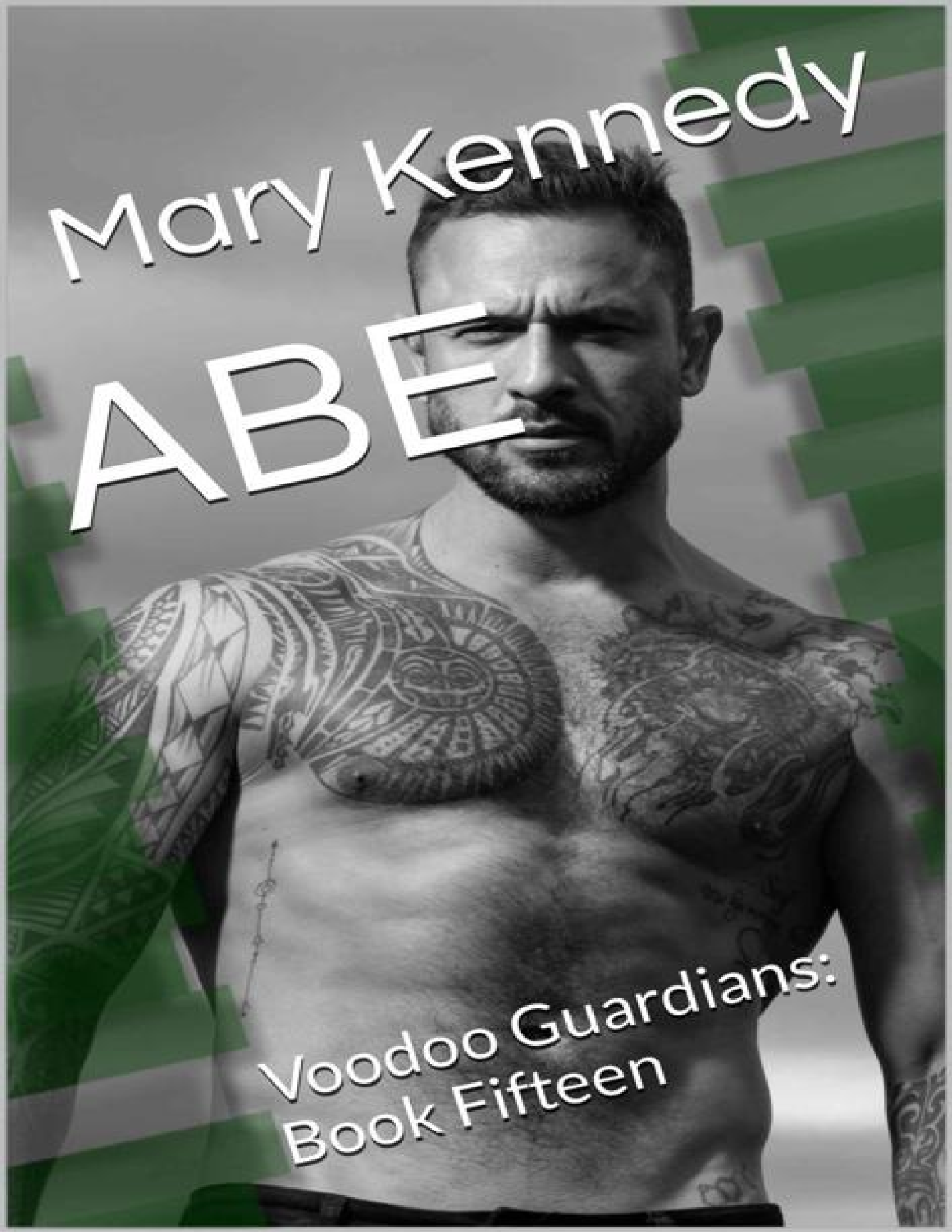


Mary Kennedy

ABE

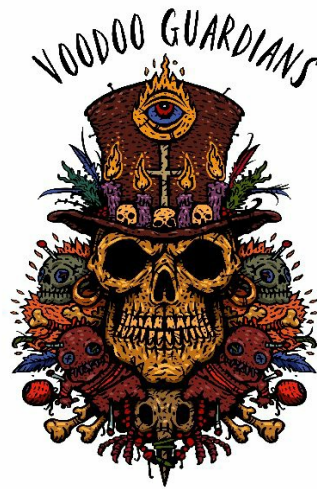
Voodoo Guardians:
Book Fifteen



ABE

Voodoo Guardians

Book FIFTEEN



Mary Kennedy



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage

Assignments

G1-8 = Garçonnière

Big House = Belle Fleur – main house where Jake & Claudette now live

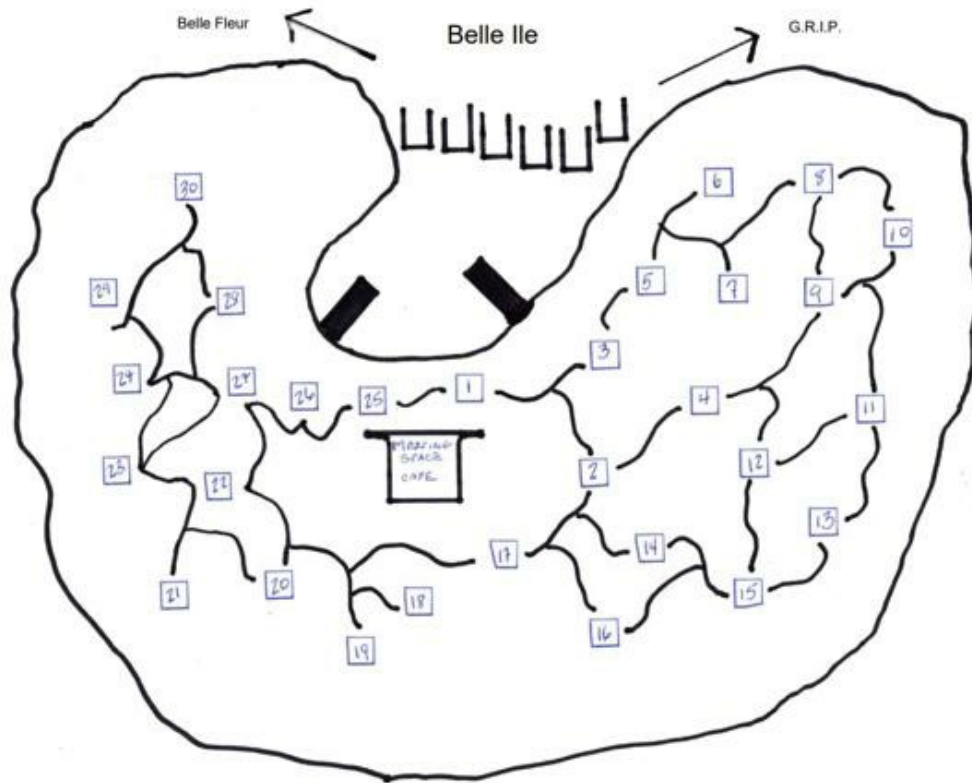
The Grove – where BBQs, picnics, and family gatherings take place



COTTAGE Assignments

1	Matt & Summer	36	Gunner & Darby	G3	Pork	97	Jalen & Stormy
2	Alec & Lissa	37		G4	Hex & Gwen	98	Chase & Kennedy
3	Gabe & Tory	38	Zulu & Gabi	69	Kiel & Liz	99	Sam & Mia
4	Kev & Tila	39	Doc & Bree	70	Joseph & Julia	100	Milo & Lia
5	Raphael & Savannah	40	Paul & Elizabeth	71	Wes & Virginia	101	Hiro & Winter
6	Jak & Mattie	41	Luke & Ajei	72	Dalton & Calla	102	Ryan & Paige
7		42	Fitz & Zoe	73	Nathan & Katrina	103	Chase & Maeve
8	Ivan & Sophia	43	RJ & Celia	74	Keith & Susie	104	Duncan & Lindsay
9	Tristan & Emma	44	Carter & Ani	75	Marc & Ela	105	JT & Kennedy
10	Christian & Winnie	45		76	Cowboy & Autumn	106	Torro & Melanie
11	King & Claire	46	Trev & Ashley	77		107	Bron & Mila
12	Sly & Suzette	47	Frank & Lane	78	Ian & Aspen	108	Fitch & Carsen
13	Rory & Piper	48	Tailor & Lena	79	Doug & Miguel	109	Bogey & Alice
14	O'Hara & Lucia	49	HG & Maggie	80	Dom & Leightyn	110	Irish & Lucinda
15	Titus & Olivia	50	Bryce & Ivy	G5	Remy & Charlotte	111	Tanner & Mic
16	Max & Riley	51	Wilson & Sara	G6	Magnus & Addie	112	AJ & Skylar
17	Stone & Bronwyn	52	Mac & Rachelle	G7	Chipper	113	Mo & Ophelia
18	Jazz & Gray	53		G8		114	
19	Ham & Sadie	54	Clay & Adele	81	Aiden & Brit	115	Ethan & Koana
20	Phoenix & Raven	55	Rush & Caroline	82	Callan & Juliette	116	Bone & Londyn
21	Noah & Tru	56	Lars & Jessica	83	Sean & Shay	117	Hoot & Scout
22	Griff & Amanda	57		84	Wade & Hannah	118	
23	Gibbie & Dhara	58	Kiel & Noelle	85	Parker & Dani	119	
24	Blade & Suzette	59	Jean & Ro	86	Eric & Sophia Ann	120	Billy & Janine
25	Skull & Avery	60		87	Bodhi & Viv	121	
26	Axel & Cait	61	Hunter & Megan	88	CC & Eva	122	Moose & Ece
27	Sniff & Lucy	62	Cam & Kate	88		123	JB & Dana
28	Noa & Kelsey	63	Jax & Ellie	89	Michael & Miriam	124	Red
29	Eli & Jane	64	Adam & Jane	90	Robbie & Carrie	125	Tobias & Gail
30	Grant & Evie	65	Ben & Harper	91	Cade & Cassidy	126	
31	Hawk & Keegan	66	Carl & Georgie	92	Garrett & Celeste	127	
32	Eagle & Tinley	67	Striker & Lucy	93	Tiger & Hazel	128	
33	Ace & Charlie	68	Molly & Asia	94	Eric Ryan & Rachel	129	
34	Razor & Bella	G1		95		130	
35	Tango & Taylor	G2	Kegger	96	Will & Brooke	IM	Ham, Sadie, Christopher, Ramey, Patrick, Margo

Map of Belle Île & Cabin Assignments



Cabin Assignments for Belle Île

1	Trak & Lauren	18	Dex & Marie
2	Nine & Erin	19	Hannu & Johanna
3	Miller & Kari	20	Otto & Robin
4	Luc & Montana	21	Teddy
5	Gaspar & Alexandra	22	
6	Ghost & Grace	23	
7	Ian & Faith	24	
8	Mama Irene & Matthew	25	
9	Ruby and Sven	26	
10	George & Mary	27	
11	Whiskey & Kat		
12	Angel & Mary		
13	Antoine & Ella		
14	Baptiste & Rose		
15	Bull & Lily		
16	Vince & Ally		
17	Code & Hannah		

CHAPTER ONE

Abraham Castro Salcedo listened intently as his mother, Bella, retold the story of how she'd lost her sight, then miraculously regained it via a surgical procedure that she didn't know was an option for her disease.

He'd heard the story before. Living in poverty in the rough Hispanic gang neighborhoods of Los Angeles, her brother was forced to care for her when their parents left them alone. When his sister continued to struggle with her vision, he had no choice but to join the gangs in order to have the money to care for her and get her sight back.

But then a doctor who ran a free clinic told her to get used to being blind. No options. No surgeries. Nothing. They didn't know any better.

Years later, after meeting and falling in love with his father, Diego 'Razor' Salcedo, Bella met Gabi, their resident physician and surgeon at the Steel Patriots. Gabi knew something was wrong after a few simple questions and an examination. They took her to a specialist in Baltimore, and with one surgery, her eyesight was recovered.

Yes, he'd heard the story a dozen or more times, but it always amazed him that his father had fallen in love with her, even knowing she was blind. He'd like to believe he would have the same respect and foresight to love a woman no matter what her physical attributes, but it was difficult to see that

through fifteen-year-old eyes.

“Didn’t it scare you to know you might have kids, and she wouldn’t see them?” asked Abe.

“Honestly? I never thought of it,” said Razor. “I think I was more bothered by the fact that she would never see how beautiful she is. I wanted her to see that. To feel it.”

The other men stared at young Abe. They were new members to the team, all older than him, but he knew one day he would fight alongside them.

“Is there something else you want to ask, Abe?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Maybe. I guess I’m just wondering, I mean, I know a lot of guys here are married to women that had, you know, things wrong with them.”

“Abe, no woman here has anything wrong with them,” said Gaspar. “Almost everyone on our compound has been through something. Tragedies, abuse, trials, but there is nothing wrong with them. Sometimes, that leaves visible scars. Sometimes, they’re invisible. But there is nothing wrong with them.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. I mean, if they have scars, doesn’t that mean there’s something wrong?”

“Tell me why you think that?” asked Ghost. He knew Abe and knew that he wasn’t raised to believe physical impairments meant something was

inherently wrong with you.

“Mr. Krauss, our biology teacher at school. He said the perfect body has no imperfections. No scars, nothing wrong with their DNA, they can see perfectly, hear perfectly, their legs function properly. He showed all these photos of men and women. They were dressed, I mean, in bathing suits, but they looked amazing to me.”

“But not to Mr. Krauss?” asked Razor.

“No. He started pointing out all the things wrong with them. Some of the women had short hair. He said women should have long hair only, that God willed it that way. Some of the men didn’t have enough muscle definition. He really criticized that. I mean, the guys in the photos looked incredibly fit and able to hold their own. Between you and me, I think he takes steroids. He’s huge but in a bulky, awkward way. He can’t really turn his neck or anything.”

“Huge doesn’t equate to strong or physically fit,” said Razor. “You know that. And Mr. Krauss should not be speaking of such things in a biology class.” Abe shrugged, looking at the men in the room.

“He made fun of Keith,” said Abe softly, staring down at his feet.

“Fun of him, how?” asked Gaspar, immediately ready to defend his nephew.

“He came to pick a bunch of us up from school the other day, and Mr.

Krauss saw us signing to him. The next day, he asked me who the ‘dumb mute’ was. I told him Keith wasn’t mute; he was deaf and that it wasn’t nice to say.”

“What did he do?” asked Razor.

“Failed me on a verbal quiz,” frowned Abe. “But it was all on stuff we haven’t even studied yet. How was I supposed to know all that stuff?”

Gaspar looked at the other men, then noticed some of the other boys across the grove. He waved over Patrick, Matt, Benjamin, and Christian.

“What’s up?” asked Christian.

“Are you boys all in Mr. Krauss’s biology class?” asked Ghost. The boys looked at each other, then at Abe.

“Yes, sir. He’s a real tool, sorry.”

“He sounds it,” said Gaspar. “Is he teaching you all that you have to have perfect bodies?”

“Yes, sir,” said Matt. “He made fun of Dad’s scar once, and I warned him if he said something again, I’d make sure Dad knew. It was kind of cool to see him scared of a man he thought was imperfect.”

“Why didn’t you tell your father?” asked Ghost.

“I didn’t want to hurt his feelings,” said Matt. “I hate that he has that scar, but I know what he did to get it, and it makes me proud of him. Mr. Krauss is a...”

“Tool,” said Razor.

“Yes, sir. He makes the guys all feel bad. Not us, really. I mean, he sees that we’re all physically fit, play sports, that sort of thing, but he’s an ass to the girls. Anyone a little thin or a little overweight, acne, that sort of thing, and he’s tearing them apart.”

“Why didn’t you boys say anything?” asked Gaspar.

“Well, sir,” said Abe. “You have more important things to worry about, and he wasn’t really bothering us. I was just trying to figure out why he would say those things. I mean, he’s made fun of some of the girls here, and they’re all beautiful. Aunt Lissa and Aunt Lauren came to the school once, and he made fun of how long their legs were. Who does that?”

“Someone who doesn’t want to live long,” growled Alec.

“Listen, boys, you know Corey. You know that he has Down’s Syndrome. Yet he’s finished college, has a girlfriend, teaches kids like him, he’s brilliant. Whatever your teacher has said to you is bullshit,” said Nine.

“You’re going to talk to him, aren’t you?” asked Abe.

“I’m afraid so,” said Nine. “We pay a lot of money to have the best teachers at our school and create a safe environment for you and the other kids. This is not what we see as a good environment. We accept everyone, without question.”

“Not everyone has the same advantages as all of you,” said Ghost.

“We all make a good living. We live in beautiful homes. We get to train hard together. We’re very fortunate, and we wanted to provide that for others. But that man is not what we had in mind.”

“I understand,” said Abe. “I just need to tell you that if he stays on, he’ll make our lives miserable.”

“Yea. No, he won’t,” said Razor.

The entire discussion weighed heavily on Abe’s heart. He didn’t like Mr. Krauss, but he didn’t want to be the kid that was responsible for him losing his job. He knew what he was saying was wrong, but it was the way he said things.

“Shouldn’t everyone have perfect skin, perfect hair, and perfect teeth?”

“Deformities and handicaps are the world’s way of saying you need to exit.”

He hated that one more than any of them. He was saying those people needed to be removed from this earth. Abe knew that was not okay.

The next day, as the boys were seated in class, a group of their fathers, uncles, and others knocked on the classroom door. At first, Mr. Krauss thought it would be wise to puff out his chest and pretend he was tough. Then he realized that these were the men paying his salary.

“We can speak in the hallway,” he said.

“No, we’re speaking right here,” said Razor. “These kids need to know that the bullshit being spewed out of your mouth is just that. Bullshit.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. I teach biology from a textbook approved by this school.”

“You teach them that imperfections are something to be ashamed of.” Krauss stared at the men, then looked at the classroom, trying to determine who had said something. “For instance, the fact that your legs are disproportionately shorter than your upper body. Or that you have a receding hairline that you’re desperately trying to conceal.”

Krauss immediately looked down at his legs, then shoved his hair forward onto his forehead.

“You made fun of my deaf nephew,” snarled Gaspar. “No one does that. No one. He’s a brilliant young man with a heart of gold, and he’s one of the most physically fit men we have in our family.”

“He’s deaf,” retorted Krauss. “That makes him inferior to me and everyone else.”

“You’re an idiot,” smirked Razor. “And based on the acne and veins on your arms and chest, I’d say you’re also on steroids. Which only proves my point. You’re far from perfect, but you’re damn sure attempting to be through the use of drugs.”

Krauss stared at the faces of the men in front of him, then at the

classroom. He grabbed his keys and briefcase.

“I’ll be going. I know what I’m teaching. Perfection is the only thing to strive for. These kids will learn that the hard way. They’re all imperfect. Every last pathetic kid!” Krauss turned to leave, only to find himself against a wall of muscle unlike any he’d ever seen before. Rory and Jean stared at him, their arms folded, not moving one inch.

“Let me leave,” he sneered.

“Ask nicely,” said Rory. “Actually, that won’t matter. We’re going to the office to have a little conversation.”

“Who will teach the class?” asked Matt.

“Me,” said Razor. “I’ll be teaching the class until we can find a replacement.”

Razor followed through on his promise. It would be four months before they found someone that they felt confident enough in to hand over the classroom. During that time, he spent almost every day undoing what Krauss had done to the kids.

They decided after this incident that they would routinely audit the classes, as well as install video cameras that included audio. The teachers, parents, and students were all made aware of it, but it would allow them to always have evidence of any claims by teachers or students.

As far as they knew, Krauss didn’t go back to teaching. One of the

parents said they'd seen him working at a local gym, preaching his perfection advocacy. It didn't take long for the members of the gym to complain about him, asking that he be replaced.

It took Abe a few months to get over the mess that had been put in his head about trying to look perfect and how to look for perfection in others. But in that time, he discovered that he actually enjoyed looking for the imperfections. The things that made people unique and different. That's what was attractive to him.

By his senior year of high school, he'd broken every state swim record held by Luke. The best part was that when Luke was home, he was there to cheer him on. And the Navy noticed. Recruited for his excellent grades, superior athleticism, and superior problem-solving abilities, Abe was headed to SEAL teams, just like his father.

The problem is, sometimes you do your job so well they don't want to let you go. On teams with young men that could conceivably be his sons, he was suddenly feeling like a dinosaur. A dinosaur that had allowed the only woman to ever turn his head to get away.



Three years earlier...

The last thing Abe wanted was to be out with the new team members. But his commanding officer had asked him to keep an eye on the young men, worried they would find their way into trouble. He was babysitting. A fucking Navy SEAL babysitting baby SEALs.

He sat at the bar nursing a glass of ginger ale while they drank their weight in whiskey and beer, singing along with the horrible karaoke performer.

“Well, you look miserable,” smirked the woman taking the stool next to him.

He started to move, then looked down at the big brown eyes and the ridiculously white smile. She had a small dimple at the corner of her mouth on the right side, and it was the cutest damn thing ever. Her shiny, thick black hair rested at her shoulders in an expertly cut bob. Her lips were glazed with a soft pink.

“Oh,” he said, swallowing the knot in his throat. “No. Not really miserable. I just don’t like babysitting duty.”

“I see,” she smiled, nodding at him. “You’re the designated driver. Well, that’s actually great of you.”

“Are you here by yourself?” he asked.

“Um, sort of,” she said, looking back toward the door. “My uncle has business across the street, and I wanted to grab a glass of wine and maybe an

appetizer. I'm Lyra." She stuck out a beautiful hand, her nails painted a soft baby blue. It made him smile. For some ridiculous reason, it made him smile.

"Abe."

"Abe, it's nice to meet you. If I'm bothering you, I can go sit over there." She pointed to the small table and chair in the corner.

"No, actually, it's nice to have some sober company for a change. So, Lyra, what do you do?"

"Well, I'm currently working on my master's degree in interior design."

"That's great," he nodded. He wasn't even sure he understood what that meant, but he'd go with it. This was the first woman in six years who held his attention for more than a hot minute. There was no doubt he wanted to take her to bed, but he wanted more. He wanted to talk to her. Have hours of conversation. And they did just that.

They talked for an hour about anything and everything. He learned the difference between chinois and chenille. He learned what constituted an antique. And he learned that Lyra was definitely a woman he wanted to get to know. When an older man in a black suit walked into the bar, he knew it must be her uncle.

He eyed Abe, then looked at his niece as he moved closer to her. Abe

stood, stretching out his hand.

“Sir, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Abe Salcedo.” The older man just stared at his hand, then turned to his niece.

“We need to leave now. Say your goodbyes.” The old man turned and walked back to the door.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said, grabbing her purse. “He’s not usually that rude. His meeting must not have gone well. I really enjoyed talking to you. If you ever want to have coffee, you can find me at Legal Grounds Coffee Shop near the university.”

She turned and was gone. The only thing Abe knew was that his life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER TWO

“Abe, please, I can’t stay. I have to go,” said Lyra, pulling on her sweater. He tried to reach for her, but she skittered away from him, grabbing her clothes as she went.

“I don’t get this,” he said with frustration. “We’ve been seeing one another for almost three years now. We have dinner; we go on dates; we come back here and spend most of the night together, then suddenly, you say you have to disappear. Are you seeing someone else? Are you married?”

“No! No, for God’s sake, no! I’m not married. I’m not seeing anyone else. You know how protective my uncle is, Abe. I’m really stuck here. I have to obey him right now. It’s the way our family is.”

Abe nodded at her, curious for the millionth time about what her uncle actually did for a living. On paper, Jessup Wolford was a businessman with multiple businesses in the area. He owned three convenience stores, one hotel, a car dealership, and recently ventured out, buying a shipping company. But there was something about the man that sent warning signals to Abe’s brain.

“Lyra, baby, I’m serious about you. I want to make a life with you, but we have to be honest with one another.”

“I am being honest with you. I’m not seeing anyone else, Abe. You

know I'm not. Between work and my part-time teaching at the university, I have no time, and Uncle Jessup is always asking me to have dinner with him and his clients." She kissed him, grabbing her purse as she headed to the door. Turning, she stared at him with tears in her eyes, then smiled. "I'm serious about you, too."

That was the last time he saw her. The last time she was standing in front of him with her impossibly adorable dimple, gorgeous body, and bright smile. He'd tried to contact her uncle, but no one would respond to him.

Knowing he needed to find another way, he stalked her favorite coffee shops and restaurants until he found someone who knew her.

"Yea, yea, I know her," said the waitress. "Lyra was her name. Really nice lady. She used to come in here like clockwork every Thursday morning. Would sit right over there with a man."

"A man?" frowned Abe as the pit in his gut grew a mile wide.

"Oh, it wasn't like that. You could tell it was something serious. All business. I don't think I was supposed to see it, but he had a badge on his belt. Not local police, though."

"A badge? What the fuck?" muttered Abe. "Was there anything that stuck out on her last visit? Was she nervous? Scared?"

"I don't know," said the waitress, shaking her head. "Oh, wait. Her bag."

“Her bag?”

“Yea, she always carried this really small cross-body bag. It was beautiful, designer all the way. But that day, she was carrying this huge hobo-style bag.” Abe frowned at her, not understanding what she was saying. The waitress looked around and pointed to another woman’s bag. “That’s a hobo bag. Anyway, it was packed full. When she left, the cop carried it for her.”

“Shit,” muttered Abe. “What the fuck is happening here?”

“Sorry, I have to get to my other tables.” He nodded, leaving a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

It would have been easy to call home and get some help, but then he’d have to answer questions about why he hadn’t gone home recently. Instead, he dug his heels in and started investigating on his own. All of his free time was spent looking for Lyra, hoping to find one small nugget that would bring her back.

When he was given the option to work with a joint team that included Homeland and the FBI, he grabbed it, hoping that maybe he could pick the brains of a few different people.

It would change his entire life.

“Salcedo? We have an assignment for you. A witsec.”

Witness security was something that usually the local police would

provide, or the FBI. This had to be someone pretty important for the feds to put a SEAL on them. As they approached the house, the agents on duty seemed to be running around in a chaotic fashion.

“What’s going on?” asked Abe to one of the agents.

“We think the witness has been made. We’ve got to move now.”

“Okay, I’ll follow to the new location.”

Waiting inside the government-issued vehicle, he stared at the front door of the brownstone. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. As he opened the car door to step out, he watched as the front door opened. Another agent walked out first, then a woman. A woman he knew all too well.

“Lyra,” he whispered. “Son-of-a-bitch. Lyra.” As he moved to cross the street, she looked up, connecting with his gaze, and froze. That’s when all hell broke loose. The entire house exploded in a thundering roar. The agent on the porch was thrown to the front lawn while Lyra and the other agent disappeared. Abe was tossed back against his car, dropping to the concrete. His head was fuzzy, the visions in front of him unclear. When he was finally able to stand, he saw the complete destruction in front of him.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No!”

Hours of interviews later, he still didn’t know what hospital they’d taken her to. Seated in one of the interrogation rooms, he waited for his

commanding officer and the division chief to come in and speak with him.

