

Mary Kennedy

BILLY

Voodoo Guardians:
Book Eleven

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Book ELEVEN



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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

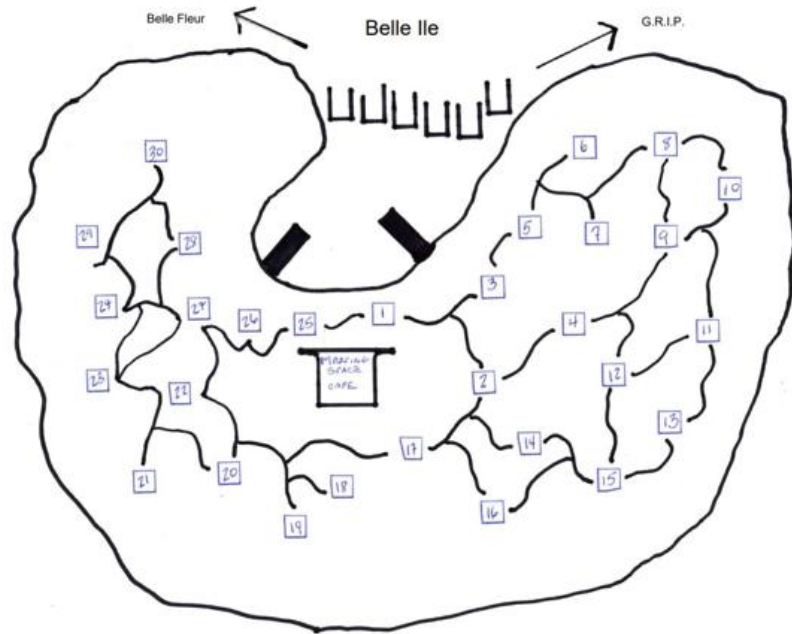


COTTAGE Assignments

<u>1</u>	Matt & Summer	<u>36</u>	Gunner & Darby	<u>G3</u>	Pork	<u>97</u>	Jalen & Stormy
<u>2</u>	Alec & Lissa	<u>37</u>		<u>G4</u>	Hex & Gwen	<u>98</u>	Chase & Kennedy
<u>3</u>	Gabe & Tory	<u>38</u>	Zulu & Gabi	<u>69</u>	Kiel & Liz	<u>99</u>	Sam & Mia
<u>4</u>	Kev & Tila	<u>39</u>	Doc & Bree	<u>70</u>	Joseph & Julia	<u>100</u>	Milo & Lia
<u>5</u>	Raphael & Savannah	<u>40</u>	Paul & Elizabeth	<u>71</u>	Wes & Virginia	<u>101</u>	Hiro & Winter
<u>6</u>	Jak & Mattie	<u>41</u>	Luke & Ajei	<u>72</u>	Dalton & Calla	<u>102</u>	Ryan & Paige
<u>7</u>		<u>42</u>	Fitz & Zoe	<u>73</u>	Nathan & Katrina	<u>103</u>	Chase & Maeve
<u>8</u>	Ivan & Sophia	<u>43</u>	RJ & Celia	<u>74</u>	Keith & Susie	<u>104</u>	Duncan & Lindsay
<u>9</u>	Tristan & Emma	<u>44</u>	Carter & Ani	<u>75</u>	Marc & Ela	<u>105</u>	JT & Kennedy
<u>10</u>	Christian & Winnie	<u>45</u>		<u>76</u>	Cowboy & Autumn	<u>106</u>	Torro & Melanie
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>77</u>		<u>107</u>	Bron & Mila
<u>12</u>	Sly & Suzette	<u>47</u>	Frank & Lane	<u>78</u>	Ian & Aspen	<u>108</u>	Fitch & Carsen
<u>13</u>	Rory & Piper	<u>48</u>	Tailor & Lena	<u>79</u>	Doug & Miguel	<u>109</u>	Bogey & Alice
<u>14</u>	O'Hara & Lucia	<u>49</u>	HG & Maggie	<u>80</u>	Dom & Leightyn	<u>110</u>	Irish & Lucinda
<u>15</u>	Titus & Olivia	<u>50</u>	Bryce & Ivy	<u>G5</u>	Remy & Charlotte	<u>111</u>	Tanner & Mic
<u>16</u>	Max & Riley	<u>51</u>	Wilson & Sara	<u>G6</u>	Magnus & Addie	<u>112</u>	AJ & Skylar
<u>17</u>	Stone & Bronwyn	<u>52</u>	Mac & Rachelle	<u>G7</u>	Chipper	<u>113</u>	Mo & Ophelia
<u>18</u>	Jazz & Gray	<u>53</u>		<u>G8</u>		<u>114</u>	
<u>19</u>	Ham & Sadie	<u>54</u>	Clay & Adele	<u>81</u>	Aiden & Brit	<u>115</u>	Ethan & Koana
<u>20</u>	Phoenix & Raven	<u>55</u>	Rush & Caroline	<u>82</u>	Callan & Juliette	<u>116</u>	Bone & Londyn
<u>21</u>	Noah & Tru	<u>56</u>	Lars &	<u>83</u>	Sean & Shay	<u>117</u>	Hoot & Scout

			Jessica				
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<u>23</u>	Gibbie & Dhara	<u>58</u>	Kiel & Noelle	<u>85</u>	Parker & Dani	<u>119</u>	
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<u>26</u>	Axel & Cait	<u>61</u>	Hunter & Megan	<u>88</u>	CC & Eva	<u>122</u>	Moose & Ece
<u>27</u>	Sniff & Lucy	<u>62</u>	Cam & Kate	<u>88</u>		<u>123</u>	
<u>28</u>	Noa & Kelsey	<u>63</u>	Jax & Ellie	<u>89</u>	Michael & Miriam	<u>124</u>	Red
<u>29</u>	Eli & Jane	<u>64</u>	Adam & Jane	<u>90</u>	Robbie & Carrie	<u>125</u>	
<u>30</u>	Grant & Evie	<u>65</u>	Ben & Harper	<u>91</u>	Cade & Cassidy	<u>126</u>	
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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		

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CHAPTER ONE

Billy Joseph Bongard was the only child of Eric and Sophia Ann Bongard, grandson to Tailor and Lena Bongard, and Trak and Lauren Redhawk. Blessed with tremendous good looks and a body that made girls, and grown women, swoon. BJ, as he was sometimes called, learned the lesson of saying ‘no’ firmly the hard way when Mrs. Freeman asked him repeatedly for help doing chores around her house while her husband was out on the rigs.

At first, Billy thought she was just lonely and truly needed help with household chores. But when she walked out onto the porch late one summer afternoon in a bikini, he sensed something wasn’t right. While he dug up the weeds in her flower beds, she was whining about her husband being gone so much and how much it ached, constantly bending over the railing so that he could see her ample breasts swaying in front of him.

“You know what I mean, Billy? A woman just aches when a man isn’t there to touch her. I bet you know how to make the ache go away.”

“No, ma’am, I’m not familiar with what a married woman would need from me. I mean, after all, I’m just sixteen,” he said, still keeping his head down. Knowing that she could either get very assertive, or try to force his hand by calling the police and claiming he’d done something inappropriate.

He tapped the communication device, indicating that he was going to need help. He understood exactly what Mrs. Freeman wanted. She’d made it more than clear to him over the last hour, in spite of his protests and pleas of ignorance.

The last thing he wanted to do was anger her or make her tell stories that weren’t true. He didn’t want to run away from his job, but he also didn’t want to be here alone with the woman any longer. A few moments later, his father and Uncles, Joseph and Nathan, pulled up.

“Time to go home, Billy,” said Eric. Mrs. Freeman stood, stomping her foot like a child, huffing at the men. “Mrs. Freeman, if you need help around the house, we’re going to send over one of the men to help you. Not my son. I’d appreciate it if you’d wear more clothing when the kids are around.”

“It’s not like they haven’t seen a woman in a bikini before,” she frowned. “Lord knows I’ve seen how some of your own wives dress.”

“Our wives don’t run around in bikinis on their front porch in front of impressionable young men. I also highly doubt that Mr. Freeman would appreciate you entertaining a young man here without him being present.”

“I wasn’t entertaining him,” she snapped. “At least not yet.”

“Ma’am, I’m going to remind you that my son is just sixteen years old. He is underage, and you are definitely not underage. I think this arrangement is done. I’m sure there are other boys at the high school who could do chores for you around the house. But I’d like to remind you that if you make any attempts at doing anything unsavory with those boys, I will not hesitate to go to the police.”

“You’re all so full of yourselves, aren’t you? Save the world, fight for the little man,” she scoffed. “I know about all you big bad heroes. Where were you when my sister’s husband was beating the shit out of her every day?”

“Had we been aware, ma’am, we would have stopped your brother-in-law,” said Eric calmly.

“You and yours, always ignoring those that you think are beneath you. I went to school with you and Luke, and you can’t even call me by my first name. You call me Mrs. Freeman,” she sneered.

“I call you Mrs. Freeman out of respect for your husband, Alissa. I know very well who you are, and I remember you from high school. But we were never friends and never hung in the same crowds. I allowed Billy to come and help you with chores because I know that your husband is on the road frequently, and I can only imagine how the jobs accumulate. That does not mean you can attempt to take advantage of my son.”

Billy could sense that his father was becoming agitated and uncomfortable. His uncles were whispering behind him, although he couldn’t hear them. He knew enough to know that Mrs. Freeman was lonely. He didn’t think she meant any harm; she just needed a confidence boost.

“Ma’am, it’s been my pleasure to help you with the chores while your husband’s been gone,” he said quietly. “I know you must miss Mr. Freeman terribly while he’s away. And I bet he misses you as well. I know one day I’ll be lucky enough to have a beautiful, wonderful wife, and there might be

times when I have to leave her for a few days. I can only imagine how hard that would be for me.”

Alissa Freeman stared at the young boy, her lip quivering as he spoke. Her husband was a good man and a good provider. The time out on the rigs afforded them the opportunity to travel when he was home. She wasn't sure what had come over her, but she was feeling terrible about herself in that moment, and this sixteen-year-old young man had just put her in her place.

“Thank you, Billy,” she said, straightening her shoulders. She pulled the shawl around her bikini-clad body and nodded at the men as she went inside.

“That was well done, BJ,” smirked Joseph.

“I think she's just lonely and scared,” he said, shrugging. “I also think she needed a bit of a confidence boost. I mean, I would hate to see Mom all by herself and you gone. Especially if I wasn't around. It would be terrible.”

“It would be,” nodded Eric. “But it was very mature of you to recognize that and not embarrass her. She's not a terrible person. She's just confused right now.”

Mrs. Freeman never asked any of the Belle Fleur boys to come and help with chores again. In fact, she never asked any of the boys at school to come to her home. On occasion, she would ask one of the girls to come over and help make things for the church fair or bake sale. It seemed Mrs. Freeman had found a new outlet for her energies, and that worked out well for everyone.

During his senior year of high school, Billy Joseph Bongard was recruited by almost every division one college known to man. You could say his name in any college town in America, and everyone knew of the budding star athlete in south Louisiana.

His size, six-feet-six and two hundred and seventy-one pounds made him desirable for any defensive line. But he wasn't a lineman. He was a defensive back. Big. Strong. And fast.

Bowling over opponents as if they were in a pee-wee league, he led the team in interceptions. He also played wide receiver on offense, leading the team in receptions. But as more and more schools came to recruit him, he became less and less interested.

“Bongard!” yelled the coach at half-time.

“Yes, sir?”

“Coaches from Auburn, Ohio State, and Colorado are in the audience tonight. They’ve requested to speak with you after the game.”

“Coach, I appreciate it, but if you could let them know I’m not interested, I’d appreciate it. Tonight is my mom’s birthday, and I’d like to be with my family.” His coach laughed, shaking his head.

“I’ll tell them, although they won’t be happy. All you have to do, Billy, is pick your school, and you’d have a full ride anywhere you want to go.”

“But that’s not what I want to do, sir. I want to join the military, earn my degree while in, and work for my family.”

“I know,” smiled the older man. He’d had more than a dozen players with the same opportunity playing for him. All from Belle Fleur. All refusing college offers and joining the military instead. Hell, he remembered when Luke was offered chances to swim for the Olympic team but refused. If they were anything, the Belle Fleur kids were dedicated.

By the end of the game, Billy had racked up more interceptions, receiving yards, and touchdowns. It was a

stellar night for him as his family and friends cheered in the stands. Walking out of the gates toward their cars, he was joined by his fellow teammates, cousins, and friends, JB, Tobias, Dan, Nathan Luke, and Michael. Their parents were close behind.

“Hey! Hey, you’re Billy Bongard, right?” asked a man.

“Yes, sir.”

“I came all the way to speak with you, son, and I don’t appreciate you turning me away.” Billy stared down at the man, glaring at his smug face.

“I had no idea you were coming, sir, or I could have saved you a trip. As I explained to coach, tonight is my mother’s birthday, and my aunt, her twin. I have plans with my friends and family. I also explained to coach that I’m not interested in division-one ball. I’m planning on joining the military.”

“What the fuck for? You’re top ten percent of your class, you excel in three sports, you’ve got a future worth millions of dollars.”

“I already have a future worth millions of dollars,” smirked Billy. He turned to walk away, and the man gripped his forearm, jerking him around to face him. Billy jerked back, the man’s hand freeing from his arm. He looked startled and angry.

“Don’t grab me again, sir. I won’t ask nicely next time. I’m sorry that you came down here for no reason, but there are plenty of other boys on our team who might be interested in your school.”

“Look here, son,” said the man, taking a step forward. He took no notice of the fact that he was slowly being surrounded by Billy’s family and friends. The others just smiled, watching it unfold. “I’ve spoken to some of your teammates, and they seem to have the same foolish notion that dying is better than playing ball. I’m wondering if your school isn’t doctoring your academic records.”

“Don’t accuse me of that again,” said Billy, taking a big step toward the older man. “I don’t take well to people accusing me of cheating. I have an IQ higher than yours, and my college entrance score was perfect. So was JB’s, Nathan Luke’s, and Dan’s. Tobias and Michael were only off by four points each. Don’t test me on academics. You will lose.

“Now, I explained to you why I can’t meet with you, nor do I want to. Not now, not ever. On Monday morning, I’ll be asking my coach to contact your university and report your behavior with me and my teammates. But if you ever come near me again and pull on my arm or question my integrity, you will regret it.”

“Are you threatening me, boy?”

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth. The feeling of an iron clamp on his shoulder had him wincing in pain, his knees buckling as he lowered to the parking lot. Turning slightly, he cursed under his breath.

“Who are you callin’ boy?”

“I guess this is your father?” he frowned.

“Grandfather,” smiled Billy. “My grandfather just dropped you to your knees. I wouldn’t advise testing my father. You are a terrible representative of your university, and your ignorance about my decision is offensive.”

“Fine,” he said, jerking the hand from his shoulder. He stood unsteadily at first, then stopped the swaying. “You can be damn sure I won’t be back at this backwoods school.”

“You won’t be back at any school,” said Tailor. “See, I played college ball. Division one. Even got a contract for the pros but went in a different direction. I still got a few friends, and I do believe you’re about to get a call from your athletic director.”

“Shit,” he muttered.

Turning, he practically ran back to his car as his cell phone began ringing. The group just chuckled, shaking their heads. The other recruiters had all been understanding and willing to talk to some of the other kids who showed promise that night.

“You handled that well, Billy,” smiled Eric.

“I know what I want to do, Dad. You know that. I’ll get my degree, just like all of you did. But we’re all planning to join. For me, it will be the Rangers.”

Eric smiled at his son, nodding. The Robicheauxs all grinned as well, welcoming another brother into their club.

“Let’s go home,” said Eric. “Time to celebrate your mom and Aunt Susie’s birthday.”

There were moments during basic training that Billy questioned his sanity in giving up the division-one

scholarship. There were even more moments that he questioned it while finishing Ranger School. But being a part of something so elite, so amazing made him feel pride that he'd never had before.

By his second contract, he was working on his master's degree and fulfilling every wish he'd ever had for himself. Being asked to go undercover with an elite team of operatives was a great way to end his career. It was time to go home and work with the family.

First, he needed to finish this.

CHAPTER TWO

“Pranka Sukarta,” said his commander. “He’s been collecting women and wives for decades now. Because he’s done it within his own country, we weren’t able to do anything. Until recently, when he allegedly kidnapped three women from South Carolina who were on vacation, along with two women from Alberta who were in the country on business.

“All five are unable to be reached but have sent text messages to their families saying they are alive and well and not to worry. Of course, we can’t confirm that the messages came directly from them, only that they came from their phones.”

“Shit,” he muttered, staring down at his feet. “Do we have anyone on the inside right now?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “You’ll be going in with Vito, Michaels, and Corvallo.” Billy looked at the two men, Vito and Michaels. He didn’t know them well as they were both with MARSOC, but he’d never heard of Corvallo.

“Who is Corvallo?” he asked.

“Dude,” scoffed Vito. “Seriously? Not sure why we’re sending her in. Not like she’d attract a husband. She’s got that big scar on the side of her face.”

“Shut the fuck up!” growled the commander. He slammed his fist on the desk and stood, staring directly down into the faces of the other two men.

“Sorry, sir.”

“She got that scar by fighting off insurgents. What about you, Vito? Any battle scars? Anything to show that you saved six of your teammates and took a knife to the face that required twenty-seven stitches?” The man said nothing, just casually shaking his head. “That’s what I thought. She’s outstanding and can get in as a woman. I’m not sending someone in there to be brutalized and raped. She’s going in as a midwife.”

“Is she trained?” asked Billy, concerned for the woman.

“I’m as trained as you are,” said the sweet voice from behind him. He stood, turning to welcome the newest member. She was tall and willowy like his Aunt Lissa. With his six-feet-six, he judged she was probably around five-feet-

ten. She was wearing street clothes that accentuated her womanly figure.

She had long dark brown hair and huge green eyes that looked sad. That's when he noticed the scar. It wasn't as long as his Aunt Noelle's, but it was as ugly. Stretching from the corner of her eye all the way down her cheek, he knew it must have hurt. Casually, she dipped her head, forcing the hair to cover her scar.

“Don't cover it,” said Billy. “It may save your life. It doesn't change how attractive you are, but they might think it does. I apologize if I stared. I have an aunt that has a scar very similar on her face. She's still a beautiful, intelligent woman.”

She blushed a bright pink color and took her seat, staring at him the entire time.

“Corvallo will be heading into this compound today. You three will arrive as part of his security team tomorrow morning. Keep eyes on her, but your priority is to get those five women out of the compound.”

“What if others want to leave as well?” asked Billy.

“My responsibility is the three Americans and two Canadians. You won’t be able to get them all out. Hell, if they find out who you are, they’ll be keeping your ass there, and it won’t be pretty.”

“Understood,” he said, nodding.

“Use your real first names so you don’t get confused. The compound is huge, with the main mansion at the center. The women are kept in smaller homes around the perimeter. We have no idea what condition they are in or if there are any children, but we have to assume there are some, somewhere.”

“I have to go now,” said Janine, standing. “I’ll see you all soon.”

“Be careful,” said Billy. She stared at his handsome face, tilting her head. The others hadn’t said that to her. Only him. She nodded as she turned and left.

“Get your gear and get ready,” said the commander.
“This won’t be easy.”



Won’t be easy. That was a fucking understatement. They’d been blending in well for nearly three months when suddenly everything went to hell. Someone sold them out.

Someone knew exactly who they were and what they were doing there.

Vito and Michaels required less than an hour of torture before giving up their teammate. When they dragged Billy into the cell, he spotted Janine in a cell across from him. Her clothes were torn and dirty, her face bloodied, but she was alive.

Two hours later, Vito and Michaels were carried from their cells, dead. That's when the fun really began. Every day at exactly ten and two, someone would enter his cell and begin beating on him. They never asked a question, never demanded anything. They just beat him.

Two weeks later, they came in with his backpack, tossing it to the floor. Beneath the hidden bottom, behind the stealth netting, was his VG communication device and extra weapon. They'd found it, and they were curious. So, the beatings increased, and his determination only became more intense.

Billy wasn't sure when it happened, but at some point, they'd removed Janine. She was either dead or worse. But her cell was empty. He asked several of his captors, but no one said a word to him.

Once in a while, another person would be brought in. A young woman's brother from a small village not far from them. He was only trying to make sure his sister was well. They beat him to death.

Because he was so much bigger than the guards, they tried to make sure his legs and feet were beaten at least every other day so that he couldn't run. Using his arms, he was able to deflect many of the blows to his upper body and head. Days passed into weeks.

Billy rolled over on the worn cot, his torn flesh rubbing against the rough wool of the thread-bare blanket beneath him. He hissed as the pain burned through his back and thighs. Normally, they would have just killed him and placed him on display, but when the strange devices and hidden pockets were found in his pack, they wanted answers.

Unfortunately for them, he didn't give answers easily.

For three months, he'd been hidden amongst their people. With his mixed-race features, black and indigenous, he blended well with those around him. Now, he was wondering if he'd ever get out of this shithole alive.

Hearing the shuffling of feet, he knew that this would be his one meal a day. Too weak to fight anyone, he'd gladly

take whatever bug-infested filth they gave him. He didn't care any longer. The key clanked against the iron bars, and he heard the creaking of the door open. Tiny hands gripped his upper arms.

“Get up,” said the small voice.

Billy tried to adjust his eyes to the dim light of the room, but he was having difficulty.

“Please, you must get up,” said the voice. The person spoke perfect English, and he frowned, wondering who in this land was able to do that. “I can't carry you. You're too big. Please, lean on me, and let's go.”

Pushing himself to a seated position, he hissed once again at the pain at the back of his thighs. The last beating was two days ago, but it was still fresh enough to cause pain. He felt the smaller person pull him to his feet, wrapping an arm over the slender shoulder.

“C-can't,” he muttered. “Too much. Too much.”

“Damn it, Billy! I need you to get up!” Billy heard the clarity of the voice this time and pulled back, staring down into the green eyes.

“Janine? You’re alive. Shit, I thought you were dead. Why did you come back? What the fuck are you doing here?” he growled.

“Getting your pathetic ass out of jail, dumbass,” she said, breathing heavily. “We don’t have much time. We need to get out of here now.”

“How did you escape?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you later. For now, we need to go!” Billy looked at the panic in her face and then realized that she’d come alone. What the fuck was she thinking?

“You came by yourself?”

“I had to!”

“Why?”

“Because no one else would come. No one else wanted to come, and if I don’t get you out of here alive, more will die.”

Gathering as much strength as he could, he used her slender shoulders to steady himself and stood with great effort. The searing pain in his feet and legs nearly crippled him, but he held onto her as she maneuvered them out of the cell. Through the door at the end of the hallway, a man stood

waiting for them and waved for her to get into the back of the truck.

“Climb in,” she whispered.

It was dark outside, maybe past mealtime. He rolled his large body into the bed of the truck, and she climbed in after him, covering them both with a tarp. When the truck began to move, Billy let out a sigh of relief, only to hold his breath at the gates. He heard the man saying he was removing more dead bodies, and two other men laughed.

Shocked that they didn't check the back, the truck moved onward for another hour. When it stopped in the middle of nowhere, Billy thought he was dead.

“Billy? We have to get up front now,” she said.

“Sleep,” he murmured. “I need sleep.”

“I know, me too. Please, Billy. Come on.” He heard the desperation in her voice and knew that he needed to try for her.

The driver helped her to lift him out of the back and carried him to the front seat. Once inside, he lay down on the seat, unable to do anything else. Janine handed the man a stack of cash, thanking him for his help. Then, she drove. She

drove through small villages, large cities, and tiny towns. She drove through rivers and down dirt roads and then wound her way upward into the mountains.

As the vehicle climbed, the temperatures dropped, and Billy began to shake.

“Not much further, Billy. Just hold on,” she said, laying her hand on his upper arm. The once massive muscles were now dwindled. His arms were still twice her size, but the definition was gone.

When the truck stopped, Billy prayed that they were at a hospital or a base somewhere, but that would have been too easy. Once again, his heroine hauled his big ass into a small cabin. She didn't even allow him to sit, taking him straight toward a small outdoor shower.

“I'm sorry,” she said, looking up at him, “but we have to wash your wounds and get you clean. I don't want anything to get infected.”

“Just do it,” he nodded. She cut off his clothing and turned on the frigid water.

“It will warm up in a minute,” she said apologetically.

He just nodded, grateful for the feeling of the cold water numbing his wounds. She gently cleaned his body, taking care of the worst of the open wounds. Grabbing a stool, she pushed him to sit and then began shaving him and cleaning his hair.

Billy was grateful for her attention as he wouldn't have had the strength to do it himself. As the water warmed, his body relaxed, and he realized how hungry he was. When she was finished, she wrapped him in a towel then pulled a flannel shirt over his shoulders.

"I know you're tired, but you need to eat." He nodded as she set down a bowl of hot broth filled with meat and vegetables. There was warm bread, a large pitcher of goat's milk, and cold water.

"Slowly," she said softly. "You'll make yourself sick."

When he'd had his fill, she led him to a large bed and began dressing his wounds. He never even felt it.

Janine watched as he closed his eyes, finally safe, fed, clean, and getting the medical attention he needed. When she'd escaped, she thought she would be able to get to command and beg for help, but that all went to hell fast.

They were on their own. Alone.

Or so she thought.

CHAPTER THREE

“Janine! What are you doing, honey?” asked her mother.

“Playing sword fight with Tommy,” she said, calling back to her mother.

“Sword fight? Milton, your daughter is playing like a boy again,” she frowned. “Maybe she’s gay?”

