

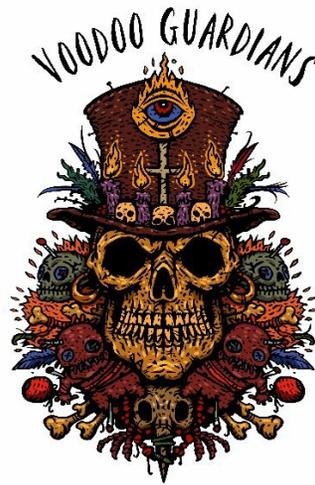
Mary Kennedy
COWBOY

Voodoo Guardians:
Book Eight

COWBOY

Voodoo Guardians

Book EIGHT



Mary Kennedy



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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

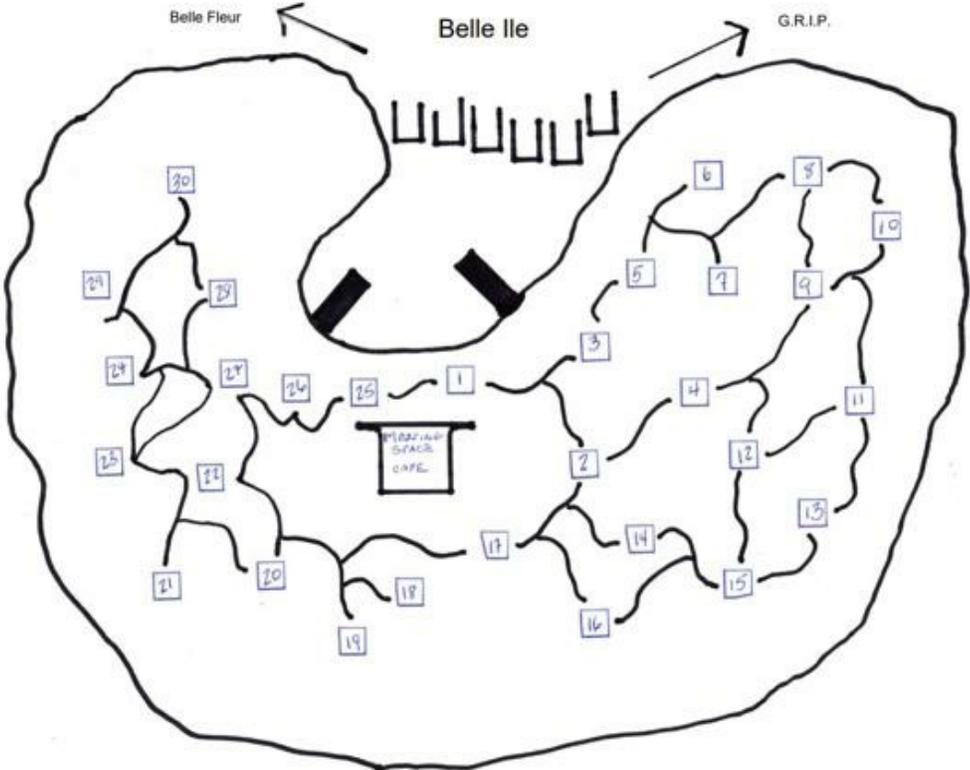


COTTAGE Assignments

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<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>		<u>45</u>		<u>76</u>		<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
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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		

CHAPTER ONE

Benjamin Alfonse LeBlanc was only six years old when he decided what he was going to be when he grew up. Everyone around him wanted to be a SEAL or a Ranger, or some other Special Forces member. Not him. He wanted to be a cowboy.

It all started when his Uncle King bought him a cowboy outfit for Christmas. He had a leather vest with leather chaps. Although it wasn't real leather, he didn't know that. It had a star on the vest to indicate that he was the sheriff. It had a holster with a toy pistol in it. And the best part in the whole world was the cowboy hat. He didn't stop wearing it the entire year.

When it came time to go to school, his parents explained that he couldn't wear the outfit to school because the other kids would be jealous and might not be able to get their own outfit. Benjamin understood, although he was very sad.

So, his Uncle King came to the rescue again, buying him his first real pair of cowboy boots. They were brown with a square toe, and they looked awesome with his new blue jeans. He was a cowboy!

As he got older and was assigned chores like the other boys, Benjamin was thrilled to be assigned to the animal division. He helped Lucy, Sniff, Dex, Marie, and the others with the animals they were training or

rehabilitating. He'd clean out the pens, muck the stalls, and feed the animals.

Other kids thought it was gross, cleaning horse or dog poop, but Benjamin knew that it was how you got to the good parts of the job. Playing with the animals. The dogs were awesome because they did whatever you told them to do. But it was the horses that really made Benjamin excited.

“What’s on the agenda for today, Cowboy,” said Sniff, smiling at the boy. Benjamin secretly loved that he called him Cowboy but didn’t tell him.

“I’m gonna try to get the mare to walk around the paddock,” said Benjamin proudly. He loved it when Sniff talked to him like a grown-up. It made him feel very important. Sometimes, he would come out to the animal pens with Caroline strapped to his chest. She was cute, for a baby. And a girl. But she didn’t compare to the animals.

“She’s still skittish, so you be careful. Take one of the bigger dogs with you.”

“Yes, sir,” he said politely, nodding at the other man. He loved Sniff. In fact, he loved all the men on the property. They were big, strong, wise, and kind. If he had to pick a hero, his father was number one, but all the other men came in at number two.

Sniff smiled at the boy’s politeness and watched as he hooked the

lead to the mare. She'd been used as a workhorse on a farm up in north Louisiana when she was brought to them for recovery. Violet, Lucy, Claire, and Dani stepped up for three days straight, trying to save the poor mare's life.

Only seven years old, her body looked like she was a hundred. She hadn't been fed or watered properly, and the work had been back-breaking. Now, she was gaining weight and learning to trust the people who rescued her.

"It's alright, girl," whispered Cowboy. "We're just going to go for a walk. I won't make you pull anything."

Sniff watched the boy as Lucy came up beside him, kissing him.

"He's so good with her," she said to him. Sniff nodded, hugging his wife tightly to his body. He never forgot that he'd almost lost her. Much younger than him, he was always worried that one day she might wake up and realize that he wasn't good enough for her. It surprised him every day that she adored him and loved him.

"I guess we're going to need to build a permanent pasture just for the horses we keep rehabilitating. It seems someone on this team can't let them go after they're better," he smirked.

"I know," she laughed. "It's a terrible quality to have when you're

rescuing animals. One day, we're going to need to open a zoo. But for now, they're my babies, and I don't want to let them go."

They watched as Benjamin slowly walked the horse around the fence line. She would place her snout on his shoulder every now and then, kissing his ear, and he'd laugh.

"You're getting stronger every day, Cinnamon," said Benjamin. Sniff and Lucy laughed. He'd named the damn horse, which only meant they couldn't let her go now. "It won't be long, and you'll be ready to move on."

Benjamin felt a funny feeling in his stomach and thought he might be sick. He stopped and turned, staring into the dark eyes of the mare. She nodded her head up and down, telling him she wanted to keep walking. Reaching out, he hugged her neck, then continued. He waved when he saw his parents standing next to Sniff and Lucy.

"Is he doing alright?" asked Blade.

"Brother, he's amazing. We couldn't do it all without him and the other boys, but he always wants to stay longer."

"We noticed," laughed Blade. "He's been late for dinner every night this week."

"I'm sorry," said Lucy. "I'll try to keep track of time for him."

"No, no," said Suze. "We love that he's found something he's so

passionate about. He spends as much time out here as he does working out with the other boys.”

“He’ll find his direction soon enough,” said Blade. “God knows, if he doesn’t want to go into the military, I’m not going to push him.”

“Hi, Dad. Hi, Mom,” he said, walking toward them with the mare. He released the lead, and she walked toward the water, away from the other humans.

“Hi, sweetie,” said Suze, ruffling his hair. “You’re late for dinner. Again.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, frowning. “Let me go wash up, and I’ll be right back.” He ran off toward the barn, washing his hands thoroughly. Running back to his mom and dad, they all walked together to the cafeteria, enjoying dinner with their friends and family.

For Benjamin, every day was the same. Wake up early, feed the animals, take a run with the other boys, go to school, do his homework, and go back out to the animals. He loved every second of it.

Racing toward the animal center, he arrived to see three police cars talking to Sniff and Lucy. Violet was crying against Striker’s chest, and Dex was holding Marie. He slowly walked toward them, and when Lucy saw him, she turned away.

“Cowboy,” said Sniff. “Son, we need to tell you something.”

“What’s wrong? Is Cinnamon sick?” he asked, looking for the mare around the paddock.

“No,” said Dex. “She got out of her stall last night. The lightning must have scared her. She got loose and was running on River Road. A truck headed to the city didn’t see her.”

Benjamin shook his head at the older man, backing up a few steps. He reached for his shoulders, squeezing him firmly.

“It couldn’t be helped, Benjamin. Both her legs were broken, and the only thing the sheriff could do was put her down. She was in too much pain.”

“No. No! Aunt Lucy could fix her or Aunt Dani. Aunt Violet, you could’ve fixed her, right?”

“Oh, baby, I wish I could have. Horses have to be able to stand, Benjamin,” said Violet. “With two broken legs, there was no way she would heal properly. There would have been too many complications.”

“Benjamin, we’re sorry, son. This is the hard part of working with animals when you love them so much. It’s hard to say goodbye.” The big tears were falling down his flushed cheeks when his father arrived, walking toward him.

“Benjamin, I’m so sorry,” said Blade.

“Dad,” he cried, falling into his father’s arms. Despite the size of the eleven-year-old boy, Blade picked him up and held him, crying for the pain in his son’s young body.

“I know, baby. I know.” He carried his son toward one of the ATVs, taking him back toward the cottages. The entire way, Benjamin sobbed, his heart cracking in two. Finally, Blade stopped the ATV in the middle of the path.

“What are we doing?” sniffed Benjamin.

“Did I ever tell you about a dog I had as a kid? His name was Bingo.” He stared at the red-rimmed eyes of his only child. There was nothing more heartbreaking than knowing you could do nothing to ease their pain. He understood his own mother more and more every day.

“No,” said Benjamin.

“Man, he was the best dog in the whole world. He would follow me to school, then run home. But every day, when I walked out of school, he was right there waiting for me. He would come with me to ball practice, he would chase me around the yard. He was amazing.”

“What happened to him?” asked Benjamin.

“Well, I’m not sure, but I think he was probably hit by a car,” said

Blade. “He followed me to school one day, and when I came out, he wasn’t there. My mom and dad looked for him, put up flyers, everything. But we never found him.”

“That’s awful, Dad. I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” he said with a sad grin. “Losing an animal is like losing a family member. It’s painful, but it also comes with beautiful memories. Every time I run with the guys and one of the dogs runs with us, I remember Bingo. It makes me smile. It’s funny, Benjamin, but when I became a Green Beret and I was sent to the most difficult assignments, I knew I would face losing teammates.”

“Did you?” he asked quietly.

“Unfortunately, I did. But losing Bingo prepared me for that. I knew what it would feel like, and I was still able to focus on the mission and grieve for my teammates at the same time.”

Benjamin looked down at his lap and thought about that. It seemed strange that he thought it might be easier to lose a teammate than another animal.

“Sniff said you should take a few days off,” said Blade. “They can make do without you for a while.” He nodded.

“Thanks, Dad. I won’t need a few days. The animals need me.”

His love of the animals didn't wane after that day, but he did find himself not becoming tethered to them. He still wore his cowboy boots, but the idea of becoming a cowboy wasn't as appealing to him anymore.

As he got bigger and bigger through high school, bulking up to a muscular two-hundred-and-ten pounds, he knew that he was meant to be a warrior. But he didn't want to be a Green Beret like his father. No, he wanted to be a SEAL.

"I'm proud of you, Cowboy," smirked Sniff at his trident pinning ceremony.

"Thanks, Sniff," he grinned. "How's the new mare?"

"She's great. Came in with a name already. Cinnamon." Cowboy smirked at his old friend, nodding.

"I love that," he laughed. "I'll be home soon to help out with the animals."

"How about you just come home and hug your mother," grinned Suze. "Just come home."

"I will, Mom."

Being the only SEAL that preferred cowboy boots to running shoes, his nickname was foretold. Cowboy it is.

CHAPTER TWO

Autumn knew what the suitcases at the door meant. Her parents were leaving again for one of their many ‘adventures.’ It wasn’t an adventure. It was just an excuse to not have to face any of their bill collectors and take care of their daughter.

Honestly, she didn’t care. She would be allowed to stay with her grandmother. In a house without leaks in the roof and mice in the garage. A house where bill collectors didn’t call non-stop asking when their debts would be paid. A house that had more food than liquor and more love than indifference.

Autumn was only eleven, but she knew enough about money and the world to know that travel and adventures cost money. Where they were getting their money was a mystery to her, but in reality, she didn’t care. She wouldn’t have cared if they had no money at all, as long as they were acting like parents.

“Oh! Autumn, hi, sweetie,” smiled her mother. “Grandma will be here in a minute to pick you up. Dad and I are going...”

“On an adventure,” she frowned. Her mother stared at her.

“Actually, we’re going to get settled in a new location. We’ll be

sending for you once we get the new house all ready. It's going to be wonderful! We're going to find something with a swing set and lots of room, maybe one of those fancy hot tubs out back."

"A new house? You can't even take care of this house. I don't want a new house, Mom. And I'm eleven. I don't need a swing set. I like this house. I like being close to Grandma. And how can we afford a new house?"

"Don't tell anyone," smiled her mother, "but your father hit it big at the roulette wheel last night. We've got plenty of money!"

Autumn frowned at her mother, looking at her sideways with disbelief. It wouldn't be the first time she lied to her. In fact, it seemed her parents made a sport of lying to her and to her grandmother. Neither believed they were smart enough to figure it out, but they always did.

"Taxi is here!" yelled her father. Autumn looked around, not seeing the car. That was their windfall. They sold the car that her grandmother had paid good money for. "Oh, hey, honey. Did your mom tell you the exciting news? We'll be back in a few weeks for you. Grandma is on her way over." He kissed her forehead and took off with their bags.

"Well, I guess we'll see you soon," smiled her mother.

"I guess," she frowned.

Her mother left her standing in the doorway, watching as the bags were tossed into the trunk of the taxi. As they started to get into the backseat, her grandmother pulled up in her old pickup truck. She jumped out, yelling at her parents.

“This should be fun,” smiled Autumn. Her grandmother was a no-nonsense kind of woman. She didn’t tolerate liars, fools, or bullshitters, and Autumn’s parents were all three of those things.

“So, you’re just gonna walk away and leave that child?” yelled her grandmother.

“Look, Mom, we have an opportunity for a better life. I got lucky at the roulette tables last night. We’ll come back and get her. It’s just going to take time,” said her son.

“Roulette tables. You think I’m a fool? You sold the car I bought for you so you could get that girl back and forth to school. Don’t bullshit me, Frances.”

“It’s Frank,” he frowned.

“It’s fucking Frances. I should know. You’re named after your father. You’re going to leave that little girl behind with nothing. You’re both cowards and piss-poor excuses for parents. You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

Autumn watched as her mother slid into the taxi, ignoring the older woman. She wasn't even upset by what she was seeing and hearing. At least at her grandmother's house, the sheets were clean, the food was hot and good, and she was loved. Frances handed his mother an envelope with a stack of cash inside, and she frowned.

"Just explain it to her, Mom. We weren't meant to be parents," he frowned.

"You got that right. Get the hell out of here. And do us a favor, don't come back. She deserves stability in her life for once." Autumn's father stared at her, seeing the anger in her eyes. She wasn't crying. She wasn't begging them to stay. He lifted his hand and gave a small wave, then slid in beside his wife.

Autumn walked down the steps and stood by her grandmother, watching the taxi disappear.

"It's okay, Grandma. It's you and me. Peas and carrots. Peanut butter and jelly. Simon and Garfunkel."

"That's right, baby," she said, kissing her granddaughter's cheek. "Go pack your things. All of them. You'll be movin' in with me. Besides, I'm in the country where city folks won't bother us. We can get that dog you always wanted." Autumn smiled at the old woman, kissing her cheek.

“It’s okay, Grandma. I don’t need a dog. You’re enough.”

Clarice Zeller felt the stab of pain in her chest, realizing just how much her granddaughter knew and understood. Standing on the front lawn, she took several deep breaths, then went into the dirty house. She wanted to scream to the heavens. It was so filthy.

Her daughter-in-law had never been much of a housekeeper. She hoped all that would change when Autumn was born. It didn’t. Grabbing an extra box from the kitchen, she packed up any food that was still edible and took it to the car, then went back inside to help Autumn pack her things.

Five hours later, they were sitting on her front porch. Strathmore, California, population twenty-eight hundred, give or take, was a quiet rural community. Clarice and her husband bought the patch of land just before he shipped off to Vietnam. It had plenty of room for horses and chickens. Five months pregnant when he left, she had a baby in her arms when she got word that he’d been killed.

Raising her son alone wasn’t easy, but she thought she’d done everything right. That is until he met Astra. Astra. What the hell kind of name was that? She remembered asking him that question, but he ignored her. In fact, he’d become good at ignoring her.

Frances and Astra got married, moved to the coast, and Clarice didn’t

see them much. Until Autumn was born. Then they wanted to see her all the time. Mostly to leave Autumn with her, but Clarice didn't care. She was her whole world.

"They're not coming back this time," said Autumn.

"No, I don't think they are."

"They said they won a bunch of money on the roulette tables," smirked Autumn. "I think it's bullshit. They sold the damn car."

"Don't curse. It's not ladylike."

"You curse," she laughed.

"I'm not a lady," said Clarice. She handed her granddaughter the envelope filled with cash.

"What's this?"

"Your dad gave it to me. I expect it belongs to you. I don't need it."

"Grandma, this is a lot of money. We need this," she said, trying to hand it back to the old woman. Her grandmother just shook her head.

"Nope. You keep it. Start a college fund or something. We're just fine."

They were both quiet for a long time. As the sun set over the hills, the porch light came on automatically. The stars were so bright and clear it

made Autumn smile.

“Grandma, do you believe in UFOs?” she asked. Clarice grinned at her granddaughter.

“I think we’d be mighty stupid to think we’re the only things alive in this whole big universe. I don’t know if it’s UFOs, or aliens, or what, but I believe there’s something else out there.”

They were silent for a long while, the crickets and frogs croaking their approval of the quiet night. Tomorrow, they’d have to enroll her in a new school. Again. She’d have to introduce herself to people she didn’t care about and pretend that she was interested in fancy dresses and parties.

Girls at her other school were already kissing boys, even sticking their tongues in their mouths. Gross! She just wanted to pass her tests, read as many books as she could carry home from the library, and be with her grandmother.

“Grandma? Did they ever love me?” she asked quietly. Clarice stopped her rocking and stared at her granddaughter. She was a woman who was brutally honest in every way. No reason to change now.

“I’m not sure they know how to love anyone other than themselves, honey. I just don’t think they understood what being a parent was all about. It had nothing to do with you.”

“It feels like it does,” she whispered.

“Well, it ain’t. You’re a smart, tough, beautiful girl. You can do anything you want. Anything!”

Clarice didn’t realize how much she would regret those words later in life. Of all the foolish ideas to come into her granddaughter’s head.

“A pilot? Why in the hell do you want to be a pilot?” she screeched.

“Grandma, I have my college degree, and now, I want to take flying lessons. I’ve been saving, and I think I can afford a small plane. I could transport people over the mountains to the local resorts and maybe even all the way to Vegas.”

“I don’t know, Autumn,” frowned her grandmother. “It’s not natural.” Autumn laughed at the older woman.

“You always said I could be anything I want to be. Well, I want to be a pilot.”

“No changing your mind,” she growled.

“No changing my mind,” smiled Autumn.

“Well, hell.”

CHAPTER THREE

Cowboy was thrilled to be heading home. He'd been stationed in Coronado for the last three years. He had one final short-term assignment in Oakland and was free to head home. Calling his parents, he told them he would be driving his truck and things home but taking his time. He needed to think about what he wanted to do, although the choice seemed obvious.

Driving south along I-5, he decided to cut over east through the Sequoia National Forest. He'd be in Vegas by nightfall, get a room and maybe play a few slots, get a big, thick, juicy steak, and then head out again in the morning.

Pulling into the big truck stop, he filled his tank and nearly choked at the cost of gas in this part of the country. Walking into the massive building, he could smell the fried foods and hot coffee. First, he needed to piss. When he was done, he came back out and gathered some food for the road. Mama Irene would not be happy with his choices of corn chips, beef jerky, energy drinks, and candy bars. But it was traveling food.

He needed to call his folks and at least give them an update on where he was, but he really wanted a few more miles under his belt first. There was an area with a hot food counter putting out burgers, burritos, and tacos. It smelled great, but he wondered how long that would last in his gut. Smiling

to himself, he shook his head, walking past the patrons sitting and having their meal.

As he walked toward the check-out, he could hear a little old woman speaking to someone on the phone.

“I don’t give a damn if it ain’t your territory. My granddaughter is in trouble.”

“No,” muttered Cowboy, “stay out of it. It’s not your business.”

“Look, who do I need to talk to to [\[PC1\]](#) get someone off their asses and out there looking for my girl? Cause you sure as shit don’t seem to want to do your job.”

Cowboy grinned at the old woman. He liked her tough talk, and other than the cussing, she reminded him an awful lot of Mama Irene. Home. Man, he could smell the po’boys and beignets now. He just wanted to hug his folks, sleep for a week, eat until he was sick, and then get to work with his family.

“Assholes!” she yelled, slamming her cell phone to the table.

“Damn,” muttered Cowboy. “Ma’am, is there something I can help you with?”