“Abe, I’m sorry, brother. She didn’t make it. We lost her and one of our agents,” said his CO.

“She disappeared on me. We were serious about one another, then she was gone. What the fuck is happening here?”

“She was a witness in her uncle’s criminal case. Money laundering, organized crime, prostitution, drugs, all of it. We’d been working with her since she was nineteen years old. She’d feed us information when she could, carefully. First, it was during class at the university. Then we’d meet her for coffee or something.

“A few months ago, he found out what she was doing. She packed a bag, contacted me, and ran. He was going to kill her, and he’d made it very clear. Put a bounty on her head and everything.”

“When is his trial?” asked Abe.

“Now? I have no fucking clue. We’ll figure it out, but he’s going to answer for this as well.” The two men watched his face, shaking their heads.

“Take some time off, Abe. You need to take some time off. I don’t need you fucking up this case. Let’s do it right. For Lyra.”

But Abe refused. He needed to keep working and, if possible, kill Jessup Wolford. Except he wasn’t sleeping, wasn’t eating, and damn sure wasn’t making any headway on Wolford. It seemed he’d disappeared as

well. Now the whole damn bureau was after him.

“Salcedo! Get your ass in here,” said his CO.

“Sir.”

“You’re fucking exhausted. You’re having nightmares. You’re not eating. You look like shit. It’s the holidays. Take some time off and get your fucking head on straight. Think about retirement, Abe. I mean it. You’re old as fucking dirt. So am I. Think about it.”

As his world began to cave in around him, the ghosts and voices assaulted his brain, day and night. He cried out for help, his teammates staring at him in the darkness.

“I’m going mad,” he whispered. “Mad.”

No one wanted to be forced to take mandatory leave. He didn’t want to go home, but it was the holidays. It was where he should be. He would surprise them. He would come home to them and, hopefully, get his head straight. Maybe the pond would help, he thought.

Deciding to take a walk through the Quarter to reminisce seemed wise at the time. His plan was to stop at the little bakery that carried his mother’s favorite macarons and bring her a box. Normally, it would have been perfectly fine for him. But he wasn’t thinking clearly. He wasn’t paying attention.

He should have paid attention. He should have been listening to the

streets, not to the voices in his head. He felt the piercing stab of the blade, the low rumble of a voice whispering in his ear.

“For Lyra, you bastard,” growled the voice.

He didn't even fight him. He deserved this. He deserved to die. He deserved to bleed to death on the streets. But something led him away from the city. Away from the streets and into the bayou. Something was calling him.

Someone was calling him.

Home.

CHAPTER THREE

The fun at the new island was continuing while Christmas and wedding celebrations continued at Belle Fleur. Tobias and Gail looked happier than anyone could have hoped, and all the new babies were squealing with delight, clutching their gifts from Santa.

“Man, I think we might have made it through a family event without shit hitting the fan,” smirked Code.

“You had to say it, didn’t you?” frowned Tanner. “You know that you’ve just cursed us. We’ve got too many brothers still out there.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” he smiled his boyish smile. Across the room, he waved at his beautiful wife, Hannah, as she spoke to her brother, Angel and his wife, Mary. She was stunningly beautiful. Then again, so was Angel. Even Code could admit that. Despite the scar he’d received the night he saved Mary, his face was beautiful, and Code was lucky enough to be married to the better-looking female version of him.

Code heard the alarms at the café and knew it was closed for the holiday. Tanner glared at him, but he only shrugged, grabbing Tanner. They took one of the ATVs to investigate.

“You just had to open your damn mouth,” frowned Tanner.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s nothing, or maybe someone who

is just hungry. I'm texting the others to let them know we're headed out to take care of it." Tanner sped down the main road toward the café, and the closer they got, the worse his stomach felt.

"Something is really wrong," said Tanner. Without warning, their new friend Marcel appeared between them in the ATV.

"I do like this curious machine," he smiled.

"Oh shit!" said Code, gripping his chest. "Give a brother a warning."

"I am. Someone is injured badly. I cannot tell if he belongs here or not." As the ATV stopped in front of the café, both men swiftly jumped out, weapons ready to draw.

The front door had been tampered with and was slightly ajar, only making them more concerned for the situation. As they entered, drawing their weapons, they saw the blood on the floor. There was no broken glass, nothing to indicate that someone had hurt themselves breaking into the café.

Code signaled Tanner to go to the left side of the counter while he went to the right. The blood clearly following that path. Frowning, he turned and saw the body lying face down. He kicked the foot of the large man, then knelt beside him, feeling for a pulse.

"Get medical here," he said to Tanner. Turning the body over, he gasped.

"Who is that?" asked Tanner.

“Abraham. It’s Razor and Bella’s son, Abe. Shit, we haven’t seen him in probably ten years. He must have been trying to get home.” Tanner quickly sent the urgent text to all medical team members and the senior team.

Wilson and Cruz came through the back door, followed by Gabi. They’d been checking on their patients who were at the clinic. When they saw the face of the man lying on the floor, they all gasped, staring at the young man.

“Holy shit,” said Gabi. “Get him to the clinic.”

As Wilson and the others lifted him onto the stretcher, he reached out for his hand, squeezing, and said one thing.

“Let me die.”

“Fuck that, you asshole! You’re not dying. Not here. You’re home, brother,” said Wilson. “I need you to hold on, Abe. Just hold on for me. You’re home.”

The clinic began to fill to capacity with family and friends. Bella held tightly to Razor’s hand, praying for her son. She knew he was in good hands, but a prayer was always welcome.

“Does anyone know anything?” asked Luke.

“Nothing,” said Tanner. “We heard the alarm at the café and thought

it might be someone hungry. The door was tampered with and open, and there was a trail of blood leading behind the counter.”

“I wonder if he was trying to get to the alarm beneath the counter?” frowned Code.

“He would have known that once he opened that door, the alarm would have been triggered, and we’d come. Maybe he’s not thinking clearly,” said Tanner.

“Razor? Bella? Anything you can tell us?” asked Cam.

“He’s been different the last few years,” said Razor. “Usually, he would call us or send an e-mail or text at least once a week. Then it started to taper off. We asked him if he was seeing someone, but he said he didn’t want to jinx anything. Something was definitely off, though.”

“Hey, I think you guys need to know what I’ve found,” said Hiro, looking sheepishly at the team.

“Brother, whatever it is, it’s okay,” said Razor. “I appreciate you taking the initiative to figure this shit out.”

“He’s been on a team with Homeland and the FBI for the last year. Recently, he was involved in an incident that I’m still working on getting details about. But when he returned to the teams, they asked him to take some time off. Apparently, he was having nightmares, not sleeping, not eating.”

“What the fuck?” muttered Razor.

“He looked big but thinner than the last time he was here,” said Code.

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Nothing to me, but he spoke to Wilson. He said, ‘let me die.’”

Sara, Dylan, and George brought a cart filled with hot chocolate, coffee, and snacks to keep them going. It was well past midnight, but they all stayed in their holiday attire, waiting for news.

Gabi and Riley walked out, whispering to one another. For Gabi, this was personal. She’d delivered Abe, watched him grow, and become a fine young man.

“How is he?” asked Razor.

“He’ll survive,” said Riley. “He was stabbed from behind, nicking the right kidney. It narrowly missed the liver, which was probably the intention of the guy who stabbed him. He’s resting comfortably right now. Wilson, Doc, and Cruz are with him.”

“Thank you, Riley. Gabi. Thank you,” said Bella.

“Honey, it’s my honor. He’s important to our family, but what we need to find out is why he was stabbed.”

“You think it was intentional?” asked Hex.

“Nothing was missing, Hex. He still had his wallet; he had his pack with him. I don’t know how the hell he got to the café, but he couldn’t have

walked. Someone must have given him a ride. But if it were robbery, they would have taken all of that. He had more than five hundred in cash in his wallet.”

“What the fuck is going on?” frowned Eric. “Can we see him?”

“Two people at a time. Let Razor and Bella go in first. Then, two of you can speak with him.”

Hex and Luke followed Bella and Razor toward the back. Entering the room, they watched as Cruz and Doc held down Abe’s arms.

“What’s he doing?” asked Razor.

“The asshole keeps saying ‘let me die,’” said Doc. Razor stormed to his side, gripping his son’s hand.

“Stop it! Stop it right now!” Abe looked up at the familiar voice, the tears swimming in his eyes. He shook his head, then gripped his father’s hand.

“It’s my fault. She’s dead because it’s my fault,” he said.

“Who is dead, Abe? Who, son?” asked Bella.

“Lyra. I was supposed to save her. I was too late. I was too late,” he cried. Razor gripped his son’s shoulders, holding him against him as he wept for the woman that he believed he was destined to save.

“See if we can get comms to find anything on a woman named Lyra,” said Hex. Cruz nodded, heading back out to the waiting area.

“Razor, brother, tell us what you can,” said Hex. Gabi stood at the door, frowning at the men.

“Didn’t I say two at a time?” she frowned.

“We’re sorry, Gabi, but this is important.” She rolled her eyes, walking away from them. “Tell us, Abe.”

“We’d been dating three years,” he said.

“Three years,” whispered Bella. “Three years, and you didn’t tell us?”

“Babe.” Razor gave a slight head shake.

“No, she’s right. I should have told you. I should have called all of you. Something was wrong. Something was strange. We were serious about one another. I was planning to ask her to come home with me for Christmas. This past summer, she disappeared. We’d spent the night together, and she left very early in the morning, as always.

“I thought she was seeing someone else, and we had a little spat, nothing serious. But when I tried calling her later in the day, she didn’t answer.”

“Did she give a reason for always leaving early?” asked Razor.

“Her uncle. Jessup...”

“Wolford,” finished Hiro, staring at the men in the room. “Jessup Wolford. His niece is Lyra Wolford.”

“Was. Was Lyra Wolford,” sniffed Abe. Hiro looked at everyone, a look that said he knew far more than Abe did.

“Hiro? What’s up, brother?” asked Hex.

“I think she’s still alive,” he said, staring at Abe.

Abe tried to sit up, but the others pushed him back to the bed. He shook his head, screaming at Hiro.

“You’re lying! I saw it! I saw the whole fucking house blow up! All of it! I’ve been suffering with fucking nightmares for months, hearing voices in my sleep, going fucking insane. Someone would have told me if she was alive.”

“Maybe they couldn’t,” said Hiro. “Maybe they had to keep it hidden. Look, Abe, I know this is hard for you, but she was the primary witness in a federal case that would have not only brought down her uncle, but potentially some very high-profile politicians, business owners, even cops.”

“I saw the fucking place blow up.”

“But did you see her body?” asked Hiro quietly. “Did you see her afterwards?”

“No.”

“Listen to me, Abe. I know this is difficult for you, but why in the hell would the feds still be hotly pursuing Wolford if their star witness was

dead? They are moving forward with the trial despite the fact that without her, they have nothing.”

Abe stared at Hiro, letting all of that soak in. They’d lied to him. All of them had lied to him. He tried to sit up, but Doc and Wilson gently pushed him back.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Wilson.

“To kill some fucking people.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“First off, if you get to kill people, we get to go with you,” smirked Hex. “Secondly, we want to know what we’re dealing with here. We have to find out if she’s really alive.”

“Oh, she is, baby,” said Mama Irene, staring at the room of people. She walked toward Abe, kissing his cheek. “Welcome home, baby. I’m so glad you’re here. I was worried you’d be too late.” Abe frowned at the old woman, shaking his head.

“Grandma, what are you talking about?” asked Luke.

“Well, now. Sometimes, I get calls from folks and they need favors. We got all them bayou cabins that used to belong to the boys. Still do, I suppose, but we never use them.”

“Grandma, get to the point, please.”

“Right, okay. Well, got a call from John Fontenot. You remember him, Luke. Y’all went to school together. Nice boy.”

“Grandma!”

“You’re so impatient! Fine. John is with the FBI now. Asked a personal favor. Said he needed to keep someone safe, and I might know how to do that. Hide ‘em away for a few weeks, maybe longer. So, I put her in cottage one-nineteen. Out of the way but close enough if she needed help. I

didn't wanna leave her all alone out in the bayou."

"Name, Grandma. Please."

"Didn't ask her name." She turned to look at Abe. "I didn't need to."

"Get me to that cottage," said Abe, looking up at Wilson and Doc.

"Please, I'm begging you. Get me to that fucking cottage."

"Alright, brother. But we make a stop at the pond first. Let's get you right. Then we'll take you to see this mystery woman."

The sun was just rising above the bayou as they got to the pond. With a little help, Abe stripped and slid into the warm waters. He ducked his head beneath the steamy pond, relishing the feel of the warmth seeping into his weary muscles and bones. The scorching pain in his back was gone, his body suddenly felt better than it had in years. He swam a few laps back and forth, knowing the routine that worked best, then got out of the pond.

"Damn, brother. You're lookin' good," smirked Cam.

"Are you checking me out?" asked Abe. He knew Cam was poking fun at him, but it felt good to poke fun back.

"Nope," laughed Cam. "Just making an observation. You used to be the little one on the property. Looks like you had a growth spurt."

"A little. I guess I've been gone too long. I'm sorry for that. Really, I am."

"Too fucking long, brother," said Luke. "Now, put your damn clothes

on. Let's go see your girl."

They could barely keep up with Abe as he made his way to the cottage in the farthest corner of the compound. The light in the kitchen was on, and he noticed that the blinds were partially closed. Stepping up onto the porch, the others followed, and he turned.

"Sorry, brother. You're not doing this alone," said Hex. "Someone connected to her tried to kill you. I'd lay money on it."

Abe tapped on the door, and it slowly opened. He nearly cried. There she was. Whole. In one piece. Her dark hair had been dyed a light brown, and she looked thinner than the last time he saw her. But that damn dimple was still there, and those big brown eyes were blinking at him.

"H-how? H-how is this possible?" she gasped.

"How is this possible?" repeated Abe. "I thought you were dead. I thought you were fucking dead!" His brief delight was suddenly replaced by anger. He was pissed. She knew he was a Navy SEAL. She could have found a way to call him. To communicate with him that she was okay.

"Abe," whispered Luke. "Hi. Can we assume that you're Lyra Wolford?"

"Y-yes. I thought no one knew I was here. They told me that no one would know other than that older woman and her husband."

"No one except my grandmother and grandfather," smirked Luke.

“You’re safe here. May we come inside?” She nodded, opening the door further. Abe was the last one through the door. He stared down at her, glaring at her as he moved past her.

“We didn’t mean to frighten you,” said Hex. “It’s just that Abe was on his way home last night and was attacked.”

“That’s right. Stabbed,” said Abe. Lyra covered her mouth, tears threatening to spill. “He said, ‘this is for Lyra.’ At first, I thought he was blaming me for your disappearance. Now, I think he was saying he wanted to stab you, not me. I think he thought I knew where you were.”

“I’m sorry, Abe. I’m so sorry. Agent Carr said that I couldn’t contact anyone. It was best if everyone believed I was dead. He said if I reached out to you, someone would know, and they would harm you.”

“Well, guess what,” he frowned. “Someone did harm me, and I had no fucking clue where you were.”

“Please don’t be angry, Abe. Please.”

“Angry? Oh, I’m beyond angry. You knew I was a fucking SEAL! You knew who and what I was. I told you I saw a future for us, Lyra. That meant something to me.”

“Abe,” whispered Razor, coming in the door behind him. He looked toward the young woman, nodding. “Hello. I’m Diego, Abe’s father.”

“Oh,” she smiled. “You look just alike. I’m so glad to finally meet

you.” Razor smiled at the young woman, then looked back at his son, giving him a silent warning.

“Abe, they wouldn’t allow me to call anyone. I had no phone, no computer, nothing. The explosion at the safe house was planned. I had a few scratches, so did the agent, but we were fine. They took me out the back and into the house behind the one I was in.

“From there, they had me in a safe house in Wyoming. Then, I was moved to New Orleans. They were worried that there were too many people. I guess someone knew Miss Irene and called her. They moved me here in the middle of the night.”

“How? I mean, we have tight security here,” said Hex.

“I know the bayou,” said Irene, coming in the door. “Y’all aren’t the only ones that could move with stealth. Matthew and I picked her up about a week ago. She was scared to stay in them bayou cabins with no one bein’ out there, so I moved her here. With everything goin’ on with the weddin’, Tobias and Gail, and Halo Island, no one was payin’ attention.”

“Mama Irene,” said Abe, shaking his head. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I knew you were comin’ home, baby. You needed to find her yourself. Now you have. She’s healthy, and you’re gonna keep her that way.”

“You’re still going to testify?” asked Abe.

“I have to, Abe. The things that I know about my uncle, I can’t just turn away and ignore that. He’s a horrible, horrible man. I discovered that he killed my parents when I was young. He killed his own wife and daughter, and I knew that eventually, he would kill me too. So, I cooperated for as long as I could, all the while feeding Agent Carr information.”

“You risked your life,” frowned Abe.

“Yes. Yes, I did. Just like you do. Every damn day. So, don’t judge me, Abraham Salcedo. Don’t you dare judge me. I did what was right. I’m sorry that I hurt you, that you worried for me. I was always planning to come back to you. But I have to do this first.”

“You do this, and you have no future,” he said, staring at her. “You testify against your uncle, and everyone who has ever done business with him will come for you. Your life is over.”

Lyra stared at him, wondering what happened to that sweet, kind, handsome man she’d fallen in love with. He was suddenly so cold and distant. She couldn’t believe it. Nodding her head, she walked to the door and opened it.

“Then I guess my life is over.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Lyra watched as Abe exited her cottage, her heart shattering from the pain in her chest. She stared at the other men, shaking her head as tears trailed down her cheeks.

“Let me talk to him, honey,” said Razor, giving her a quick hug. “My son is stubborn like his mama.” She nodded as he squeezed her shoulder, leaving the others with her.

“Lyra, we need to know everything,” said Hex. “I know this is going to be hard for you, but we have to know what we’re dealing with. We’ve got friends at the bureau, but we also know that sometimes they don’t get to everything. We want to make sure we cover all our bases and get you to that courtroom when the time comes.”

“Have you done this before?” she asked.

“We have,” nodded Luke. “My Aunt Rose was a witness in a trial against her ex-husband. Skylar, AJ’s wife, was in witsec when he met her. We’re all former Special Forces, or former agency, bureau, or law enforcement. I promise you that we know what we’re doing.”

“I was supposed to get a call from Agent Carr yesterday. When he dropped me off here, he gave me this phone, telling me only to use it to contact him or him to contact me. He never called. He’s always on time.

Always. At first, I thought it might be that it was the holiday, but when I tried calling his number, it just went dead. Nothing. No ringing, no voicemail. Nothing.”

“May I have it?” asked Hiro, holding out his hand. She set the burner phone in his hand, and he disappeared.

“What’s he going to do?” she asked.

“Make sure you weren’t tracked and see if Agent Carr is alright,” said Hex. “You’ll stay in this cottage. It’s safe. Close enough to all of us. Hoot and Billy are the closest to you, so they’ll be checking on your cottage. But this is what you need to know. No one gets on this property without us knowing about it.”

“I did,” she smirked.

“That’s different,” said Luke. “When my grandparents are involved, all the rules are out the window. Believe me, Mama Irene won’t allow anyone on the property that could hurt us. You need to let us know if there’s something you need or something you want. Otherwise, you don’t move from this property. You can join all of us for meals from now on.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “Thank you. Wh-what about Abe? He’s really angry at me.”

“He’s angry because he cares,” said Luke. “He thought there was a future between the two of you. Just the fact that he told you he was a SEAL

tells me everything I need to know about how he felt about you. Give him some time to come to grips with it all.”

“I may not have time,” she whispered. “You and I both know that. My uncle is determined to see me dead. I betrayed him. I stole documents from him. Agent Carr said...”

“Agent Carr is dead,” said Hiro, walking back into the room. “I’m sorry.” Lyra gasped, clutching her chest, falling to her knees.

“Brother, how many fucking times do we have to tell you, Ace, and AJ—soften the blow,” frowned Eric. He knelt beside Lyra, gripping her shoulders. “It’s alright, honey. We’re on extreme vigilance now. Nothing will happen.”

“You c-can’t promise that,” she hiccupped. “You c-can’t. He got to him. An FBI agent! He could get to me and then to all of you. P-please, just put me on a plane and let me go somewhere else.”

“We can’t do that,” said Hex. “That’s not how we’re built. You’re gonna tell us everything you know about your uncle, everything you have. Then we’ll all know, we’ll all see it, and he damn sure can’t fight all of us.”

Lyra continued to shake her head while Eric, Cam, and Luke set water and tissues in front of her and started the tea kettle. She laughed, looking up at them.

“You guys seem to know what to do for crying women,” she grinned

through her tears.

“Oh, hell yea,” said Eric. “We’ve had more experience than we’d like with that. You’re gonna be just fine, sweetie.”

Bella, Darby, Taylor, and Charlie came into the cottage and immediately began wrapping Lyra in warmth and love. Charlie set a stack of books on the table, Taylor and Darby set down two bags of clothing, cosmetics, and hair care products.

“Lyra, I’m Bella.”

“Oh,” she whispered. “You’re Abe’s mother. He hates me now.” The tears began to fall again, and Bella hugged the young woman to her ample breasts.

“He doesn’t hate you, honey. He’s terrified for you. Rightfully so. My brother was a gang leader doing time in a prison. It took me a long time to realize that everything he did in his world was to protect me. Abe’s scared of what he’s willing to do to protect you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He’s willing to do anything, honey,” said Charlie. “I’m Charlie. Those are my books. You read them, and it might help you a little.”

“I’m Taylor,” smiled the beautiful little blonde. “My husband is Tango. You’ll meet him and everyone else soon enough. This is Darby. She’s married to Gunner, and they have a daughter, Calla.”

“Do I have to remember all of this,” she sniffed. The others laughed, shaking their heads.

“No, honey. You’ll meet everyone, and then you’ll know who belongs and who doesn’t,” said Bella. “For now, you must be starving. It’s almost lunchtime, and we’ve been holding you hostage here. Come on, we’ll go get some food.”

“Give me one minute. I just need to wash my face and put something warm on.” Lyra disappeared to the back bedroom, shutting the door. All eyes turned to Hiro, staring at him.

“Basic. Carr was tortured, then his tongue cut out, and mailed to the bureau. His body was found in his truck, inside his garage. They have no idea what he said to them. No documents were at his home, so if they were looking for something, they didn’t find it.”

“Where is all the evidence?” asked Luke. Hiro looked down the hallway, then back at the team.

“She has it.”

CHAPTER SIX

“You want to explain to me why you treated a young woman that way?” asked Razor. “I’ve taught you better than that.”

“She’s being stupid! She’s going to fucking die!”

“She’s anything but stupid, Abe. That woman is intelligent. I can see it in her eyes, and she’s so fucking brave, it breaks my heart. She’s willing to sacrifice herself for what’s right. Put her uncle away for good.”

“She. Will. Die.”

“No. She won’t. Not as long as we’re here. Whether you’re a part of this or not, we will all protect that young woman.”

Abe kicked the dirt, sending rocks and grass flying across the path. He stared back at the cottage, then turned to see Mama Irene walking toward him. He was so angry with her he was afraid of what he might say.

“You’re angry. That’s alright,” she said, nodding. “It tells me I did the right thing. That girl needed help, and we can give it to her. But more than that, she needs someone that loves her to truly protect her. I knew it was you.”

“No offense, Mama Irene, but you know nothing.”

“ABE!” yelled Razor, taking a step toward his son.

“No, honey. It’s okay. He can be mad at me all he wants.” She took

a step towards him, her barely five-feet of nothing staring up at his six-feet-two. “Be mad. Be real mad. But let me ask you something. If she walked out of here today, what would you do? Would you go after her? Would you track her down? You were prepared to do that when you thought she was alive. Would you be able to live with yourself knowin’ you coulda’ protected her but didn’t?”

Irene stopped, saying nothing as the cold wind blew through them. She looked over his shoulder, staring at the women walking with Lyra into the cafeteria.

“If you let her go, and her uncle takes her, what do you think will happen?” The fear etched on Abe’s face told her everything she needed to know. “That’s what I thought. Pull yerself together, and go tell that girl how you feel before she decides to run.”

Abe’s eyes followed Lyra into the cafeteria, watching as his mother and the other women help her to fill a plate and sit with them. He looked at his father, then at Mama Irene. Shaking his head, he moved closer, grabbing her and hugging her to his body.

“Forgive me. Please forgive me. You’re the last person I would ever want to hurt. I know you did this for me. I don’t know how, but I know. I love you, Mama Irene.” She patted his back, then pushed back to touch his face.

“I know, baby. I love you, too. It’s why I did this. She will bring you peace. Just let her in.” The old woman turned and walked away, leaving Abe with tear-stained cheeks. His father gripped his shoulder, and he turned.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Abe. When you love someone, your behavior tends to be out of the ordinary. I just think you didn’t realize how much you actually loved that woman. The challenge for all of us, and I do mean all of us, will be to figure out what the fuck she knows about her uncle and his businesses and then how we stop him.”

“Can’t we just shoot him?” asked Abe. Razor laughed, shaking his head.

“Well, that would be the easiest solution, but I’m going to bet that the feds have a say in this. What do you say we go find out?”

Abe nodded, following his father toward the cafeteria. It was already filling with all the familiar faces of family and friends. He’d missed this. He’d missed it all and never realized how much until this very moment. Passing each person, he shook hands, hugged, kissed, and smiled. All the while, his eyes were only on one person. Lyra.

“He’s going to yell at me, isn’t he?” she asked Bella.

“If he does, I’m going to turn him over my knee,” said Bella. Lyra laughed, shaking her head at that image.

“I might like to see you do that,” she smiled. Bella and the other women stood, moving to the next table over as Abe sat next to Lyra. He grabbed her hand, placing it between his two rough palms.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me. I’m scared, Lyra, and I’ve never been scared before. Never. The thought of losing you again is eating me alive.”

“Oh, Abe,” she said. Reaching for him, she hugged him, enveloping herself in his arms. She’d cried for this. Every night, she prayed that she would have another chance to be in his arms.

“I know that you’re scared. I am, too. I wanted you by my side. I needed you by my side, but Agent Carr said that couldn’t happen. Dozens of times, I reached for the burner phone and wanted to dial your number, but I kept remembering that Carr said someone could track your number and find you. I couldn’t live if that happened, Abe. The fact that someone stabbed you is making me... Wait. You were stabbed? Where?”

Abe laughed, shaking his head as he kissed her.

“Explanation for another day,” he said, pulling her tighter against his body. Inhaling her scent, he nearly cried aloud. “This is all I’ve dreamed of. The thought of never seeing you again was never a possibility. Never. I just knew that you were out there somewhere. I knew it in here.” He thumped his chest, and she kissed him again.

“Abe, what do we do about my uncle? He’s not going to give up.”

“We’ll handle that. You’re going to need to tell us everything, Lyra. Everything. Give any information you have to our team, and we’ll keep it safe.”

“Abe, it’s a lot. More than you think. More than Carr knew. I didn’t show him everything.”

“Why not?” frowned Abe.

