority request near Alameda. Routine on paper. Emergency vehicle access, apparently. Except no ambulance had been dispatched there. No fire unit either. The request had come through a third-party municipal contractor with proper authentication, then vanished from the live log four minutes later.

Gutierrez had recovered it from cache.

The second anomaly appeared near Banning and Fifth.

This one had teeth.

Traffic models had been run for a hypothetical pursuit corridor. Not by LAPD. Not officially. But using LAPD templates. Vehicle speed, road closures, signal timing, pedestrian density, unit response estimates. Someone had asked the city how to trap a fast vehicle without looking like they were trapping it.

Luis leaned closer, eyes narrowing.

At the top of one recovered file was a project title someone had tried to overwrite.

HAWK-LURE/PHASE TWO.

He sat back.

"Damn."

Mendez appeared beside him with a coffee in one hand and a breakfast burrito in the other, because apparently the universe had a sense of humour and absolutely no respect for mood. "You look terrible," Mendez said.

Gutierrez didn't look away from the screen. "Good morning to you too."

"Did you sleep here?"

"No."

Mendez glanced at the desk, at the coffee cups, at the folders. "That means yes."

Gutierrez minimised one window and opened another. "What do you want?"

"Calder wants updates on anything tied to Corrido chatter. Also, your

wife called the desk because you're ignoring your phone."

"I'm not married."

"Girlfriend?"

"No."

"Mother?"

Gutierrez finally looked at him.

Mendez raised both hands. "Okay. Not my business. But someone named Rosa says you're an idiot and you need to eat."

"My sister."

"Ah." Mendez put the burrito down beside him. "Rosa sounds wise." Gutierrez ignored the food.

Mendez leaned over, squinting at the screen. "What am I looking at?" "Something I shouldn't have found."

"That's becoming your brand."

Gutierrez pointed to the recovered route model. "Someone used city traffic infrastructure to simulate a pursuit near Banning and Fifth."

Mendez frowned. "Could be emergency planning." "Except it was hidden. And tagged HAWK-LURE." The younger officer went still.

He was learning.

Gutierrez opened another window, showing a grainy frame from the warehouse district: a black motorcycle streaking through rain, barely captured between two cameras.

Mendez lowered his voice. "Is that..."

"I don't know."

"That doesn't look grey."

"No."

Mendez swallowed. "So the copycat has a copycat?"

Gutierrez almost smiled. "Try to keep up."

He zoomed the image. The bike was mostly blur, but the shape was wrong for Razor's machine. Too smooth. Too low. Too clean. Even through rain and motion smear, it carried itself differently.

A scalpel, not a sledgehammer.

Gutierrez pulled up the old archive still beside it.

Mendez stared.

For once, he had nothing clever to say.

Gutierrez saved the comparison to an encrypted personal drive, then opened the Banning and Fifth model again. "Whoever's running this wants police to be predictable. They're counting on us to establish a block here." "Then tell Calder."

"With what? A corrupted traffic cache, a ghost tag and two blurry bikes?" Mendez shrugged. "You've had worse." Gutierrez gave him a look.

Mendez softened. "Luis, if this is Corrido—"

"It is."

"You don't know that."

"No. But I know what it feels like when someone is building a stage." Mendez studied him, more serious now. "And who's the audience?" Gutierrez looked again at the black motorcycle still.

"Street Hawk," he said quietly.

The word sounded absurd in the fluorescent room.

It also sounded true.

Mendez glanced toward the door. "Calder told you to bring anything directly to him."

"He told me to keep my eyes open."

"And?"

Gutierrez copied the recovered files to a secure packet. "They're open." He hesitated over the send field.

If he sent it officially, it would go into the system. If it went into the system, Corrido might see it through whatever municipal backdoor he was using. If he kept it to himself, civilians could die because he was afraid of looking foolish.

There was a third option.

Luis opened a blank routing advisory, stripped of theory, stripped of Street Hawk, stripped of anything that sounded like ghosts. Just data.

Potential signal manipulation near Banning/Fifth.

Unverified third-party emergency priority requests detected. Recommend manual override protocol for all units in sector.

Avoid static barricade placement. Maintain civilian clearance buffer.

He routed it to Calder.

Then, after a moment, he copied it to the night-watch traffic supervisor under a bland subject line: SIGNAL INTEGRITY CHECK.

Mendez watched. "That's it?"

"That's enough to make someone cautious."

"And if they ask why?"

Gutierrez picked up the burrito at last. "Then I'll lie badly." Mendez smiled despite himself.

Gutierrez looked back at the screen, at the route model Corrido had tried to bury.

For the first time since this began, he felt less like a man chasing a ghost and more like a cop standing in front of a door no one else had noticed.

Above the city, another day gathered itself.

Somewhere out there, Victor Corrido was planning a move.

And Luis Gutierrez had just placed his first piece on the board.

Victor Corrido hated hospitals.

Not because of blood. Blood was honest. Not because of pain. Pain clarified.

He hated hospitals because they turned power into paperwork. Names on charts. Waiting rooms. Fluorescent lighting. The soft squeak of shoes on polished floors. The sickening democracy of human frailty.

Everyone looked small in a hospital.

His father had looked small at the end.

Victor remembered that more clearly than he remembered the funeral.

The private clinic he used now was not officially a hospital, which made it tolerable. It occupied the top two floors of a medical building in Westwood, all frosted glass, clean lines and discretion purchased by the hour. Men with gunshot wounds came here under false names. Men with money left without paperwork. Men like Victor Corrido did not wait.

Razor sat on an examination table in one of the procedure rooms, one trouser leg cut away, his left knee swollen and wrapped. A split ran across

his eyebrow. His hands were bruised. His pride was worse.

Angel stood by the window with her wrist in a brace, saying nothing.

Oscar was dead.

That fact had annoyed Victor more than it saddened him. Oscar had been useful in small doses and irritating in large ones. His death had been neither noble nor strategic. He had bled out in the warehouse after refusing to stay down and attempting to shoot a machine that was already leaving.

Waste was unforgivable.

The doctor finished wrapping Razor's knee and stepped back. "He shouldn't walk on it for at least forty-eight hours." Razor snorted. "Good luck with that." Victor looked at the doctor.

The doctor stopped smiling.

"You may leave," Victor said.

The doctor left.

When the door closed, Razor swung his legs off the table with visible effort. "We had them."

"No," Victor said. "We had what we needed."

"She got away."

Victor adjusted one cuff. "Miss Miller was never the objective."

Razor's face tightened. "Then maybe you should've mentioned that before I got my knee smashed by her." Angel's mouth twitched.

Victor turned his eyes to Razor. The room seemed to cool. "I gave you a role," he said. "You performed it adequately." Razor looked like he wanted to say something fatal.

Angel intervened. "Street Hawk's response profile was cleaner than expected. They extracted under pressure, but the route data came through. Two relay sequences, three blind spots, partial comm cadence. Not enough to locate their base, but enough to predict deployment behaviour."

Victor's gaze moved from Razor to her. "And Jesse?" "He was on comms."

The smallest satisfaction touched Victor's face.

Angel continued. "Voiceprint confirms. Older than archived material, but the match is strong."

Razor frowned. "So Mach is alive." Victor looked toward the window.

Beyond the glass, Los Angeles stretched under grey sunlight, its towers and freeways indifferent to inheritance, pain, debt. Somewhere beneath all that concrete, the old ghost had crawled back toward the machine.

"Alive," Victor said. "And listening."

Razor shifted, jaw clenched. "Then why not hit the Vault now? We've got enough to start narrowing sectors."

"No."

"We could smoke them out."

Victor turned. "That is exactly what men without imagination always want to do. Kick the door. Shoot the room. Burn the evidence. Then spend the rest of their lives wondering why they never owned anything larger than the fire they started." Razor's face flushed.

Angel looked down.

Victor stepped closer to the window, hands clasped behind his back. "Street Hawk is not a place. Not anymore. It is behaviour. A set of moral reflexes wrapped in machinery. You don't defeat that by finding the garage. You defeat it by controlling the circumstances under which it moves."

Angel nodded slowly. She understood. That was why he tolerated her questions.

Razor didn't.

Victor continued anyway. "The first phase confirmed response speed. The second confirmed emotional priority. They will risk exposure for civilians. They will risk operational security for personal attachments. And the rider..."

He paused.

"The rider is interesting."

Angel glanced over. "Nolan?"

Victor smiled faintly. "He did not chase me when I offered him the chance."

Razor scoffed. "Because he was scared."

"No." Victor's voice sharpened. "Because he chose the hostage."

"So?"

"So Jesse Mach would not have." The room fell quiet.

Victor let that sit.

It mattered. More than Razor could understand. Victor had studied Jesse Mach for years. Not the myth. Myths were for amateurs. Victor studied behaviour. The old incident reports, the buried witness accounts, the fragments of traffic footage his father's people had kept. Mach was reckless under emotional pressure. Brilliant, brave, infuriatingly lucky, but reckless. He pushed through. He pursued. He believed he could save everyone if he was only fast enough.

That belief had broken him.

Jason Nolan was different.

Not better. Not yet.

Different.

Which meant the next test had to be sharper.

Angel stepped closer. "The traffic model is ready."

Victor nodded. "Banning and Fifth?"

"Yes. But there's a complication. Someone inside LAPD flagged the signal requests."

Victor turned slowly.

Angel raised her tablet. "Manual override advisory. Civilian clearance buffer. Whoever sent it didn't use our language, but they saw enough to become inconvenient."

"Name?"

"Officer Luis Gutierrez."

Victor's expression did not change, but the name entered the room like another piece sliding onto the board.

Razor looked from one to the other. "Cop?"

Angel nodded. "The one from Koreatown. He's been pulling Street Hawk archive material." Victor considered that.

Gutierrez. A policeman with curiosity. Dangerous in the way small stones were dangerous when placed inside machinery. Not impressive by himself, but capable of damaging motion at the wrong moment.

"Can we remove him?" Razor asked.

Victor's eyes stayed on the city. "Of course."

"Then—"

“No.”

Razor stared. “Why not?”

“Because dead policemen create noise. Curious policemen create channels.”

Angel understood first. “You want to feed him.”

“I want to aim him.”

Victor turned from the window at last. “Let Gutierrez believe he is discovering the shape of something. Give him enough to move his department where we need them. Not too much. Just enough.” Angel nodded, already taking notes.

Victor’s gaze hardened. “But make sure he understands danger is close. People make cleaner decisions when they believe they are acting against time.”

Razor shook his head. “This is too many pieces.”

Victor smiled then, but there was no warmth in it. “That is why I move them, and you ride when told.” Razor’s hands curled into fists.

Victor ignored him.

He looked again at Los Angeles, the city that had taken his father’s name and turned it into a footnote beneath a vigilante legend. That would change. Not by killing Jesse Mach in an alley. Not by shooting the new rider off the bike. Those were endings for lesser men.

Victor wanted the city to watch Street Hawk choose.

He wanted the legend placed in a situation where speed became useless, power became dangerous, and morality became a trap.

He wanted Jesse Mach to see the same shape of nightmare that had ended him once before.

Only this time, Victor would design every inch of it. “Prepare the invitation,” he said. Angel looked up. “For Mach?” Victor’s smile returned. “For all of them.”

The message reached the Vault at 11:43 a.m.

It did not arrive through the main network. Sasha had cut too many lines for that. It did not breach the firewalls or trip any of the intrusion counters.

It appeared instead through an old municipal maintenance feed Norman had insisted on keeping alive because, in his words, old systems were too dumb to be arrogant.

The printer in the corner of Control woke with a stuttering mechanical whine.

Everyone turned.

A single sheet fed through.

Norman crossed to it first, but Sasha was faster. She tore the page free and stared at the black text printed in the centre.

No header.

No signature.

Just coordinates.

And one line beneath them.

THE CITY STILL REMEMBERS WHERE HEROES FAIL.

Jesse took the paper from her.

His face changed.

Cassie, sitting in a chair near the back of Control with a blanket over her shoulders, saw it before anyone else did. The colour leaving him. The stillness returning. The old wound opening not with violence, but recognition.

"What is it?" Jason asked.

Jesse didn't answer.

Norman looked over his shoulder and went very quiet. Sasha checked the coordinates. "Banning and Fifth." The room tightened.

Jason stepped toward Jesse. "That's the intersection from Corrido's model."

Jesse folded the paper once. Carefully. Too carefully.

"He knows," Jesse said.

Norman's voice was barely audible. "About the hatchback." Jason frowned. "What hatchback?" Nobody spoke.