“Not unless you can climb mountains, swim in ice-cold streams, and fly planes,” she frowned. He almost wanted to say, ‘you’re in luck,’ but held

back. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t very nice of me. My granddaughter has her pilot’s license. Has for almost ten years now. She was flying over the Sierra Nevada, and they lost contact with her. Except them damn fools all say her plane isn’t there. Said she didn’t file an accurate flight plan, but I know damn good and well she did. If I have to, I’ll be hiking my ass up there to find her.”

“When did she leave?” he asked.

“Three days ago. She’s never gone three days without calling or texting me. We’re all we have. She wouldn’t leave me,” she said, shaking her head.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “I’m going to regret this but tell me everything.”

“Son, I need someone who can truly tackle this. You don’t look all that special.” Cowboy chuckled. The old woman was being pretty particular for someone desperately needing help. Although, in his current cargo shorts, torn-up running shoes, and sweatshirt, he probably didn’t look like much.

“Don’t worry, ma’am. In my family, we’re all special. I just happen to fall somewhere in the middle.”

“Well, no offense, but I don’t need the middle. I need the top of the food chain. There are mountain lions and bears out there.” She shook her

head and wiped a tear. “This ain’t like her. She’s careful and flies that route all the time. She was picking up her regular client from the Los Angeles area and taking him to Vegas.”

“What’s the passenger’s name?” asked Cowboy. She eyed him, tilting her head.

“I’m Clarise Zeller,” she said, holding out a hand. “My granddaughter is Autumn Zeller.”

“Ma’am. I’m Benjamin LeBlanc, but everyone calls me Cowboy.”

“Her passenger was supposed to be Constantine Liconitis.”

“The Greek billionaire who owns all the casinos and other things?” frowned Cowboy.

“That’s him. He’s been usin’ Autumn for a few years now. Has a big ranch out near Santa Barbara but has several businesses in Vegas. She flies down, picks him up, drops him in Vegas for a few days, and does it all over again.”

“Ma’am, are you aware that Mr. Liconitis has some rather unsavory businesses?”

“I ain’t stupid, boy. I read the computer. I know what they say about him, but he’s always been good to Autumn. Even bought her a new plane and lets her pick up other clients for extra money. She had one of them small

propellor planes, and he didn't like ridin' in that. So, he financed a small jet for her."

"Did your granddaughter and Mr. Liconitis have a personal relationship?" asked Cowboy.

"Oh, hell no," laughed Clarice. "He's old enough to be my beau, not hers. Besides, he's got a wife he adores. She's been sick lately, and Autumn has even taken her back and forth to her treatments when she can."

"And who were you yelling at when I walked up?"

"The damn air traffic controller. Idiot. That boy barely passed math class. Not sure how he ever got to be an air traffic controller. Willie. Willie Staples."

"And he said she didn't file a correct flight plan?"

"That's right. Which is stupid 'cause it's the same damn flight plan every time. So, whadya gonna do about it?" Cowboy chuckled. Yea, she was definitely like Mama Irene.

"Well, do you know of a place where I can rent some hiking and camping equipment?" The old woman grinned, nodding at him.

"Tell me what you need." Cowboy listed off all the things he would need, and Clarice stood, standing beside the table. "Well, you comin' or not?"

“Yes, ma’am, but what about the supplies?”

“Just follow me,” she said. He followed the old woman in her beat-up pickup truck. It looked to be held together by rust and prayers, although he was pretty sure the prayers were running out. When they pulled up to a small ranch house, he grinned at the horses in the pen.

“Beautiful horses,” he smiled.

“Yep. Folks will rent them out to ride the trails. I expect your truck’s got a hitch. You’re gonna need to haul the trailer with Creole and Abilene up to the trails and take it from there.”

“Creole? The horse’s name is Creole?” he laughed.

“Why’s that funny?”

“Ironic is probably the better word,” he muttered. “Do you have a copy of the old flight plans?”

“Yep. Come on in.”

He followed the woman inside to find a small but neatly decorated home. There were photographs of a little girl all over the walls, and he smiled at her freckles. The furniture seemed in good condition, a nice television sitting on the stand. Everything was updated but not overly expensive.

“Your home is nice,” he said.

“Thank you. Like I said, we make money from folks wanting to rent the horses. I sell the eggs the chickens lay, and I make the best pickles this side of the Mississippi. Autumn makes a good living, and we treat ourselves every now and then to something new for the house.”

“She isn’t married? No boyfriend?” he asked. Clarice stared at him, looking him up and down.

“You got a job?” she asked.

“I actually just retired. I’m a United States Navy SEAL.” There was an expression of surprise on her face, and she stepped back, staring at him.

“I guess you are special, aren’t you? You got a family to head home to?”

“My folks, cousins, friends. We own our own business in Louisiana.”

“Interestin’. No. She don’t have a husband or boyfriend. That girl is always too busy and too damn picky. Didn’t help none that her father was a lazy, swindling piece of manure.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, frowning at the old woman. Despite her tough exterior, he could tell that it bothered her to speak of the girl’s father.

“Follow me. We’ll get the tack loaded and an extra horse. Autumn

will want to ride her own.”

“Ma’am, you need to be prepared that I might not be able to find that plane. I mean, something devastating could have happened.”

“Nothing has happened,” she said through clenched teeth. Cowboy stared at her and nodded. “Let’s go.”

Once he had the trailer hooked to his truck, they loaded the two horses and all the tack and gear. She ran inside and brought him back a large backpack with ropes, cantilevers, and grappling hooks. Apparently, she was a full-service mountain facility. His cooler was now filled with waters and food, and the first aid kit ready for the worst-case scenario.

“Well, good luck,” she said, staring up at him. “This is my cell phone number if you need to get ahold of me, but the signal out there will be for shit. I’ve gotta get back into town and have a talk with Willie. If I find out anything else, I’ll call that fancy phone of yours, but I doubt you’ll get a signal.”

“Trust me, ma’am, I’ll get a signal.” She nodded and started to walk away, then walked back toward him, giving him a hug.

“Be careful. You never know what’s out there. And, thank you.”

He chuckled as she hurried away from him, speeding back toward the little town. Inside the cab of his truck, he made the call he knew he should

have made three days ago.

“Benjamin! How are you?” said Blade.

“I’m good, Dad. Listen, I have a story to tell you.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“We’re looking at the satellite photos now, Cowboy,” said Ace.

“That’s a lot of terrain to cover.”

“According to her grandmother, she left Los Angeles three days ago at her usual time of 0800. The flight plan I sent you was the same one she filed every time she went. We should be able to find an area to search.” Ace and Doug narrowed the search area, given her flight plan, and Doug immediately spotted something that shouldn’t be there.

“Damn,” muttered Doug, standing beside Chipper. “I think that’s it.”

“Where?” said Ace.

“There. The silver object you see in the trees. I think that’s it. I’m not sure anyone could have survived that.”

“Well, send me the coordinates, and I’ll check it out. If nothing else, I’ll bring her back to her grandmother. Also, see what you can find out about Liconitis. Is there anything new on the radar with him? Any noise on the web?”

“We’re checking now, son,” said Blade. “Looks like if you park at the mouth of Three Rivers, you’ll be able to take the horses and get to her. Probably a full day’s ride.”

“I’m here now. I’ll check in with you guys later,” he said.

“Cowboy?” said Eric. “If you need help, call us, and we’ll be there, brother. It wouldn’t take any time at all for Chipper or Evie to drop some men down to you.”

“Thanks, Eric. I’ll check in with you in a few hours.” The men all looked at one another as the call ended.

“What do you want us to do, Blade?” asked Cam.

“I want you to listen to my son,” he said. “He knows what he’s doing, and we’ll wait to hear from him. I’ll help you follow up on Liconitis and see what he’s been up to.”

“Alright,” nodded Luke. “Let’s find this girl.”



The horses were well-trained and used to walking the narrow trails of the park. He pushed them the first few miles, then slowed as the trails became narrower and more treacherous. Using the coordinates that the team back home sent him, he carefully followed to where he hoped he’d find a plane and at least one person alive and well.

Stopping along a stream, he allowed the horses to drink, and he did the same. In his pack, he pulled out two apples and gave one to each of them, petting their necks. He ate one of the sandwiches Clarice had made for him

and then continued.

“Come on, boys, let’s find your girl.”

Cowboy was almost ready to stop and camp for the night when he caught a glimmer of something in the tree. As he moved closer, sure enough, it was a damned plane, nose down, suspended between branches.

“Shit,” he muttered. Tethering the horses, he grabbed the rope and secured it to a big limb. Climbing up the side of the tree, he was able to look into the open side door. “Hello? Is anyone in here?”

“H-help,” said a weak voice.

“Hold on,” he said, securing the rope around his waist. Testing his weight in the plane, he heard it creak, but it stayed put. Shining his flashlight around the space, he finally saw where the voice was coming from. The cockpit.

“Hey, hey, are you alright? Let me look at you,” he said, shining the light in her face. She had a large gash across her forehead and bruises on her neck and shoulders, probably from the seatbelt.

“H-help,” she whispered with her eyes still closed.

“I know, honey. I’m helping. Are you Autumn?” he asked. She nodded, searching the space around her. Her foot appeared jammed between two twisted pieces of metal. “Okay, Autumn, I’ve got to get that metal bent

back, honey. This might hurt.”

She said nothing at first, but as he pushed the aluminum apart with his hands, she cried out like a wounded animal. Lifting her foot from between the two pieces, he knew she was now free. But hearing the creak of metal, he also knew they didn't have long in that tree.

“We gotta move, Autumn.” Unbuckling her, he pulled her against his chest. She was limp as a rag doll, smelling of urine and feces. He knew it was probably mortifying to her, but it wasn't his first rodeo. Tying a loose piece of the rope around her, he secured her to his own harness and slowly backed out of the plane.

As gently as possible, he rappelled down. When he released his rope, he lifted her in his arms and moved toward the horses.

“I need to get a fire going,” he said. “Sit tight.”

She didn't say anything as he collected the wood and had a fire going in no time. Gathering water from the small stream, he carried it back. Kneeling beside her with a lantern shining on her face, he saw how bad the gash was.

“Just let me clean you up, honey.” He wiped the blood from her face, the bruises worrying him more than anything. She could have internal injuries, and he wouldn't know what to do for that. Gently pressing along her

rib cage, she didn't seem to have any trouble breathing.

When he was done, he realized that she'd been lying in that plane for three days in soiled clothing. Gathering more water, he stripped her clothes from her body and washed her down the best he could. From the pack, he pulled out clean clothing that Clarice had sent with him. Realizing she was completely naked, he swallowed, looking at her bruised body.

She was probably five-feet-five, slender, with small pert breasts. He tried not to stare, but it was damn difficult. She had lean, toned muscles and long, light brown hair. Seeing her skin pebble from the cold, he dressed her quickly, then placed a blanket over her.

Tilting her head up, he forced her to drink as much water as she would take, then gave her a small bite of banana.

"Easy," he said softly. "Easy." He heard the creaking of metal again, turning just in time to see the plane's nose hit the ground, then flipped on its back.

"My p-plane," she whispered.

"Yea, that was your plane. It's not going anywhere, honey. Was there someone else in the plane?" he asked.

"Liconitis," she whispered. "Took him. They took him."

"Who took him?" he asked. "Autumn? Who took him, honey?" She

was out. Safely out of the plane, now she was fast asleep.

Taking out the suture kit, he decided it would be the right time to stitch her head. When that was done, he looked at the ankle that had been trapped. It was black and blue, possibly sprained, but didn't appear to have any broken bones.

Using the wrap in his first aid kit, he wrapped the ankle and elevated it on one of the saddles. Hopefully, she would sleep all night. With the horses tethered, he grabbed his weapons and lay on the other side of the fire from her. He wouldn't get much sleep, but he'd be alert and able to fend off any wild animals or humans coming their way.

The night air was chilled, and he could see his breath in the darkness. He'd forgotten that they were at a higher elevation. He would need to get them down off the mountain as soon as possible if they were going to survive.

Her face turned toward the fire, and Cowboy swallowed, a pit in his stomach growing by the minute. She was beautiful. He didn't notice it before. But she was absolutely perfect.

“Shit.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Cowboy awoke at first light and gathered more wood for their small camp. When the fire was stoked once again, he checked on Autumn, still sound asleep. As he stared at the plane, he noticed something odd and walked toward the upside-down craft.

Running his hands along the wing, he frowned as he reached the massive hole. Pulling out his phone, he took a picture and sent it back to the team.

“What does this look like to all of you?” A few minutes later, he got the call he knew would be coming.

“Someone shot that girl down. She’s lucky the whole thing didn’t explode. Whoever did it didn’t hit the fuselage,” said Chipper.

“That’s what I was afraid you would say.”

“How is she?” asked Blade.

“Bad head gash, but I stitched that up last night. Her ankle was stuck between two pieces of metal, but I was able to get her free. I don’t think it’s broken, but it’s probably sprained. She has bad bruising from the seatbelt across her neck, chest, and shoulders.”

“Try to keep cool compresses on the ankle and bruises,” said Lena.

“Make sure she doesn’t have any broken ribs before you move her.”

“I was thinking about making a litter for her. Just pull her out of here. She said that Liconitis was taken. I couldn’t get any more information. She just said they took him.”

“We’re still trying to locate any information on him. His wife is in hospice in Los Angeles. They don’t think she’ll survive the week, so it’s possible he’s with her. But that doesn’t explain who took him and left her,” said Luke.

“Well, I’m going to see if we can move out of here by tomorrow. I’m worried whoever shot that plane down might come back.”

“We’re sending a team,” said Hex, shaking his head. “No more bullshit. We’ll send a few guys your way and have them meet up with the girl’s grandmother, and she can give them directions on how to get to you.”

“That might be a good idea,” said Cowboy. They spoke for another twenty minutes, then he hung up and connected the phone to the G.R.I.P. solar-powered charger. The power needle immediately went to the right. It was a miracle device.

He watched Autumn carefully, waking her every hour to drink something and check for a concussion. When she stirred around 1400, he knelt beside her with more water.

“Pee. No more water. I have to pee,” she said, shaking her head.

“Okay, let’s see if you can put any weight on that ankle.” He carefully lifted her, and she leaned against him. She swayed but then steadied herself using his arm. Looking up at him, she stared into his face, then looked down. Taking one small step, she tested her weight on her ankle.

“Well?”

“It’s sore, but I don’t think sprained. Thank you.” He nodded, watching her limp toward a grouping of trees. Turning his back, he fixed her a plate of food and waited until she returned.

“You changed me. I mean, you changed my clothing,” she said, blushing.

“You were soiled,” he said. “I’m sure it couldn’t be helped, considering how long you were in that plane. Here. I have some food for you. I need you to eat as much of this as you can and drink.”

“Who are you?” she asked, taking her seat again.

“My name is Benjamin LeBlanc, but my friends call me Cowboy. I’m a retired Navy SEAL. I found your grandmother cussing out someone named Willie,” he smirked.

“What did that asshole do now?” she frowned.

“Well, he said you didn’t file a correct flight plan.” Her head jerked up, and she closed her eyes, regretting the fast movement. “Take it easy. Your grandmother knew it was a lie. I just happened to be in the truck stop and heard her cussing someone out and begging for people to help her granddaughter. She can be very persuasive.”

“You have no idea,” said Autumn. “My whole body hurts.”

“It should,” he said, pointing toward the plane. She slowly turned, seeing the crumpled wreckage that was once her baby.

“Damn. Liconitis. They took him.”

“You said that last night. Do you know who they were?”

“No. We weren’t in the air long, and I heard a loud bang and looked at my wing to see it on fire. I tried to keep us in the air until I could get to flatter ground, but she wasn’t having any of it. I don’t remember much after hitting the trees, but I woke up briefly and heard some men, maybe the bodyguard and someone else, mumbling about getting him out.”

“No names or faces?”

“No, I’m sorry.” She took another bite of the sandwich and then set it down. “I think I want to sleep again.”

“I’d really like it if you could stay awake just for a little while.” She gave a soft nod, staring at him. He let her stare, staring back.

“You rode the horses up here?” she said casually.

“Yep. Your grandmother again,” he smirked. “Don’t worry. I’m an experienced rider. I knew what I was doing. Once you’re feeling up to it, we’ll get you on and ride back. Or I can make a litter out of something on the plane.”

“I should be able to get on the horse. Just give me a day or so.”

“We’re in no rush unless whoever shot you down comes back,” he said. She looked back at the plane, then at him.

“Do you think they’ll come back?”

“If they think you saw something and are still alive, they’ll come back.” She didn’t say anything at all, which worried Cowboy. “Did you see something?”

“I’m not sure,” she frowned. “Before we took off, Liconitis said we had to stop in Fresno. We never do unscheduled stops, but I didn’t care. I’m on his dime. When we landed, he was talking to his men when another man pulled up in a black SUV. He rolled the window down just a little and started yelling at him. One of the bodyguards walked toward the SUV, yelling at the man to leave. I didn’t really hear anything or see anything other than that.”

“You don’t know who the other man was?”

“No, I’m sorry. God, his wife. Annette is gravely ill. She has stage

four colon cancer and has been in hospice for a while now. She was getting these experimental treatments, but they weren't working. They both agreed that she would stop them. She just wanted to go peacefully in her sleep."

"The news is reporting that they don't expect her to live much longer."

"They loved one another dearly," she murmured. "They were so good to each other. He would have done anything for her. Ironically, the one thing she needed, he couldn't give her. A cure for cancer."

"You can rest now," he said. "I'll keep watch." She nodded, lying back on the blanket.

"If I haven't said it, thank you. Thank you for coming for me." He watched her as she closed her eyes, already asleep.

Cowboy watched as the soft breeze blew her hair across her face. He rose and knelt beside her brushing the strand of hair away, tucking it behind her ear. He felt her ice-cold hands and pulled the blanket up higher to her neck, then felt for the pulses in her feet. Everything seemed to be okay. So far.

"My pleasure."

CHAPTER SIX

Cowboy let her sleep for another few hours, then started fixing dinner. Fresh caught fish. The stream they were camped near was full of beautiful trout. Using some string from a pack in the plane and a metal rod, he fashioned a hook from wire and went to work catching their meal. It didn't take long, and the fish were definitely biting.

“Something smells wonderful,” she said, sitting up.

“Fish,” he grinned. “I have some mushrooms and berries I found as well, but this will be our main meal.”

“Do you know which mushrooms and berries are poisonous and which are not?” she asked with concern.

“I promise. I know what I'm doing,” he grinned.

He watched as she stood, gingerly testing her ankle again. She walked toward the cover of the trees, no doubt to relieve herself. A few moments later, he heard her digging inside the plane.

“What are you doing?” he asked, frowning at her. She pulled out a box with chocolate bars, granola, and beef jerky.

“My emergency box,” she said, handing it to him. “Sometimes I have to wait for my passengers, and there isn't a lot around the small private

landing strips. So, I always make sure I have something to eat. I'm not a very nice person when I don't eat." Cowboy chuckled, shaking his head.

"Neither am I. Come on. Move away from the plane. It's not stable." She took his hand and was struck by how large it was. His callused palms were rough and scratchy. He wore no jewelry, just an expensive diver's watch.

"Is your family worried about you?" she asked.

"It's just me and my folks and extended family. We kind of work together. They all know where I am, and, in fact, they're sending a few additional men to help us out in case there's trouble."

"Do we expect trouble?" she frowned, taking her seat again.

"Let's just say trouble seems to find us whether we want it to or not. It's just a precaution. They're also trying to locate Liconitis. So far, no luck."

"It just doesn't make any sense," she said, slowly shaking her head. "I know that people think he's some sort of Greek mob boss in Vegas, but he's really not. Yes, he owns two casinos and hotels. Yes, he's rich. But I've seen that man send huge checks to schools, orphanages, veteran charities, and so much more.

"When I started flying him on a regular basis, Annette always flew

with him. They didn't like to be separated. They had family and business in Greece and, sometimes, would fly back home, but this jet doesn't fly that far. Someone else would take them. Anyway, they wanted to know my story. So, I told them."

"And what is your story?" smiled Cowboy.

"My parents deserted me when I was a kid. Left me with my grandmother, which I was more than happy with. She was, is, my rock. That woman taught me so much about life. Her husband was killed in Vietnam when my father was just an infant. She provided for them both, made that small ranch into something that would give her income."

"She sounds amazing," smiled Cowboy.

"You met her," she laughed. "You should already know she's the bomb. She doesn't take shit from anyone, and I love that. But she also taught me how to fix my hair and do my makeup. She taught me how to waltz and two-step."

"We'll have to test out your two-step when that ankle heals," he grinned. Tilting her head, she smiled at the handsome man.

"No wife? No girlfriend?"

"No. As I said, I just retired as an active-duty SEAL. I think my whole family has had a similar philosophy of not getting involved with

someone while you're deployed or at risk of being deployed. What happened to your grandparents is exactly what worried us. I've seen too many men rush off to marry their girl because they were afraid she wouldn't be there when they got home."

"And were they? I mean, was she there when they got home?"

"Some were. In fairness, yes. Some were there. But many were not. They either couldn't handle all the deployments or found their comfort elsewhere. That would kill me," said Cowboy. "My folks have been married more than thirty years, and they love one another more today than the day they were married. I want that one day."

He stared at the pretty woman, seeing the purple bruises peeking from her collar. Grabbing one of the small towels, he walked to the stream and dunked it into the icy-cold water, wringing it out. Walking back to her, he pressed against her collarbone.

"Ohhh," she shivered. "That's cold."

"I think it's supposed to be this time of year," he smiled. "The cold will help with swelling and bruising." Feeling the soft flesh beneath his fingertips, he pulled back and took his seat.

"So, your folks just walked away from you?" he said, clearing his throat.