“He didn’t want to know. He said it was safer for me and him if I didn’t tell him all the details or show him where it was. In the end, it probably killed him,” she said, shaking her head.

“He’s dead?” asked Abe.

“You left the cottage, but that man, Hiro, said he was dead. I don’t know the details, but he said that my uncle got to him.”

Abe just nodded, pulling her tightly to his body again. He looked over her head at his father and the other men, all of them already knowing what he’d just been told.

“We’ll worry about all of that tomorrow. Today, we talk. We tell one another everything. No holding back, no secrets, everything. Feel me, Lyra?”

“I feel you,” she whispered. “Everything.”

Abe hugged her, and over her shoulder, he saw Grip, Tony, Nathan, Yori, and Martha. Then he noticed a few new faces and shook his head.

“Yea, so about telling you everything.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

After Lyra had water splashed on her face, came back to consciousness, and met the ghosts face-to-face, she seemed to calm a bit. It was a lot for a girl to take in at one sitting. Abe made the wise decision to hold off on the pond for a while. It might be too much.

Pigsty brought a box to the table with a bracelet, necklace, and earrings. He told her what they were, and she shouldn't remove any of them. The bracelet was attached with an unbreakable clasp. They were beautiful pieces designed by Ela and Harper. The gold made them look like high-end jewelry pieces. Small colored stones of various sizes were sprinkled across them.

"These are beautiful," smiled Lyra.

"They're practical," said Pigsty. "These have trackers in them, communications devices, GPS, everything. We've been perfecting this for years, and with Ela and Harper designing them now, we can make them look mainstream."

"Well, I'd wear them no matter what. They're truly unique."

"You must have a lot of questions for me," said Abe.

"I suppose I do," she smiled. "It's pretty obvious that you're not some average, everyday SEAL. I mean, if there is such a thing. What do you

do, Abe? What is all of this?”

“I am a SEAL, although I may be retiring very soon,” he said, shaking his head. “My entire family lives here. Blood and non-blood. My father was a SEAL and served on the team of Ghost, another SEAL.” He pointed to Ghost, who smiled at her, nodding. She’d seen him around the compound but never left the cottage before today.

“Every man here served his country. Many of the women as well. Evie, Savannah, Piper, Lucia, Addie, Hazel, Kate, and so many more. These men and women are extraordinary. They’re intelligent, highly skilled in weapons, hand-to-hand combat, speak multiple languages, and are the finest people I know. I’m honored to be their family.”

Abe sat up straighter, looking around the room. He was honored. And it was time he showed them that. He’d been running for so long and wasn’t even sure what it was he was running from, or to. This was where he belonged. This was where he was supposed to be.

“Lyra? This is where I want to be when all this is done. I want to come back here and work with my family. Live right here in this compound. I need to know now if you think you might be willing to do that as well.”

“Now? Can’t I think about it?” she grimaced.

“What’s to think about? If you love me, and I think you do, what would hold you back?”

“Abe. What would hold me back? Are you kidding me? My uncle has a price on my head. By all appearances, he’s killed the only man who was protecting me.”

“Not the only one,” said Abe. “If you had let me know, I would have been protecting you all along.”

“Abe, I couldn’t tell you. I told you that.”

“I know, I know,” he said, shaking his head. “Your uncle has nothing to do with how I feel about you. You heard what we said about my mother’s brother, my uncle. You’ve heard the stories. What your family does is not a reflection on you, Lyra. You’re a good person. Kind. You, we, could have a life together here.”

“How is that possible? Even if my uncle goes to prison, he will have men that come after me. It’s just not possible, but neither is me walking away from testifying against him. Someone has to stop him, and since I’m the one with all the information, I guess it’s me.”

Abe was screaming on the inside, but there was also a part of him that was proud of Lyra. She was taking a huge risk with her life. He wanted to yell at her for that. Truth is, he would do the same. So would everyone else at Belle Fleur.

“I sure hope you have solid evidence against this man,” said Abe.

“I have more than solid evidence. I have myself.” He frowned at her,

tilting his head sideways. “There’s a lot more than what I’m about to tell you, Abe. Do you remember when I wrote to you during that deployment a year ago? You were in Africa somewhere, and I told you I had to have my gallbladder out.”

“I remember. The scar seemed wicked for that kind of surgery.” She nodded, biting her lip.

“That’s because it wasn’t gallbladder surgery.” Abe stiffened, and Lyra suddenly realized they’d gained quite an audience. There were dozens of men and a few women standing around them. “It was my punishment for not attending dinner with one of my uncle’s clients. He took my left kidney. He said he would take pieces of me every time I disobeyed him, promising that the next time, it would be something far more valuable than a kidney. He would take an eye, arm, or leg.

“That’s when I told Carr it had to stop. It had to end. He agreed, and we began working on a plan to get me out of there. The day Carr took me, my uncle demanded a meeting with me because I’d missed another dinner with one of his clients. This time, I did it intentionally. I knew who it was, and I knew what he wanted. Or, I should say, who he wanted.”

“His client wanted you?” growled Abe.

“Yes. And what my uncle would do to me paled in comparison to what this man would have done.”

“Who was it?” asked Luke, staring at the young woman.

“Quetzalcoatl. He prefers to go by Quetz.”

“Jesus,” murmured Abe.

They were all very familiar with the name. Quetzalcoatl was an Aztec and Mayan god. He was known as the patron of rain, science, agriculture, and much, much more. The name means Feathered Serpent, and he was known for always having a snake on his wrist. Usually, poisonous.

“I’d been to another dinner when he was present. I was probably twenty. He stared at me as if he could count the freckles from five hundred paces. It gave me the creeps, but my uncle said I had to stay.

“After dinner, my uncle provided entertainment,” she said with disdain. “There were several young women and men. Probably only in their late teens, maybe early twenties, but I highly doubt it. They were ordered to dance and entertain the guests. They’d been taught a dance routine. It was, um, very erotic.”

Abe looked up at Luke and Cam, then around at the other faces.

“There was one girl; she was very young. I don’t think she was even fourteen. Quetz said he wanted her. God,” she said, closing her eyes, “I can still hear that girl crying, begging them to not let him take her. I didn’t see her after that, but I overheard one of the guards saying that he’d brutalized her. Raped, sodomized, beaten, and bitten by his pet snake dozens of times.

She was a child. When I asked my uncle about the girl, that earned me a slap. It was the first of many more to come. It was as if once I'd seen one thing in his business, now I was fair game. I think in his mind, there was no escape for me."

"That's exactly what he thought," said Luke. "He thought that since you were family, in his control, and he kept a leash on you, you'd never run. I am surprised, though, that he allowed you to spend so much time with Abe."

There it was, thought Abe. The question everyone had been holding in. Was Lyra using him for information?

"At first, he didn't care all that much. I was occupied, attending school, and out of his hair. Then suddenly, he took a huge interest. I think he figured out who and what Abe is. I would sneak out of the house, but one of his men would always follow me."

"So, you led them right to my home?" scowled Abe.

"I-I guess I did. I never thought about it. I just wanted that time with you. I'm sorry, Abe."

"Don't be," he said, softening. "I just wish you'd told me. I'm going to see if my commander will send a team to check out my apartment. If he knew where I was living, he might have sent someone to try and find out information on me."

“Oh, no,” she gasped. “He could be coming here!”

“Honey,” laughed Abe, shaking his head. “There is nothing in my apartment with this address, a phone number, nothing. I didn’t even have photos of my parents in the apartment. They won’t find a thing.”

Lyra yawned, big and loud, and Abe laughed.

“Come on. Let’s get back to the cottage.”

“But, where’s your cottage.”

“My cottage is your cottage, Lyra. Mama Irene gave you my cottage.” Lyra stared at him, then looked off toward the kitchen at the little white-haired woman speaking to the staff. “She knew I would be coming home soon. I don’t know how, but she knew.”

“I don’t care how she knew,” said Lyra. “Seeing you today was the best thing that’s happened to me in months.” Abe nodded, kissing her.

“Me too, babe. Me too.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Getting to know Lyra's body again was well worth the wait. Abe took his time exploring, loving, tasting, touching. He wasn't just a Latino male. He was from double Latino heritage. And that meant romance and passion all the time. He'd watched the tender way his father treated his mother and vowed that he would one day treat his woman the same way.

Lyra loved how he made love to her. It was as if he were savoring a piece of art or a decadent dessert. Abe took his time, enjoying every moment of whatever he was doing to her body. She thought he was done, only to find him getting a warm cloth and wiping her body down, then coming back with body oils, massaging, gently making love to her in new ways.

When she woke in the morning, she didn't want to get out of bed. Never as satisfied in her life, she was happy to just lay there the rest of her days.

The rest of her days. That sobered her quickly. She had to help Abe and the others stop her uncle. Not just for her but for all the others out there who would suffer if she didn't. She showered and dressed, then stepped into the kitchen to find Abe reviewing some notes on a tablet.

"Good morning," she smiled.

"Good morning, baby," he said, standing to kiss her. "Are you sore?"

Do you need anything?"

"I'm perfect, Abe. I love how you love me. I love how you make me feel while you're loving me. I should have told you that sooner, but I was scared."

"I love how you let me love you. And I should have told you that I was in love with you before all of this mess. I wanted to, Lyra. I was scared, too," he grinned. "We're going to have breakfast and then head over to the offices today. Are you ready to speak to everyone?"

"I am," she nodded. He looked at her, then down at her hands.

"Lyra, we need the evidence you have on your uncle."

"I know."

"Baby, I need you to trust me. Where is it?"

"I have it," she said. He stared at her, and she smiled at him. "I have it, Abe. I need for you to trust me."

He nodded, pulling on his coat. She grabbed her black wool peacoat and walked toward the door, waiting for him. He just shook his head, wondering if she was leading them on. Knowing the danger that she was in, he damn sure hoped she actually possessed the evidence she'd told everyone about.

Breakfast was loud and filled with love and excitement. The children were still enjoying the post-Christmas break. Gaspar was feeding Violet and

Striker's new baby, Grayson. His big, beefy hands held the infant like a football, making strange noises as he fed.

"Why didn't you tell me about the surgery?" asked Abe quietly. "I could have helped you."

"Abe, I know you think that, but if I had said anything, I just know that my uncle would have found out. I worried all the time that he'd bugged your apartment."

"Babe, I screened my apartment for bugs all the time. No one had cameras or listening devices inside my apartment. Not ever. If you had just trusted me, we could have prevented all of this." Bella saw the defeated look on Lyra's face and walked toward her son.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear," she smiled. "I hope you had a good night. Abe? Perhaps Lyra didn't tell you because she knew that you would react just like you are now."

"And how am I acting, Mom?"

"Like you can save the day. You men always think you can save the day. Sometimes, the day can't be saved, Abe. Lyra was doing what she thought was best. Protecting you while attempting to protect herself as well. As your mother, I will forever be grateful to her for that. But, for now, why don't you cut her some slack and recognize the sacrifice she made in doing what she did."

Abe was quiet for a moment, looking at his father. His brows were raised, giving his only child a knowing look. His beautiful wife knew far more than she was given credit for. With an engineering degree, she often helped with designs at G.R.I.P. and still did editing for braille text. She was his everything.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. You did what you thought was best in the moment, and I appreciate it. But we’re a team now. You and me. I’ll keep you informed, and you keep me informed.”

“I promise,” she said, nodding at him.

She looked at Bella and gave a small smile, nodding at her. Lyra was going to like having this woman as her ally and friend. Beautiful, smart, and she knew how to manage her son and husband. She’d missed having that female influence in her life. Maybe now, she would have it.

“Are you ready to head to the offices?” asked Abe.

“I think so,” she nodded.

Although the sun was shining, the wind was whipping with a bitter cold, causing everyone to pull their coats up around their neck. Inside the office building, Lyra was surprised to find it larger than it looked from the outside.

“How do you keep all of this hidden? I mean, you said no one knew where you were located. How?” she asked, an expression of confusion on

her face.

“Technology,” smiled Abe. “We have the most technologically advanced devices in the world. This entire property is beneath a stealth canopy that doesn’t allow for it to be seen from the main road or from the air. It just appears to be green, wet swamp. Nothing else.”

“That’s amazing,” she said, shaking her head. “Who does all the decorating of the cottages and all the buildings? I haven’t seen the inside of any other cottage but the one I was in, but seeing all of this now, it’s amazing. It’s stunning.”

“Mama Irene, mostly,” smiled Abe. “She and Matthew believe in a personal touch, but everyone has the right to change anything they want in the cottages. Is there something you want to change?”

“Oh, no! Nothing. It’s all beautiful. I mean, the antiques are so amazing.”

“Antiques?” frowned Abe.

“Abe, you didn’t notice that the bed we slept in was an American Late Classical four-poster? It’s probably worth ten grand. I’ve never seen such fine pieces of furniture all in one place.”

“You’ve got a good eye,” said the handsome older man. Matthew smiled at Lyra, and she graced him with a big, beautiful smile. “My wife and I love to antique shop. I mean, why not? We’re antiques ourselves.” He

laughed, and Lyra grinned at him.

“Everything is just exquisite,” she said, complimenting him.

“After the boys get this mess settled for you, let’s talk about some things I have in mind for you. I think we can keep you very busy here.”

“Oh,” she gasped. “Really? I’d love that!”

“Lyra? Are you ready?” asked Luke.

“Yes. Yes, I’m ready. Thank you so much!” she said, hugging Matthew. He kissed her cheek, touching the soft skin.

“Be brave, child. The boys will have the courage to back you up.” Matthew walked away, and Lyra looked up at Abe and Luke. They both shrugged, smiling.

Seeing everyone in the cafeteria was one thing, but here in the auditorium was something else. Dozens of faces, all attached to gorgeous, rock-hard bodies. The women, mostly sitting in the second row, were stunningly beautiful and had the bodies of swimsuit models.

“What’s wrong?” asked Abe.

“I’m suddenly wishing I hadn’t skipped those cycling classes,” she whispered. Abe just laughed, shaking his head.

“You’re fucking perfect,” he whispered in a sexy voice. “Just be you.”

She turned back to Luke, who was standing next to a high stool. He pointed at it, taking her hand as she took a seat.

“Ready?”

CHAPTER NINE

Was she ready? Could she do this? Could she talk about all the heinous things she saw? All the things that gave her nightmares, which terrified her. Could she truly follow through with all of it?

“Honey?” Turning, she saw Abe’s concern and knew the answer.

“Yes. I’m ready.”

“You said you had evidence, Lyra. We’d sure like to see what we’re dealing with,” said Cam. She nodded, taking off her coat and laying it on the table.

“Do you have a knife?” She heard the click of a dozen knives opening and grinned. It wasn’t surprising that it was Razor who stepped forward.

“It’s really sharp, honey. What do you need?” he said.

“I need you to cut out the lining and the pockets.”

“But it’s a fine coat,” he said with confusion. “Are you sure?”

“If you want the evidence, I’m sure.”

“Are you telling me you’ve had the evidence inside that coat all this time? You’ve been wearing the damn evidence?” growled Abe. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

“What did you expect, Abe? I couldn’t carry it any other way. I

sewed the slip drives into the inside of the coat in various places so that nothing would feel too heavy in one spot. As I took photos of things, I would download it to my laptop, save to the drive, and then erase it, resetting my computer each time. Please,” she said, nodding at Razor, “go ahead and cut it open. Although I will need a new coat after this.”

He smiled at her, nodding, and began carefully cutting away the fabric of the lining. Sure enough, on the inside of the coat, she’d sewn dozens of slip drives.

“Why so many?” frowned Luke.

“Because I had to do this in pieces. I used a different slip drive each time, thinking even if one was found, the others would still be intact.”

“Brilliant girl,” grinned Hex.

“Before we view them, we’d like to hear what made you do this. Was there one incident that made it all come to life?” asked Eric. He handed the drives to the tech team, turning back to Lyra for her explanation.

“Yes. Finding out that he killed my parents,” she said, staring at the room. “I wish I could cry about it, but I cried enough about it when I found out. I’m just bitter and angry now. It was the first time he asked me to join him and his clients for dinner. I was probably seventeen, maybe a few weeks before my eighteenth birthday. I was getting ready to leave for college the next week.

“I often never knew the names of the men and women who attended dinner. In this case, it was three men and a woman. Ironically, the men didn’t give me bad vibes, but that woman sure did. I never knew her name, but during dinner, she and my uncle began arguing about something. My uncle told her to stop, and she said, ‘why don’t we tell your lovely niece about her parents.’

“Obviously, that got my attention. I froze, staring at him. He calmly set down his knife and fork, turning to me,” she said in a whisper. “I can still see it all. Feel it all. I just looked at him, afraid to speak. He said, ‘I’m only going to tell you this once. Your mother and father were not loyal to this family. They violated my trust and the trust of all of our business partners. When that happens, the family bond is broken, and all bets are off. I was forced to dispose of my problem.’”

“Jesus,” muttered Razor.

“I couldn’t believe it. I just stared at him, then back at the woman who had this grin on her face. I looked at him and asked him point blank if he killed them. I’d been told they were killed in a carjacking. He very calmly, very casually returned to his steak, cutting a piece, and said yes. He said, ‘I had my men stage the carjacking. It was business.’

“I asked to leave the table, but he denied my request. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t move. They just continued talking about business. It was as if what

he'd said meant nothing. When I was finally able to leave the table, my uncle grabbed my hand and asked me if the woman's comments had upset me. *Her* comments! I just said 'yes.' The next day, he said she'd never be at our table again."

"I'm so sorry, Lyra. You left for college after that, right?" asked Luke.

"Yes. I thought I'd be safe. I thought I could find a way to stay away from him. After being gone a few months, he told me I had to return home and commute to school. It didn't seem that I could do anything right. After that dinner, when I met Quetzalcoatl, I begged to be excused from them, but he seemed to delight in knowing that they made me uncomfortable.

"That's when I made the decision to listen more intently. Listen to the low conversations at the other end of the table. Wait until my uncle was gone and search his office. He's old school, lots of paper, but he had some things on an old computer."

"He doesn't have someone handling his books?" asked Jean.

"No. He trusts no one. You won't be surprised to know that everything he does is a front for something else. His auto dealership ships high-end sports cars overseas with the trunk and tires filled with drugs. The convenience stores launder money for him. The hotel is where his guests stay," she said, rolling her eyes.

“It’s also an active site for prostitution and trafficking. It’s open to the public, but only certain floors. One of the desk agents made the mistake of booking a young couple on the floor where my father’s associates were, and the woman was taken by them, assuming she was part of their package. They were both abused beyond recognition and left a few miles away on the beach.”

“We have to stop him,” said Abe.

“That’s what we’re trying to do, Abe. We have to know all the details, see all the evidence to figure out where we are on this.”

“What did the bureau say when you called?” Hex looked at Code and Sly. Sly looked toward Lyra, then out at the other men.

“They said they didn’t have anyone looking into Jessup Wolford. They had nothing on him to indicate that he was a problem. It seems that the protection of Lyra was unsanctioned by the bureau.”

Luke and the others looked at Lyra, who didn’t seem bothered by the statement. She just stared back at them, then up at the whole room.

“Oh. You’re surprised by that. Sorry. I thought you knew.”

“Knew what, babe?” asked Abe.

“The man who brought me here, Fontenot, and Carr were the only two men who knew the details of the case. Fontenot’s wife was killed by my uncle, and Carr’s sister was murdered by him. They had a reason to want

him gone. When they tried to bring the whole bureau in on it, they were told that it wasn't significant to the American people."

"Not significant?" frowned Razor. "What the fuck?"

"See. The only two people who knew all of it are either dead or disappeared. After Fontenot and Carr dropped me off, they were going to go their separate ways and try to hide for a while. With Carr dead, I have no way of knowing where Fontenot is."

"We haven't been able to find him," said Code. "Our contact at the bureau said that he asked for extended leave, and it was granted." The leadership team stared at one another, then nodded at Lyra to continue.

"I did everything I could to protect myself. My uncle didn't have cameras in the house. He was paranoid that someone else would tap into them. He checked for wire-tapping all the time, and he hated it when I had my cell phone out because he thought I might be recording him. With Quetz involved, I knew that eventually, my uncle would be angry enough to hand me over to him."

"That won't fucking happen. Not in this lifetime," said Abe, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I hope it won't happen even in the next lifetime," frowned Lyra. "I think part of the reason that the bureau may have ignored this case is because my uncle met with men from Washington all the time. He was always

driving up from our home to D.C. He hated it. Hated being away from the house at all. He would be gone only a day or sometimes a few days at a time. He would never tell me who he was meeting with, but I know it was usually the same men.”

“Men from Washington? What kind of men?” frowned Cam.

“I think I can answer that.”

CHAPTER TEN

Nathan Luke Redhawk could have been an identical twin to his grandfather. With his mother's Hispanic heritage and his father's Navajo heritage, he looked like the dangerous man that he'd become. Maybe too dangerous.

"Nate? What the fuck, brother? Welcome home!"

"I'm not home for good," he smirked, shaking the hands of Luke, Cam, Eric, and Hex. He walked toward his father, hugging him, and then kissed his grandfather's cheeks, hugging him tightly.

"Does your mother know you're home?" asked Nathan.

"Not yet, Dad. Let's keep it that way for a while."

"Last time I saw you, we were busting Eddie Quinn. I think you were chasing Admiral Jonathon Garvin."

"Wait, I know that name," whispered Lyra. Nate turned to stare at the pretty woman, nodding. "I'm Lyra."

"I know who you are," said Nate curtly. She seemed surprised by his reaction but said nothing.

"Nate, explain, brother. That seemed unnecessary," said Luke.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. Your uncle and Admiral Garvin have been the thorn in my side for almost six months now. Delta

doesn't normally handle domestic issues like this, but Wolford and Garvin have been playing with some heavy global hitters."

"Yes, he's been meeting with a man named Quetz," said Lyra. Nate nodded, then turned to the others.

"Quetz is the least of your worries. Garvin has been selling secrets to our enemies. Most of those revolve around advanced technologies for submarines and aircraft carriers."

"Please don't tell me the technologies belong to us," frowned Luke.

"Sorry to tell you, but yes. But it's not just the technology from G.R.I.P. He's selling secrets from NASA, the NSA, CIA, all of them."

"Why doesn't anyone in the White House do something with him?" asked Eric.

"They're trying, but they've yet to actually catch him with his hands in the cookie jar. That night at Eddie Quinn's house, I was hoping to catch him in the act, but I think he recognized Jean."

"Me? Why the fuck would he recognize me?" frowned Jean.

"Because you look exactly like Miller." Miller stared at Nate, then turned to his brother Jean. Then it dawned on him. Then he knew.

"Fuck. I testified before the House Committee on Defense," said Miller. "It was probably fifteen years ago, maybe more. He wasn't part of the Joint Chiefs at that time. I think he might have been, damn, he was a

commander of a carrier.”

“That’s right,” said Nate. “We think that’s when all this started. Quetz is his concierge service. He communicates what is needed, what is wanted by the other countries, and Garvin finds it for him. He has access to everything. It’s like leaving a kid in charge of the candy store, and he’s the only one with the keys.”

“We can stop some of that,” said Sly. “From our end, we limit the access to anything we have. From their end, I can go in through the backdoor and have a little fun.”

“Do it for our things,” said Nate, “but don’t do anything on their end yet. I need to catch this guy. He’s as bad as we’ve ever seen, and the company he keeps is even worse. You need to know that Quetz is trying to convince Garvin to put out a false terrorist report on Lyra. He wants everyone looking for her.”

“Shit,” muttered Luke.

“What do I do?” whispered Lyra.

“Nothing,” said Abe. “You stay right here. No one is aware of where you are right now. We can protect you.”

“Do you know what happened to Fontenot?” asked Lyra.

“No,” Nate said, shaking his head. “We knew that Carr was murdered, but no one can find Fontenot yet. I hope he’s alive because he had

a lot of information.”

“Not nearly as much as I have,” said Lyra. “There’s an entire slip drive with notes that my uncle made about meetings with Garvin.” Nate stared at her, then at the rest of the men.

“It’s true,” said Code. “I’ve got it right here. His penmanship is lacking, but the notes are clear. This one actually discusses their next meeting would be on board the Michigan.”

“He got Quetz on board a U.S. sub?” frowned Luke.

“No one questioned him, brother. He’s known for busting guys down for no reason, and he is not a man who tolerates women on his team. That’s been a detriment to him, as you can imagine. The female members of the House and Senate have criticized him multiple times over it.

“I thought maybe he wasn’t interested in women, but the reverse is true. He’s married but never seen with a strange woman at a public event. However, he does take advantage of everything Quetz and Wolford have to offer him.”

Nate looked at Abe, a silent conversation happening between them.

“What? What’s that look for?” asked Lyra.

“Your uncle wasn’t going to give you to Quetz, although you may well have ended up with him. He was planning to have Quetz give you to Garvin first.”

“I don’t understand. Why? I never met him. At least, I don’t think I did. Did he see me somewhere?”

“He’s seen you multiple times,” said Nate. “The last woman he was with, well, when he was done, it wasn’t pretty. She’s institutionalized now.”

“God,” whispered Lyra.

“The girl at Quinn’s? He was going to take her,” said Tobias. His cousin nodded at him.

“She’s just a kid. I mean, she’s twenty-four, but still.” His father stared at him, wondering if he was connected in some way to the young woman in question. “She’s safe, from what I know. Away from her family anyway.”

“Wait, is that the girl you asked us to create a new identity for?” asked Sly. Nate bit his lower lip and nodded.

“Listen, that’s not what we’re here about. We need to work together to stop Garvin and her uncle.”

“And Quetz,” said Lyra. “He’s the one that scares me.”

“Honey, they should all scare the fuck out of you, but Quetz is the least of our concerns. Abe is right. You’re safe here, and no one will know that you’re on this property. Garvin is pushing to get the data on our stealth and whisper technologies. So far, everyone has told him that he can’t have access to them.”

“That’s for damn sure,” frowned Ryan. “No one has that kind of access. If we sell it, we install it, and we’ve been very reluctant to sell to anyone. Right now, only our team has access to that technology.”

“He’s pushing for it, so just watch out.” He turned, heading back to the door.

“Where are you going?” asked Nathan.

“I have to finish this, Dad. You guys take care of Wolford, and I do mean take care of him. Finish him off, and Quetz won’t have his resource any longer. I’m going to work on getting Garvin.”

“Where’s Mike?” asked Nathan. Nate smirked at his father, shaking his head.

“Sorry, Dad. That’s classified.” Nate disappeared, and Lyra just sat, staring at the swinging door. So many of the men looked alike, but Nate definitely looked identical to his father and grandfather. And uncle. And cousin. Now she was really confused.

“Lyra? Honey, did you hear me?”

“No, sorry. I was just thinking about how much he looks like his father and grandfather. I mean, really, really like his grandfather.” The men chuckled at her observation, nodding their heads.

“We have a lot of family that are multiples, and it seems the DNA is strong on this property.”

“I guess that’s a good thing,” she whispered, nodding at Abe. “So, what do we do now? You have all the information I have. What next?”