Cassie looked at Jesse, then Norman. "Tell him." Jesse's jaw clenched.

Norman took the burden because he owed him that much.

"The last operation in 1986," Norman said. "The one that shut the program down. Jesse was pursuing a target. Civilian vehicle got hit during the chase. Red hatchback. Mother and child inside." Jason looked at Jesse.

Jesse stared at the folded paper in his hand. "They lived." The words came quickly. Too quickly.

"But the cameras caught enough," Norman said softly. "The program was exposed. The government shut us down. Street Hawk disappeared."

Jason absorbed that, pieces connecting with unpleasant precision. The way Jesse froze at the map. The way he understood Corrido's plan before Sasha finished explaining it. The way his voice had changed when civilians entered the equation.

"He's recreating it," Jason said.

Sasha shook her head. "Not recreating. Updating."

Cassie's eyes were hard. "He's going to use civilians."

Jesse finally looked up. "Yes."

Jason felt the room tilt around that single word.

The machine below. The route above. Gutierrez in the department without knowing he was already part of the same war. Corrido somewhere in the city, measuring them through pain and memory.

Jason looked at the paper in Jesse's hand. "Then we go first. We clear the area before he moves."

Sasha shook her head. "If we move visibly, he adapts."

"Then quietly."

"He's watching for quiet."

Jason turned to Norman. "Can we jam him?"

"Maybe. Locally. Briefly."

"Can we warn LAPD?"

Jesse answered. "Not directly."

Jason looked at him. "Why?"

"Because if Corrido has a channel into municipal traffic, he may have eyes on police routing too. Anything obvious, he sees. Anything official, he bends."

Sasha's tablet chimed.

She checked it, then frowned. "There's been an LAPD advisory issued for Banning and Fifth. Manual override recommendation. Civilian clearance buffer."

Norman looked up sharply. "From who?" Sasha scanned. "Officer Luis Gutierrez." Jesse exhaled once through his nose.

Jason turned. "The cop from the diner?"

"And the archives," Sasha said. "He's been closer than we thought."

Norman stepped toward the console, suddenly alive with calculation. "Can we use that?"

Sasha hesitated. "Maybe. If Gutierrez keeps the corridor fluid, Corrido loses the fixed block."

"Unless Corrido wants him to do that," Jesse said.

Everyone looked at him.

Jesse held the folded paper like it weighed more than metal. "Victor isn't just reacting. He sent this after the advisory. He knows someone inside LAPD saw the board. Which means Gutierrez is either already in danger, or already being used."

Jason's voice hardened. "Then we bring him in." "No," Norman said immediately.

"He can help."

"He's a police officer. Bringing him in compromises everything." Jason laughed once. "Everything's already compromised." Sasha didn't disagree.

Cassie pushed herself carefully to her feet. Jesse moved toward her, but she waved him off.

"Stop thinking like men protecting a secret," she said.

The room turned to her.

She steadied herself against the back of the chair. "Corrido isn't attacking the Vault. He's attacking your rules. Your secrecy. Your guilt. Your need to keep everyone else outside the circle until it's too late." Her eyes moved from Norman to Jesse, then Jason.

"If Gutierrez is already on the board, pretending he isn't won't protect him."

Norman looked away.

Jesse folded the paper again.

Jason watched all of them, feeling the shape of the next choice forming around him.

This was not the road yet. Not the engine. Not the chase.

This was the moment before.

The point where old men measured secrecy against trust, where a new rider decided whether he was a weapon or a person, where a woman who had just survived being used as bait reminded them that survival without honesty was just another kind of trap.

Sasha broke the silence.

"We don't bring Gutierrez in," she said. "But we don't leave him blind either."

Norman looked at her. "Meaning?"

"We send him something he can act on without knowing where it came from. Something police-shaped. Something boring enough to survive his system."

Jesse nodded slowly. "A nudge."

Jason looked at the map. "To keep civilians clear."

"And to keep the barricade moving," Sasha said. "No fixed target for Corrido to weaponise."

Norman's fingers moved across the console, old instincts returning. "Anonymous traffic integrity packet. No Street Hawk language. No names." Cassie sat back down, exhausted but satisfied.

Jesse stood over the projected intersection map with both hands braced on the console.

Banning and Fifth glowed in the centre of the display. Around it, Sasha had layered traffic flow, signal control, probable Corrido movement, police response times and civilian density. The map looked less like a street plan now and more like a wound.

Jason stood opposite him, helmet tucked beneath one arm.

Sasha was at the neighbouring console, building alternate routes faster than the system could label them. Norman hovered behind her, one eye on Street Hawk's diagnostics, the other on the map. Cassie watched from the

recovery-room doorway, pale but upright, wrapped in Jesse's jacket despite insisting she was fine.

No one believed her.

Jesse pointed to the western approach. "Corrido wants you here."

Jason followed the line. "Because it gives me the cleanest angle on him."

"No," Jesse said. "Because it looks like the cleanest angle."

He moved his finger to the cross traffic. "Then he puts pressure here. Civilian vehicle, police unit, maybe both. Something ordinary enough that you don't identify it as part of the trap until you're already committed."

Jason nodded slowly. "So I break off."

"And he escapes."

"So I stay on him."

"And someone else pays."

Jason's expression tightened.

Jesse held his gaze. "That's the trick. Men like Corrido don't just set traps for machines. They set traps for conscience." The room went quiet around that.

Jason looked at the map again. "So what do I do?"

"You stop asking which loss he wants you to choose."

"And choose what?"

Jesse tapped the centre of the intersection. "The thing he didn't design."

Sasha looked up from her console. "That's not a tactical instruction."

"No," Jesse said. "It's better." Norman frowned. "That is debatable." "It always was," Jesse said.

Jason studied the projected routes, the red warnings, the probability spikes. "The system won't always show that."

"No," Jesse said. "It won't." "Then how do I see it?" Jesse took a moment.

He thought of the old Command Center. Norman's voice in his ear. The red hatchback. The lie of clarity. The way speed could make every choice feel righteous until the road forced you to look back.

"You slow down inside," he said.

Jason looked at him. "At three hundred miles an hour?"

"Especially then."

"That sounds impossible."

"It is," Jesse said. "Do it anyway."

Cassie's mouth curved faintly from the doorway. "That's his teaching style, by the way. Useless until it saves your life."

Jason gave her a brief look, grateful and afraid in equal measure.

Jesse stepped around the console and stopped in front of him.

"When Corrido gives you two choices," he said, voice low enough now that the others could have pretended not to hear, "both of them will feel urgent. Both of them will feel moral. Both of them will make you hate yourself for not choosing fast enough." Jason said nothing.

"That's how you'll know he's in your head."

The helmet felt heavier under Jason's arm.

"And when that happens?" he asked. Jesse held his gaze. "Find the third."

Jason nodded once.

This time, the words did not sound like strategy.

They sounded like inheritance.

Not of the bike.

Not of the ghost.

Of the pause before the choice.

Luis Gutierrez received the anonymous packet at 12:08 p.m.

It came through as a routine correction to the advisory he had already filed. No sender ID. No signature. No clever little ghost symbol. Just a set of signal timing irregularities, pedestrian flow estimates and a warning embedded in the metadata where most people would never look.

STATIC BLOCK CREATES CIVILIAN RISK.

KEEP CORRIDOR MOBILE.

DO NOT TRUST AUTOMATED PRIORITY REQUESTS.

Gutierrez stared at the screen for a long time.

Mendez hovered beside him, chewing slower than usual because even he could sense the air had shifted.

"That from Calder?" Mendez asked.

"No."

"Traffic?"

"No."

"Then who?"

Gutierrez scrolled through the metadata again. Buried at the bottom, in a field reserved for obsolete maintenance notes, was one additional line.

THE GREY BIKE IS NOT THE GHOST.

Gutierrez leaned back.

His pulse had gone very steady.

Mendez read it over his shoulder and whispered, "Nope. Absolutely not. I officially hate this now."

Gutierrez saved the packet to his private drive, then opened a new operational note.

He did not write Street Hawk.

He did not write ghost.

He wrote:

Banning/Fifth corridor vulnerable to hostile traffic manipulation.

Recommend rolling containment only.

Clear civilian vehicles before any high-speed pursuit reaches bridge approach.

Manual signal control required.

Dispatch plain-clothes units to monitor third-party contractor access.

Then he sent it to Calder.

This time, he did not soften the priority.

Mendez watched him. "You realise if this is wrong, Calder's going to staple you to traffic duty until retirement." "If this is right?"

Mendez looked at the screen.

Neither of them needed to finish the thought.

Gutierrez stood, grabbing his jacket from the back of the chair.

Mendez frowned. "Where are you going?"

"To Banning and Fifth."

"Of course you are."

"You coming?"

Mendez looked personally offended by the question. Then he grabbed his own jacket.

"I'm bringing the burritos," he said. "If I die chasing ghost motorcycles on an empty stomach, I'm haunting you first." Gutierrez almost smiled.

Almost.

They headed for the stairs.

By late afternoon, the Vault had become a war room.

Not officially. No one used the phrase. But everyone moved like soldiers who had stopped pretending they were mechanics, analysts and ghosts.

Sasha built a new route architecture from scratch, using paths Corrido had never seen Street Hawk take. Norman patched the damaged systems and rerouted power away from the compromised telemetry suite. Cassie rested when Jesse forced her to, then ignored him the moment he turned his back and began helping Sasha identify old service corridors from half remembered city maintenance maps she had seen in Jesse's hangar years before.

Jesse trained Jason in the only way he knew how.

No simulator.

No helmet.

No bike.

Just a map, a grease pencil and the hard truth of roads.

They stood over a physical street map spread across the briefing table, weighed down at the corners by tools because Norman had not owned proper paperweights in forty years. Jesse marked lines in red, blue and black. Jason watched every movement.

"Corrido wants the bridge because it feels inevitable," Jesse said. "That's

the trick. He'll make every route push you there. Traffic, police, panic. You'll think you're choosing speed, but you'll be following pressure."

Jason nodded. "So I break away early."

"If you can. But he'll plan for that too."

"Then what?"

Jesse circled three side streets. "You watch what he protects." Jason frowned.

"Not where he runs," Jesse said. "What he avoids. People like Corrido always have an exit they love more than the plan. Find that, and you find the truth."

Jason studied the map. "You sound like you've chased him before."

"I chased his father." "And?"

Jesse's pencil stopped.

"And I learned being fast doesn't make you right." Jason absorbed that.

Across the room, Sasha glanced over. The words mattered. She saw Jason take them in, not as history, not as legend, but as instruction.

Jesse put the pencil down. "Corrido is going to show you civilians in danger. Maybe one. Maybe a dozen. He's going to make it look like stopping him is the heroic choice and saving them is the failure."

Jason looked up. "Saving them is never the failure."

"No," Jesse said quietly. "But it can feel like one when the villain gets away."

Jason thought of Cassie's arms locked around him as Corrido vanished into the rain. Thought of the map Sasha had shown him. Thought of the ugly little voice that kept saying, you were used.

Jesse saw it.

"That voice?" he said.

Jason's eyes lifted.

"The one telling you he beat you because you didn't chase him?" Jason said nothing.

Jesse nodded. "Don't trust it. It sounds like strategy, but it's just pride wearing a uniform."

For a moment, Jason forgot to be defensive.

Jesse stepped back from the map. "You want to beat Corrido? Make peace

with letting him think he's won for five more seconds than he deserves." Jason looked down at the lines again.

Five seconds.

On a bike like Street Hawk, five seconds could be a lifetime.

Sasha's console chimed.

Everyone turned.

She looked at the incoming feed, then at Jesse.

"Movement," she said. "Corrido just leaked a location through three separate channels. Too obvious to be accidental." Norman rolled his chair over. "Where?" Sasha put it on the main screen.

An old municipal records building near the river. Abandoned. Adjacent to the corridor they had been studying all day. Close enough to Banning and Fifth to make Jesse's stomach turn.

Jason looked at Jesse.

"Invitation?" he asked.

Jesse's mouth became a hard line. "No." Norman frowned. "Then what?"

Jesse stared at the map, at the building, at the bridge approach beyond it. "Curtain rising," he said.

Night came early beneath the city.

Above, Los Angeles prepared for rain again. Clouds crawled low over the skyline, bruised purple and iron grey, swallowing the last of the sun. Street-lights flickered on across wet roads. Traffic thickened, then thinned, then rearranged itself into the restless evening rhythm that made every intersection feel alive.

At Banning and Fifth, Officer Luis Gutierrez sat in an unmarked cruiser half a block from the bridge approach, watching the traffic lights cycle manually under city override.