“They’d done it on and off since I was born. My father said he hit it big at the roulette wheel, but neither me or Grandma bought it. He handed her an envelope of cash and said they weren’t meant to be parents.” She shrugged, and he frowned at the thought of leaving his own child. “I put the money in a bank account and used it to go to college. I knew Grandma wasn’t going to let me get my pilot’s license without a degree.”

“You’ve done everything you set out to do,” he smiled. “That’s great.”

“She never put limitations on me. Never. As you saw, we live pretty far out, so I didn’t have a lot of interaction with other kids. It was mostly adults around her age. I think it made me a little more serious than I should have been.” He smiled at her, and Autumn shivered, not from the cold but from the electricity creeping up her spine. “What will you do now that you’re no longer active duty?”

“Well, my family and friends own a security company. Almost all of us are former military or para-military. I’ll join them and make my home near all of them.” She nodded again as he plated their dinner, handing it to her.

“This is delicious,” she smiled. “You’re hired.” Cowboy laughed, shaking his head.

“Fish and beef are about it for me on an open fire. In a kitchen? You’ll starve, honey.” Autumn swallowed, staring at him. Honey. “Sorry, I’m from the south, and we use a lot of casual endearments. It’s just a term we use.”

“It’s okay. I mean, I know you didn’t mean anything by it. I mean, not mean anything. I mean, never mind.”

“Autumn? Do you have a boyfriend or husband?” he asked.

“I did. My ex-boyfriend ran one of the hotels outside Reno that Constantine owned. He wanted me to move there, and I didn’t want to leave my grandmother. He just started to be very demanding, and I didn’t respond well to that. Simple as that.”

“He should have never asked you to do something so difficult. She’s family.”

“She’s everything,” said Autumn. They both jumped as his phone rang. Cowboy grinned at her, wiggling the phone.

“Yea.”

“Hey, brother. We’re at the ranch, but there’s no one here. Ask the woman if we can use four of the horses,” said Mo. “I’m here with Ethan, Moose, and Red. Moose and Red are the new guys.”

“Man, I don’t care who they are. Glad you’re here. Hold on.” He

placed his hand over the phone and looked at Autumn. “Your grandmother isn’t at the ranch. They just want someone to know that they’re going to take four horses.”

“Oh, of course. But it’ll be dark soon. They should probably wait until daylight. I wonder where she went off to?”

“She said you can take the horses, but you might want to wait until daylight. She was curious as to where her grandmother went.”

“Well, I’m not seeing anything suspicious,” said Mo. “The front door is locked, and the truck is gone.”

“I’m sure she went into town or something.”

“There are several bunks in the loft of the barn,” said Autumn. “They’re welcome to stay up there. Grandma always leaves it unlocked in case someone needs shelter.”

“Did you hear that?” he asked Mo.

“We heard, brother. We’re gonna get a few hours of sleep and head your way before dawn.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.” He looked at Autumn and smiled. “Cavalry is on the way.”

“Do we need the cavalry? I mean, I’m grateful for the help, but why

all these men?”

“Just a feeling, honey. Just a feeling.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Clarice gathered a few things and placed them in her pack, headed to the door. She was going to have a long conversation with that idiot at the control tower. Stepping onto the porch, she locked the door and headed toward her old pickup when a shiny SUV pulled up.

“What the hell?” she muttered.

“Good morning,” said a man stepping out in a black suit. He appeared to be in his mid- to late-thirties. His hair was a shiny black, combed tightly to his head. He wore a gold pinkie ring, and she moaned inwardly. Pinkie rings were trouble.

“Mornin’,” she said. “I’m headed into town, but if you need to rent the horses, help yourself.”

“Oh, no, no,” he laughed, raising his hands. “I’m afraid I’m not much of an equestrian. I’m looking for Autumn Zellers. She’s a pilot, yes?”

“If you’re lookin’ for her, you should know what she does for a livin’,” said Clarice, eyeing the man suspiciously.

“Indeed,” he frowned.

He snapped his fingers behind him, and two men stepped out of the SUV. One was holding a very intimidating rifle. Clarice knew that whatever

they wanted to do with Autumn, it wasn't good.

"I'll ask you again, nicely. Where is Autumn Zellers?"

"I don't know. She took off a few days ago, flying a passenger to Las Vegas. I guess she'll be another few days." Clarice didn't like to lie, but she knew she was damn good at it. If someone was going to fuck around with her and her family, she was going to make them work for it.

"I see."

"May I ask what you want with my granddaughter?" she asked.

"Your granddaughter," he grinned. "That's interesting. Your granddaughter was flying an old friend to Las Vegas. He had a pack with something very precious in it to me. Now, see, I'm a businessman all the way. I don't mess around.

"That plane was supposed to land several days ago or crash where I planned for it to, and I was going to be able to get my pack. But now I can't get to it because she didn't fly to Vegas, and she didn't crash where we expected. I can send my boys out looking for her, but if they find her, it won't be pretty. I want my pack. We sent a drone up and saw several campfires out there, and I think one of them is hers."

"Maybe she started walking back, or maybe the fire was made by some hikers," said Clarice, shrugging her shoulders. "Lots of hikers this time

of year and park rangers out there checking on things.”

“Maybe,” said the man, nodding his head. “Or maybe she got help and has my pack. Either way, you’re going on a little expedition with us. We’re gonna track her down, and you’re going to lead the way.”

“Why me?” she scoffed. “I’m an old woman, and I’m only gonna hold you up. You know the way, so you go get her.”

“See, that’s the problem. My men saw the wreck coming from the opposite direction. We’re not outdoor people, as you can see, so I need someone that can take us from this way.”

“You’re awful dumb,” said Clarice, shaking her head. “Just follow the damn steps from the opposite direction you came from. How hard is that?”

“Old woman, I’m not going to ask you again.” Clarice thought about running for the barn, but even if she made it, then what.

“Alright, someone needs to help me saddle the horses,” she said.

“No horses.”

“You said you wanted to get there, and you seem like you’re in a damn hurry. Horses are the way to get there. Can you ride or not?” she barked.

“No fucking horses, old woman. We walk.” She looked down at their dress shoes and started to laugh, shaking her head.

“You boys are crazy. You won’t make it a mile in them fancy city shoes. Fine by me. Let’s go.”

Clarice prayed that somewhere along the way, she would be able to try and make a run for it. She was older than the men, but she knew this terrain better than anyone. If she could make it to the western ridge, she would be able to signal them below.

A mile in, the men started to bitch about their feet hurting and the shoes rubbing blisters on their heels. Clarice could only laugh, shaking her head.

“Shut up, old woman!” yelled the man with the gun.

“Take out your heels and push the back of the shoe down,” said their leader.

“But, Boss, these cost me three grand,” whined the man.

“I don’t give a fuck. Do it!”

Clarice just smiled as they fixed the heels of their shoes. Staring off in the direction they needed to go, she prayed that the ex-SEAL would protect her granddaughter. If he didn’t, she’d kill these boys and then hunt him down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cowboy got the message that the team had left the ranch at 0400. He expected that on horseback, they would arrive within an hour or so. The sun was already up and high in the sky, shining down on them. It wasn't hot, but it was pleasant weather for this time of year.

Allowing Autumn to sleep, he went back to the wreckage to find anything that might be personal for her or something that could have caused them to be shot down. Other than killing Liconitis, he couldn't figure out why someone would do it.

In a small bin, he found a leather crossbody bag that had her wallet, keys, and a lipstick in it. He couldn't help but smile. It seemed such an intimate thing. Putting it back in the bin, he lifted it, then grabbed a sweatshirt that had Cal State across the front.

When the crash happened, cans of soda and bottled water had rolled from the tiny galley area, along with crackers and a few other food items. Carefully making his way toward the tail, he crawled on all fours up the upside-down aisle. With the plane flipped on its back, he was working in an awkward position. There was a slight creak, and the plane adjusted an inch or two.

“Easy, girl. I just need another minute,” he whispered.

Opening the rear door, he found two leather suitcases. Both were filled with men's clothing, so he left them there, assuming they were for Liconitis and his bodyguard. He found another small tote bag that appeared to be filled with magazines.

"Women and their damn fashion magazines," he muttered. He was going to leave it, then decided it might be something she really enjoyed reading. Carefully making his way back out of the plane, he exited and climbed out of the plane.

Just as Cowboy started walking away, he heard the final creak of the aluminum on the plane as she crumbled against the earth, crunching together like an accordion. With his haul, he made it back to the camp just as Autumn was waking.

"Good morning," she smiled.

"Good afternoon," he grinned. "I thought I'd let you sleep, and then we could get started."

"You should've woken me," she said, standing.

"No, you needed the sleep. How's the head?" She ran her fingers over the bandage and turned her head right then left, up then down.

"It seems okay. I don't feel any dizziness or nausea, so that must be good."

“I think that’s good. Let’s pack everything up, and we’ll get the hell out of here. I’m sure your grandmother is worried about you.”

Autumn rolled the blanket up and gathered her soiled clothing, shoving them both into one of the bags. When the horses were saddled, they allowed them to have as much as they wanted to drink, then walked along the creek for a bit just to get the feel of moving. Cowboy was still worried about her head injury and wanted to take it slow.

On the other side of the creek was a large drop-off into a ravine, where a gulley wash had created a deep, ditch-like structure. When the creek overflowed in spring, it would widen once again, encompassing the gulley wash. Until then, it was just a small creek and a deep ditch. Rising about it was a cliff face.

“I remember seeing that ravine when we were flying and thinking, ‘don’t crash there.’ It was probably the last thing I remember.”

“I wonder if whoever shot at you was up there, on the edge on the other side,” he said, staring at it.

“The creek is shallow here. We could cross and look,” she said. Cowboy nodded as they crossed to the other side of the creek and looked down into the ravine. If she’d crashed there, she wouldn’t have survived. It wasn’t hundreds of feet down, but it was deep enough that it would have

killed her. The plane probably wouldn't have been able to fly through it.

"I'm not sure how anyone would have gotten down there unless they slid down from this side, but they damn sure could have been on the other side. You still would have been relatively low here. It wouldn't have taken much except an expert marksman."

"Right," she nodded. "I still don't know why, though. That bothers me."

"Me too," he said, turning to face her.

Her light brown hair had streaks of gold from the sun. It was dirty and tangled, but for some reason, Cowboy thought it was beautiful. Her eyes were an interesting shade of brown, sometimes green, sometimes chocolate. A strand blew across her mouth, and he reached up, tucking it back behind her ear.

"Th-thank you," she whispered.

"My pleasure," he grinned, slowly leaning forward. Unfortunately, he never got close to his destination. The echo of a pistol shot rang out, and he grabbed Autumn, shoving her behind him. Scanning the ridge above them, he saw three men standing on the other side.

"No worries, friend," yelled the one man. "I just wanted to get your attention."

Cowboy turned, still pushing Autumn behind him. The men were in suits, which by itself was strange, but what he saw behind them had him really worried.

“You better explain why the fuck you just fired at us,” called Cowboy.

“Simple. I want my pack.”

“I don’t know who the fuck you are or where your pack is,” yelled Cowboy.

“Maybe this will be incentive to remember,” said the man. One of the men behind him in a suit pulled Clarice Zellers toward the cliff’s edge. The old woman struggled against his hold, kicking out at him.

“No!” yelled Autumn. “No! Don’t hurt her, please. I don’t know anything about your pack. I don’t know who you are.”

“Autumn, get outta here!” yelled her grandmother. “Don’t listen to these fools!”

“Old woman, you’d better shut up,” growled the first man in a low voice that only she could hear. “Give me my pack!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” cried Autumn. “Benjamin, Cowboy, please. Please, she’s all I have.”

“I know, honey. But I don’t know what he’s talking about either.” He turned back to the ravine. “Look, we have no clue what you’re asking for. Please, just let the old woman go, and we can talk. You can search the plane or anything you want. Just let her go.”

“Let her go?” laughed the man. “Alright, we’ll let her go.”

He nodded at the man beside him, holding Clarice precariously over the ledge. Grinning, the man released his hold on her, and she plummeted over the side of the ravine to the waiting earth below.

“Nooo!” screamed Autumn.

Cowboy held her back, then the echo of a rifle behind them, whizzed past them hitting its target above them. The man who’d dropped Clarice found his own way to the bottom of the ravine as the other two dashed away.

Cowboy turned, scanning the land behind them. Mo and the others walked out of the trees. A huge man was carrying a rifle.

“Nice shot,” said Cowboy, still holding Autumn’s sobbing body.

“Not soon enough,” said Moose. “I’m awful sorry, ma’am.”

“P-please. P-please can we get my grandmother? She might be alive,” she begged. The others nodded, knowing Clarice wasn’t alive but willing to risk it to get her body back.

“We’ll find the other two soon enough. Let’s get the woman, and we’ll take her back to the ranch,” said Mo. “Maybe we can get an ID on the other man. Oh. Cowboy, this is Moose and Red. You already know Ethan.”

“Nice to see you, boys. This is Autumn Zellers, and that woman down there is her grandmother, Clarice.”

“We’re awful sorry we didn’t get here sooner, ma’am,” said Ethan. “We circled around the trail, coming from the same way you did.”

She could only nod, still numb from the entire event. But Cowboy could tell she was going to crash hard. Giving a head jerk to the others, they gathered the rope, and Red began to repel down the ravine. At the bottom, he stared at the elderly woman wanting to cry for her granddaughter. If she’d fallen from their side of the ravine, she might have survived. But the fall from the higher side was deadly.

Her body was lying in an awkward position, several bones broken, including her neck. Pulling the portable cradle from his pack, he unfolded it, carefully placed the woman on the litter, and secured her. He then tied the rope to the lift and watched as the two men above pulled her lifeless body to them.

Walking back further along the bottom of the ravine, he found the man that Moose shot and rolled his body over. He didn’t recognize the face,

but then again, he was from Canada. If this was some famous criminal in America, he might not know it. He snapped several photos of his face, then pulled out his phone and used the digital fingerprint app to scan his prints. The information immediately went back to VG.

When he was back up the ravine, he saw Autumn lying next to her grandmother's lifeless body, speaking softly to her.

"Shit," he muttered.

"It's breaking my fucking heart," said Cowboy. "She raised her after her folks deserted her. I met the old woman in a truck stop, and she was trying to get help to find her granddaughter. Tough as shit old bird, brother. Reminded me of Mama Irene, except a whole lot more cussing."

"We can keep her on the litter and pull her back to the ranch," said Mo. Cowboy nodded, walking toward Autumn. He knelt beside her and pulled her up for a hug.

"I know, honey. I'm so damn sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

"Why?" she sobbed. "Why kill her? Why? She did nothing! I don't have a clue what he was asking for."

"I know," repeated Cowboy. "We're gonna take her body back to the ranch and help you bury her. Then we're gonna figure all of this out. Can you ride?" She nodded, standing to let the men wrap her grandmother in a

blanket and secure her once again.

“What about the man you shot?” she asked Moose, looking toward Red.

“We got what we needed from him. I took a photo and got his prints. The coyotes and bears can have what’s left of him, but even that’s too good for him.” She nodded at him, then walked up and hugged him.

“Thank you for bringing my grandmother up for me,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he smiled.

Cowboy helped her onto the horse, watching to see if she swayed at all. It was going to be a long ride back to the ranch, given the fact that they were towing the body.

Following the same path they’d taken to get there, they were able to make it before midnight. But what awaited them was anything but a positive greeting. The house had been burned to the ground, the horses released from the pens, and the barn was still smoldering.

“Oh, my God,” whispered Autumn as she slid off her saddle.

Cowboy caught her before she hit the ground, wrapping an arm around her waist. She gripped his shoulders for dear life, then buried her head in his chest, crying uncontrollably. There were three pickup trucks parked near the home, and several men came walking toward them.

“Autumn, sure glad to see you, hun,” said one old man. “We didn’t see your grandma.”

Autumn pointed to the litter, and the men all frowned.

“Someone killed Clarice,” said Cowboy. “We’re going to find them. We think they did this as well.”

“Well, they definitely lit her up,” said another man. “Used a couple cans of gasoline. I got Mack out tryin’ to find the horses for ‘ya. I can keep ‘em at our place until you get things straight.” Autumn could only nod.

“Listen, is there a hotel nearby we could stay at?” asked Cowboy.

“Afraid not,” said the old man. “Closest one will be Fresno. I got a coupla’ tents if you’re okay camping for a few days.”

“That’ll do,” said Mo, nodding at the man. He followed him to his truck, grabbing the camping gear.

“Just luck I had this,” said the man. “I was gonna take some tourists into Yosemite, but they cancelled on me. Just hadn’t had the chance to remove any of it. Autumn gonna be okay?”

“Not sure,” said Mo. “Her plane was shot down, and my friend went out to find her at the request of her grandmother. Whoever did it was probably the same men who killed Clarice.”

“Damn,” muttered the old man. “She was a good old woman. Tough as shit, but she was solid. I’m real sorry to hear that. Listen, there’s everything you need in these cases. Tents, cots, sleeping bags, all of it. Everything gets a deep clean after each excursion. Best place for you to camp would be at the campgrounds near the park. They’ve got patrols there, and at least you’re close to someone if you need help.”

“Thanks,” said Mo, sticking out his hand. “My name is Mo. The man who saved Autumn is Cowboy, and that’s Moose, Ethan, and Red.” The old man looked at them, then gave a strange look.

“Trigger,” he grinned. “You know, I served in Vietnam, and I’ve been around the block a few times. I’ve been a volunteer forest ranger and firefighter. I’ve worked on search and rescue missions, even helped track down escaped convicts. I know a thing or two, and I know when I see a man who isn’t just the average Joe. You ain’t just average boys, are ‘ya?”

“No, sir. We definitely are not.”

“If you need anything, let me know. I got a few gun cases in the house if you find you need some help.”

“I’ll be sure and do that, sir.”

CHAPTER NINE

Cowboy stepped out of the tent, staring at his teammates seated around the fire. It was 0730, but none of them had gotten more than a few hours of sleep. Once the tents had been set up, Cowboy, Moose, and Autumn took one, while Mo, Ethan, and Red took the other. Autumn had cried herself to sleep while Cowboy and Moose tried to console her.

“Morning,” he said in a gravelly voice.

“Morning, brother,” said Ethan. “Did she finally sleep?”

“Yea, around five. I didn’t think she’d ever stop crying. Fucking breaks my heart.”

“Red went over to the park store and picked up some food. We’ve got breakfast going, and we can make a plan,” said Mo.

“Any news on the dead guy?” asked Cowboy.

“Nothing yet,” said Mo, “but we’re still working on it. We heard him say he wanted his pack. Did you find a pack?”

“No. There were two suitcases, but they only had men’s clothing in them. She had a small purse and a tote bag with magazines, but that was it. Nothing else was in that plane.”

“The old man from last night, Trigger, he got Clarice to the funeral

home for us. They're making arrangements. She wanted to be cremated, and her ashes spread on the ranch." Cowboy nodded again, looking back toward the tent.

"Someone shot the plane out of the sky," he said, looking at the others. "If you wanted what was in that plane, why would you shoot it out of the sky? You risked the whole thing blowing apart."

The men all frowned at one another, shaking their heads.

"You've got me," said Red. "Unless. Unless it was in a fireproof box."

"I didn't see anything like that," said Cowboy. "Like I said, just the suitcases and tote. She had a small box that we got out earlier with candy bars, granola, snacks, that sort of thing, but it was all food."

"Well, until we know who these guys are, we aren't going to be able to figure this out," said Ethan. "The problem is, they know who she is."

Cowboy respected all of the men they worked with, but Ethan was on an entirely different plane. He was like having Trak, Zeke, Nine, and Gaspar rolled into one. He'd been through hell and found the love of his life in the form of Noa's niece. Now, they were raising a daughter together.

"I appreciate all of you for coming out," said Cowboy. "I know you have family back home."

“Not me,” smirked Moose. “I’m a single man and happy about it.”

“Me too,” smiled Red.

“Oh, damn,” muttered Mo. “You say that around Mama Irene, and you’ll be in trouble for sure. That woman cannot let a single man alone.” They all chuckled, nodding their heads. It was of no surprise to any of them when the text message came through that Annette Liconitis had succumbed to cancer the day before. It was, however, a surprise when it was noted that her grieving husband took his own life to be with her.

“Shit,” muttered Cowboy. “I really thought the old man might have something to do with all this or that he was kidnapped. To know that he got out of that plane wreck, but no one got her out, pisses me off.”

“He still could have something to do with all this,” said Mo. “Maybe he had something on that plane that belonged to the man. Or his bodyguard was doing something shady. Speaking of, where the hell is he? I mean, if Liconitis was pulled out, probably by his own people, where is the bodyguard? And why leave Autumn in the plane?”

No one had an answer to that as they frowned over their coffee. When the old pickup truck pulled up, they knew exactly who it was.

“Mornin’,” said Trigger. “Just wanted you all to know we got Clarice taken care of. I’ll hold onto her ashes until Autumn is ready to let ‘em go.

We found all but one of the horses and have them in our pens. No rush on gettin' them. How is she?"

"Devastated," said Cowboy. "She's lost her plane, her boss, her grandmother, and her home all within a few days. I don't know a lot of people who could survive that."

"She will," said the old man, nodding. "Look. I've known Clarice nearly my entire life. When she and Francis bought that place, it was a dump. Just when they were gettin' it fixed up, he got called up to Vietnam. She was pregnant. Less than a year later, she had a baby, a ranch, and was a widow. That woman worked harder than ten men, even though she had a loser for a son. When Autumn came to live with her permanently, it was like seeing a younger version of Clarice. Autumn worked right beside her. I'm not sure what makes the Zeller's men weak as shit, but it makes the women strong as an ox."

"I'm not sure I would consider a man getting killed in Vietnam weak," frowned Ethan. The old man looked at him, stepping closer.

"He was shot by his own men for trying to run away," whispered Trigger. "I should know. I was there. I wasn't in the same outfit, but we heard the story. I couldn't believe it.