“Deidre, don’t be ignorant,” frowned her husband. “She’s a tom-boy, that’s all. She likes sports and getting dirty and fishing and all the things boys, and girls, do. Let her be who she is. She’s a strong young woman, and I, for one, would be grateful if she knew how to handle herself.”

“I know, but she’s a girl,” said Deidre.

“Yes, I’m aware,” he laughed. “I was there when she was born.”

As it turned out, Deidre had nothing to worry about. Her daughter was good at everything she did. Everything. She was as good at soccer as she was at baking cookies. She

was as good with a knife as she was with a knitting needle.

And she never said no to a challenge.

So, when she told her parents she'd be joining the Army, they didn't think twice about it. This was their daughter. The all-American girl with skills. They never expected that she'd make a career of it and take on some of the most dangerous missions known to man. Although never fully embracing her career choice, they never openly denounced it either. Her mother on occasion would remind her of how difficult it would be to find a husband when she was in such a dangerous career. When she was injured, she could only remind her how much more difficult it would now be.

Now retired, her parents were enjoying golf and pickleball in south Florida along with the bugs and the snakes and the gators. To each his own, thought Janine.

Janine stood outside the tent, listening to the men. She knew Vito and Michaels, but she didn't know the other man, although she'd seen him. A delicious blend of indigenous and African American features, he was tall, muscular, and positively gorgeous. Of course, he would never look at her.

“Who is Corvallo?” asked the big man.

“Dude,” scoffed Vito. “Seriously? Not sure why we’re sending her in. Not like she’d attract a husband. She’s got that big scar on the side of her face.”

“Shut the fuck up!” growled the commander.

“Sorry, sir.”

“She got that scar by fighting off insurgents. What about you, Vito? Any battle scars? Anything to show that you saved six of your teammates and took a knife to the face that required twenty-seven stitches?” The man said nothing, just casually shaking his head. “That’s what I thought. She’s outstanding and can get in as a woman where you cannot. I need someone that can get to the women in the compound. I’m not sending someone in there to be brutalized and raped. She’s going in as a midwife.”

“Is she trained?” asked Billy, concerned for the woman.

“I’m as trained as you are,” said Janine, stepping inside the tent.

She felt the man taking in her features and then noticed when he stopped at her face. Usually, someone would hiss in

mock pain, or they would ask how it happened. He just looked at her with admiration.

What impressed her more was that he never once questioned her skills or asked personal questions of her. The others would have had the commander not been present. But this man seemed to take her entire being in with just one look.

When she arrived at the compound the next day, she was searched and shown to her quarters. Although there had been no children seen at the compound, apparently, several women were close to giving birth. She was ready for whatever came her way.

Over the next few weeks, she'd spot Vito, Michaels, or Bongard around the compound. They would give a small, friendly nod but never spoke. It wasn't allowed for the men to speak to the women, not even her.

But she noticed everything Bongard did. It was hard not to. He was kind to others at the compound, always willing to lend a hand, and always, always looking for a way to get to Sukarta. When the door to her room was breached, and she was dragged to a cell in a filthy hold, she knew her life was over.

Begging for an explanation, they beat her several times, then just decided she wasn't what they wanted any longer. Given a reprieve, she was able to build her strength and find a way out. The mortician.

“Please,” she whispered through the bars as he prepared the bodies of Vito and Michaels to be removed. “Please, just throw me in a bag as well.”

The man stared at the young woman, and his heart nearly cracked in two. His own daughter was about her age. He could take her out and tell the others that she was dead in her cell. They would never know.

Free, she headed back to command, only to find that their commander was no longer there. He'd been asked to retire and was long gone on a dream trip with his wife. She tried to explain to the new command what was happening, but since they had no record of the off-grid operation, they thought she'd gone AWOL.

It was Janine's worst nightmare come to life. Running from the military and running for her life, she needed to get to someone who would listen. But first, she needed to get someone out of their prison.

It hadn't been easy. She'd paid off the mortician, begging for his help once more. Tossed into the back of his truck, no one even inspected the bodies in the middle of the night. After all, who would be stupid enough to betray Sukarta?

Staring at the sleeping man on the bed, she wondered for the millionth time what they were going to do. They'd been here two weeks now, and he was slowly regaining his strength and putting on weight. He'd insisted on chopping wood earlier, and it nearly killed him.

The surprising thing was they barely spoke to one another. He was regaining his strength. She was cooking for them, feeding him, and changing the dressings, and yet they'd said barely a word. Until tonight.

"I'm going after them. And I'm going to kill them all."

"You can barely walk, Bongard."

"Billy. My name is Billy or BJ."

"Alright, Billy. You can barely walk. And if you go after him, we go together. You forget that I was beaten as well."

“I didn’t forget,” he said, looking down at his plate of food. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.”

“Sorry? Billy, you were nearly dead, locked in your cell. There was nothing you could have done. You weren’t there to protect me. I did alright.” He looked up at her, staring at those big green eyes.

“I suppose you did. I need a phone.”

“We can walk into the village tomorrow,” she said. “There’s a monastery that’s been helping us. They have satellite phones available.”

“Perfect.”

“Who are you going to call? I’m considered AWOL. You’re probably considered AWOL or dead. No one will help us.”

“Yes, they will. My family will.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Eric? What’s wrong, brother? You’ve been staring at that computer screen for more than two hours,” said Luke.

“It’s BJ, brother. He usually connects with us at least once a month, but it’s been almost two months now. The boys looked into his files to see where he was, and it says AWOL or presumed dead. He wouldn’t have gone AWOL, Luke. You and I both know that.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“I’m not sure. He was nearing retirement, and we thought he’d be home by Thanksgiving.”

“Who’s his commander?” asked Luke.

“That’s just it. His commander was Spanner, but he retired about six weeks ago. The new commander, Grandover says he left base and hasn’t returned. There’s a woman missing as well and two Marines.”

“That makes no fucking sense whatsoever. Where were they?” asked Hex.

“Nepal.”

“What in the world would they be doing in Nepal?” asked Cam.

“Three guesses and the first two don’t count,” said Hiro. They all stared at the man standing in the doorway.

“I honestly don’t know, Hiro. I haven’t been to that part of the world in ages. Nepal is a peaceful place. Monks, mountains, that sort of thing,” said Eric.

“And compounds for Sukarta.”

“Fuck me,” muttered Cam. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. After Eric asked me to check into Billy, I was trying to figure out why they would be there. Sukarta has been a boil on everyone’s ass for ten years. A while back, there was a rumor that he’d kidnapped a couple of American women and two Canadian women. He’s basically creating a compound where he gets to rape, beat, and impregnate any women he likes.”

“Were we sent in?” asked Eric.

“Not officially, but I was able to contact his old commander. He said, and I quote, ‘although I cannot confirm or deny this was a mission, if there was such a mission, I can

tell you that Bongard would have been my choice.’ End quote.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” said Cam.

“He and three others, two men and a woman, were sent in to kill Sukarta if possible but get the five North American women out of there. Spanner was giving the updated reports during a briefing and two hours later was asked to take his retirement.”

“Well, that’s not fucking suspicious at all, is it?” said Hex.

“A little,” smirked Hiro. “Spanner gave the entire file to his successor and thought it would be handled.”

“Who would gain by letting Sukarta live?” asked Luke. “And what the fuck does it matter if we get the women out?”

“That’s a great question, but...” Hiro looked down at the emergency line and frowned. “Satellite phone. Robicheaux Oil and Gas, how can I help you?”

“Hiro? Please don’t hang up, it’s Billy.”

“Billy! Where are you, son? We’ve been worried sick,” said Eric.

“Dad? Shit, it’s great to hear your voice. Listen, I don’t have much time, but we need help.”

“We?”

“A female Army officer, Janine Corvallo. She saved my life and got me out of there. The other two are dead. I’m weak but recovering. We’re at the base[PC1][MK2] of mount Lamjung Kailas in Nepal. There’s a monastery here, and they’ve been helping us, but we’re in a small cabin about three miles from them.”

“We’ll be there to get you,” said Luke.

“No,” said Billy. “I’m not leaving. Not yet. Someone killed the other two members of our team, and for some fucked-up reason, our commander turned his back on us.”

“He didn’t turn his back,” said Hex, “he was asked to retire. He turned over all the information to the other commander, and he ignored it, reporting all of you AWOL.”

“Shit,” muttered Billy. “Look, just bring everything you can. The compound took my backpack with my stealth netting. That’s why they kept me alive. They wanted to know what it was and how to make it work.”

“Well, that explains why it went offline. They must have tampered with it, which automatically makes it deactivate,” said Hiro.

“I need warm clothes, so does Janine. She’s probably Piper’s size or Grandma Lauren.” Luke nodded into the phone.

“Hang tight, BJ, we’ll be there soon.” The call ended, and Eric looked at the men around the room.

“I’m going,” he said, standing straight.

“No shit, asshole,” smirked Cam. “We’re all going.”

“So am I,” said Tailor, standing in the doorway with Trak. The other man just glared at the new leadership team.

“Just how many are we bringing?” frowned Luke. Tailor stared at the younger man.

“A whole fucking army.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Who was that?” asked Janine as he stepped out into the cold evening air.

“My family.”

“Your family? And does your family just hop airplanes and fly around the world to rescue you when needed?” He was taking long strides back toward their cottage.

“Yes. Although this is the first time I’ve needed rescuing. Usually, we’re the ones rescuing others.”

“Right, of course,” she mumbled. “Can you please slow down? My legs aren’t as long as yours. They won’t be here tonight.” He turned and stared at her, raising a brow.

“Listen, Janine, I need for you to keep something quiet. It’s imperative to the safety of my family and friends. You cannot tell anyone.”

“Who would I tell, Billy? We’re out here with monks and goat herders. There is no one to tell anything to.” He smirked at her.

“True. Here’s the deal. My family is somewhat legendary in the military and security community.”

“Legendary? Like myths and legends?”

“No. Like real legends. My grandfather was an original member of REAPER. My father was part of REAPER-Patriots and is now part of...”

“Voodoo Guardians,” she whispered. “God. I can’t believe how stupid I was!”

“Stupid? Why were you stupid?”

“Vito and Michaels. They said you were some kind of legend in the Rangers and that being on a team with you would bring me death. They said you would never want to work with me, and I should ask Spanner to assign someone else. I thought they were bullshitting me. It was them that never wanted to work with me.”

“It isn’t who my family is that was bringing us death. It was someone that sold us out to Sukarta. You know that’s the truth.” He watched as she stared up into his eyes, shaking her head. “Listen, if you want to go back, my family will get you back home. But right now, you and I are considered

AWOL. Until we can prove our innocence and get those women out of that compound, we're fucked."

"Get the women out of the compound? Billy, are you nuts? We can't go back there. They'd shoot us both on sight. I've been terrified that someone here would give us away. Hiding and crawling behind bushes from the cabin to the monastery. I can't do this, I can't!"

Billy turned back to her and took two steps toward her, gripping her shoulders.

"We won't have a life unless we do this. Together. I will protect you, and you will protect me. Better than that, my family will have our backs. I'm not full strength yet, not even close, but I will be soon. I need you to trust me, Janine."

She felt the searing heat of his fingers through the thick alpaca sweater. How? How could she feel his heat and strength through the wool? He was weak. Wasn't he?

"I've never been scared, Billy. Never. I was always the dare devil girl, willing to jump out of airplanes, or climb mountains, or swim with sharks. But I won't lie to you. I'm scared now."

“You weren’t scared when that guy took a knife to your beautiful face?” he smirked.

“No. And don’t make fun of me. I’m not beautiful. He was doing what he was trained to do, and I knew I was trained better.”

“I wasn’t making fun of you. You have a beautiful face. Your green eyes melt my black soul.” Janine swallowed, shaking her head.

“We’re getting off track.”

“No, we’re on track. You risked your life to save mine, and I won’t forget that. Not now, not ever. I’m going after the men who sold us out, and I’m going to get those women out of that compound. If you’re scared, I can have my family take you to our home, and you can wait there. I promise you; I’ll clear us both.”

“You can’t be serious, Billy,” she said, reaching for his hand. “You’re half the size you were a few months ago. You were beaten nearly to death. I can take care of me. I can hide somewhere until we figure this out.”

“Janine, you’re not listening,” he said, tugging on her hand, pulling her closer. He moved the dark brown hair from

her face, cupping the cheek with the scar. Running his thumb over the rough flesh, he frowned, then bent down, kissing the scar.

“There is nowhere for us to hide. We’re going to prove that we were sent into that compound for those women. If I know my family, they’ve already taken Commander Spanner’s statement.” He leaned down, kissing her cheek again.

“Wh-what are you doing? I can’t think when you do that,” she whispered.

“I watched you every fucking day in that compound, helping those women give birth. Then I had to sit across from your cell and watch them beat you.” He kissed her cheek again. “You’re the bravest fucking woman I know, and believe me, I know a lot of them.”

“You know a lot of brave women?” she frowned. He chuckled, nodding as he kissed her cheek again.

“Yes. My mother is probably tops on the list, next to my grandmothers and at least four dozen more.”

“Your family?” she asked, tilting her head.

“My family. Stay with me, Janine. Don’t leave. I can protect you, and you can protect me,” he whispered.

“Sounds like your family can handle that job,” she said, staring up into his eyes. She gripped his wrists framing her face.

“True, but I want you there. I want you here, with me,” he said, touching her lips gently.

“Wh-why me?”

“This is why,” he murmured, covering her mouth with his own.

The crisp night air caused their breath to come out in great puffs of clouds. Janine wrapped her arms around his neck, tasting him, teasing him as his huge body pressed against her own.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she said, pulling back. “I know what I look like, and I know what you look like. You don’t have to do this.”

“I think you misunderstand me, honey. I want to do this. I’ve wanted to do this from the moment I saw you. You’re the most beautiful, brave, amazing woman I know, and I want you by my side.”

She started to open her mouth, but above, dark clouds rumbled with thunder and the sounds of impending rain and

snow. He grabbed her hand, pulling her toward their cabin. On the doorstep was a large basket of supplies, no doubt left by one of the monks that had been so generously helping them.

Janine carefully put everything away, then placed more wood on the fire. The dampness of the cabin began to dissipate, then she sat at the table, staring at Billy.

Gripping the handle, he opened the door and then locked them inside, ensuring they were safe for at least one more night. By morning, help would arrive.

“I’ll cook tonight,” said Billy, smiling at her.
“Tomorrow, we hunt.”

CHAPTER SIX

Getting to Nepal was no easy task. Unless you were VG. Autumn and Evie landed the Osprey at the base of Lamjung Kailas, near the small village of Namarjung. Ensuring they were far enough away that no prying eyes would see the Osprey, they placed it in stealth mode and out of the immediate path of any passersby.

Stepping into the early morning light were a team unlike any other. Tailor, Trak, Joseph, Nathan, and Eric stepped down first. Following them were Bodhi, Tiger, Red, Jalen, Frank, Chief, Chase, Benji, AJ, Hoot, and Jak.

Trak pointed toward the path leading toward the monastery, and the others obediently followed. They had some coordinates available to them, but since his tracking devices were left at the compound, they were relying on his information only.

Stopping a short distance from the cabin, they noted the plumes of smoke coming from the building and knew they were awake. Eric stepped forward, knocking on the door.

When his son opened it, he nearly gasped. He was easily fifty pounds lighter, his face still showing signs of his beatings.

“Dad, nice to see you,” he smiled. “Did you happen to bring some of Mama Irene’s coconut cake?” Eric laughed, shaking his head.

“I should beat the shit out of you for taking ten years off my life,” he frowned, hugging his son. He slapped his back and heard him groan. “Sorry.”

“Dad, this is Janine. Her bravery and cunning got me out of that hellhole and here. She saved my life.”

Eric walked toward the young woman, pulling her in for a hug. He thought it would be short and sweet, but he held onto her.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “You saved my only son, and I will never be able to repay that debt.”

“It was my pleasure, sir,” she smiled. Pulling back, she realized just how much Billy looked like his father, but when his grandfathers walked in, she knew he was a perfect combination of the three men.

“Wow, you have great genetics,” she smiled. Tailor picked her up, kissing the side of her face.

“Whatever you need, little bit, you just tell me, and it’s yours. He is the only son of my only son, and you saved his life. I don’t take that lightly.”

“Oh,” she laughed.

“Well done, little one,” said Trak. Trak kissed her forehead, then stood aside as the others squeezed into the small two-room cabin.

“Um, I think we’re going to need a bigger place,” she said, looking at Billy.

“We’ve got tents,” grinned Eric. “Janine, these men are Billy’s uncles, Joseph and Nathan. You met his grandfathers, Trak and Tailor. These other men are teammates. Bodhi, Tiger, Jalen, Frank, Chief, Chase, Benji, Red, AJ, Hoot, and Jak.”

“I’m not sure I’ll remember all of that, but hello,” she smiled. A big man with auburn hair and whiskey-colored eyes was staring at her with a fierce expression.

“Did they do that to you?” frowned Frank, pointing at her cheek.

“Oh, no. It was during a fight in the sandbox,” she said with a pained smile, gently touching the scar on her cheek.

“I did win, though.”

“Good for you, sunshine,” nodded Frank. “I hope you gave him plenty back.”

“I did. No, my beatings weren’t nearly as bad as they beat Billy. He was beaten nearly every day and practically starved to death.”

“Let me check you out,” said Tiger, pointing to the chair.

There was no use in arguing. They would check him out one way or another, so why not get it done. Billy took a seat and removed his shirt, the others staring at him. The startling loss of muscle and the visibility of his bones was almost too much to bear. Trak walked toward his grandson, touching his shoulders. He lowered his forehead against the other man’s, whispering a prayer in Diné.

“You will be strong again soon, my grandson.”

“While he’s working on you, tell us what happened,” said Eric.

Billy nodded at Janine, who told the story from her viewpoint. She talked about how they came in the middle of the night and took them from their rooms without warning.

Vito and Michaels were interrogated, no doubt giving them up, and then beaten to death. She bribed the mortician to get her out, and then she got him to take her back in to rescue Billy.

“You went back in, knowing it could have been a death trap, only to rescue him? Way to go,” smirked Nathan.

“Thank you, but I didn’t get to save our other two teammates. Vito and Michaels were killed pretty quickly. I think they gave them some information they wanted, pretty much sealing their deaths.”

“Did you see the American and Canadian women?” asked Red.

“Yes. They were kept with the others in smaller huts outside of the main compound where Sukarta lives. He’s like some fat sultan sitting up there waiting for someone to give him a son.”

“All those babies, and he hasn’t had a boy?” asked Chief.

“No. It’s all been girls so far that I could tell. They’re removed from the mother and sent to a building where nurses take care of them. But there hasn’t been one boy that I’ve seen. To me, that’s more than a little suspicious. Some of the

women remarked that he had difficulties keeping an erection. He blamed it on the women, of course, and then beat them for it. That seemed to help his issues, temporarily anyway,” she said, frowning.

“What’s his game?” asked Joseph.

“We don’t know. Not really. He claims that it’s his religious right to have as many wives and children as he wants. The monks refuse to bless his marriages, but he seems fearful enough of their divine power to leave them alone. They’ve risked a lot by helping us and keeping us hidden. There isn’t a day that goes by that they don’t leave food and clothing on our doorstep.

“Billy told me who you are, and I’d sure appreciate it if we could somehow reward them for all they’ve done. They don’t ask for anything, but there must be something we can do for them.”

“The chimes,” said Tailor, staring at the others.

“The what?” asked Janine.

“The prayer wheels. They typically would be hanging from a wall, and you would walk by and spin the wheel and

pray. I noticed the wall is cracked, falling over in the street. We can repair it for them.”

“That would be lovely,” she smiled.

“Well,” said Tiger, stepping back from Billy as he pulled on his shirt. “He’s skinny as shit, for him anyway, but he’s remarkably healthy. Did you treat those wounds?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “One of the monks gave me a salve to put on his feet and hands. It was remarkable how quickly it cleared up. He’s been eating more every day, but he won’t listen to me when I tell him to take it easy. The fool was chopping wood yesterday.”

“Stubborn like his Mama,” smiled Eric. Joseph and Nathan chuckled, nodding.

“I understand that we were sent in for those five women, but when Billy mentioned getting the rest of the women out, we were told to leave them. I don’t think anyone is there willingly, so why wouldn’t we get them as well? There must be more than a hundred women in that compound from all over India, Asia, Europe, everywhere.”

“That’s a great question,” said Frank, frowning at the others. “Tailor? What do you say we go do that favor for our

monk friends. Bodhi, Chief, and Jak come with us. We should be able to get that wall repaired in no time.”

Tailor walked toward his grandson, hugging him and kissing him once again. Then he turned, hugging Janine.

“Wait a minute! What about us being AWOL? They think he’s dead, and I’m on the run as of this point. What do we do about that?” asked Janine.

Tiger nodded at her, giving a knowing smirk.

“No worries, hun. We’re taking care of that as we speak.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Although the monks didn't understand everything the big men were saying to them, they caught the gist of it and were more than happy to have assistance in repairing their prayer wheels. By mid-afternoon, a new wall stood strong, the beautifully carved wheels and bells singing their praises once again.

"Bless you for your kindness," said a young monk in broken English.

"We thank you for your kindness in helping my grandson," said Tailor. "Is there anything else that we can do for you?"

"Keep the evil man away from our mountain," said the monk.

"The evil man?" asked Bodhi.

"Yes. Sukarta. The lady said that he beat she and the big man."

"That's right," nodded Bodhi. "Has he been here to the village?"

“No, not in the last five years. He sends others to do his bidding,” said the young man. He looked around and pointed toward a stone wall. “Please. Let’s sit. My name is Bahtsal. I have been at this monastery since I was an infant.”

“I’m Bodhi. That’s Tailor, Chief, and Jak.”

“You are good men. I can feel it in your spirit, just like we felt it with the woman and man. About ten years ago, Sukarta would come to our village and force some of our young monks to mate with the women at his compound. They were humiliated. We pledge a life of celibacy.”

“How did they force the men?” asked Jak. The young monk smiled at him, shaking his head.

“You would know this better than I,” he smiled. “The only way we were able to stop him was by castration.” The men were stone silent for a moment, staring at the young man.

“You castrate your monks?” asked Bodhi.

“We choose this, yes. When Sukarta found out, he was angry, but there was nothing he could do. He cannot always father the children he wants, so he brings in young men willing to have relations with these women. They are blindfolded and forced to do what he asks or risk their lives.”

“I thought his goal was to have as many children as he could that belong to him,” asked Tailor.

“I don’t think this is his goal,” said Bahtsal. “The children are born and cared for by wet nurses, nannies, and then teachers. They are kept separate from him and the women. Once they give birth, they are not allowed to see the children any longer, so that they think of all the children as their own. They won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“Are there any other men in the compound other than the guards?” asked Jak.

“I have never seen any, and Sukarta does not leave the compound. Ever. We have heard from hikers and mountain climbers that there are news stories about him. We hear that he does many illegal things, but we do not listen to outside reports of anything other than weather.”

“Do his men ever visit the monastery? Are they ever here looking for anything or asking questions?” asked Tailor. The young man stared at the giant, then looked at the others, all extremely large men.

“If you were covered in white fur, our people would say you are yeti,” he smirked.

“We’ve heard that before,” laughed Bodhi.

“They come every few months just to walk around the village and then visit the monastery. They don’t take anything. They don’t leave anything. They just show up.”

“When are they due to show up again?” asked Chief.

“Maybe a week,” he shrugged. “Maybe a month. We never know.”

“You’ve been very helpful,” said Tailor, shaking the young monk’s hand.

“So have you,” he grinned, nodding at the chimes.

“This means a great deal to our monastery and for the pilgrims who come here. The prayer wheels are important to our culture.”

“What do they mean?” asked Chief.

“They are designed to give you enlightenment. The text is used to accumulate wisdom and merit or good karma. It’s also supposed to purify negatives or bad karma.”

“Maybe we should all give them a spin before we leave,” smiled Tailor.

“I don’t think you need to worry about bad karma, my friend.”

“I wish that were true, son,” said Tailor. “We’ve been warriors a very long time, and I’m sure there is bad karma somewhere in our history.”

“Men who fight on the side of right will never have bad karma,” he smiled.

Nodding at the men, he folded his arms across his middle, hiding his hands beneath the large, warm sleeves of his robe. Walking back up the hill, he disappeared around the corner, and the others just stood for a moment.

Tailor walked forward first, slowly walking down the row of chimes, spinning them, whispering silently to himself. Bodhi went next. Then Jak and Chief. Tailor turned to the men, nodding.

“We can use all the good karma we can find.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tiger and Jalen helped Janine with the evening meal while Trak took Billy outside for some exercise. Although he was weaker than the usual Billy, he was still stronger than the average man.

“She’s a lovely woman,” said Trak.

“Yes. She is. And she’s strong, brave, and smart as hell. That scar means nothing to me, Grandpa.”

“I know that.”

“I mean, how many women could survive such a thing and continue fighting for their lives and the lives of their men? She was incredibly fucking brave and kept going.”

“Yes. Brave. And lovely.”

Billy just stared at his grandfather in the dim light of twilight. The sky was a magnificent swirl of pink, purple, and white clouds. The mountain peaks were covered in snow, climbers attempting to reach their summits.

“How did you know with Grandma Lauren?” he asked quietly.

“It was foretold,” Trak said, giving a rare smile. “My grandfather said I would meet a woman with amethyst eyes, and she would steal my heart forever. He was right. I knew the moment I saw her that she would be mine, but she was in pain. Bruised, hungry, and broken, I wanted to kill every man in my path until I could find the one that had caused her such harm. Love makes a man do very strange things, Billy.”

“But you didn’t kill every man in your path.”