No automated priority.

No fixed barricade.

Civilian clearance buffer active.

It was not much.

It was something.

Mendez sat in the passenger seat, tapping one finger against the dashboard. "You know, most officers spend their evening looking for stolen cars or drunk drivers."

Gutierrez kept his eyes on the intersection. "You can transfer."

"And miss whatever this is? Not a chance."

The radio crackled. Calder's voice came through, clipped and calm. "Unit Twelve, confirm status."

Gutierrez lifted the handset. "Sector clear. Manual control holding. No sign of target vehicles."

"Keep it that way. And Gutierrez?" "Yes, Chief?" A pause.

"Your advisory better be worth the paperwork."

Gutierrez allowed himself the smallest smile. "Understood." He lowered the handset.

Mendez looked at him. "That was almost affection."

"That was warning."

"Same thing from command."

Gutierrez glanced toward the bridge.

For a second, through the sheen of rain beginning to gather on the windshield, he thought he saw a black shape move between two service buildings.

Then it was gone.

He did not reach for the radio. Not yet.

In the Vault, Jason Nolan lowered the helmet over his head.

The world disappeared.

Then returned in blue.

Telemetry swept across his vision. Heart rate elevated. Respiration controlled. Route model loaded but not locked. Manual override enabled. Sasha's new architecture sat in the corner of the HUD, not as command but suggestion. Jesse had insisted on that.

"No glowing line to chase," he had said. "You follow the street, not the software."

Now Jason sat astride Street Hawk, gloved hands resting lightly on the bars, feeling the engine breathe beneath him.

Not thunder.

Not rage.

Potential.

Sasha's voice came through the comm. "Systems green. Weapon locks remain restricted unless authorised. Hyperthrust available but limited after last night's strain."

Norman added, "Don't push the right stabiliser past ninety percent. I patched it, not blessed it."

Jason gave a faint smile. "Copy."

Cassie's voice came next, still rough but steady. "Bring the bike back in one piece."

Jason glanced toward the platform where she stood wrapped in a blanket, bruised but upright beside Jesse.

"And the rider?" he asked.

Cassie smiled faintly. "Him too, if convenient." Jesse stepped forward.

For a moment, the launch bay quietened around them.

Jason looked up at him through the visor.

Jesse rested one hand on the edge of Street Hawk's canopy. Not possessive. Not nostalgic. Something closer to farewell and trust braided together. "Remember," he said. "When he gives you two choices—" "Find the third," Jason finished.

Jesse nodded.

Sasha looked from one to the other, then back to her console. "Street Hawk," she said, voice steady. "You are clear to launch." The Vault doors opened.

Rain-scented air rushed in from the tunnel.

Jason tightened his grip.

The machine surged forward.

Black armour vanished into blue-lit darkness, down through the artery beneath the city, toward the streets where Victor Corrido had arranged his final lesson.

Above them, Los Angeles waited.

And this time, so did they.

RESURRECTION PROTOCOL



Rain turned Los Angeles into a city of reflections.

Every street light doubled itself in the wet asphalt. Every traffic signal bled colour across puddles. Every building seemed to shimmer with a second, broken version of itself, stretched thin across glass, chrome and water. From the rooftops, the city looked almost beautiful. From street level, it looked like a place waiting to make a mistake.

Victor Corrido watched it from the passenger seat of a black Dodge Charger.

The car idled in the shadow of an abandoned municipal records building east of the river, its engine pulsing with restrained power. The windows

were tinted. The plates were clean but false. Rain tapped against the roof in a steady rhythm, soft enough to suggest patience, persistent enough to promise damage.

Corrido liked rain.

Rain softened edges. It complicated visibility. It made people cautious in ways that could be measured. Braking distance increased. Reaction times lengthened. Pedestrians hurried across streets without looking properly. Drivers followed instinct instead of judgment.

Rain made cities honest.

Angel sat behind the wheel, one hand resting lightly at twelve o'clock, the other near a tablet mounted below the dashboard. Her injured wrist was wrapped beneath a black driving glove, but she held herself steady. Competent. Alert. Useful.

Razor was not with them.

That had been deliberate.

Razor had wanted the bike. Wanted the street. Wanted one more chance to prove the grey machine could stand against the black one.

Victor had refused him.

Razor was too loud. Too personal. Too easily baited by pride. Tonight required precision, not theatre. The theatre would come from the city itself.

Angel glanced at the tablet. "Traffic flow is responding to the manual override. Gutierrez's advisory is live. They're keeping the corridor mobile."

"Good."

"That makes the original block impossible."

Victor smiled faintly. "That was never the original block." Angel looked at him.

He did not elaborate immediately. Instead, he watched the rain gather on the windshield and slide downward in trembling lines. Beyond the glass, the records building loomed like a corpse of bureaucracy: boarded windows, broken civic seal above the entrance, old marble stained by smog and neglect. A place that had once stored histories nobody wanted to read.

Appropriate.

"The mistake people make," Victor said at last, "is assuming a barricade

must be physical.”

Angel’s eyes returned to the tablet.

Victor continued. “Police think in vehicles. Cones. Roadblocks. Deployment lanes. They see a choke point and ask where to place bodies. Street Hawk thinks in speed. Angles. Escape vectors. It sees the same choke point and asks where the opening is.”

“And you?”

“I ask what both of them cannot ignore.”

Angel’s fingers tightened slightly on the wheel.

On the tablet, Banning and Fifth glowed in pale blue. Signal phases. Unit locations. Civilian vehicle density. Emergency response overlays. The city reduced to lines and coloured pulses, each one representing a choice made by someone who believed they were acting freely.

Victor touched one icon with a gloved finger.

A red sedan.

It was two blocks east, waiting at a light that should have changed ninety seconds ago.

Inside were a woman and a child.

Not hostages. Not prisoners. Not bound, not threatened, not even aware they were being used.

A simple ride home from a late music lesson. A mother annoyed by traffic. A child in the back seat with a school bag, headphones and a half-finished drink carton.

Innocence worked best when it remained innocent.

“Signal phase ready,” Angel said, quieter now.

Victor looked through the rain toward the empty road ahead. “Begin.”

Street Hawk moved beneath the city like a black thought.

Jason Nolan kept low over the bars, the HUD casting soft blue geometry across the inside of his visor. He had no glowing route to follow now. No obedient line carving a safe path through the chaos. Sasha’s new architecture lived at the edge of his vision, a series of possible roads rather than orders, each one shifting as traffic changed above.

He felt the difference immediately.

Freedom felt less comforting than he expected.

"Two miles from target zone," Sasha said over comms. "Rain is intensifying. Police have rolling units near Banning and Fifth. No static barricade."

"Gutierrez?" Jason asked.

"Likely in-sector. Unmarked unit. We have intermittent visual."

Jesse's voice came next, lower, rougher, carrying no wasted syllables. "Don't look for Corrido yet. Look for the pressure."

Jason's fingers eased on the throttle. "Copy."

The tunnel opened ahead, a long concrete throat leading up toward the industrial grid. Street Hawk's engine deepened as the incline rose. Water ran down the sidewalls in thin streams. The bike did not slip. It seemed to climb the wet surface with predatory calm, tires adjusting beneath him almost before his body registered the change.

Jason breathed.

Not too fast. Not too shallow.

He had spent the afternoon with Jesse's words pressed into him like bruises.

Don't chase the man. Read the street.

When he gives you two choices, find the third.

The tunnel doors parted.

Rain hit the visor.

Street Hawk emerged into Los Angeles.

The city unfolded around him in fragments: chain-link fences, loading docks, warehouse lamps, sodium glow on puddles, the black seam of the river channel beyond the buildings. Sirens murmured somewhere to the west. Not frantic yet. Gathering.

Jason cut the lights and moved along the service road, letting the bike's stealth profile swallow him between rows of delivery trucks. The HUD marked LAPD units in pale amber. Civilian vehicles in white. Potential hostile signals in red, though half of them were ghosts created by damaged traffic sensors and rain distortion.

His heart rate climbed.

The suit noticed.

He ignored it.

"Street Hawk, I've got a new signal anomaly," Sasha said. "Old municipal building north side. Too clean. Looks like a leak." "Invitation," Jason said.

"Curtain," Jesse corrected.

Jason almost smiled despite the tension. "Right."

Norman broke in. "Jason, keep the right stabiliser under ninety percent. I meant that as engineering advice, not a polite suggestion."

"Understood."

"And if you scratch the left turbine housing, I'm blaming Jesse."

Jesse muttered, "That thing was always fragile."

"It was not fragile. You kept jumping it off things not listed in the operating manual."

"There was an operating manual?" Jason's smile became real for half a second.

The humour helped.

Then Sasha's voice sharpened.

"Movement. Black Dodge Charger leaving the records building. East-bound."

Jason felt the city narrow.

"Corrido?"

"Thermal shows two occupants. Passenger profile matches. Driver likely Angel."

Jason leaned forward.

Street Hawk responded.

The service road blurred.

Officer Luis Gutierrez saw the Charger before dispatch did.

It rolled out from beside the municipal building without hurry, headlights cutting through rain with expensive arrogance. The car was too clean for the neighbourhood, too composed for a driver trying to avoid police, and too perfectly timed to be innocent.

Gutierrez lowered his binoculars.

“That’s him,” he said.

Mendez shifted in the passenger seat of the unmarked cruiser. “You say that with a lot of confidence for a man looking at a black car in Los Angeles.”

Gutierrez picked up the radio. “Unit Twelve to Control. Possible target vehicle eastbound from municipal records building. Black Dodge Charger, no visible wants yet. Request rolling containment only. Do not establish fixed block.”

Control answered with static, then a dispatcher. “Unit Twelve, confirm probable cause?”

Gutierrez watched the Charger move through the light at slow speed, as if daring the city to accuse it.

“Traffic manipulation investigation,” he said. “Possible connection to Corrido advisory. Keep units loose.”

Mendez looked at him. “Corrido advisory?”

Gutierrez covered the radio mic. “Sound official, people listen.”

“Does that work?”

“We’re about to find out.”

The radio crackled again, this time Chief Calder’s voice cutting through the channel. “Unit Twelve, this is Calder. Maintain visual. Do not engage alone.”

Gutierrez exhaled slowly. “Copy.”

“And Luis?”

“Yes, Chief?”

“If this turns into one of your ghost stories, I’m retiring early just to avoid the paperwork.”

Gutierrez allowed himself a grim smile. “Understood.” Mendez leaned forward, squinting through the rain.

The Charger turned south.

At the same moment, a black motorcycle flashed between two warehouse shadows a block behind it, so fast Mendez swore under his breath.

Gutierrez saw it too.

Not grey.

Not crude.

Not pretending.

For one impossible second, the old archive photographs came alive in the rain.

Mendez whispered, "Tell me you saw that." Gutierrez did not answer immediately.

The motorcycle vanished before the next street light.

Then his phone buzzed.

Unknown sender.

No caller ID. No traceable route.

Just a text.

KEEP THE CIVILIANS MOVING.

Gutierrez stared at it.

Mendez saw his face. "What?"

Gutierrez started the engine. "We're changing the lights manually." "Can we do that?"

"Tonight? We can do whatever keeps people alive."

The Charger accelerated like a threat learning to speak.

It cut through the industrial district, not recklessly, not at first. Angel drove with clean aggression, choosing lines that pulled police units closer without letting them settle. Every turn seemed to offer a route and deny it half a second later. Every green light arrived just late enough to make pursuit hesitate.

Corrido sat beside her, watching the side mirror.

Waiting.

"There," Angel said.

In the mirror, a shape moved through rain and light.

Black. Low. Unmistakable.

Street Hawk.

Victor Corrido felt something inside him settle.

Not relief.

Fulfilment.

"Hello," he said softly.

Angel hit the accelerator.

The Charger surged forward, tires hissing over wet asphalt. It cut around a delivery truck, bounced over a shallow curb, and screamed beneath a railway overpass. Street Hawk followed, not directly. Smart. The rider stayed two lanes over, using parallel streets, matching speed without taking the bait of the Charger's wake.

Different.

Victor's smile thinned.

"Nolan," he murmured.

Angel glanced at him. "Still think it's not Mach riding?"

"That isn't Mach."

"How can you tell?"

"He's thinking."

The words carried no admiration.

Only recalculation.

Victor tapped the tablet. "Shift phase two."

Angel's thumb moved.

Ahead, three traffic signals blinked from green to amber, then held amber just long enough to confuse the flow. A pair of civilian cars slowed unexpectedly. A delivery van hesitated in the centre of an intersection. A police cruiser approaching from the west had to brake and swerve.