"He got scared and kept trying to fake injuries to go home. They

were in a firefight, and he said he wasn't gonna die in that place. Stood up and started screaming, waving a white flag. He was gonna give away their position. So, his teammates shot him."

"No one questioned it?" asked Ethan.

"No one cared back then," said Trigger. "Autumn doesn't need to know that. She never knew him, although her daddy was just like him. A runner. That girl is just like her grandmother. And whoever earns her love and trust is one lucky bastard."

Cowboy stared at the man, swallowing hard, then looked down at his feet. Mo nudged Ethan. Moose and Red stared at their friend.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your breakfast. Here's my card if you need anything. Just let Autumn know I've got Clarice." They noticed the man said the last words with emotion, his old eyes watering.

"You were in love with her," said Red. He stopped, staring at the younger man with his head cocked to the side.

"Everyone was in love with her. It was hard not to love a woman like that. But you can't love someone that just wants to be free," he said.

Turning, he walked back to his truck as the others just watched. Ethan turned toward Cowboy.

"You care for the girl," he stated. It wasn't a question.

“Of course I do.”

“You know what he means, Cowboy,” said Mo. “You’ve got feelings for her.”

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I mean, she’s strong and beautiful and smart. I’ve never met anyone like her.” They all laughed.

“Yes, you have,” smirked Mo. “You’ve met a hundred like her.”

“We haven’t really had the time to get to know one another.” He knew he was making excuses for not answering the question, but he just wasn’t sure yet. Then he frowned.

“She said when she picked up Liconitis that an SUV pulled up with a couple of men in it. One of them was yelling at him, but his bodyguard walked over and was screaming at him and told him to leave.”

“Could be the same guys,” said Ethan. “We can have Ace check airport security cameras.” Mo tapped out a message to Ace and the team back home, then turned his attention back to Cowboy.

“We need to go after those men,” he said.

“I know. But I also know she’ll want to come, too. I’m not sure I want to let her do that,” frowned Cowboy.

“Try and stop me.” All eyes turned toward the woman as she glared

at Cowboy.

“Autumn, I didn’t mean I would stop you physically. I just meant that these men obviously don’t care who they hurt. I don’t want to see something happen to you.” She swallowed, staring at him, then looking at the others, who all had strange expressions on their faces.

“May I speak with you privately?” she asked. He nodded, standing to follow her a few yards away toward the trees. “Can you please explain this sudden need you have to be my bodyguard?”

“I don’t mean for it to come across that way. I just. I just want to be sure you’re alright. Look, I’ve come to care for you these last few days. I want to protect you. It’s who I am.”

“Why?” she whispered.

“Because I was a SEAL,” he frowned.

“No. Why protect me?” she asked.

Cowboy was trying to think of a good response, but the only thing he had didn’t require words. Stepping closer to her, he gripped the back of her neck and lowered his mouth to hers. Her body immediately melted against his own, her lips mimicking his movements as he pulled her tighter to his body. Behind him, he heard soft chuckles, then someone breaking the bond.

“Breakfast is ready!” called Moose.

“I hate those guys,” he laughed.

“I like them,” she smiled. “I like you, too. A lot. Thank you, Benjamin. Cowboy.”

“Call me whatever you like, Autumn. Just always call me.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” she smiled. “You’re the first man I’ve kissed in almost two years. I’d say you’re a shoo-in for the homecoming dance.” Cowboy laughed, not wanting to tell her that he never went to his homecoming dance. He was too busy with the horses.

“Let’s eat. We’ve got a day ahead of us.”

CHAPTER TEN

“I’m going to go take a shower,” she said, staring at the men. “I smell like horse, sweat, and smoke. And something far worse.” She wrinkled her nose as she gathered the clean clothes that Trigger had brought for her. The park had a communal shower facility that separated men and women, but it was within viewing distance of their campsite.

As she walked away, Ethan stood and paced around the fire. When she was inside the shower facility, he turned to the other men.

“We got word from Ace and the team. The dead guy is Richie Marovski. He’s a Bulgarian-born American-raised two-bit gangster. He did time in upstate New York for allegedly killing three men in a bar fight. Two years into his time, one of the witnesses stepped forward and said they were wrong. It wasn’t him. It was someone else.”

“Shit. Known acquaintances?” asked Cowboy.

“Many. He’s basically a gun for hire. His last known employer was Arturro Stepanapolos.”

“Shit,” muttered Mo.

“I’m in the dark on that one,” said Red.

“He owns a number of Greek ships that have been known to transport

items less than kosher. But he died about three years ago,” said Mo.

“His son didn’t,” said Moose. They all looked at him. “He has a son because I saw him. We were sent to kill Arturro, but someone beat us to it, and I always suspected the son.”

“Could that have been him on that ridge?” asked Cowboy.

“Could have been. I didn’t get a good look at his face. I was focused on the other guy’s forehead.” When the phone rang, they knew it would be the leadership team.

“Morning,” they said in unison.

“We need you guys on a chopper and headed back here, now,” said Luke.

“Hello to you too, sunshine,” grinned Ethan.

“Not fucking funny, Dunvegan. Dimitri Stepanopolos is a sick, twisted bastard. Whatever he’s after cannot be good, and if that girl has it, he’s going to find her. We’ve got Savannah headed your way. Meet her at the park’s Ranger headquarters. They have a landing pad there.”

“Will do,” said Cowboy.

“Oh, and Cowboy,” said Luke. “Welcome home.”

“He’s funny,” smirked Cowboy. They packed up the tents, and by the

time they were done, Autumn was walking toward them.

“Are we leaving?” she asked.

“We’ve got some friends picking us up in a chopper. It seems we might know who our killer is, and he’s one nasty bastard. We’ll be able to make a plan at our headquarters.” She started to speak, but Cowboy leaned forward, giving her a quick kiss. “A plan that I promise you will be a part of.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Do you mind kissing me every time you want to say something to me?”

“I don’t think that will be a hardship,” he laughed. “We’ll leave all the equipment at the Ranger station and let Trigger know.”

Two hours later, they were standing by the helipad watching as the modified Osprey landed, light as a feather, with a smiling Savannah at the stick.

“What in the hell is that?” gasped Autumn.

“That, is a creation of our own,” smiled Mo. “A modified Osprey with every weapon we own, technology no one can figure out, and the comforts of a luxury jet.”

“Oh, man,” she whispered. “I wanna fly it. Can I fly it? Please, please, please!” The men all laughed as Savannah walked toward them.

“You’ll have to get past her. This is her baby.”

“Hi. I’m Savannah Robicheaux,” she said, shaking the hand of the younger woman. “I understand you’re a pilot.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she nodded.

“No ma’ams. It makes me feel really old,” laughed the voluptuous woman. “Come on. We need to get out of here.”

Before the helicopter even lifted off, Autumn was excitedly speaking with Savannah about the mechanics of the chopper. The two women spoke the entire way while the men were able to lie back and close their eyes for a catnap. When they landed, Chipper and Evie were waiting for them, and Autumn started asking them questions.

“I promise we’ll show you everything we have,” laughed Evie. “First things first. You have to meet Mama Irene.”

“Mama Irene? Who is that?” she asked.

“I’ll explain on the way,” smiled Cowboy.

The waiting ATVs took them through the property and toward the cafeteria, where everyone was already gathered for dinner. When Cowboy walked in holding Autumn’s hand, the entire room turned and smiled at the man.

Five of the biggest dogs Autumn had ever seen ran toward them. Taught by her grandmother to stand still, she watched as they leaped onto Cowboy's chest, licking his face.

"Well, I guess they're friendly," she laughed.

"They are definitely friendly," he grinned.

"Welcome home, Cowboy," said Sniff, pulling him in for a hug.

"Autumn, this man is one of my many heroes. Alex 'Sniff' Mullins. He's our K-9 expert, and his wife, Lucy, is a veterinarian. One of the things our team does is rescue animals, train K-9s, that sort of thing. Violet, Striker, Dex, and Marie work with them, as well as Dani and Parker."

"I think I'm in heaven," smiled Autumn. "First that amazing helicopter, then I saw some of the jets, and now animals everywhere! Grandma would have loved it here."

She had tears in her eyes, and she tried to hold them back. Shaking her head, she looked up and noticed a tiny white-haired woman coming toward her and a large black man, gray and wrinkled.

"Who made this girl cry?" yelled George.

"Hi, George," smirked Cowboy. "She's just feeling sad. Her grandmother was recently killed. Autumn, this is George. The one and only. And this is definitely the one and only Mama Irene."

“Child, we are so happy to have you here,” said Mama Irene, giving her a big hug. “I have a cottage all ready for you. If you need anything at all, I can get it for you.”

She released her into George’s arms, and something made Autumn cling to him. She’d never warmed up to father figures very quickly. It just never ended well for her. But for some reason, this man was making her emotions surface.

“There, there, honey. It’s all gonna be okay. We can take care of whatever you need,” he whispered to her.

“You’re all so wonderful,” she sniffed, pulling back. “What I really need is clothing. I lost everything when they set the ranch on fire.”

“Did I hear someone say they needed to shop?” smiled Suze. “Hi, Autumn. My name is Suze LeBlanc, and this handsome devil is my son.” She kissed his cheek, hugging him.

“Mom,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she smiled.

“Me too,” said Blade, hugging his son. “Hi, Autumn. I’m Benjamin as well, although they call me Blade. I’m his father.”

“You look so much alike,” she smiled. “God, you’re all so wonderful.” Her tears began again, and Suze held the young woman,

soothing her.

“Why don’t we have some dinner. Then the girls and I will show you how to shop like a champion,” she smiled. Autumn nodded as Suze led her to a table. George put a plate full of food in front of her that even Taylor wouldn’t be able to eat, but she just smiled and dug in.

“She’s beautiful,” said Blade, smiling at his son.

“Yep. And she’s in danger. What the fuck do I do now?” The others laughed, shaking their heads.

“First, you protect her,” said Cam, slapping his back. Luke gripped his shoulder.

“Then you marry her.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Cowboy, the cottage is beautiful,” said Autumn walking around, running her hand over the back of the dark navy leather sofa. There were two navy, cream, and tan floral side chairs. An old railway rolling luggage cart had been converted into a coffee table. The paintings on the wall were magnificent renditions of country living. There was one of a man plowing the fields, another of a woman cooking in a huge iron pot over an open fire.

“I’m glad you like it,” he smiled. “All the cottages are similar, but everyone is able to put their own spin on things. You can change anything you like.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know if I’m staying,” she said nervously.

“You don’t have to decide that now. But there’s nothing for you back in California,” he said softly. “I wish there was, but nothing could be saved. Trigger has the horses taken care of, but if you wanted them, we could get a couple of trailers and bring them here.”

“Cowboy? Are you asking me to stay here? With you?” she said, tilting her head sideways.

“I know it seems strange, Autumn, but I’ve never felt like this with a

woman before. I damn sure never brought a woman back here and introduced her to my family.”

“Never?” she frowned.

“Never. Come here, honey. Take a seat.”

She sat beside him on the leather sofa, turning to see him more clearly. She tucked her feet beneath her bottom and stared at those gorgeous brown eyes of his. Cowboy cleared his throat, internally willing his dick to behave.

“You already know I’m a retired SEAL. My father is a retired Marine. Moose and Mo were both SEALs. Ethan, well, Ethan was everything. SEAL, Ranger, MARSOC. Every male on this property was in the military or para-military. We have a few like Keith, who is deaf, who couldn’t join. But he’s brilliant and fucking badass. Ryan has a PhD in engineering. Smart as shit. Thomas, well, he’s got PhDs in all kinds of shit. Don’t even get me started on the women.”

Autumn smiled at him, nodding.

“Yes, your mother was with the FBI. That would have been helpful to know,” she grinned.

“Yea, I guess it would have. Sorry. My point is these men all served at the highest levels of our country’s military. When they retired, they

formed a security agency to continue the work that they do. We were pretty silent about it for a while, then slowly came out into the open and got our asses handed to us. So, we rebranded. Now, we're back in the shadows, so to speak.

“To bring someone here is entrusting them with who we all are and where we all are. We're exposing ourselves to you and trusting that you'll never divulge who or where we are. Any woman ever brought here is now married to the man that brought her.” Autumn's eyes went wide, and she scooted backward for a moment, then stilled.

“I didn't mean to scare you,” said Cowboy. “I guess I should also explain that we tend to move really fast around here. My dad knew my mom when they were kids. In fact, he dated her sister for a while. Long story for another day. But they reconnected and were married within a few weeks. Ethan and Koana, a week or so. Mo and Ophelia, a little more complicated.”

“Are you saying you want to marry me?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, no. I mean. Yes. I can't lie, Autumn. Everything in my body is saying, 'this is the woman for you.' Everything. I know it's only been a few days, and it's been a hellacious few days, but I know that I've never met a woman that I didn't want to say goodbye to. I know that if I had to, it would kill me.”

“That’s a lot, Benjamin,” she whispered.

“Tell me what’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” he asked.

“I-I’m trying to figure out why a man that looks like you would want a woman like me. I mean, have you looked in the mirror lately? You’re billboard Times Square worthy. You’re smart, successful. You have family, Cowboy. A beautiful, wonderful family and parents that didn’t desert you.”

“That’s on them, honey. Not you. They missed out on an amazing woman, and I damn sure wish your grandmother was here for me to thank. But you’re all those things and more, Autumn. Fuck, you’re beautiful, sexy, smart, brave as shit. You’ve got your degree. You fly planes. We don’t have to do a thing right now. All I’m asking is that you give us a chance. Spend some time here with me and my family. Get to know us.”

“I think that’s a given,” she smirked. “Wh-what do we do about sleeping arrangements?”

“There are three bedrooms in this cottage. We can have our own sleeping space. I will never, ever pressure you to do something you don’t want to do.” He leaned forward, pulling her in for a slow, easy kiss. But it seemed Autumn had other ideas.

Moving closer and closer, she pressed her hand to his chest, pushing him back against the sofa. Now, lying between his thighs, she felt the bulge

of his erection and moaned against his lips, grinding her pelvis into him.

“Baby, mmm, honey, I’m only human,” he moaned.

“Me too,” she giggled. “I’ve been wanting to be in this very spot since I could see you clearly.”

“You have?” he smirked.

“Benjamin, you’re the most handsome, exciting, seductive male I’ve ever met. You’ve treated me with kindness and respect, you’ve protected me, and you damn sure light my fires. Yes. I’ve been wanting to do this and so much more.”

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath.

Autumn ran her hand up the inside of his shirt, feeling the warm skin of his flesh. Her cool touch sent chills down his spine as she reached between them, unzipping his pants.

He kicked off his shoes, pulling his feet up on the couch. Kneeling between his thighs, she pulled the shirt over her head, revealing the beautiful breasts he’d seen in the darkness of the forest. Her right nipple had a small piercing through it, and his dick immediately rose to attention.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he growled.

“It feels amazing when you lick it,” she smirked.

Leaning forward, she allowed his tongue to flick back and forth as she moaned, grinding into his groin. Without a word, he stood, wrapping her legs around him, and headed to the bedroom.

Lying her on the bed, he removed her jeans, then his own. Grabbing a condom from his pocket, he rolled it on and opened her legs as wide as he could. He knew he didn't need to get her ready. She was dripping with desire. He could see it. He could smell it. Pressing the head of his cock to her opening, he drove through, and she let out a squeal.

Cowboy stilled. No. No.

“Autumn.”

“I know. I should have told you, but this is what I wanted.”

“You said you dated a man for two years,” he whispered against her lips.

“Dated. I didn't say we had sex. It was part of why we broke up. I knew he wasn't the one.” He looked down into her face, his cock still inside her.

“Are you saying I am the one?” he grinned.

“You're inside my body, Cowboy. I'd say that's a sign from me that you're the one.”

“Fucking right I am,” he growled, moving slowly inside her. “I just wish you would have told me. I would have been gentler.”

“I don’t need gentle. I just need you,” she moaned, rolling her hips upward. “God, that feels so good.”

“Yes, it does.”

After another hour of exploring one another’s bodies, they showered and crawled back into the big, plush bed. Cowboy could hear the winds picking up, which meant a late summer storm was probably brewing out in the Gulf. It was still hurricane season, but he hadn’t heard anything about that just yet.

He got up to ensure that everything was secure, turning off the lights in the kitchen. He picked up their discarded clothing, smiling as he did, and tossed it in the basket. Tomorrow would be a difficult day for Autumn. She would need to face the entire team and walk through everything that had happened.

No matter what. She wasn’t going anywhere.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Good morning,” she blushed, walking into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” smiled Cowboy, kissing her sweetly. “Coffee?”

“Oh, man, now you’re speaking my language. I’m not a girl that needs flowers or candy, but give me coffee, and I’ll do anything you want.”

“Anything?” he smirked. She kissed him, taking the mug from his hand.

“Anything,” she said seductively, kissing him again. He adjusted his hardening dick, then touched her pierced nipple beneath the thin t-shirt fabric. The chill bumps on her arms rose as she became excited by the touch.

“Fuck, I love that piercing,” he moaned. A pounding on the door had him turning to see a couple of his teammates. “I really do hate those guys sometimes.”

“Well, I like them,” she smiled, opening the door. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Autumn,” said Moose. “Did the ugly bastard treat you right last night? If not, I’m a single man. I’m happy to step in.”

“You wanna keep those teeth?” smirked Cowboy.

“Brother, you’re a big dude, but I’ve got forty pounds on you easy and two to three inches in height. I don’t wanna embarrass you.” Moose

winked at Autumn, and she just shook her head, laughing at the banter between the men.

“You know, I didn’t grow up with a father around me. He was gone by the time I was eleven. Even when he was there, he wasn’t an alpha male figure at all. The only male influences I had were the other ranchers. I didn’t really date at all in college. I’m sure because I was so awkward. I mean, Grandma, she was...” Autumn stopped, swallowing her words as her eyes filled with tears.

“She was so amazing, you guys. She was strong and smart. She taught me to bake an apple pie and shoot a .22. That woman didn’t take shit from anyone, including her own son, when it came to me. I owe her everything, and I don’t know how I repay that now.”

“You’re doing it,” smiled Ethan. “You’re remembering her and telling her story. She sounds like an amazing woman, and I would have loved to have met her.” Autumn nodded, hugging the big man.

“Thank you for that. She would have loved all of you. She used to say all the ‘real’ men died with John Wayne. I’m not sure that was true, but she’d love to see all of you. So, what happens today?”

“Well,” said Mo, “we’re going to escort you to the auditorium where breakfast is being served this morning. Then, we’ll have you walk through

the whole story once again. Our tech team is the best in the world. I can guarantee that. They'll search on every word you say, just to see if it hits on something."

"Okay," she nodded. "Let me grab my shoes." She disappeared to the bedroom, and Mo, Moose, Ethan, and Red stared at Cowboy.

"The old man was found murdered this morning," said Ethan.
"Trigger."

"Are you fucking with me right now?"

"I wish I were, brother. We let the local sheriff know what was happening but didn't divulge that we have Autumn. We only said she was somewhere safe."

"I'm ready," she said, walking out. They all turned with fake smiles, and she knew something was up. She also knew they probably wouldn't tell her.

The rain was annoyingly light. It wasn't a sprinkle, but it wasn't a full-blown downpour, either. It was enough to get you wet and make the humidity rise by a thousand percent. It was miserable. Walking into the auditorium, she shook off the raindrops and then looked up in surprise. Autumn was shocked at the number of people.

"Wow," she whispered.

“Yea, this is the whole family,” smiled Cowboy.

People came forward, hugging, kissing, and slapping his back as he introduced Autumn to everyone. Along the wall was a long buffet line where everyone was filling their plates. She stared at the line as three men who appeared to be nearly seven-feet tall argued over how many biscuits they could eat.

“I’m tellin’ ‘ya, I’ve eaten a dozen in one sitting,” said Tailor.

“You’re lying. Let’s test it here,” said Alec. “Each one of us grabs a dozen. First man done with all of them wins.”

“Eating contests are juvenile,” said Noah. “Besides, we all know that Brit can outeat everyone.” Brit nudged the big man, then put four biscuits on her plate, already piled high with food.

“How about you boys save some for the rest of us,” said Baptiste. They all looked at him, frowning with a look that would make others melt. “I’m telling Mama.”

The men laughed, and Autumn felt a wave of relief run through her. She would not want to make those men angry.

“I say let our guest go first,” said Trak. The entire line jumped from the rumbling sound of the bass voice. Autumn stared at the man, then smiled, nodding her thanks.

“That’s very kind of you, but I’m good with a little coffee and some fruit,” she said.

“Nonsense!” said Zeke. “The food here is worth every calorie. You have to try the cinnamon rolls. They’re a favorite for everyone.”

Every time Autumn tried to leave the line, someone placed another spoonful of something on her plate. By the time she sat down, she was embarrassed at the amount of food before her.

“Don’t worry about it,” said a beautiful indigenous woman, “they’re always like this. I’m Tila. I’m married to Kevin, right over there.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Autumn.”

“I’m relatively new here, although honestly, you can’t say that after just a few days. It seems everyone embraces you, and suddenly, it feels as though you’ve been here for years.”

“Yes, I’m getting that vibe,” she smiled.

“You’ll be just fine. All of these men and women are incredibly capable and brave. They won’t let anything happen to you.” Tila stood with her plate and moved back to sit near Kev, allowing Cowboy to take her place.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes. Just a little overwhelmed, I suppose. Everyone is wonderful.

It's just a lot coming at me at one time."

"It will get better. I promise." He kissed her, then heard someone clear their throat at the front of the room.

"Good morning," said Hex. A chorus response followed, and Autumn couldn't help but smile. "Autumn, welcome to our family. I'm Hex. This is Luke, Cam, and Eric. We're the leadership team, generation 2.0. The original team is in the back. Nine, Gaspar, Ian, and Ghost."