“No, I didn’t. But I wanted to. Had it not been for her, Billy, I would not have returned to New Mexico and found my grandfather before it was too late. I might have never known that Erin was my cousin. I might have never fully understood what my grandfather did for me as a child. She saved my life.” Billy nodded with a smirk.

“That seems to be a common theme for our men,” he grinned. “Women entering our world and saving us, saving our lives.”

“Did they touch her? Sukarta’s men. Did they touch her?” asked Trak quietly.

“No,” said Billy. “I would have torn down the place had they touched her in that way. They came in and beat her a few times, but never like they did with me.”

“Perhaps Sukarta was going to use her?” said Trak.

“I didn’t think about that, but maybe,” frowned Billy. “I would have killed everyone in that place had that happened.” Trak nodded at his grandson, helping him to stretch his legs.

“What will you do when you go back?” Billy stared at his grandfather, not understanding the question. “She will want to go with you to capture Sukarta and free the women. She’s a warrior like you.”

“No. No, I can’t let her go back in there and risk her life. Besides, she said she was scared for the first time in her life.”

“You may not have a choice, Billy. She is obviously trained well and knows what she’s doing. She also has insight into the women’s part of the compound. We may need her.”

Billy frowned at his grandfather, standing and pacing back and forth. He was built more like his own father and paternal grandfather. But his calm demeanor was all

Redhawk. He didn't lose his shit very often, but when he did, everyone stepped back. The idea of Janine putting herself in danger was not sitting well with him. Yet he knew there would be nothing he could do to stop her.

“Let her know how you feel,” said Trak, gripping his shoulder.

“I did. I mean, I kissed her,” he said, blushing in the fading light. Trak could only smirk at the young man.

“Kissing her does not tell her how you feel. Tell her that she's yours, and you are hers. It will make you both feel better when times get difficult.”

“But, Grandpa, I've only known her a few months. Not even really that. I mean, we were across from one another in cells!”

“Stranger things have happened,” he grinned. Trak pulled his head down, kissing his cheek as he walked past. As he opened the front door, Janine stepped out.

“Good evening, Trak,” she smiled.

“Good evening, little one. It's a lovely evening for a walk.”

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” He nodded, moving into the cabin and shutting the door. “Are you alright? Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I mean, I’m fine. I was just speaking to my grandfather about something. Janine? That kiss we shared? It meant something to me.”

“It meant something to me, too,” she smiled. “In case you didn’t catch it, I’m not very experienced at this sort of thing. It’s not like there was a line of men waiting to date me, a soldier. A soldier with a scar on her face.”

“They were all fools,” said Billy, stepping forward. “You’re an amazing woman. A beautiful, capable, sexy as shit woman.” She laughed, shaking her head.

“You see something others don’t, Billy. I’m grateful for that. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier that someone saw me in such a light. But you were talking about that kiss.”

“Janine, when I saw you come into command, I knew that you were something special. The way those two idiots laughed, I knew they were hiding something. See, a boy makes fun of the girl he likes to cover for the fact that he

thinks she's beautiful. They thought you were beautiful and were too afraid to say it. I'm not.

“You're fucking beautiful. Perfectly beautiful, and I'm crazy about you. I know that doesn't make any sense to you, but in my family, we fall quickly, and when we fall, it's for life. My grandparents have been married forever, my father and mother, my uncles and aunts. All of them. We just know.”

“Are you saying you love me, Billy?” she said, smiling up at him with those big green eyes.

“I think that's exactly what I'm saying, Janine.”

Janine reached up, touching his gaunt cheek. His once full, strong features were thinner now. Not less handsome, just different. Standing on her toes, she kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Billy gripped her waist, pulling her tighter to his body, grinding his hips into her own. He could feel his cock growing, pressing against her body as she moaned into his mouth. He was so lost in her touch he never heard the others approaching.

“Evening, Billy,” smiled Tailor. “Don't mind us.”

“Nice job, brother,” grinned Bodhi.

“Way to go, Billy,” laughed Chief.

Janine pulled back, burying her head against his chest, laughing as they walked by them and headed into the cabin.

“I’m so embarrassed,” she giggled.

“Don’t be. Sometimes they’re a pain in the ass. But other times, they’re exactly what we needed.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Man, that was good!” said Tailor, patting his belly.

“Thank you, but Tiger and Jalen did as much as I did. You guys would be handy to have around.”

“Do you have any siblings, Janine?” asked Eric.

“No. I’m an only child. My parents are retired, living in Florida now. I haven’t spoken to them since we got here, but I don’t speak to them as often as I once did. No reason, really. They just have busy social lives, and I’m, well, I’m busy as well.”

“Janine, can you tell us what you saw with the women?” asked Bodhi. “Did they appear healthy? Were they kept under lock and key?”

“For the most part, they appeared healthy and happy. If Sukarta couldn’t get erect, he would blame the women and beat them, but not to the point of death. Although, I suppose that doesn’t really matter, does it? The women’s compounds were unlocked, but it was five houses with twenty to thirty women in each.

“The homes were like small dormitories, but they were kept clean, and they were comfortable. They had televisions, but it was like a constant loop of old American comedies. I thought it was so strange at first, then realized it was all shows about women being good housewives. There were no news programs, nothing like that.

“They were allowed to exercise in the yards three times a day. They could go for walks within their sectors, but most of the time, it was horribly uncomfortable and hot. There was another nurse in the compound as well, but she was older, and I think some of the women had been complaining about her.”

“So, Sukarta listened to the women? He brought you in because they didn’t like the other nurse?” asked Red.

“I guess so,” she said, staring at him. “I expected to go in and find women who were abused and fighting to get out, but they seemed, um, I don’t know. Content?”

“Content? Is he drugging them?” asked Eric.

“Not that I could see. We drank from the same water source, ate at the same tables, so I don’t think they were drugging their food or water. It was strange that at least six of the women were over the age of forty-five and had been there for more than two years.”

“Forty-five? No offense, but isn’t that kind of past the prime age for baby-making?” asked Jalen.

“It’s definitely pushing the limits,” smiled Janine. “These women aren’t just impoverished women from the streets of India. Three were highly intelligent women who possessed PhDs. There was a woman who was an engineer, one who had been a teacher, even one who had been in the Royal Navy. They seemed to be the ones who were the leaders, or in charge of the women in some way.”

Nathan stared at his twin, then at Chase and Chief.

“What did she do in the Navy?” he asked.

“Something in submarines. I didn’t get to speak with her at length,” said Janine.

“And the engineer? What type of engineer was she?” asked Joseph.

“Engineering physics,” said Janine. They all looked at her with a questioning expression. “Don’t feel bad. I didn’t know what that meant either. Engineering physics, or engineering science, is the study of the combined disciplines of physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, and engineering, particularly computer, nuclear, electrical, electronic,

aerospace, materials, or mechanical engineering. It's sort of like she's the 'master' engineer."

"Did you get her name?" asked Eric.

"They wouldn't allow us to ask names. All of the women wore numbers on their dresses, and that's how we were to address them."

"What did the teacher teach?" asked Trak.

"Math," said Janine.

"So, we have a math teacher, an engineer who seems to be an expert in all engineering disciplines, and at least several other highly educated women?" asked Billy. "I never saw it, but did they give instructions or teaching to the other women?"

"They had what was referred to as reflective time," said Janine. "We were told to leave, and the guards had to remain outside the gates of the inner compound. It was the only time that Sukarta was ever inside their private space. Any other time, they were called to him. It would last about three hours, and then he would leave, and one by one, the women would leave the buildings and return to their residences."

“I’m so fucking confused,” frowned Red. “Is he teaching these women something, or is he just using them to make babies?”

“He’s not using them to make his own babies,” said Tailor. “We learned from one of the monks that he used to bring the younger monks to the compound and force them to have sex with the women. Apparently, Sukarta has a little trouble sometimes.”

“That makes sense,” said Janine. “I was asked to administer doses of stimulant for him, but they weren’t working. I explained to the guards that it doesn’t always work and there could be other issues. I even offered to give him a medical examination, but that earned me a hard slap across the face from one of the women I think was a leader. Apparently, it was frowned upon for me to have an opinion on anything other than the health of the women.”

“Janine? The Americans and Canadians, how did they appear? Were they healthy? Distraught?” asked Frank.

“The young Canadian girl kept asking to go home, but her mother told her that they needed to stay for a while. She never gave an explanation that I heard, but the daughter

seemed appeased by that. The American women never spoke at all. They didn't appear to be drugged, as I said before."

"And no names?" asked Eric.

"No, I'm sorry. I can draw out the compound for you if you like. I know exactly where everyone was and which houses held which people."

"That would be helpful," started Tailor. There was a knock at the door, and Janine looked at Billy.

"That's one of the monks. They have a specific knock," she said, going toward the door. Frank pulled back on her arm and smiled.

"Allow me to be an alpha asshole," he grinned. He opened the door, and the young monk from earlier nodded at them, smiling.

"Forgive my intrusion," he said politely, bowing to the room.

"Please, come in," said Janine. "I've been wanting to thank you for everything you've done for us. Is everything alright?"

"Yes. I think everything is fine here, but we received word from another monastery of something unusual."

“Great, that’s what we love,” grinned Billy.

“Unusual.”

“Large moving trucks pulled into the Sukarta compound today and loaded everything and everyone. They left late this afternoon, and no one knows where they went.”

“They all left?” gasped Janine.

“Every person. We have sent messengers to the other monasteries to be on the lookout for them. He would not leave northern India to travel south, but he could be headed here, to Nepal, or to Bhutan. I will let you know should we hear anything.”

“You’ve been very helpful and generous,” said Tailor. The young monk smiled, nodding at the group.

“Our prayers are heard now because of your strength and hard work. It would have taken us many days to do what you did in a few hours. Thank you, my yeti friends,” he grinned. The men chuckled as the young monk left.

“What now?” asked Janine. “That seems strange and certainly timely, given our escape. Do you think he knows where we are?”

Eric looked at his father and father-in-law, hoping for some senior guidance. Both men stood stoically, staring at him, waiting for his orders.

“Now, we get some sleep. I’ll contact comms and see if they can find the caravan on satellite. We should know more tomorrow about where the two of you stand with the government. Either way, you’re coming home with us.”

CHAPTER TEN

It was difficult to get time alone with Janine when there was a cabin full of men watching their every move. Plus, it was a cabin with not much space to move around, and there were some very large men in there. But Billy wasn't going to be deterred. He reached for Janine's hand and bent down to whisper to her.

"Hey, I know it's chilly out tonight, but how about a walk?" he whispered to her. Janine smiled at him, nodding. She moved toward the bedroom and grabbed a sweater that the monks had left for her.

"We'll be close," said Billy, nodding to the others. Eric smirked at his son. Tailor raised his brows as Trak gave him a knowing smile.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," said Frank.

"Fucking children," he moaned as they walked outside.

The night sky was so clear it was startling. Filled with stars that neither had ever seen before, it took their breath away. In the distance, the mountains were laden with fresh

snowfall, a low rumble of a small avalanche far away. The puffs of white smoke from their breathing filled the air.

Janine looked up at Billy, smiling at him.

“You’re nervous,” she grinned.

“I am, and I don’t know why. That’s not true. I know why. You matter to me, Janine. You matter a great deal to me, and I’m not sure when it all happened. I know that you’re capable and trained, but things are different now. Would you consider going back to Louisiana?”

“With you? Yes. But if you’re asking me if I’ll leave while you and the others finish this mission. No. It’s my reputation as well, Billy, and I want to see this through. I was scared when I thought it was just you and I going back there, but with all of your family here, it’s different now. Besides, whatever Sukarta is doing is more than just collecting women and having sex with them.

“I saw the looks on everyone’s faces when I spoke about the educated women in the compound. I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me sooner, but it should have. That’s on me. Whatever is happening, I want to be a part of this.”

Billy nodded, wrapping her in his arms as he kissed her forehead.

“I keep thinking that we were sent to kill Sukarta, but maybe it was something more. I mean, we had opportunity to get into his private home but were ordered not to. What the hell did they want us to do about him?”

“That’s a great question and one I asked myself several times. Those women don’t seem to be in distress of any kind. If they’re there willingly, why are we worried about it? Also, why did command drop the ball after the command change? I mean, they knew we were there, so why not call us back?”

“I think our communications team will need to help us answer some of this,” said Billy, brushing the hair from her face. He kissed her nose, then her lips, relishing in the warmth of her lips. She smelled like fresh rain and the mountains. Her warm hands slid beneath his shirt, rubbing his flesh.

“Baby, there is nothing I want more than for you and I to continue this, but we’ve got a lot of eyes watching us right now.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I just wanted you to know I was interested.”

“Honey, I know that you’re interested by the way you look at me from across the room. If I haven’t said it lately, thank you for saving my life, Janine.” She pushed back, frowning.

“You don’t owe me anything, Billy.”

“Whoa, whoa,” he said, raising his hands. “I didn’t mean it that way, and you know it. I don’t take someone saving my life lightly. You came back for me, Janine. I know men that wouldn’t have done that. And I’ve explained to you that I was interested in you from the moment you walked into that command room.”

“I know,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. That’s my own insecurities coming through.”

“Baby, we’ve all got ‘em,” he smiled.

“No way,” she laughed. “Are you telling me the six-foot-six, two-hundred-and-thirty-pound sex god has insecurities?”

“Sex god? Where the hell did you hear that? Believe me, I’m no sex god, and I’m very particular about any woman I let into my life.” Janine stared up at him with disbelief.

“Listen, baby. I’ve never brought a woman home to meet my family. Never.”

“Never?” she frowned.

“Never. We are very private and very protective of our family and what we do. I never met a woman that I wanted to spend more than a few hours with. Not that I was doing one-night stands, but I just didn’t see the need to have someone waiting back home when I was going to be deployed a lot.”

“I understand that,” she said, kicking the dirt beneath her feet. “Before the scar, I had a few boyfriends, but they just didn’t understand my commitment to the military. Ironically, two were in the military. I think they expected that their careers should come first and mine would come in second. It was frustrating.

“Then, after the scar, well, no one wanted to date me. It was like this flashing light that just said ‘stay away.’”

“Tell me how it happened,” he said, pulling her into his arms again.

“We were outside Kandahar and getting ready to breach this house that had our tango in it. We did everything by the book,” she said, shaking her head. “Suddenly, all hell

broke loose. My guys were trapped and couldn't break away. Two were hit, one was out of ammo, so I started pulling them out. I handed the one with no ammo my weapon and told him to clear the path for me.

“I pulled my guys back and then returned for him. As I took the weapon back, this kid jumped out of the alley. He must have been twenty or so, but he was strong. My man took off at that point, and there I was, trying to keep him off of me. I lost my weapon in the scuffle, and then he pulled out this big rusty knife.

“I swear to God, I thought I was dead. I felt that blade touch my face and knew he was going to try and take out my eye. Then I remembered I had my own blade. I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner, but I just wasn't thinking clearly. I got him several times in the side, then jumped up and headed to my team. The last man that got out, the one who ran, stared at me in disbelief. I couldn't tell if he was surprised I was alive or pissed.

“I didn't care at that point. I got my men out safely and on that chopper. My face was killing me, but the other guys needed more urgent care. We were so understaffed and putting fires out left and right, I had the medics stitch me up.”

“Damn, honey,” frowned Billy.

“I know. I shouldn’t have let them. It was probably forty-eight hours later before they could get a plastic surgeon to re-open and stitch it properly. I know that a good plastic surgeon could fix it, but there’s just something about it that makes me feel connected to myself. It’s a reminder that I’m a survivor and I can overcome anything.”

“Then don’t do a damn thing about it. You know you don’t have to convince me. It tells me what a fucking badass, amazing warrior you are.”

“Billy? What if they try to court-martial us?” she whispered.

“It won’t happen, I can promise you,” he said, shaking his head. “Our team back home is already working the angles and trying to find out why they ignored the previous mission records.”

“Maybe someone was working with Sukarta? But why? I mean, what does he have that they would want?”

“It’s a great question, honey.”

They stood in one another’s arms for a while longer, just enjoying the contact and feeling of contentment.

“It’s so quiet here,” she whispered. Billy smiled.

“Back home, you’ll see,” he grinned, “the bayou can be so quiet at night. Sometimes, it’s as if the whole world stopped. In the summer, you hear the bullfrogs and the gators, the owls and the egrets. It’s amazing. But in the winter, it can be so quiet it makes you think you’re all alone. Some nights, you think you can hear the stars sizzling in the sky. Mama Irene told me a story once about a Cajun boy who missed his dead love so much, he named a star after her. When he died, they said a new star appeared right next to hers.”

“That’s really beautiful. When you were looking up, when it was cold and winter outside, were you all alone?” she asked.

“Never. My parents were always there for me. My cousins, aunts, uncles, blood and non-blood. I was never alone. I had my football teammates, who were basically the guys I grew up with.”

“I knew you played,” she laughed.

“I was offered college scholarships,” he smiled. “I turned them all down because I knew where I was supposed to

be. I knew what I was meant to be. Just like my father. Just like my grandfathers. Just like my uncles.”

“No offense, Billy, but no one is like your grandfathers.” He looked down at her, surprised that she hadn’t said something sooner. “I might not have known you were with Voodoo Guardians, but I damn sure knew the names Trak Redhawk and Tailor Bongard.”

“You’re full of surprises,” he laughed.

“So are you. But I like them all, Billy. All of the men inside that cabin. I admire them and appreciate them more than you know. They walk with an air of assuredness and confidence that only men with their kinds of experience and skill can have. I’ve never been around men like that before, mostly because men like that didn’t want me around them. They are definitely in a league of their own, and I’m honored just being in the same room with all of them.”

Billy kissed her once more, wishing he could steal her away to a warm bed somewhere. In time, he thought. In time.

“Let’s get inside. No telling what tomorrow will bring.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Any word on where Sukarta and the women have gone?” asked Luke.

“We had to ask Code to help us with some old-fashioned RP technology,” smirked Hiro. “We hacked into one of the DOD’s satellites. They weren’t playing nice and giving us the information that we requested, so we took what we wanted. Don’t worry. No one will know that we’re controlling satellite 436-N5.” The others just shook their heads, chuckling at him. Janine wondered if he were serious or making a joke.

“And what did we find?” asked Hex.

“This,” said Sly, showing the screen. “The entire entourage moved toward the border of Bhutan. There is no complex built there, but we’re seeing these ancient caves that were used as homes built into the mountainsides.”

“The new commander of the unit that sent Billy, Janine, and the others into Sukarta’s camp, Grandover, requested emergency leave yesterday. No one has any idea

why, but he was granted the leave, and now no one can find him.”

“What the hell?” muttered Cam. “We’ll figure out where that asshole went soon enough. But why? Why did Sukarta move from a place where no one was bothering him?”

“Because Janine and Billy got away,” said Hiro. “They knew too much. Saw too much. He couldn’t risk them coming back and attacking his compound again. At least, that’s what we think is happening with Sukarta. With Grandover, we’re not sure.”

“But what is he hiding, other than the women?” asked Luke.

“We’re not sure,” said Sly, “but you need to have a conversation with the legal team. Shit is seriously weird with the commander who took over after they left.”

Luke, Cam, and Hex walked down the hallway to the legal offices, knocking on the door. When Kat told them to come in, they stepped through, staring at the women. Kari, Kat, Katrina, Georgie, and Maggie were hovering over legal books and briefs.

“This looks serious,” frowned Luke.

“We’re working on several things right now,” said Kari. “Take a seat, and we’ll let you know what we have so far with Janine and Billy. Their commander who assigned them this mission is Spanner. You knew that. He retired and then promptly went on a round-the-world cruise with his wife. He was generous enough to let us know that the commander who took over should have known everything, as he personally handed over the classified file. He obviously didn’t or pretended that he didn’t.”

“Why?” frowned Hex. “What does he have to gain by leaving them there, or in Janine’s case, accusing her of being AWOL?”

“That’s what you need to find out, not us. What we do know is that Spanner didn’t think that Grandover was a good fit for the unit. He wasn’t sure why he was selected, but, in his words, Grandover must be someone’s nephew or someone who knows all the dirt. He barely finished basic but was fast-tracked for top-tier careers.”

“Someone knows this guy,” frowned Luke. “We need to put out feelers and find someone that can tell us more about this asshole. Him taking leave at this time is awfully

convenient. We also need to find out exactly what Janine and Billy saw in that fucking place.”

“I think there’s a bigger question,” said Hex. “What’s the reason we want this guy dead, and is it really all about the women? I mean, if Janine is right, they were all there willingly.”

“I think there’s a whole lot we don’t know. Another option for this entire project would be to simply pull them out and call the POTUS. But if we do that, we’re letting them know that Billy called us.”

“I think that’s better than the two of them being on the run for the rest of their lives,” said Luke. “We have to find a way to help them.”

“We have the AWOL charges under control,” said Kari. “They won’t be charged, and no one will come for them. We’ve submitted retirement papers for both of them. They’ll either sign them upon their return, or retract them. They have the right to do either.”

“You’re certain?” asked Hex.

“I’m certain. We’ve been able to get written testimony from his former commander that he was sent on this mission

with the team. He and Janine both will be exonerated of the AWOL charges. I'm not sure if they'll want to go back to regular duty or not, but for now, they're both okay."

"That still brings us back to the issue at hand. What the fuck is Sukarta doing?" They all stared at one another, waiting for someone to respond. "Hiro? What's happening in Bhutan? Is there something going on there? And what about those women with the advanced degrees? Are we able to find out anything about them?"

"We're searching now, but so far, nothing. What's interesting about all of this is that Bhutan is a Buddhist kingdom. Peaceful. There hasn't been any unrest in decades there. Some of the most significant monasteries in the world are within their country. They did have an ugly history of turning away immigrants at their border in a violent and horrific way. That's changed over the last few decades, but it's followed them politically for many years."

"I think the answers lie in what those women are doing for him," said Luke. "We need to get names if at all possible."

"I have an idea," said Kari. Hex, Cam, and Luke stared at the older woman, shaking their heads.

"No. Absolutely not."

“Cam, we formed the Girl Squad for this very reason. We need to get women into that compound and find out what’s going on.”

“Uncle Miller is going to beat the shit out of me,” said Luke.

“I didn’t say I was going,” laughed Kari. “I just said we needed to get the Girl Squad in there. With Autumn able to fly the jets as well, we could send her and Evie, as well as four or five of our girls. He would take them; you know he would. Age obviously isn’t an indicator. Find a way for them to be seen by him or his scouts.” Cam looked at Hex and Luke, holding up a fist for rock, paper, scissors.

“Who’s telling Rory that Piper is headed over?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Snow fell throughout the night, making the cabin colder than before. As the winds picked up, the entire structure shook with its force. The team huddled together on make-shift pallets. Janine and Billy curled together on the small bed, fully clothed, much to the disappointment of Billy.

As the sun began to rise, there was a light tap at the door, and Bodhi and Tiger jumped up, ready to defend. Bodhi opened the door to find their friend, the monk frowning at them.

“It’s awful early,” he said. “Are you alright?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Our entire monastery was woken this morning by our brothers from the monastery to the north. Sukarta and his men moved through on their way to the new compound and burned down the monastery. He told the men that he now owned the land, and they had two hours to pack their belongings and leave.

“Of course, our men refused. They were beaten and thrown from their beds. Everything was burned to the ground. We’ve taken them in, but two were killed.”

“Killing monks? Why?” whispered Tailor, stepping toward his friend. “There would be no purpose to killing the monks. It wouldn’t help their cause at all.”

“I don’t know. However, one of our younger brothers followed their caravan to the new compound.”

“Yes,” said Tiger, “we heard it’s at the border of Bhutan.”

“No,” said the young monk, shaking his head. “I’m not sure what’s there, but it’s not their compound. The entire group stopped northeast of here, outside ancient mountain cliff dwellings. They haven’t been used in centuries, but they’re still strong and offer shelter. They unloaded truckloads of crates and equipment. But what they didn’t unload was more alarming. There were no women.”

“That must be wrong,” said Tailor. From the shadows behind his friend, another monk stepped forward. He was about the same age, small and thin. His face was bloodied and black and blue, but he tried to stand tall, nodding at the men.

“I am sorry, American yeti,” he whispered. Tailor laughed, shaking his head. “My apologies. That’s what my friend said your name is.”

“It’s all good, man,” laughed Tailor. “My name is Tailor, but call me whatever you like.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “It is as my friend said. There were no women with them. There were dozens of men and dozens of crates, but no women or children. Perhaps they will arrive later, or perhaps they split off into two groups.”

“Could they have been women dressed like men?” asked Janine, standing in the doorway of the bedroom. All the men turned to stare at her. Billy’s brows raised in admiration of her quick thinking.

“It is possible,” said the monk. “I was quite far away. But they were all wearing men’s clothing.”

“Then it’s possible that they were women dressed as men. Some of the guards were women, and a few of the women in the dormitories acted as guards. They were big and strong.”

“Dressed as soldiers,” said the monk. “Someone hit me on the head from behind, then beat my face and chest.”

“Let me look at you,” said Tiger, pointing to the chair. He held up his hand, shaking his head.

“I thank you, but one of our monks is trained in first aid. I will be alright,” he smiled.

“A man wouldn’t hit you from behind,” said Trak. “You’re small, slight of build. There would be no reason to attack you from behind. A woman, fearful that you could overpower her, might do so.”

“That makes sense,” said the young man.

“What are you going to do?” asked Tailor.

“We’re not sure,” said his friend. “The Abbot is fearful that they will come for our monastery and burn it to the ground. We have many valuable relics and historical documents for our area.”

“We’ll post guards,” said Billy. The others turned to stare at him. “Better yet, perhaps a few of us should get right with God.”

“Amen to that,” grinned Frank.

“I’m not sure the Abbot will be in favor of this,” said the young monk. “He’s very particular about who steps inside our sacred buildings.”