Street Hawk did not.

It slipped through the disruption at an angle, cutting between the van and a parked truck with inches to spare, then vanished behind the cruiser before reappearing on the other side.

Angel's jaw tightened. "He's not following projected path." Victor watched.

"No," he said. "He's listening to someone."

In the Vault, Sasha's hands flew across the console.

Every screen carried a different version of the same problem. Corrido's Charger in red. Street Hawk in blue. LAPD units in amber. Civilian vehicles in white. Signal corruption flickered across the map like infection, spreading

ahead of the chase, probing intersections, testing response.

Norman stood beside her, headset crooked, one hand gripping the back of her chair hard enough to whiten his knuckles.

Cassie sat at a secondary console, blanket gone now, bruises stark beneath the harsh light. She had insisted on staying. Nobody had successfully argued with her.

Jesse stood behind Jason's live feed, eyes fixed on the HUD stream.

He was back in 1986 and not back at all.

The rain. The lights. The moving target. The black machine. The impossible arithmetic of speed and consequence.

He heard his own younger voice somewhere inside his skull.

Come on. Show me something.

He hated that voice now.

"Sasha," he said, "zoom Banning and Fifth." She did.

The intersection filled the central screen.

"Civilian density is dropping," she said. "Gutierrez's buffer is working." "For now," Jesse said.

Cassie leaned closer to her monitor. "There's a red sedan east approach." Everyone looked.

It was stopped at an intersection two blocks away, boxed by signal timing. A woman driver. Small child in the rear seat. No visible threat. No hostile escort.

Jesse felt the old scar open.

Not on his body.

Somewhere worse.

Norman saw it too. "No."

Sasha checked the signal logs. "That light should have changed three cycles ago."

Jason's voice came through the comm. "What is it?" Jesse closed his eyes for one second.

When he opened them, he was no longer the man watching a memory.

He was the man who had survived it.

"Jason," he said, voice steady through sheer force. "Red sedan. Two blocks

east of Banning. Woman and child inside. Corrido is holding them in the grid.”

Silence.

Then Jason: “Hostages?”

“No,” Sasha said. “They don’t know.”

Jesse stared at the screen. “That’s the point.”

Jason saw the red sedan appear on the HUD.

At first it was just another white civilian marker in the rain. Then Sasha tagged it manually, outlining it in pulsing amber. The car sat at the edge of the corridor, trapped by traffic signals that refused to behave like traffic signals. A woman leaned forward behind the wheel, frustrated, glancing at the light. In the back seat, a child shifted beneath a hooded jacket, face lit by the glow of a tablet.

Jason felt cold spread through his chest.

Corrido’s Charger was three hundred meters ahead, closing on the bridge approach.

If Jason pushed now, he could catch him before the turn.

The HUD calculated it without being asked.

INTERCEPT WINDOW: 7.4 SECONDS.

Seven point four seconds.

Enough.

Maybe.

The Charger’s tail lights flared through the rain like two red eyes.

Jason’s right hand tightened.

Jesse’s voice came through, quiet. “He wants you looking at him.”

Jason swallowed. “I can catch him.”

“I know.”

“He gets away if I don’t.”

“Maybe.”

The sedan’s marker pulsed again.

Traffic pressure shifted. A delivery truck rolled forward behind it,

unaware that the light ahead was about to release cross traffic at the wrong moment.

A police cruiser moved into the far lane. The geometry began to reveal itself.

Not a crash yet. A crash waiting for permission.

Sasha's voice sharpened. "Jason, signal phase is corrupting. If that sedan moves on the next cycle, it enters the Charger's path or gets boxed into the police lane."

Norman: "We're trying to override—" "No time," Sasha said.

The Charger accelerated.

INTERCEPT WINDOW: 5.9 SECONDS.

Jason saw both futures at once.

In one, he opened Street Hawk fully, tore past the sedan, caught Corrido at the bridge and ended it. The villain stopped. The chase won. The myth intact.

In the other, he let Corrido go for a few seconds.

Maybe forever.

And moved toward the family.

His body wanted speed.

His pride wanted Corrido.

The machine wanted input.

Somewhere inside him, the old behavioural pattern rose like a command written before he was born.

Push through.

Catch him.

Be fast enough.

Jason took one breath.

Then another.

He heard Sasha in the bay: The pattern didn't make it. The machine didn't make it. Jesse's ghost didn't make it.

He heard Cassie, bleeding and defiant: Less identity crisis. More running.

He heard Jesse: When he gives you two choices, find the third.

Jason's eyes moved.

Not to Corrido.

Not to the sedan.

To the street.

The third choice was ugly.

It always was.

"Norman," Jason said, "can the forward pulse system fire at road surface without fragmentation?"

Norman answered instantly. "Low-yield particle burst, yes, but why?"

"Because I'm not stopping the car."

Jesse's voice cut in. "Jason—" "I'm stopping the street."

Gutierrez saw the red sedan move.

The light flipped green when it should have stayed red. The woman hesitated, then released the brake. Behind her, a delivery truck lurched forward. Cross traffic, still under manual disruption, began to roll from the left. It was subtle. To anyone else, it looked like normal urban confusion in rain.

To Gutierrez, it looked like murder wearing a traffic signal.

"Control, kill east approach!" he snapped into the radio.

Static.

The channel stuttered.

"Control, this is Unit Twelve, kill east approach now!" No response.

Mendez reached for his own handset. "I've got nothing." Gutierrez didn't wait.

He slammed the cruiser into gear and pulled across the intersection, lights flashing, siren wailing in a hard electronic scream. The move was stupid, dangerous and absolutely against at least six procedures he could name without trying.

It worked.

The red sedan braked hard.

The delivery truck behind it blasted its horn and skidded sideways.

Gutierrez felt impact coming and braced, but the truck stopped a foot short of his rear quarter panel, rocking on its suspension.

The woman in the sedan stared at him, terrified and furious.

Gutierrez threw one hand up, palm out.

Stay.

Mendez shouted, "Left!" Gutierrez looked.

The Charger came out of the rain like a black bullet.

For one frozen second, everything aligned.

The sedan. The cruiser. The truck. The bridge. The Charger. And Street Hawk.

Jason fired the low-yield pulse into the road twenty meters ahead of the Charger.

The beam lanced out from Street Hawk's concealed system, blue-white and surgical. It struck the rain-slick asphalt not as an explosion but as a violent thermal punch, flash-heating water and surface tar in a narrow strip. Steam erupted across the road in a sudden wall, not enough to blind for long, but enough to force reaction.

Angel reacted well.

Too well.

She threw the Charger left to avoid the steam bloom, exactly as a trained driver would.

Jason had counted on it.

"Jesse," he said, "now."

In the Vault, Jesse had one second to understand.

Then he did.

"Gutierrez," Jesse said, though he had no direct line to him. "Hold that cruiser."

On the street, Gutierrez did not hear the words.

But he held anyway.

The Charger swerved left, found the path blocked by the cruiser, then snapped right toward the service lane.

Jason was already there. Street Hawk slid across the lane in a controlled diagonal, tires cutting through rainwater, black frame low and impossible.

For the first time that night, the Charger had nowhere clean to go.

Angel slammed the brakes. The Charger fishtailed.

Victor Corrido's calm broke for half a heartbeat.

Just half.

Enough.

The car clipped the curb, launched slightly, came down hard, and tore through a stack of construction barriers at the entrance to the bridge approach. Plastic exploded across the road. The Charger kept moving, wounded but alive, its rear end slewing as Angel fought for control.

Jason could have ended it there.

Could have fired on the axle. Could have rammed. Could have crushed the car against the barrier and let physics finish the argument.

But the sedan was still behind him.

The truck was still sliding.

Gutierrez's cruiser was still exposed.

Jason turned away from Corrido and went back.

Street Hawk's rear wheel screamed as he pivoted across the intersection, using the bike's body to shield the sedan from the truck's final slide. The truck clipped Street Hawk's rear stabiliser with a metallic shriek, spinning sideways enough to miss the sedan by inches.

The woman screamed.

The child in the back seat stared through the rain-spattered glass at a black motorcycle that should not have been there.

Jason held the bike upright through the impact, teeth clenched, arms shaking. The HUD went red.

RIGHT STABILISER: 94%.

Norman shouted in his ear. "I said ninety!"

Jason grunted. "Put it on my bill."

Behind him, the Charger roared away toward the service lane.

For one terrible second, Jason thought he had lost him. Then Gutierrez moved.

Luis Gutierrez had seen many stupid things in his career.

He had seen suspects try to outrun helicopters on foot. He had seen a man hide stolen jewellery in a sandwich. He had seen officers he respected do brave things for bad reasons and foolish things for good ones.

He had never seen anything like Street Hawk taking a hit from a delivery truck to save a family and somehow staying upright.

For half a second, he forgot to breathe.

Then the Charger fled.

Gutierrez snapped back into himself. "Move!" he barked.

Mendez was already shouting into the radio. "Target southbound service lane! Black Charger, damaged rear quarter, heading for river access!"

Gutierrez slammed the cruiser into reverse, clearing the sedan, then spun hard enough for the tires to spit water sideways.

The woman in the sedan was still frozen.

Gutierrez pointed at her, then at the curb. "Pull over!" She obeyed.

Good.

Alive was good.

The Charger disappeared down the service lane.

Street Hawk turned after it.

For an instant, the black bike and Gutierrez's cruiser ran parallel, separated by rain and a lane of empty road. The rider's helmet turned toward him.

Gutierrez felt the look.

Not a threat. Not gratitude. Acknowledgment.

Then Street Hawk launched forward, leaving the cruiser behind like the laws of engines had become optional.

Mendez stared. "We are not catching that."

"No," Gutierrez said, accelerating anyway. "But we can catch what it leaves behind."

In the Charger, Angel was bleeding from the corner of her mouth.

The steering wheel vibrated badly. The front alignment was damaged. Warning lights flashed across the dash. The car still had speed, but its grace was gone.

Victor Corrido gripped the door handle, fury held behind his teeth.

He had seen the choice.

He had watched Nolan abandon the intercept, save the sedan, block the truck and still bend the trap.

Not win.

Not yet.

But bend.

That was intolerable.

"He should have gone for the car," Angel said, breath tight.

Victor's eyes flicked to her.

"The sedan," she clarified. "Or us. He shouldn't have been able to do both."

"He didn't."

"He saved them."

"And lost time."

The Charger shot down the service lane beside the river channel, rain hammering the windshield. Ahead, the road narrowed toward a maintenance ramp and a rusting flood-control gate. Beyond it lay the riverbed, open concrete, multiple exits.

A workable escape.

Not elegant, but workable.

Angel glanced at the mirror. Street Hawk was coming.

Victor saw the black shape gaining, not frantic now, not chasing in blind anger. Controlled. Patient. Terribly fast.

For the first time that night, Victor understood the adjustment he had failed to make.

He had built his trap for Jesse Mach's wound.

Jason Nolan had ridden through it with Jesse Mach's lesson.

That did not make him stronger. But it made him less predictable.

Victor reached beneath his coat and removed a compact pistol.

Angel saw it. "What are you doing?"

"Changing the equation."

She looked ahead. "If you shoot at that bike, you'll just make him—"

"Not him."

Victor lowered the passenger window.

Rain and air exploded into the cabin.

The flood-control gate ahead was half-open. A maintenance worker, summoned by the corrupted city system, stood beside a service panel in a yellow raincoat, struggling with the lockout controls.

A civilian.

Another variable.

Victor raised the pistol.

Angel's face changed. "Victor—"

Street Hawk's headlight flared behind them. Victor fired.

Jason saw the gun.

Not the target. The gun.

The muzzle flash came from the Charger's passenger window, bright and flat against rain.

The maintenance worker dropped before Jason understood whether he had been hit or had thrown himself down. The flood-control gate sparked as the bullet struck the panel beside him. The gate shuddered, mechanisms whining, half-open and unstable.

The Charger aimed for the gap.

"Worker down!" Jason shouted.

Sasha's response came instantly. "Thermal shows movement. He's alive. Gate motor unstable."

Norman: "If that gate drops while you're under it—"

"I know." Jesse: "Jason." That was all.

Just his name. Not an order. Not a warning. A trust.

Jason opened the throttle.

Street Hawk surged.

The Charger hit the ramp first, bouncing hard. The damaged suspension screamed. Angel fought the wheel, keeping the car aligned with the narrow gap beneath the flood gate.

Jason took the side wall.