She turned and smiled up at the men, giving a small wave. The men, who would have been intimidating any other time, gave a smile to the young woman, waving at her.

"I'm sure that Cowboy has already told you that we can't allow others to know where we are or who we are." She nodded again. "Good. When you're ready, we'd like to hear your story from the beginning."

Standing, she moved to the front of the room. Nervousness began to take hold, and she wiped her hands on her jeans. This was reminiscent of her college speech class. The one she hated.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you for making me feel so welcome." Ace adjusted the microphone on her shirt, then pointed to the stool where she could sit. "Thank you."

"Any time."

“Do I need to tell you about my childhood?” she asked with confusion.

“If you think it’s helpful, then yes,” said Luke, trying to ease her discomfort.

“Okay. Well, my parents left me when I was just eleven. My father said he had hit a big one on the roulette wheel, but my grandmother and I didn’t believe him. They said they weren’t meant to be parents. But don’t feel sorry for me. Because if there was ever a woman meant to be a mother, it was my grandmother.

“Sh-she is. She was,” she stopped swallowing, looking down.

“Take your time, sweet girl,” said Max, seated in the front row. “We got all day.” She nodded at the big man, feeling suddenly comforted and protected at the same time, then continued.

“She was this amazing rock of Gibraltar. My north star. She taught me to ride a horse, bake a pie, and multiply fractions. She even taught me to shoot a gun. That woman made a living for us and somehow saved enough for me to go to college and get my pilot’s license.

“When I first started flying, I just had this small, used Cessna 402. Grandma helped me to reupholster the seats because they were all torn up. Then we redid the flooring. But she was mine. Bought and paid for. One

night, I dropped a passenger off in Las Vegas, and there was this man standing there looking at his watch. He was wearing a dark suit, and I knew his watch was expensive, so I figured he was waiting on a private plane. I took a chance and asked if he needed a ride somewhere.

“He said he was waiting on his personal jet, but it had been delayed due to weather. He was going to the Los Angeles area, and I offered to take him. I don’t normally let people sit in the co-pilot seat, but he seemed harmless enough. We talked the entire time.”

“What about?” asked Luke.

“Mostly his wife. She had colon cancer and was dying. They had an amazing marriage, and he was willing to do just about anything for her. When we landed, he asked me if I could take him back to Vegas the next day. So, I did. It went like that for a few months, then one day, he said my plane just wasn’t going to cut it.

“I thought he was firing me, but instead, he pulls out this Cessna Citation Mustang. God, she was beautiful,” smiled Autumn. Evie, Savannah, Chipper, and Doug all grinned at the young woman. She spoke about airplanes like most women speak about shoes or handbags. “That plane had everything in it. He said he wanted me to be his exclusive pilot, but if he weren’t going anywhere, I was welcome to take on other customers.

It was a no-brainer for me.

“As Annette, his wife, got sicker, she would fly with him just because he didn’t want her to be alone. Her nurse would fly with us as well. Now, they’re both gone.”

“What happened the night of the crash?” asked Hex.

“We left Los Angeles after his usual visit with Annette and stopped in Fresno. He said he had a short meeting with someone. I didn’t even get out of the plane. We lowered the stairs, and the bodyguard went out to a black SUV to yell at someone. I heard the voices but nothing else. Mr. Liconitis never left the plane.”

“Okay, then what?” asked Cam.

“Everything was going normally. I filed my usual flight plan, although the control tower said I didn’t. We crossed over the mountain range, and I heard this loud bang, and suddenly, I had no control.”

“We saw the photos,” said Chipper. “It looks like it was a small rocket launcher, and it went right through your wing. There was no way for you to control it.” Autumn nodded.

“I looked for a lake or something flat to land on, but there was nothing except trees. My best option seemed to try and land treetop and hope for the best. I saw the ravine below me. The one where they killed my

grandmother, and that was the last thing I remember.

“I woke up once, just barely, but I heard voices yelling that they had to get him out of there, then I was out again until Cowboy showed up.”

Benjamin nodded, standing beside her.

“After my encounter with her grandmother, I set out in the direction she thought the plane had gone down. I was shocked as shit when I found it. Autumn was trapped inside; her foot was stuck between two pieces of metal, and she had that nice gash on her head. Honestly, I was surprised she wasn’t dead.”

“Autumn, when the man was on the other ridge with your grandmother, what did he say he wanted?” asked Cam.

“He said he wanted his ‘pack,’ but I don’t know what that is. I’d never seen that man before, and I didn’t have anything in the plane other than Mr. Liconitis’s suitcase and his bodyguard’s suitcase. I had a small box with my snacks I always carry and my personal things, a purse, sweatshirt, that sort of thing.”

“You had the tote with the magazines,” said Cowboy.

“What tote?” she asked with confusion. “I didn’t have a tote of magazines.”

“Fuck me.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I never thought to ask you,” said Cowboy. “I mean, I saw all these women’s magazines and just assumed they belonged to you.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, staring at the magazines spread out on the table. “I’ve never seen these before.”

“Why would Liconitis have a tote bag full of women’s fashion magazines?” asked Hex. “Could he have bought them for his wife?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” said Autumn. “Annette really wasn’t able to look at anything for very long. She was so sick those last few months. Besides, the hospice center she was in would have had all of those for her if she wanted them. No, he was more inclined to buy her diamonds or rubies, not magazines.”

“Okay,” said Gwen, stepping forward, “this is my domain, so let’s see what we have here. French, Italian, Brazilian, and Chinese fashion magazines. Four beauty magazines, two from the U.S., one from France, and one from India. And several catalogs from designers.”

Gwen took the first one from the stack and slowly began to flip the pages. The others watched as she did. As she got ready to flip the page, Autumn gripped her wrist.

“Wait. What’s that?” she asked, pointing to something on the page. Gwen held up the magazine, turning it carefully.

“I don’t know. Maybe a print error?” she said, frowning.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Autumn. Taking the magazine, she stared at the dress, not able to clearly see the blemish there. “Can you put this on the screen and enlarge it?”

“Definitely,” said Sly.

He grabbed the magazine and then flattened it to the scanner, showing the designer dress on the big screen. It was a wide skirt in a beautiful cream wool. The whisper-thin model was looking upward, her hand artfully placed at the side of her face. Autumn stepped closer and closer, staring at the grouping of numbers.

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“It’s a flight plan,” she whispered. “That’s a flight plan. It’s not on a form or anything, but that’s what it is. The four numbers are the time it was filed. Then the ID of the person who filed it, aircraft ID, type, time of departure, date of departure, departure city, and arrival city. Someone was going from Las Vegas to Orlando on the twenty-first at three-fifty p.m.

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“Damn. You’re right,” smiled Chipper. “That was awesome.”

“What does it mean?” she asked the others.

“Let’s see if there are others before we jump on this. We might have something, but we may not,” said Eric.

It took them five hours of passing the magazines around so they had different pairs of eyes on the pages. Each time, they discovered that someone had missed the hidden numbers, despite knowing what they were looking for. The items on the pages expertly hid the flight plans.

“How many do we have?” asked Luke.

“A total of forty-seven,” said Cowboy. “And they were going everywhere. There are no two cities the same. But all the dates reflect flights in the last two years.”

“What the hell is this?” muttered Cam. No one seemed to have a response to his question, just staring at the grouping of numbers.

“Did we get through all of the magazines?” asked Hex.

“All of them,” said Autumn. “Could someone be tracking people? I mean, if I think about the people I flew back and forth to Vegas, L.A., and other big cities, they were all high-profile businessmen and women, business owners, that sort of thing. Maybe my plane was targeted because of Mr. Liconitis.”

“Maybe, but why?” asked Cowboy. “I mean, were they hoping to kill

him? Kidnap him? His team, or at least we think it was his team, got him out of the plane, so what did it prove?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “But it also kind of hurts my feelings that they didn’t try to get me out of the plane.” She gave a wry smirk, and the others chuckled at her ability to laugh at this.

“I think we need to dig into Liconitis’s business,” said Luke. “We know he owned those casinos in Vegas, but he had other businesses as well. Everything we heard was that he had some questionable practices, but you told Cowboy that he wasn’t what everyone thought.”

“No. He wasn’t anything like what Cowboy said. The man I knew, and I’ll include his wife, because they were always together. The man I knew gave to charities all the time. He would surprise a mother in need with a new home, fully furnished. Annette would make sure the children had clothing and toys. This was often, not just one time. He was like a secret Santa.

“I remember one time dropping him off in Vegas, and he was going to be there a few days with Annette. They invited me to be their guest at the hotel, gave me a suite, and everything. It was wonderful for me because I wouldn’t have been able to afford that by myself. Anyway, Annette knocked on my door late one night and said they had to fly someone to the East Coast.

“I raced downstairs, and in the limo was a woman with a small child.

The stepfather had beaten the child to the point of a traumatic brain injury. The best pediatric neurosurgeon was in Baltimore, and they wanted to get him there.”

“That’s admirable,” nodded Cam.

“It is, but you need to know that they didn’t even know the woman. She was a prostitute that the bodyguard, Liam, found on the side of the road crying, begging for help. No one would even stop for her. Her son was inside, bleeding and dying. She’d been waiting almost thirty minutes for emergency services to arrive.”

“Did the bodyguard know the woman?” asked Cowboy.

“No. They saved that boy and then bought the woman a home in a new state, got her enrolled in school so she could finish her education, and provided a trust for the boy. I found out later that they paid the bodyguards extra to find people in need. The Liconitis’s didn’t have any children of their own, and they were determined to give away as much as they could.”

“Well, you’re right. He sounds very different from what we all knew of him.” Autumn nodded.

“I know that he wasn’t always that way. Annette told me once that he changed with the death of their little girl.”

“I thought they had no children,” frowned Hex.

“None living. They had Lisa late in life. Annette was almost forty-five. She was their miracle baby, but they kept it very quiet. He knew that she could be used against him if his enemies found out. When she was three, Annette was taking her on a shopping excursion. One of his business rivals tried killing Annette and missed killing the child. Annette said everything changed after that. He severed business relationships, cleaned up the businesses in Vegas, and started giving money away.”

“Sounds like a man that found a better path,” said Luke. “I’m glad for him, and I’m glad that they’re still together in their next life.”

“Me too,” said Autumn with a sad smile. “But why did someone shoot down my plane with him in it?” Cowboy kissed her temple.

“Baby, that is the million-dollar question.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

While the tech team worked to find out if all the flights had made it to their destinations safely, the women took Autumn to all the businesses on the property.

“I can’t believe all of this. It’s like your own little city,” she said, staring at the school, hospital, café, and other properties. “I probably could use a good haircut and manicure.”

“We can make that happen,” smiled Winter. “Why don’t we do it in the cottage, so you’re not off-property. That would probably make Cowboy feel better.”

“I’d love that.” Back at the cottage, Keegan got busy on her hair while Winter gave her a manicure.

“Later, I’ll give you a good massage,” said Ramey.

“You have triplets,” smiled Autumn. “I hardly think you have time to give me a massage right now. In fact, I should be giving you a massage.”

Ramey laughed, shaking her head.

“Actually, you wouldn’t believe how helpful Christopher is. He gets up at night with them, changes them, feeds them, all of it. I stood outside the door last night while he was telling them stories of his time in Malaysia. I

wanted to interrupt, but it was so damn cute I couldn't. I'll have to put a stop to those stories when they get a bit older."

"That's so adorable," smiled Margo. "Patrick is doing the same, and I know Ham is helping Sadie. In fact, the triplets all seem to wake at the same time. Kind of creepy."

"It should be creepy," grinned Alice. "Those babies outnumber the adults at the island mansion. You guys might wake up and find yourselves tied to the beds and the children taking over."

"That's not even funny," smirked Micaela. "Mattie has Tanner so wrapped around her little finger I worry that he's going to buy her a car for her fifth birthday."

There was a knock at the door, and Lucy got up to open it. Standing there was her daughter, Caroline. Just turned twenty-six, she was in her last year at vet school. Stunningly beautiful, she had her mother's startling blue eyes and her father's dark hair. Five-feet-nine, she looked like a cover model, not a vet student.

"Hi, everyone," she smiled with a wave.

"Caroline! I feel like we haven't had the chance to see you since you've been home," said Tori.

"Honestly, Aunt Tori, I haven't had time to see anyone. I've been

working at the school, plus trying to take a few of my last classes. I'd like to be done with everything by Christmas so I can come back and help Mom and Dad."

"I know they'd love to have you," said Rose. She was seated with Zoe and Ani, looking at the magazines from earlier.

"And I'd love to be here," she smiled.

"So, Caroline," grinned Lissa, "any male prospects on the horizon." The young woman immediately turned beet red, looking at the faces of the dozens of women she knew so well. She swallowed, pushing back her long hair from her face.

"Aunt Lissa, I just don't have time right now. Besides, the guy I like doesn't know I'm even alive."

"Then he doesn't deserve you, honey," said Tru. Caroline nodded, smiling at the other woman.

"Did you need something, sweetie?" asked Lucy.

"No, I was just going to tell you that I'm headed to the airport. I'll be in Ankara, Turkey, helping them to care for the animals. The earthquake devastated the zoo, and they're just trying to contain them. I've only signed on for four weeks, but I have all the fancy G.R.I.P. equipment, and I'll call every day."

“You’ve trained her well,” grinned Ally.

“Her father trained her well,” smiled Lucy, hugging her daughter.

“Be safe, and we’ll see you soon.” She kissed her daughter and watched as she turned, waving to everyone.

“Aren’t you worried for her?” asked Zoe.

“Terrified,” said Lucy. “But I can’t tie her down. She’s smart, cautious, and follows all the rules set forth for her. This work in Turkey will really help to prepare her for working here. I know she’ll be fine.”

“You’re all very tight-knit,” said Autumn. “It was always just me and Grandma.”

“When you were little, didn’t you spend time with your mom?” asked Ally.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “My mother didn’t want to be a mother. She made that very clear. She and my father enjoyed their time together and took off whenever they could, leaving me with Grandma. Even when I needed new clothes or shoes, she didn’t want to take me because, of course, as a kid, I just wanted to find my stuff and leave. She thought we should spend all day shopping.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” said Ally, reaching for her hand.

“The only thing I’m sorry for is that I didn’t have more women

around me. Grandma was a lot,” she smirked, “but I needed women my own age, and I didn’t have that. When I saw all of you that first day, I was intimidated. But I’m truly blown away by how supportive and kind you all are. It’s not what I expected.”

“We get that a lot,” smiled Lissa. “There’s something magical about this place, Autumn. I can’t explain it, and I’m not sure I want to. The women are so special, so loving and kind, but so are the men.”

“I’ve figured that out,” she laughed. “I honestly never thought I’d find someone to love. When I was lying next to that fire, my head swimming from the wound, I looked up at Cowboy and knew I was dreaming. I’ve never met anyone so thoughtful and kind. And...”

“And?” grinned Tori.

“He’s an amazing lover,” she blushed. “I can share that with all of you, can’t I?”

“Yes,” laughed Zoe. “We tend to share those things. But maybe we need to share something else. It’s some advice that our leadership wives give to the young women who come here.” Lissa nodded.

“They tell us that 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."

"That's beautiful," she nodded. "I feel so fortunate that my grandmother happened upon Cowboy in that truck stop and that he agreed to find me." The women all laughed, shaking their heads.

"Honey, we don't think that anything happens by chance. We're not sure what it is, but it's definitely more than pure chance," grinned Lucy.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm glad I'm here. It took me a while to understand that my being here wasn't putting anyone in danger, but Cowboy explained it all. I think I understand now."

"I tell you what," said Ally. "You're looking beautiful, and the rain has finally stopped. Why don't we take a walk around the back of the property so you can see just how safe you really are. By that time, we'll be ready for dinner."

Autumn stared at more than a dozen women surrounding her and felt

the warmth in her chest. She wished her grandmother had lived to see this and be a part of it. She wanted nothing more than for Autumn to find a family beyond her. Well, she had. She was finally home.

“I think it sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“She’s quite a woman, son,” grinned Blade, gripping his son’s shoulder. “She reminds me of your mother.”

“Please don’t put that in my head,” he smirked. The men all laughed, nodding their heads. “She is an amazing woman. Surviving her parents deserting her, living in that little nothing town, getting her degree and pilot’s license, then surviving the crash. It’s beyond what most would be able to do.

“My concern is who took Liconitis out of the plane, leaving her for the wildlife or worse. So far, all we know is that Dimitri Stepanopolos was most likely our man on the ridge. I want to find him.”

“We’re looking for him,” said Luke. “The news is reporting that the estate of Liconitis and his wife was to be divided amongst several charities. The casinos were to be sold by their estate, and the money given to the Liconitis Foundation that helps single mothers.”

“Maybe we had him all wrong,” frowned Hex. “Maybe Autumn was right. After the death of their child, he seems to have changed.”

“I think he did,” said Cowboy, nodding his head. “The question is, who wanted to kill him enough to shoot that plane out of the sky?”

“And what the hell are those old flight plans doing in those

magazines?” asked Eric. “None of it makes any sense.” The men all looked at one another, silently asking for ideas. When they turned to the front row of their pilot team, the four were whispering in secret as if they had the world’s problems solved.

“Chipper? Doug? All of you, did you have something?” asked Luke.

“It’s a long shot,” said Savannah, “but what if those are routine flight plans for those planes. And, what if they carry the same passengers or cargo on every flight. And, what if that cargo is human.”

There was silence for a moment as they all looked at one another. Then Chipper stepped up to the dais.

“All of the planes listed on those flight paths are capable of carrying five to twelve passengers, no more. That means that they can avoid certain types of security and scrutiny at private airports. It looks on the up-and-up. Maybe, Stepanapolos was trying to get Liconitis to carry his cargo, and the man refused.”

“If it were me,” said Kegger, “I’d be looking into whether or not Liconitis was into any sort of trouble with Stepanapolos. Maybe he owed him money or even a favor.”

“Nice of you to speak up, Kegger,” grinned Benji.

“I speak when I need to,” he grinned. “Look, it’s been a lot of years.

Pork and Otto might remember more details than I do. But we went after Arturo about twenty years ago. He was transporting women from Eastern Europe to Central and South America, then bringing some into the States. The problem was that he was good friends with the president of Greece. They didn't want him touched. The U.S. felt otherwise."

"I remember that," said Otto. "We were in a submersible just a mile from his ship. I had him in my sights on deck with three young girls. He'd made them strip and was inspecting them."

"I was begging someone to let me shoot," said Pork. "Then suddenly, we get the word to stand down. Turn the submersible back, get on board the carrier, and get the fuck out of there." Luke and the others looked toward Bodwick. It was long before his time as President, but he would have been in Congress at that time.

"I don't remember anything about that," he said, shaking his head. "If a decision was made, I was completely unaware of anything. It's not surprising, but still, Arturo was a big deal back then."

"Hey, I don't want to interrupt, but I've received a message from the sheriff in California," said Pigsty. "We left our number as the contact number if they needed anything from Autumn."

"What do they need?" asked Cowboy.

“Nothing from her. Some lawyer for Liconitis brought a box that was left to her. I asked him to ship it to our P.O. Box at the General Store. I’ll have someone pick it up to see what’s in there. I’m going to guess that he left her something in the will.”

“I’m sure she’ll be grateful for whatever he sent,” said Cowboy. “She spoke highly of him. What do we do now? Marovski is dead, but we know that he worked for Arturo. Do we pay him a visit?”

“Not yet,” said Eric. “Let’s see what we can find out from our friends in Washington. If they’re working on something, we want to cooperate with them. If not, we’ll be cooperating on our own.”

“Just a little something that might be helpful,” said Gaspar from the back row. “Forty years ago, Nine, Ghost, and me were on a joint mission with some of the others in Cyprus. We were sent to kill Zeus Stepanapolos, the grandfather of Dimitri.”

“Did you succeed?” asked Cowboy. Nine stared at him like he had three heads. “Right. You succeeded.”

“We did,” said Ghost. “I was a young SEAL back then, so serving on a team with these guys was like being chosen for the dream team in the Olympics. Zeus, cocky bastard, by the way, was hosting a party at his seaside home. When we came up on the beach, we noticed that everyone

seemed to be panicked. We were certain it wasn't about us, but it did help us." Gaspar nodded.

"Our team was able to get close to the pool area, and what we saw was beyond disturbing. Zeus had beaten his wife to death in front of their guests. She'd chosen the wrong wine for the meal, and he wanted them to know what happens to people who disappoint him. It wasn't hard to pull that trigger," said Gaspar.

"Was the son there?" asked Cowboy.

"I never saw him," said Nine, "but that doesn't mean he wasn't there. He would have been in his late twenties at the time, so he could have been off partying with his own age group."

"Did they know it was you?" asked Cowboy.

"They knew it was Americans," said Ghost.

"Damn."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Hello there,” said Cowboy, kissing Autumn. She smiled up at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Can I just stay like this forever?” she whispered.

“I think that’s the plan, honey. Did you have a good day with the girls?”

“The best. They’re all so amazing, Benjamin. I mean, your own mother isn’t just the average FBI agent. She was specialized in chemical weapons. She even consults with the people out at G.R.I.P., which was the bomb, by the way! I’ve never seen so much technology and innovation in one place. And so much brainpower!”

“Yea,” he laughed, “we’ve got quite a crew here. Listen, the sheriff called and said one of Liconitis’s lawyers brought a box that he left you. We’re having it shipped to our P.O. Box, but I wanted to let you know that we would open it first. Just in case.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “I have nothing to hide. I’m sure it’s something that Annette wanted me to have. When I would drop Constantine off, if she were with him, we would go shopping together. She was in a wheelchair most of the time, but her nurse always came with us. Annette

would insist on buying me a new sweater or pair of earrings. She was very generous. They both were.”

