

RIDERS



Veronica Rossi



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

riders

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*For Andy, Wes, and all those
who have dedicated their lives
to protecting freedom.*

RIDERS



Chapter 1

When I open my eyes, all I see is darkness.

Can't move . . . can't speak . . . can't think through this jaw-grinding headache. I hold still, waiting for some clarity on where I am or how long I've been out, but nothing comes. What I know for sure: I'm tied to a chair, gagged, and my head is covered with a hood that reeks of sweat and vomit.

Not what I expected from a rescue.

My neck creaks like a rusty hinge as I straighten, and the darkness comes loose and starts to spin. It spins and spins and my stomach throws in the towel, and it's spinning, too. Hot spit floods into my mouth. I know what's coming next, so I pull deep breaths, in and out, until the urge passes and I'm okay again. Just sitting here sweating bullets in this chair and this hood.

I can't believe this. They *drugged* me. Gave me some kind of sedative, because I am *way* too calm right now. Probably painkillers, too. I can't feel my shoulder and that cut was deep. My deltoid looked like raw steak. Even I should still feel a gash that bad.

Nice. Well done, US government. The whole world is going to hell, pretty much. I'm one of the few people who can help—and this is what they do?

I turn my focus to listening. Every so often I hear feet shuffling or a throat clearing. I pay attention to the sounds, trying to figure out how many men are guarding me. Two is my guess.

A radiator clicks on behind me and keeps clicking, like someone's tapping a wrench against metal. Heat builds on my back like sunshine. Strange in all this darkness. After a few minutes it shuts off and the quiet stretches out. My back is

just starting to cool when a door whines open. Footsteps come toward me and stop. Then a chair scrapes across the floor.

It's game time. Answer time.

"Take off his hood," says a female voice.

There's a tug, then a rush of cool air against my face, and my eyes slam shut against the brightness. I'm not expecting it when the gag goes next, tearing out a few layers of my tongue with it.

"Take your time," says the woman.

Like I have a choice. For a few seconds, all I can do is try to get some moisture back in my mouth. I pull against my arm restraints, riding out the urge to rub my stinging eyes. It takes forever for the figure in front of me to come into focus.

A woman—in her forties, I think—sits behind a small wooden desk. She has olive skin and dark hair, eyes as black and shiny as wine bottles. Her navy-blue suit looks expensive and she has a PhD kind of vibe, like she knows everything about something. And wrote a book about it. A civilian. I'd bet anything.

"Hello, Gideon. I'm Natalie Cordero," she says. "I'm going to be asking you some questions."

She folds her hands in front of her and pauses, letting me know she's in control, that she talks to guys like me every day, but I know for a fact that's impossible. No one else in the world is like me. No one.

A whiff of her perfume reaches me—a floral-citrus-musk-meatlover's combo that's strong, a scent bullhorn, but better than the stench from the hood.

Two men stand behind her. The guy wearing a Texas Rangers baseball cap is massive, the size of the door he's guarding. The other guy's more compact, has a dark complexion and wrestler ear. He rests a hand on the Beretta in his belt holster and gives me a look like, *Just give me an excuse to use this.*

Both have full beards, wind-chapped faces, and are dressed in jeans, hiking boots, and Patagonia jackets, but they're special ops. Delta or SEALs. You don't get that kind of stance, relaxed but totally alert, without earning it.

I recognize them. They were part of the unit that busted me out of Norway today. Or yesterday . . . or whenever that happened.

Natalie Cordero assesses my shirt and cargos, the dried blood, the burnt patches, the crusted mud, the top layer of fine ash. I've looked better, I'll admit. Then I follow her eyes to my shoulder. Through a tear in my shirt I see that my captors—who are supposed to be my allies—put a compression bandage on my cut. That was cool of them.

“Water?” Cordero asks.

It takes a couple of tries but I manage to scrape out some words in reply. “Yes. Yes, please.”

The bigger guard in the Rangers cap brings over a plastic bottle with a flexible straw. His face is ruddy and square, brickish. Graying beard, blue eyes. He's the guy who knocked me out in Jotunheimen. But I didn't really give him an option. I lost it when Daryn stayed behind. I didn't expect her to do that. Never saw it coming and totally lost it. That can't happen again. I can't lose control of this situation, so I focus on getting my bearings as I suck down water, replenishing my dehydrated body.

I'm in a small room with pine walls and floorboards. Even the trim is pine, so. Either I was eaten by a tree or I'm in a cabin. There's a window to my left with checkered blue curtains. No light or sounds bleed through, so either it's nighttime or the window's been blacked out. I'm going to go with both. The only illumination in the room comes from an iron lamp in the corner with no shade, just a bare bulb that's either a trillion watts or my eyes are extra sensitive from the drugs.

A cool draft seeps through the two-inch gap beneath the

door. It's not easy smelling anything beyond Cordero's perfume but I catch stale carpet smell and woodsmoke. As prison cells go, it's pretty cozy.

"I should've asked before," Cordero says when my water break is over, "would you prefer that I call you Gideon or Mr. Blake?"