“He might want to get less particular,” said Billy. “If those men, or women, come to destroy your buildings, you

won't be able to stop them. We will. We promise to try and keep the violence outside the buildings, but please, let us help.”

The two monks whispered amongst themselves, then nodded at each other.

“I will go and ask the Abbot. He will stay and allow your friend to look at him further. He says he's having difficulty breathing.”

Tiger gently led the young man to a chair, placing a privacy screen in front of him. As he began the examination, Tailor, Frank, and Trak followed the other monk back to the monastery.

“It would be helpful if we knew what types of documents you have within your monastery,” said Frank.

“I cannot speak to them.”

“Listen, we don't have to know everything,” he said. “We just need to figure out why Sukarta is burning down monasteries for no reason.”

“No, you misunderstand. I cannot speak to them because I do not know what they are. The Abbot is the only man who can see the documents. They are ancient scrolls and

are kept under lock and key in an ancient box. I don't know what they are."

"I see," frowned Frank, staring at his friends.

The sun began to come up between the mountains, bathing the valley in a purple and pink hue that seemed unnatural. The glow of light from the freshly fallen snow was nearly blinding. The young monk stopped, staring at the breathless moment in time.

"It's beautiful," said Tailor touching the young man's shoulder.

"It was written about once. The author called it Shangri-La, an imaginary place of perfection. I'm sad to think that perfection will leave our mountain."

"We're going to do everything we can to stop that from happening," said Tailor. The young monk nodded, a tear rolling down his weathered, brown cheek. He looked older than his tender years in that moment.

"I came here as an infant, my family unable to care for me any longer. The Abbot and the others have been so kind and generous with me. I've found my Shangri-La, and I am happy to share it with all of you. I am young. I could move to

another monastery, but many of my brothers are old and wouldn't make the journey. We can't leave this place. We would not survive." Trak looked at Frank and Tailor, giving them the gaze he was known for.

"Then you won't leave this place. Not in this lifetime."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Inside the monastery, the monks were going about their morning rituals without thought to the world outside. Their young friend waved them forward until the Abbot stood, frowning at them. He spoke quickly in his own language, a language none of the three men knew.

“He’s asking why you are here,” said the monk. “I’ve explained that you are here to help and to protect us. He’s worried about our vows of peace.”

“I understand vows of peace,” said Trak, staring at the older man. “But this man will kill your monks and destroy your buildings. We are only asking that you allow us to prevent that from happening. Move all of the valuable objects to a safe place. Leave us with robes to greet them when they come, and we will take it from there.”

The Abbot stepped forward slowly, a slight limp on his left side. He stared up at the large men, staring into their eyes. Looking at Trak, he took in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“You are men who know of war and killing. I won’t pretend to know what you know, but I know that we are a place of peace for anyone who chooses to come here.” His English was perfect, and the men smirked at him, raising a brow.

“These men won’t care that you’re dedicated to peace. It doesn’t matter to them if they have a goal in mind,” said Frank. He nodded.

“I know, I know. Which is why I will have the monks move the relics to a safe location and give you the robes. If your hand is forced, I would ask that you take death outside of our compound.”

“We will do our best, Abbot.”

Trak nodded at the man, then sent a message to the others to come to the monastery. As the monks scattered, carrying small trunks and tubes filled with what they presumed were documents and relics, they began to fortify the compound.

There were a few dozen civilians who made their home near the small monastery. Like the monks, they were peaceful people who didn’t own weapons, nor know how to use them. Tailor went to each one with his young friend, asking them to

move the women and children, but if the men would stay and appear busy, it would help the ruse.

Janine watched as the men moved about quickly, then took their places around the monastery in their robes. She wasn't sure they knew how ridiculous they looked, but she couldn't help but smile. They'd removed their tactical boots replaced with humble cloth boots or slippers, but the robes barely fit them.

Sitting along the wall outside the main compound, Tailor, Rory, and Frank hunched on a bench against the wall, trying to make themselves look smaller. She could only smile.

“You might try hiding your hands,” she grinned.

“Our hands?” frowned Rory.

“You have muscular, lean hands, well-manicured. Those would not be the hands of a monk,” she smiled.

They all nodded, pulling their hands into the sleeves of their robes. She walked toward Billy, kissing his cheek.

“I'm going to be with the women and children in the cellars at the edge of the field,” she said, looking up at him. He sighed visibly, relieved that she wasn't trying to stay at the

compound. “Don’t look so smug. I would be out of place here, and they would know it.”

“They’re coming!” said one of the young monks. “They’re making their way around the bend now on horseback.”

“How many?” asked Billy.

“A dozen, maybe fifteen,” he said.

“Alright, go. Stay hidden and don’t come out no matter what.”

Janine took off toward the fields, finding the door hidden against the mountainside. She entered to find the women and children calmly continuing with their chores. A few were mending robes or other articles of clothing. Some were doing other chores. The children were quietly playing with cloth dolls or small wooden trucks. It was truly as if she’d stepped back in time.

“Do any of you speak English?” asked Janine.

“I do,” said an older woman, nodding at her. “I was a teacher many years ago and taught English to Nepalese children.”

“Good. Just try to keep everyone quiet, and we’ll be alright. These men are amazing, and they’ll make sure we’re safe.”

She smiled at Janine, nodding as if to say, ‘yes, we know.’ Against the dirt wall held up by large timbers were three trunks that she saw the monks carry out of the monastery.

“Should those be here?” she asked. “I mean, are they safe?”

“It is safe here,” smiled the older woman.

“May I ask what’s in them?” asked Janine.

“The items are sacred to the monastery. Our people have helped to protect them for centuries, and in turn, the monks have kept us safe and fed.”

“Safe and fed? I thought you were farmers who managed your own crops and livestock,” said Janine.

“We are,” she smiled.

“I’m sorry. I’m confused. If you’re farmers and manage your livestock, then how do the monks keep you fed?”

The old woman just smiled at her, continuing with her chores.

“Sometimes you need to be fed spiritually.”

Janine stared at the women, all with grins on their faces as they worked and kept silent. The children played with their stuffed dolls and toys, quietly remaining at their mothers’ feet.

Something strange was happening in this mountain valley. Something beyond Sukarta and his men, or women, killing monks.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Billy watched from his perch inside the monastery as the horses neared. At least five were definitely male, but there were far more females dressed as men as well. None of the men stood when they approached, waiting for them to make their move.

“Where is your Abbot?” asked a man.

“He is praying for the village,” said Trak in a soft voice.

“Get him,” said the man, pointing his AK47 at him. Trak shook his head, still looking downward.

“I cannot. I cannot disturb his prayers.”

“Listen, you dress-wearing piece of shit. Get him, or I’m going to put a bullet between your eyes.” The man shoved the end of the weapon into Trak’s chest, his hand over the grip but not near the trigger. Trak slowly stood, and the man grinned at him. But he had nothing to grin about.

Gripping the end of the barrel, Trak jerked the weapon from his hand, shoving the butt into his face, breaking his

nose. The two men behind him were so shocked they didn't have a chance to move. Instead, they stared as Frank and Tailor stood from the bench, towering above them.

“Give it to me nicely, and I won't hurt you,” grinned Tailor.

The men could only nod, handing over their weapons to the big man. Four women walked toward them, their own weapons now drawn.

“What the hell are you doing?” said the first woman. “You gave him your weapon? Willingly? You coward!”

She pistol-whipped the man, jamming the weapon into the back of his head. Before she could start on the second one, Frank had her wrist twisting so hard she was forced to drop the weapon. She tried to kick out, but he swept her legs from beneath her, slamming her body to the cold earth.

The two other women started toward them, but Billy and Tiger had them cold. No longer caring that these were women, not men, they had them on the ground with the others, zip-tied and unable to move. Several other women were brought forward in ties, their weapons confiscated by the team.

“You fucking monks,” growled the woman who had pistol-whipped her own man. “You’ll regret this. We’re going to burn this shit to the ground and take what’s ours.”

“Hardly think anything here is yours,” grinned Tailor. “First of all, you’re American or sound like it. Secondly, the monastery and the land belong to the monks. So, whatever bullshit you and Sukarta are planning is done.”

She stared up at the men from the ground, wondering how they could possibly know that their group was connected to Sukarta.

“Why are you here?” asked Billy. “What do you want?”

The woman looked away, then at the others, giving them a warning that if they spoke, they were dead.

“We can do this the hard way,” smiled Frank. “Or we can do it the fucking hardest way on the planet, and you will feel every second of it.”

“Tell them,” whispered one of the men. The woman turned her head so swiftly the man actually jumped backwards on his bottom. “I won’t die for him or for you. Tell them what we want.”

“You open your mouth again, I’ll kill you,” she muttered.

“Gonna be hard to do when you’re stripped of your weapons and tied up,” smiled Tailor. “Now, I make it a habit not to break women in half. My mama taught me better, and my wife would be awful angry. But for you, I’ll make an exception. So, this is what you’re gonna do. You’re gonna tell us what you want, or I’m gonna start with your fingers and work my way to every little bone you got.

“I’m a big man. I got lots of strength and can break a bone fast. Way I see it is if you don’t talk, you’ll be cryin’.”

“I don’t cry,” she said, staring at him.

She felt the intense burn, but it was so fast she didn’t see what had happened. The big Indian knelt beside her, his hand on the handle of a large knife. He shoved it into her thigh another two inches, hitting bone. She let out a loud scream, trying to shove him with her shoulder.

“What do you want?” asked Billy.

“Genia, tell them,” said the woman beside her.

“Genia. Interesting name,” said Billy. Comms confirmed that they heard it and then confirmed that she was

the engineer.

“Fuck you,” she seethed.

“Seems odd for an engineer to be working for a pedophile and polygamist.” She stared up at Billy’s face, narrowing her eyes.

“I know you,” she snarled. “You were one of the bodyguards. Shit. You were the one that got away because of that bitch midwife. We should have killed you with the other two soldiers.”

“They were Marines,” frowned Billy, “not soldiers. And you’ll be sent to the electric chair for killing them. If I don’t kill you first.”

“Take them to the pit,” said Frank.

“No! No! I won’t die for this,” said one of the men.
“You’ve lost your mind! This is absurd.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Billy.

“Shut up!” said Genia.

“Fuck you, Genia. Look, the old man heard that the monks have some old bones and DNA from a bigfoot. They even know the location of where they can be found. And

there's something else that some guy is willing to pay big for, but we don't know what it is."

"A bigfoot?" frowned Billy.

"A yeti?" grinned Tailor. "Boy, that shit ain't real."

"It's real," said Genia, staring at them. "The monks know it's real, and so do we. If we can find them, we'll find one of the greatest anthropologic treasures of all time."

"You don't strike me as someone who gives a damn about anthropology," said Billy. She just shrugged, looking away from him.

"That's because she's not interested in anthropology," said Janine, walking toward them. "She's interested in plutonium. The relics are a cover."

"Bitch! We took you in and treated you well," she snarled.

"You treated me like an animal," said Janine.

Genia spit at her feet, and Janine turned, doubling her fist and punching the other woman in the face. She fell backwards, spitting blood. Janine saw the knife in her thigh and gripped the handle, twisting it, then pulling it out. The woman's blood-curdling scream echoed in the valley.

She handed the knife to Trak, watching as he wiped the blood from the blade and placed it back in the sheath.

“Honey, what are you talking about?” asked Billy.

“Come with me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bodhi, Tailor, Frank, and Tiger stayed with the prisoners, ensuring that no one got away. The women seemed more experienced than the men. Almost as if they had been part of a team, whereas the men were just extras. It seemed strange to all of them, but knowing their own wives, they knew not to underestimate the women.

The others followed Janine back to the underground hut where the trunks were kept.

“Babe, what’s going on?” asked Billy.

“You need to see what they’re holding. It’s not just relics.”

“But are there relics?” asked Trak.

“There are definitely some relics,” nodded Janine. “I’m not sure what to make of them, but I’m certain they’re worth money.”

As they approached the underground hut, the women and children were already dispersed outside the huts, playing or working the fields, or headed back to their own homes.

Janine just shook her head at their casual reaction to all of this. Entering through the door, they adjusted their eyes to the dim light, seeing the chests against the wall.

“The tubes have paintings and documents in them. I’m not sure what they are. I can’t read the writing. But the paintings must be worth a fortune. One of the painters was a monk from this monastery in the year 892 AD.” They all looked at her with brows raised. “I googled it, and I asked one of the women. It was painted right here at this monastery and has never seen the light of day.”

“Damn,” muttered Billy. “What’s in the trunks?” Janine stepped toward the one on top and carefully lifted the lid, then stood back.

“What the fuck?” muttered Rory.

“Plutonium. It’s not naturally found anywhere. It’s usually microscopic. According to the woman who speaks English, there are several caves where these bricks were found. Naturally. The Abbot knew what they were and ordered that they be hidden.”

“Holy shit,” said the men in unison.

“My thoughts exactly. What does Sukarta want with all this plutonium? Why the ruse of the women? What is going on?”

“We need to move these trunks,” said Billy. “Rory? Ask the Abbot where he wants the artwork and relics. Did you find any bones?”

“Yes,” nodded Janine. “Again, I’m not sure what they are, but they’re not human. They’re far too large. It could be a gorilla or... Honestly, I don’t know.”

She shook her head as she opened the smaller box, revealing a long forearm bone and hand. Beside it was a cast imprint of a footprint. Both far too large for a man. Even one of their men.

“The relics aren’t our concern,” said Billy. “They belong to the monastery, and it’s up to them to do with them what they will. Although I’d damn sure like to know what the fuck those are.”

“The women and children just kept smiling and saying ‘yeti.’”

“I agree with Billy,” said Rory. “That’s none of our business, nor is the relic. If we really think Sukarta is

searching for the yeti, then we'll try to prevent him from doing that. What's more puzzling are those chests. I think we need speak with Genia again."

"I'm happy to speak with her," said Janine with a smirk. "She was the one that slapped me at the compound. I'm more than willing to give a little back."

"You'll have your time with her," nodded Billy. "Comms? Any noise about plutonium for sale? Anything on Sukarta?"

"Nothing," said Hiro.

"Let's go."

Back at the monastery, the women were lined up against the wall, kept separate from the men. Their backs were to the wall, their legs outstretched. Genia's leg was still bleeding, everyone refusing to give her any first aid whatsoever.

Janine walked up to the woman, standing in front of her.

"Why are you really here?" she asked.

"Fuck you, bitch." Janine knelt beside the woman, digging her fingers into the open leg wound as she screamed.

“Let’s try this again. Why does Sukarta want the plutonium?” Genia’s eyes grew wide, then she looked back down. “Oh, I see. Sukarta doesn’t know about the plutonium.”

“We didn’t know about plutonium,” said one of the men.

“What’s your name?” asked Billy.

“Dieter. We’re just hunters, man. We were told we’d have the opportunity to hunt and kill a yeti. We don’t know anything about all the other shit.”

“That explains a lot,” said Rory. He noticed Janine staring at Genia, then followed her eyes as she looked at the woman’s forearm.

“Hunter Troop,” said Janine. “You’re part of Hunter Troop.”

“Jegertroppen?” frowned Rory.

“What the fuck is Jegertroppen?” asked Tiger.

“It’s the all-female special forces unit for Norway. The first and only,” said Janine. “The very best the world has to offer. Except, a few years ago, a group of women were dishonorably discharged for conduct unbecoming.”

“Conduct unbecoming?” frowned Billy.

“They raped two male soldiers.” Genia stared up at Janine with a sneer on her face. “Six women held down two males and abused their bodies so badly, the men were hospitalized.”

“Pussies couldn’t handle the pussy,” smirked one of the other women.

“They didn’t want your pussy,” said Janine. “No one would want it, which is why you raped them.”

“You pretend to be such a good girl,” said Genia. “Maybe you should let loose and fuck your way through these hunks. It might improve your mood.” Janine pressed on the open wound again, the woman squirming and screaming as she did.

“Let me get this straight,” said Bodhi. “Sukarta knew nothing about the plutonium. All he wanted was the potential yeti relics.”

“He thinks it will help him to live forever, and he believes if he can find them, replicate their DNA, and then show the world, he’ll have a sort of amusement park for yetis,” said one of the men.

“Jesus, what a fucked-up mess,” said Tailor.

“So, who wants the plutonium?” asked Janine. “You all might be engineers or scientists, but none of you have the skill to make the plutonium an active weapon. Who wants it?”

The women all stared at her, not saying anything. They looked away as if to dare Janine to push them further. She accepted the challenge. Taking her own blade, she stabbed Genia’s thigh again, just inches from the old wound. Ripping the blade down her leg, she sliced through muscle until she hit the kneecap.

“Another inch, and I’ll hit the popliteal artery,” whispered Janine. “You’ll be dead in minutes, and no one here will save you. No one. Who wants the plutonium?”

“F-fuck you!” she screamed. Janine didn’t hesitate, slicing through the artery. She stood, her hand covered in blood, and turned to the next woman.

“Next!” she called out, like a short-order cook.

“No! No, I’ll tell you,” she said. “You just have to be sure you keep me away from them.” She nodded toward the other women, and Janine gave a slight nod.

“Who wants it?” asked Billy.

“Furman Pasquale.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Furman Pasquale? He’s a tech giant, not a weapons guy. What the fuck does he want with it?” asked Rory.

“I don’t know,” said the woman. She looked beside her, Genia on her last breaths, as no one offered any help at all. “Genia said we’d make two million apiece. Once it was done, we could go our separate ways and retire. Sukarta is a child, playing with his father’s inheritance and using women as his playthings. Most of them want to be there because he showers them with gold, diamonds, jewels, anything they want. As long as they have sex with him and produce babies, he’s happy.”

“The women want to be there?” asked Janine. “What about the Americans and the Canadians?”

“I’m telling you, they all wanted to be there. I know you saw him beat a few of the women, but it’s mild. More of a BDSM thing. They like it.”

“What do we do with them?” asked Tiger, pointing to the men and women.

“Team, this is comms. We’ve contacted the Nepalese military. They’ll be there within the hour to take them off your hands. Anything you need to do to help the monastery has been approved.”

“Roger that,” said Billy. Taking Janine’s hand, he pulled her to the other side of the compound, then kissed her fiercely in private.

“I know why you did that,” she smiled. “I’m not leaving.”

“Baby,” he said in a pleading voice.

“Don’t baby me, Billy. I’m not leaving. I know who Pasquale is, and I know he’s a ruthless piece of shit in the business world. The guy has been accused of selling the data for the users of his software, creating tech that spies on everyone around the world. That asshole even put a virus in his own web cameras that allowed him to reverse view anyone owning them. It couldn’t be proven, but the feds believe he captured photos of thousands of men and women and posted them on the internet.”

“Honey, I know. That makes him terribly dangerous.”

“I’m terribly dangerous, Billy,” she frowned. “Don’t forget that I’m trained as well. I know what I’m doing.” He pulled her into an embrace, kissing the sides of her face.

“I know you know what you’re doing,” he whispered. “I’m just not sure I know what I’m doing anymore. With you here, I feel confused and conflicted. I’m terrified for you.”

“Don’t be,” she said, kissing him. “But what do we do about the whole yeti thing? Should we send someone to investigate?”

“Well, the obvious choice would be my grandfather and a few of the boys from Team Big. But...”

“But?”

“It’s crazy. I know it is, but what if they’re real? What if yetis are real, and they find them? Then what?”

“You will leave them.” They both turned to see the Abbot staring at them. “If you find the yeti, you will leave them and not tell anyone.”

“Sir, this could debunk all the myths. Put an end to the speculation.”

“And potentially put an end to a species,” said the Abbot. “I cannot stop you from looking for them, and I cannot

stop you from finding them. But I will beg of you to not reveal them.”

“Let me talk to my grandfather,” said Billy.

“Yes,” he grinned. “The dark yeti should be a good one to send. In fact, you have several yeti on your team.”

“I guess it looks that way, doesn’t it?” The Abbot gave a toothy grin, nodding at him. “Alright, sir. You have my word that if we find them, we’ll try to get them to move so that no one else finds them.”

“Good,” he said, nodding. “Take the weapons and do what you need to. I do not wish to have them in my possession any longer. They are weapons of destruction.”

“As they are now, they are not weapons,” said Billy. “However, the man who wants them will turn them into weapons. You have my word that we will do everything we can to prevent that from happening.”

The old man nodded, then walked back toward the monastery. Billy kissed his girl one more time, hugging her tightly.

“Damn, I want you naked beneath me,” he murmured. Janine smiled up at him.

“Not as badly as I want to be naked beneath you.”

Arriving back with the team, the others were preparing to load the prisoners onto helicopters with the Nepalese authorities.

“What’s the plan?” asked Tailor.

“Well, Grandpa, how do you feel about meeting a yeti?” he grinned.

“Is that a joke?”

“No, sir. The Abbot thinks that you should try to find them. If you do, he asks that we warn them and get them to move, if possible.”

“Warn them?” cried Eric. “Warn them? Are you fucking nuts? We’re talking about a possibly mythical being that may or may not exist. How are we supposed to convince it to move to another location? IF we find it?”

“I don’t know, Dad,” said Billy, shaking his head. “I don’t know. All I know is that the Abbot asked us to warn them.”

Tailor looked at Eric, then back at Rory, Frank, and Bodhi. This was crazy. He’d done a lot of crazy things in his lifetime, but this would be tops on the list.

“I can help,” said a young monk. “The relics will help us. I know the direction that they allegedly live.”

“I’m going to hate myself for this,” said Tailor, “but let’s get our climbing gear and cold weather shit. Lena’s gonna have my ass if I get eaten by a yeti.”

“They do not like meat,” said the young monk, smiling at them. Tailor frowned at him, shaking his head.

“Funny monk. Cute. Very cute.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

With the prisoners out of their hands, the team was free to try and figure out what Pasquale wanted with plutonium. It seemed that they let Genia die before they could get all the information. According to the other women, they were supposed to secure the chests and bring them to a location in the mountains.

“What location?” asked Trak, standing over the last woman placed on the helicopter. He spun his blade in the palm of his hand, and she swallowed.

“We weren’t told. That’s the truth,” she said, staring at him. “If I had to guess, he has a mountain home somewhere near here or in a neighboring country. Genia never told us anything, but I’m not an idiot. I did my homework. Pasquale is friends with a lot of unsavory characters from around the world. Russian, Indian, Chinese, you name it. This guy isn’t just a tech giant. He wants to rule the world.”

“Doesn’t everyone,” murmured Trak as he turned his back on the woman.

“Hey! Don’t we deserve to know who you are?” she called. Trak turned with his black eyes boring holes into her.

“No. No, you don’t deserve it.”

Trak could hear the sounds of the rotors behind him and knew the prisoners would be handled. Nepal might be a small country, but they were diligent, sometimes ruthless, with the punishment of those that break their laws.

Walking toward him were Bodhi, Frank, Rory, and Tailor. He smiled at his old friend, shaking his head.

“I always knew your size would be a detriment,” he grinned.

“Oh, you’re funny, old man,” frowned Tailor. He looked over his shoulder at Eric and Billy. “Take care of them, Trak. They’re all I have.”

“He is my grandson as well,” said Trak. “Nothing will happen to him, and nothing will happen to you either. I have Grandfather’s word on it.”

“Great, our lives are in the hands of a ghost,” chimed Rory as he walked past.

Somehow, the monastery had been able to secure a four-wheel drive vehicle and some additional winter

equipment and mountain climbing gear. There were sacks of food and water, as well as cooking utensils for the open fire.

The young monk was seated between Bodhi and Frank, squeezed between their massive shoulders. He hadn't stopped smiling since Tailor and the Abbot agreed he could go with them.

“You look awfully happy for a boy that might die,” said Rory.

“Rory, don't scare the boy,” said Tailor. “We got you, little man.”

“This will be exciting,” said the monk. “My name is Rensa. I love adventures, and the Abbot will send me every now and then. It's exciting to get away from the monastery now and then.”

“How long have you been there?” asked Bodhi.

“Like many, my entire life. I was orphaned, and instead of going into an awful orphanage or living on the streets, the Abbot selected me to join the monastery. I've been very happy but for a desire for adventure.”

“Careful what you wish for, little man. Careful what you wish for.”



Using the cabin as a location to begin tracking Pasquale, the others met for dinner, finding they had room to stretch out with Team Big gone. In fact, it left the bedroom open for them to be alone.

“So, why does a man who is a billionaire want raw plutonium?” asked Janine. “He could have bought from the black market, or he could have worked with any of his unsavory friends.”

“I agree that none of it makes sense,” said Tiger. “I asked Hiro to send us some information about his company and the ongoing investigations. The file was so big, he had to send it through a special site and divide it up.”

“Jesus, what’s up with this guy?” asked Billy.

“Pasquale was born in Fresno, California, to immigrant parents. He was a two-bit hoodlum, making extra cash by stealing cell phones and computers. He was a self-taught tech nerd. He’d wipe everything off the devices, make it so no one would ever know, and then re-sell them to neighbors and friends.

“When he was nineteen, he received a scholarship to the local technical college. He flew through the curriculum so fast that they hired him as an assistant professor. That only lasted about a year, then he started his own company. His breakout product was a software program that could track employees at work.”

“You mean a locator?” asked Janine.

“No,” said Tiger, shaking his head. “It tracked the amount of time they were actually working on a computer, logged in, logged out, even their attire for the day.”

“The webcams,” said Billy.

“The webcams. He would make notes to his management team like, ‘tell Tammy that red isn’t her color. Don’t wear it again.’ He was sued by more than a dozen former employees, but of course, the software was deleted by the time the investigation began.”

“Was the software removed from the market?” asked Eric.