“It sounds like they were good people who definitely changed their ways,” said Cowboy.

“I met Lucy and Sniff’s daughter today. She was headed out to work at a zoo in Turkey. I guess the earthquake there has them scrambling to take care of the animals and get them temporarily placed elsewhere. She was beautiful.”

“Yea, Caroline is definitely the best of both her folks. I always thought she and Tobias would get together, but I don’t think that ever happened.”

“She did say she wasn’t dating anyone but was kind of vague about someone she liked but didn’t seem to notice her,” smirked Autumn. “I guess boy-girl dynamics never change, do they?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Cowboy. “I made sure my girl knew I liked her.”

“Yes, you did,” she grinned. “Cowboy? Do you think when all this settles down, I might be able to join the team as a pilot? I really don’t want to give up flying.”

“I don’t know why not. Doug has been talking about doing less

flying for years, and I know Rafe would love it if Savannah flew less. That would leave you, Evie, and Chipper.”

“He’s getting up there as well,” said Autumn. “I know he’s a great pilot, but it’s odd to see so many men and women that are in their sixties, seventies, even eighties performing full-time jobs, strenuous jobs. And they’re all in amazing shape. I saw this big blonde guy running earlier, Wilson, I think was his name. He didn’t have a shirt on. I won’t lie. I was salivating a bit.” Cowboy could only laugh.

“Yea, he was part of the original REAPER team in Virginia. He’s amazing. Once a division one college volleyball player, SEAL, and RN. Guy’s a beast for sure.”

“I know, but the girls told me he has daughters older than me and grandchildren my age and older. How is that possible?” Cowboy smiled at her, taking her hand.

“Let’s go for a walk. It’s a nice day.” Autumn nodded at him, walking the damp paths beside him. “Autumn, I know it’s early in our relationship, but since you brought up staying and flying with the team, I’m going to ask this. When we’ve figured all this out, will you stay here, with me?”

Autumn stopped him on the path, smiling at him. It was cute that he

thought he needed to ask. In her mind, she had nowhere else to be or to go. This was the place she felt at home, loved, desired.

“Cowboy, maybe I was assuming too much, but I thought that was already decided. I have no plans to go anywhere. This is where I want to be. With you and your crazy huge family.”

Cowboy let out a slow breath, nodding his head. It was such a relief to hear her say it. Kissing the tip of her nose, he pulled her along the path toward the pond. Reaching the dock, he began to remove his clothing.

“Skinny dipping? Out here? Won’t someone see us?” she smiled.

“Trust me. You have to strip.” She stared at his serious expression and stripped off her clothes. When he jumped in, she followed, coming up quickly with a gasp of surprise.

“It’s warm! It feels wonderful,” she smiled. He nodded, then pointed to her forehead where the huge gash had once been. Running her fingers along the spot, she frowned. “What the hell?”

“I know,” he nodded. “This pond has some unusual mineral deposits and other things we’re not quite sure of. It’s been able to heal nearly every wound anyone has sustained here. There are some things it can’t change. It can’t grow a severed limb back. It can’t always help someone with infertility, yet it has in some cases. But for things like broken bones, cuts,

even gunshot wounds, it has a healing property we can't put our finger on."

"I've never in my life felt anything like this," she said, gently treading water back and forth. Her perfect breasts were bobbing on the surface, and Cowboy felt his cock ache for her. Taking her hand, he led her beneath the waterfall and lifted her onto the ledge.

"I need you," he moaned, spreading her legs. She nodded as he filled her, kissing her, stroking her. "This fucking piercing."

"Mmm, yea, keep that up," she gasped. Autumn arched her back, bringing her knees higher. As she did, Cowboy's thick head hit her g-spot, sending her into an abyss of pleasure. He was right there with her the whole time.

"You are so fucking perfect," he said, kissing down her torso. "What made you get the piercing?"

"Well, I don't have any tattoos or other piercings except my ears. That guy I dated for a while kept saying I was boring and never took risks. What he really wanted was sex, and I wasn't ready for that, but I thought I could do something risky."

"Like flying a plane isn't risky enough," smirked Cowboy.

"Yea," she laughed, "I guess not. Anyway, one of the cocktail waitresses overheard us arguing, and when he left, she said that she got her

nipples and her clit pierced. She said it changed her sex life for the better. I wasn't willing to let a man pierce me down there, but a nipple seemed harmless."

"Did it hurt?" he asked.

"Oh, yea. Definitely. But once it was healed, I noticed that every time I touched it, my body was on fire. I think I realized then that I didn't need to keep dating someone hoping that he was the 'one' when I could pleasure myself and truly find the 'one.'"

"And have you?" he grinned.

"Cowboy, we've made love nonstop for days. I think you can rest assured you are the one for me. The only one. I hope Grandma knew when she met you."

"You know, she asked if I had a girlfriend, wife, or family. I thought it was an odd question at the time, but maybe she did know. I'm not sure," he said, kissing her nipple once again. "All I know is I'm glad you're here with me."

"Me too."

After leaving the pond, Cowboy showed her the Sugar Lodge, then walked the long way around the property. They passed several of the couples out for a walk, just holding one another, kissing, and laughing. It was

something he'd missed while gone.

Seeing all these happy couples always gave him hope that true love was out there for him. Did they get angry? Of course, they did. But they always talked it out and settled their differences. There were no finer examples, in his opinion.

They smiled as they approached Ela, her canvas resting on the easel as she painted one of the fountains on the property.

“Ela, that’s beautiful,” said Cowboy. “I’ve always loved this fountain.”

“Me too,” she grinned at the couple. “Marc and I did a lot of kissing at this fountain when we first got together. I was so grateful for him and Uncle Zeke. I don’t know what I would have done had they made me go back to my parents’ home.”

“We’re glad you’re here,” said Cowboy. She nodded and waved as they continued down the path. “I may have to leave for a few days to track down some leads. I know you will, but please stay here with everyone. We don’t know what Dimitri’s game is just yet, and I’d like to find out.”

“I promise. I’ll stay right here,” she said, kissing him. “Besides, Charlie has given me a stack of books to read. I have plenty to do.” She patted his ass, laughing as she walked toward the cafeteria. Cowboy

swallowed, realizing he was going to be very busy for the next few months.

Hopefully, years.

“Hot damn.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“We know where the bodyguard is,” said Ethan as they walked toward the Osprey. “He’s living in one of the suites of The Athena, Liconitis’s premier Vegas hotel. He’s been there for about six years.”

“I want to have a conversation with him,” said Cowboy with a fierce expression.

“I think we all do,” said Mo. “Moose? No killing unless we say so.”

“Why does everyone assume the big guy will be the first to want to kill?” he frowned. They all stopped, staring at him. “Okay. Fine. No killing. I’m hungry, though.”

“I’ve got you a snack, baby.” The men all turned, expecting to see Mama Irene. Instead, they saw someone different. Not new. Just different.

“Aunt Claudette,” grinned Cowboy, kissing her cheek. Jake was standing behind her with a big bag.

“Hi, baby. I’ve got some sandwiches for you, homemade chips, some fresh made potato salad, my famous pecan brownies, and Jake has a cooler with some sparkling water in it.”

“Uh, Claudette, you do realize we’re not going on a picnic, right?” smirked Mo.

“I know, I know. But you can’t save the world on an empty stomach.” She handed them their food, kissing their cheeks as she did, and then walked hand-in-hand with Jake back toward the big house.

“That seemed eerily familiar,” frowned Cowboy.

It was a short plane ride to Vegas, but somehow Moose managed to eat half of the sandwiches by the time they’d arrived. He had mustard stains on his shirt and cookie still at the corner of his mouth. Mo handed him a wet napkin, shaking his head.

Taking the rental to the hotel, they called up to the room for Christopher Sephones. He’d been in the Greek Army before going to work for Liconitis. On the thirty-third floor, they rang the bell. When the man opened the door, they were surprised to see him dressed comfortably, but his face appeared tired and weary.

“Mr. Sephones? I’m Benjamin LeBlanc.”

“Come in,” he said. “Please have a seat. You had questions about Autumn Zellers.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head.

“For?”

“She died. Didn’t you know? She was flying the plane that nearly killed Constantine. We got him out, and when we went back to get her, she was gone. We assume animals got to her.”

“No, Mr. Sephones, she didn’t die. Her grandmother sent me out to find her, and I did. She’s safe and healthy.”

The man began to shake, sobbing as he sat down, crying in his hands. The men all looked at one another, then looking around the suite, realized how very neat it was. It looked as though no one lived there.

“I-I thought I’d killed her by leaving her there,” he said, shaking his head. “Mr. Liconitis was my priority. He was my employer. I was able to get a hiker to help me get him out, and we fashioned a litter to pull him to safety. I had to get him to L.A. to the hospital, but he didn’t want to go. He wanted to see Annette. By the time I was able to get back to the plane, Autumn was gone.”

“She could have died out there,” said Cowboy, trying to control his temper.

“I know. Don’t you think I know that! That kid was wonderful to Annette and Constantine. She was like a kid sister to me. But I had to think of Annette.” Cowboy understood what he was saying. He didn’t agree with it, but he had a personal connection to Autumn.

“We need to ask you a few questions,” said Ethan. The man nodded, wiping his tears.

“Of course, but can I get you guys anything to eat or drink? On the house.”

“No, we’re fine,” said Cowboy.

“I could eat,” frowned Moose. Sephones laughed, nodding his head. He placed a room service order and then turned back toward the men.

“Autumn said you stopped in Fresno and that you had an argument with a man in a black SUV. Is that right?”

“Yea. That little prick Dimitri Stepanopolos had been harassing the boss about using his plane to transport girls back and forth between cities. Constantine refused. He knew the kids’ father and knew what kind of men they were. He didn’t want anything to do with it. So, I told him to back off, or I’d put a bullet in his brain.”

“Did you know that the plane was shot down?” asked Mo. He seemed genuinely surprised by that, shaking his head.

“No. I mean, I knew the plane was well cared for by Autumn, so I assumed someone screwed with the engines. It was dark when I pulled Constantine out of the plane, so I didn’t see anything.”

“Dimitri killed Autumn’s grandmother,” said Cowboy.

“Oh, shit,” he whispered, coving his mouth. “She was tight with her grandma. They were together all the time. It was one of the things Constantine really admired about her. She wanted to take care of her. I’m damn sorry to hear that.”

“He found the grandmother, brought her to a ravine near the crash site, and dropped her in front of Autumn. He said that she had his pack. Do you know what that is?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Shit, that had to have been devastating for the poor kid. We weren’t carrying anything for Dimitri. I can guarantee that. I had my suitcase and Constantine’s on board. Autumn never carried more than a purse, maybe a change of clothes, and some food. That’s all.”

“What do you know about Dimitri that maybe we don’t?” asked Ethan.

“Man, whatever is illegal, he has his hands in it. He’s tried to do illegal shit here in the casino and the sister property, but our security knows to watch for him now. It’s like he can’t be happy unless he’s doing something against the law. His big thing with us was transporting the girls and women he intended to traffic.

“Somewhere along the way, he’d discovered that the U.S. military

would always find and stop his ships. Big commercial airliners can't be used. It's just too obvious. I mean, some of those poor girls are just thirteen or fourteen years old."

"How do you know?" asked Moose with a suspicious stare.

"I know because we've stopped him on a number of occasions. He would bring the girls here to Vegas and put them to work. Constantine, he changed after the death of his own kid. All he wanted to do was help women and children. He would send me or one of the other boys out to find these girls, and we'd find a way to get them home.

"Some of them were so bad, they didn't want to go home. They knew they would never be the same. So, Constantine and Annette built a group home outside of L.A. for them. They were cared for, went to school, and most are off to college now or married. They were good people."

"Autumn said the same thing," said Cowboy. "But why pressure Constantine to carry the girls? I mean, it would have been easier and cheaper to use random planes and pilots."

"I'm not sure. All I know is that there was a beef between Constantine and Dimitri. I never pried, mostly because Constantine was very open about his business." There was a knock on the door, and two waiters came in with trays of food. Moose smiled as they set down the mound of

food. He dove into the burger and fries first while the others watched with fascination.

“He’s hungry. A lot,” said Mo.

“I see that,” smirked the other man. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t get back to Autumn fast enough, but I’m damn glad the kid is okay. Constantine and Annette loved her like a daughter. When she was gone, I went to her grandmother’s home and saw that it had burned down. I’ve been sick about it ever since.”

“Thank you for the explanation,” said Cowboy. “We’ll get out of your way now. Just out of curiosity, what will happen to the casinos?”

“They’re both going to be sold, and profits will benefit their charity and others. If you can believe it, they actually stipulated that this suite would be mine until death, should I want it.”

“That’s a generous gift,” said Ethan. “Will you stay?”

“I’m not sure,” said the man, shaking his head. “I still have family in Greece, but it’s such a mess there. Knowing Autumn is safe, I can relax a bit and think about what I want to do. Maybe I’ll go guard the property in L.A., make sure the women and kids are safe. I’m getting older, so that seems like something I could do.”

“You’d be great at it,” grinned Mo. He turned to see Moose biting

into the second burger and shook his head. “Let’s go.”

“But I’m not done,” he said with a mouthful of burger.

“Dude, we need to get you checked for a tapeworm.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Autumn stared at the women seated around the room. The Sugar Lodge had been converted into a book club space for the day. George was overseeing the snacks, which in Autumn's opinion, rivaled the best in the world.

Homemade cookies, brownies, and mini-cakes alongside Cajun spiced popcorn, shrimp and crab dip with spicy crackers and enough wine to make the entire country of Italy happy.

"Charlie, I can't believe that you're CC Robot," smiled Autumn.

"That's me," she grinned. "I've been very fortunate to have a lot of inspiration around me. I never use anyone's real name, and sometimes even change the way they look. But every man and woman here has inspired a book of mine. Although I have to say, my favorite inspiration is my own hunk."

"Don't tell me which books," blushed Autumn, "or I might not ever be able to look at him again. I do have to ask, though, how in the world do you come up with these ideas. I mean, this one with the gymnast and the basketball player. Ho-lee-shit!"

"You're making me very warm just thinking about it," smiled Lily as

she nudged Montana. “I’m not quite that flexible, but I’d definitely try it with Bull.”

“Oh!” said Montana. “Lissa is that flexible! So are Carrie and Brooke. Show us how it’s done, ladies.” The women all cheered them on as they stood, using their dance and gymnastics experience. Standing with their backs to the wall, they bent down, touching their toes. Slowly, they raised one leg behind them, pressing backwards until they were in a full split against the wall.

“Yes!” screamed the women, clapping for them.

“What I want to know,” said Gabi, “is with a beast like Alec, how would you reach him in that position?”

“I didn’t write the book with a six-feet-eight hero in mind,” smiled Charlie.

“But,” smiled Lissa, “to answer your question, he’d simply lift me.” The room roared with laughter as Lissa blushed, laughing with her friends.

“You guys are really open about everything, aren’t you?” smiled Autumn.

“Oh, honey, we have to be,” said Suze. “Talking to others about sex and female problems is important for our mental health. Plus, it brings us all closer together. Sometimes, Charlie just needs ideas for her books, and we’re

always happy to help.”

“I never had that,” she shrugged. “I mean, Grandma was pretty open to talking about anything, but she was still my grandma. I think she really loved my grandfather, but she also knew he wasn’t exactly an alpha male. I guess she was the alpha in the relationship.”

“Did she never remarry?” asked Suze.

“No. Never. I think Trigger wanted to marry her, but she said she wasn’t going to let any man run her life again. She never once did it when I was there, but I’m pretty sure that she and Trigger had a bedroom relationship.”

“Oh, maybe that’s my next book,” smiled Charlie. “Sex after sixty.”

“Well, there are a lot of us here having sex after sixty. And seventy. And eighty,” laughed Montana. “I’d like to believe that Luc and I will be having sex right up until the day we die. Lord, that man sends my hormones raging even more today than when we were first married.”

“Wow, that’s good to know,” smiled Autumn. “It’s so awesome to see all these healthy relationships. Is that how you get inspiration, Charlie?”

“Some,” she nodded. “I mean, look at all these amazing, beautiful, wonderful women. I could write a story for each of them, and in many ways, I have. I love that we have all ethnicities, all walks of life, and we still find

love with one another. Our stories were meant to be told, and this is a way for me to do that.”

“And the sex and the toys? How do you come up with those ideas?” asked Calla.

“Well,” she blushed, “sometimes Ace and I just want to experiment. It pays to be married to a certifiable genius. He’s always thinking of clever ways to use our bodies together and bring pleasure, no pain.”

“But how do you decide what’s sexy or what isn’t?” asked Autumn.

“Honey, everything is sexy to someone. Even things that we would consider painful or out of the norm, for some, are considered fun. For instance, not every woman likes anal sex. For some, that’s dangerous and exciting, and they love it. I’m not here to judge. I’m here to entertain. If you like it, do it. As long as it doesn’t involve animals or children, we’re pretty open about sex here.”

“That’s so wild,” smiled Autumn. “I mean, I’ve read your books for years and always wanted to have someone to enjoy sex with, like your characters. I just never trusted anyone enough.”

“Trust is the biggest component of a healthy sexual relationship. If you can’t trust your partner, it’s over.”

Autumn looked around the room at all the women. She knew who

most of them were married to, and for some, it was difficult picturing them with those men. For instance, how in the world did Lena and Tailor have sex? It was as if she'd said it aloud.

“You’re wondering about the partners,” smiled Suze.

“I guess I am. I mean, Lissa and Alec, Lena and Tailor, Tru and Noah. I guess I’m assuming the man’s equipment matches the rest of him but still.”

“Believe me, honey, I was terrified the first time I was with Tailor. I thought that man might split me in two,” said Lena, shaking her head. “The interesting thing is, these men are all so loving and gentle. It would never happen. They would stop before hurting the woman they were with.”

“I agree,” said Avery. “Skull was amazing when we slept together the first time. I knew I’d never be able to walk away from him, and for that matter, I couldn’t walk for a few days after we were together.” More laughter filled the space, Autumn shaking her head.

“Same,” said Lissa. “I was pretty battered and bruised, yet Alec treated me like fine china. He handled me with a delicate touch that told me I would never be okay with another man touching me. Never.”

“I feel that way about Cowboy,” said Autumn. “I mean, I’d never been with anyone before him, but I knew enough to know I didn’t want to

be. I had to feel deep. Not just an urge or craving. I needed to feel as though I couldn't breathe without him."

"You'll find that we're all that way," smiled Claudette. "I loved my first husband. But it wasn't a breathless love. Jake was always the man I was meant to be with. Now, we lay in that bed upstairs at night, and I can't believe the things he does to this old girl's body. Lord! I think I need to go to church and get some Jesus."

The woman screamed in laughter, shaking their head at Claudette. When Martha and young Claudette entered, Autumn held her breath. As the women explained who they were, Martha smiled at the young woman, nodding.

"We thought we could help as well," said Martha. "I've found the man of my dreams in the afterlife. Isn't that strange? Nathan is able to give my body pleasure that I didn't have when I was alive. I think that's good news for everyone here. You'll all continue to experience the joy of a man's touch even when you're gone."

"It's true," smiled Claudette. "I didn't think I would ever get that chance since I died before my time. Mama Irene and Martha were very worried about me because of my age at death. But the truth is, I'm centuries old. It has been wonderful to have Tony show me the love of a man and

woman.”

Autumn could only smile at the teenager. It must have been awful to have died before your first kiss, then find someone you truly loved but couldn't have. She was glad to see that they'd found a way to be together.

“Well, all I know is that Cowboy is the only man for me, and I plan on showing him that every single night.” Suze smiled, nodding at her.

“That's my girl,” she grinned. “I need grandchildren, so you keep reading, and I'll make sure you're left alone with my son as much as you want.” Autumn could only laugh.

“Yes, ma'am.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Leaving Christopher Sephones, Cowboy and the other men decided to hang around Constantine's two casinos for a few hours. Moose and Cowboy planned to stay at Athena, while Red and Ethan were going to go to The Palladium. They weren't sure what they were looking for but hoped that something would stand out for them.

"So, we'll meet back here in a few hours and grab dinner before we leave," said Cowboy.

"No," said Moose, staring above his head.

"Moose, you can do the all-you-can-eat buffet later. Let's just get the work done first," smirked Red.

"No, that's not what I mean. If I'm not mistaken, that's our boy Dimitri with an entourage," he said, nodding toward the gaming tables. Cowboy started toward him, but Moose gripped his shoulder, pulling him back.

"Hold up, big man," said Ethan. "Let's try and get some photos of who he's with." Tapping his ear, he connected to comms and asked them to hack into the cameras at the Athena. Within sixty seconds, they were looking at the table where Dimitri Stepanopolos was laying out some heavy cash.

“I’ve got three bodyguards with weapons. Five women, all very young. Two appear to have bruises on their arms and legs,” said Sly.

“Anybody ever played roulette before?” smirked Red. They all looked at him, shaking their heads. “Well, I’m feeling lucky. Give me all your cash, boys.”

Dimitri pulled the young girl to his right tighter to his body, his hand running up the back of her dress. She squirmed, attempting to get him to stop, but he only pinched her bottom, causing her to squeal.

“You are mine,” he growled. “Do not ever attempt to escape my touch. I do what I want with your body, and you will be rewarded. Men will pay thousands to be with you when I’m done with you.”

“Please,” whimpered the girl. “I just want to go home. I don’t want to do this anymore.” Dimitri started to speak when suddenly the girl was pulled from his grasp. Before he could even see where she’d gone, a man took the seat beside him, bumping the table.

“Hi there,” grinned Red. “Fine afternoon to place some bets, don’t you think?” Dimitri glared at him, then turned, trying to find where the girl went.

“Find her,” he said to one of the men. The bodyguard turned to scan the room only to be faced with the largest man he’d ever encountered.

Moose gave him a smirk.