I was right. She's not military or she'd have called me "Private Blake."

I swallow again, my throat feeling better. "Ma'am, I'd prefer you untied me and told me where I am." I instantly want to punch myself for the *ma'am* thing. She's *detaining* me. Screw manners.

She doesn't answer, so I try another question. "Are we still in Norway?" Nothing again. I look to the guys at the door. "Are we back in the States?"

"I can't give you that information at this time, Gideon," Cordero says, deciding for herself what to call me. I'm eighteen, probably half her age, so I can see why she didn't go with "Mr. Blake."

"Why can't I know where I am? Why all this?" I nod to myself. "I'm not going to run. I called *you* guys, remember? For help? How about cutting me free?"

"When I'm done questioning you, you'll be released."

"Released?" It's so messed up, I have to laugh. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"No?" She leans forward, her gaze narrowing. "You inflicted millions of dollars of damage on Jotunheimen National Park. You don't think that's wrong? American taxpayers are paying for that damage. The American public paid to bail you and your friends out of that mess. You're lucky the media hasn't caught on yet. You almost caused an international incident. You do realize that? Until I know exactly what you were doing in Norway and why you chose to destroy acres of

pristine parkland, you aren't leaving this room. I mean that, Gideon. You might as well get comfortable."

"You think this is about damaged land? About *money*?"

"If I thought that was all this was, you wouldn't be here."

I'm not sitting here and playing this game. "You really want to know what this is about? I'll tell you. Pure evil is out there. We're in trouble—and I don't mean American taxpayers. I mean humanity. I mean *everyone*. And you're looking at one of the only people who can do anything about it. So what do you say you untie me?"

"Not happening, Gideon," she says, disregarding everything I just said. "And before you become belligerent again, let me tell *you*. Losing your temper won't help anything."

This is a huge waste of time. I need to get out of here. Find the guys. Get the key back. "Where's Colonel Nellis?" I trust my commanding officer. I want to talk to him, not a stranger.

"This incident has gone above the jurisdiction of the US Army," she says.

"Who are you with? The Defense Department? CIA?"

"Let me spell this out for you. *I* ask questions, *you* answer them. That's how this works."

There actually wasn't any spelling in that, but whatever. I'm done with this. Time to bring the wrath.

I reach for my anger, for my sword, for Riot.

I get nothing. I'm powerless. The drugs have neutralized everything. I'm completely zeroed.

It makes no sense, none, so I start yelling. She's making a huge mistake. I'm one of the good guys. She has no idea who she's talking to. Everything I say sounds scripted and insane but it's true. It's the truth.

Cordero checks her watch. "Seems it's about that time again." She looks over her shoulder at the guy with the Beretta. "Get him under control."

Beretta slides a small black pouch from a cargo pocket. He pulls on latex gloves and takes out a hypodermic needle as I keep yelling and thrashing against the bindings, getting absolutely nowhere.

The bigger guy, Texas, comes around my chair and puts me in a rear chokehold. "Relax," he says. "Relax."

Which is the last thing I'm going to do, but then stars flicker against the pine walls and the room dims, then / dim. I'm not yelling anymore, I'm passing out.

Beretta sticks the needle into my forearm and depresses the plunger. A slow burn spreads through me. My face goes numb. My muscles relax. I relax.

I don't want to relax, but I relax.

Texas releases me and I suck in air. Gulp it down. Oxygen is the best damn thing ever created.

Beretta shines a penlight into my eyes.

Bright light.

Doesn't feel good.

Close eyes.

I'm vaguely aware that I reacted too slowly. Reactions shouldn't happen in steps. Unless it's only one step. A single, self-contained step.

Yeah . . . that seems right.

"The kid's cooked," Beretta says as he peels off the gloves. He and Texas step back, posting up by the door again.

Keeping my head up becomes my new goal. It's not easy. Reminds me of balancing a basketball on my finger. While trying to process information through it. Except my head isn't actually a basketball, it just feels like one.

Yep. The kid's cooked.

Cordero unfolds her hands. She drums her fingers on the table, watching me. "Ready to talk now?"

"You have no idea how big this is . . . what's happening. You have no idea who I am."

It takes me a second to realize that the words hanging in the room are mine.

Not good.

Cordero's fingers stop drumming. "Why don't you tell me?"

I come so close to blurting it out, blurting *everything* out, I almost feel like I did it. Something's not right. A prison break is happening in my mind. All my thoughts want out. My story wants out. Images of the past few weeks crash around in my head demanding freedom. Holding them back's a full-body effort. I'm tied to a chair but my heart's doing a triathlon. My face goes hot and the back of my throat starts to burn. What the hell did they just give me?

Cordero waits. "Okay, Gideon. We'll try again in half an hour." She pauses at the door. "I can do this all day. Can you?"

After she leaves, I let my head fall forward where it wants to be.

Breathe, Blake. Breathe.

I could've handled that better. But was I supposed to tell a stranger what's going on? Who I am? *What* I am?

No way. Cordero would've panicked. She'd have lost her mind. But the words are still on my tongue. They're right there.

I'm War, I want to say.

I am War.