“It was, but a replacement was developed that couldn’t be tracked. When the new software came out, it was sold only

to a select group of corporations and governments. His second breakout product was sold exclusively to governments.”

“I’m not going to like this, am I?” asked Trak.

“It ties in with so many of the past cases we’ve worked, it’s terrifying. The new program was placed inside transmitters and communication devices to track our military. There are easily a dozen cases where our men were tracked using the program, and they were led into a trap. Killed. All of them.

“Pasquale, of course, claims the program worked, and the deaths were not related. He said it was poor leadership. The team at G.R.I.P. is looking at all of his programs and software that are available now. According to Bodwick and the others, the President is aware of the allegations against Pasquale and has suspended all contracts until further investigation.” He tossed a stack of photos across the table.

“These were all taken within the last three weeks. Private meetings with officials in Russia, Malaysia, China, Sudan, Iran, and Afghanistan.”

“Shit,” muttered Jalen. “Maybe this is how Grandover was involved. Maybe he’s in bed with Pasquale.”

“Maybe. If he doesn’t get the plutonium, he’ll try to find it from another source,” said Red. “Maybe we should be the source.”

“That’s dangerous, but it might work,” said Billy. “But we still need to know where he’s headed. Sukarta isn’t our issue right now. Pasquale is.”

“We were still tasked with killing Sukarta,” said Janine. “If we don’t do that, we’ve failed our mission. We have to let someone know why we’re not killing him.”

“I’ll do it,” said Red. “I’ll go into Sukarta’s compound and kill him. Give me two men, and we’ll get in and out without being seen.”

“Red, that’s too much to ask of you,” said Billy. “This was our mission, not yours.”

“I know,” he nodded, “but we need to get them both, and Sukarta is low man on the totem. Let me take Jalen and Hoot. They’re expert marksmen and have spent a lot of time in cold weather climates. I’m Canadian, so we all know I can handle a little cold.” Billy looked at the three men and nodded, then stared at his father.

“Alright,” agreed Eric. “We send three to kill Sukarta. Take out the guards, if possible, without killing them. If the women want to leave, let them. If you find children, contact us, and we’ll send help to get them out of there. But if the women refuse to leave, we need to contact the Nepal authorities. With winter coming on, they won’t survive in this climate. I don’t care how fucking enlightened Sukarta is.”

“Sounds like a plan,” smiled Hoot. “I’ll gather all the supplies we’ll need and see if we can secure some horses. It seems to be the preferred way to travel. Someone needs to let the authorities know that we might have a slew of women needing a ride home.”

A blast of cold air hit them as the door opened, and several beautifully curvy figures crowded the doorway.

“You’re not going without us.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What are you doing here?” asked Tiger, staring at his wife.

“Hello to you, too,” smiled Hazel, kissing her husband. “We couldn’t let you guys have all the fun. The Girl Squad decided that we’d get into Sukarta’s compound easier than any of you. We’ll pretend to be on a pilgrimage, finding ourselves kind of thing.”

“Baby, you’re tatted up with piercings everywhere. I think you found yourself,” smiled Tiger.

“Oh, look at this handsome devil!” said a beautiful, tall, lithe woman walking toward Billy. “How are you, honey?”

“Hi, Piper,” he grinned. “I’m doing good. Everyone, this is Janine. Janine, this is my family.”

“Beautiful family,” she grinned.

“I like her,” laughed Lucia. “We’re all married, sweetie. Nothing to worry about here. But we’ve all been in the military or one of the three-letter agencies.”

“Oh, wow. That’s awesome,” said Janine.

“I’m Lucia. This is Piper, Savannah, Ani, Suzette, Evie, Addie, and Hazel. We formed the Girl Squad a while back to go into places the men couldn’t. Savannah and Evie are both pilots, and we also have Autumn, but she’s not trained fully.”

“This is amazing! Maybe I should go with them to Sukarta,” said Janine.

Billy started to open his mouth and protest but realized that this was exactly what he would prefer. With the Girl Squad, she’d be headed to Sukarta. A different kind of crazy than Pasquale. She was far less likely to be harmed going into his compound.

“Alright,” he nodded, frowning, making a good show of it. “Go with them to Sukarta, and I’ll stay here to plan our move on Pasquale. When you’ve got the women free and Sukarta dead, head back to our home with all of them. Please, wait for me there.”

“Where else would I wait for you?” she smiled. “I don’t know a lot of men that would tell a woman with this scar that he loved her.”

“Then you’ve met some stupid men,” he grinned.

“Because I do love you, Janine. I love you, and I need you to be safe.”

“I know,” she smiled. “Okay, let us take the three men, and we’ll be out of your hair. At least for now.”

“Ladies, I know this doesn’t have to be said, but please don’t get hurt,” said Trak. “If I have to explain a scratch to your spouses, it’s not going to be a good conversation.”

“Awww, he’s worried about us,” grinned Evie, kissing the older man’s cheek. Each woman passed by him, doing the same, and when Janine did it as well, he couldn’t help but smirk.

“You’re getting soft, Grandpa,” laughed Billy. “The Grandpa Trak that I remember never smiled and never allowed women to fight.”

“I’m not getting soft,” he growled. “I’m getting smarter. They know what they’re doing, and you know it too. You also know that getting into Sukarta’s compound and killing him is infinitely less dangerous than going after Pasquale. Make sure they have all the weapons they need.”

“Yes, sir,” smiled Billy, bending slightly to kiss his grandfather’s cheek. “Love you, Grandpa.”

“I love you too,” he grinned.

Trak’s face sobered as he watched the young men helping the women with their supplies and weapons. They would most likely leave at first light, but it didn’t make him feel any better knowing that they now had two teams out there. Communications would be spotty at times, even with the excellent equipment from G.R.I.P.

“Why the face?” asked Chief.

“I don’t like when we are split up. Especially the women.”

“There are three men going with them, Trak. You know how well-trained the women are. They’ll be fine. Sukarta’s guards were taken by us. I doubt that he would have had time to get more. He thinks Genia is off securing yeti relics for him. Let the women do this. They’re right in that they’ll get into that compound a lot faster than we will and have better luck at convincing the women to leave.”

Trak could only nod his head. He thought of his old friend out there with Team Big and prayed for his safe return.

Lena would be inconsolable if she lost him. They all would be.

As night settled around them, they once more had to make room for additional bodies in the cabin. Space was tight, but at least they were warm lying so close to one another. Before the sun even rimmed the mountains, the women were up and gone. Janine kissed Billy in front of everyone, holding him a long time, longer than necessary.

“We’re not going to war, baby,” smiled Evie.

“Maybe not, but I’d at least like to get back and make love to him,” she grinned.

“You haven’t secured this deal yet?” frowned Lucia. “You seriously need to get on the ball before someone takes your girl.” Billy frowned at that, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to be taken by anyone. You’re the man I love, Billy. Just you.”

“Damn glad to hear that,” he smiled, kissing her once more.

As they left the safety of the cabin and the monastery, the men watched them make their way in the two large SUVs they came in. Horses would have been more ideal, but

securing enough for all of them would have crippled the village and stopped their own work. They were capable women, and with Red and the others, they felt even more assured of their safety.

Once they were close to Sukarta's compound, they would hide the SUVs and hike up to the compound, pretending to be searching for their souls. The women would say they were on a girl's trip, searching for peace or enlightenment. Whatever they needed to say and do to get the job done was what they would do.

In the end, it would be Sukarta who should pray for his soul. Janine knew the women well enough that someone might actually open the gates for them if there were any gates to open. If not, they would simply act naturally and ask to be part of the group, even if for a short period of time.

"We've got a lot to do, and not a lot of time to do it. We need to get comms to keep track of the team headed for the yeti, and make sure that we follow the Girl Squad to wherever Sukarta is hiding," said Eric. "Time to call home and see what kinds of toys we can use." Billy smiled at his father.

"Love it when we get to play."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The treacherous mountain roads made for slow-going with the team of women. With freshly fallen snow and the risk of avalanches and landslides, they were moving at a snail's pace. But that also meant that Sukarta and his team weren't moving at all if they'd stopped in one of the old dwellings.

“According to the maps from the Abbot, the dwellings are about two miles ahead in the rock face,” said Janine.

“It's got to be cold as shit for them,” said Evie. “Did he even have the brains to make sure they were in cold weather gear?”

“I don't know,” she said, shaking her head. “When I was there, it was warm, and we wore very loose clothing. I never saw any cold weather gear, but they could have purchased that or had it hidden somewhere.”

“What about children?” asked Piper.

“That's just it. Although he kept saying he wanted more children, I never saw any. They were kept in a separate part of the compound, away from their mothers, tended by wet

nurses. There were a few close to delivery when I arrived but they threw me in the cell before I could help with the births.

“To make matters worse, one of the monks said that they began castrating themselves because Sukarta would send men to bring the monks back to his compound and force them to impregnate the women. Apparently, he has difficulty with an erection.”

“I’d like to say I feel bad for him,” said Chief, “but I don’t.”

“Well, we need to walk in from here. The men will need to stay back or hide somewhere,” said Janine.

“We’re not staying back, princess,” smirked Red. Janine turned quickly, frowning at the big Canadian. He held up both hands in apology. “I meant nothing by it.”

“The last man to call me princess was the man who put this scar on my face. He’s dead. Please don’t call me that.”

“My apologies, Janine. Truly. I meant nothing by it.” Janine took a deep breath and nodded, taking a few steps back.

“No. I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. I know you meant nothing by it. That word just always brings about a bad memory for me.”

“I really am sorry,” he said.

“Me too,” she smiled. “Okay. Let’s make our way up and see what we find.”

If they thought the roads were bad for their vehicles, the trails were even worse to walk on. On a typical day, any one of them could do a two-mile hike in about twenty minutes. Today, it took them nearly an hour to climb the rough mountain path.

As they approached, they could clearly see the carved stone caves in the side of the mountain. Fires were burning, billows of smoke filling the air as clothing hung out on long lines to dry. Janine pulled a scarf over her face, hoping to hide the scar from anyone who might remember her.

“Welcome, sisters,” smiled a woman walking toward them. “Are you here for Sukarta?”

“I’m not sure,” giggled Evie. “I mean, I don’t know who he is. We’re just on a little girls’ trip. A sort of spiritual journey to cleanse our souls. You know, get rid of all the bad male influence in our lives.”

“I understand completely,” smiled the woman. “My name is Clara, and I’m one of Sukarta’s wives. This is a place

of peace and sanctuary. Love and enlightenment.”

“What a crock,” murmured Hazel.

“Shh, we don’t want to give ourselves away,” said Janine.

They were led toward a big fire to warm themselves, where they were given warm bread and hot tea. Shown to one of the dugouts, they were instructed to place their things inside, and they could sleep there.

“Who is this Sukarta man?” asked Hazel.

“He’s a genius,” smiled the woman. “He understands that the world is a cruel place, and we all need to seek something better. He’s found the key to a long life. In fact, we have a team of people out searching for it now.”

They all knew the woman was speaking of the yeti but didn’t acknowledge it.

“So, it’s just a long life he wants?” asked Evie.

“A long life and a long line of children,” smiled the woman.

“*See if you can get near the children.*” They all heard Red in their comms, and Hazel tapped her ear.

“Why is it so important for him to have so many children?” asked Piper. “I mean, aren’t three or four enough?”

“Oh, no,” said the woman, shaking her head. “Sukarta needs hundreds of children to populate his own country. His line will be the only line that survives and lives for eternity.”

“You know that’s impossible, right?” asked Ani.

The woman stared at her, frowning in her direction. These women had been brainwashed, and if Ani was right, they were all on some sort of mind-altering drug, fooling them into believing they were living in a utopia.

“Come with me,” said Clara. They followed her through the maze of tunnels and caves, walking past women huddled in front of their fires.

“These women won’t make it through winter,” whispered Addie. “It’s already freezing in here, and it’s not even a full snow yet.”

“I’m not sure we’re going to be able to convince them of that,” said Ani.

Clara stopped in front of a large, dome-shaped room. Children ranging in age from a few months to teens were

scattered around the room. They appeared to be well cared for, well dressed, warm, and fed.

“These are the offspring of Sukarta and his wives. They will be the lucky ones to be at the precipice of living forever. They will become the settlers of a new nation. A nation that only wants peace and prosperity for all its citizens. It will be magnificent, and we are the lucky few who gets to join him.”

Janine nodded at the woman but was seriously concerned for her sanity. She moved slowly around the room, smiling at the children, attempting to make them feel more comfortable.

“Wait! Go back!” yelled Red in her ear. She stopped, smiling at the children, then at the young girl holding a toddler and infant.

“Holy shit. That’s my daughter.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hi,” said Janine, kneeling beside the girl. “My name is Jan. What’s your name?”

“Brittany,” she said, staring at her. She looked up to be sure there weren’t other women in the room. “Are you staying here?”

“No,” said Janine. “My friends and I are just passing through. Then we’ll hike out and move on to somewhere else.”

“Take me with you,” she whispered.

“Sorry?”

“Take me with you. Please, I don’t want to be here. My mother had this wild hair up her ass after my stepfather left her, and we ended up here. I should be headed off to college, not sitting here for some fat fuck to take my virginity.”

Janine could hear Red cursing in her ear and prayed he was far enough away that no one else heard him.

“Where is your mother now?” asked Janine.

“Probably with him,” she said, rolling her eyes. “She’s become one of his favorites, but it makes me sick. Please, take me with you. The guards are gone, and they won’t be able to keep me here.”

“Have you tried to leave before?” asked Janine.

“No. I was too scared, but I wouldn’t be scared with all of you.”

“Where is your father?” she asked cautiously.

“I don’t know. My mom said he left us when I was a kid. He served in the Gulf War, but she said he came back all fucked up or something. I guess he didn’t care that he had a daughter at home.”

“I doubt if that’s true,” said Janine. “I’m going to bet that he cares a great deal for you, and there was probably a misunderstanding between him and your mom.”

“Maybe. All I care about right now is getting out of here. Then I’ll figure something out. I need to get back to Canada and try to find my dad or someone that will take me in.”

“Where is Sukarta?” asked Janine.

“Up there,” she said, pointing toward a stone staircase. “He’s at the very top level of these caves so that he can look out and see the world that he thinks will belong to him. He’s crazy, and I think he’s sick as well.”

“Did he touch you?” she asked.

“No. No, not like what you’re thinking. He doesn’t touch any of the children. Since I’m not his, he wanted to make me a wife as well, but I begged my mother to give me more time.”

“Okay. Okay, we’re going to help you,” said Janine. She looked behind her to see Piper and Ani. “I need you to gather all of the children and any women who want to leave and go with my friends.”

“Not many want to leave,” said Brittany. “He gives them all jewels and gold, that kind of shit, but they have to have sex with him.”

“Well, go with my friends and see how many will leave with you.”

“Where are you going?” asked the young girl.

“I’m going to see Sukarta.”

Piper and Ani quickly gathered the children, sending them out the door with Hazel and Addie. Clara was up ahead speaking to two women in the kitchens, then looked back at them.

“Where are the children going?” she asked.

“Out for fresh air,” said Piper.

“Oh. Of course.” She walked away as if totally unconcerned that two strange women were taking more than three dozen children.

“Jesus, this is fucked up,” said Ani. “Let’s move and see how many women we can get to leave.”



Janine carefully climbed the cold, slick stone steps to the upper levels of the caves. She could hear laughter, then a deep male voice.

“This is perfect, don’t you think, my sweet Canadian maple leaf?” The woman giggled, and Janine rolled her eyes.

“Yes. It’s perfect, and I know that I can convince Brittany to become your next wife. We’ll be one big family.”

“Over my dead body,” said the voice of Red.

“Shit!” muttered Janine, running up the remaining stairs. “How the hell did you get up here?”

“You were taking too long,” he frowned. “What the fuck is wrong with you that you bring our daughter here?”

“Did she call you? Did she reach out to you?” asked the woman. “I strictly forbid her to reach out to you.”

“I’m her father! She can call me for anything, any time.”

“Get out!” yelled Sukarta, struggling to sit up in the bed. His large girth was becoming a problem for him in many ways. “I’ll call my guards.”

“You have no guards,” said Janine, removing her scarf.

“The nurse,” he muttered. “You escaped with the male prisoner. How?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that your entire security team is now in the custody of the Nepalese authorities. You have no security here, and anyone who wants to leave will.”

“No one will dare to leave me,” he said, jutting out his chin.

“Actually, it appears that almost all of them want to leave you,” said Red, staring out into the valley below. “I should have known that you fed Brittany a line of bullshit about me. I should have been man enough to get my daughter.”

His ex-wife just stared at him, not saying anything in her own defense. Without a second thought, Janine lifted her rifle, killing Sukarta in his bed. Blood soaked through his silk sheets onto the ancient stone floor. The woman just stared at her, then pulled a knife from between the mattress, stabbing herself in the heart.

Red started to move forward, then just stopped, staring at the distraught look on his ex-wife’s face.

“I’m sorry, Red,” said Janine.

“Don’t be. If it hadn’t been for you, I would have never known what happened to my daughter. I didn’t even know that she was missing. What kind of father does that make me?”

“One who is out of touch with his little girl. A young girl who needs you desperately right now. What do you say we find some place for all these women and children and then

get home. You need time with your daughter, and I need to wait for my boyfriend to get home.”

Red nodded at her, snapping a photo of Sukarta’s dead body. They would want proof that he was gone. Downstairs and outside, there was a circle of women refusing to leave.

“You’ll freeze to death here this winter,” said Piper. “There is no way to keep those caves warm enough for all of you. Sukarta is gone.”

“We’re not leaving,” said Clara. “This is where our future, our destiny, is to be held.” Red looked around at all the faces, finally seeing the one he never thought he would see.

“Dad? Pops?” she cried, running toward him. She leaped into his arms, hugging him.

“I didn’t know,” he said, rubbing her back. “Your mom said you didn’t want anything to do with me and that I needed to stay away.”

“No! No, Dad, I wanted you to come for me. Mom was losing it, Dad. Seriously, she was losing her mind. That’s why Al left her.”

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry,” he whispered into her hair. “We have a lot to catch up on, but it looks like you’re going to

be living with me for a while.”

“I think I’m more than okay with that, Dad.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Receiving word that Sukarta was dead was a relief for all of them. Knowing that the Girl Squad and the others were unharmed was elation. They were headed home with one additional passenger.

The women and children who left Sukarta were taken to a refugee station, where they would be given the option of returning to their homes or moving on.

As for the women who stayed, they notified the authorities about them and asked that they send someone to try and convince them of the foolishness of staying. It might work. It might not. But their conscience was clear.

“Any word from Grandpa?” Billy asked his father.

“None. I know they’re okay. I can feel it. I just wish I could hear it and see it for myself. It would make me feel better.”

“Well, if there really are yeti out there somewhere, it would be cool to know. I mean, hell, there are ghosts. Why can’t there be yeti?” Eric smirked at his son, nodding.

“I’m sure comms is tracking them. They may not be able to communicate with us, but at least we know where they are.”

“Now, what about Pasquale?” asked Billy. “What does he want with that plutonium, other than the obvious?”

“Hey, I think you guys need to come and see this,” said Tiger, pointing to the antiquated television. “That’s Pasquale.”

“What the hell is he doing?”

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your time today. I’m excited to announce the newest technological advancement from Pasquale Industries. We are changing the world by taking a weapon of war and making it useful for all mankind. By using plutonium from nuclear weapons and raw forms, we have developed a heating source that will solve the world’s energy and heating problems.”

“What the hell,” muttered Billy. “Is that possible?”

“According to Montana, it isn’t,” said Sly in their ears. “We’re all watching this as well and feel the same way you all do. It’s an interesting idea but hardly believable, considering his history. However, he may have gotten desperate nations to sign on.”

“Damn. Think about it,” said Eric. “If Russia, China, any other nation with population, income, natural resource issues hear of this, they’ll want this new source. That gives them access to plutonium, legally!”

“Shit, he’s found a way to get them what they want under the ruse of helping to heat their nation. Once they have it, they can re-purpose the plutonium for whatever they want,” said Billy. “This is going to create more issues than we could possibly imagine.”

“Well, we’ve taken the big haul away from them, but now we have to get inside Pasquale’s headquarters and figure out how to stop him.”

“Noah has an engineering degree,” said Billy. “Maybe we get him and Montana to apply for jobs inside the company.”

“We’re working on that now,” said Sly. “We’ve submitted their resumes for consideration. Montana has already received a call, which is interesting since her specialty is in weapons engineering.”

“That does not make me feel warm and fuzzy,” said Billy. “It’s like giving the kids the keys to the candy store.”

“Or,” said Tiger, taking a step toward them. “Or he could be doing what we all fear. He’s telling the world this is for an energy problem. The world believes him, and he gets to walk right into all our enemy nations and hand them ready-made nuclear devices.”

“We have to get to him,” said Billy. “Even if it’s trying to take him out with a sniper rifle, we have to take him out.”

“It won’t stop the people who are trying to get the plutonium,” said Hiro from comms. “I think there’s a bigger game here, and we have to figure out what it is. We can try to figure out the end game here and then work backwards. But we have to get some people on the inside. And that includes me.”

“Hiro? Brother, what the fuck are you doing?” asked Billy.

“I’m going to be interviewing for a job in the tech department. According to their website, they need someone that helps to create systems for complex technology that could involve dangerous assignments. Their words, not mine.”

“Hiro, are you sure, brother? Maybe we send Tanner with you as well.”

“Way ahead of you,” said Tanner. “I’m going to be Hiro’s boss if things go well. In fact, we need to head to our video interviews right now.”

“Be careful, brothers. I appreciate what you’re doing,” said Billy.

“Hey, we can’t wait to meet your girl,” said Hiro. “We hear she’s amazing.”

“She’s more than amazing. She’s the woman I never knew I needed or wanted. One minute, I was thinking I was going out to kill Sukarta, and then next, all I wanted to do was keep her safe. I’ve never felt anything so strange in all my life.”

“That’s how it happens, brother,” laughed Tanner.

“They should be there by late tomorrow for all of you to meet her. Do me a favor, Tanner? Make sure my mom is the first to get there. I know how Mama Irene can be sometimes, and I don’t want her to scare Janine off.”

“What do you mean, scare her off?” yelled Irene’s voice. Billy winced, scrunching his face, realizing his mistake. The others all chuckled, shaking their heads.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Mama Irene. It’s just that, well, sometimes you’re a lot coming at a new person. Janine is, she’s special to me, and she’s got this big scar on her face that she’s self-conscious about.”

“Baby, I know she’s special,” she said softly. “That’s why you found a way to get her home. Don’t you worry. I won’t run her off.”

“Thank you, Mama Irene. I can’t wait to see you,” he grinned. Comms went dead, and he looked at the others, his father shaking his head.

“When are you gonna learn. That old woman can hear, feel, see everything. She might not be a ghost or a yeti, but she’s damn sure not human,” smirked Eric. He looked at his son, seeing the mirth but also concern on his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling that we’re missing something. That and I want this to be done so I can get home to my girl. She’s it, Dad. I mean IT. I don’t give a damn about the scar on her face.”

“Nor should you,” he laughed. “That scar tells me what kind of woman she is, and she damn sure won’t take any shit from you. You needed a woman like her to make sure you

were in your place. I think she's it, and I think your mother is going to love her."

"Oh, no," said Billy.

"Oh, no? Oh, no what?" frowned Eric.

"We suggested engineers go to Pasquale, but I didn't even think about Mom being an engineer." Eric's eyes went wide, and he shook his head.

"Hell, no. Fucking hell no. Where's the sat phone?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the lobby of Pasquale's headquarters, there were dozens of applicants applying for jobs with the new energy division. The promise of high salaries, loads of perks and benefits, and freedom of 'creative license' when it comes to development.

Among the applicants were some familiar faces. Tanner and Hiro were sitting in the area that was designated for IT applicants.

In a nearby section, Sophia Ann, Montana, Noah, and Liffey were waiting in the engineering area.

One by one, the applicants were called back to meet with panels of interviewers. When Montana's name was called, she stood and straightened her suit, walking toward the middle-aged secretary.

"Good afternoon," she said, smiling at Montana.

"Afternoon."

"This is just a formality, Ms. Divide." Montana nearly corrected her, then realized the team had used her maiden

name on the resume.

“I’m confused. A formality? Am I not interviewing?”

“Oh, yes. I’m sorry. I should have been clearer. You will be interviewing, but your resume was quite impressive, and the team was very happy with your virtual interview. You’re practically a shoo-in,” she smiled. Montana nodded at the woman.

Of course, she would be a shoo-in. With a PhD in weapons engineering and her resume accolades, they would be stupid not to hire her.

Stepping into the conference room, Montana smiled at the faces smiling back at her. At the head of the table was Furman Pasquale. He looked up and smiled at the curvy woman. He knew that she was over fifty, but damn if she didn’t look thirty-five. Her flaming red hair and curves were making his body hum. A little overtime with the hot redhead, and he’d have himself a new plaything.

“Ms. Divide, I cannot tell you how happy we are that you’ll be joining our team,” he said, grinning. Montana chuckled, shaking her head.

“No offense, Mr. Pasquale, but I haven’t been made an offer yet, nor do I know what I’ll be working on. I like to know that things have promise and possibility before diving in.” She caught the flash of anger in his eyes and congratulated herself at bringing that out in him.

“You know, Ms. Divide, it’s interesting that there are several engineering applicants from G.R.I.P. Are they going under? I’m familiar with some of the radical innovations they’ve created for the government, but I thought they were doing well.”

“They are doing well,” said Montana, “but they’re under new management, and it’s created conflict within our teams.” The others could hear everything that was being said in Montana’s interview. They would know to send the same rumors, helping to reinforce the new division of VG.