“No need, friend. We’ve got her taken care of. You should keep an eye on your boss. He’s in a lot of trouble.”

Dimitri stared at the men, then saw the man he recognized. Cowboy was across the table, giving him a death stare. Red laid his money down and gave a big smile to Dimitri.

“Better put your dough down if you wanna play,” he laughed. Dimitri nodded at the casino worker, and he spun the wheel, waiting for the ball to stop on his number.

“Red twenty-one,” said the man.

“Hot damn,” grinned Red. “My lucky color. Let it ride.”

Dimitri stared at the casino worker, and he gave a slight shrug. Red heard the laughter in his ear and knew that, somehow, the boys back home were helping him out. Spinning the wheel again, the dealer waited, then was forced to call out the winning number.

“Red nine.”

“How about that?” said Red. “I won again. Pretty cool. Right. Dimitri.”

“You have me at a loss,” said the man stiffly. “I don’t know who you

are.” He started to stand, but Red gripped his forearm. Before his bodyguards could move, Ethan and Mo had them on their knees.

“Oh, I think you do know who I am. I’m the man that killed your pathetic lackey on that ridge. And you’re the man that killed the old woman.” Everyone around the table stilled, staring at the men. “That’s right, folks. The rich and famous Dimitri Stepanopolos killed an old woman by shoving her off a cliff. Very brave of him, considering she was elderly and couldn’t fight back. That’s the kind of man you want to do business with.

“Now, my friend over there is seriously pissed off at you because you shot his girl’s plane out of the sky. Then, you were fool enough to think you could touch her. Here’s a little hint. You can’t. You won’t ever touch her because we’re going to make sure you don’t breathe ever again.”

“Wanna bet?” grinned Dimitri.

“Oh, hell, yea,” said Red. “All or nothing. One number. One time.”

Dimitri smugly pushed the stack of chips to his number, then watched as Red did the same. He gave a cocky nod to the dealer and waited for his win.

“R-red. Twenty-nine,” stammered the dealer. Dimitri slammed a fist on the table.

“No! That’s not possible!” he yelled.

“Oh, man! We got ourselves a sore loser,” laughed Red. “What’s the matter, Dimitri? Did your man not push the little button below the table? You need to get used to that shit because you’re going to be losing a lot more than a little cash.” The other gamblers all started murmuring, whispering about the dealer cheating.

Dimitri stood, waiting for his bodyguards to do something, but when they didn’t move toward him, he realized that he was truly in a bad situation. Cowboy walked up to him, looking down at his dark, smug face. He saw the Vegas PD walking toward him and knew they wouldn’t be able to take the man from the casino. Not this time.

“Here’s the deal, D. You fucking dared to harm my girl and her grandmother. Pathetic, cowardly shit, killing an old woman. Now, I’ve got your weapons, I took your girls, and I’m giving you one warning. Whatever you think Autumn has, she doesn’t. There was nothing in that plane. Nothing. If you so much as breathe her way, I’ll cut off your dick and feed it to you. Clear?”

Dimitri stared at the man, then looked around the table. It was true, his girls were all gone, and the men were standing there, stiff as boards, not making any moves.

“I asked you a question,” said Cowboy. “Are we clear?”

“Clear,” said Dimitri through clenched teeth. He buttoned his suit coat and turned to leave, shoving his bodyguards out of the way. They watched him leave and nodded at one another.

“Gentlemen, is there a problem?” asked the officer.

“No, sir. No problem at this time,” smiled Cowboy.

“Trackers are working,” said Pigsty in their ears. Each of the men now had a tiny tracking device on their person.

“The girls are with security,” said Ethan. “I’m going to make sure they get to where they want to go. You need to go back upstairs and have a conversation with Sephones. Why the fuck was Dimitri enjoying himself in Constantine’s casino?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” said Cowboy.



“Gentlemen, I didn’t know you were still here,” said Christopher, opening the door just a crack.

“No, I bet you didn’t. Did you know that Dimitri was downstairs?” His face paled, and he tried to shut the door, only to have Moose shove his foot through, stopping its closure.

“My friend asked you a question,” said Moose.

“Listen, he does what he wants. I can’t help it. I don’t work for Constantine any longer, and I don’t control the casino. Dimitri can come and go as he likes.”

“Yea, he can come and go and display his new playthings for all the big spenders to see,” said Mo. The man took another step back, shaking his head. “Don’t worry. We got the girls to safety. This time.”

“You’ve got five minutes to tell me everything you know, then I start cutting off body parts,” said Cowboy.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” he said, shaking his head.

“Listen to me, you pathetic piece of shit. You portrayed yourself as the savior for women and children when, in reality, you’re helping that prick sell flesh.” Mo moved closer, his knife now at his throat. “Speak. Or I will remove your tongue.”

“I was helping Constantine with the women and children, and he was paying us well. When he started giving away his millions, I knew what he was doing. He was planning for his death with Annette. He couldn’t stand to be without her. But that meant I would be without a job.”

“So, you decide the best way to deal with that is to work for the competition?” frowned Cowboy.

“No. Not at first. Dimitri wanted Constantine to transport girls from

one city to the next, but he refused. In fact, he refused to even speak with him. Dimitri would show up and try to talk to him here or at the airport, and Constantine would just walk away from him. It pissed Dimitri off. He doesn't like to be ignored."

"I'll make a mental note of that," frowned Cowboy. "You're running out of time. What is the fucking pack he's talking about?"

"I'm not sure," he said, shaking his head. Moose started toward him, and Christopher held up his hands. "I swear! I swear to you, I don't know!"

"Make a guess," said Cowboy. "Did he give you something to carry?"

"No. I never took anything from him to put on the plane. If he did that, he had one of his men put something on the plane. But I swear, I never saw anything on that plane. He met with Constantine the week before. He'd been driving him crazy and causing problems here at the casino. Then he started threatening Annette, and that was the last straw. So, Constantine had him come into the office."

"What did they say?"

"I don't know. They both made the bodyguards stand outside the room. They were in there for about two hours. Then Dimitri came out and left. That's it."

“That’s it?” frowned Mo. “You better come up with something better than that, asshole.”

“I don’t know what they discussed,” he said, shaking his head.

“Did Constantine take anything from him?” asked Cowboy.

“No. There was nothing unusual on his desk, and he didn’t ask me to carry anything for him. I would have known had he done that.”

“You would have known had he wanted you to know,” said Cowboy. “Maybe he didn’t trust you as much as you think. Maybe he already knew you were screwing him over. Smart men have a way of sensing these things.”

“Dimitri won’t stop,” he said, looking at the men. “If he thinks Autumn has something that belongs to him, he won’t stop. He once cut the fingers off a man who accidentally took his overcoat at a dinner party. They had identical coats. It was an honest mistake. But Dimitri didn’t see it that way.”

“Sounds like it runs in the family,” said Cowboy. The others nodded in his direction. “Who is Dimitri doing business with right now?”

“Everyone. He doesn’t discriminate. If they have the cash, and he can make it happen, they’re business partners.”

“Has he said how big this pack is?” asked Cowboy.

“Look, I told you. I don’t know anything about the pack. I went back to the plane and got Constantine because I couldn’t leave him there. I thought I could just leave him there, but I couldn’t. He was too good to me. I felt like shit for leaving Autumn, but I wasn’t lying. I did go back for her expecting to find her eaten by bears or something.”

“You son-of-a-bitch!” growled Cowboy. He slammed his fist into his nose, the man flying backwards over his sofa. Moaning, he came to his feet, wiping the blood from his nose. “Why did you have the magazines?”

Christopher knew he was fucked now. He never thought anyone would see those or figure out what was in them.

“I believe my friend asked you a question,” said Moose. “What the fuck were you doing with the magazines, and why were there old flight plans in them?”

“I-I picked them up from the air traffic controller. Dimitri wanted to know who was making regular routes to his major markets, so he would know who to target for transporting the girls. He was going to pay them some serious cash. I forgot about them, but he didn’t seem to care. He was more worried about the pack, but I don’t know what that is.”

“I should throw you out that window right now,” said Cowboy. “You put Autumn in danger, and that psycho is after her. If anything happens to

her, anything, I will come for you. Don't you dare try to run and hide. If you hear anything, see anything, you're going to call me and let me know. Clear?"

"Clear," nodded the man.

Back on the main floor, Ethan was waiting for them. He'd gotten the girls to safety, and the city police were going to help them get home. They knew about Dimitri but hadn't been able to stop him on their own.

As they stepped out into the blistering Las Vegas sun, they heard glass shatter and looked up to see the body of Christopher Sephones hurtling toward Earth. When his body hit the concrete fountain in front of them, they stepped back and looked up, not seeing anyone. Cowboy looked at the other men, shaking his head.

"Well, that won't look suspicious." Moose just frowned, staring at his friends.

"I'm hungry."

CHAPTER TWENTY

By the time Moose had his fill from the all-you-can-eat buffet, they were ready to head home. It was nearly midnight when they rolled up onto the property. All of them were tired, but Ethan wanted to get home to his wife and daughter. Mo wanted to get home to his wife, and the others just wanted a shower and sleep.

For Cowboy, all he could think about was lying next to Autumn and holding her. She was still in more danger than he cared to think about. If Dimitri got a wild hair up his ass, he could put a hit on her and have every freelancer with a weapon out looking for her.

Taking a deep breath, he sat on the stone bench in the garden and just inhaled, hoping to calm himself. The sounds of the trickling fountain and the distant flicker of lightning eased his anxiety. But it surprised the shit out of him when he turned to see Claudette walking toward him. She was in an old-fashioned cotton robe and a pair of slippers. There were lights on at the big house, but he hadn't noticed.

“Evening, Cowboy,” she smiled. “Looks like another storm is headed this way.”

“Claudette, why are you up so late? Did I wake you?” he asked.

“No. No, you didn’t wake me. I just had this sudden urge to come down to the fountain and sit. Sometimes, I don’t sleep well, and this is my favorite place. I can relax with the water and smell the flowers and trees. It’s all the things I missed while I was living away from here.”

“Claudette, are you taking lessons from your mother?” he asked with a grin. Claudette laughed, shaking her head.

“Mama and I have been spending a lot of time together. It’s because I want to learn all the things I need to know to take care of this place. I want to make sure that the big house is always a beacon of welcome and safety for all of you. I want to preserve our history, our love, our family. I want to make sure that the rare plants and trees survive.”

“So, you are taking lessons from her?” he grinned.

“I suppose I am,” she laughed. “It scares me.”

“Why? I think you’re amazing and the right choice to take over the big house,” said Cowboy.

“Thank you, honey. But it’s a lot of responsibility. I thought Marie would be the one, but she doesn’t want it. She’s happy being with Dex and helping the animals, and I think that’s what she was meant to do. So, it fell to me.

“I know now what Mama went through all these years. All of us kids

going off to do our own thing. The boys in service. What Rachelle went through. I worry about you boys when you leave. I love it when you're home, and I welcome the new ones like they're my own." Cowboy gave her a sad expression.

"Your son still doesn't call you?" he asked.

"No. No, he doesn't want anything to do with me. It hurts my heart, Cowboy, but I think that's why I feel such an affection and fondness for all of you. I mean, I love my brothers, sisters, their children, and grandchildren dearly. But those of you who aren't blood, well, you almost feel like you're even more mine."

"I would take you as a grandmother any day of the week, Claudette. I've always loved the way you treated us kids, and when I see you, I see Mama Irene. Not just looks, although you do look like her. It's about the love and compassion you radiate. It lets me know that I'm always welcome here, and I'm always at home as long as you're here."

"Oh, honey," she said, kissing his cheek. "I needed to hear that tonight."

"Is Jake treating you right?" asked Cowboy. Claudette laughed, nodding.

"Cowboy, Jake treats me like a man should treat his wife. He loves

me with such tenderness and compassion it makes my heart ache. He respects and admires me to the point of unrelenting gratitude. I hate that we didn't marry when we were younger, but maybe this is the way it's supposed to be."

"I'm glad," he smiled. "I feel like I'll have that with Autumn. I love her so much, Claudette. She's everything I've ever wanted in a wife and, hopefully, one day, mother to my children."

"Then why are you sitting here?" she smirked.

"I just needed a minute to make things right in my head," he said quietly. "I've been on a lot of missions. Killed a lot of men. Some because my government told me to. Some because I was protecting myself and my teammates. But this man, he makes me want to kill him for no reason. He sells young girls. Although I guess that's a good enough reason.

"He sells girls who should still be playing with dolls. They should be getting ready to go on their first date or have their first kiss. That kind of man doesn't deserve to live, and it scares me that I'm willing to kill him without thought."

"Honey, I don't think that should scare you. I think that tells the world what kind of man you are. And I, for one, think you're the kind of man that we breed here. See, I think we're like a prize kennel or stable. We

only put out champions. We are the best in the world, and our men and women show it in everything they do. Everything.

“I’ve watched you grow up, Cowboy. I’ve watched you care for the animals, be respectful and kind to your parents, honor your elders, and be inquisitive about others’ cultures. You are exactly the kind of man we need here and certainly the man that Autumn needs.” She stood from the bench, bending to kiss his cheek once more.

“Go home, baby. Go home to your girl and love her. Let her know how much you love her and respect her. The rest of this mess will sort itself out.”

“Let me walk you back to the big house,” he said, standing and holding out his arm.

“Now, how in the world could I refuse that escort,” she laughed.

When Claudette was safely inside the big house, Cowboy walked calmly back down the path toward his own cottage. There was one small light on in the living room, and he knew when he entered. Autumn was sound asleep on the sofa, waiting for his return.

He locked all the doors, then lifted her, carrying her to the bed. When she was tucked in, he crawled in beside her, kissing her sweetly.

“You’re home,” she murmured sleepily.

“I’m home, baby. Home where I belong. With you.”

“I love you, Cowboy.”

“I love you, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Whatever storm the Gulf was brewing up had come in with a vengeance during the night. The men were up well before dawn, already out placing the sandbags and securing the property. Those from Belle Île had moved to the main property just to be safe. No one was going to G.R.I.P. today.

“Looks like it’s a tropical storm, but not hurricane strength yet,” said Sly speaking to everyone in the cafeteria. “I think we continue to monitor the weather and just sit tight.” He turned to Ace, who stepped forward.

“We don’t want to ruin anyone’s breakfast, but we do have some things we have to discuss. Our team has been trying to find out the connections between Constantine and Dimitri and what this ‘pack’ could be.”

“But I thought that Christopher said at the casino that Constantine hated Dimitri. How could there be a connection?” asked Autumn.

“That is what he said, but since he lied about other things, we wanted to check a few things on our own. Almost everyone knows that Dimitri is as dirty as his father or dirtier. When we reached out to our contacts at the FBI and Homeland, they also agreed that Constantine had changed his ways, but he was still being watched.”

“Why? I mean, if they knew he changed, why watch him?” asked Autumn.

“Because he and Dimitri are related,” said Ace.

“What? No,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “No, that can’t be. Why wouldn’t he have told me that? They talked all the time about wishing they had a child because they had no family at all. They said they thought of me as a daughter. If they were related to him, why not treat him like family.”

“Because Dimitri was the one who attempted to kill Annette the first time and ended up killing their child.”

The silence in the room was deafening. Autumn couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Why wouldn’t they tell her so that she could avoid this man?

“Autumn, Dimitri is Constantine’s nephew. We know for sure that he and his brother split the businesses of their father when they were younger men. Even back then, Constantine was not into selling flesh. He didn’t mind transporting stolen goods or drugs, but not women and children. We think his wife convinced him to back away from the shipping side of the business and buy the casinos and other businesses.”

“But they don’t have the same last name,” said Autumn.

“He used his mother’s maiden name. Legally changed it about thirty

years ago,” said Ace. “It’s one of the reasons we didn’t see the connection right away.”

“Well, it makes sense that Dimitri was in the casino acting like he owned the place. Maybe he thinks it will be his, or he’s going to buy it,” said Cowboy.

“It won’t be his,” said Ace. “The stipulation of the sale was very clear. It could not be sold to Dimitri or any company connected to him. It was to be sold to one of eleven people who had expressed interest, all reputable businesses. Then the money would be divided up to the charities.”

“But what does any of this have to do with me? I mean, I have no idea what that ‘pack’ is he’s talking about, and I wouldn’t have known anything about his will. He didn’t discuss those things with me, nor did Annette.”

“We’re just not sure at this point,” said Luke. “But Dimitri being related to Constantine makes everything suspect. The bodyguard said that they met in his office for almost two hours a few weeks back. He said Constantine asked the bodyguards to stay outside the office, but he and Dimitri met.”

“What about?” asked Autumn.

“We have no idea. It might be helpful to know that,” said Eric.

“Check the video feeds,” said Autumn. She looked at Keith and nodded. “I mean, if he can read lips, I know that he always had the video feeds on. He said once that he always kept the sound off because he didn’t want anyone to hear the conversations, but that the security team could keep an eye on whoever he met with.”

“That sounds like a man who was paranoid,” said Cowboy.

“Maybe,” shrugged Autumn. “Or, maybe he was discussing family business that he didn’t want others to hear. I keep thinking, though, if he was as bad as you say when he was younger, why didn’t he kill Dimitri when he attempted to kill Annette?”

“Another great question,” smirked Hex. “Ace? Are there any other nieces or nephews? Maybe someone else that’s holding a grudge?”

“Not that we’ve found so far. We’ll let you know.”

The room returned to the loud breakfast-time banter. Autumn was more confused than ever. Why would Constantine put up with all the bullshit from Dimitri? None of it made sense to her.

“I can see your wheels turning, baby. There’s no use trying to make sense of the actions of a madman.”

“I know you’re right,” she said, hugging him. “What do we do now? We obviously can’t go out today and do anything. Do we need to stay on-

property?”

“I think until the storm blows over, we should. Matthew made sure that all of this property was elevated to avoid massive flooding, but it can still happen at the edges. We’re safe here, for now, but that doesn’t mean the wind can’t knock down trees and power.”

“What happens to security if we lose power?” frowned Autumn. Cowboy kissed her nose.

“No need to worry, babe. The security system runs on its own power grid. We won’t lose that for sure. While we have some time to think, though, I need to ask what you want to do about your grandmother’s ashes.”

“Well, Trigger has them, right?” she asked. Cowboy looked at her, shaking his head.

“Honey, I think he does. Or did. But we think Dimitri killed him as well. He was found shot a few days ago. There was so much going on. I didn’t want to burden you with more bad news. I’m sorry.” Autumn wanted to be angry with him, but the truth was, she wasn’t sure she could have heard that bad news a few days ago. It was too much all at once.

“I understand why you did it, Benjamin, but please don’t keep things from me in the future,” she said.

“I promise, babe. Did he have children? Anyone that would take care

of his body?”

“Yes, he had a son that helped him at the ranch. Mack is probably fifty or fifty-five, but he was the one that caught our horses and had them penned. I’m sure he’s taken care of his father.”

“Why don’t you call him and see if they still have your grandmother. If they do, we’ll make arrangements to spread the ashes on the mountain like she wanted.” Stepping away from the table, she called Mack from the new phone that Sly had given her. Apparently, it had all kinds of bells and whistles on it. She didn’t care as long as she could take care of her grandmother.

“Hello,” said the deep voice.

“Mack? Mack, it’s Autumn,” she said.

“Autumn! Honey, we’ve been worried sick about you. Autumn, they killed Daddy. Shot him in the chest,” he said, sniffing.

“I heard. I’m so sorry, Mack. Is there anything I can do?”

“No. Nothin’ to be done. We still got your horses here.”

“I’m sorry about that. Can we leave them there a while longer? I’m not sure what I’m going to do about them.”

“Of course. You know we’ll give you a fair price if you want to sell

them. I'm gonna be busy now without Daddy."

"I'll think about selling them, Mack. I'm not sure I have a place for them where I am. I was wondering, do you still have Grandma's ashes?"

"You know I do, hun. I've got them on the mantle, next to Daddy. I figured maybe they'd want to be spread together. It seems the right thing to do," he said quietly.

"I think that sounds perfect," she said, wiping back tears. "I'll let you know when I can get back there. The man that killed your father and Grandma is still out there, and he's looking for me. I'm safe, but be careful, Mack. He could come back hoping to find information about me."

"I will, hun. Stay safe." She hung up the phone and turned to see all the families, all the children and grandchildren.

"Right. Safe."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As with any time there was excessive rain for endless days, there were things that could be fixed indoors. Between Claudette, Mama Irene, Matthew, George, and Jake, the team was cleaning closets, fixing cabinet doors, scrubbing the floors in the café, tattoo shop, and bike shop, and making piles for the donation bin.

“You know, we have all these toys that the kids hardly use. Maybe we should think about doing a toy drive for the holidays. Gently used or new,” said Erin.

“I think that’s a great idea,” said Lauren. “I know that we try to give any educational toys to the school and daycare but think about how much we could collect at the tattoo shop, bike shop, and salon. Maybe give people a discount when they bring in a new toy.”

“Before my grandmother got me,” said Autumn, “we used to have to rely on charity bins at the local church. I hated going in there because I knew that my parents had money. They just spent it in the wrong ways. But I remember seeing how embarrassed the kids were. Do you think there’s a way we could do this anonymously and deliver the toys?”

“Now that’s a great idea,” smiled Mary. “Maybe we start putting out feelers with the church and other places to see who is in need. Maybe those

that are food deprived, we could even provide a basket with all the things needed for a full holiday meal.”

“Now we’re talking!” said Kari. “Think of all the families in this area that just need a little helping hand during the holiday season. We already make sure the kids at the boys’ home are taken care of, but there are so many more.”

“Well, I say we’ve got a project for the holidays, ladies,” smiled Claudette. “I’ll reach out to all the churches and get a list of families in need. Then we’ll know what we have to deal with. We can all contribute financially, but maybe we make it fun.”