“Next, we’re going to have you sit with Hiro, Tanner, Sly, and Code and go through all the information you copied. If an explanation is needed, please give as much detail as you can,” said Abe. “We’re going to make contact with a few people we know in D.C.”

Abe kissed her forehead as Sly started to lead her into another room. Lyra stopped and looked at all the men and women in the room.

“I appreciate everything you’re doing for me. But at any time, if Quetz or my uncle come for me, don’t let them find all of you. I’ll swim my way out of here before I let that happen.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“We need to find WOLFORD,” said Abe. “I agree with Nate. We eliminate him, and then we’ve only got Quetz and Garvin to deal with.”

“Only?” smirked Hex. “Quetz is one of the most revered and feared criminals in the world. Garvin is wiggling his way to the White House. Dealing with them isn’t like dealing with your average piece of shit.”

“I know that,” said Abe, “but we have to protect Lyra and help Nate. I won’t leave him out there to do this on his own.”

“If he’s out there, I have to believe Mike is out there too,” said Nathan. “They’ve been working together as a team for a while now.”

“Pigsty? Can you give us any insights into what Lyra has on the drives?” asked Hex.

“It’s a lot. She really risked her life to get this shit. He definitely only kept paper records, and she took photos of everything she could. Shipping manifests, dozens of pages of notes in a notebook where he kept a journal of who owed him what. She wasn’t kidding. Very old school.”

“There’s genius in that,” said Miller. “He could easily just toss it all into a fire, and everything would disappear. He knows enough to recognize that anyone could come in and hack a computer. He probably never expected that his niece would take photos with her phone.”

“He must have suspected that,” said Cam. “Lyra said the sight of her phone made him nervous. I’m going to bet he was worried that she was recording, taking videos or photos all the time. Did you check the phone? Make sure it was wiped?”

“She did well,” said Pigsty. “She wiped the phone clean every single time, literally taking it back to factory settings. It was a pain in the ass for her because she would have had to reset her contacts every time.”

“Do we know where Wolford is now?” asked Abe.

“He’s not hiding. That’s for damn sure. He attended a Chamber of Commerce dinner last night outside Norfolk. His mansion sits up on a hill overlooking Elizabeth River and the Naval base.”

Groans and moans echoed in the room, along with a few ‘fuuuucks’ and other choice words.

“Yep. I got a drone up as soon as I found the place. He’s got tight security, gated, that kind of shit, but there are no cameras. Lyra was right. He’s tech-phobic. We also did some initial research into her parents. The father, Jethro Wolford, was definitely involved in the family business. It appeared that he was fine with money laundering and trafficking drugs, but he didn’t want any part of the women or betraying his country.”

“Great, a criminal with a conscience,” said Abe.

“Careful, brother. That’s your girl’s father, and she doesn’t know all

of that,” said Luke. Abe nodded, realizing that Luke was right.

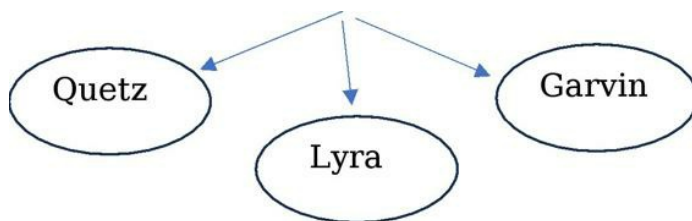
“Anyway,” continued Pigsty. “When her father said he didn’t want any part of the rest of the business, Jessup panicked and asked him to make a choice. Loyalty to family or death. Jethro attempted to take his wife and young daughter away, securing transportation for them to Europe. When they returned to pick up Lyra, they were killed before they ever got out of the car. It was driven to a deserted road and left with the dead bodies inside.

“Kind Uncle Jessup swooped in to care for his only niece. From all accounts, she had a good, normal childhood. Probably blissfully unaware of what her uncle was capable of. She attended good schools, but when she tried to go to school far away from home, he forced her to come back so he would have access to her.”

“Access?” growled Abe. “Was he planning to...”

“No. No, no, sorry if I misled you. It doesn’t appear that he wanted to touch or use her in that way. But he definitely wanted to use her.”

“How can you be sure, Pigsty?” asked Luke. He slid the sheet of paper beneath the camera, projecting the image on the screen.



“Because of this.”



“I’m really nervous,” said Lyra. Tanner and Code smiled at her.

“Don’t be nervous, honey. We just want to walk through all this information and make sure we understand what we’re looking at. Did you review it all after you took it?” asked Code.

“I did. I know that was probably stupid of me, but I just thought I needed to know what I was dealing with. I mean, if it was just a grocery list, I was going to look pretty stupid to Fontenot and Carr.”

“Did you see this drawing?” asked Hiro, showing her the same drawing the others were looking at.

“I did,” she said, nodding as she swallowed back the bile. “It was as if that were the beacon for me. The thing telling me that I was at the center of everything. If I didn’t already know it, that definitely told me he was planning on using me.”

“Does this woman look familiar to you?” asked Sly. Lyra gasped, leaning back in the chair.

“That was the woman. The one at the dinner that forced my uncle to tell me that he’d killed my parents. I don’t know her name.”

“Her name was Madeline Saint. She was a chief justice on the Supreme Court.” Lyra stared at the photo, then back up at the man beside her.

“This woman? She was a justice for the highest court in the land?”

“I’m afraid so. She was found dead in her home about nine years ago of an apparent heart attack. It confused everyone at the time because she was known for being in great health. She jogged every day, was a vegan, truly took care of herself. Apparently, she didn’t take care with the company she kept.”

“That woman terrified me. Just the way she stared at me made me nervous.”

“You’d never met her before? Never?” asked Hiro.

“No, I swear!”

“I believe you, hun. The thing is, your father and Madeline Saint attended university together. In fact, there are several photos of them together in the college yearbook looking pretty cozy.”

“What? No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, that can’t be. My mother told me that she and my father had known one another since high school.”

“They did, Lyra, but they weren’t dating. In fact, in this document,” said Code, pushing the sheet of paper toward her, “you can see a note made by your uncle. Your father and mother were an arranged marriage. An alliance. He wanted to marry Madeline.”

“She hated me because of my mother. Right from the start,” whispered Lyra.

“Unfortunately, yes. But I think she also hated your uncle. He was the one that refused his brother’s request to marry Madeline instead of your mother.”

“Jesus, is this all some sort of game for him? Was he just using me and everyone else as pawns?” she asked no one in particular.

“I don’t know, hun. But Madeline is gone, so are your parents. That means for us, we have to focus on your uncle and Quetz.”

“What about the admiral?” she asked.

“We’ll take care of him as well, but we need to be certain of how deep this truly runs. For all we know, at this point, it could stretch all the way to the White House. We hope not, but we have to be certain.”

Lyra stood, pacing around the small conference room. She pushed back the hair from her face, then turned, staring at the men.

“I’m trapped, aren’t I? I’m stuck here, no matter what.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” said Hiro.

“This is my future. Right here. Even if you kill my uncle, even if you kill Quetz and the admiral, I’m still going to be on the run.”

“Lyra, we can provide a new identity for you. It might seem extreme, but if necessary, plastic surgery is always an option.” She stared at the group of men, all staring back at her, waiting for her response.

“I was hoping to avoid that before. Fontenot offered it to me as well. I just kept thinking I didn’t want to not look like my parents. Knowing what I know now, maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

“You don’t have to decide anything right now. Let’s find out what the others think, and we’ll devise a plan. For now, just stay on property. Your trackers will ensure we know where you are or if you’re in trouble.”

“What about a phone? You took mine,” she said, staring at Hiro.

“We’re tracking all calls coming into your phone.”

“And? Have there been calls?” she asked.

“A few,” said Hiro. “They’ve all come from your uncle. We can only assume that Garvin was somehow able to get the numbers of the burner phones.”

“I can only imagine what he had to say,” she said, shaking her head. “Let me guess. Something like, ‘Lyra, if you don’t return home, you’ll force me to do something drastic.’”

“That’s not far off,” smirked Code. “Don’t worry, honey. He doesn’t

know where we're located. He can't find you."

"Does the admiral?" They all stared at her, frowning. "Does the admiral know where you're located? Could he find me?"

"Shit."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Hey, we have a call coming in from Admiral Garvin,” said Pigsty. Cam stared at Luke, Hex, and Eric. Eric nodded at Pigsty as he placed the call on speaker.

“Admiral Garvin, what can I do for you?” asked Eric.

“Is this a Robicheaux or one of the others?” His tone wasn’t one of respect but rather of contempt, indifference, and a general annoyance.

“It’s Eric Bongard, sir. What can we do for you?” Eric was trying to control his temper, ready to unleash on the man. But they wanted to play this carefully.

“We’re experiencing some issues with one of the technologies aboard the Michigan. We’d like to take a closer look at those plans,” he said.

“Sir, as you well know, our contract prohibits us from sharing anything with anyone. Including you. If there are issues, we can send our engineers to take a look at the problem.”

“That’s not possible. She’s on a classified mission,” he said quickly.

“Again, sir, I’d like to remind you that we have the highest classification next to your own. We can send our engineers to the Michigan’s location. Just let us know where and when.” They heard the slamming of a door, then the squeak of a chair.

“Listen to me. I can make sure that there isn’t another fucking contract delivered to you. I will ensure that nothing developed by G.R.I.P. is ever installed into another U.S. fighting vehicle.”

“Yea, you can do that,” smirked Eric. “But then where would you be? There is no one developing the types of things that we are. No one. If you want the best, you go to the best. We keep our technologies under cover for good reason. Now, you can tell us what’s wrong on the Michigan, or you can risk the lives of every sailor aboard.”

There was a long silence, and the men stilled, not wanting to make any noise whatsoever.

“Maybe you can help me with another problem,” said Garvin. “A friend of mine is concerned for his adult niece, who disappeared a few months back. There have been no signs of her, and he’s really worried that something has happened to her.”

“Has he filed a missing person report? Maybe called his local police?” asked Eric.

“No, he’d like to keep this quiet for as long as possible.”

“No requests for ransom? No requests for trade?” continued Eric.

“None.”

“Sounds like maybe she doesn’t want to be found,” he said. “You can give us the name, and we can try to track her down, but the truth is, if she

doesn't want to be found, she won't be found.”

“Fine. Her name is Lyra Wolford. She's about twenty-seven, maybe twenty-eight now. Five-feet-four, about one-forty, long black hair with big brown eyes.”

“Sounds like you've met her,” said Eric.

“As I said, she's the daughter of a friend. I've met her once or twice.” Abe started to move toward the speaker, but his father gripped his shoulder, shaking his head.

“Well, we're stretched pretty thin right now, but I'll put a man or two on it. We'll see if we can find any trace of her.”

“I appreciate that. You may be hearing from the president on the issues on board the Michigan,” he said in a threatening tone. Eric chuckled, shaking his head.

“Admiral Garvin, you can threaten me all you like. Our contract is solid. You cannot force me to divulge any secrets to our technology. We welcome a call from the president. There's a lot we'd like to discuss with him.”

The line went dead, and Eric glanced at the faces around him. The only one that concerned him was Abe.

“Brother, you need to rein in that killer instinct. We have to do this right, or we're going to end up with a lot of shit laid in our laps. Without

solid proof against Garvin, we've got to play this game for a while."

There was a soft knock at the door, and Abe turned, expecting to see Lyra. Instead, it was Mama Irene. She wasn't in the habit of knocking, so it made everyone a little worried.

"Grandma? Is everything okay?" asked Luke.

"No, baby. I just got a call from Iris Fontenot. John was on the front porch of their camp up on False River this morning. They'd been up there for the holidays."

"Is he alive?" asked Abe.

"For now, yes. His mama's sister is a nurse, and she's with him. I told her you boys would likely be sendin' someone to speak with him. Riley's willin' to go with you and check him out."

"Thank you, Grandma." Luke looked at the other men. "Abe, you should go. I'll go with you since I knew John in school. Max? Riley is coming, so you should come as well. JB and Ham. That should be enough." Abe nodded at his friend.

"For now."



John Fontenot was the same age as Luke. Divorced, he had two

grown sons who were now living in the northeast, pursuing their own careers. Lying on the bed in the small vacation home, he looked much smaller and much older than the actual image in Luke's head.

"John, you don't look so good, brother," said Luke, taking a seat beside the bed. "We're gonna let Riley do her thing with a little help from Ham. Can you speak?" He nodded, every move causing him excruciating pain.

"John, my name is Abe Salcedo." He nodded.

"Know who you are. Kept track of friends for Lyra. We were hoping you might figure out what was going on. We couldn't tell you, and she was too scared to."

"I know," nodded Abe. "I sure wish she would have said something sooner. Did her uncle do this?"

"His men," he grimaced as Riley pressed against his belly, then examined the broken bones of his hands and feet. "Thought they wouldn't find me at my lake house near Glenora. I should have known Garvin would rat me out."

"Garvin? Admiral Garvin?" asked Luke.

"He's behind everything here. I'm not sure what Woford is feeding him or vice versa, but he's up to his eyeballs in this."

"Funny," frowned Abe, "he called a while ago and wanted us to give

him the plans for all our technology on the Michigan.” John shook his head, trying to sit up.

“Stop right there, Superman,” said Riley. “Beyond the broken bones in your hands and feet that your aunt did a fine job of setting, I’m detecting broken ribs, bruised kidney and liver, possibly more. Ham? Get the portable machines for me.” Ham disappeared, and John lay back against the pillows.

“You can’t let him get to the Michigan. If something is wrong on it, it’s because of sabotage. They want the plans for everything to sell. We were sure of it. I think he has someone on board fucking with the programs.”

“Any idea where the Michigan is right now?” asked Luke.

“Not a clue. You know they don’t tell us anything like that. I thought your programs could track the location,” said John. Luke smirked at him, nodding.

“You know what? You might be right.” He nodded to JB, who stepped away to make a call.

“How is she? Lyra. How is she doing? She’s a good person. That kid was scared shitless when she first came to us. We tried so fucking hard to get our division chief to listen to us, but it was as if he didn’t believe a word we said. She risked her life for this. You have no idea how much,” he grimaced.

“I have a good idea,” nodded Abe. “She’s safe, but she won’t have

much of a life unless we get to her uncle and, obviously, to Garvin.”

“Don’t forget about Quetzalcoatl,” said John. “He wanted her in the worst possible way. We saw what happened to women that were left alone with him. The uncle is very low-tech. Doesn’t trust anything, which was good for us. We had some of the finest G.R.I.P. listening devices planted in his office.”

“Good for you,” laughed Luke. “Did you get much?”

“Everything. We got fucking everything, but we knew that no one was listening to us. We secured the audio in a lockbox and sent it to my Aunt Ida in Denham Springs. She’s mean as a snake and would rather shoot you than speak to you.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” smirked Luke.

“Should we head up to her and get the box?” asked Abe.

“No. My dad and brother went up there this morning and are on their way back. No problems that I know of.”

“None at all,” said his father, walking into the room. “Ida was a raging bitch as usual, but we got the box.” He handed it to Luke.

“Thank you, Mr. Fontenot.”

“Good to see you, Luke. How’s your daddy? Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Good, sir, thank you.”

“Well, I hope you can stop this man. He hurt my boy bad, and we don’t take kindly to that,” said John Sr.

“We’re going to do our best, sir,” said Luke. John looked at Abe.

“Abe, you gotta keep her away from her uncle, but never let her get near Quetz or Garvin. They usually go for much younger, but I think they’re both pissed that they couldn’t get to her sooner. Her uncle was protecting her in a strange way.”

“Protecting her? Why? I thought he wanted her out of the way,” said Abe.

“On the contrary. He wanted her there. Her father was the older son. Everything was controlled by him. Everything. I never said this to Lyra, but her old man wasn’t much better than her uncle. She doesn’t remember a lot about him, but our records from previous investigations tell us all we need to know.”

“Did she inherit the house and business?” asked Abe.

“Inherit it? Brother, she owns it all. We just have to find the paper proof.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Oh, shit,” muttered Ham, looking up from examining John. “Did she know that?”

“No,” said John, slowly shaking his head. “She didn’t want anything to do with it. You have to remember her uncle was making her watch everything. I’m not sure if he was hoping it would grow on her or if he was hoping she’d ask to walk away.

“He’d have these dinners at their home, always at the house. The worst of humanity was invited to those damn things,” said John, shaking his head. “That poor girl would have to sit and listen to their disgusting conversations about murder, mutilation, rape, beatings, and ways to undermine our own country and military. The worst part was being forced to watch some of that.”

“She mentioned a young girl that Quetz took after a dinner. A dancer or something,” said Abe. John gave a little head nod.

“Fourteen. Fourteen fucking years old,” he said, wiping his eyes. “We barely recognized her body when it was found. Took the photos and tried to get the division on board, but we were threatened within an inch of our lives. Careers we didn’t give a shit about, but we couldn’t help Lyra if we were dead. I think Garvin was behind keeping us off track.”

“You do know that Carr is dead, right?” asked Abe.

“I figured,” he said, biting his lip. “We had sat phones that we rotated so no one could trace the calls. There was a set time of day and night we always connected. Wolford and Quetz killed my ex-wife. She was a real estate agent, and they used that to set up a showing of a house. She never knew what was going on.

“Showed up at the house, and they lured her in. The things they did... The things they did to her,” he said, shaking his head, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“Brother, I’m so fucking sorry,” said Abe.

“Not nearly as sorry as I am for my sons. John III, known as Tré, and Ruben are close. Close as any brothers I know. They were both out of college and trying to decide what to do. Ended up going to work for a friend in Philadelphia.”

“Are they safe?” frowned Luke.

“Yea, man. We got them papers with different names. No one will know who they are.” Riley began putting her things back in the bag, staring down at John. “I’m not gonna make it, am I?”

“I won’t lie, John. It’s bad. The damage to your kidneys may heal, but the rest of it,” she shook her head. “I’m just not sure. I wish you’d come back with us and let me do exploratory surgery.”

“I think I’ll take my chances, Doc. Never planned on living to a hundred.”

“John,” murmured his mother.

“It’s alright, Mama. If I can do this last thing. This one thing, and give this woman a life, it will make up for all the things I’ve ever done wrong, and God knows I’ve done a fuck lot wrong in my life. Find the Michigan, Luke. Someone is sabotaging her, and if you don’t get there, those men are gonna die.”

“Fuck,” muttered JB.

“Listen to me,” said Riley. “You don’t move. Not even to piss. Use a pan, a jug, anything. But do not move from this spot. The longer you’re able to lie still, the better off you’ll be. Your aunt has some instructions from me, and she’ll check on you every day. You do one thing wrong, and I’ll have Max, Taylor, and Alec come back here and drag your ass down to us.”

John gave a smirk and little nod, winking at Max.

“Oh, no, asshole. You’re not winking at me and getting me in trouble. You listen to my wife, or I will come get your ass, and I won’t be gentle.”

“Understood, sir.”

They left John in the bedroom with his aunt and mother by his side. On the front porch, his father looked at the men, shaking his head.

“I don’t know who this man is, but I’d sure like to see him dead, Luke. It’s the Cajun way. You hurt mine; I hurt you worse.”

“I know, sir. I can promise that we’re going to stop them. First, we have to get to the Michigan.”



“Anything on the sub?” asked Hex, staring over the shoulder of Hiro.

“I’m working on it. We’ve got some strange locators happening, sort of like a debris field.”

“Fuck. Did she sink?”

“No. I think whoever is sabotaging the sub is taking shit out and littering the ocean floor with it. Look,” he said, pointing to the screen. “You can see the trail of debris, all with our locators in them. He either knew the locators were there and thought to get rid of them or was just getting rid of anything made by G.R.I.P.”

“Best estimate. Where are they?” asked Eric.

“Best estimate? Here.” He pointed to the dot on the map, and the men just shook their heads. The Michigan was out of Bangor, Washington. Right now, she was sitting off Yakutat, Alaska. There were no signals of distress, just sitting atop the water. Prime target for destruction and viewing.

“I hate the fucking cold,” frowned Cam.

“You chose to be a SEAL,” smirked Eric. Cam flipped him the bird, then turned back to Hiro.

“Who is the captain of the Michigan?”

“Bill Peters.”

“Okay,” nodded Cam. He looked around the room and nodded to the former SEALs. “It’s gonna be an ass-biting cold trip. Pack your long johns, and let’s pray we don’t have to get wet.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What are they saying at command?” asked Captain Peters.

“We’re having trouble holding communication, sir. Our locators are down. Our communications are spotty. Nothing is working right. Tech is saying the parts are faulty, but they were working just fine when we left port.”

“The fucking parts aren’t faulty!” he yelled at the young man. Shaking his head, he squeezed his shoulder. “Apologies. I know G.R.I.P. and the men that started the company. Those parts aren’t faulty. Something else is happening here.”

“Captain! Captain, sir!”

“What the fuck is it now?”

“There are two small inflatables off our starboard. Twelve men, sir. All in dive gear, black face. They say they want to speak with you and said to tell you it’s RP.”

“RP? I thought...” He stared off at the screens, then turned to the younger man. “Get them on board and into my private quarters. Find that fucking tech and have him waiting for me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Peters made his way as quickly as possible to his cabin, but the truth

was you didn't move fast anywhere on a sub. If you tried to run, you'd damn sure bust your head, shins, or both. The trick was moving with purpose and focus but not forcing anything.

Opening his cabin door, he quickly straightened things and waited, looking around. Realizing that he couldn't fit twelve men inside this small space, he moved to the officers' mess.

"Anything for you, sir?" asked the chef.

"Plenty of hot coffee and some sandwiches if you have time. We've got visitors."

"Yes, sir."

He stood at the door, waiting to see the men coming toward him. He immediately recognized two faces. Cam Dougall and Luke Robicheaux. When the men behind them towered above the two giants, he swallowed, watching them maneuver the tiny space.

"Good to see you, Captain Peters," smirked Luke.

"Don't fuck with me, Robicheaux. This must be big if you're in this damn freezing water." He turned, smiling at the other men. "Cam, I damn sure know you. Know of some of the others. When you said it was RP, I was confused, but figured you were trying to keep your new identity under wraps. Does this have anything to do with my faulty equipment that has me dead in the water?"

“Yes. And it’s not faulty,” said Cam. “We have Ryan and Thomas with us. They’re our genius engineers, along with Hiro, one of our tech experts. Can someone take them to the command and engine rooms?”

“Done and done,” he said, nodding to his lieutenant.

“Right this way, gentlemen.”

“We’re trying to find our tech guy now. It’s a fucking sub, he couldn’t go far. We’ve been losing tracking, communications, and now critical abilities for our engines for the last week. He kept blaming it on G.R.I.P., but I knew better.”

“Did you reach out to command?” asked Luke.

“You know that I did, Luke. When I had comms, that is. They kept saying there was nothing wrong, but we weren’t getting anywhere.”

“Were you out here on mission?” asked Cam. He looked at Cam and Luke, then back at the others.

“You know we all have clearance at least as high as yours,” smirked Abe.

“The Russians have been pulling their bullshit. Sending ships close to Alaskan waters and shores, weather balloons that look suspiciously like spy balloons, strange Russian visitors going in and out of customs. A week ago, they caught a Russian trying to get on Bangor Trident base. Said he was a fisherman and banged his head, got lost. That’s a long fucking way from

home. Admiral Garvin wanted us out here and keeping watch.”

“Admiral Garvin?” asked Luke. The other man nodded, knowing immediately that something was drastically wrong.

“Do you think they’re trying to get to the sub?” asked Abe.

“I think they’re trying to figure out the new stealth equipment you placed on the sub, along with the new whisper-firing technologies. I could fire on anything from right here, and they wouldn’t know it was coming from me. It’s genius.”

The men all nodded, smiling at one another. They knew their team was the best.

“Wait. How did you find me?” asked Peters.

“Every piece of equipment we put on a ship has a tracking element to it. Your tech guy, or whoever it was, is tossing the pieces overboard. He’s literally leaving a trail for us to follow. Once we had that, we were able to use our own satellites and find where you were.”

“Damn impressive,” he smiled, nodding at him.

They heard shuffling in the passageway, and Fitch, AJ, Patrick, Christopher, and Gator moved toward the door. The lieutenant, along with two other men, were trying to wrangle a smaller man down the hall. They knew he was the man they were looking for.

Patrick and Gator stepped into the passageway, moving toward the

man. Gator settled his hand at his trapezoid, squeezing with a twist. The man immediately stopped squirming, gasping for air.

“You want to live, you little shit? Then stop fighting.” He blinked, and Gator gripped his arm, shoving him into the mess.

“Freeman?” frowned the captain. “He was my former head of tech support platform. He asked for another assignment. What happened to Wainwright?”

“If you asked for another assignment, why in the hell are you on this sub?” asked Cam.

“I have to be.” He stopped, staring at all the men, then down at his feet.

“You’d better keep talking, little man,” frowned Gator.

“They have my sister and brother. They’re just kids. Both were attending college, and Wolford got to them with the help of Garvin.”

“Garvin? Admiral Garvin?” asked Peters. The other man nodded.

“Please, if I don’t find what they want, they’ll kill them.”

“What do they want?” asked Luke.

“I was supposed to find everything that was imprinted with the G.R.I.P. label and take photos of it. Everything. One by one, I had to throw them in the sea, hopefully leaving the sub vulnerable enough that the Russians could move in on it. But it’s better than I thought. Even removing

a few things doesn't stop her completely, and the photos weren't providing them with enough information. I tried to tell him that it wasn't as if I could just walk off the sub with a carton of discarded parts. You've got something on them that sends out an alarm if they're moved too far away from where they were installed."

"That's right, you idiot," growled Christopher. "We're the best, and this ship is the best because of us. Who is Garvin working with?"

"I'm not sure," he said, shaking his head. "Seriously. I don't know. Once a week, he meets with some guy in D.C. at this little bar in Foggy Bottom. He's usually in sweatpants and a hoodie. You wouldn't know who he was at first glance. I wasn't supposed to see him there, but I did, and that's what got me into this situation.

"He told me if I didn't help him with a mission of national security, I'd die. Told him I didn't care about me, and that I wouldn't help him. That's when he took my sister and brother. I have to help them, please."

"We'll find them," said Luke. "But you're not getting off that easy. You're going to help us get Garvin and the Russian that he's working with. What do you know about Wolford and Quetzalcoatl?"

"I don't know anyone named Wolford. Quetzalcoatl is a name I know, but I've never seen him." He stopped, then covered his mouth. "Oh, God. You don't think he has my kid sister and brother?"

“We’re not sure,” said Gator. The young man sat down at the table, his arms folded on top of the table, crying.

“What happened to the kid that was your replacement? Wainwright,” asked Captain Peters. “You wanted off the sub, and I brought in someone else. Where is he?”

“I paid him to switch places with me again. He didn’t understand, but he needed the money.”

It was six hours of sitting and waiting, peppering the young man with questions before Thomas and Ryan returned to the mess.

“You’re up and running,” smiled Ryan. “I made a few improvements that I’ve left with your engineer. He’ll be able to fill you in, but I can promise you that no one will be able to come near this vessel again without you knowing it. And no one will be able to remove anything with our name on it without a shocking surprise.” The captain shook his head, chuckling.