“I hate to hear that,” he frowned, the hint of a smirk at the corner of his mouth. Montana wanted to smack it off his face. “Joel? Would you kindly explain to Dr. Divide what we’ll be doing?”

“Of course,” said the older man, nodding. “We’ve always known that certain types of plutonium can be heat conductors, but we’ve found a way to take all forms and

transfer their energy into heat conducting devices. We'll literally wipe out the energy crisis." The man smiled at her, and Montana burst out laughing. His smile disappeared, replaced with anger, and Pasquale stood from his chair.

"I'm sorry," she said, controlling the laughter, "but it's not possible. The emission of toxicity once the plutonium is heated would kill anyone within a thirty-mile radius. Minimum." Pasquale's head turned quickly, staring at the older man.

"N-no," he stuttered. "No, that's not right. We've found a way to control it. No one will be exposed."

"I'm sure you're very good at what you do," said Montana, standing from her chair, "but this is an impossibility and will kill more people than it will help. You would need to find a way to create a reactor-like device, similar to that of nuclear energy plants, to control the output of the plutonium."

Montana turned, thanking them all, and headed toward the door.

"The interview isn't over, Dr. Divide," said Pasquale. "I have questions for you."

“That seems moot if you don’t listen to my warnings. Listen, I have three colleagues sitting out there that could validate my concerns.”

“Get them,” Pasquale said to the secretary. She nodded, opening the door and calling Noah, Sophia Ann, and Liffey into the room. When they entered, they seemed surprised that all four were standing there.

“Dr. Divide, please explain to your colleagues what we’re trying to do,” said Pasquale. Montana nodded, telling the others what the man named Joel had said. They all chuckled, shaking their heads. She could practically see the steam coming from Pasquale’s ears.

“Leave the room!” he said to the interviewers seated at the table. “All of you!” When the VG team tried to exit, they called them back.

“I am sorry, Mr. Pasquale, but I agree with my colleague,” said Noah. “This cannot be done.”

“I agree,” said Sophia Ann.

“You’re the design engineer, correct?” asked Pasquale. She nodded at the man. “Listen, I’m looking for a team that I can trust. I need a brilliant team that will understand that

sometimes genius comes at a cost. I have contracts waiting to be filled, and I need them filled.”

“No offense, Mr. Pasquale,” said Liffey, “but we can’t fill contracts that can’t be worked. As the other three have said, this cannot be done.”

“It doesn’t have to be done,” he smiled. “Please, take a seat. I have a great deal to tell you. But first, here are your contracts.” He slid several folders down the table. As they opened them, they all realized he was offering something, that for the average person, would be too good to turn down.

Salaries were set at more than three hundred thousand, with bonuses for hitting goals at thirty percent of pay quarterly. You received a condo appropriate for family size, a company car, corporate credit card, and twelve weeks of paid vacation. No one could turn that down.

“That’s quite generous,” said Montana.

“Generous enough to sign?” he grinned. Montana nodded, signing the contract and praying that the legal team could get them out of it. The others followed, signing it and sliding the paper back to him.

“Now that you’ve signed the contract, which includes a non-disclosure agreement, I can tell you the details.”

“I thought the details were providing a new energy source to countries that need it,” said Sophia Ann.

“Don’t be naïve, my dear. The world would not let me get my hands on this much plutonium if they knew what we were doing.”

“And what are we doing?” asked Noah.

“Simple. We’re creating nuclear-powered computer systems that can explode on command, killing everyone in the building where it resides.”

“You’re creating a super weapon?” frowned Liffey. Pasquale laughed at them, shaking his head.

“No. I’m creating chaos.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“He’s doing what?” yelled Billy.

“Listen carefully,” said his mother. “If nuclear-powered computer systems for the average person or business were put in place, there would be no guarantee of containment of the plutonium. He’s not even concerned about that. What he’s doing is creating supercomputers that every nation will want, believing that they control their new energy systems. Once those energy systems are live, he can send a code to the computers, and every plant, every location where these reside will blow.”

“He’s going to make it look like other nations attacked them,” said Eric.

“I think so, honey,” said Sophia Ann, staring at her husband and son.

“We’re just waiting on Dad and Team Big to return from their, uh, excursion, and then we’ll head home,” said Eric. “When do you all have to report to work?”

“Tomorrow morning, seven a.m. sharp. He wants us to have this system ready to be installed by the end of the month in all countries. I don’t think he knows yet that his team failed to get the plutonium from the monastery. He made a reference to a large quantity arriving this week.”

“Does he know what it looks like?” asked Billy. His mother looked confused. “I mean, if he has no clue what it actually looks like, maybe we can create something that would at least suffice. We need to get more details on all of this. We’ve got to find out who he has contracts with and if they’re going to be detonating or is he.”

“We could probably fool him into believing we have it. Get with the others at G.R.I.P. and see if they can put something together. Right now, we’re headed to our lovely new condos on the Raritan River near Rutgers.”

“Headquarters is in New Jersey?” asked Eric.

“Yea. We were a bit surprised as well. We all thought it would be in Silicon Valley, or maybe even Arizona or another hot tech spot. But, nope. New Jersey.”

“Be safe, babe,” said Eric, staring at his wife. “Stay close to Liffey and Noah.”

“I know, I know,” she smiled. “I love you both and can’t wait to see you.” The screen went black, and Eric looked at his son.

“We need to get there. Now.”



With Sophia Ann in New Jersey, her twin Susie, Lauren, Lena, Kate, and Gabi met the women at the plane. Red stepped off with Brittany, holding her hand tightly.

“I’m glad you’re finally here,” smiled Mama Irene, walking toward them. “We got a room all fixed for you in your Pop’s cottage. I’m sure you’ll be fine until you decide if you want to go off to college or not.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know you, do I?” asked Brittany.

“Britt, this is Mama Irene. She and her family own everything you see here. They’ve been very good to me, and I’m sure they can help you deal with what’s happened.”

“I’ve dealt with it, Dad. Mom made her choice. Sukarta over me. Now, why in the world would that bother me?” she frowned.

“Ah, teenage hostility,” smiled Ashley, walking toward them. “I recognize that. Hello, Brittany. My name is

Ashley.”

“Let me guess. You’re a therapist.”

“Something like that,” grinned the woman.

“Brittany, apologize. I don’t know what your mother expected from you, but I expect a well-behaved, kind, decent young woman. If you can’t be those things, then we’ll have to find another arrangement for you. I love you, and I know we have a lot of work to do, but you will not disrespect my friends and the people who are trying to help.”

The young girl stared at her father and then swallowed, nodding at him.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m really sorry, all of you. It’s just not easy knowing what my mom did.”

“That’s why we’re all here, honey,” said Ashley. “We’ve all had our unfortunate events, and we’ve helped one another get through them. I think we can help you too. Your dad said you were a great student, an athlete, all of that.”

“H-how did you know that?” she asked, staring at Red.

“I kept track of you, Brittany. Your mother said for me to stay away, but I wanted to know that you were alright. I

thought these last few months, you might have been exploring before you went to college.”

“You kept track of me?” she whispered.

“I was trying to be respectful of your mother’s wishes, but I wasn’t about to not know what was happening in your life.” She wrapped her arms around her father, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you, Dad. Thank you for telling me that.”

“I’ll bet you could use some clean clothes,” smiled Ashley. Brittany nodded, smiling at the woman. “Why don’t you come with me, and we’ll get you whatever you need, makeup too.” Red watched as his daughter disappeared with Ashley. He turned to Mama Irene.

“I’m so sorry for her behavior,” he said.

“Oh, ain’t nothin’ I haven’t seen or heard before, Red. You forget, I had six daughters of my own, and they all had their unique dispositions,” she grinned. “She’ll figure all this out with the help of Ashley. Don’t you worry.”

“I don’t know how to be a dad, Mama Irene. I don’t know anything about it,” he said, shaking his head.

“Especially to an eighteen-year-old girl.”

“We can help you with that,” said Nine, walking toward him with Wilson. “We’ve had a bit of practice. Let’s take a walk.”

Mama Irene gave the two men a wink, nodding as they took Red for a walk through the hedges. The crisp autumn temperatures made her tighten the wrap around her shoulders a bit more. Turning, she walked back toward the other women, seeing the one she really wanted to meet.

“You’ll love it here, Janine,” said Susie. “We always have something going on, and we’re kept busy with more contacts than we can handle.”

“It’s so beautiful here,” she said, smiling at the women. “I won’t lie to you. I was incredibly nervous about meeting all of you. I mean, I know you’re his aunt and that his mother looks just like you, but if she’s as nice as you, I’m going to be okay.” The women laughed, nodding at her.

“My sister is nicer than me,” laughed Susie. “She’s working on this very case, so I’m sure you’ll meet her soon enough. Oh, this is Mama Irene.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” said Janine, reaching out a hand. To her surprise, Mama Irene reached out, cupping her cheeks, and kissed them both.

“You’re a gem. A beauty. I can see why our Billy wanted you for his very own,” she smiled.

“Wow, you guys really know the right thing to say to a girl,” she giggled. “I’m not sure how it all happened so fast. I mean, one minute, we were on a mission together, nodding at one another as we passed, unable to speak. Then we’re both prisoners, I escaped, and all I could think about was getting back to him. When I finally got him out, he was bad for a while, but I knew I couldn’t leave him.

“But it’s all happened so fast. I mean, crazy fast. I was always led to believe you fell in love over weeks and months or years. Not a few days or weeks.”

“Oh, honey, things are very different here,” smiled Lena. “Kate, why don’t you give her the advice.”

“Advice is something I could use right about now,” she smiled.

“Love is so very hard to find that when you do, recognize it as the gift it is. You should hold it gently. Don’t squeeze too hard, but don’t let it go. These men are different in every way. Their lives have been entirely about protecting others, with no thought as to who would protect them. Expect that they’ll be overbearing, alpha in every way. But recognize

how unbelievably special that is and that they've chosen us to be by their sides. He will protect you, but you will protect him as well. He will drive you mad with his overprotection, but he will soothe you with his love and adoration of you. And there is nothing like the love of one of these men."

"I felt that, you know," grinned Janine. "Even though he was sick, he was injured, he was protecting me. Always concerned for my safety and well-being. I've never had a man treat me that way. Most were terribly insecure when they found out I was a soldier. Then, when the knife incident happened, well, not many men looked my way."

"Then they were all idiots," said Gabi. "Have you asked a plastic surgeon about reconstruction?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I was worried that it would make it worse."

"Well, I can guarantee it won't be worse," said Gabi. Janine stared at her. "I'm offering, if you want it, Janine. I've had great luck with scar revision, and I think I can help you. It won't go away completely, but it may be less noticeable, especially under makeup."

"Really?" she said with a hopeful breath.

“Really, honey.”

“Could we do it soon?”

“Any time you want.” Janine smiled at the others,
nodding her head.

“I think I’m going to love it here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

Billy and the team landed at 0320, silently walking to their own cottages. He knew that Janine was probably in his place, and he was grateful his family had made her welcome. Quietly opening and closing the door, he quickly showered and crawled beside her in the bed.

Turning, she faced him and smiled.

“You’re naked,” he grinned.

“So are you,” she laughed. “I was kind of hoping you would get home before dawn.”

“Me too,” he said, kissing her face.

Running one hand up the curve of her thigh to her waist, he rested it there while she moaned against his mouth, rubbing her body against his. Her velvety soft skin made his cock harder than it had ever been, already releasing the built-up energy within.

“I need you, Billy,” she whispered.

“Oh, baby, I know. I can smell how badly you need me. Condom or no condom?” he asked. “You know I’m clean.”

“Me too, and I’m on the pill,” she said. “I want to feel you.”

“Fucking yes,” he growled. His massive body kneeled between her legs, pushing her knees apart for him. She reached up, stroking his thick, long cock, wondering if it would rip her to pieces.

“I’ll go slow,” he said, smiling at her.

“Don’t go slow on my account,” she laughed. “I’ve been dreaming about that for quite a while now. Actually, since the moment I walked into the commander’s office. All I could see was this tall, muscled, cinnamon skin, golden eyes with a very odd lavender ring around them. Having met your aunt and Mom, I get it. You’re so beautiful, Billy. So perfect.”

“Baby, I am nothing compared to you.”

He touched the head of his dick to her warm, wet opening and gently slid inside. Stopping, he let out a slow

breath of excitement, then inched forward as she opened wider for him, wrapping her legs around his back.

Janine had perfectly formed breasts. Not too large, not too small. They were perfect for him, and the rosy-pink nipples hardened as he nibbled on them, his tongue wrapping around her sensitive flesh.

“Shit, you fit me perfectly,” he moaned.

“You’re a little big,” she grinned, squirming against him.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, stilling inside her.

“No. No, you’re stretching me, and I’m accommodating, which is wonderful. I need this, Billy. I need to release, and I want to feel you inside me.”

“You won’t have to ask me twice,” he said, picking up speed. When she arched her back, raising up off the mattress, he knew she was close and needed it desperately. Together, they cried out in the night, falling in one another’s arms.

Tired and sated, they fell asleep to the cold November winds blowing outside. When the rain started around 0500, Billy just rolled over, pulling Janine tighter to his body. By the time they made it to the cafeteria for breakfast, the rain had

stopped, but the ground was soaked, smelling of damp earth and fresh moss.

“One of your doctors, Gabi, is going to do a scar revision on my face,” she said, looking at Billy.

“Is that what you want?” he asked. She shrugged, and he reached across, taking her hand. “Baby, I don’t care about that damn scar. I love you, Janine. I love you just like you are. If it’s something you want, then do it. But don’t do this for me.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she smiled. “But I think I want to try to make it better. I know the doctors did what they could in the moment, but I’d like it to not be the first thing people see when they meet me.”

“Alright then, we’ll get it done. When can she do it?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, smiling at him. “I know that you may have to go to New Jersey, but she’s able to get this done quickly, and it will be outpatient. Your aunt and Mom will be here to help me. In fact, your grandmother said she would be in the surgery room.”

“Then you’ll be in great hands.”

“Where are your dad and the others? I thought they were returning with you. They returned on a different flight, but they got back late last night or this morning, as well. We’ll see them at the morning meeting. Which reminds me, we have to get to the morning meeting.” He grinned at her, and she laughed, shaking her head.

“Glad you told me. I wouldn’t want to be late on the first day.”

Billy was greeted by the team, slapped on the back, and welcomed home, while Janine was met with open arms, hugs, and kisses. Just as the meeting was about to begin, Tailor, Bodhi, Rory, and Frank walked in.

Eric and Billy stared at the men, the others anxiously waiting to hear what they’d seen or found.

“Well?” asked Red. Tailor looked at the three men beside him, then at the others.

“We did what we were sent to do. That’s all anyone needs to know.” It was uncharacteristic for Tailor. He was the loud, talk-about-anything guy. But not today. Rory, Bodhi, and Frank had blank stares on their faces, all looking somewhat pale and out of sorts.

“Tailor,” said Trak, staring at his old friend. “What did you see?”

“I’m not sure that matters, old friend,” he said with a small grin. “We finished what we set out to do.”

“But Grandpa, are they real or not?” asked Billy.

“Maybe one day you’ll find out.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The four men refused to say anything else, and the others didn't push. There was another, more serious matter at hand. Listening to the meetings with the team at Pasquale's headquarters, they knew that he was up to no good. If the computer systems could be detonated remotely, he was probably planning to blow them and pit countries against one another.

"I think we have to figure out who he's spoken to in these other countries and what was promised," said Luke. "I hate to say this, but we need to send a few men to each of the locations."

"I'll go," said Bodwick from the back of the room. "I know the men involved in Russia and China. Those will be the most difficult to talk to. I'll take Sly and Code with me. They both speak Mandarin."

"I'll go," said Trak. "I speak Russian."

"Trak, you're supposed to be retired," said Cam.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," he frowned. "I'll go." They nodded at him, assigning the teams. When the

meeting ended, Bodhi, Frank, Rory, and Tailor left the room. Before he could get out the door, Miller pulled back on Frank's arm.

“Son, what happened on that mountain?” he asked.

“I'm not sure I could ever explain it, Dad. Tailor took the lead. We were following these odd tracks that the monk took us to. Tailor was about fifty yards ahead of us and called back for us to stay where we were. We saw... I don't know. Shadows, I guess. We heard shuffling and maybe grunting or something.” Frank ran his fingers through his hair, looking away and then looking back at his father and the other men. There were tears in his eyes. “I don't know what we saw. I just know it was beautiful.”

Walking away, Trak followed the young man, then in the distance, saw Tailor walking slowly down the oak-lined main road. His friend never walked slowly or quietly. He would not let him carry this burden or suffer alone. He would not.

Following his same path, he crept up slowly beside him. Tailor grinned.

“I've learned to hear you comin' up on me,” he smiled. Trak just nodded, not saying anything for several

moments.

“I’m worried for you,” he said softly.

“Don’t be,” said Tailor, turning to his old friend, gripping his shoulder. “I’m okay.”

“You don’t seem okay.”

“Do you remember the first time we saw the ghosts? That feeling that we were seeing something unusual, so other-worldly, that it would never leave our brains.” Trak nodded. “It was that feelin’, Trak. It just isn’t something I can explain. I’m not sure what I saw, but I believe I was the right man to see it. The others too.”

“Keep it close to your chest, my friend. The world would destroy whatever it was and take its magic.” Tailor nodded as Trak hugged him, a very uncharacteristic thing for him to do. Walking away, he heard Tailor call out to him.

“Hey, Trak?” he grinned. “I ain’t the only who slaps my feet when I run.” Tailor grinned and continued down the pathway, Trak just staring at his big, wide back.

“We always knew you were yeti,” he grinned to himself.

Tailor and the others would never speak of their adventure again. It was an unspoken agreement they'd made amongst themselves, with the monk, and perhaps with whatever they saw on that mountain. But it was their secret to keep and their treasure to protect.



Billy held Janine's hand as they waited for Gabi and Lucinda to come in. They were there strictly for the pre-surgery consultation and to hear what the gifted surgeons had to say. Lena came in first, hugging her massive grandson, kissing him soundly.

"It's all going to be alright," she said, smiling at Janine. "We're going to take great care of you."

"Grandma, I'm worried that I might have to leave this afternoon. Will you take care of her for me?"

"Now, that's a stupid question," she frowned. "Of course I will. Between all of us here, your aunts and uncles, she'll be well taken care of." The door opened, and Gabi and Lucinda came in.

"Good morning," smiled Lucinda. "How are you feeling about all this?"

“Nervous. Excited. Worried. All of it, I suppose,” she laughed nervously. Billy rubbed her hand, assuring her that everything would be okay.

“That’s all normal,” said Gabi. “But we’ve done things like this before. We’ve helped a number of our own team members, as well as others that have come to us for assistance. We often help women who have been abused, doing scar revision or removing tattoos.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” said Janine. “I don’t know if you need to know, but this was done with a khukuri, a common knife in the Middle East. It was rusted and dirty and, unfortunately, dull. I just remember feeling the intense pressure of him trying to break the skin. The doctors were initially more worried about infection than anything else. I think it’s why the scar looks the way it does.”

“Did they not repair it right away?” asked Gabi.

“No. The medics stitched it quickly, but the doctors reopened it then had to debride it several times. When they were sure there was no infection, they finally went in, but by that time...”

“It was already healing,” said Lucinda.

“Yes. Can you still help?” she asked, filled with hope.

“We definitely can,” smiled Gabi. “Think of it this way. You’re going to get a facelift before your time. In order to ensure that we don’t pull the scar too taut, we’ll need to nip the other side, just here, beneath your cheek.” She touched the underside of her cheek, running her finger along the jawbone.

“I can’t believe this is really going to happen,” she smiled.

“0700 tomorrow,” said Gabi. “If you’re gone, Billy, Lena and I will come and get her from the cottage. Don’t worry about her. This will be a relatively quick procedure. Once she’s alert and we don’t see any signs of infection or concern, we’ll take her back to your grandparents’ cottage. Then Lena can keep an eye on her.”

“I can stay if you want me to,” he said, looking at Janine. She shook her head.

“I think I can manage this with all these amazing women,” she smiled. “You forget, I know what it’s like to be mission deployed. Do what you have to do to stop Pasquale, and then come home to me.”

“That’s right,” he said, kissing her. “We’ve got a wedding to plan.” Janine’s eyes went wide, opening her mouth slowly as Billy kneeled in front of her, pulling out the large sapphire and diamond engagement ring.

“I should have warned you that things move quickly around here. I called ahead to Mama Irene, and she got the ring for me. I thought it might be nice to get married Thanksgiving Day. I mean, will you marry me Thanksgiving Day?”

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Well, don’t keep him waiting,” laughed Lena. “I need great-grandchildren. Soon!”

“Grandma,” said Billy, rolling his eyes. Janine only laughed.

“Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you, Billy Bongard. I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.” Gabi laughed, nodding her head.

“Now, that’s what I call a successful consult.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Two hours before her scheduled surgery, Billy kissed her soundly after having made love to her since 0300. She didn't fight it, knowing it would only help her to fall asleep on the operating table. Besides, no one in their right mind would fight making love to Billy Joseph Bongard. The man was made for pleasure.

By 0600, Lena and Gabi were knocking on her door. She was dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt as they loaded into one of the heated ATVs.

“Janine, this is Cruz and Doc, two of our nurses. They're the best in the business.”

“Uh, okay,” grinned Janine. “Is this a joke?”

“A joke?” frowned Doc.

“I mean, do you prance male strippers before patients to calm their nerves? Is that what this is?” Both men laughed, shaking their heads.

“I assure you, sweet girl, we are not strippers. Although I do, on occasion, strip for my beautiful wife.”

“Oh, God! I’m so sorry,” she said, covering her mouth. “I really thought, I mean, oh shit, never mind.”

“Don’t worry about it,” laughed Lena. “These guys get that a lot. When we throw Wilson into the mix, things really get hormonal around here. They were all medics in Special Forces. They saw some of the worst combat and worst injuries you could imagine.”

“Even worse than this?” she frowned, pointing to her cheek.

“Way worse, honey,” said Cruz. “You’re going to be right as rain in no time.” He started the IV and slowly injected the medication, asking her to count back from one hundred.

“Why one hundred?” she asked. “I mean, that seems so silly. Why not start at the beginning? One, two, three, ninety-seven, ninety-six...” The doctors and nurses smiled at one another then began the procedure.

An hour into it, Gabi frowned.

“There’s a piece of the knife still in here,” she said. “It’s tiny. Barely visible, but it was embedded in her buccal fat, here in the cheek.”

“She’s lucky she didn’t die from infection,” said Cruz, taking the tiny piece of metal.

“I’m more shocked that she didn’t feel it in her cheek. I’m going to bet it caused her some pain at certain times, either when chewing or if something were pressing on her face.”

“Alright,” said Gabi, “let’s begin the reconstruction.”

Another two hours and Janine was waking in the recovery room. Her face was hurting, but nothing compared to what she remembered from the first surgery. Doc told her about the piece in her cheek, and she remembered feeling discomfort at times if she slept on that side or pressed her hand against her cheek. It was astonishing that no one had found it before.

“I would have thought at least my dentist would have found it when doing my x-rays,” said Janine.

“He might have thought it was something intentionally left there. Who knows.”

“Did it work?” she asked him.

“I think you’re going to be very happy with the result, honey,” said Doc.

“Do I go back to the cottage now?” she asked. Cruz and Tailor walked in, smiling at her. “A security detail?”

“Nope. We’re takin’ you swimmin’,” grinned Tailor.

“Swimming?”

Doc lifted her, carrying her to the waiting ATV. They weren’t sure that there would be any additional benefit in taking her for a swim, but it was at least worth the try. The bandages were still on her face, the sutures hidden beneath the skin. At the very least, it would speed her healing time.

As they drove in the ATV, Tailor explained the pond to her and the importance of keeping it secret. He told her of the schedule, the sister pond on the other island, and the need to be naked.

“Naked? Hey, look, I’m sure you’re going to be a great grandfather-in-law, but getting naked with you does not feel right,” she said with concern.

“Don’t worry, little bit. I’m not going to get naked. As long as you can swim, you can get in by yourself. Just trust us. Trust the process.”

Standing on the dock in the frigid winds, everyone except Lena and Lucinda turned their backs while she

stripped. Helping her in the water, when she was in, the men turned around.

“It might feel wrong, Janine,” said Cruz, “but go ahead and duck your head in the water.”

“Are you sure? When this first happened, I couldn’t get it wet for like ten days.”

“Trust the process,” they all echoed.

She grinned, nodding at them, and pushed herself below the surface of the water. At first, she felt nothing, then a slight sting and something she couldn’t identify. When she emerged, she touched her cheek.

“It feels odd,” she said, looking up at them. They were all smiling. Lena handed her a mirror, and she stared at herself, tears spilling from her eyes. “It’s barely visible. It’s like a scratch line, white, but not puffy and raw.”

“I think that’s as good as it’s going to get,” said Lena, “but it’s a damn sight better than what it was.” The men turned as Janine swam back to the dock. She pushed herself out, toweling off and redressing.

“I can’t believe how good I feel. I’m not feeling any of the post-surgery effects of grogginess or aching. That’s just remarkable.”

“You look beautiful,” said Tailor, hugging his wife beneath his arm, kissing the top of her head.

“I’m so lucky to be a part of this family,” she said, shaking her head. “With Billy gone, what do I do now? Do I need to start training with all of you? Wait. Do I need to apply for a job? Oh, crap! Do I have a job?”

“Calm down,” laughed Tailor. “You got a job. You’ll start training with everyone soon enough. For now, I believe you got a weddin’ to plan. Maybe you need to call your folks and get them out here.”

“I hope they’ll come,” she frowned.

“Why wouldn’t they?” asked Lena.