Street Hawk climbed the sloped concrete edge of the channel at a diagonal, tires gripping wet surface with impossible hunger. The world tilted. Rain streaked sideways across his visor. The gate filled his vision, steel teeth

descending in broken increments.

Timing collapsed into instinct.

Not Jesse's.

His.

Jason fired the vertical lift assist for half a second—just enough to unload the suspension—then cut hard across the channel wall and dropped in front of the Charger.

Angel slammed the brakes.

Too late.

Street Hawk's rear armour clipped the Charger's front corner, not a ram, not a crash, but a precise deflection. The car spun sideways, momentum carrying it away from the gate gap and into the open riverbed. It hit the concrete hard, rear wheels lifting, then slammed down in a shower of sparks.

Jason landed beyond it, fighting the bike as alarms screamed across his HUD.

**RIGHT STABILISER: FAILURE IMMINENT.
HYPERTHRUST LOCKED.
WEAPON SYSTEMS OFFLINE.**

Norman's voice rose. "Jason, get clear!"

But the Charger was still moving, sliding sideways toward a drainage drop where the riverbed stepped down three meters into a lower channel. If it went over at that angle, the car would roll.

Angel might survive. Corrido might not.

Jason's hand tightened.

There it was again.

The choice.

Let him go over.

End it.

No trial. No escape. No more civilians turned into chess pieces.

Rain hammered the visor.

The Charger slid.

Jason thought of Corrido smiling in the warehouse. Thought of Cassie tied to a chair. Thought of the red sedan. Thought of Jesse's voice telling him pride could sound like strategy.

He swore and moved.

Street Hawk lunged forward, damaged stabiliser screaming. Jason brought the bike alongside the spinning Charger and fired the left side impact brace, a system designed for collision absorption, not rescue. The brace slammed into the Charger's rear quarter panel, shoving it sideways just enough to change the angle.

The car missed the drainage drop by two feet and crashed nose-first into a concrete divider.

Airbags exploded. Glass burst. The engine died.

Silence hit like a physical thing.

Then rain filled it.

In the Vault, no one spoke.

The central screen showed the wrecked Charger, steam rising from its ruined hood. Street Hawk stood several meters away, tilted slightly, stabiliser warning pulsing red. Jason's bio-readouts were elevated but stable.

Cassie covered her mouth with one hand.

Norman looked as if he might either collapse or start shouting at the machine for daring to survive.

Sasha sat frozen at the console, eyes fixed on the screen.

Jesse did not move. He watched the Charger.

Watched Street Hawk.

Watched the place where Jason had chosen to save Victor Corrido from his own crash.

Something inside Jesse gave way.

Not broken.

Released.

For forty years, the red hatchback had lived in him as a loop without ending. A woman's terrified face. A child in the back seat. The screech of metal. The knowledge that speed had limits, that heroism could become damage, that the world did not care how good your intentions were when

physics came due.

Tonight, the shape had returned.

A red sedan. A child. Rain. Cameras. Pursuit. A villain running.

But the ending had changed.

Not because Street Hawk was faster.

Because the rider was different.

Because he had been taught.

Because he had listened.

Because he had chosen.

Jesse lowered his head, just slightly.

Norman looked at him.

Neither man said anything.

For once, there was no need.

Jason climbed off the bike with difficulty.

His right leg nearly buckled when his boot hit the wet concrete. He caught himself on the seat, breathing hard. The suit had absorbed most of the impact, but pain flashed through his ribs and shoulder in hot white bursts. Somewhere inside the bike, a cooling system whined in distress.

"Street Hawk, status," Sasha said.

Jason touched the side of his helmet. "Upright."

"That is not a status."

"It's the only one I've got."

"Are you injured?"

"Probably."

"Define probably."

"Later."

He staggered toward the Charger.

Angel was slumped over the wheel, alive, dazed, blood on her lip. The driver's side airbag had pinned her back. Her eyes fluttered as Jason approached.

Victor Corrido was already moving.

Of course he was.

The passenger door had been forced open. Corrido crawled from the

wreck, one hand pressed to his side, pistol still clutched in the other. His suit was torn. Rain plastered his hair to his skull. Blood ran from a cut at his temple, thin and dark.

He saw Jason.

For the first time since they had met, Victor Corrido looked truly angry.

Not composed.

Not amused. Angry.

"You had me," Corrido said.

Jason stopped a few meters away.

The rain ran down his visor.

"Yes."

"You could have let the car go over."

"Yes."

"You should have."

"No."

Corrido laughed, but it broke halfway. "Do you think that makes you noble?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Jason looked back toward the bridge, where distant police lights were beginning to gather. "It makes you alive long enough to answer for what you did."

Corrido's face twisted.

He raised the pistol.

Jason did not move.

A shot cracked across the riverbed.

Not from Corrido.

His pistol flew from his hand, struck by a round that sparked off the weapon's slide and sent it skittering across wet concrete.

Corrido screamed, clutching his hand.

Jason turned.

Officer Luis Gutierrez stood at the top of the access ramp, pistol raised in a two-handed grip, rain dripping from his hair and jacket. Mendez stood

behind him, weapon trained on Angel's side of the car, looking terrified and determined in equal measure.

"Victor Corrido," Gutierrez shouted, voice carrying across the concrete. "LAPD! Down on your knees!"

Corrido stared at him with contempt. "You have no idea what you're interrupting."

Gutierrez descended the ramp carefully, gun steady. "Pretty sure it's several felonies and a midlife crisis with better tailoring." Mendez muttered, "Good line." "Not now," Gutierrez said.

Jason almost laughed. Almost.

Corrido looked from Gutierrez to Street Hawk.

Then to the rider.

His expression shifted again, something cold and calculating returning despite the blood and wreckage.

"You think this ends with handcuffs?" Corrido said.

Gutierrez moved closer. "For tonight? Yeah. I'm feeling optimistic."

Corrido ignored him, eyes fixed on Jason. "You saved them. The woman. The child. The worker. Even me. You think that proves you're not him?" Jason said nothing.

Corrido smiled, blood on his teeth. "It proves you're easier to control." Jason stepped closer. Gutierrez tensed. "Don't." Jason stopped.

Corrido's smile widened.

Jason tilted his helmet slightly. "You're wrong."

"Am I?"

"You thought saving people was the trap." Corrido's smile faded.

Jason looked toward the red and blue lights gathering above the channel. "It was the way out."

For the first time, Corrido had no answer.

Gutierrez moved in fast, cuffing Corrido with practised efficiency. The moment steel closed around his wrists, something in the night shifted. Not victory. Not clean justice. But consequence.

Corrido kept staring at Street Hawk even as Gutierrez hauled him upright.

"You can't keep him hidden," Corrido said. "Not anymore."

Gutierrez glanced at the black bike, then back at Corrido. "Funny. I was just thinking the same about you."

Mendez moved to Angel's door, calling in medical. "Driver alive! Need paramedics down here!"

The maintenance worker limped toward them from the gate, shaken but uninjured beyond a cut arm. Above the channel, police units were converging. Real ones now. Not manipulated. Not predicted.

Jason backed slowly toward Street Hawk.

Gutierrez saw.

Their eyes met through the rain.

Or rather, Gutierrez looked into the black visor and understood that if he wanted to stop the rider, he had maybe five seconds to try and the rest of his life to regret failing.

Mendez noticed too. "Luis?" Gutierrez kept his gun down.

Jason waited.

Gutierrez said, quietly enough that only the rain and the ghost could hear, "The grey bike isn't Street Hawk." Jason did not answer.

Gutierrez's mouth twitched. "But you are." For a moment, the riverbed held its breath.

Then Gutierrez turned away.

"Unit Twelve to Control," he said into his radio. "Suspect Corrido in custody. Multiple civilian near-misses prevented. Unknown motorcycle fled prior to our arrival." Mendez stared at him.

Gutierrez gave him a look.

Mendez lifted both hands. "I saw nothing. Rain was in my eyes. Very aggressive rain."

Jason climbed onto Street Hawk.

The damaged machine protested beneath him.

Norman's voice came through, strained. "Jason, I do not recommend riding that bike."

Jason looked at the police lights.

Then at Corrido, handcuffed and furious.

Then at Gutierrez, who was deliberately looking anywhere else.

“Noted,” Jason said.

Sasha sighed in his ear. “That is not the same as listening.”

“No,” Jason said, starting the engine. “But I’m learning.” Street Hawk moved.

Not fast at first. Not with its usual impossible grace. It limped into motion, damaged but alive, rolling through rain and steam toward the far end of the channel. Then, as the police lights brightened behind him, Jason opened the throttle just enough for the legend to become shadow again. The black bike vanished beneath the bridge.

The Vault doors opened to receive him like a held breath.

Street Hawk rolled in wounded.

Its right stabiliser housing dragged slightly. One armour plate hung loose. Steam curled from the lower vents. The engine coughed once, then settled into a rough idle that made Norman wince as if personally insulted.

Jason cut the power. For a moment, nobody moved.

Then Norman crossed the bay at a speed that looked dangerous for a man his age.

“Off,” he barked.

Jason lifted the visor. “Good to see you too.”

“Off the bike. Now. Before it decides to fall over out of spite.” Jason obeyed, though his knees nearly betrayed him.

Sasha reached him first, one hand on his arm, scanning him with a medical reader in the other. “Rib bruised. Shoulder strain. Elevated stress markers. You’re an idiot.”

“Alive idiot?”

“Temporarily.”

Cassie appeared beside her, eyes bright with worry and something like pride. “You saved them.”

Jason looked down, suddenly uncomfortable. “I almost didn’t.”

“But you did.”

Jesse stood a few steps away.

Jason looked at him last.

The old rider's face was unreadable in the blue light, but his eyes were not. They were wet, though whether from exhaustion, memory or relief, Jason did not know.

For a long moment, they simply looked at each other.

Then Jesse stepped forward.

"You found the third," he said.

Jason swallowed. "Barely."

"That's usually how it works."

Jason looked toward the damaged bike. "Corrido's alive."

"Good."

"I wanted him stopped."

"He is."

"For now."

Jesse nodded. "For now."

There was no grand speech in him. No perfect blessing. No passing of a torch clean enough for stories. Just an old man standing beside a younger one, both of them bruised by the same machine in different decades.

Jesse placed a hand on Street Hawk's damaged fairing.

Then, after a second, he placed the other on Jason's shoulder.

"You're not me," he said.

Jason's throat tightened.

Jesse's grip firmed. "Thank God for that." The words hit harder than praise.

Norman looked away first, pretending to examine a ruined stabiliser bracket with sudden, intense interest. Sasha smiled faintly and let her scanner drop to her side. Cassie watched Jesse with the quiet expression of someone seeing a locked room inside him open at last.

Jason looked at the bike.

For the first time, Street Hawk did not feel like a ghost waiting to swallow him. It felt like a machine.

Powerful. Dangerous. Wounded. Repairable. Like all of them.

Luis Gutierrez filed three reports before sunrise.

The official version was concise, defensible and boring enough to survive command review.

Victor Corrido had been arrested following a high-speed pursuit, suspected traffic infrastructure manipulation, unlawful weapons discharge, kidnapping conspiracy, attempted vehicular assault and a growing list of charges that would make prosecutors smile in private. Angel was in custody under guard at County USC. Razor's whereabouts remained unknown. The grey motorcycle was still outstanding.

The black motorcycle did not appear in the report.

Not as Street Hawk. Not as unknown vigilante. Not as anything.

Gutierrez sat at his desk, jacket over the back of his chair, tie loose, eyes raw from exhaustion. Mendez slept in a chair nearby with his mouth open and one arm over his face. On the desk between them sat a paper bag of uneaten burritos, cold and tragic.

Chief Calder stepped up beside him.

Gutierrez did not look up. "If you're here to shout, I request coffee first." Calder said nothing for a moment.

Then he placed a fresh cup on the desk.

Gutierrez looked at it.

"That bad?" he asked.

Calder pulled a chair over and sat. "Corrido's lawyers are already moving. Federal people have called twice. Internal wants to know why one of my officers issued a traffic advisory that prevented civilian casualties before anyone officially knew civilians were at risk."

Gutierrez took the coffee. "Lucky guess?"

"Try again." "Good police work?" Calder studied him.

Gutierrez met his gaze. Tired, but steady. Finally, Calder sighed. "Did you see it?" Gutierrez said nothing.

"The motorcycle," Calder said. "Not the grey one."

Gutierrez looked toward the rain-streaked windows.

Dawn had begun to thin the darkness over Los Angeles. The city looked washed out, fragile, alive despite itself.

"I saw a lot of rain," Gutierrez said.

Calder almost smiled.

"That so?"

"Very aggressive rain."