“I love you guys.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“They’ve been gone a while now,” said Lyra. “Is it always like this? Do they just have to leave and not tell us anything?” Bella smiled at the young woman, running a hand through her hair, pushing it back from her face.

“Do you like the color they dyed your hair?”

“No. I hate it. My hair is the same color as yours, and I miss it.”

“Let’s get Keegan and Winter up here, and they can fix you right up,” smiled Bella. She turned to Kate, who texted the girls. They promised to be there within thirty minutes. “Now, to answer your question.”

“It’s not an easy question to answer,” said Sophia Ann. “Most of the time, we have some idea of what they’re working on or who they’re going after. It’s necessary. My sister and I both work out at G.R.I.P., so if it’s something with national security or our weapons development, we have to know.”

“But that’s not always the case, right?”

“No, it’s not always the case,” smiled Ajei. “There will be times when they have to leave and can’t tell us where they’re going. When Luke and I were first married, he was a SEAL, and I never knew where he was going. I had to learn to get used to that quickly. When he returned, he

couldn't tell me where he'd been or what he'd done. He'd have nightmares or worse, not able to sleep at all."

"That must have been horrible for you," said Lyra.

"No, honey. It was awful for him. I just did what a wife, a partner, should do. I comforted him. I was there for him. I held his hand. I sat with him some nights all night long. If he wanted to talk, I listened. If he didn't want to talk, we just sat there."

"Did it stop for him?"

"Not really. He's just learned to cope better with the memories and nightmares. Believe it or not, all of the men are required to do yoga and meditation once a week, at least. Cait is our instructor, and she's fabulous."

"Does she have classes for the women as well?" asked Lyra.

"Absolutely," laughed Gwen. "Believe me, we all have to let go of some stressors as well. You're going to meet Winter, but there are a few other women here who were horribly abused. I think we've all had our fair share of nightmares."

"I'm so sorry," frowned Lyra. "I guess when you're in the moment of abuse, you don't think anyone will ever know what you've been through."

"Unfortunately, a lot of women here know what you've been through," said Bella. "My brother protected me for as long as he could. After that, I was fortunate enough to find Razor. The man who was after me

was not going to let me get away.”

“Sorry, can we back up? Why do you call him Razor? I thought his name was Diego,” said Lyra.

“It is,” laughed Bella. “Many of the men get names while they’re on the teams. Sometimes, it’s an obvious name, like with Skull. He’s a huge man to be on a Coast Guard vessel. He cracked his skull a lot.”

“Nine was nicknamed for his nine lives,” grinned Erin.

“Miller for his appreciation of beer,” laughed Kari.

“Gator, well, that was because he wasn’t afraid of alligators. They all thought he was a ‘gator whisperer,’” smirked Dylan. “He was so wonderful to me when I got here, helping me to get my son back. I fell in love with that man immediately.”

“When Abe and I met, I just thought he’d be fun to meet for coffee or drinks now and then. My uncle wasn’t as obsessive with my every move back then.”

“What changed?” smiled Bella.

“I was falling in love with him almost immediately. I tried not to, knowing what I was hiding from him. He told me he was a SEAL, but I don’t think I truly understood what that was. Plus, I believed my uncle could get to anyone and might hurt him. I didn’t know about all this. I didn’t know that I could trust him.

“When Carr and Fontenot approached me, I knew that I would be able to get them the information they needed. But it was slow going. It went on for more than five years. My uncle would leave the house with his bodyguards, and I would make sure it was all clear, make my way into his office, and start copying all the notes.”

“You never got caught?” asked Kate.

“No. Once, the cook walked in on me. He looked at me, then down at the desk. I was holding my phone directly above the notepad. He just looked up at me again and asked what I wanted for dinner. That was it. I think he wanted out as well.”

“Lyra, maybe it would be good for you to speak with Bree, Ashley, Calla, or one of our counseling team,” said Bella.

“It’s probably a good idea,” she said, nodding. “The things that happened to me, that were done to me, aren’t what gets to me. I lost a kidney, and that’s awful, but I’m alive, and I’m okay. It’s the things I saw or heard them do to others. How are men like Quetzalcoatl allowed to walk this planet?”

“I might be able to explain that,” smiled Winter, coming in the door with Keegan. “I’ll work on your nails while Keegan gets that color right.”

“Why did you say you could explain?” she asked.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but my grandfather was the head of a

one-percenter motorcycle club. Do you know what that means?” Lyra shook her head, confusion in her expression. “It means they believe they can do whatever they like. Kill, rape, brutalize, steal. There were women brought to the club and raped in front of all the men on a pool table. Men were encouraged to take the women, gang rape them.”

“Oh, God,” whispered Lyra.

“It was my life. My mother gave birth to me inside that club and was raped just a few hours later. She died when I was an infant. I should have died, but one of the women in the club cared for me as best she could. Their favorite thing to do was to keep me in a cage, naked above the floor, watching everything that was happening.”

“Winter, you don’t have to tell me more,” said Lyra.

“It actually helps me to speak about it now. When I came here, I couldn’t even look at any of the men. I was terrified.” She shook her head, smiling at the women. “At first, I learned to trust Keegan’s husband, Hawk. He didn’t let me just slink away. He assured me I would be safe and that he would help to keep me that way.

“Then it was Hiro. Hiro, he saw the fear. He felt it and wouldn’t let me hide. Weeks of coaxing me out of my shell, getting me used to being around all these people. He was so incredibly patient, kind, and gentle. Mama Irene, she was there every step of the way. So was Keegan and all

these other women.”

“What happened to the men at the club?”

“When I found out that the man who was running the club, the man who was at the center of my pain and terror, was my grandfather, it was devastating. He’d raped me. Forced me to perform oral sex on him.” She shook her head, watching as Lyra’s tears fell silently. “Don’t cry for me, honey. Cry for the women that didn’t get away. That man and all the men in his club will never touch another woman. You know why? Because men like these exist.”

Slowly, women filled the small cottage, bringing in snacks, wine, and love. By the time Keegan was done, Lyra felt like her old self again. She looked in the mirror at the image she hadn’t seen in months. Smiling, she turned back to the group of women.

“I can’t thank you enough for this. I wasn’t raised with a mother, not one I remember anyway. I had no sisters, no real girlfriends to speak of. Having this kind of female companionship is new for me. But I crave it and didn’t even know that I was craving it.”

“We’re a tight-knit group, honey,” said Bella, hugging her future daughter-in-law. “We have to be. We support one another, fight for one another, cry for one another, and most importantly, shop and eat with one another.”

Laughter filled the cottage, the women enjoying this special time together. On the front porch, Nine, Razor, Ghost, and Skull sat in the rocking chairs, just listening and watching.

“Do you think they’ll try to find her?” asked Razor. “Do we really believe they’re stupid enough to attempt to come here or find her here?”

“Knowing Quetz? Yep,” said Skull. Razor nodded at his old friend.

“Then this is where he’ll die.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Admiral Garvin was seated at his favorite table in his favorite restaurant outside of Alexandria, Virginia. Across from him was his wife of thirty years. She was stunning, but then again, he'd spent a fortune to keep her looking that way. If he had to pretend to be a fine, upstanding gentleman, he'd at least enjoy the package hanging off his arm and sleeping in his bed. Well, sometimes in his bed.

She'd been the manager of a hotel when he met her. Long, thick blonde hair, a pert little nose, and the prettiest blue eyes. But it was the tits that got him. They were firm and high, and she loved when he played with them.

Neither were interested in marriage, but he knew that if he was going to move up in the Navy, he needed to show what a solid, well-grounded man he was. Their marriage was more of convenience than anything. She didn't want children, didn't want to ruin her body. He didn't want them because he didn't want the responsibility. A marriage made in heaven.

"Did you have your injections today?" he asked, looking at her frozen face.

"You know that I did. It's my quarterly routine. Freeze, fix, and fill."

"It looks good. You have no visible wrinkles."

“Thank you,” she said, nodding at him.

It was about as close to a compliment as she was going to get. She stared at him, the salt-and-pepper hair making him appear more distinguished than it should. It didn't seem fair that he didn't have to do all the maintenance that she did, and yet he still looked the same as when they'd married thirty years ago.

They weren't fooling one another. He had his little playthings on the side, usually far younger than they should be.

Ten years ago, they agreed that they wouldn't bring their entertainment home. She didn't want to walk in on him with a fifteen-year-old again, and he didn't want to see her with two very large men in their bed.

So, they bought a small condo on the water and created a schedule where they could take their fun.

“I'll need the condo tomorrow night,” she said, taking a bite of her pork chop.

“That shouldn't be a problem. I may have to travel to the West Coast. There's a problem with something out there.” He made a mental note to call the condo and get his guests to clear out immediately.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” she said with no real conviction.

“Are you entertaining tomorrow night?” he asked, staring at her above his martini.

“I am,” she smiled, crossing her legs in a sexy curl. “The usual, but they promise not to leave marks this time. I know how you hate seeing that.” He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Oh, darling. I don’t hate it. I just wish I were the one delivering those marks on your body.”

“We’ve had a deal for a lot of years, Jon. It’s benefited us both. Don’t get greedy now. I know things. More things than you think, and I’ve made sure that what I know is secure. You fuck with me, and I will ruin you.”

“Careful, darling. You’re sounding like a jealous wife.” She smiled at him, uncurling her legs as the waiter took the plates away.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to use the ladies’ room. Try not to poison my drink.”

“Your drink is gone, and you’re not ordering another. We need to leave soon,” he frowned. She disappeared down the long hallway leading to the ladies’ room, leaving him to stew in his seat. If it killed her, she was going to take as long as possible just to make him wait.

Garvin watched her walking away and cursed his life. If he could just get this deal done, he wouldn’t have to bother with her again. He’d stage his death and disappear forever, leaving his lovely wife with a nice life insurance policy. Or even better, he’d come back as the lost hero, saving the day.

Or he'd kill her then disappear. He smiled to himself at that thought.

"Would you like another martini, admiral?" asked the waiter.

"No, thank you, Sean," he smiled.

"Oh, I think the admiral is going to need another cocktail," said Luke. "In fact, I think he's going to need a lot of cocktails." Garvin stared up at the big man, shaking his head.

"What do you want, Robicheaux?"

"Now, that's not nice at all, admiral. We've come a long way to talk to you. See, we had to fix a sub that was literally a sitting duck in the frozen north." Garvin said nothing but swigged the martini the waiter had just set on the table. He was fuming on the inside, wondering how in the hell they found the sub and fixed it. "You're going to need more drinks than that."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and need I remind you that I'm a high-ranking official in the United States Navy *and* a member of the Joint Chiefs? You're on thin ice, Robicheaux."

"No. I'm not. But you're about to find out what happens to a high-ranking man in the Navy when he's convicted of treason, conspiracy, and a whole bunch of other words that I'm too dumb to understand," he smirked.

"No one will do a thing to me," he said with a cocky grin.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Nate, moving to stand in front of the table. "You and I are going to have a conversation."

“Just you and me?” smiled Garvin. “Don’t forget that I’m trained as well. I might be a few years older than you, son, but I can handle myself.”

“Don’t call me son. That won’t end well for you. I’m so far above your experience and training you won’t even see my ass when I come to kill you. My name is Nathan Redhawk. Remember it. Get up.”

Garvin didn’t move, unsure if he heard the last name correctly. He knew about the Redhawks. He knew about their father and their grandfather, and if they were involved, he just might be fucked. Staring up at the dark-haired man, Nate leaned over the table.

“Get up, or I’m going to really embarrass you.”

“I’m afraid my wife is in the ladies’ room.”

“Your wife is being handled,” smiled Abe. “She’s being handled, just like you handle all those sweet young girls that Quetz provides for you. In fact, I believe you’ve even been handed a few boys. Different for you, but if they look a certain way apparently, you’re all in.”

That brought him to attention. His eyes went wide, and he reached for his cell phone. Abe grabbed it, dropping it to the floor and smashing it with his heel.

“That was foolish,” said Garvin, swiping at his pant leg. “I’m sure you’ll want to take a look at what’s on there, or not on there.”

“Oh, we’ve already done that,” laughed Luke. “I think you forget

who we are. Let's go. We've got a date with the POTUS."

Garvin held out hope that someone would come to his rescue. Right up until he was shoved into the backseat of the SUV. That's when he looked up to see his wife in handcuffs, crying and screaming. The two women gripping her elbows were Amazons. Both tall, well-built, and one was covered in tattoos and piercings.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know! Just let me go!" she screamed.

He was screwed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Garvin had been tight-lipped since arriving at the interrogation room beneath the White House. He thought they'd give him the dignity of going through the front door, but instead took him through a dark tunnel and into the sub-basement level. Five secret service agents were waiting, snarling in his direction.

Somewhere down the hallway was his screaming wife. She would fucking sing like a little bird. He wondered exactly what she had hiding in her 'secret location.' Looking down at his hands chained to the table, he was trying to find a way to get out of the situation. When the president walked into the room, he knew he was screwed.

"Jon," he said, frowning at the man.

"Mr. President, this is all a misunderstanding. I'd respectfully request that you tell these men to release me."

"Respectfully? That seems an odd word to use for someone who swore to protect his country and its people, then turned around and betrayed us." Garvin swallowed, suddenly realizing just how fucked he really was.

"You actually mentioned to us on the phone all the cool toys that the government uses from G.R.I.P.," said Luke. "You would have thought someone who graduated at the top of his class at Annapolis, a former Blue

Angel, would realize that our cool toys are everywhere. Shall I show you?”

“I don’t need the theatrics, Robicheaux. You and your fucking family. You’re all a bunch of inbred, muscle-bound thugs who ride the fine line of the law.” Gator reached across the table, gripping his throat.

“Watch your mouth, you piece of shit, or this inbred, muscle-bound thug will show you just how dangerous we are.” Releasing Garvin, he coughed, shaking his head.

“Let’s take a look,” smirked Luke.

Abe was watching the man closely to see the signs of which photos would make him squirm the most. The first were of him meeting Wolford and Quetzalcoatl. He just stared at the photos, not giving any emotion whatsoever. But it was the next few that made him start to squirm. Photo after photo of him with young girls and boys. Taking their hands and leading them into his vehicle or his condo.

Two photos showed him leading the young victims back out of his condo, bruised, crying, and clearly traumatized.

Garvin was running scenarios in his head. He was helping the children. They were disturbed already, and he was only attempting to support them. No. No, they wouldn’t buy any of that.

“How about this photo?” asked Luke. “Now, see, this one is really interesting to me. That is Polina Golubeva. A prima ballerina with the

Moscow Ballet. Now, what in the world would you be doing having conversations with a ballerina?”

“I’m a fan of the arts,” he said quietly.

“Right, the arts,” frowned Luke. “Abe? Maybe you and your dumbass SEAL brain can explain to the admiral what we know.”

“Of course. My pleasure. Polina Golubeva, daughter of Anton Golubev, Admiral of the Russian fleet. Now, I’m just a stupid SEAL, inbred with my friends here, but I do believe that’s significant.”

“I knew her because I’d met her father at a few state events,” he snapped.

“We haven’t had Russian Navy personnel at a state event in more than ten years, Jon. You might want to rethink this approach of yours,” said the president. He said nothing, and Luke nodded at Abe.

“Anton Golubev has been attempting to get the technologies on the new Ohio-class submarines for the last five years. Those technologies, of course, belong to us. The dumb, inbred, muscle-bound criminals.” Abe turned to the others. “Did I get that right?”

“Thugs,” said Gator. “He called us thugs, but I suppose that’s the same as criminals.”

“Please, continue,” smirked the president.

“A week ago, a Russian attempted to get on base in Alaska. Claiming

confusion and loss of memory and direction. Unfortunately, when the individual left the base, a phone call was made to Golubev asking him to contact one Admiral Garvin to allow entrance on-base.”

“I don’t know the man.”

“I didn’t say it was a man.” Garvin froze, glaring at Abe with such hatred it was palpable in the small room. “As I was saying, he clearly used your name as a reference. Then, imagine our surprise when we find out that the Michigan is dead in the water, and you want our plans. We, of course, refused.

“Instead, we found her sitting off the coast of Alaska, boarded her, found the issues, fixed them, making significant improvements, by the way, and we found the saboteur.”

“Ohhh, big words, Abe. Good job!” smiled Cam.

“Thank you. I read a page in the dictionary last night.”

The Secret Service agents and POTUS chuckled in the background, Garvin frowning at them all. It was nice that they thought they could laugh at his expense. He took solace in the fact that the young man wouldn’t squeal with his siblings being held hostage.

Luke, Cam, Gator, and Abe stared at him, smirking. They knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Shall I show another photo?” asked Abe.

“You shall,” nodded Cam.

“How about this one? That is ITS Freeman hugging his sister and brother. Strange that we found them in the basement of your home, being held by two known members of the Quetzalcoatl cartel. I wonder how that happened?”

“Holding two Americans hostage in your home doesn’t look good for you, Jon,” said the president. “You might do yourself some favors and start talking. Or, the boys and I can step outside and let Luke and the others question you in their way.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I damn sure would. You sold out your country, Jon. Sold me out. I knew you were power-hungry, but I thought all you wanted was the office. Do you understand what the Russians would do with that technology? Do you understand that they would come for us first?”

“Of course, I know! That’s the fucking point,” he snarled. The men all stood straight, staring at the cuffed, shamed man. “I’m sick at the turn this country has taken. The weak, pathetic excuses for leaders. Not one of you understands the sacrifices that have to be made in order to make our country safe and secure. Not one of you.”

“How dare you,” whispered Cam. “How fucking dare you. Every man standing in this room served his country, and I dare say we served in far

more dangerous parts of the world than you and acrobatic flying. Not saying it didn't take skill, but how many missions did you have in an active combat arena, admiral?"

Garvin said nothing, turning and looking in the opposite direction. Finally, he looked at them all.

"One."

"One? One? Between us, we've done nearly a hundred. A hundred fucking combat missions, shithole assignments to make the likes of you look good. Sure, we complained about it, but we never once thought to go against our country. Not once."

"Good for you," said Garvin. "You're all Yankee Doodle Dandies. Waving your flags and singing the "Star-Spangled Banner." How nice. Do you have any idea how much the Russians are willing to pay you for your G.R.I.P. technologies?"

"Actually, we do. They've tried to buy them above board. We know exactly what they offered, and we turned them down. Which, I suppose, is why they found the weakest link to hit on."

"I'm not weak. I'm stronger than you think," he frowned.

Patrick, Christopher, and Hazel walked into the room, staring directly at Garvin. Hazel pushed a folder onto the table. He recognized the

handwriting on the label immediately. He knew. He knew what was in there, and he knew who was to blame.

“Tell us, admiral. Does Golubev know you’re talking to the North Koreans as well?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fucking wife. His fucking wife had all the information she claimed she had. Photos of him with the North Koreans on foreign soil when he was supposed to be in the U.S. Standing beside him were Quetz and Wolford.

“This seems a pretty big meeting for Wolford. Small time nothing with the big dogs,” said Abe.

“You know nothing. Wolford is behind everything.”

“How is that possible? He doesn’t have the government connections. Did you introduce him to all the players?” asked Cam.

“He knew all the players. He knew them better than I did. Who do you think provides them with their specific tastes? Wolford is connected to everyone and uses those connections to his advantage. He has spies spying on the spies. You can’t get anything by him.”

Abe felt a gut punch, wondering if Lyra was safe back home. He’d spoken to her only once since leaving for Alaska, and she seemed fine, but if Wolford was as well connected as Garvin said, who knew what resources he had available to him?

“No one has seen your technology up close and personal. Not even me,” he growled. “They all just wanted to see it, get a few photos, and then create it for themselves.”

Cam let out a chuff of laughter, then Luke followed and the others until the whole room was laughing.

“You think that’s funny?” snapped Garvin.

“I think it’s hilarious,” said Gator. “You can’t reverse engineer our technologies. We’re smarter than you think. Obviously.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll find it and take it. In fact, your precious Michigan is probably being overtaken right now.”

“You weren’t listening, Jon, old boy,” said Abe. “We boarded the Michigan and fixed her. She’s doing just fine.” Garvin smiled at the men, shaking his head as he released a maniacal laugh.

“They’re going to blow her out of the water. If they can’t have her, neither can you.”

“Really?” mocked Cam. “Let’s see. Pull up the satellite images, please.”

One of the Secret Service agents turned the television on and tapped a few buttons. In surprising clarity was an image of the Michigan, sitting on the surface of the water. Except it wasn’t the Michigan at all. It was a mirage of her.

As the Russian vessels moved closer, they could see them preparing to fire. Garvin continued to grin as a hellfire of missiles were shot from the bow of the Russian Navy ships. But all that was seen were splashes of water,

beautifully pluming to the heavens.

From behind the two Russian ships, the Michigan rose in eerie blackness. From her hull, she released her missiles, the smaller, less-equipped ships never standing a chance.

“No,” whispered Garvin. “No. You fool! You idiot! You’ll bring war to us!”

“Wasn’t that your plan?” asked the president. “Isn’t that what you wanted? I mean, you attempted to sabotage a United States Navy submarine. You conspired with known cartel members, drug lords, and terrorists, not to mention a communist.”

“Yea,” he huffed. “That was my plan. But I’d be on the other side of the fucking world. When my country needed me most, I’d show back up and save the day, changing your weak-ass policies and foreign involvement.”

“Weak? You think how we’re dealing with North Korea, Russia, ISIS, and all the other assholes in the world is weak?”

“I damn sure do.”

“You know nothing of weakness or strength. What you know is cowardice. There’s a big difference between them. Let me ask you something,” said Abe. “What were you doing at Quinn’s party?”

“I was there to pick up a friend,” he smirked.

Nate slammed his fist into his jaw, sending him backwards. Had it

not been for the handcuffs holding him to the table, he would have cracked his skull on the floor. Pulling himself upright, he stared at Nate.

“Is she yours?” he grinned.

“She’s no ones. I don’t know her, other than I was the man that saved her from you that night.”

“Wolford wants his niece,” he said, still glaring at Nate. “He needs her to broker a deal between the North Koreans and Quetzalcoatl. If he doesn’t get her, Wolford is a dead man, and all the business he’s been getting from south of the border will go to someone else.”

“Too fucking bad,” growled Abe. “She’s safe, and not even I know where.”

“Where do we find the Russian?” asked Cam.

“I’m going to guess in Moscow,” he grinned. “Your little trick with the sub probably has him concerned.”

“Which is why he won’t be in Moscow,” said Luke. Garvin frowned at him. “If he goes back to Moscow defeated, made a fool, they’ll kill him. It doesn’t matter how high up he is. What he did makes them look foolish. Where is he?”

Garvin looked away, not wanting to answer the question.

“I want a deal,” he said, turning back to them. “I’ll give you Wolford, Quetz, and the Russian, all for my freedom.”

“Wow, you’re really concerned for your wife. I mean, she’s crying and screaming in the next room, and you’re so concerned for her,” said Abe.

“She sold me out. I don’t admire disloyalty. Just let me give you those three, and then let me go.”

The president jerked his head toward the door, and the men all walked over to him.

“Do you think he really knows where they are?” he asked.

“Yep, but he won’t be honest with us,” said Luke. “Let us do this our way, sir. You and your men leave. Plausible deniability and all that bullshit. Sir.” The president gave him a smirk and nodded.

“I don’t want to see his face again, Luke. I don’t really give a damn about deniability. Get rid of him.”

“Yes, sir.” The president turned to face Garvin, the smile on his face telling them he thought he’d won his deal.

“This is goodbye, Jon. I don’t know what happened to you, but you were a good man once upon a time.” The president turned with his agents, leaving the men of VG in the room alone with him.

“Wait! Wait!” he screamed. Piper and Hazel walked by the room, dragging his wife by her arms, her limp body clearly no longer able to move. “What did they do? What did you do to her?”

“Don’t worry, Jon. You’ll be joining her soon enough,” said Abe.

Nate stepped forward, staring at the disgraced admiral.

“Let’s chat.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Luke and the others waited outside the room while Abe and Nate took their time with Garvin. At one point, they could hear him crying, begging for mercy. It sounded like they were enjoying themselves, and in a way, they deserved this.

Nate had always been a good student during training, but he was especially attentive when learning about knives from his grandfather. He was superior in almost every way, simply due to his youth and speed. But right now, he was also out of control.

“Nate always was a vicious bastard,” smirked Cam.

“Yea, but he gets it done. We heard from the Michigan. She’s doing fine and headed home. Tech made sure all the satellite images only showed the Russian ships firing on her, not her firing back.”

“That’s going to create serious issues in Moscow. Two ships missing, and no way to ask for help. If they did, they’d have to explain what they were doing that close to U.S. waters.”

The door opened, and Abe stepped out first, wiping his hands on a wet paper towel. The crimson and pink coloring of the towel telling the team all they needed to know. Nate walked out, and Cam and Luke stared over his shoulder, raising their brows.

“A little overkill, don’t you think? No pun intended,” said Luke.

“Nope. He got what he deserved. You’ll find Golubev at their condo. Apparently, he was given a few girls to entertain while he waited for Garvin.”

“We’ll head that way,” said Gator, nodding at the others. Turning, he, Christopher, Patrick, Fitch, and AJ headed out. They would approach the condo from the street side, knowing that Golubev most likely would be staring out at the water, not the street.

“What do we do with him?” asked Abe.

“We’ve got it, sirs,” said a young man standing behind them. He was wearing a hazmat suit and gloves, carrying a black body bag. “We’ve been asked, confidentially, to dispose of your toxic waste. Happy to do it, sirs.”

“No need to call us sirs,” smirked Luke.

“All due respect, sirs, but we know who you are and what you’ve done. It’s an honor to meet all of you. Unofficially, of course.”

It only took a few moments for them to load Garvin’s body, wipe the entire room clean, sanitizing it, making it look like new. The men nodded as they carried the body away, and Cam just shook his head.

“I guess this is how our parents felt,” he whispered.

“Let’s head to the condo and see what the boys have found.”



Gator tested the door, sure that it was locked. Taking out his kit, he picked the deadbolt first, then the door handle. Barely opening a crack, he ran a long device up the frame to ensure there were no triggers. He could hear a television blaring in the background, then nodded at Patrick.

Slowly, they opened the door, taking careful steps into the condo. The television was playing some awful pornographic movie, blasting throughout the home. Christopher jerked his head toward the stairs, and Gator and Patrick made their way slowly up, one step at a time. Nearing the top, Patrick slowed. Frowning at his friends, he held a finger to his lips, tapping his ear.

They all heard it. The muffled crying of a woman. Or girl. Then, it was another, pleading for release.

Satisfied that they were alone in the condo, they quickly made their way into the bedroom, pushing the door open. The older man's back was to them as he hovered above a young girl.

“Glad you are here, old friend. They’re getting restless.” He glanced over his shoulder, shocked. Jumping from the bed, he tried to get to a handgun on a dresser, but Gator beat him to it. He stared at the naked old man, sneering at him. He held the gun out in his palm, holding it out to the

Russian.