“They were never fans of me joining the military, or at least my mother wasn’t. When they moved to Florida and retired, I saw them less, spoke to them less. I’m not sure why.”

“Is there something going on with them?” asked Cruz.

“That’s a good question. I guess I’ll find out when I call them.” She hugged each of them, kissing their cheeks. When she got to Tailor and Lena, she gave an extra hug.

“Thank you for welcoming me into your family.”

“Easy thing to do, little bit. Easy thing to do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad,” she said, waving at the screen.

“Janine! How are you? Oh my, your face. Your face is like it was,” said her mother.

“Deidre! Don’t be so rude!” growled her father.

“It’s okay, Dad. I had scar revision surgery, Mom. They did an amazing job, and I’m feeling much better. But I called because I have other news for you. I’m getting married!”

Janine wasn’t met with the exhilaration and excitement she’d hoped for. Instead, they frowned, staring at one another. Swallowing back her disappointment, she spoke again.

“He’s a wonderful man. He’s a retired Army Ranger Special Forces officer. Incredibly brave and smart. He’s very tall, muscular, and he has this amazing family with mixed heritage.”

“So, he’s a black man?” asked her mother. Janine felt as though she’d been slapped. “I mean, it doesn’t really

matter, I suppose. Honestly, we didn't think you'd ever get married, so this is quite a surprise to say the least."

"To answer your question, Mother. Yes, he's black, Navajo, and Caucasian. It's what makes him such a beautiful, wonderful man. But none of that matters. None of it. He's the man I love and the man that loves me."

"Well, we're happy for you," said her father with a strained smile. "Don't get us wrong, Janine. We were truly hoping for a good future for you. In fact, we thought you'd come visit us when you returned stateside. We have a neighbor who has a son that we thought would be a good match for you."

Janine couldn't believe what she was hearing. All these years of being alone and her parents had never mentioned fixing her up with anyone. Never. Why the sudden change?

"Why don't you come down and meet him before you jump into this," said her mother. "I mean, this relationship certainly seems awfully sudden, and I wouldn't want you to make a mistake or anything."

"Mom, I'm not jumping into anything. I've known Billy for a while now, and I've never had a man treat me so

well, love me so well. He's my future. He's the man I'm going to marry, and I had hoped you would be at least a little excited for me."

"I'm sorry, honey," said her mother. "I just think you're jumping at the first man to offer you a compliment."

"A compliment? What in the hell are you talking about? Do you honestly believe that no man before him has complimented me? How narrow-minded are the two of you? Did you think this, Dad? Did you?"

"Janine, don't get upset, honey. Listen, you know how we felt about you joining the Army. We were concerned for you. I was all for you doing what you wanted to do, but it took some convincing for your mother. We thought it would be a phase. Then it was four years, and then eight years, and well, you weren't done with your phase."

"It wasn't a phase, Dad. It was my career. I chose to serve my country, and my job was important. I can't believe you guys. Is this why you haven't kept in touch? Is this why you've distanced yourself from me?"

"Look, we have a life as well," said her mother.

"When you had your injury, it was difficult to look at you, knowing that you could choose to leave at any time. As I said,

now we have to explain to our neighbor's son why you won't be coming to meet him. He would have been perfect for you. He has a large scar as well, down his arm." Janine could barely breathe she was so angry.

"You should have never promised something you couldn't follow through on. You never mentioned this to me. You never once said anything." She took a deep breath, slowly releasing it. "I guess this means you won't be coming for the wedding."

"Janine, it seems silly to come to a wedding that simply will not last," said her mother. Janine was shocked by her statement. Hurt, but shocked even more.

"Well, it's good to know how you feel about this. In case it matters to you, his parents have been married for more than thirty years. His grandparents for more years than I can count. They're good, honest, hardworking, decent people, and I adore them. I'm sorry that you feel this way."

"Good luck to you, Janine." Her father gave her a curt nod, her mother not even bothering to say goodbye. She ended the call then turned slowly to see Lena, Lauren, Taylor, and Eric behind her.

“I never knew. I never knew they felt that way,” she said through trembling lips. “How could parents feel that way about their own child?”

“Come here, little bit,” said Tailor, opening his arms. She ran toward her new grandfather, hugging him tightly as Lauren, Lena, and Eric hugged her as well. “It’s alright. Somethin’ ain’t right with your folks, but we’ll figure it out. For now, you got family that loves you and wants you here. It’s going to be a beautiful weddin’, and all you got to do is pick the dress, flowers, food, and who will walk you down the aisle.”

“Walk me down the aisle,” she whispered, looking up at all of them. She turned to Eric, smiling. “Would it be weird if it were you? I mean, you were there with us in that cabin on the mountain. I knew instantly who you were and connected with you. You’ve been so kind to me.”

“It’s not weird at all,” smiled Eric. “I’d be honored. We’ve had more than a few occasions like this, and we’ve always been able to find a man to walk the bride down the aisle. No shortage of volunteers here, I assure you.” Lena and Lauren smiled at one another. Lauren held out her hand for Janine.

“Well, then. Time to go to the big house, or as well call it, wedding central.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

“General Zhi, thank you for taking the time to meet with us,” said Bodwick. “We know how busy your schedule is. These are my colleagues, Sylvester DiMarco, Will Erickson, and Joseph Redhawk. The General squirmed a bit but said nothing. “Sylvester and Will both speak Mandarin if you prefer to speak in your own language.”

“I speak English,” he said plainly. Bodwick nodded.

“General, we are aware that you have been in touch with Pasquale Industries regarding their new technology for energy. Is that correct?”

“Yes. As you know, we are a country bursting at the seams, and with oil and coal prices increasing steadily, many in our population do not have heat in the winter months. It can be extremely cold in the north.”

“I remember,” smiled Bodwick.

“Yes, I seem to remember you being in our north without authority,” said the general. He let that sit for a

moment, then grinned at the other man. “It was a different time, Mr. President.”

“I’m no longer president, as you are well aware.”

“I am aware. I think your country needs you. Back to Pasquale, we are in discussions with him to install the new systems. They will place five massive servers and more than two hundred computers into a dedicated building that will allow for the energy to be dispersed and to be controlled by our engineers.”

“Sir, we believe it’s more than that.”

“Conspiracy theories, Mr. Bodwick?” he grinned.

“I don’t think it’s theories, sir. Hear me out.”

Michael explained how they believe the computers could be used to create a detonation of the plutonium. The general frowned at him but asked him to continue. When they were done, he stood, pacing around the room.

“General, we are genuinely concerned about this,” said Code.

“Yes. I can see that you are. But I wonder if this isn’t some trick to keep the technology away from my country. Perhaps it’s something the Americans want to control.”

“Sir, I can assure you it is not something we want to control. This is a very serious matter, and we are genuinely concerned for your safety, and the safety of your people. Our own president has suspended all contracts and potential work with Pasquale Industries. We are very concerned about his practices.”

“We are at the end stages of negotiation with Mr. Pasquale,” said the General. “His tech team is working with our technology experts to ensure that the technologies can be married with what we currently have. I’m not the expert in this, believe me. I hate my phone, and I hate my computer even more.”

“I feel the same way,” frowned Bodwick. “Sir, all I can ask is that you give this some thought. We’ll be making similar visits to other countries. I hope you’ll consider what we’ve said.”

“I will definitely give it some thought,” he nodded. “You were a good president, Mr. Bodwick. You were truthful and a good diplomat. I find no reason why you should be any different now.”

The men shook hands, bidding one another farewell. As they headed out on their next flight, they were somewhat

concerned about the next location.

“Russia, here we come.”



Moscow was a contradiction. Structures hundreds of years old, surrounded by modern buildings of glass and steel. The familiar onion domes gleamed with gold in the afternoon sunlight. The massive complex of Red Square, known for housing the KGB and other unsavory agencies, stood waiting for them.

“Is that where we’re going?” asked Sly.

“No,” said Trak. “We’re meeting an old enemy.”

“Say what?” frowned Code.

Trak didn’t bother to reply. It would be too difficult to explain. Perhaps even too painful for him. Young men make great enemies. Old men make for reflective comrades. His history in the military was long, dark, and fraught with tales too horrible to tell. This man they were meeting knew one of them.

Stepping inside the small café, they took a seat in the corner and waited. There were two other men in the room, both very obviously military. Trak said nothing, just staring

straight ahead as they placed their order for tea and sandwiches.

When the front door opened, the two men stood and left the café. Trak stood from his seat and waited for the man to stop in front of him.

“The Delta Devil,” he said calmly.

“The Russian Hammer,” said Trak. The old man smirked, shaking his head.

“Why do you still look like the young man I faced in the battlefield, and I look like my grandfather?”

“We’re all old, comrade. Believe me, the lack of wrinkles doesn’t begin to define my creaking bones and aching joints.” Bodwick, Code, and Sly knew that there was no creaking or aching with Trak, but he was playing the game.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” he said, staring at the other man.

“Nor I, but this is important. I’ve brought some colleagues. Sylvester DiMarco, Will Erickson, and Michael Bodwick.”

“President Bodwick,” nodded the man.

“Just Michael, sir.” He looked at Trak and smiled.

“I’m no longer in the military, as you may know. I am a consultant for our energy department. I suspect you’re here to talk about oil distribution.”

“No,” said Trak. “We are not. We understand that you are in talks with Pasquale Industries, and we may have some information that you need to know.”

Unlike the Chinese, the Russians had loads of questions that didn’t seem to stop. Most were around the idea that the Americans were up to no good. But when Code heard something about the use of the internal infrastructure, he interrupted the man.

“Excuse me, sir, but did you say that they would be using your current infrastructure to attach to the new system?” asked Code.

“Yes, that’s right. They assured us that it was completely safe and wouldn’t be able to access anything other than their own programs.”

“Respectfully, sir,” said Code, “if they are attached in any way to your systems, they can create what’s referred to as a backdoor and enter.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” said Bodwick, “that they could get into any of your computer systems with the right hackers. I’m talking military files, secret government files and programs, personnel data, anything.”

The Russian stood, pacing back and forth in front of the men. If this was true, he could lose his job, be executed, or sent away for putting the nation in jeopardy. He didn’t like the Americans, but he respected Bodwick and Redhawk. They were honorable men who fought for what they believed in, and it was usually for good.

“I think we need to speak further.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

While they were tackling obstacles in Russia and China, Max, RJ, and Carter were dealing with a very stubborn government official in India. Carl, Ben, and Joseph were chasing down a Malaysian official who didn't think the meeting was important and decided to take an extra-long lunch.

But at Pasquale Industries, the group was being forced to proceed with a plan they didn't agree with.

“How are we supposed to make this work but not make it work?” asked Sophia Ann.

“Look busy,” said Noah, drawing plans from his drawing board. “If he wants this to work, he can get rid of us and find someone to make it work. We need to find out if there is any other plutonium or if he was counting on our find.”

“There's more,” said Montana, walking toward them. “I was just given a tour of the manufacturing facility, which is a joke, by the way. There is nothing in there that could do

what he's telling them it could do. If anyone with an engineering background walked through there, they would know immediately it was all a hoax.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Sophia Ann.

“I think we have to get the plutonium out of that warehouse. Without it, he's stalled. He can't do anything. I know that the tech boys could interfere with the cameras, but there are a lot of guards back there. At least ten.”

Noah stared at her, wondering why she was worried about ten little men. She smirked in his direction and shook her head.

“They're very well trained, Noah. He made a point of telling us that they were ex-Mosul.”

“Mosul,” he frowned. “Why would they be helping him?”

“I don't know, but it brings another layer of concern to the whole situation. I mean, if Israel, Palestine, all of that powder keg is involved, what are we really facing here?”

“That is what we will find out,” said Noah.

“That's not all. They're trying to recreate some of our engineering. I think he wanted us here to help with that as

well.”

“We have to make sure we don’t do that,” said Sophia Ann. “Use our NDA with G.R.I.P. as an excuse, or that it’s unethical, something. We can’t let this man get hold of anything we’ve worked on before.”

“I agree,” said Montana. “Let’s head back to the hotel. I’ve been pushing back on us moving into the apartments because I have a sneaking suspicion that he’s tapped the rooms and is recording all the conversations that people are having. He may even be filming them.”

“Creep,” murmured Sophia Ann, shaking her shoulders.

“Well, for now, we have to figure out what the creep is doing.”

Loading up to head home, they noticed that they were some of the last to leave the facility. The parking lot was nearly empty. As they pulled up to the security gate, Noah spoke to the guard.

“Are we late leaving?” he asked the man.

“No, you didn’t hear?”

“Hear what?”

“He fired almost everyone today. Said he only needed about twenty people to do what he needs. Everyone else was let go, including the guards in the manufacturing facility. Poor folks left their other jobs and came here hoping for a better life. Pretty shitty if you ask me, but I’m just a contract security guard.”

“Thanks, man.”

The car was quiet until they arrived at the hotel suite. Noah quickly scanned the area for bugs, not finding anything. When there was a knock on the door, they all tried to act casually, turning the television on. Noah looked through the peephole, his weapon at his back, and grinned.

“Ladies, I believe someone misses you,” he smiled.

Opening the door, Luc walked in first to lift his wife in the air, hugging her. Not to be outdone, Eric tossed Sophia Ann in his arms, kissing her soundly. Following them were Billy, Jalen, Benji, AJ, Hoot, Chase, and Jak. The same team had been in the mountains with them.

“I’m so glad to see you,” said Montana, kissing Luc’s face. He smiled, kissing her back.

“I seem to remember you saying that when I pulled you out of a bayou ditch,” he grinned.

“Yea, but this time, I mean it,” she laughed.

“Are you okay, Mom?” asked Billy.

“I’m good. How’s that beautiful fiancée of yours?” she asked, smiling up at her handsome boy.

“She’s great. Actually got her to agree to marry my ass the day after Thanksgiving. The grandmas and Mama Irene are with her now, God help her, planning everything. She had her scar revision surgery this morning, and it went great. You can barely see it, thanks to the pond.”

“I heard,” said Montana. “Gabi said they may have discovered that if someone has a horrific scar, if they re-open it, then place them in the pond, it may heal better. It’s awful to think about, but we’re still trying to figure it all out.”

“Speaking of,” said Luc, “what did you figure out here?”

While the team went over everything they’d discovered so far, Jalen and AJ went out to get food, wanting to avoid room service if at all possible. When they returned with three huge boxes of take-out food, the team dug in.

“We heard from the teams traveling that Pasquale wants to connect this system to their country’s infrastructure systems. That seems inadvisable,” said Billy. “With the right hackers, like our own, they could go in the backdoor.”

“That’s exactly what they’re doing,” said Hiro, raising his head from his laptop. “I’ve been trying to track this since we arrived. He keeps everything pretty close to the chest, and no doubt, he’s good. But we’re better.”

“Are you gonna share why you’re better, or do we have to guess?” asked Eric.

“I’ll share,” smirked Hiro. “He fired everyone because they were slowly figuring out what we already knew. The system is designed to gradually creep into whatever it’s connected to. Once it hits the main infrastructure, server, whatever it’s looking for, it’s almost like a slow-release valve where small incidences begin to occur.

“First, everyone will think it’s just a glitch and not worry about it. Then, they’ll send someone in to fix it. Once they open it to repair it, it opens the way for the entire system to infest their network. When that happens, he owns their internal computer systems. All of it. I don’t care how good you are; he’ll be able to get inside and find whatever he wants.

“If I were a betting man, and I’m not, I’d bet that he’s going to pretend to be some malware spy and hold them for ransom to release the virus. Once they pay the ransom, he releases the system to them, but he’s already got what he wants. They won’t know that, but he’ll have it all.

“At any point in time, he’ll be able to detonate the plutonium batteries from the servers and computers. It will look like the king of all industrial espionage.”

“But everyone will look at him,” said Hoot.

“He’ll be long gone by then,” said Tanner. “We did our own backdoor. Pasquale pays himself a generous salary as CEO of the company. That money goes into five separate bank accounts. Two Swiss, one Bahamian, and two in Cuba.”

“Cuba? Is he in bed with the Cubans as well?” asked Billy.

“No, but his ex-wife is Cuban. It keeps her mouth shut, and she lives a life of luxury in her native land,” said Tanner. “For anyone who has seen Pasquale, the man has a permanent tan. He’s not headed to Switzerland when this is done. My guess is that he has a place in the Bahamas.”

“Alright, maybe we expose this for what it is and meet our friend at his island mansion,” said Billy. “I know you’re in charge, Dad, as the senior leader here. But this was my last mission, and I have to finish it.”

“We’re all in charge,” said Eric. “Nothing has changed from the old leadership. You all know what you’re doing and know how to get your shit done. Just know that if we don’t stop this, it will look like the Americans are the winners in all of this. We have the support of Russia, China, and India. They’re going to stall Pasquale for a while if they can.”

“I think Mom and Aunt Montana are right. We have to find the other canisters of plutonium and get them out of there. Can we definitively get the systems off-line and get in there?” he asked Hiro and Tanner.

“My feelings are hurt,” frowned Tanner. “But since I like you, and you have a wedding to attend, yes, we can get them shut down.”

“I see everyone is still a smartass,” he grinned. “Okay, a little night work. Let’s eat and then go.”

“You’re eating first?” smirked his mother.

“Mom, we can’t catch bad guys on an empty stomach.”

Sophia Ann could only shake her head, realizing just how much her son was like his father and grandfather. It was a good thing. A very, very good thing.



The security guard was safely inside his small building, the arms down on the entrances. They could tell from the flash of light inside that he was watching a movie or some television show. With all of the employees gone, surely, he suspected that there was nothing to worry about.

Every few minutes, he’d look up at his security monitors, ensuring that all was quiet. Given the signal, Hiro made sure that they were all on a loop and nothing appeared amiss. The other men went around back to enter through the docks.

Tanner held up a small device, scanning the space to be sure they weren’t surprised by internal guards or dogs. It also scanned for any unknown cameras or listening devices. For all Pasquale’s tech genius, this seemed pretty lame.

“Over there,” said Luc. “Montana said the canisters were being held behind the manufacturing lines in those green

metal containers.”

Using the massive metal cutters, they broke the locks on all of the containers. Inside each were more metal containers, all locked.

“Do we dare open these?” asked Billy.

“Put this on,” said Eric. Billy stared at his father, holding a mesh suit. “Your mother developed it. I have to believe she knows what she’s doing. She said it would prevent any of the toxin or radiation from getting to you, but you have to be quick.”

Billy pulled the mesh suit over his head. It was really more like a dress, not allowing for much movement. Opening the containers, he saw the same types of canisters of plutonium that he’d seen in Nepal. Nodding to the others, he secured them once again, locking them tightly.

“Let’s get them out of here,” he said to the others. It only took them a short while to get them removed from the facility and on the plane to Washington and the DOD. Back at the hotel, they showered and crawled into bed, hoping for a few hours of sleep before reporting to work the next day.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Montana, Sophia Ann, Noah, Hiro, Liffey, and Tanner reported to work the next morning as usual. When they arrived at their desks, they noticed that they were nearly alone. Only a scattered few were seated.

“Is everyone sick?” asked Montana innocently.

“We’re not sure,” said one of the designers. “A big group was called into a meeting at the end of the day yesterday, and then they all disappeared.”

“That’s because I let them go,” said Pasquale, smiling at the team. “I have my ‘A’ team. I don’t need anyone else. That does put a lot of pressure on all of you. You see, I need my systems ready to be deployed in three days. I’ve got some serious people who want this, and they won’t take no for an answer.”

“But we’ve told you that this won’t work the way you want,” said Sophia Ann.

“You’ll make it work in a new way,” he smiled.

“Come with me.”

They followed him down the stairs and into the massive manufacturing facility. Nothing was moving, making the quiet pronounced as their heels clicked on the concrete floors.

“We’ve got you all on audio and video,” said Billy.
“Act naturally and just try to play along. We need for him to admit what he was trying to do.”

No one said anything. There was no need. When they stopped in front of the metal containers, Noah knew what he was going to do. In a grand, theatrical gesture, he would reveal his great find and then tell them all how it would be used.

Before leaving the night before, they’d replaced the locks, sliding the new keys on the keyring in his office. Hopefully, he wouldn’t see the difference.

“Inside these containers is the item that will make us all rich. All famous. When this job is done, we’ll be able to retire to anywhere in the world.”

“Sir, no offense,” said the designer from earlier, “but what you pay me won’t allow me to retire.”

“Good news, Studie, you’re going to be receiving the equivalent of ten years’ pay. IF. If you can make this happen in three days.”

Sophia Ann felt a bit of guilt. These people were counting on this money for their families. They may not know what they were being asked to do, but it most likely wouldn’t matter.

“Mom, I see that look on your face. We’ve done our homework. Tim Studie is a great designer, but he’s also done time. He did ten years for money laundering and another five years for writing bad checks. Sweet little Karen over there, she did six years for property damage to her ex-husband’s car and home and for setting his girlfriend’s car on fire. These people are not sweet and innocent. They will do what he asks without question.”

Sophia Ann gave a small nod, tapping her ear twice. She understood.

Pasquale pulled the big metal door wide and waved an arm behind him. His audience was not reacting the way he’d expected. They glanced around his body, staring at him, and shrugged their shoulders. Turning sharply, he gasped.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, this can’t be.”
He raced to the other containers, opening each one, only to find them empty.

“What are we supposed to be seeing?” asked Studie.

“Did one of you do this?” he growled.

“Do what?” asked Montana. “We don’t know what you’re trying to show us. Plus, we all worked in the engineering rooms upstairs. We did the new employee tour, but other than that, I’ve never been down here.”

“Me either,” said Tanner.

“Me too,” said Studie. Looking panicked, he walked a few yards away, grabbing his phone and dialing a number.

“He’s dialing the number for Genia. Obviously, no one will answer. Now, he’s dialing the number for one of the others. The Nepalese government was supposed to allow her access if he called.”

“Where is it?” he shouted. “You know what I want. Where is it? You and that bitch, Genia, were supposed to get it for me. Now, she’s not answering her phone. It was just a bunch of fucking monks and that over-sexed Sukarta. You should have been able to handle that. Where is it?”

“Taken? What do you mean, taken?” He was silent for a long time, pacing back and forth. Suddenly, he threw the phone against the wall in a fit of rage. Turning back to the wide eyes, he frowned. He dialed another number and they all waited.

“Grandover? I need plutonium now. No, your fucking job isn’t done!” he screamed. Well, that answered that question. Grandover was the one who originally knew of the plutonium. “Get me more. What do you mean you can’t? Where are you? Where are...” He threw his phone against the wall, turning to see the shocked faces.

“Go! You’re all released from your contracts. Go!”

“But, sir, we signed NDAs. If we can help, we will. What is it you need?” asked Hiro.

“I need a miracle. Do you have one of those in your pocket? I need a fucking miracle and a shit-ton of plutonium.”

“Is that all?” smirked Sophia Ann.

“Yea, that’s all,” he mocked.

“Okay,” said Montana.

“Okay?”

“Yea, okay. How much do you need, and what are we doing with it? Because this is damn sure not about energy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“How is the fake plutonium coming along?” asked Montana, staring at Doug and Ryan.

“You don’t ask for much, do you, Aunt Montana?” said Ryan.

“Well, I like to keep you smarty-pants kids on your toes. I wouldn’t want you to think you can pull one over on us old folks.”

“We’ve got it here. It looks like the real thing, but if he opens it, it damn sure won’t be the real thing. You should all make sure you’re out of the room.”

“Well, he’s got the government agent from Malaysia flying in today for a demonstration. We need that immediately.”

“Evie and Savannah will be landing soon. Jak and Benji will be your delivery drivers. You’ll have it by the time you hit the office.”

“Thanks, everyone. Wish us luck.” Montana turned, staring at the room. “This just got very real. We have to make

this look like the real thing. I'm not even sure how to do that.”

“Leave it to us,” said Liffey. “Noah and Hiro had a great idea on making a fake program as well. They copied what Pasquale had started with and then were able to modify a few things to make this appear as if it's valid. Once he hits the key, the turbines will spin as if the plutonium, or fake plutonium, is creating energy and heat.”

“We have also arranged for a bit of a surprise,” said Noah. “Our contacts from China, Russia, and India will be present as well. What they are going to see on the screen is Pasquale's new technology getting into their computers.”

“This should be fun,” smiled Sophia Ann.

“No, it won't be fun. He's going to lash out at the employees. There's no telling what he might do, and if the others get wind of what we've done, they may turn on you as well. I need you to get the hell out of there.”

“Listen, Grandover was tracked to a small island near Fiji. The feds are picking him up now. He'll be court-martialed, and more. But don't worry about this. Noah made a fail-safe,” said Hiro. “Once they see what's happening to the computer systems, the alarm bells will go off that there has

been a leak in plutonium. All of you will run. And I do mean run.”

“Run, right,” said Montana, standing and turning toward the bedroom.

“Babe, what are you doing?” asked Luc. She looked down at her feet and grinned.

“Changing out of my heels and into comfortable flats.”



Pasquale paced back and forth in his mansion house, watching as the crates and boxes were loaded on the trucks. He had dozens of homes around the world, but no one knew of this place. No one. It was his sanctuary on the Jersey shore.

His Cuban wife hated it. The water was too cold. The winter was too cold. The people were cold. She was fucking cold. An iceberg in bed. That is until she met the hot Cuban carpenter he'd hired at her insistence to expand the boathouse. He was expanding something else as well, his wife's traitorous pussy.

“Careful with that!” he yelled. “That painting is priceless.”

“Yes, Mr. Pasquale.”

“I have your word that this will arrive at the mansion in the Bahamas in three days,” he said.

“Yes, sir. Three days. We’re taking all of this directly to the ship, and we’ll be sailing straight away. There shouldn’t be any issues with customs. We’ve taken care of that.”