From the chair beside them, Mendez mumbled without opening his eyes, "Extremely aggressive."

Calder looked between them, then stood. "Your report stays as written," he said. "For now." Gutierrez nodded.

Calder walked a few steps, then paused.

"Luis."

"Chief?"

Calder's voice lowered. "If ghosts are coming back, make sure they stay on our side."

Gutierrez looked at the old Street Hawk folder tucked beneath a stack of traffic reports. "Yes, sir."

When Calder left, Gutierrez opened his private log.

He added one line.

STREET HAWK SIGHTINGS – CONFIRMED.

Then he paused.

Deleted it.

And wrote instead:

The real one saves people.

He saved the file, encrypted it, and closed the laptop. Outside, the city woke.

Victor Corrido sat in an interrogation room with one hand bandaged and both wrists cuffed to the table.

He had said nothing since arriving.

Not to Gutierrez. Not to the detectives. Not to the federal liaison who had appeared too quickly and smiled too little. His face was bruised, his suit torn, but his posture remained immaculate. Men like Victor Corrido understood the value of appearing unbroken.

Across from him, Gutierrez placed a folder on the table.

Corrido looked at it, then at him.

"You think you won," Corrido said.

Gutierrez sat. "I think you're in cuffs."

"A temporary condition."

"Maybe."

"You have no idea what my father built."

Gutierrez opened the folder. Inside were photographs: the grey bike, the warehouse, the traffic models, the black Charger wrecked in the riverbed. Then one final image, blurred almost beyond recognition.

A black motorcycle in rain.

Corrido's eyes lingered there.

Gutierrez noticed.

"You wanted him on camera," Gutierrez said. "Wanted the city to see."

Corrido's mouth curved. "The city will."

"Maybe."

"You can't bury a legend twice."

Gutierrez leaned back. "No. But we can choose what story gets told."

For the first time, Corrido looked directly at him with something close to interest.

Gutierrez closed the folder. "You built a trap around what you thought heroes had to do. Problem is, you forgot people can learn." Corrido smiled thinly. "And you think he learned from Mach?" Gutierrez stood, taking the folder with him.

"No," he said. "I think Mach learned from him." He left Corrido sitting in the fluorescent silence.

Beneath the city, Norman repaired the bike.

Sasha rebuilt the routing system.

Cassie slept at last in a chair beside Jesse, one hand loosely wrapped around his.

Jason sat on the steps overlooking the bay, ribs aching, hair damp, a mug of terrible coffee cooling between his hands.

Street Hawk rested below him, stripped open again, armour plates removed, systems exposed. It looked less like a legend in daylight. More like labour. More like consequence. Wires, bolts, fractures, scorch marks.

The romance of speed stripped down to the reality of keeping something impossible alive.

Jesse lowered himself onto the step beside him with a quiet groan.

Jason glanced over. "Knee?"

"Everything." Jason nodded. "Same." They sat in silence.

After a while, Jesse said, "You did good."

Jason stared into his coffee. "Does it ever feel like enough?"

"No."

Jason looked at him.

Jesse shrugged. "But sometimes enough isn't the feeling. It's the result."

Down in the bay, Norman swore softly at a damaged connector. Sasha corrected his diagnosis without looking up. Norman objected. Sasha overruled him. Cassie, half-asleep, told them both to shut up.

Jason smiled. Small. Real.

Jesse saw it.

"You know," Jason said, "Corrido said saving people makes me easier to control."

Jesse watched Street Hawk. "Corrido says a lot of things."

"He wasn't completely wrong." "No," Jesse admitted. "He wasn't." Jason frowned.

Jesse turned to him. "Caring gives people leverage. Always has. Doesn't mean you stop caring. It means you get smarter about what they can do with it."

Jason absorbed that.

Above them, the Vault hummed. Around them, ghosts lingered, but quieter now. Less like chains. More like witnesses.

"What happens next?" Jason asked.

Jesse looked at the bike. "We repair what broke."

"And after that?"

Norman's voice carried from below. "After that, no one touches hyper-

thrust until I say so.”

Sasha called, “Which means probably never, because Norman thinks joy is a diagnostic error.”

Cassie, eyes still closed, murmured, “I like her.” Jason laughed.

The sound surprised him. It surprised all of them, maybe.

Jesse smiled faintly.

For the first time in forty years, the name Street Hawk did not feel like a wound.

It felt unfinished.

Not resurrected because someone rebuilt a machine.

Not resurrected because a city needed a myth.

Resurrected because, when the choice came, someone chose differently.

Above them, Los Angeles carried on: sirens, traffic, rainwater, neon, bad decisions, ordinary courage. The city had not been saved. Cities never were. Not permanently.

But a woman and child had gone home.

A maintenance worker had lived.

A cop had believed just enough.

A villain had been stopped without becoming a corpse.

And somewhere beneath the streets, the man, the machine, and the ghost between them waited for the next night.

Street Hawk was back.

Not as memory.

Not as imitation.

As promise.

20

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One week later.

Los Angeles had not forgotten.

It had tried, of course. Cities were good at that. They paved over trauma, repainted walls, swept glass into gutters, changed headlines, changed seasons, changed the story until even the people who had lived through it began to doubt the shape of what they had seen. Los Angeles had survived riots, fires, earthquakes, scandals, wars fought in boardrooms and alleys. It had a gift for moving on.

But this time, moving on proved difficult.

The story had faded from the front page, but only because there were too

many versions of it to fit beneath one headline. Victor Corrido's arrest was official. That much no one could deny. The ruined Charger pulled from the river access road had been photographed from three angles by news helicopters before the scene was sealed. Angel's name had leaked within forty-eight hours, though half the outlets still called her an "unidentified associate". The grey motorcycle remained missing, which meant the city had a villain it could name, an accomplice it could fear, and a machine it could imagine.

But none of those things were what people talked about.

They talked about the black motorcycle.

Not clearly. Never clearly. That was part of the problem. There was no clean footage. No crisp frame. No license plate, no face, no unambiguous proof. Just bad angles, rain-smeared dashcams, distorted reflections in shop windows and one impossible shot from a phone held by a trembling bystander two blocks away: a black shape sliding between a delivery truck and a red sedan in a burst of steam and light.

The clip lasted four seconds.

It played everywhere.

News channels looped it beneath banners designed to sound sceptical while feeding exactly the opposite.

STREET HAWK RETURNS?

URBAN MYTH OR CLASSIFIED MACHINE?

MYSTERY RIDER SAVES FAMILY DURING CORRIDO PURSUIT.

WHO WAS THE BLACK BIKE?

The official police statement was cautious to the point of absurdity. It credited rapid coordination between traffic control, responding officers and "unknown civilian actions" for preventing mass casualties at Banning and Fifth. It confirmed that a woman and child in a red sedan had been unharmed. It confirmed that a maintenance worker had survived a gunshot related equipment failure near the flood-control gate. It confirmed that Victor Corrido was in custody pending multiple charges.

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It did not confirm Street Hawk.

That only made the city believe harder.

In diners, people argued over coffee. In garages, mechanics froze the footage frame by frame and shook their heads. In bars, older men who had been young in 1986 leaned close over sticky tables and said, no, you don't understand, I heard that sound once before. Kids who had never known a world without drones and livestreams made edits set to pulsing synth music. Conspiracy forums resurrected old rumours. Hashtags rose and collided.

#StreetHawkLives

#BlackGhost

#BanningAndFifth

#CorridoFiles

By the fourth day, murals had started appearing.

The first was small: a black helmet painted beneath a freeway overpass, white stripes cutting down the sides like lightning. By the sixth day, a larger one appeared near Figueroa — Street Hawk in profile, not quite accurate, not quite wrong, racing beneath the words:

THE REAL ONE SAVES PEOPLE

Nobody knew who painted it.

Officer Luis Gutierrez did. He told no one.

Jason Nolan watched the city turn him into a question from a recliner that smelled faintly of old vinyl, machine oil and painkillers.

The chair had been dragged into one of the converted apartments above the Vault because Sasha had decided he needed somewhere “human” to recover. Jason had objected to the description more than the chair. Human, in Sasha's vocabulary, apparently meant a room with a window, a microwave, two lamps that didn't flicker, and a blanket Cassie had bullied Norman into buying from a supermarket at two in the morning.

Jason sat beneath that blanket now, left arm in a sling, ribs taped, right knee braced beneath loose sweatpants. The medical scanner insisted nothing was broken badly enough to require hospital admission. Sasha had phrased that in a way that suggested his gratitude should be immediate and ongoing.

His body disagreed.

Everything hurt.

His shoulder hurt when he breathed too deeply. His ribs hurt when he laughed. His knee hurt when he thought about standing, which felt petty but consistent. There was a stitched cut above his left eyebrow and a bruise blooming along one side of his torso in colours that Norman had described, with unsettling enthusiasm, as “diagnostically useful”.

Jason had not found that comforting.

On the television mounted opposite the recliner, another panel discussion had assembled itself around footage of the chase. Four experts occupied four squares. One was a retired traffic engineer. One was a former federal analyst who clearly knew less than she implied. One was a historian of urban legends. One was an actor who had apparently played a motorcycle cop in a streaming drama and now felt qualified to discuss experimental pursuit vehicles.

Jason stared at them with exhausted disbelief.

The actor leaned toward his camera. “What people are responding to here is symbolism. Whether the motorcycle is real almost doesn’t matter.” Jason reached for the remote.

Pain stopped him halfway.

He glared at the television instead. “It mattered to my ribs.”

Sasha, seated at the small table beside the kitchenette, did not look up from her tablet. “You were told not to watch the news.”

“You put a television in here.”

“Cassie put a television in here. I put a password lock on the channels. You bypassed it.”

“It was four numbers.”

“It was not supposed to be a challenge.”

“You made it my birth year.”

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Sasha finally looked up. "I made it Norman's birth year."

Jason blinked. "Norman's that old?"

From somewhere below, Norman's voice echoed up through the open stairwell. "I heard that."

Jason smiled, then winced.

Sasha gave him the look she used when deciding whether sympathy would encourage bad behaviour. "Stop smiling with your ribs."

"I'll add it to the list of banned activities."

"The list is medically necessary."

"The list includes walking to the coffee machine."

"You fell over yesterday."

"I leaned aggressively."

"You fell."

Jason looked back at the television. The footage had restarted. Steam. Rain. The red sedan. The black bike cutting across the intersection.

The room quietened.

Sasha noticed.

Jason watched the clip until it froze on the same frame every channel seemed to love: Street Hawk between the truck and the sedan, headlight flaring white, rain exploding around the front wheel. You could not see his face. You could barely see the bike. It looked less like proof than memory.

The woman in the sedan had given one interview.

Her name was Maria Alvarez. Her son, Mateo, was eight years old. She had not seen much, she said. Everything had happened too fast. A police car had blocked the intersection. A truck had skidded. Something black had come out of the rain.

When the reporter asked whether she believed it was Street Hawk, Maria had gone quiet.

Then she said, "I don't know what it was. But my son is alive."

The clip cut away after that, because television liked tears but feared silence.

Jason reached for the remote again, slower this time.

Sasha spoke before he could turn it off. "You did that."

He kept his eyes on the screen. "Gutierrez did that. You did. Jesse did. Norman did. The bike did. I just happened to be the idiot sitting on top of it."

"That is one interpretation."

"It's the accurate one."

"No," Sasha said. "It's the one that keeps you from having to accept the weight."

Jason looked at her.

She set the tablet down and stood, crossing the small room. The morning light from the window caught the scar along her jaw and softened it, making her look younger than she usually allowed herself to seem.

"You don't have to carry it alone," she said. "But you do have to admit you were there."

Jason looked back at the frozen image.

For days, he had remembered the wrong things.

Not the save. Not the family. Not the moment the truck missed the sedan by inches.

He remembered Corrido's face when he raised the pistol. He remembered the urge to let the Charger go over the drainage drop. He remembered that dark, clean little voice in his head telling him it would be easier. Faster. Final.

He remembered choosing not to listen.

That should have comforted him. It did not.

"What if he's right?" Jason asked.

Sasha folded her arms. "Corrido?"

"What if saving people makes me predictable?"

"It does."

He looked at her, surprised by the bluntness.

Sasha shrugged. "Corrido wasn't wrong about the existence of leverage. He was wrong about what it means. Caring gives your enemies something to aim at. It also gives you something to build around."

"That sounds like something you practised."

"It's something I learned."

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Jason looked back at the screen. "He'll come after it again. That instinct."
"Probably."

"Someone else will too."

"Definitely."

"And that doesn't scare you?"