“I dare you. Take it. Go ahead,” said Gator. “Take it, and let’s play this movie out to the end.”

“You are trespassing,” he said in broken English.

“No, old man. You’re trespassing, and if I had to guess, you’re forcing these girls to have sex with you.”

Patrick knelt next to the girl on the bed, her mouth covered in tape as she lay there naked. Carefully, he removed the tape from her mouth.

“It’s alright, precious,” he whispered. He covered her with the blanket, then lifted her and carried her to another room, lying her on a small sofa. “You wait right here while I get your friend, okay?”

“He drugged us,” she sniffed. “H-he stuck a needle in our arms.”

Patrick frowned, staring at the girl. Her makeup was smeared down her face in a streak of tears, the lipstick all around her mouth. Her tender little mouth was bruised, bruises beginning to show on her neck and shoulders. He didn’t have the stomach to inspect her body. Someone else would need to do that.

“How old are you?” asked Patrick.

“Th-thirteen,” she sniffed. “Another man took us and brought us here. We were just waiting for a friend we met online.” Patrick cursed under his breath, then sat across from the girl.

“Honey, he was the man you met online.”

“N-no,” she said, shaking her head. “The guy we met online was fifteen. We saw his photo. He was really cute and had blonde hair. He said his name was Jon. He said he was going to pick us up and take us to the mall.” Patrick shook his head, trying to understand the naivety of the girl.

“What’s your name?”

“Ann.”

“Ann, that was a fake profile. That’s a trick that predators use to lure you into their cars or to a location where they can easily take you. They offer money, jewelry, makeup, all sorts of things to get young girls to follow them. I’m sorry, honey, but he is the guy you met online.”

“I feel so stupid,” she sniffed. “He forced me to have sex!”

“I know, baby. We’re going to get you some help, okay?” She nodded as he moved back into the bedroom. While Gator and Christopher took Golubev downstairs, Patrick kneeled beside the young girl on the floor. Her eyes were glazed over, her young body bruised from his abuse.

Grabbing the sheet from the bed, he wrapped her up and took her into the other bedroom with her friend.

“You wait right here,” he said. “I’m going to get you both something to eat and some water. Don’t move. Okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded. “You won’t leave us with him again, will you?”

“I’m not going to leave you with him, I promise. What’s your friend’s name?”

“Ashley.”

“Okay. Ann and Ashley. I’ll get you some food, then we’re going to try and find your parents. Do you live in Alexandria or Washington, D.C.?”

“Is that where we are?” she said, starting to cry again.

“Yes, honey. You’re in Alexandria, Virginia. Where do you live?”

“We live in Millhaven, Georgia. It’s a little, nothing town. There’s never anything to do there. It’s just farms and double-wide trailers. All we wanted was to get out and go to the big mall in the city. We thought we would have some fun,” she sniffed. “This wasn’t fun.”

“No, I don’t suppose it was,” he said, cursing under his breath. He had three boys at home and was grateful for that. But his siblings each had girls. He would damn sure have a talk with them as they got older.

Downstairs, he grabbed two bottles of water and then searched the cupboards for something for the girls to eat. He needed to get them hydrated and get some food in them. He found a box of cheese crackers and some grapes and made his way back through the living room.

“Are my precious little dolls hungry?” smirked Golubev. Christopher gripped his hand, bending his wrist backwards until he heard the snap of tendon and bone. Screaming, Gator covered his mouth with his huge hand.

“Shhh. We don’t want the girls to think you’re a cowardly baby.”

Turning to Patrick, he spoke in low, hushed tones. “How are they?”

“Filled with drugs, raped, brutalized, but they’re alive. They’re thirteen, Gator. Babies. He lured them online with the promise of a shopping mall trip. Said he was fifteen. They’re from Georgia.” Gator released a low growl, glaring at Golubev.

“Get their last names to the tech boys, and we’ll track them down.”

“Already done,” said Hiro into the comms.

“How did you do that?” asked Gator.

“Me,” said AJ from behind them.

“Shit!”

“Son-of-a-bitch!”

“Did you forget that I was in the car with you?” They both blushed, nodding at their friend. “I really need to speak up more. Once I heard their names, I did a data search of missing persons. Amber Alerts were placed three days ago. They were last seen taking a bus out of town. He must have sent them the bus tickets to meet him.”

“We both know that Garvin helped him with this. Did you notify local authorities?”

“Done,” said AJ. “We’re going to let them reach out to the parents. They know the circumstances and are okay with turning their heads while

you deal with Golubev.”

“We’re happy to help with that,” said Luke, walking into the room. Cam, Abe, and Nate were behind him.

“You guys handle him. I’m going to get some food into the girls,” said Patrick.

“I’ll help,” said Abe. He wanted to destroy Golubev, but he’d give this one to someone else just to have a shot at Quetz and Wolford.

Gator moved Golubev into the main floor bedroom while the police arrived and took control of the young girls. They were more than happy to take the credit for finding the girls, grateful that they were safe and could get home to their parents. They were taken to the local hospital, where they were examined, rape kits done, and placed on IVs to flush their system of the drugs Golubev gave them.

They would both have a long, hard road to recovery, but hopefully had learned their lesson about becoming bored and trying to find excitement.

“We’ll take the girls from here. Thank you,” said the detective. “The parents are on their way here now. They’ve been frantic, as you can imagine. The girls are good students, never did anything wrong, and then suddenly they’d disappeared. The parents said they asked to spend the night at one another’s homes and, of course, never came back the next day.

“When they started asking around their hometown, someone said they

thought they saw them get on the bus headed for D.C. He must have met them at the bus station and took them from there. Those kids had to have been terrified.” The men all nodded, knowing this story all too well, having heard similar stories too many times before.

“I’m just curious. Should I place the fire department on call for a potential condo fire?”

“Might be a good idea,” said Gator. “There’s about to be an explosion here.”

“That’s what I figured.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“When do you think they’ll be home?” asked Lyra.

“I’m not sure, honey,” said Bella. She looked toward her husband, hoping for some backup and assistance.

“Lyra, we just don’t know how long this will take. What I can tell you is that Abe and the boys rescued two young girls from a condo owned by Garvin.”

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “I should have spoken up sooner. I should have gone to the FBI sooner.”

“You couldn’t know about all of this, and you damn sure didn’t know what you were seeing had the scope it does. Men like Garvin, Golubev, Quetz, and your uncle all know how to manipulate and fool others.”

“But they don’t fool all of you. Do they?”

“No, honey. Usually, they don’t. That’s not to say we haven’t been hoodwinked by a few men in our day. And a few women. We’ve been fortunate that when one person doesn’t see it, another does. We always have one another’s six.”

“Your six?”

“Our backs,” he smiled. “Think of it like a clock. In front of you is twelve. Behind you is your six. We always have the back of the man in front

of us. No surprises.”

“That’s amazing. May I ask,” she said, lowering her voice, “those two men over there, Ryan and Devin. How did they lose their limbs?” Razor waved them over, and Lyra blushed.

“It’s okay,” smiled Bella.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s perfectly alright,” said Razor. “I’m not telling you because it’s their story to tell, not mine.”

“Hey, Razor, Bella. Hi, Lyra,” smiled Ryan.

“Hello.”

“Guys, Lyra was curious how you lost your limbs. Do you mind telling your stories?” asked Bella.

“Not at all,” said Parker. “I lost mine while serving. Ben Robicheaux was my captain. I was sitting, wallowing in self-pity in West Virginia, and these boys showed up on my doorstep. Actually, Ben’s wife found me. But I just wanted out of there. My brother had other ideas.” He smiled at Lyra, who cocked her head in curiosity.

“Didn’t he want you to be well?”

“Oh, he did. In his own way. He’d just divorced for the third time. Or maybe it was the fourth, I can’t remember,” he smirked. “I was the replacement for his attention, and he was smothering me to death. They all

came asking about something unrelated and offered me a place to heal and potentially work.”

“That’s awesome,” she smiled. He nodded.

“It was. I had the chance to work with a kangaroo we rescued who had lost one of her arms. Matilda was a beauty, and she seemed drawn to me for some reason. In the process, we discovered an exotic animal ring that was killing off species on every continent. And I met my beautiful wife, Dani.”

“That’s a wonderful story,” she smiled. “May I ask, I mean, if you’re willing to tell me. I knew a guy in college who had returned from overseas and appeared fine on the outside. What no one saw was the pain and damage on the inside. He’d been suffering with depression and delusions. No one helped him, and he eventually took his life.”

“That makes me very sad,” said Ryan, looking at Parker. “It’s something we try very hard to ensure doesn’t happen here.”

“I guess my question is, he was whole, and you weren’t. How did you avoid the same fate?”

“He wasn’t whole, honey. He was half the man he was when he left. It happens more than we like, and when we see any signs of it, we stop it immediately. We get them help, sit up with them all night, anything. Losing a man, or woman, is not an option.”

“Thank you for telling me that. What about you? How did you lose your arm?”

“My story is far more complicated,” said Ryan. “I was nine when my mother, a drug addict, abandoned me. I called my Aunt Ella, and she immediately hopped on a plane and came to get me. The problem was my mother owed some drug dealers a lot of money, and they came for her.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. They took my aunt and me and were prepared to sell us in a trafficking auction. I was terrified. I didn’t understand any of it, but my Aunt Ella, I call her mom now,” he smiled. “Mom, she protected me until help arrived.”

“The police?”

“No, honey. These men. The man I call Dad now. They rescued every last woman and child that was on the auction block that night. Dozens of us, including Luke, Adam, Ben, Carl, Violet, and Lucy. They were all adopted by Gaspar and Alexandra. You would think that I would be grateful for all that, and I was.”

“But they weren’t your mom,” she said, staring at him.

“No, they weren’t, but I didn’t know how to communicate that. I started acting out a bit in high school, separating myself from all my friends that I grew up with. It was stupid. I had the chance of a lifetime, and I was

throwing it away. I had a crush on one of the girls here and acted out. Then, I developed a gambling problem, which led to a drug problem. It all started when I met a woman at the casino. She was beautiful, and she was giving me a lot of attention. I thought she cared for me.

“What I didn’t know at the time was that they were trying to get information from me about G.R.I.P. A woman, specifically. I did something incredibly stupid, Lyra.” He swallowed, turning away for a moment with tears in his eyes. “I was in love with Paige but was still filled with poison. I slapped her. I didn’t mean to. I regretted it immediately and vowed to stop what I was doing. Unfortunately, the men and women I was dealing with had other ideas.

“The entire team went to Paris while I was in rehab. These people kidnapped me, beat me within an inch of my life, and then cut off my arm, hoping I would tell them something.”

“Dear God,” said Lyra. Ryan nodded.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“How can you say that?” she gasped.

“Because it led me back here. Right where I was supposed to be. I went away to rehab this time. Stayed longer than recommended because I really wanted my head screwed on straight. Paige, she came to see me almost every week,” he smiled. “She saved my life. When I came back here,

I had to reconcile with my aunt... with Mom and Dad, then I had to face Paige's father."

"He obviously forgave you," she smiled.

"He did because he knew me better than I knew myself. They knew who I really was, and I was only just discovering that. I've been incredibly blessed with an amazing wife, a strong, brave son, and a job that I love. That job has led me to be able to create some of the most advanced prosthetic devices in the world. My own included, and that has helped hundreds of veterans live better lives and, hopefully, not take their own life."

"You're all so remarkable," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not sure how I add to all of this. I'm just an interior designer."

"You're not 'just' anything," said Bella. "You're important to Abe, which makes you important to all of us. You'll continue doing design work. We'll find a way to make sure of that."

"Thank you. All of you."

They smiled, then stared out the glass windows as the SUVs pulled up, and the men stepped out one at a time. Parker and Ryan knew the look. They knew the mannerisms of men who had to make very difficult decisions but made them anyway for the good of those around them. It was written on their faces. Etched in the wrinkles around their eyes and the exhaustion in their bodies.

“I believe your prince has returned,” grinned Razor. Lyra looked at him, staring through the glass with a big smile on his face. She nodded.

“If you’ll excuse me. I have something I need to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“So, Garvin and Golubev are gone?” asked Lyra.

They’d made love for hours when he got back. She could still smell him on her body, but she prayed that no one else could smell him as well. It was comforting and made her feel whole again. It was the thing she’d missed, the thing she’d craved when she couldn’t touch him all those months. Couldn’t call him. It was painful.

“We got them, but there’s still your uncle and Quetz,” said Luke.

“And the woman,” said Lyra.

“What?” frowned Abe.

“The daughter of Golubev. She’s still out there. She won’t let his death go unnoticed or unpunished. Even I know that’s now how these people work. We have to find all three, or I’ll still be running for my life.”

“She’s right,” nodded Cam. “Damn. She’s right.”

“Hiro?”

“I’m on it,” he called back.

“What can he do from here?” asked Lyra.

“He’ll be checking street cameras, security cameras, traffic light cams, everything. We have a software system that searches by facial recognition. It hones in on certain features and characteristics of the face and

can identify, with ninety-nine percent certainty, someone's identification. If we can find them on camera, we can track them," said Hex.

"So, you'll all be leaving again?" she asked.

"I think we have to, baby," said Abe, hugging her close. He'd worried the whole time he was gone that she wouldn't be able to handle this new lifestyle. If she couldn't, he wasn't sure what he would do.

"I understand," she smiled. "I'll be staying with your mom and dad while you're gone. They let me sleep in your old room, and it made me feel really safe. I'm okay, although I may have to remove the Gwen Stefani poster." Abe laughed, shaking his head.

"Yea, I think you can safely remove that now. You're really okay?" he smiled.

"I am. I'm more than okay. No one here lets me get lonely or worry for too long. They've been wonderful, Abe, and if I have one regret, it's that I didn't tell you all of this sooner so that I could have met them sooner."

"You don't know how happy that makes me," he said, hugging her.

"I've got the woman," said Hiro. "Golubeva. I have her. She's outside Fort Lewis near Seattle."

"What the hell is she doing there?" growled Eric.

"I don't know, but what do you say we go find out."



Polina Golubeva was a stunningly beautiful woman, and she knew it. Men watched as she walked in front of the base gates, her long brown hair swinging down her back. Her dress hugged her curves, the long, muscled legs elegantly striding toward her objective.

It was cold. Too fucking cold to be in a dress like the one she was in. If she thought the soldiers at the base were too stupid to figure that out, she was wrong.

Stepping inside the small restaurant, she took a seat in a corner booth, waiting patiently. Four times, she texted her father with no response. Five times, she texted Garvin with no response. Something was wrong.

“Are you sure I can’t get you anything other than coffee, hun?” asked the waitress.

“I am sure,” she said. Staring up at the television, she saw the headline. “Can you turn that up?” The woman nodded, clicking the button for the volume of the television.

“George, this is a disturbing story that has the White House and everyone in Washington on edge. Early this morning, the body of Admiral Jonathon Garvin was found in the marshy swamplands of the Chesapeake area. Just a few feet away was his wife. If that wasn’t disturbing enough,

investigators went to their homes to check for any signs of foul play.

“Their main residence was untouched. However, a condominium they owned was the scene of a three-alarm fire. When fire investigators searched the home, they found a third body. That of Anton Golubev, Admiral of the Russian Fleet.

“Homeland, FBI, and military investigators are denying any knowledge of Golubev being on U.S. soil or any contact with Admiral Garvin. This is a puzzle, George. One that won’t be solved soon.”

“No,” she whispered to herself. “No, this can’t be true.”

Throwing a twenty-dollar bill on the table, she walked out of the restaurant and back across the front gates of Fort Lewis. Two blocks down, she found her rental car and headed back into Seattle to the small house she’d rented.

For months now, she’d been flying back and forth between Alaska; Seattle; Washington, D.C.; and Moscow. They were on the verge of scoring the biggest deal of their lives. What the hell was happening?

First, the U.S. submarine reported back to port. Then, two Russian Navy vessels disappeared, and now, her father and Garvin were found dead. Oh, and his wife. She could care less about her. She’d been a problem from the beginning.

She parked the car in front of the house and walked up the sidewalk to

the door, letting herself in. Once inside, she secured the locks and kicked off her high heels. Grabbing a glass, she poured some ice into it and then a healthy pour of vodka.

Sitting on the sofa, she laid her head back against the cushion, taking in a deep breath. When her phone rang, she prayed that it would be her father. Maybe this was all a sick joke.

“What happened?” said the man’s voice. Wolford.

“I don’t know,” she said calmly. “I just saw it on the news. Father was supposed to meet with me today. When he didn’t show, I began calling him and Garvin. That’s when I saw it on the news.”

“I could give a fuck about your father or Garvin. What happened with the submarine?”

“I don’t know,” she ground out.

“You have twenty-four hours, Polina. Find out how I get that submarine, or you’ll be joining your father and Garvin.”

“Did you kill him?” she asked, sitting on the edge of the seat.

“I wish I had, but no. I didn’t kill them. It wasn’t time yet,” he laughed.

The line went dead, and she tossed the phone on the seat beside her. Standing, she moved to the bedroom and began packing her things. She stripped the dress off and put on warm leggings and a sweater, then pulled

her tall boots on.

Tossing the bag to the floor, she wheeled it into the living room and froze.

“Hello, Polina. We have some things to discuss.”

“How did you get in here?” she said in a heavy breath.

“We’ve been in here for an hour, waiting on you,” said Abe.

“Interesting conversation you had with Woldford. He doesn’t sound like he’s willing to give you any time to try and find the Michigan.”

“Who are you?”

“Me? Or we?” he asked, turning on the light to reveal a dozen men staring at her.

Polina made the wrong decision. She tried to kick out at Gator, and he gripped her ankle, twisting her leg in mid-air. She fell face down, then stood once again. Trying to kick out again, he gripped her leg one more time, thrusting his fist, knuckles first, into her inner thigh.

“Don’t make me break your leg. You’ll never dance again.”

“Fuck you!”

“Okay, sunshine. No problem.” Gator twisted his body, dislocating her knee, tearing the tendons and ligaments free from their hold. Polina screamed in agony, falling to the carpet. Patrick lifted her, throwing her on the sofa.

“Maybe next time you’ll listen to my friend. Now, start talking.”

She shook her head, tears streaming down her face as the knee expanded in size, the swelling causing her extreme pain.

“Listen to me,” said Abe. “My fiancée is Lyra Wolford. She’s safe, never to be found by anyone. But you fucked with the wrong family. Where are Wolford and Quetz?”

Polina stared at the men with such hatred they could feel it seeping into their souls. Gator started to step forward, and she flinched. Nodding, he stepped back.

“Again, where is Wolford and Quetz?”

“I don’t know.”

This time, Gator and Patrick stepped forward, leaning toward her leg.

“No! Please, no more,” she cried. “Did you kill my father?”

“You don’t get to ask questions,” said Abe. “Where are they? And if you lie, we’ll know, and you’re going to suffer unimaginable pain.”

“I don’t know where Quetz is. That’s the truth. He’s constantly on the move.”

“And Wolford?”

She looked away, then toward the photo of her and her father. He was gone. Her mother was dead. Her father was dead. She had no one. Neither Wolford nor Quetz would give a damn about her in the end.

“Everyone thinks he only has one home. He has three.”

“Where?”

“Virginia Beach area, Lubec, Maine, near the Canadian border.”

“That’s convenient,” frowned Christopher.

“That’s only two. Where is the third?”

“Point Loma, California.”

“Point Loma? Jesus,” muttered Patrick. “He’s parked himself for an escape to Canada and near two prime naval installations.”

“Which one is he at now?” asked Abe.

“He’s not in Virginia,” she said, gripping her knee. “He was supposed to meet them there but cancelled last minute. He wouldn’t go to Maine. He doesn’t like the cold.”

“Well, then. That leaves us Point Loma. You’ve been very helpful, Polina, but you’ve outlived your usefulness.”

“No! Wait, I can help you!”

“How could you possibly help us?” asked Abe.

“He needs the girl. Your girl.” Abe frowned at her, leaning over her cowering body.

“I’m well aware that he needs her. He needs her for Quetz,” he snarled. Polina realized she was out of options. There was nothing left for her. Nothing except one thing.

“There’s another man. Another person trying to get to the Michigan and to the company, G.R.I.P.”

The men stood back, staring at her. She wouldn’t just give up that information. She would want something in return. She couldn’t return to Russia. They’d kill her.

“What other man?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Did you get that?” yelled Christopher into his comms.

“I got it. We’re sending a team there now.”

As the SUV sped away, the small house in the cul-de-sac exploded with Polina Golubeva, incapacitated, inside. It would be determined that a gas explosion caused the house to blow, Polina so injured she was unable to escape.

“Fontenot. Fucking Fontenot,” growled Abe.

“They’re on their way to him. They’ve taken the chopper, so should be arriving in a few minutes.”

“He took a fucking brutal beating just to throw us off,” said Abe. Boarding the jet with Autumn at the stick, they headed home as fast as they could. By the time they landed, Luke and the others were already home and waiting for them.

“Well?”

“He wouldn’t say much,” said Luke. “He said that both he and Carr were in on it from the beginning but had different ideas of what should be done. The men that you saw at the safe house were just hired security made to look like agents. Your commander thought the request for you to be on the team was legit.”

“Carr didn’t like the idea of turning Lyra over to Quetz or the uncle. Fontenot wanted the bounty, but he also wanted revenge for them killing his ex-wife. When we started asking him more questions, he declined, choosing death.

“His mother said he kept telling her how sorry he was and that he’d have to leave them for a while. She thought he was depressed. She even called here to see if Bree could come up and speak with him.”

“He knew we had her,” said Abe. “We told him we were keeping her safe.”

“He did, but tech reviewed his phone, laptop, and the parents. There was nothing there to indicate that he notified the others. Maybe he was holding that one in his pocket. I’m not sure. Abe, there’s one other thing. He was the man who stabbed you. He was hoping that you’d tell them where she was, but when he realized who you were, where you were going, he regretted it. You don’t remember, but he gave you the ride to the café. It was all part of the plan.” Abe just shook his head.

“But we can’t be sure that he didn’t tell Woldford or Quetz,” said Abe, staring at Luke. “Where is she? Where is Lyra?”

“Abe! Settle down, son. She’s safe with your mother at our cottage. Rory and Noah are on the front porch, and Noa and Merrick are in the house. Nobody is getting to her.”

Abe released a shaky, slow breath, nodding at his father. He took a seat, resting his head in his hands.

“Abe, if he had told Quetz or Wolford, we would have spotted them in this area. I think he realized that he was in over his head. He killed Carr, not the others.”

“Jesus, this is fucked up,” said Abe.

“Your commander sent men to look at your apartment. It appeared someone had been inside, but nothing was stolen or disturbed. They’ve moved all of your belongings to a storage facility,” said Code. “He also said that your retirement papers have been submitted.”

“I didn’t fill those out?” he frowned.

“Abe,” laughed Luke. “You’ve been in longer than any SEAL I know, other than maybe Ian. Come home, brother. It’s time, and you were seriously distracted, brother.”

“Well, I can’t deny that,” he smirked.

“We have to find Quetz and Wolford, and we need to find them soon. Wolford loses everything if he doesn’t turn Lyra over to Quetz. Quetz can survive without him, but not easily. He’ll want to make sure his connections to the other cartel members stay in good graces.”

“I think we have a lead,” said Hiro. “We’ve been helping Homeland and Border Control on the influx of migrants racing toward our border. Our

technology has been tracking their paths and where they're coming in from. We've also been able to stop a few semis loaded with people. It slowed the last few weeks, but no one could figure out why."

"Why is that bad?" asked Hex.

"Normally, it wouldn't be. But what we've seen is the migrants turning and going back the way they came. Then yesterday, we saw this."

The image on the screen was disturbing. Waves of men, and only men, making their way toward the river. Border guards stared at the masses of men, wondering what they were going to be able to do to prevent this from happening. Many carried weapons, some homemade machetes or knives.

"Watch," said Hiro. "There. That man is Quetz. He's right out in front, yelling at them. At least, that's what it looks like. But I don't think he's yelling in the sense of anger. I think he's giving them marching orders. I think he's telling them that they're at war with the U.S."

"Fuck me," said Abe.

"Send the Ospreys," said Cam. "Get as many men on board as we can spare and stop those men from coming across. Hover above that river in plain sight, then engage the stealth. They'll either run or be tempted to shoot."

"Are we hoping for one or the other?" asked Hiro.

"We're hoping they'll shoot," said Cam. "If they do, we fire back and

solve this issue on more than a few fronts. The cartel members will be gone, and hopefully, Quetz as well. The valid migrants will be free to move back if they feel safe enough to do so.”

“Another discussion for a different day,” said Luke. “For now, get to the choppers. We have to stop those men from crossing the river.”



Three Ospreys were hovering above the border, staring straight at the men under the control of Quetzalcoatl. He wore a colorful robe and headdress.

“What the hell is he wearing?” frowned Cam.

“It’s an Aztec costume,” said Razor, staring at the image of the man below. “He’s telling the world that he is the god Quetzalcoatl and cannot be defeated.”

“Well, he’s about to be proven wrong,” growled Luke. “Give me the mic.” Savannah turned back toward him with a raised eyebrow.

“Luke Robicheaux, this might be a tense situation, but you still know your manners.”

“Sorry, Aunt Savannah. Can you please hand me the mic?” She grinned, handing him the device.

“Luke, let me,” said Razor. “Most of those men down there probably only speak Spanish. I’ll speak. Abe can translate for anyone who doesn’t understand.”

¡Escúchame!

“Listen to me,” repeated Abe into the comms system. “Quetzalcoatl is nothing more than a man. A man with a vision that will lead to death for all of you and wealth for him. He is not a god. You will not win this.

“America is not at war with you. He is attempting to control you. Do not do this.”

The conversation paused as Quetz moved to the front of the crowd. He screamed at them to be gone as if they were a pestilence of some sort. What he didn’t expect was the wall of muscle standing on the other side of the river.

Noah, Noa, Rory, Merrick, Trevor, Titus, Max, Zeke, Eli, Carter, Fitz, and Chris looked as though they were made of stone. Modern-day terra-cotta warriors in their impenetrable gear, with their intimidating weapons.

Quetz stared at the men and realized he had inadvertently lured the sleeping giant to his location. There was a moment of panic. You could see it. He was contemplating running, but if he were to save face, keep his god-like status, he would need to stand tall. Turning, he ordered the men to fire on the choppers.

Before one bullet could leave the weapons, stealth was engaged, and the Ospreys disappeared. Dozens of men gasped, dropping their weapons and running back into the woods, believing they'd angered a far more powerful god.

Quetz screamed at them, ordering them back to the lines, but the men only ran. When the Ospreys reappeared, he gave the order again. One that sealed all of their fates.

As bullets flew unyielding at the birds, the men only watched with the sad realization that these men would lose their lives today. They seemed to have forgotten the dozen men on the other side of the river, now skillfully making their way to the Mexico side. The border patrol guards and agents turned their backs. They saw nothing.