“Good. I have a feeling I may need to get down there quickly,” he frowned.

He wasn’t sure what happened, but someone had sabotaged his entire operation. His first thought went to the new hires from G.R.I.P. The problem was they were so honest it was pathetic. They couldn’t tell a lie if their lives depended on it.

No, it must be one of the others. That’s what he got for hiring convicted criminals. Initially, it felt like the right thing to do, but now, he knew it wasn’t. Somehow, someone had gotten wind of what was in the containers and removed it.

Were they selling it on the black market? Were they giving it to a competitor? Or maybe they were planning to use it themselves on his design? The G.R.I.P. team had found him more plutonium, so it wasn’t them. It couldn’t be.

Sitting on the one chair left in the mansion, he opened his laptop to look at the security screens from the last three nights. Nothing stood out. Nothing. People came and went in the same manner they always did. Nothing was disturbed in the warehouse or manufacturing facility, and the offices were dark.

“Sir, it’s time to leave,” said his driver.

“Get my bags, Phil. I’ll need to get to the private jet immediately after this. I have a feeling something is very wrong.”

As Pasquale stepped into the backseat of the town car, his driver pulled away as the last of the boxes were loaded into the truck. With the mansion locked up, a For Sale sign in the front yard, he had no intentions of returning. He’d leave the cold behind and finally make a life for himself in the warmth of the islands.

Across the street, hidden beneath an old beach shack, Benji smiled as the car pulled out of the driveway. This was a man who knew he was in trouble.

“The bird is flying your way,” he said into comms.

“Good luck, little birdie.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“I’ve never thought about a wedding before,” said Janine. “I mean, I suppose at some point I thought about it like every little girl. I just didn’t think it would really happen to me. Especially after the injury, I was sure that no one would want to marry me.”

“Well, it’s really happening,” said Lauren. “You know, I think my wedding dress might fit you. We’re about the same size.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t!”

“Why not? I’d be honored to let you wear it. It was custom-made by Angel’s sister. She has a famous bridal boutique on the East Coast now. I know it would be beautiful on you. My daughters wore their own gowns. I’m a bit taller than them. I could save it for any granddaughters I might have, but those seem few and far between.”

“You really don’t mind?” she asked.

“Not at all. It’s just collecting dust in the closet. Let me get it for you to try on.”

Lauren disappeared into the back bedroom, reappearing a few moments later with the dress. Janine slipped it on in the bathroom, realizing that it fit like a glove. Lauren was bigger in the chest, but that could probably be tailored for her.

“Well?” Janine spun around, turning left and right, staring at the delicate train. She looked at the faces of the other women and knew it looked alright.

“Oh, wow,” said Lauren with tears. Lena nodded. “You look so beautiful.”

“Well, I don’t think I fill this out quite like you did,” she smiled. Trak walked into the room and grinned.

“No, not quite. But you are as beautiful as my bride was, Janine.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I love it, Lauren. It’s perfect.”

“Let me call Gwen, and she can get up here and fit it for us.”

Twenty minutes later, Gwen came running into the cottage with her sewing kit, ready to pin the dress for

adjustments. There wasn't much to do, and it wouldn't take her any time at all to get it done.

“Will it be ready by Thanksgiving?” asked Janine.

“Absolutely. We'll have it done for you in no time,” said Gwen. “In fact, I have the perfect shoes for you. What size do you wear?”

“A nine usually.”

“Great, I'll bring them up later for you to try. What about flowers?”

“Mama is taking care of that,” said Claudette. “She was putting together some bouquets for her to choose from. You know how she is. She has a vision for each bride and knows what to choose. I'll learn one day.”

“I'm sure you're learning just fine,” smiled Lena.

“I hope so. It's a lot, y'all. I never realized how much Mama does around here. I mean, I knew, but I didn't. Everything we see, everything we smell and touch, she has her hand in that as well. The way the cottages are designed, furniture, paintings, meals, the gardens, all of it. Hell, she even decorates the school. Did y'all know that?” They all

laughed, shaking their heads. Mama Irene was a woman not to be reckoned with.

Janine looked at the woman, so much like her siblings. They were all remarkably beautiful with their auburn hair, laced occasionally with a sprinkle of white. Their whiskey-colored eyes were identical. But it was the lack of wrinkles that were catching her eye now.

“I don’t mean to pry, but your mother must be ninety?”

“Closer to a hundred, Janine,” said Claudette. “You know about the pond, right?”

“Yes, it helped to heal the scar on my face. It’s amazing, and I couldn’t believe it when I saw how well it worked.”

“Well, Mama and Pops have been swimming in that pond for years. Long before any of us. We think it helps to keep aging at bay, and we’re not quite sure how. It’s our secret, and we don’t tell anyone. If you watch Mama walk or Pops work, you’d think they were thirty years younger, at least.”

“It’s truly a magical place,” smiled Janine. “I’m so lucky to have met BJ, I mean Billy.”

“BJ is a name he left a long time ago,” smiled Lauren.
“He thought it sounded too much like a little boy. Sometimes, we still call him that, but he’s still our little man.”

“Also, you should know that you meeting Billy wasn’t luck,” said Lena.

“Oh, I know. We were assigned to the same mission. Our commander was the one that put us on the same team. I just meant I was lucky to be on the team.”

“Honey, that’s not what she meant,” said Claudette.
“We all think Mama has a sixth sense with these things. That maybe she’s, well, blessed with certain gifts.”

“Like fae?” asked Janine.

“Interesting that you went with a fairy,” smirked Lena.
“Most would say a witch or voodoo.”

“But aren’t voodoo and witches bad? I mean, I know in movies, there’s always a good witch, but I think of her more like a fairy. She helps those that need it but gives her help only to those she loves, those that are deserving. Plus, she’s like this tiny tidal wave that sweeps across and just washes all the bad away.”

“Maybe you’re right, but she’s had a hand in almost every marriage on this property. She and Pops just seem to know who should be together and who shouldn’t be.”

“Have there been a lot that they didn’t think should be with someone?” asked Janine.

“Well, with Miller, there was one for sure. The boys got smart and didn’t bring home girls they knew weren’t gonna meet with approval. Marie’s first husband, he was a horrid man, and Mama and Pops did not like him. Hell, none of us did. But sometimes we make mistakes.”

“Maybe sometimes we need to,” said Janine. They could see the sad expression on her face and knew she was feeling a loss at not having her own small family attend her wedding.

“I wish your folks would reconsider,” said Lena.
“Family is very important to all of us.”

“Well, I’ll have to be happy with all of you as my family.” The door opened with a burst of wind, and in came Irene, carrying a huge basket of flowers.

“I think I have the perfect bouquet for you, baby.” She reached into the basket and pulled out a colorful collection of

flowers that shouldn't even be in bloom at this time of year.

“We have tulips, crocus, hyacinth, and lily of the valley. I think they're perfect.” The twinkle in her eyes could not be missed.

“Mama Irene, I may have been a soldier, but a girl knows her flowers. Those are flowers of forgiveness. Are you trying to tell me something?”

Irene handed her the bouquet, seeing it with the backdrop of the dress. The others all smiled, nodding with tears in their eyes.

“Baby, forgiveness is the hardest thing in the world to give. You can't go into a marriage with an open heart if you're angry at your mama and daddy. They've made their choices. You don't know why and, quite frankly, don't need to know.

“All you need to know is that by forgiving them, you set your heart free to be open for all the love our young Billy is gonna give you. Loving a man is a powerful thing, baby. Powerful. It can consume you, eat you alive. Or it can nurture you and feed your soul. The love of a good man will keep you warm and safe. It will help you to make all the right decisions

in your lives and will always, always make you eager to come home.”

“Mama, please don’t talk about sex with you and Pops,” grinned Claudette.

“Oh, hush! Sex is natural, and it’s a part of loving one another. After all, I had fifteen children, I know a bit about lovin’. But I was talkin’ about love. Let your disappointment and anger go, baby. Hold those flowers close to your chest and just inhale.”

Janine stared at the older woman and pulled the bouquet to her nose. She took in a deep breath, smelling the fragrant scents blended together. At first, she smelled them individually. Then, their combined scent filled her head. As she released her breath, it was as if huge, strong arms were wrapping around her, holding her. She opened her eyes to see the smiling faces.

“I can’t believe I actually feel better,” she grinned.
“That worked.”

“Of course it did! It always works. Alright, we got the bouquet. Now it’s time to taste the cakes. Let’s go. Dylan and Sara have baked up a buffet for us.”

By the time they were done tasting all the cakes, Janine was so overwhelmed she couldn't make up her mind.

"I just don't know," she said, shaking her head. "They were all so good. What's his favorite? What does Billy like the best?" Lena and Lauren smiled at one another, then looked at Irene.

"It's the same as his grandfather's," said Lena. "Mama Irene's coconut cake."

"Is that this one," she asked, dipping her fork in for another bite. Lena nodded. "Then that's our wedding cake. Coconut cake. Lucky for him, coconut is one of my favorites." Mama Irene smiled at the young woman, nodding.

"Lucky for him indeed." She left the table, walking back to the kitchens.

"What did she mean by that? Is that what you all were talking about?" she asked. Lena laughed, shaking her head.

"That's exactly what we mean, honey. Exactly."

CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

Waiting on the manufacturing floor like good children, they all were nervous when Pasquale showed up in his limousine outside the dock doors. He spoke to his driver in a low voice, nodding at him, then walked toward the steps. He came into the room, nervous himself, and that only made them all more nervous. When another limousine pulled up, he waited for the Malaysian to step out.

To say he was shocked when three additional men showed their faces was an understatement. He was visibly shaken. Turning pale, Montana kindly got him a glass of water.

“Are you alright, Mr. Pasquale?”

“What? Oh, yes. Just a few additional guests I didn’t expect to see,” he frowned. “Get ready. All of you get ready to demo the system.” Taking their places, they watched as he nervously shook hands with each of the men.

“What a surprise, gentlemen. I wasn’t expecting all of you.” He tried to give a big flashing smile, the white of his

teeth more emphasized by his dark tanned skin.

“We’ve been talking and thought it might be best if we all saw what you were doing. You know, collectively,” said Zhi.

“Yes, of course. Well, this is my engineering, design, and IT team. They’re the best the world has to offer.”

“We’re nothing without your program,” grinned Liffey. Pasquale frowned at him, but Liffey just played stupid, continuing with the big smile.

“Show us,” said the Russian.

“Of course,” said Pasquale, clearing his throat. He opened the program, and the big turbines spun, creating a vortex of heat. The men nodded, then looked back at the screen. The flashing, flickering screens seemed unusual even to novice computer users.

“What is that?” asked Zhi.

“It’s just the system working to integrate with your own systems,” smiled Pasquale. Zhi stepped forward, staring at the information scrolling across the screen.

“Integrate? Is that what you call it? We call it spying,” said Dinal from India. “You’re inside our treasury files.”

Pasquale turned, staring at the screen.

“No. No, that’s not possible,” he said breathlessly.

“Obviously, it is possible,” said the man. “Move aside.”

The four men crowded around the screen then pointed to Hiro.

“You, come here. You’re the genius technology expert. Look at this and tell us what we are seeing?”

“Uh, well, sir. You are correct. Those are the files for the treasury of India. And on this screen,” he said, clearing his throat, “those are the files for the KGB in, uh, Russia.”

“And those are the files for Chinese military defense programs,” said Zhi. He turned, searching the faces.

“Pasquale? Pasquale? Where did he go?”

“We don’t know, sir,” said Hiro.

“Can you shut this down?” Hiro nodded, happy to shut down the dummy program he and Tanner had created.

Pasquale obviously took off, but he wouldn’t get far. He might make it to his beach, but that euphoria wouldn’t last.

The four men refused to leave until Hiro could assure them that everything had been shut down and burned. When Zhi

explained to the others that they could all be trusted, they were satisfied.

“What about the plutonium?” asked the Malaysian.

“There was never any plutonium,” said Sophia Ann, hoping her lie didn’t show on her face. “It was all a lie on his part. We knew that it couldn’t be done, but he asked us to create something anyway. We apologize for the ruse.”

“No apology necessary,” said the man. “It appears you’ve saved us, our governments, millions of people, and trillions of dollars.”

“I wish we could do more,” said Noah.

“Is there any way to make this work?” asked Zhi.

Noah shook his head.

“I wish there were, sir. We would be more than happy to consider any suggestions you have, but for now, it does not work.”

“Understood.” The men left the way they had come. In a limousine together. As for Pasquale, they knew he was headed to his private jet.

“What do we do now?” asked the others.

“Be glad those men didn’t kill us all. They weren’t exactly thrilled with what they saw, and I can’t blame them. If they had wanted to, we would have all been eliminated right here,” said Liffey, hoping to put some fear into them. “I’m going home.”

“I’m not leaving without getting some of my pay,” said one of the women. “I think the laptops upstairs should bring a pretty penny. I’m going to get paid one way or another.”

The others smiled at her, their criminal minds working together as one. In the end, they would steal more than seven million dollars’ worth of equipment, machinery, and furnishings in the Pasquale headquarters.

It didn’t matter. It would never be used again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“What about Pasquale?” asked Sophia Ann on the jet home.

“He’s being taken care of,” said Eric, kissing his wife. Billy smiled at his parents, hoping that he and Janine would still be that much in love in thirty years.

“We deserve to know how he’s being taken care of,” said Montana. “We risked our lives being inside that facility. I’d like to know that he won’t rear his ugly head again any time soon. The man is an egomaniac, and unfortunately, he has an IQ to match. He couldn’t make that system work, but it may work next time. Then what?”

Eric nodded at Noah, who turned on the television in the jet. It was a perfect photo of a beach mansion in the evening twilight. Lights were on inside, someone moving casually from room to room.

The camera view moved as if someone were walking with the camera. As they reached the veranda, you could hear Pasquale on the phone.

“What do you mean my assets are gone? I had nearly a billion dollars in your bank! A billion! Where is it?” He paced back and forth, practically pulling his hair out. “That’s not possible! You idiots! I’ll be there first thing in the morning, and you’d better pray this is handled.” He slammed the phone to the granite counters of the bar and poured a glass of whiskey for himself, plopping in the big chair.

The camera began to move again, coming up behind the man, a gun slowly being revealed and placed on the back of his head. He instantly stilled, swallowing.

“Your business associates want you dead,” said the voice.

“No. No, it was all a mistake. I can make this work. You have to believe me.”

“But I don’t believe you, and neither does anyone else.” With a jerk of the camera, the weapon fired, leaving a splatter on the lens. As the gunman wiped the lens clean, they followed his path out to the beach to a waiting boat.

“Who is that?” asked Sophia Ann, staring at the screen.

“Hi, Aunt Soph,” smiled JB. She gasped, holding her hand over her mouth.

“Joseph Billy Redhawk, you are in so much trouble!”

“Uh, actually not,” he grinned. “This was my mission. It always was. Delta just didn’t know the Rangers and Marines were looking for Pasquale as well. You guys just made it easier for me. Tell everyone I said hello and I love them. See you all soon!”

“Holy shit,” laughed Billy. “Cuz really knows how to make an exit. I like his style.” Sophia Ann grinned at her son, then snuggled tighter to her husband.

“Let’s go home.”



The news was plastered with the story of Pasquale and his failed attempts at hacking into the computers of foreign nations. His assets were frozen, his factories shut down, and his ex-wife mysteriously missing from her Cuban mansion.

Eleven former employees were charged with theft of company property and interfering with a federal investigation. No one seemed to know what happened to all of the other employees.

The days leading up to Thanksgiving were chaotic, but still held the normal business routines of morning meetings

and getting Janine used to the early morning workouts and team assignments.

In the end, she decided that the Girl Squad was the place for her. In some ways, it made Billy happy. There were fewer missions for them. In other ways, he was worried that she would still be out there conducting missions.

He had to manage the good with the bad. The bad was the danger. The good was that she was about to become his wife.

Brittany was finding her place at Belle Fleur. She'd enrolled in college for the spring semester, studying dental hygiene. She hoped to be able to help Londyn in the dentistry clinic one day. She was becoming keenly aware of all the handsome young men that would come and go from Belle Fleur. Many were too old for her, but there were a few that were catching her eye.

For now, she was adjusting to being with her father and everyone else. Knowing that her mother chose Sukarta, and death, over her, would weigh on her for some time. But Bree and Ashley were helping her to work through all of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Are you sad that your parents didn’t come, baby?” asked Billy, dancing with his new wife.

“Yes. And, no. I was angry, but Mama Irene taught me to forgive and let go. I don’t know what’s going on with them, but I hope whatever it is makes them happy.”

“Are you happy?” he grinned.

“Happier than I ever thought possible. I’m married to the man I could have never even dreamed of, wearing his grandmother’s wedding dress, in designer heels from the Gwen N’hana.”

“Wow,” he laughed, “that’s a lot to be happy about.”

“We never talked about children, Billy. I’d like to have a family one day. Not right now. This is all so new. But one day, I’d like to have maybe two or three.”

“I think I can handle two or three, baby. As long as they look like you, all will be good.”

“Funny, I was thinking they should look like you. We know they’ll be tall, that’s for sure,” she giggled.

“Well, I do have one short grandmother,” he chuckled.

“I heard that, big stuff,” said Lena, tapping his shoulder. “Give your grandma a spin around the floor.”

Janine laughed as the two went off, dancing and laughing. She felt a huge, rough bear paw against her hand and smiled.

“Hi, Grandpa Taylor,” she grinned.

“Maybe we just say Grandpa or Taylor,” he smiled. “How ‘bout a dance? I promise not to break your toes.” She nodded as he practically carried her onto the floor.

“Are you ever going to tell anyone what happened on that mountain?”

“You’re tall,” he said, ignoring the question. “Billy’s gonna appreciate that. I love my bundle of energy over there, but damn, my back hurts bendin’ over to kiss that woman.”

“I’m sure it’s a chore,” laughed Janine. She said nothing else, knowing that it was something Taylor didn’t want to talk about. But when he pulled back, his eyes watery, she frowned.

“It was beautiful, Janine. It was unlike anything you could imagine, and I damn sure can’t explain it.” She kissed

his cheek, hugging him.

“Then that only proves that you were the right men to be there. Whatever is on that mountain is safe.” As the music ended, he kissed her on the forehead and went back to his wife.

“You and Grandpa looked like you were having a serious conversation,” said Billy.

“Not serious, really. He’s amazing, you know. Both of your grandfathers and your grandmothers. They’re all just remarkable people, and I feel so lucky, so blessed to be here. Thank you, Billy. Thank you for choosing me.”

“Oh, baby, don’t you know I had no choice in this?”

“Yes,” she laughed, “I learned that Mama Irene may have a lot more to do with everyone’s futures than we believe. She’s pretty amazing if you ask me. And Matthew is no slouch. He took me on a boat ride through the bayou, showed me G.R.I.P., and the other island. He even told me this amazing story.”

“Yea, what was the story about?” Janine stopped, staring up at him again.

“You know, I have no idea, but when I figure it out, I’ll let you know.” He kissed her, laughing as they finished their dance.

“What do you say we begin our honeymoon, Mrs. Bongard?”

“You know, I think I might be wearing some very special lingerie from Charlie beneath this dress. Perhaps you’d like to see it?”

“Woman, you’d better take that dress off before I rip it off and have my grandmother furious with me.”

“Let’s go, yeti,” she grinned.

Billy could only laugh as they ran out of the tent toward their own cottage. Tailor laughed at them, Trak, Rory, Frank, and Bodhi standing beside him. The four Team Big members sobered, staring at one another.

“We did the right thing, Tailor.” He nodded, smiling at his friends.

“I know.” They walked back to their tables, finishing the evening with friends and food and music. A typical Belle Fleur night. In the back of the tent, their faithful spirits watched.

“Will they be alright?” asked Claudette.

“They will be,” said Nathan. “It will take some time to come to grips with what they saw, but they will be alright. They’re fine men.”

“It’s a big secret to keep,” said Yori. Nathan nodded.

“Yes, but they are big men. It will be kept.”

He took Martha’s hand and, hovering above the floor, spun her around for a dance. Yori grinned at them, watching as Claudette and Tony did the same, kissing one another sweetly.

It was funny that the others saw her as a child, but he saw her for the woman that she was or would have been. None of them was really sure, but it was a destined relationship.

“Someone is in trouble,” said Yori. Grip nodded, staring at the man.

“Someone is always in trouble.”

EXCERPT from JB

“Man, I need a drink,” said Tobias.

“You always say that, and you only drink one. We don’t need a drink; we just need a break. They’re using us non-stop, and we can’t keep up the pace. I don’t know how Grandpa did it for so many years on his own.”

“We’re Redhawks,” grinned his brother. “We keep going. In fact, I see something I might want to keep going with.”

JB rolled his eyes, watching as his brother approached the dark-haired beauty. One of the advantages of being Delta was that they were often in foreign lands for longer than a hot minute and could enjoy nature and the natural wildlife. Women included. Although JB was less engaged than his brother.

“You’re not going to have some fun?” asked the young woman.

He looked down to see a woman with light brown hair and light brown eyes. She didn’t appear to be from the islands, but she was stunning.

“My brother and I have different ideas of fun,” he said casually. “I don’t drink.”

“You don’t have to drink to have a good time,” she said. “I was just going to ask you to dance.”

“Dancing isn’t really my thing either,” he said quietly.

“Do you walk?”

“Walk?”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Do you walk? We could take a walk on the beach. It’s a beautiful evening.”

He looked at his brother, grinding against the woman on the dance floor. He knew where that was going, and it would include him being barred from the hotel room for the night.

“Alright, a walk on the beach.”

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
<i>RS 1</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<i>RS 2</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<i>RS 3</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<i>RS 4</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<i>RS 5</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
	Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan		
<i>RS 6</i>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
<i>RS 7</i>	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
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

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RS 18</i>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<i>RS 19</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<i>RS 19</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<i>RS 20</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<i>RS 20</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<i>RS 20</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
<i>MSB 5</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
<i>MSB 5</i>	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB 6</i>	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB 7</i>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
<i>MSB 8</i>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
<i>MSB</i>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
<i>SP 1</i>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
<i>SP 2</i>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
<i>SP 3</i>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
<i>SP 4</i>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
<i>SP 5</i>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
<i>SP 5</i>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
<i>SP 7</i>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
<i>SP 8</i>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
<i>SP 9</i>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	

<i>SP 9</i>	Ryan “Hawk” O’Neal	Keegan Oakley		
<i>SP 10</i>	Scott “Skull” Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O’Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
<i>SP 11</i>	Benjamin “Blade” LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<i>SP 12</i>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
<i>SP 13</i>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<i>SP 14</i>	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		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel “Axe” Mains	(d) Decker “Ice” McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlutti			
<i>SP</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
<i>SP</i>	Ian Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Conor Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	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
<i>RP 20</i>	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
<i>RP 21</i>	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
<i>RP 22</i>	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
<i>RP 23</i>	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fornet	Claudette Robicheaux		
<i>RP 24</i>	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
<i>RP 25</i>	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
<i>RP 26</i>	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
<i>RP 27</i>	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	
<i>RP 28</i>	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
<i>RP 29</i>	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
<i>RP 30</i>	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
<i>RP 31</i>	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
<i>RP 32</i>	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
<i>RP 33</i>	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
<i>RP 34</i>	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
<i>RP 35</i>	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
<i>RP 36</i>	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
<i>RP-50</i>	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
<i>RP-51</i>	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
<i>RP-52</i>	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
<i>RP-53</i>	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
<i>RP-54</i>	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
<i>RP-55</i>	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
<i>RP-56</i>	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
<i>RP-57</i>	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
<i>RP-58</i>	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
<i>VG-1</i>	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
<i>VG-2</i>	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
<i>VG-3</i>	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
<i>VG-4</i>	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
<i>VG-5</i>	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
<i>VG-6</i>	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
<i>VG-7</i>	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	(preg)	
<i>VG-8</i>	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
<i>VG-9</i>	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		
<i>VG-10</i>	Christian Martin	Winnie Pasko		

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Noa

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Lars

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Zulu – Book Four

Gunner – Book Five

Tango – Book Six

Razor – Book Seven

Ace – Book Eight

Hawk & Eagle – Book Nine

Skull – Book Ten

Blade – Book Eleven

Noah – Book Twelve

Tristan – Book Thirteen

Ivan – Book Fourteen

Griff – Book Fifteen

Bryce – Book Sixteen

King – Book Seventeen

Grant – Book Eighteen

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Jean – Book Two

Jax – Book Three

Hunter – Book Four

Carl – Book Five

Sniff – Book Six

Cam – Book Seven

Keith – Book Eight

Eric – Book Nine

Joseph – Book Ten

Ryan – Book Eleven

Nathan – Book Twelve

Ben – Book Thirteen

Sean – Book Fourteen

Kiel – Book Fifteen

Ian – Book Sixteen

Adam – Book Seventeen

Marc – Book Eighteen

Wes – Book Nineteen

Aiden – Book Twenty

Parker – Book Twenty-one

Dalton – Book Twenty-two

Frank – Book Twenty-three

Hiro – Book Twenty-four

Dom – Book Twenty-five

Bron – Book Twenty-six

Fitch – Book Twenty-seven

CC – Book Twenty-eight

Callan – Book Twenty-nine

Duncan – Book Thirty

Remy – Book Thirty-one

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Christian – Book Ten

Strange Gifts

Dark Visions

Dark Medicine

Dark Flame

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.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website insatiableink.squarespace.com. Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!

[\[PC1\]](#) When I hear base, I think of an Army base. But if they are at an Army base wouldn't they be arrested since they are considered AWOL?

[\[MK2\]](#) IT's the base of the mountain