Sasha's expression softened, but only a fraction. "Of course it does." Jason waited.

She picked up the remote and turned the television off.

The room fell into a sudden, ringing quiet.

"That's why we build better protocols," she said. "That's why Norman repairs the machine. That's why Jesse stays. That's why the new Street Hawk stays in the shadows. That's why Gutierrez keeps his report vague. That's why you heal."

Jason leaned his head back against the chair.

"Healing is boring."

"Good."

"I hate boring."

"I know."

She moved back to the table, retrieving her tablet. "You have three more weeks before light simulator work. Six before controlled saddle tests. Eight before I even consider letting you touch live throttle."

Jason stared at her. "Eight weeks?"

"At minimum."

"Sasha."

"No."

"I saved a family."

"And nearly tore your stabiliser assembly, your right knee and Norman's last nerve completely apart."

"He has plenty of nerves."

"He has three. You damaged two." Jason opened his mouth.

The stairwell door creaked.

Jesse Mach stepped in carrying two paper cups of coffee and a brown bag that smelled like breakfast burritos. He took in Jason's expression, Sasha's

posture, and the blank television.

“Arguing about riding?” Jesse asked.

Jason pointed at Sasha. “She said eight weeks.”

Jesse handed him a coffee. “Sounds generous.”

Jason stared. “You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“I am. That’s why I’m agreeing with the person stopping you from doing something stupid.”

Sasha looked pleased. “Thank you.”

Jesse gave her the second coffee. “Don’t get used to it.”

Jason sank deeper into the recliner, defeated. “This team is a dictatorship.” “No,” Jesse said, sitting opposite him. “Dictatorships are better organised.” For a few seconds, the apartment felt almost ordinary.

Coffee. Food. Morning light.

Pain, yes. Secrets, yes. A city above them chewing on rumours. A villain in custody with lawyers circling. A damaged machine below, waiting for parts that officially did not exist.

But ordinary, just the same.

Jason unwrapped the burrito awkwardly with one hand until Jesse leaned forward and helped without comment.

That, more than anything, made Jason look away.

Luis Gutierrez filed clean reports and kept dirty notes.

The clean reports went where reports were supposed to go. They moved through departmental channels, acquired signatures, prompted meetings, survived questions and generated more paperwork than the arrest itself. Victor Corrido’s lawyers attacked the timeline. Federal liaisons requested copies of footage that had mysteriously corrupted during transfer. Traffic Control insisted their system failures were due to a “rare cascading software fault”, a phrase so bland Gutierrez considered having it framed.

The dirty notes stayed in his drawer.

Not all of them were on paper.

Some lived in an encrypted file hidden beneath an old vandalism case. Some existed as scraps tucked into the back of a notebook. Some were only

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memories, and those were the ones he trusted least, because memory liked to edit itself into meaning.

He had written one sentence three times and deleted it twice.

The real one saves people.

The third time, he left it.

On the seventh day after Corrido's arrest, Gutierrez sat alone in his parked cruiser beneath a rebuilt traffic signal at Banning and Fifth. It was late afternoon, the sky pale gold behind the downtown skyline. The intersection looked ordinary now. Cars moved through it in clean phases. Pedestrians crossed with paper cups, shopping bags, earbuds, impatience. A delivery truck idled at the kerb. A red sedan passed through on green.

Gutierrez watched it go.

His hands rested lightly on the steering wheel.

The city had no idea how close it had come.

That was probably for the best.

Mendez climbed into the passenger seat carrying two coffees and a paper bag. "You have officially become depressing to eat lunch with."

Gutierrez accepted the coffee. "I didn't invite you."

"You parked at the scene of your emotional damage. That's basically an invitation."

Gutierrez looked at him.

Mendez took a sip. "Also, Calder told me to make sure you weren't writing another secret report."

"I don't write secret reports."

"No, you write unofficial supplemental observations."

"They're different."

"They're really not."

Gutierrez ignored him.

Mendez opened the paper bag and pulled out a burrito wrapped in foil. "So, are we ever going to talk about the thing we didn't see?" "No."

"Great. I love not talking about things. Very healthy."

"Mendez."

"What? I'm just saying, if I don't know what I didn't see, I need to know

exactly how much I didn't see in case Internal asks me whether I didn't see it."

Gutierrez turned slowly.

Mendez held up both hands, burrito included. "Fine. Officially? Rain. Steam. Confusion. Very heroic traffic cone. Unofficially?" Gutierrez waited.

Mendez's joking faded a little. He looked out through the windshield at the intersection. "Unofficially, that kid in the red sedan gets to grow up because somebody on a motorcycle decided catching Corrido wasn't the most important thing in the world." Gutierrez said nothing.

"That's worth protecting," Mendez added.

Gutierrez glanced at him.

Mendez shrugged, uncomfortable with sincerity. "Don't make a big thing out of it."

"I won't." "Good."

They sat in silence for a while, watching traffic.

After a minute, Mendez asked, "Do you think he's old?"

Gutierrez frowned. "Who?"

"You know who."

"I thought we weren't talking about what we didn't see."

"We're not. Hypothetically, if someone didn't see a black motorcycle moving like the devil owed it money, would the rider be old? Like the original guy?"

Gutierrez thought of the way Street Hawk had moved through rain.

Not perfect. Not mythic. Not old footage come back to life.

Human.

He thought of the hesitation before the rider vanished. The brief turn of the helmet. The silence that had passed between them, heavy with mutual recognition.

"No," Gutierrez said. "Not old."

Mendez considered that. "New guy, then."

"Maybe." "Good?"

Gutierrez watched the traffic signal change.

"He chose the family," he said.

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Mendez nodded as if that settled it.

Maybe it did.

A call came through the radio. Routine disturbance. Two blocks over. Noise complaint escalating in a parking lot.

Mendez groaned. "Back to glamour."

Gutierrez started the cruiser. "That's the job."

As they pulled away from Banning and Fifth, he glanced once in the rear-view mirror.

For a second, he imagined a black motorcycle waiting in the reflection, half in shadow beneath the overpass.

There was nothing there.

Only traffic.

Only sunlight.

Only the city, alive because enough people had made the right choices at the right time and then agreed not to talk about all of them.

Victor Corrido had not spoken for three days.

Not to detectives. Not to prosecutors. Not to the federal agents who arrived with sealed folders and careful voices. Not to the psychiatrist sent to determine whether his silence was strategy or pathology. He sat in interview rooms and holding cells with the same controlled posture, one bandaged hand resting on his knee, eyes fixed somewhere beyond the walls.

People mistook silence for surrender.

Corrido knew better.

Silence created space.

Space made others uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable people filled silence with information.

By the fourth day, he knew which charges were likely to stick, which would be argued down, which evidence chains were weak, which officers were careful, and which were frightened. By the fifth, he knew Angel had not cut a deal. By the sixth, he knew Razor had not been found.

That amused him.

Razor had always been better at vanishing than following orders.

On the seventh day, Gutierrez visited him.

Not as interrogator. Not officially. The interview room camera was on. A second detective stood behind the glass. Everything proper. Everything dull.

Gutierrez entered with a folder under one arm and two cups of coffee. He set one in front of Corrido.

Corrido looked at it.

"I don't drink precinct coffee."

"Smart," Gutierrez said. "It's terrible."

He sat opposite him and opened the folder.

Inside were photographs, none of them surprising: the damaged Charger, the flood-control gate, the signal maps, stills of Angel, fragments of municipal intrusion code, evidence bags holding components from the grey bike's support equipment. Then one image Corrido had not expected Gutierrez to possess.

Not clear. Not useful in court.

But unmistakable.

Street Hawk between the truck and the red sedan.

Corrido looked at the photograph for too long.

Gutierrez noticed.

"You wanted the city to see him," Gutierrez said.

Corrido's gaze lifted. "Did I?"

"You built a stage."

"Cities are stages."

"You put civilians on it."

"Cities are full of civilians."

Gutierrez leaned back. "You know, most people who talk like that are either guilty or running for office."

Corrido smiled faintly. "You're amusing, Officer."

"I get that a lot from handcuffed men."

Corrido's smile thinned.

Gutierrez tapped the photograph. "This bothers you."

"Blurry photography?"

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"He didn't do what you wanted." Corrido said nothing.

"You expected pursuit. Pride. Rage. Something old." At that, Corrido's eyes sharpened.

Gutierrez continued. "You built your plan around Jesse Mach's guilt. But the man on that bike wasn't Jesse Mach." Corrido's face revealed nothing.

Gutierrez saw enough anyway.

"He made a different choice," Gutierrez said.

Corrido's voice lowered. "He made the same choice every sentimental fool makes. He saved what was placed in front of him." "And still stopped you."

A pause. Small. Beautiful.

Corrido looked away first.

Gutierrez closed the folder. "That's the part I'd be thinking about, if I were you."

"You think this is over because you have me in a room?"

"No."

"Good. I would hate to overestimate you."

Gutierrez stood. "I think it's over for tonight. That's usually enough."

Corrido laughed softly. "There are things beneath this city you don't understand."

Gutierrez paused at the door.

"You'd be surprised what people notice when everyone else is staring at the legend."

Corrido's expression cooled.

For the first time since Gutierrez had entered, the silence belonged to someone else.

Gutierrez left him there.

The Vault repaired itself in layers.

First came the bike.

Norman treated Street Hawk's damage like a personal betrayal. He spent the first forty-eight hours beneath the frame, emerging only to request tools, reject food and mutter darkly about stabiliser abuse. The right assembly had

taken the worst of the impact. The armour plating along the rear quarter was scorched and twisted. The side brace had fused at one hinge. The forward pulse lens required recalibration. Hyperthrust was locked down behind three separate security walls, two of which Norman had installed while glaring at Jason through the floor monitor.

Sasha added a fourth.

Jason called it excessive.

Everyone ignored him.

Second came the system.

The routing architecture Sasha had improvised during the chase became the foundation for something new. Not a command path. Not the old predictive model that treated rider and bike as one seamless weapon. Corrido had nearly used that logic against them. He had counted on patterns. Expected reflex. Weaponised moral certainty.

So Sasha began building uncertainty into the system.

Choice points. Human overrides. Civilian-first route weighting that did not simply default to stopping, but searched for alternatives around the obvious sacrifice. Traffic manipulation detection. Police coordination ghosts — anonymous advisory packets that could help someone like Gutierrez without exposing the Vault. Failure models that assumed the enemy understood heroism well enough to corrupt it.

She called the new system Proteus.

Norman called it rude.

Sasha took that as approval.

Third came the people.

That was harder.

Cassie returned to the hangar on the second day and lasted three hours before driving back to the Vault with two boxes of tools, clean clothes, pain medication and a look that dared anyone to comment. She split her time between Jesse's old life and the new one beneath the city, as if refusing to let either become a hiding place.

Sometimes, Jason caught her standing beside Street Hawk with her arms

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folded, studying the bike the way she studied engines at the hangar: not as a symbol, but as a problem with bolts.

"You know," she said on the fifth day, "for something designed to save lives, this thing spends a lot of time trying to kill the people around it."

Norman, half inside an access panel, grunted. "It does not try to kill people."

"It throws them at walls."

"Only if mishandled."

Jason, from the gantry above, said, "I feel unfairly implicated." "You should," Cassie and Norman said together.

That made Jesse laugh.

It was quiet, brief and startled, as if the sound had escaped before he could stop it.

Everyone pretended not to notice.

Jesse noticed that.

The Vault was changing around him in ways he did not fully understand. Not the technology. He could learn that. Machines changed. Tools changed. Displays became thinner, diagnostics became faster, coffee somehow became worse. The deeper change was not in the walls or wires.

It was in the fact that people stayed.

After the original shutdown, silence had swallowed everything. Equipment boxed. Files burned. Friendships sealed behind law and shame. Jesse had walked away carrying what he thought was the whole weight of failure because there had been no one left beside him who knew how heavy it was.

Now, everywhere he turned, someone was carrying a piece.

Norman carried the machine.

Sasha carried the systems.

Cassie carried the stubborn insistence that human beings mattered more than ghosts.

Jason carried the helmet, or would again when his body allowed it.

Jesse did not know yet what he carried.

For the first time in decades, he suspected it might not be punishment.

On the seventh evening, he found Norman alone in the main bay, seated

on an overturned crate beside the half-repaired bike. The old engineer held a small component in one hand and Jesse's old gloves in the other.

Jesse stopped at the bottom of the steps.

Norman looked up. "I was going to put them away."

Jesse crossed the bay slowly. "You kept them."

"I kept a lot."

"I know."