With the hopes of capturing Quetz and not killing dozens of men who were only trying to make a living for their families, they waited until the bullets stopped. Hearing the crowd's gasps and cries that the helicopters must be from more powerful gods, the VG team unleashed at their feet. Immediately, almost everyone dropped their own weapons. Those that didn't met their fate at the shores of a river they believed held their future hope.

"Leave," said Razor in Spanish. "Leave, and your lives will be spared."

All but one left. All but one ran. Quetz stood in his colorful coat and

headdress. Perhaps he was delusional, believing he truly was an Aztec god. Rory stood in front of him, looking down at the smaller man. He gripped the headdress at the base, squeezing it tightly, and Quetz's face sunk.

Holding the headdress tightly, Rory tossed it to the ground, watching as the snakes scurried away. When Max ripped the robe from his shoulders, the snakes on his arms hissed, arching their heads toward their potential victims.

Instead, Noah gripped them, squeezing their heads. The poisonous serpents squirmed, begging for life, but Noah was not to be deterred. When they stopped moving, he threw them at Quetz's feet and stepped back.

"I know who you are," he whispered.

"Where is Wolford?" asked Abe.

"His niece belongs to me. Bring her to me, and I will tell you where he is." Abe stepped forward, thrusting a large knife beneath the man's chin.

"Better idea. You tell me where he is, and I won't cut your head off and post it on a spike to ward off your fucking evil."

He'd underestimated these men. He'd underestimated their skill, their technology, and, more than anything, their desire to protect the girl and find her uncle. The gods were not in his favor, and he was going to lose the day.

"You will lose more than the day," said Noah. Quetz stared at the man wide-eyed. "Your mother is with you. She is disappointed in your

behavior. She says to tell you that this is not what she taught you.”

Quetz shook his head, staring at the big Viking before him. He’d never seen men of such size and wondered if this was some sort of technology as well.

“Your mother says that if you do not cooperate, the ghost of your sister, who you killed, will haunt you day and night.”

Gasping, Quetz attempted to step back but was met with an unyielding object. A man.

“How are you performing this magic?”

“It’s not magic. Where is Woldford?” asked Abe again.

“He’s trying to find the girl. He had three days to deliver her to me, or I would take my business elsewhere and tell my colleagues to do the same.”

“Well, good news, you’re not going to have any business to give him. Where is he?”

“I don’t know. That’s the truth. He used to sit in his house in Virginia and not move unless we were meeting with people in D.C.”

“Oh, you mean Garvin and Golubev?” asked Razor. Once again, Quetz was taken aback, unsure how these men knew all these details.

“They’re dead. Speak now.”

“I truly do not know. Let me go,” he asked.

“Afraid we can’t do that,” said Abe. “You won’t ever touch Lyra. Never. In fact, you will never lay eyes on her again.”

“She is mine!” he yelled.

“And that’s your last chance,” smirked Abe. “I’m so glad you’re giving me the satisfaction of wiping you from this earth.”

“You can’t! You’re on Mexican soil!”

“I don’t think Mexico cares about your dirty ass. They’ll be just fine without you.”

“Make it fast, Abe. We have to go,” said Luke.

Carter and Trevor gripped the man’s arms, dragging him toward the forested area. Abe followed, and just moments later, the three men emerged with dark expressions on their faces.

“Did he say anything else?” asked Razor.

“Yes. Dios mío.”

CHAPER TWENTY-THREE

Back at Belle Fleur, preparations were underway for Mardi Gras. It was still weeks away, but the holiday was second only to Christmas at Belle Fleur. Claudette had taken on the majority of the duties, allowing Irene to sit and watch, silently directing from a distance.

For Lyra, she'd never been a part of anything to do with Mardi Gras, so this was going to be special for her. What really made it special was the fact that she was here with Abe. Or at least she was here.

Abe still had not returned, and she was starting to become concerned.

“Hello.”

“Oh. Hello. M-Martha, right?”

“That’s right, dear,” smiled the shimmering figure. “Are you alright?”

“I’m confused. Scared. In love,” she smiled, laughing at herself.

“I see. You know, it’s rather sad, but I’m not sure I was ever truly in love during my time. I’m in love now. There is irony in that, I suppose. I find my true love two hundred years after my death. A love that would have never been allowed in my time.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lyra.

“Nathan is Diné. Navajo. In my time, we would have never been

allowed to have a relationship.”

“Martha, you do not strike me as a woman who adheres to social convention or rules. I see you as a historic feminist.” Martha laughed, nodding at the young woman.

“I suppose I was. When I took over this place, no one thought a woman could do it. No one except my brother. He was wonderful. Men tried to convince me that I needed them to do this job. They attempted to woo me in the ways that men did back then. Flowers, chocolates, even jewelry. What were they thinking? I was a wealthy woman with an ability to purchase those things on my own!

“As they realized that I would not take a husband, many men refused to do business with me. That’s when Franklin stepped in for me. He would take the cotton and the crops to be sold. He would negotiate with the shippers. It was unprecedented for a black man to have such power back then, but they knew he was representing the owner of Belle Fleur.

“I still appeared in public. I went to mass. I attended the ladies’ teas. I made myself known, but when I started to no longer age, I was accused of voodoo or witchcraft.”

“Oh, yes. Abe told me about the pond and its healing abilities. I have to confess. I didn’t believe in it at first. Recently, I went down there with Bella. I felt remarkable afterwards. Sort of light and just different.”

“Yes, it’s an amazing gift we’ve been given. But also one that has to be hidden. I couldn’t show my face any longer. When I was a young woman, Lyra, probably younger than you, I thought I was in love.”

“You did?”

“Yes. A beautiful man. His family owned a property upriver. He courted me with every intention of asking my parents for my hand. One day, he came to tell me that he would be sailing north to meet with some very important people.

“I waited for him. Week after week, I waited and watched. I asked my father every day when he thought he might return. He just told me to be patient. Then, one day, my father walked into the maze and sat beside me. He said he had something to tell me, and it would not be easy to hear.”

“Did your man pass?” frowned Lyra.

“Pfft! I wish!” Lyra let out a little giggle. “No, he married the daughter of the man he’d met. She was even wealthier than me. I heard through friends that she was quite round with a pock-marked face, but she was damn sure wealthy.”

“Martha, I’m so sorry,” said Lyra.

“I’m not. All good things take time, my dear. Sometimes, you have to wait to get to the best parts. Your man, Abe, is the best part. He is true of heart and will return to you. I know because I found the same. Nathan and I

could move on if we wanted to. No one really knows that, but we could.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Because this is home. This is where we can have our love, in this magical place. We can have a physical touch that isn’t possible if we move on. Claudette and Tony are the same. We’re able to speak to all of you, be with you, read books. It’s magical, and we don’t want to lose that.

“Nathan is the only man that has truly loved me for me. He gets nothing by loving me.”

“Nonsense,” said the big bass voice. “I get loved back. I’m a fortunate man. I get to see my grandson, great-grandsons and great-granddaughters, and my great-great-grandchildren. My life was lonely and filled with pain when I walked this earth as you do. Now, I am in love with the most amazing woman, and my heart, though not beating, is full.”

“I’m going to bet that your heart is beating, Nathan,” smiled Lyra. “You’re all so amazing. Grip is amazingly protective. When I go for my walks in the morning, he follows me around. I’m not sure what he could do if someone were to try and take me, but it makes me feel better. Yori is full of wisdom and wonderful stories. Claudette and Tony are forever youthful and in love. You’ve all given me something that I needed. Family.”

“You’ll meet the others eventually,” said Martha. “Billy and Marcel.”

They heard commotion and turned, seeing Christopher chasing

Ramey down. He was laughing and crying at the same time. She was not.

“This isn’t funny, Christopher!” she turned, charging back at him, shoving his chest.

“I think it’s wonderful,” he laughed. “Ramey. Ramey, honey, look at me.”

Everyone stopped to watch the couple, and Ramey stared at them all, crying as she looked at Christopher. Angel and Mary were holding the triplets, Brooks, Mitchell, and Melissa.

“Christopher, I can’t do this.”

“Oh, my goodness,” said Lyra. “I hope they’re alright.”

“They’re just fine,” smiled Nathan. “Listen.”

“Do you remember when I told you that I loved you and wanted to marry you? I said I wanted to have babies with you,” said Christopher.

“I remember, and don’t throw that back at me. I was stupid in love,” she sniffed. He laughed, hugging her.

“And I still am stupid in love with you, Ramey. You said you wanted seven babies. Seven. We got three on the first round.”

“Yes, and now I’m pregnant with three more! The triplets are still babies, Christopher. How are we going to do this?”

“Like we do everything. With help. Look around you, baby. All of these people will help us. All of them.”

“You know we will,” smiled Sadie.

“We’re going to have six babies under two,” said Ramey. “You’re getting snipped!”

“Uh, can we talk about that later?” frowned Christopher. She nodded. “I love you, Ramey. I love the woman you are, the mother that you are. I will be here through it all.”

Staring up at him, she knew it was true. He’d been a wonderful husband and father thus far, and she had no reason to believe any of that would change with more babies. She kissed him, and everyone applauded. That’s when Lyra spotted Abe and ran toward him, leaping into his arms.

“And that’s how it’s done,” smiled Martha. Nathan kissed her cheek.

“That’s why I love you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“So, Quetz is gone?” asked Lyra. “How?”

“Baby, we can’t answer that. But he will never bother you, or anyone, again.” Kissing her face, he made his way down her body, tasting, touching, and loving the woman in his bed.

“Did you see Christopher and Ramey?” she panted.

“Mmhmm,” he moaned.

“Six babies. Th-that’s a lot,” she cried out, arching her back.

“We’ll have as many as you want,” he said in a raspy, sexy voice. He filled her with his seed, and she stared up at him, then down where they were joined.

“You’re not wearing a condom,” she smiled.

“Nope. Won’t be wearing one ever again.”

“You want babies. With me.”

“Yep.”

“How many?” she asked suspiciously.

“I don’t think we should say that out loud. That’s where Christopher and Ramey made their mistake,” he laughed. “Saying things out loud around here tends to make them true.”

“Alright,” she giggled. “I won’t say it out loud. But I will tell you

that I want at least one. A boy. Big and strong like his father.”

“A girl,” smiled Abe, kissing her soft, sweet breasts. “Beautiful like her mother.”

“Careful,” she moaned, gripping his hair. “That’s two spoken out loud.”

Abe started to say something, but his phone was vibrating so loudly on the nightstand he couldn’t concentrate. Lifting it, he read the text message and quickly stood, heading to the shower. Realizing his mistake, he turned back, grinning.

“Shower with me,” he smiled. Lyra nodded, following him into the steamy space. He couldn’t help but make love to her one more time before they dressed and made their way to the offices.

“Are you going to tell me why we’re in such a rush?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. Only that they think they have something on Wolford.” Lyra could only nod, the mention of her uncle making her stomach twist into knots.

“Good morning,” said Luke. “Thank you for coming in so early. The tech boys found this video early this morning. It was sitting in the spam folder in our secure e-mail. I would imagine he knew that we were involved in everything because of Garvin.” He turned, nodding at Pigsty.

“Hello – I suppose no introductions are needed. You know me, and I,

in a strange way, know you. You have something I want. Someone I want and need. You killed Quetz, but that doesn't help me at all. Now, I have no one to barter with. No one to help me with the other business associates. That's going to cost me money and will cost you something as well.

“Return my niece to me by midnight tonight, or I'll take another life. A much more annoying life.”

“Let me go! Let me go!” yelled the voice.

Nate's head immediately came up, staring at the face of Harlow. She seemed relatively unharmed, only a small bruise on her jaw.

“A life for a life. It's as simple as that. Meet me in Bluetown, Texas. I warn you, it's a small population, and any strangers will be seen as enemies to these people. There is a ranch at the border between Bluetown and the Mexican border on Bluetown Pump Station Road. You'll recognize it because it has my name on it. Be there by midnight, or the girl will die. And if you think I'll stop there, you're wrong. I'll kill a woman a day until you bring me my niece.”

The film ended abruptly, and Nate stood, headed toward the door.

“Rory,” called Cam. Rory and Tailor stood in front of the door, but Nate glared at the two men.

“Don't make me do this,” he said.

“Don't make us do this, brother. Stay calm. You can't help that girl

if you go off half-cocked by yourself. You know better. You were trained better.”

“Get out of my way,” he sneered.

“Nate,” whispered his father behind him.

“Don’t, Dad. Don’t try to stop me. I will not let that girl fall into his hands any longer than necessary!”

“Nathan!” The entire room stopped, turning to stare at the face of Trak. He never raised his voice. Never. “Sit. Down.”

Nate stared at his grandfather, then turned and took his seat once more. Trak walked down to him, standing in front of him.

“This is not the way of the warrior. We will get the girl, but we will do it without risk to ourselves and her. Follow your leaders.” Nate nodded, but he was dying a little inside.

“I have to go,” said Lyra. “I have to go and trade myself for that girl.”

“No. No fucking way,” said Abe. “We can’t let that happen. He’ll kill you.”

“He won’t kill me,” she said, staring at the room. “You’re the professionals. You saw it. He wants something from me, and it has nothing to do with Quetz any longer. He’s dead, and my uncle knew that. There is something else he wants.”

“We’ll do this our way, Lyra. We may need you to go with us, but we do it our way. You’ll be protected at all times. No one goes off on their own in rogue fashion.” She nodded, and Luke turned back to Pigsty. “What does this ranch look like?”

“This is the layout,” he said, putting a map on the screen. “You can see that the main house is facing the road, but it’s deceptive. It’s pretty far back from the main road and surrounded by fencing. There’s a large barn and what appears to be a bunkhouse. Back here, we see another entrance to an underground bunker. At least, that’s what we think it is.”

“Wait,” said Lyra. “This doesn’t make any sense at all. My uncle hated the country. He has terrible allergies and hay fever. He doesn’t like animals. We rarely had guard dogs, and when we did, he made them stay outside the house. I thought that was cruel. He wouldn’t want to be at a ranch. Why is he there?”

“I don’t know,” said Dex, “but I think we travel with the big dogs. Not you, Alec and Tailor. The real big dogs.”

“We are the real big dogs,” frowned Alec. The others just shook their heads at the banter.

“He could be hiding anything there, honey,” said Abe. “It could be a weapons stash, drugs, women, anything.”

“Technology,” she whispered.

“What did you say?” asked Hiro.

“He was trying to take the technology off that submarine and sell it to the highest bidders, or Russia, or North Korea, or whoever. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe he’s hiding other technology there. It’s close to the border, close to the Gulf. He could get it moved out quickly.”

“Jesus, that’s brilliant,” smiled Hex.

“Hiro, check with the DOD and see if anything of value is missing. Specifically, ask them about technology or anything we created or sold them. We experienced this once before, and they neglected to tell us that the shipments were stolen.”

“While Hiro is checking on that, I caught sight of Wolford in Dallas,” said Pigsty. “He actually stopped to enjoy a nice dinner last night.”

“Well, he was really grieving for his friend, wasn’t he?” frowned Abe.

“Maybe. But he wasn’t alone at dinner,” said Pigsty. “I’m trying to get facial recognition on that man right now.”

“No need,” said Thomas, standing at the back of the room. “That’s Dr. Che Kwan. He’s an aeronautical engineer with degrees in industrial engineering and chemical engineering.”

“What the fuck?” muttered Eric.

“If he and Woford are together, they could be working on something. Kwan defected from North Korea, but many in the scientific world believed it was a front. He was too valued, treated extremely well in his country. Also, they didn’t complain when he defected.”

“And no one was concerned about that?” cried Cam.

“I guess not,” shrugged Thomas. “If I think of what they wanted on the Michigan and then look back to see what else they could have taken, I might be able to tell you what they were trying to build.” Abe nodded, looking at the others and then looking down toward his friend, Nate. He seemed controlled for the moment, but it wouldn’t be for long.

“Then let’s figure this shit out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“We’re going to focus on Mardi Gras and let the boys do what they do best,” said Bella, taking Lyra’s hand.

“I know what you’re doing. I’m not going to run. I’m not stupid.”

“I know you’re not,” said Bella. “Besides, they’re going to need you in some way. We’ll figure it out, but let them do their work, and we’ll do ours. You’ve never been to Mardi Gras before, right?”

“That’s right. I just never really got a chance to go anywhere before. My uncle refused to allow me to leave the house unless he knew exactly where I was going. Especially as I got older. It got worse, and so did he.”

“It must be hard for you being here and not having your freedom,” said Bella.

“This is different,” she smiled. “I’m with Abe, and I love all of you. This place is so special, and it feels as if I’m in my own little city here. It’s nothing like my life there.”

Walking to the grove, there were dozens of other women and children waiting to help work on decorations for the upcoming holiday. There would be three boats in the bayou parade this year, plus the usual games and festivities at Belle Fleur. Dylan, George, Sara, and Mama Irene wheeled out hot coffee, cocoa, beignets, and steaming pots of gumbo.

The gazebo-like structure over the grove was covered this time of year, allowing them to meet outdoors without freezing to death. The small heaters were blasting their warmth at the group.

“Wow, this is crazy!” laughed Lyra.

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet. It’s a wonder that we’re not all morbidly obese.”

“It is a wonder,” said Lyra. “How are you not? I mean, I see some of the women running, and a few do yoga. But I also see what you all eat. How is it possible that no one is bursting at the seams?”

“That’s a good question, but one we really don’t like to ask. We might not like the answer,” smiled Kate. “Come on over here, Lyra. We’re working on the capes for the members of the Belle Fleur Krewe.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of purple, green, and gold.”

“The colors of Mardi Gras, baby,” smiled Irene. “Each color means somethin’. Purple is for justice. Green is for faith. And gold represents power. No one ever said why those colors were chosen or those meanin’, but we know them to be true.”

“I think they’re wonderful,” smiled Lyra. “Everything seems bright and happy.”

“Mardi Gras is a time of happiness and indulgence. Most folks just think of it as a time to get drunk, but that ain’t the true meanin’. Mardi Gras

means Fat Tuesday. It comes before Ash Wednesday, and it's the beginnin' of Lent. On Fat Tuesday, you could indulge all you wanted, and then you would give up somethin' you really enjoyed for Lent."

"That sounds like a free ticket to eat and drink too much," said Lyra.

"I suppose it is," chuckled Irene. "We try to control the drinkin' around here. Have some fun and enjoy, but it's really about the food and family for us here."

"But you're Catholic. Don't you push Lent?"

"I don't push anythin' except kindness, honey. Folks can believe in what they want." She looked around at the tables. "Alright. Let's get busy on these capes."

Lyra followed the women from one table to the next, giving her design opinions about the costumes. When Lauren called her over to the king and queen's thrones, she knew she'd found her job for the party.

"We need to make these truly spectacular. Maybe something reminiscent of Versailles, very baroque," said Lauren.

"Well, you're off to a good start. That gold paint is magnificent, and purple velvet is stunning. It looks as though you're missing the medallion that goes up here," she said, pointing to the ornately carved top of the thrones.

"These are awful old," said Irene. "Matthew and I bought these at an

antique store in Lake Charles. They'd come out of a house in Houston, some big banker who travelled the world. Fool thought he was a king, but apparently, never found his queen."

"Well, they're beautiful," said Lyra. "I'd either put a carving or a medallion of some sort shaped like the sun in that upper portion of the chair. Maybe someone can paint it."

"Just a regular five or six-point star?" asked Erin.

"No. Something more ornate. Something like, oh! Something like this," she said, pulling the necklace from beneath her sweater.

"That's gorgeous," said Ela. "Did someone make that for you?"

"It isn't mine. It belonged to my mother. In fact, it's the only thing I have of hers. My uncle took everything else and burned it. I wasn't allowed to keep anything belonging to them because he said it made me sad. My nanny at the time saved it for me. She said that my mother would have wanted me to have it.

"I don't wear it a lot, but when I do, I still instinctively put it beneath my clothing. Maybe soon I won't have to do that."

"May I see that?" asked Sophia Ann.

"Of course." She removed the heavy chain from around her neck, handing the star to Sophia Ann. "Susie, May, look at this."

The three women huddled over the star, whispering to one another.

“I’m sorry. Is there something wrong with it?” asked Lyra.

“No. This isn’t just a plain star, Lyra. This is called a Meaning Star. It spiritually comes from the Latin quote *Ad Astra Per Aspera*, meaning one must endure great difficulties in order to attain divine height. This star symbol is widely used as something beautiful and positive.”

“That’s amazing. I had no idea. I wonder why my mother had it?” pondered Lyra.

“Honey, I don’t think it’s a necklace at all,” said May. “I think it’s a key. I think you have a key that opens something that your uncle needs or wants.”

“Oh, shit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“A key? She’s been wearing a fucking key around her neck that could have killed her?” screeched Abe. Lyra just stared at him.

“I didn’t know, Abe. I just thought it was a necklace that my mother gave me. My uncle didn’t know that I had it. I hid it from him.”

“Well, he must think you have it somewhere, Lyra,” said Luke. “It’s obvious that he’s after that, but the bigger question is, what does it open?”

“I really have no idea. As I said, he burned everything that belonged to my parents. I don’t even have photos of them. Whatever it is, he must have it but can’t get into it. I never took this off unless I was forced to wear a dress that he picked out for me. Sometimes, he would buy me a dress to wear to a dinner, and it would be lower at the neckline or back. I just took it off and put it inside my diary.”

“Huh. And he never found it. That’s interesting. He had a line,” said Eric. “He was willing to kill his brother and his wife, even you, but he wouldn’t snoop in your diary.”

“Can we really understand insanity?” asked Lyra. “I mean, it’s obvious that my uncle is insane. He was an absolute recluse for years, then suddenly starts going out more, or so I thought. He was actually going to all these homes I didn’t know about. He murdered my parents, countless others,

raped young girls, sold drugs, brokered terrorist deals, and is now tracking me, hoping to kill me. He's insane."

"Yes. Yes, he is," said Ashley.

"I'm not proud of that," said Lyra.

"I know, honey. I know. But if he's truly insane, you can manipulate the mind. Make him believe things he didn't believe before."

"What do you mean?" asked Eric.

"I mean, I have an idea."



"I'm not sure how I feel about this," said Abe. "I know that you've done this trick before, showing someone as a mirage. I mean, hell, you did it with the Michigan. But the minute he attempts to take her or touch her, he's going to know, and that poor girl is dead."

"Harlow," frowned Nate. "Her name is Harlow."

All eyes turned to him, staring at his stricken face. To their knowledge, he'd only met the girl one time at the party thrown by Quinn. It wasn't completely ridiculous, but it was odd if he fell in love with her that quickly.

"Harlow. Sorry, brother," said Abe. "Listen, we're all good with

stealth technologies. I say we approach the ranch from the rear. Let's figure out what's in that bunker and then just make our way up to the bunkhouse and the ranch itself."

"He's right," said Montana. "We could use some of our personal stealth options and get you all close to that bunker. You find out what's in there, and we keep going from there."

"Hey, you guys might want to hear this," said Sly. "It took a while, but we finally got the DOD to talk to us about missing shipments. No one was aware of this. No one. NASA and the DOD have been partnering to develop weapons to be attached to the satellites. They have the capability of firing from space, hitting their targets within a five-hundred-yard miss."

"We told them we wouldn't do that," said Montana. "Doug, Cam, Luke, and I met with them about two years ago. They wanted us to develop the technology, and we refused. For this very reason. If anyone gets their hands on those, they could be modified to fit any satellite out there."

"Are we talking nuclear weapons?" asked Nate.

"Thermonuclear and chemical," frowned Montana. "Thermonuclear would be mass destruction for an entire continent from that distance. Chemical could annihilate an entire country. Some organisms and bacteria are so deadly placing them in a small canister and hurtling them thousands of miles to Earth would be the end of a species."

“They could hit somewhere in a place with little habitation, and the organism could spread so rapidly no one would ever know where it came from.”

“Jesus, what does he have in that bunker?” frowned Hex.

“I think we have to go to Texas and find out.”

“Bluetown is considered a part of McAllen. If we fly into their airport, everyone will know that we’re coming. We’ll go in by the Gulf. Get to Padre Island and go from there. No Ospreys. No jets. They won’t expect that,” said Luke.

“Get the SUVs waiting at the docks for us. Fly them in on the cargo plane and get them down there tonight. By the time we get there, they’ll be ready,” said Cam.

“There have to be others involved,” said Ryan. “If he’s stealing technologies from NASA, the DOD, and trying to steal from us, there have to be people other than Garvin involved in the government.”

“Lyra said that he had connections to police, politicians, government officials, all of them. We need to know who else has met with Wolford,” said Luke.

“We need the North Korean scientist,” said Abe. “He’ll cave. We have to get to Dallas and find him.”

“He’ll be easy to find,” said Thomas. “He’s currently a visiting

professor at SMU.”

“Then I guess we’re going back to college,” said Nate. Cam and Luke stared at him, then back at his father.

“Nate, you’re still with Delta, brother. You can’t go rogue on this.”

“I’m taking leave. Mike is still out there and doing his thing, but I took leave. I have to finish this. I have to find her.”

“We know where she is, Nate,” said Abe.

“No. We know where he claims she is. He could have moved her anywhere by now. Sold her. We don’t know!” he yelled. Abe stared at his friend, nodding. He knew what he was feeling. He’d felt it as well.

“Then let’s go find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The campus of SMU was beautiful, set right in the middle of Dallas near the swanky neighborhood of Highland Park. Million-dollar mansions with gorgeous tree-lined streets and private schools filled the small community.

Ryan, Thomas, and Parker entered the engineering building with Zeus, heading toward the research laboratory where Kwan was supposed to be. As they neared the lab, Zeus let a low rumble escape his chest.

“It’s okay, boy,” whispered Parker. Watching the door, Parker carefully pushed it open to see Kwan hovering above a table with strange devices laid out.

“What are you doing? This is a private laboratory!” he said. “I’m calling security.”

“Probably not a good idea,” said Thomas.

“Dr. Bradshaw,” he said calmly. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same, Dr. Kwan. What are you doing here? How in the world did you get into the United States and make your way here to SMU? And why would the North Koreans let you go so easily?”

“I am not valuable to them,” he said, standing straighter.

“We both know that’s a lie,” said Thomas. “You’re highly valuable

to them, and we know why. You're spying. You're stealing technologies and attempting to recreate them."

"How dare you! I am skilled enough that I don't need your inferior American technologies."

"Then why do you have them lying before you?" asked Thomas. He walked toward the table, and Kwan started to push him back, but not before Parker and Zeus made their presence known. Stilling, he watched Thomas examine the table.

"This was developed by NASA. It's a lovely little device that can scan through any kind of weather and pinpoint a drop point without fail." He picked up another metal object and turned it in his hand. "This one is rather nasty. It can hold up to eighteen vials of biological material. I'm going to guess toxic, deadly biological materials. It was developed by a pharmaceutical company out of New Jersey."

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Why does Wolford need the key that his niece has?" asked Ryan. Kwan's eyes went wide, and he gasped. "I thought so. Why?"

"It opens a box," said Kwan.

"I'm well aware that it opens a box of some sort. What's in the box that's so damn important to him?"

"His brother wasn't just some blasé criminal like him. He was a

gifted designer and inventor. He'd figured out a way to make a thermonuclear and biological weapon in one. His brother wanted it sold to the highest bidder, but he wanted it sold to his own government. That was their disagreement.

“When Woford killed him, he expected to find everything in the car. It infuriated him that there was nothing there except personal belongings and a cryptex.”

“A cryptex?” frowned Parker.

“It's a puzzle that, if you don't have a key or guess letters or words correctly, can release an acid that destroys its contents. If you try to open it, break it, anything other than using the key or solving the puzzle, you've lost everything inside,” said Ryan.

“That's correct,” said Dr. Kwan. “He cannot open the cryptex without the key, and if he attempts to, he will lose the plans for the greatest invention of all time.”

“It's a god killer,” said Thomas. “Just like in the ancient texts. It will destroy all life.”

“Exactly,” smiled Kwan. His smile turned quickly as three FBI agents and two Homeland agents stood in the doorway of his laboratory.

“I believe we've heard enough, Dr. Bradshaw. We can take it from here.”

Parker took out his phone and snapped a few photos of the items on the table. The agent stared at him, frowning.

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“Let’s just call it insurance.”



“You’re going to stay with Alec, Taylor, and Jean on the boat,” said Abe. “If we need your image, they’ll do it from here. It’s close enough that we can ensure the image is stable and will fool him long enough to get the girl out.”

“Harlow.”

“Right,” he grinned. “Harlow. Just stay here and do what they say.”

“I promise,” nodded Lyra. “Just come back to me.” She handed him the key around her neck, and he shoved it in his pocket. It was made from a heavy metal, not silver or gold, but definitely something solid. Someone needed this star to stay intact.

Five SUVs took off toward the Wolford Ranch but before hitting the county line turned their stealth technology on. They passed multiple state troopers, their radar going crazy at seemingly nothing going by them at a hundred miles per hour.

Parking inside the trees, they kept the stealth on and marched through the dim light of the forest, watching for hidden dangers. Some kept their sights on the trees, others downward to the forest floor for trip wires. The rest kept their eyes on the land ahead.

By the time they reached the back of the ranch, it was pitch black. There were no security lights at that part of the property, but they were careful, nevertheless.

“The bunker is ahead,” whispered Abe. Surrounding the mound of dirt, Abe and Nate moved to the front of it, a faint light radiating from around the small opening.

“I’m gonna go get more beer,” said a man.

“You know the boss won’t like that. He wants us sober just in case these pussies actually show up.”

Abe raised a brow, grinning at Nate. Both men nodded stepping through the doorway and walking down the steps.

“Hello, boys. The pussies are here.” Nate slammed a fist into one fast, a knee into the groin of a second man, while behind him, Abe, Hunter, and Carter took down five more men. When they were secured and sitting on the floor, they began the search of the bunker.

“See if we can get Ace and AJ in here,” said Abe. “I don’t understand any of this shit.”

“No one does, asshole,” said one of the men. Abe made a donkey kick behind him, slamming the heel of his boot into the man’s face. It definitely shut him up.

“What’s up?” asked AJ. Abe pointed to the shelves. “Oh, shit. Okay, give us some time. We’ll get it loaded and out of here.”

“Let’s go, boys,” said Trevor. “We’ve got a nice old bus for you, boys. Don’t worry, the ride isn’t so bad, but the discipline at the special school is a bitch.” Nate nodded at the other man, silently thanking him. He then turned to Abe.

“Ready, brother.”

“Ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Do you think they’ll show?” asked the man seated across from him.

“They’ll show. They can’t help themselves. Always saving the day. Of course, if they don’t, we’ll have our entertainment for the night.” He smirked at the girl sitting in the corner. Her hands and feet were tied, duct tape over her mouth. She had a few scratches and bruises, but they were mostly due to her fighting them.

He’s been sorely tempted to take her just because he wanted to, but he knew that if she were damaged, he would get nothing. All he wanted was to put his hands on his traitorous niece and squeeze the fucking life out of her. After he got the key.

Harlow stared at the two men, glaring at the one seated with his legs crossed. She knew the older, chubbier man. She’d seen him at parties her parents had forced her to attend. But the other man wasn’t anyone she’d met before. Recognize? Yes. Met? No. After all, how many times do you meet the vice president of the United States.

One of the guards came inside, checking all the rooms as he’d done for the last four hours. He shook his head at Woldford and went back outside, leaving the three individuals to stew and wait.

“You have to know that they may not come,” said Vice President

Reeves.

“They will come. Their bleeding hearts won’t let her die.”

“That might be true, but they won’t trade one life for another,” said Reeves. “They’ll find a way to get what they want and leave us high and dry.”

“You’re just worried that they’ll figure out that you’ve been at the heart of all this,” smirked the man. “Kwan was your idea. You brought him in to reverse engineer or steal everything we needed.”

“I brought him here for the good of our nation,” said Reeves.

“You brought him here to make you rich. I’m curious, though. With Garvin out of the picture, you could step up to the presidency. Don’t you want that role?”

“You know that I do. It has to be handled carefully. He’s not an old man. He’s in excellent health. I can’t just claim he’s had a heart attack.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out,” said Wolford.

Harlow kicked the wall several times, and Wolford rolled his eyes.

“What now!”

The guard walked into the house and stepped closer, pulling back the tape from her mouth.

“I have to pee,” she said.

“Fine, take her to the bathroom.” He lifted her off the floor and

carried her down the hallway to the restroom. Inside, he pulled her pants down, rubbing his hand over her ass.

“Enjoying that, you pervert?” she said, not moving.

“Oh, baby, you have no idea how much I enjoy it.” He shoved her to the toilet seat and stood watching her, grinning. He could hear the urine stream, and when she finished, he lifted her again. “Let me wipe you.”

“I can do it. Just let one arm free.”

“No can do, sugar.” He felt a cold, hard object at his temple and froze.

“Let the girl free.” The guard didn’t move, and Harlow just stared at her rescuer. “Take the tape off, and if you so much as put one mark on her, I will splatter your brains in that toilet and flush it.”

Carefully, he removed the tape and set the knife down on the sink. Turning slowly, he finally caught the image of the man. Shit.

“How many?” whispered Nate.

“Five,” said the man.

“He’s lying,” said Harlow. “There are at least thirty. Maybe forty.” Nate nodded at her. Taking a syringe from his pocket, he jammed it into the man’s neck. Slumping into the tub, he left him there, draped over the side.

“I’m going to turn so you can dress,” he said. “Flush the toilet, and then I’m taking you out of here.” He did as promised. Turning for her to pull

her jeans up. Hearing the flush, he turned, and she leaped into his arms, holding him tightly.

She was so tiny he barely felt her weight. But there was no denying her generous breasts pressed against his body. He held her for a brief moment, relishing the feel of her.

“Thank you for coming for me,” she whispered.

“Masters, if you’re touching that girl, I’ll cut off your dick,” yelled Wolford. He heard someone clear their throat, and Nate turned to see a smiling Abe.

“If you’re done with the reunion, get her out of here. We’ll handle the rest.” Nate didn’t want to let her go. He knew that he’d done what he came for, but he also didn’t want to desert his teammates. His family. “Go, brother. Get her somewhere safe.”

“Thanks, Abe.” Carrying the girl down the hallway and to the window, Nate left the others to take care of Wolford and Reeves.



The bunkhouse contained at least twenty men, all in various states of sleep. They were a ragged mix of men. Some appeared to be just general

cowhands, helping around the ranch. Others appeared to be mercenaries, and still others looked to be professionals. Those were the ones that the team took out first.

Red couldn't believe it when he recognized two men in the last bunks. Both had been with the municipal police in Kenora, Ontario. Canadians. What the fuck were they doing here?

"Why are you here?" he asked the men secured with zip ties on the floor with the others.

"Did you think only the Americans want these weapons?" said one man. "We're being paid handsomely to get that key."

"Too bad," frowned Red. "You failed."

"You know them?" asked Dalton.

"Yea, fucking Canadians. They're trying to get that key as well. We need to find the box."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Masters! Where’s the fucking girl?” yelled Woford. He stood to head down the hallway but was met with a dozen men coming through doors and windows, weapons pointed at him.

“The girl is gone,” said Abe.

“You. Fucking Navy SEAL. I should have killed you when I had the chance.”

“You never had a chance,” said Abe.

“I could have killed you a dozen times,” he frowned. “I enjoyed watching you with my niece.”

“There were no cameras or audio equipment in my apartment.”

Woford laughed, shaking his head.

“I’m old school, young man. I just perched on the building across the street and watched through my binoculars. Sent all the photos to Quetz, which, of course, piqued his interest. Where is she, by the way? Where is that fucking cunt of a niece of mine?”

Something slammed into the back of his knees, causing his legs to buckle, slamming to the floor. He cursed whoever or whatever it was, then turned to see someone looking very similar to Abe.

“A brother?” he frowned.

“Worse. I’m his father and will fucking gut you right here if you speak of your niece that way again.”

“I believe you’re looking for this,” said Abe, dangling the necklace in front of him.

“Give me that! I can make you a very rich man.”

“I’m already a rich man,” said Abe. For the first time, he truly looked at the other man in the room and shook his head. “You.”

“Don’t worry, Abe,” said Fitz. “I’m taking a few photos for the president. I’m sure he’s going to want to have a conversation with him.”

“No! No, please! This is all a misunderstanding. He kidnapped me. Yea, he kidnapped me and forced me to be a part of this.”

“You’re pathetic,” said Abe.

“On that, we can agree,” said Wolford, glaring at the other man. “It won’t stop with me. There are far too many players in this game.”

“There are always too many players in this game,” said Abe. “We’ve got Kwan. We got Garvin, Quetz, and Golubev. Oh, and his precious daughter.”

“You’re very resourceful,” he frowned. “But you won’t find the box.”

“You mean this box?” asked Noa. Wolford paled, staring at the man. “Yea, we’re not as dumb as you think, and hiding a box under a bed is pretty

old school. You should really work on your technical abilities. I mean, I would have hidden this in a safe, at least. Or maybe pull out a few bricks on that fireplace and make a hole for it. But, whatever.”

“You are the most annoying men I’ve ever met.”

The group smiled, and a chorus of ‘thank you’ echoed in the room. Reeves attempted to run, only to be grabbed by Chris and O’Hara, pulling him back into the room.

“Try that again, and I’ll kill you,” said Chris.

“I’m the vice president of the United States of America!”

“You were the vice president,” said Chris. “Tonight is the night that you died.” The man fainted, pissing his pants all the way to the floor.

“Let’s see what we have,” said Abe. He took the star, placing it in the mimicking depressing on the box. Turning it right, he heard the click and opened the lid. Wolford stared at him, waiting for the contents to be revealed to him. He didn’t know how he would get them, but he would steal them somehow.

“Hmm,” said Abe. “She was a cute kid.” He held up a photo of Lyra holding a stuffed giraffe. Then, another of her parents holding her. Photos. Stacks and stacks of photos filled the box. Turning it, he allowed Wolford to look inside.

“It’s quite a treasure,” smirked Abe.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No. It’s in there. I know it’s in there! He had the plans for it. There’s a false bottom. There must be a false bottom!”

“There’s no false bottom. This is it. All that work, all that death and destruction for something that didn’t even fucking exist.”

Wolford knew he had nothing to lose at this point. He ran toward the front door, only to be greeted by a large boot to the gut. Falling to his feet, he groaned in agony and was then gripped by his arms and dragged backward.

Abe knelt in front of him, pulling his head back by his hair.

“Listen carefully to me. You will no longer be on this Earth after tonight. I will love your niece for all time. She will be mine and mine only. We will have babies together, lots of healthy, normal, happy babies that you will never see. Enjoy hell, Wolford.”

As the sounds of helicopters and sirens filled the air, they knew that their federal partners were coming in.

Taking tracts of land, teams of men searched the ranch, finding three more bunkers filled with weapons, documents, and mechanical devices that no one was able to identify as yet. It would take some time, but they would find out what they were and who obtained them.

The vice president was taken into federal custody, crying and begging for his release. His shame and humiliation would be placed on display during

the trial for all of America and the world to see. It would send a message that no one was above the law. No one.

“How did they get all this?” asked Red, staring at the stash. It was being logged into a computer, photographed, and loaded on dozens of military trucks. Some of it belonged to the U.S., and some belonged to other countries.

“I’m not sure,” said Cam, “but we’re going to look at it all, take what belongs to us, and return the rest. We don’t need any animosity between nations. Not any more than we already have.”

“Canada wanted something from this. But what?” asked Red.

“I’m going to guess that everyone wanted something from this, Red. If we had found the blueprint for the device, I’m sure that’s what everyone wanted.”

“That’s fucking scary. Everyone wants to kill everyone else,” frowned Red.

“It might not be about killing but about intimidating,” said Abe. “Just the thought that they could annihilate us, or anyone, would make some people kneel before them. I’m not sure we would.”

“You think we’d stand against an unseen, undefendable weapon?” asked Red.

“I don’t think we’d have a choice,” said Abe. “It’s who we are. We

stand strong, no matter the odds. I heard this interesting statistic recently. It's estimated that it takes three to four men to bring down one Marine. In the sandbox, when the enemies were poorly trained, it took nearly ten. We would send groups of three to four Marines to take on groups of thirty. What does that say about us, Red?"

"Marines are fucking crazy?" he smirked.

"I heard that," said HG, Bone, and Hoot in harmony. Abe chuckled, shaking his head.

"Yea, but you know he's right." The triplets shrugged their shoulders, smiling at the big man.

"Crazy? Probably. Brave as fuck? Always. Let's go. We have a boat ride to catch."

CHAPTER THIRTY

“So, you guys get babysitting duties?” smiled Lyra.

“Naw, we got the sweet job of watching over you, precious,” smiled Tailor. She laughed, shaking her head.

“How does a man your size come across as being nothing but a big teddy bear?”

“Well, I am a big teddy bear. Unless you make me angry. Then I’m a big badass, angry grizzly, and you’d better run.”

“I can see that,” she grinned. “Lena has been very sweet to me. You’re a lucky man.”

“Don’t I know it,” he laughed.

“I am curious. I mean, you’re, uh, this,” she said, waving up and down, “and she’s tiny. I mean really tiny.” Alec and Jean laughed at her innocent question.

“I’ve been asked that my entire married life, honey. It didn’t matter how big I am or little she is. I loved that woman from the first moment I laid eyes on her. She was taking care of Sniff after an op.”

“Oh, was he hurt?” she asked, filled with concern.

“He wasn’t part of our team at that time. He’d been homeless,” said Alec, “and was taken to research facility for experiments. He was brave as

shit. Skinny as all get out and down on his luck, but man, he was special.”

“He’d been an explosives expert with a trained K-9,” said Jean.

“Oh, is that how he met Lucy?”

“Sort of,” laughed Jean. “Lucy was really young when Sniff first started coming to Belle Fleur. He always had his dog with him, and Lucy would run to the dog. As she got older and prettier, Sniff knew he had to distance himself, but it was hard.”

“I can see that. He’s not that much older than her.”

“No, but she’s my brother’s daughter,” smirked Jean. “She also has eight uncles, Alec and me included.”

“Oh,” said Lyra, wide-eyed. “Yea, I can see where that would be intimidating. I could have used a few like you over the years.”

“I wish we’d been there, honey,” said Tailor.

“Lucy was nearly hurt during an op, and Sniff blamed himself for not being there quick enough. He left, thinking it was better for Lucy, but he couldn’t stay away. They’re so in love with one another and in love with all those damn dogs.”

They all chuckled at that, and Lyra looked at Alec.

“And you married a ballerina,” she smiled.

“I sure did. She’s so damn beautiful when she dances. I love that she still teaches the little ones and is passionate about it. I hate that her career

was cut short. She had her own horrible adventure, but we got her out and safe. I've never loved anyone so much in all my life, Lyra."

"It shows. For all of you, it shows. I see the love in your eyes, the way you touch your wives, look at them. It's absolutely amazing. I didn't get to see any of that with my parents, or at least, I don't remember it.

"My uncle killed his own wife and daughter before I was born. So, I never knew her. I can only imagine how he must have treated her."

"You've found a good one in Abe, sweetie," said Jean.

"It feels that way," she smiled. "I hope to have a marriage like all of yours. Long, healthy, happy. That's all that really matters to me."

"That's all that matters to anyone." She got quiet, staring out at the Gulf. "What's wrong?"

"What if he turns around one day and looks at me and sees him? What if he sees my uncle? I mean, I'm human. I could lose my temper one day and say something hateful, and he might look at me and think, 'what the hell have I done.'"

"What if I look at you and say, 'damn, I'm the luckiest man on the damn planet.'" Lyra turned to see Abe and the others boarding the boats. She walked toward him, touching his arms, turning him to check to see if there were wounds on his back. Her hands skimmed over the strange, thin vest beneath his black shirt.

“I’m good, baby. Nothing hurt.”

“But, what if...”

“No what ifs, Lyra. You and me.”

“Where’s Harlow? Is she okay?” she asked, searching the male faces for another female face.

“She’s good. Nate got her out of there. He’ll make sure that she gets somewhere safe. He’s got to find his way back to Delta. They already know that Garvin was handled, so he’ll need to explain what took him so long to get back to his brother.”

“They may not question him,” said Jean. “He and Mike are premier, like their father and grandfather. They’re given a lot of leeway.”

“I’m glad,” said Lyra, hugging Abe around the middle. “Now we can begin our life together.”

“Damn right,” smiled Abe.

By the time the boats reached the docks of Belle Fleur, the others had already heard the news. The vice president had been paraded before the media on his way to federal prison, foolishly screaming that strange men had murdered Wolford. The world already knew what and who Wolford was. It didn’t play well for the VP.

Abe carried the sleeping Lyra to their cottage, his mother waiting for them. She stood, smiling at him, letting out a long breath. She kissed his

cheek, then kissed Lyra's forehead. Razor took her hand, waving at their son.

She was right. Tomorrow, they would start their life together.



No one had heard from Nate or Mike, and in the eyes of the men, that was a good thing. No news was good news. Lyra did worry about Harlow and wondered if the young woman was okay. She busied herself during the days with the Mardi Gras preparations, fast becoming friends with the women on the team.

“Morning, Lyra,” smiled Matthew.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Matthew.”

“It’s just Matthew, honey. Or you can call me Pops.” Lyra blushed, nodding at the handsome older man. “I wanted to talk to you about starting an online design company.”

Lyra’s brows raised, and she couldn’t believe what she’d heard. First, it seemed odd that Matthew knew about online businesses. That was her own bias. But second was the realization that this man who barely knew her was willing to help her feel useful.

“Wow, I mean, I don’t even know how that would work,” she said.

“I understand from our tech boys that there are several design

programs you can use. Photos can be taken of folks' homes, their rooms, that sort of thing, and you can design the room of their dreams. Right from here."

"I see. Right from the safety of here," she said.

"Yea, I suppose that's true. Nothing wrong with keeping you safe, honey," Abe said.

"No, there isn't," said Matthew. "I've talked to the boys, and they agree that if a client wants you to visit their home, they'll provide support for you. You won't be alone."

"I don't think I can turn this down," she smiled. "It allows me to do what I've always wanted to do and still be home every night."

"That's good," smiled Matthew. "That's real good because I've got five folks waitin' for a reply from you. Check with Pigsty. He's got all the information and the webpage we created for you." Matthew stood, starting to walk away.

"Wait! You already made a webpage? How could you know I would say yes?"

"A little birdie, honey. A little birdie." Lyra just laughed, shaking her head. Abe hugged her from behind, kissing her neck.

"Did you put him up to that?" she laughed.

"Nope. But I'm damn happy that he thought of it. It makes me feel better knowing you get to do what you love, but you'll still be safe doing it.

Just in case.”

“Just in case,” she repeated. “I’m glad Matthew offered me this opportunity. I mean, I have to have some way of making a living.”

“About that,” smiled Abe. He told her the entire story of owning everything. That it all belonged to her. The houses, the businesses, everything. In the end, she just shook her head.

“I don’t want anything to do with any of it. Let’s ask Georgie and the legal team if they can sell it and donate the money. I don’t want anything to do with any of them. Not my father, no one.”

“He’s gone, baby. All of them are gone. We’ll figure out where your father’s invention is hidden.”

Mattie, Tanner and Micaela’s little girl, skipped toward them. She was playing kickball with a few other children, and the ball rolled toward them. Lyra bent down, picking up the ball, and Mattie smiled at her.

“Thank you, Miss Lyra.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.” Mattie looked at the necklace, then held it in her tiny hand.

“That’s pretty,” she said.

“Thank you. It belonged to my mother.”

“What does it say?” Lyra looked at her, shaking her head.

“It doesn’t say anything, Mattie.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Mattie, what are you seeing?” asked Abe.

“Look, right there on the edge. It has words, but they’re too big for me. The glass is funny too. In the middle, right there,” she said, pointing at the faded green stone.

“Holy crap,” said Abe, checking his language in front of the little girl. He lifted her in the air, and she squealed with delight. Taking the necklace, he ran toward the offices, Lyra hot on his heels.

“What the hell?” said Eric, hearing the rumbling thunder of people running down the hallway.

“The necklace,” said Abe. “The necklace has the answers.”

Sly grabbed the necklace and placed it beneath a magnifying light, turning it carefully. On the outer edge, he read the wording.

“Beneath the glass, you will see the formula leading to the death of all mankind.”

“Well, that’s cheery,” frowned Luke. Lyra stared at the necklace, then at the men. She took the necklace and set it on the desk, then grabbed a pair of pliers that were sitting there and smashed the green glass.

“Babe!”

“No,” she said. “I will not explain to our children one day how their grandfather was the creator of a world-ending weapon. No. No one needs to

know how to build that.” She sat the wrench back on the table and turned and walked away. Abe just stared at her in awe. Hex laughed, shaking his head at the young woman.

“Well, brother, if you weren’t sure before, you can be sure now. She’s a keeper.”

EXCERPT from NATE

Harlow stared out the window at the stormy seas of the Pacific. The winds were howling, bringing in typhoon-like winds and rain, soaking the California coastline. The gray of the sky matched the gray of her mood as she tucked her feet beneath her bottom.

Pulling the blanket up around her knees, she sipped on the hot green tea, wondering what she was going to do with her life. She couldn't return to her family, not after what they did to her. Trading her body for their debt with Quinn was unforgivable. Although she'd never been forced into violent sex, she was touched, forced to perform oral sex, and forced to dance.

It was enough.

The wet nose of the Doberman hit her hand, and she jumped, then reached out, petting his sweet head. He always knew when she was feeling blue, and today, she was really feeling blue.

When Nate swept in and saved her, again, she hoped that perhaps he had feelings for her. Instead, he bought her the dog, found the small cottage on the cliff for her, loaded her bank account, kissed her on the forehead, and said, 'I'll see you again.'

"See me again," she muttered. "What the hell does that mean?"

One of the patio chairs blew sideways, and she was concerned it

would tumble over the edge and onto the beach below. It wasn't that she couldn't retrieve it later, but it was a bitch to climb down the steps to the beach.

“Sorry, boy. We have to get wet.” She set the mug down and opened the door, walking into the driving rain. Lifting the heavy chair, she set it upright and then moved the other chairs closer to the house.

Fritz barked incessantly, and she tried to quiet him, but he persisted, standing at the top of the stairs.

“If you want to pee, you're going to do it by yourself,” she said. The dog continued to bark, staring down at the beach. “What the hell?”

Already soaked to the skin, she stared over the edge of the railing. Pushing her hair from her face, she squinted, unsure of what she was seeing. A body. A man was lying at the bottom of her stairs.

“Oh, shit. What do I do now?”

Nate had been very clear. Don't speak to anyone. Don't let anyone come into her home, and for goodness sake, don't approach anyone you don't know.

“I'm probably going to regret this. Come on, Fritz. Let's help the poor bastard.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 1	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
RS 2	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
RS 3	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
RS 4	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
RS 5	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
			Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan
RS 6	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
RS 7	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
RS 9	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
RS 9	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
RS 9	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
SP 19			Violet	Striker Michaels
RP 6			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins

RS 10	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
RS 11	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
RS 12	Raphael Robicheaux	Savannah O'Reilly	Ian Luke	Aspen Bodwick
			Katherine Gray "Kate"	Cameron Dougall
	Doug Graham	<i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos		
RS 13	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
RS 14	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
RS 14	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
RS 15	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
RS 16	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
RS 16	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
RS 17	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
RS 18	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
RS 19	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
RS 19	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
RS 20	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
RS 20	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
RS 20	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
RS	Chad Taylor			
RS	Woody "Doc" Fine			
RS	(d) Tony Parks			
RS	(d) Alan Haley			
RS	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
RS	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
RS	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
MSB 1	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
MSB 2	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
MSB 3	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
MSB 4	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
MSB 5	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		

MSB 5	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
MSB 6	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
MSB 7	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
MSB 8	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
MSB 8	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
MSB 8	(d) Anthony Garcia			
MSB	Eric & Anna Tanner			
SP 1	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
SP 2	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
SP 3	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
SP 4	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
SP 5	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
SP 5	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
SP 7	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
SP 8	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
SP 9	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
SP 9	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
SP 10	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
SP 11	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
SP 12	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
SP 13	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
SP 14	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	
SP 15	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
SP 16	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
SP 17	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
SP	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
SP	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
SP	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
SP	James Scarlutti			
SP	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
SP	Ian Laughlin			
SP	Conor Laughlin			
SP	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
SP 19	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux	Grayson Matthew	
RP 1	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
RP 2	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
RP 3	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
RP 4	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
RP 5	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
RP 6	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
RP 7	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
RP 8	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
RP 9	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
RP 10	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
RP 11	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
RP 12	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	
			Michael Douglas	
RP 13	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
RP 14	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
RP 15	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
RP 16	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
RP 17	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
RP 18	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
RP 19	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 20	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
RP 21	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
RP 22	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
RP 23	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fornet	Claudette Robicheaux		
RP 24	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
RP 25	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
RP 26	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
RP 27	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	
RP 28	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
RP 29	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
RP 30	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
RP 31	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
RP 32	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
RP 33	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
RP 34	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
RP 35	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
RP 36	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
RP 37	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
RP 38	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
RP 39	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
RP 40	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	
RP 41	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
RP 42	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
RP 43	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
RP 44	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
RP 45	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
RP 46	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	

RP 47	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
RP 48	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
RP 49	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 50	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
RP 51	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
RP 52	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
RP 53	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
RP-54	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
RP-55	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
RP-56	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
RP-57	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
RP-58	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
VG-1	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
VG-2	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
VG-3	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
VG-4	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
VG-5	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
VG-6	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
VG-7	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	Willa Avery (Wavy)	
VG-8	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
VG-9	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		
VG-10	Christian Martin	Winnie Pasko		
VG-11	Billy 'BJ' Bongard	Janine Corvallo		
VG-12	Joseph Billy 'JB' Redhawk	Dana Vaughn		
VG-13	Tobias Franklin Redhawk	Gail Mackenzie		
VG-14	Operation Pere Noel			

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

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