Norman looked back down at the gloves. The leather was worn, creased, shaped by hands younger than Jesse's now, hands that had held throttle and fear and impossible faith.

"They were on the bench after the shutdown," Norman said. "I told myself I left them there. Then I told myself I moved them so the tech crew wouldn't throw them out. Then I told myself a lot of things." Jesse sat beside him.

For a while, they listened to the hum of the Vault.

"I blamed you," Jesse said.

Norman nodded. "You had reason."

"I still do."

"I know."

Jesse looked at the bike. "But not for everything."

Norman's throat moved. "That's generous." "It's accurate. Don't ruin it."

A faint smile touched Norman's face and vanished.

Jesse reached for the gloves. Norman handed them over.

The leather felt smaller than he remembered. Or maybe his hands had grown around forty years of everything else.

"I thought if I came back down here, it would all start again," Jesse said.

"Same mistakes. Same ending."

Norman's voice was quiet. "Did it?" Jesse looked across the bay.

Jason was visible through the glass of the recovery room, asleep in the recliner because he had refused the bed again. Sasha sat nearby, tablet in hand, also asleep despite insisting she was "reviewing telemetry". Cassie had placed a blanket over both of them. Somewhere beyond the far wall, the city moved through another uncertain night.

"No," Jesse said. "It didn't." Norman nodded slowly.

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Jesse folded the gloves once, carefully, and set them on the crate between them.

"They don't belong in a box," he said.

Norman looked at him.

Jesse stood, one hand resting briefly on the bike's scarred frame.

"Put them somewhere he can see them."

"Jason?"

Jesse nodded. "Not to wear. Just to know."

Norman held the gloves with something close to reverence. "Know what?" Jesse took a moment before answering.

"That the first rider was scared too."

Jason dreamed of the intersection again.

Not as nightmare.

That was the strange part.

The first few nights, the dream had been all impact: the truck sliding, the sedan frozen, Corrido's gun, the Charger spinning toward the drop. He would wake with his pulse spiking and the room too small around him, one hand reaching for handlebars that were not there.

On the seventh night, the dream changed.

He stood at Banning and Fifth without the bike. No helmet. No rain. Just the empty intersection beneath a sky the colour of old steel. The red sedan waited at the light. The Charger waited ahead. The delivery truck waited behind. The whole city seemed paused, holding its breath for him to choose.

Then Jesse appeared beside him.

Not old Jesse. Not young Jesse. Something in between, blurred the way people were in dreams. He wore the black gloves, helmet tucked under one arm, face turned toward the road.

"You going to tell me what to do?" Jason asked.

Jesse shook his head. "No."

"Figures."

"You already know."

Jason looked at the sedan. Then the Charger. Then the street beneath his

feet.

The third choice was there again.

Not obvious.

Never obvious.

But there.

When Jason woke, the room was dim and quiet. His ribs ached. His shoulder throbbed. The television was off. Someone had left water beside him and two tablets in a small cup.

On the table next to them lay a pair of old black riding gloves.

Jason stared.

They were not his. Too worn. Too personal. The leather had softened in places where fingers had curled again and again around grips. There were old scuffs across the knuckles and a repair stitched along one thumb.

A note rested underneath.

Not a speech.

Not a blessing.

Just four words in Jesse's handwriting.

For when you doubt.

Not for when you become me.

Not for when the city needs a ghost.

Not for when the machine asks too much.

Just that.

For when you doubt.

Jason picked up one glove.

He did not put it on.

He simply held it and let the weight settle in his palm.

For the first time since the chase, the weight did not feel like a demand. It felt like company.

The city kept telling stories.

Some were wrong.

Most were.

In one version, Street Hawk was an AI-controlled weapons platform that

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had escaped from a defence contractor. In another, it was ridden by Jesse Mach himself, now eighty years old and apparently immune to both time and orthopaedic reality. One channel ran a special suggesting that the black bike had been a publicity stunt for a streaming series until the studio threatened legal action for making their marketing look underfunded.

A podcast claimed Officer Luis Gutierrez had personally summoned Street Hawk using a secret LAPD beacon hidden in traffic lights.

Mendez sent him the clip.

Gutierrez blocked him for seven minutes.

Through it all, the people who had actually been there said very little.

Maria Alvarez refused further interviews after the third day. When reporters pressed, she asked them to leave her son alone. The maintenance worker from the flood-control gate returned to work with his arm in a sling and told colleagues he was considering a career somewhere with fewer bullets. Chief Calder gave two statements and perfected the art of answering questions without providing information. Federal agents circled Corrido's case and found, to their irritation, that LAPD's evidence chain was cleaner than expected in all the places that mattered and mysteriously useless in all the places that did not.

Razor remained missing.

That worried Sasha.

It worried Jesse more than he said.

Victor Corrido sat in custody and waited.

That worried everyone.

But on the seventh night, Los Angeles was quieter.

Not safe. Never safe.

Just quieter.

In the Vault, the main bay lights dimmed to their overnight setting. Street Hawk rested in its cradle, armour panels refitted but unpainted, one section still primer-grey where new plating had been installed. Norman had refused to rush the finish.

"Scars are useful," he said when Jason asked.

“On people or machines?”

“Yes.”

Sasha stood at the central console, reviewing the first completed Proteus simulation. The model generated six possible Corrido-style moral traps and solved four of them without demanding impossible speed. The other two remained open, highlighted in red.

She found that comforting.

Any system that claimed to solve everything was lying.

Cassie sat on the steps with a mug of coffee, watching Jesse rather than the bike. He had been down in the Vault every day since the chase. Sometimes for hours. Sometimes only long enough to argue with Norman, insult the coffee and leave. But he always came back.

That mattered.

Jason joined them slowly, one careful step at a time, using the rail more than he wanted to admit. He had refused the wheelchair. He had accepted the brace. Everyone had called this progress.

He stopped beside the bike.

No one spoke at first.

The five of them stood around Street Hawk in the soft blue light: Norman with grease on his hands; Sasha with data reflected in her tired eyes; Cassie wrapped in Jesse’s spare jacket; Jesse with his arms folded and his ghosts quieter than before; Jason bruised, braced and stubbornly upright.

Not a celebration.

Something better.

A beginning that knew what beginnings cost.

Norman cleared his throat. “I’ve completed preliminary repairs.”

Sasha looked over. “That is a dangerously optimistic sentence.”

“I said preliminary.”

“Still dangerous.”

“The stabiliser housing is rebuilt. Pulse lens recalibrated. Steering response is within acceptable tolerance.” Jason brightened.

Norman pointed at him without looking. “You are not riding it.” Jason dimmed.

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Cassie smiled into her coffee.

Jesse stepped closer to the bike. His fingers brushed the new plating, then the older scar beside it. For a moment, his reflection appeared in the black surface alongside Jason's. Two faces, split by age and glass and machine.

Jason saw it too.

This time, it did not unsettle him.

"You ever think about what people get wrong?" Jason asked.

Jesse glanced at him. "About what?"

"Street Hawk."

Jesse gave a small, humourless laugh. "Most things."

"They think it's the bike."

"Usually."

"Or the rider."

"Sometimes."

Jason looked around the bay. At Sasha. Norman. Cassie. Jesse.

"But it isn't, is it?"

No one answered too quickly.

Norman set down his tool.

Sasha closed the simulation window.

Cassie watched Jesse.

Jesse looked at the machine for a long time before speaking. "No," he said. "It's the choice." Jason nodded slowly.

Outside the Vault, somewhere high above concrete and steel, a siren began to wail. Not for them. Not yet. Just the ordinary cry of a city continuing to be itself.

Norman sighed. "That one's not ours."

Sasha checked the feed anyway. "Domestic disturbance. Units responding." Jason looked toward the launch tunnel, instinct waking before judgment.

Sasha did not even turn. "No."

"I didn't say anything."

"You leaned."

"I'm injured. Leaning is most of what I do."

"No."

Jason looked to Jesse.

Jesse shrugged. "Don't look at me. I'm enjoying not being the reckless one."

Cassie raised an eyebrow. "That's new." "For all of us," Norman said.

The siren faded. The moment passed.

Jason exhaled, half frustrated, half relieved.

There would be another call. Another night. Another impossible line between what could be saved and what had to be risked. The city would make sure of that. Cities always did.

But not tonight.

Tonight, the bike stayed in its cradle.

Tonight, the rider healed.

Tonight, the old ghosts stood watch without demanding blood.

Later, after the others drifted away, Jesse remained in the bay alone.

He had done that often during the week. At first, Norman had worried. Then Sasha had monitored from a distance. Then Cassie had told them both to stop treating grief like a suspicious package.

So Jesse was left alone.

He stood beside Street Hawk with one hand resting on the seat, the other in his jacket pocket. The bay lights hummed softly overhead. Somewhere in the walls, water moved through old pipes. The city's vibration reached even here, faint but constant, like a heartbeat heard through layers of earth.

For decades, Jesse had thought peace would feel like forgetting.

It did not.

He remembered everything.

Marty's laugh. Norman's panic. The old Command Center. The first time Street Hawk had leapt beneath him and the world had become a line of light. The red hatchback. The child's face. The dismantling. The gloves on the bench. The long years of pretending he had become ordinary enough to survive.

He remembered Cassie's hand finding his in the dark.

Jason turning away from Corrido to save a family.

Gutierrez lowering his gun.

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Norman standing beside him again without asking to be forgiven.

The memories were still there.

They had not softened. Not exactly.

But they no longer stood in a circle around him with their fists raised.

Jesse looked at the bike and, for once, did not see an accusation.

He saw work.

He saw danger.

He saw something built by flawed hands and ridden by flawed men for reasons that only mattered if people lived because of them.

"You got me home more times than I deserved," he said quietly.

The words echoed faintly, old words returning in a new room.

Then he smiled, small and private.

"Guess we'll see if you can do the same for him."

Behind him, Cassie's voice answered from the stairs. "Talking to motorcycles again?"

Jesse didn't turn. "They listen better than people."

"Rude."

"Accurate."

She came down slowly and stood beside him. For a moment, they simply shared the quiet.

"You okay?" she asked.

Jesse thought about lying. Habit offered it immediately.

Fine.

Good.

Tired.

Instead, he said, "Closer."

Cassie slipped her hand into his. "That'll do for tonight."

He squeezed her fingers.

Above them, Los Angeles shimmered in the dark, restless and wounded and alive. Somewhere, rumours travelled faster than traffic. Somewhere, a boy painted a black helmet on a wall. Somewhere, Luis Gutierrez closed a file that was not really closed. Somewhere, Victor Corrido stared at concrete and planned what silence might still give him. Somewhere, Razor rode under

another name, on another road, with borrowed time ticking beneath him.

The story was not over.

Jesse knew that now.

Maybe it never had been.

But endings, he was learning, were not always where things died.

Sometimes they were where people finally stopped running from the beginning.

He looked once more at Street Hawk, at the black frame waiting beneath blue light, at the new plating beside the old scars, at the empty space where a rider would sit when the city called again.

Not a ghost.

Not a monument.

Not a mistake waiting to repeat itself.

A promise with wheels.

Cassie leaned against his shoulder.

Jesse let himself stay.

And far above the Vault, beyond concrete, rain gutters and neon, Los Angeles carried on into the night — dangerous, beautiful, unforgiving.

The city had not been saved.

Cities never were.

But somewhere beneath it, the engine waited.

And when the darkness came again, Street Hawk would ride.

Because legends, after all, don't end.

They just ride on.



About the Author

Lee Tyers is a writer, designer, and lifelong fan of action-adventure stories, cult television, and the kind of heroes who always take the long way home.

A passionate supporter of the original Street Hawk series, he wrote *Street Hawk: Resurrection Protocol* as a tribute to one of the most memorable machines of the 1980s and the fans who kept its legacy alive long after the cameras stopped rolling.

When he's not writing, Lee can usually be found working on creative projects, talking into a microphone somewhere, or watching motorcycle speedway (Up the Poole Pirates!).

This may be his first novel, but it won't be his last.
Jason, Jesse, Sasha, Norman, and Cassie will return.

If you enjoyed reading ***Street Hawk: Resurrection Protocol***, I'd love to hear from you.

Whether you'd like to leave a review, share your favourite moment,

or simply say hello, please visit www.LeeTyers.com and use the Contact page.

While you're there, you'll also find links to my Instagram and Facebook pages, where I share updates on current and upcoming writing projects, behind-the-scenes insights, and the occasional hidden Easter eggs for readers who enjoy digging a little deeper into my stories.

Thank you for reading—and for helping keep the legend alive.
Because some legends never truly stop riding.

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