“Fun how?” asked Erin.

“Oh, I know,” laughed Autumn. “A swear jar. A dollar for every cuss word. By my calculation these last few days, we should have close to a million dollars by the holiday season.” The women laughed, shaking their heads.

“One problem with that,” smiled Gabi, “I cuss as much as the men. That might be too hard on me. Maybe we just make it a change bucket in the office. Every time you walk by it, if you have a dollar or less, just drop it in the bucket.”

“I like that idea,” smiled Kari. “You know that most of these guys

will end up dropping a five or ten. We should have plenty of money to buy the gifts by the holiday season.”

“Great, let’s get working on the planning, and we can make this happen!” said Erin with enthusiasm. She looked at the other women, then stopped. “Oh, gosh. Kate, Ajei, Soph, Gwen. This is your job now, not mine. I’m sorry, girls.”

“Don’t be sorry,” smiled Kate. “I love that you’re willing to take some of this on. We’re helping more and more at G.R.I.P., Gwen’s ridiculously busy at the studio, and Ajei’s schedule is insane. This really helps us.”

“She’s right,” said Sophia Ann. “We need you guys. Just because you’re out on the other island doesn’t mean you’re not still part of the team. We need you more than ever, and we darn sure need your guidance and wisdom.”

“Thank you for saying that,” said Lauren. “I think sometimes we’re out there with just us old gals, and we feel a bit useless.”

“That’s crazy!” said Kate. “We have to change that. There’s no reason why you can’t be here every day, helping us, contributing. What about the men? Do they feel the same way?”

“I’m not sure,” said Erin. “To be honest, they go off and do their

training, meet up for breakfast, then they always seem to have something that they're working on. I don't think they feel it as much as we do."

"Well, we can change that," said Gwen.

"You know, when my grandmother decided to make the ranch something that would bring in money, she had no idea how she was going to do it. She kind of looked around her and saw what she had. Like the horses, the mountains, etc. She ended up starting a horse rental service, mountain and trail guides, that sort of thing.

"I was just wondering if this property is so big, maybe you could have the older guys start a guide service for the bayous. Or, I know Cowboy told me that you have a gym up front to train first responders and military men prepping for the next level. But what about teaching self-defense for women and children."

"I think those are all great ideas, Autumn," smiled Lena. "It's getting our guys to organize it and follow through with it."

"Well, I'm happy to help with anything," smiled Autumn. "I'm really hoping that I'll become part of the flight team here."

"Of course you will," smiled Savannah. "We've already determined that you can handle the smaller jets for now. Once we have you trained and get some hours under your belt, you can fly the Osprey and the bigger jets."

“Oh, my goodness,” she whispered. “I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

The women just laughed, shaking their heads. But on the other side of the room was Cowboy, staring at the woman who’d stolen his heart. He just needed to figure out why Dimitri wanted her.

“Easy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Robbie made sure the General Store was locked up tight. Over the years, they'd expanded from a small thousand-square-foot building to now nearly three-thousand-square-feet. With the addition of the paintings, jewelry, cookbooks, and other items made by the team, they had become a destination location.

Visitors traveling into New Orleans would often make the drive down to their little neck of the woods just to shop for the amazing items created by the incredible women of VG. Of course, they didn't know it was Voodoo Guardians. The store was just called The General Store. Pretty simple.

Things were so good, that one of Ela's recent paintings was sold to a gallery for six-figures. The jewelry creations by Shay and the others were selling faster than they could make them.

But what everyone wanted were signed copies of the CDs with Bull, Amanda, and Mia playing together. They would often sign a limited number, release that they were available at the store, and by the time the staff opened the next morning, there was a line out the door onto the porch and into the parking lot. Top that with their online business, and they were busy.

Gwen had even started making a line of clothing more affordable for the masses. T-shirts, sweatshirts, jeans, and simple cotton dresses lined the

back row. Robbie shook his head, hearing the winds pick up once more.

Grabbing all the mail from the P.O. Boxes, he saw the large box on the floor for Autumn and added it to his pile. Loading everything into the truck, he took off toward the compound.

“Where do you want all this?” he asked Luke.

“Oh, thanks, Robbie. You didn’t have to go out in this for all that. It could have waited.”

“It’s fine. I wanted to be sure we didn’t have any leaks and that the team locked the store up. We’ve got a good crew right now, but sometimes the kids forget to set the alarms. We can do it remotely, but still, I like to check things myself.”

“Thanks, brother. I guess just set all that in the conference room. What’s the box?”

“That’s the box the attorney sent Autumn. Do you think we should check it?” he asked with a suspicious smile.

“It’s probably a good idea. Beast? Here, boy!” he called down the hallway.

Beast came rumbling toward him, and Luke held up his hand, trying to slow the dog from knocking him over. But the poor thing didn’t know his own size and strength. Jumping on Luke’s chest, he stumbled backwards,

hitting the wall as Beast licked his face.

“Well, you did call him,” laughed Robbie.

“Shut up,” grinned Luke. “Okay, boy. Okay. Down.” He led the dog toward the table and laid everything out.

“Search, Beast. Search.”

Beast put his front paws on the table and sniffed each envelope, then stuck his nose against the box. Luke turned it, so he could smell the entire thing, but Beast didn’t react to anything inside.

“Looks like we’re good. I’ll let Cowboy know that it’s here,” said Robbie.

“Thanks, man.”

Luke sat on the floor rubbing Beast’s head. The damn thing must weigh two hundred pounds, but he didn’t seem to mind lying all over the man. Of course, he probably thought they were the same size, so what did it matter.

“You’re a good boy, Beast. Good boy,” he cooed. Adam and Ben stuck their head in the room, smirking at their older brother.

“Resorting to talking to dogs now?” asked Adam.

“Bite me, asshole,” he smiled. “He’s a good boy. Comes when you

call him, checks the packages, even works well with the other animals. If we could just get him to not jump on us when we call, we'd all be safe."

"Well, he is called Beast for a reason," smirked Ben.

"What are you guys doing?" asked Luke.

"We heard some chatter on the web about some insurgent forces chasing a lone U.S. military guy. We're trying to figure out who it might be, but it all seems suspect. Maybe just a bunch of bullshit. We're not even sure it's good intel."

"Who do we have out there?" asked Luke with a frown.

"BJ, JB, Dan, Tobias, Nathan Luke, Michael, Rush, Everett, Eastman, Ethan, Connor, and Christian," said Ben, counting on his fingers.

"Damn. That's a lot of our boys out there," said Luke. "Christian has to be forty now. What the hell is he still doing out there?"

"I asked Vince and Ally the same thing. They just said that he felt like it was where he needed to be. He made Major last year. Maybe he wants to do thirty," said Adam.

"Sounds insane to me, but I admire him if that's what he wants," said Luke. "Well, if you hear that it's one of our boys, let me know. You know that we'll be in to help as soon as we can. Is everything good with Caroline?"

“She’s fine,” said Adam. “We know that the Turkish army is at the zoo helping them move the animals. Hopefully, she can get this done and get back and finish her last semester. I know Sniff and Lucy are ready to have her home.”

“Don’t tell Dad, but I’m ready to have them all home,” said Luke. “I never understood what they were going through. What they were feeling. It was bad enough when Garrett was out there, but now having all the others as well. Damn. It’s making me old before my time.”

“Brother, I hate to tell you, but ‘nine toes’ Robicheaux is old.” Luke scowled at his little brother, then whispered to the dog.

“Get him, Beast,” said Luke. Beast jumped on Adam’s chest, licking his face as he fell backwards into the hallway.

“Not funny, Luke! Get him off of me!” Luke stood, laughing at his brother. He gripped Ben’s shoulder and steered him toward the door.

“I think it’s time for dinner,” said Luke.

“I’m starving,” laughed Ben. When they reached the door, Luke turned and looked at Beast, sitting on his brother’s chest, licking his face.

“Beast. Come. Dinner.”

The dog ran toward them as he opened the door, and he took off toward the cafeteria. Adam stood up, slobber all over his face.

“Are you coming?” smiled Luke.

“I think I’ll wash up first. Asshole.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Moose was shoveling in the food as Taylor, Noah, and Alec watched. Seated beside him was Brit, who was eating right along with him. When Moose sat back, pushing his plate toward the center of the table, Brit smiled at him.

“Are you done?” she asked.

“Give me a minute,” he frowned, rubbing his belly.

“Look, if you’re going to be a professional, you have to finish the job.” Brit laughed at the big man while her husband only smirked, watching the spectacle before him. He’d never met anyone that could put away as much food as his wife. Not even a full-grown man.

“How the hell is a little bitty thing like you able to eat so much?” he asked, releasing a huge belch. “Excuse me.”

“I’ve always had a big appetite and high metabolism. Even when I was little, I would eat twice as much as my uncle or any of my friends. I enjoy food and truly crave it. Coming here was like having all my addictive dreams come true. Food all the time, and really good food. I have to eat every hour, or I’m very cranky.”

“Trust me, she is,” smirked Aiden. Brit nudged his shoulder, smiling

at him.

“I’ve never seen a woman put away so much food,” said Moose, shaking his head. “Do you work out? I have to work out like an animal to make sure I burn all this off.”

“I hate to tell you,” she grinned, “but I really don’t. I’m very lucky.”

“What about you three?” asked Moose. “Do you have to work it all off?”

“Not me,” said Alec. “My size came from a late growth spurt. I’ve always been able to eat a lot. It just never stuck until I was in my twenties.”

“I’ve always had a big appetite,” said Tailor. “Problem for me is I like all the wrong kinds of foods. Lena tries to keep me straight, but I admit it. I cheat big time.” He looked at Noah, who tilted his head sideways.

“I eat what I want. The difference for me is some days I eat eight or ten times, other days I don’t eat at all. I eat when I’m hungry, and I eat what my body craves. It works for me.”

“Red? What about you? Do we need to feed you more?” asked Tailor.

“Once again, he’s not a puppy,” frowned Alec.

“I know he ain’t a puppy, but he’s just a boy and still growin’. Maybe

he doesn't know he can have food twenty-four-seven here."

"Tailor, I appreciate the compliment, but I'm not a boy, and I truly hope I'm not still growing."

"You're a boy to me," he frowned.

"I guess I am," laughed Red. "I'm getting plenty to eat. Don't worry about me. But while we're alone, I'm not sure if Tila heard, but her father and Koda were tried and convicted on multiple counts. Her father probably won't ever see the light of day. Koda turned over like the coward he is. He gave evidence against Manto."

"I won't say anything to her," said Tailor. "The girl's had enough drama in her life, and she's pregnant. Don't want her to go into labor early."

"She's not due until after Christmas, right?" asked Brit.

"No, but you know how those things go around here. Everyone seems to deliver at the same time, no matter what the due date is."

Cowboy came in carrying the box from the office. Once Luke said it was safe, he thought he'd bring it over so Autumn could open it in front of the others. He set it on the table and waited for everyone to finish their meal.

"I'm kind of nervous," said Autumn. "I have no idea what to expect." Cowboy slid his knife over the tape, opening the flaps. On the top was a letter from the attorney.

“What does it say?” asked Cowboy.

“Just that Annette and Constantine thought highly of me and were grateful for my service these last few years. They wanted me to have a few things of their own.” She pulled back the paper and saw four books inside.

“Books?” asked Red.

“Yes. But not just any books. These are first editions. I remember Annette showing them to me. She allowed me to take them and read them as long as I returned them. This one is *A Christmas Carole*, by Charles Dickens. This is *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen. This one is *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. And the last one is, well, this is odd. I never read this one.”

“What is it?” asked Cowboy.

“It’s Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. I’ve never read it. That’s odd, but maybe she just thought I’d enjoy it.”

“It’s an amazing book,” said Thomas, taking it from her. “And this is a first edition as well. It’s about the betrayal of family, faith, marriage, and friendship.”

They all stared at one another, then back at the book.

“Is there anything tucked inside it?” asked Cowboy. Thomas carefully flipped through the pages hoping to find something tucked between

them. But when nothing appeared, he shook his head. They flipped through the other books but didn't see anything.

"It was worth a try," said Autumn. She pulled out a silver platter that Annette had on her dresser. It held her perfumes and other items. "I loved this piece."

"Apparently, she thought a great deal of you," said Cowboy. He looked back into the box. "What's this?"

"I don't know," said Autumn, pulling out the black leather envelope bag.

"That," said Noah, "is often referred to as a pack."

"Oh, shit," muttered Autumn, carefully opening it. "I've never seen this before. It's a copy of his original will. The note on it is from the attorney saying he has a copy, and now I do. He says I should put it somewhere for safekeeping."

"Let me see," said Georgie.

She scanned the pages, much of it the usual legal mumbo-jumbo. It was clearly stated that the casinos would be sold to one of the men listed on the sheet, and the profits given to the designated charities. The homes would be sold, and the same was true for the profits from those sales as well.

"Oh, shit," said Kari, looking over her shoulder.

“Oh, shit? Oh, shit, what?” said Autumn.

“Constantine still owned the majority of his family’s shipping business. He wants it sold and the money given to charity. He also has evidence,” said Kari, digging through the folder. She pulled out dozens of photos and documents. “He has evidence of Dimitri kidnapping and selling women and children.”

“He knew that Dimitri would try to find this,” said Autumn. “How could he put me in this kind of danger? If he had all this evidence, why didn’t he just send it to the FBI himself? Why make me the victim here?”

“I don’t know, honey. We may never know, but now we have something that might be able to stop Dimitri. The shipping business alone is worth billions. Dimitri would have nothing if that gets sold to an outsider. He wouldn’t be able to control anything that goes on with the ships.”

“But shouldn’t Constantine have stopped it? I mean, if he owned the majority, he should have put a stop to all of it. Why didn’t he?” she demanded.

“My guess is that his wife was the priority. He didn’t have the energy to watch her die and to stop his nephew. Or he could have been threatening Annette. I mean, he tried to kill her once. I’m sure Constantine thought about that all the time,” said Cowboy.

“We have to stop him,” she said resolutely. Cowboy raised his brows, staring at her. “I know you think I’m crazy, but we can’t let him continue taking women and children and using them like this. Look at these photos, Cowboy. Look!”

“I see them, honey. I’ve seen photos like these before. We’ll find a way to stop him. I promise we will.”

As they looked through the documents, Keith walked up to them.

“I’ve been looking at the tapes the boys got from Constantine’s office. I think you’re going to want to come to the office and see what I found.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

As Keith signed to everyone, Alec translated for Autumn, who was the only person who didn't use ASL fluently.

“There’s no doubt that Constantine was paranoid. The cameras were placed so that you could see him, his guests who were seated around the office, and the door. Nothing was left untouched by the cameras. You can see him open the door and wave off the bodyguard, saying it’s okay, that they need to meet privately.

“Dimitri takes his seat, and you can see that he looks nervous, almost like a child getting ready to face his father or his boss. He’s picking at his clothing, but he’s not saying anything yet. The cameras were designed to follow movement, even something as subtle as lip movement.”

“I’d say that’s indicative of what Constantine thought might happen in the office,” frowned Luke. Keith nodded.

“Dimitri actually asks if he’s alright and how his wife is doing. Constantine says, ‘we both know you don’t care – state your business.’ Dimitri is nodding, then goes into a long explanation of why Constantine should give him control of the shipping business. He says he’ll stop transporting women and children, but he needs the ships in order to make money through other avenues. He tells him he has several clients lined up to

do business with.

“Clearly, Constantine isn’t buying it. He says, ‘you’re a liar and a cheat, just like my dead brother. I won’t let you have anything because you haven’t earned it. Not one penny of my money or money made from my businesses. You tried to kill my wife and succeeded in killing my child. I haven’t forgotten that, and the only reason you aren’t dead is that I value family more than you do.’

“Now, Dimitri doesn’t just look nervous. He looks scared. He begs him, ‘please, uncle, don’t leave me penniless and without a way to make a living. I’m sorry that I haven’t followed your rules, but I need to be successful in my own way.’

“Constantine asks him what way that would be, and Dimitri says he’s going to transport weapons instead of women. For the next twenty minutes, all he does is talk about the deals that are on the line with major countries willing to allow him to transport illegal weapons into their country. He also says he would like to branch out and carry nuclear weapons.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” asked Hex.

“I try to never fuck with anyone outside my own marriage,” smirked Keith. “This is where it gets interesting, and difficult. Constantine starts asking him about the last shipment of heroin and why it didn’t arrive on

time.”

“No,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “No, that can’t be right. He wouldn’t transport drugs. He just wouldn’t. You must be wrong. Read his lips again.” Keith followed the woman’s lips and then looked up at the others.

“Autumn, Keith is never wrong. This is what he does. It’s how he lives his life. If he’s saying Constantine transported heroin, we have to believe him,” said Cowboy.

“But I thought you said he didn’t have anything to do with the shipping business any longer,” she asked.

“It’s possible he wanted to portray it that way,” said Eric. “If he backed up from the business, he could allow his nephew to take the fall for anything that happened from a legal perspective. He would still be making money, still be primary owner of the shipping lines. But it would be Dimitri that would take the fall if caught. That must have been quite an agreement between them.”

“I don’t understand why he would lie about all of this? Did his wife know?” she asked Keith.

“*I think she knew,*” he said, nodding at her. “*He mentions her displeasure that the furs didn’t arrive in Belarus in time for the Countess’s*

ball. I asked the boys in tech to see if they could find out what he was talking about, and apparently, there is a ball held every year by one of the many European countesses and her husband. She gives fur coats to the women every year. What they don't know is that they're all stolen.

“At this party, the women are allowed to bid on new help or entertainment.” Keith stopped, letting that sink in for Autumn.

“New help? You mean servants? Slaves?” Keith nodded. “How could I have been so wrong about these people? How were they able to fool me completely? I mean, if you'd met Annette, she was the sweetest, kindest woman ever.” Keith looked at Cowboy, and the other man nodded to him.

“Autumn, during the conversation, Constantine says that he'll be arranging for you to fly them to Europe in the near future. He says the Countess wants to meet you. We think they were planning on taking you. None of that happened when Annette started to get sicker, but they didn't seem concerned about protecting you from Dimitri.

“He mentions to Dimitri that he doesn't trust him and believes he'll try to change his will. He tells him that he's leaving a 'pack' of information and items for you and his lawyers to safeguard. At this point, Dimitri gets angry, starts yelling at him. Dimitri tells him that his brother would be disappointed in him. Constantine says he doesn't care.

“It’s just family insults and arguments after that. When he leaves, Dimitri tells him that he’ll have everything one way or another, even if he has to kill Annette and you to get it. It seems that Constantine still held the purse strings for his nephew’s money. He was basically giving him an allowance if he liked his work. If not, he got nothing. Dimitri was getting tired of being treated like a child and wanted the shipping business and his full inheritance.

“Pigsty was able to dig into the Greek archives and find Dimitri’s father’s will. He left everything to his brother, basically asking him to take care of his son. The father even stated that he didn’t believe Dimitri was ‘mature’ enough to handle the day-to-day of the business.”

“God, what a mess,” said Autumn, standing to pace the room. “He was aware of everything that was going on, so was Annette. They didn’t care about me. They needed me for the time being, and then they were going to turn me over to some sadist!”

“Honey, I’m sorry,” said Cowboy. “We’re not going to let him get away with any of this.”

“He’s dead. Annette’s dead. The only person left is that little weasel, Dimitri. He’s transporting drugs, women, children, and apparently stolen furs.”

“Not that it matters a great deal in the grand scheme of things, but

the furs were illegally caught. Many were endangered animals or protected. Polar bears, cheetahs, panthers, zebras, and more. I didn't go into that detail because, honestly, it doesn't matter for all of this. It's illegal, and we'll stop it. It's all sick and disturbing."

"Am I gullible?" asked Autumn, staring at the room full of people. "Was I so happy to have a new plane and full-time customers that I ignored clues?"

"Honey, you can't think like that," said Blade. "Sometimes, the things right in front of us seem the most normal and benign. We ignore them because they don't fit with the picture before us. You did nothing wrong, Autumn. I'm just glad all of this came to a head before they were able to get to you."

Autumn nodded at the older man, hugging him. He rubbed her back, giving a serious, killer look to the others above her head.

"I think I want to take a walk," she said. "I don't even know how to fix this other than to stop Dimitri. I'm sure he hoped to kill Constantine in that plane crash, but he obviously didn't give a shit if I were killed as well. I'm assuming Christopher had a change of heart and decided to pull his boss from the wreckage but didn't give a shit about me. Dimitri must have remembered what he said about 'pack' and assumed he would have it with

him.”

They watched as she left with her shoulders slumped forward. Blade immediately texted Suze and the other women, hoping they could find her in the rain and make sure she was okay. He turned to look at his son and the other men.

“This is some fucked-up shit.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Autumn strolled down the long main drive, flanked by massive oak trees. Their branches were heavy from the rain, a new wave coming at them in the thick, dark clouds. She'd been so naïve, so excited that she had such an amazing airplane and these generous, kind customers. What a crock of bullshit!

Her grandmother would be disappointed in her. She'd tell her that she needed to get her head out of the clouds and put her feet firmly on the ground. Get with reality, girl! She reached the end of the drive and turned to walk back. The sight in front of her was spectacular.

On all sides were gorgeous Acadian cottages with their full wrap-around porches. People were starting to put up their fall decorations, complete with corn stalks and hay bales. The maze and gardens were blooming with their fall colors and scents, and the fresh rain made everything smell alive.

But what really made the view amazing were the three dozen women walking toward her. Five of them had bottles of wine in their hands, six had plates of sweets, and two had new books from Charlie.

“Are you okay, honey?” asked Suze. Autumn smiled at the women, then laughed, nodding her head. The more she laughed, the more the

emotions rolled over her body, and she began to cry.

“Oh, sweetie, don’t cry,” said Celeste.

“I feel so stupid!” she said, crying harder against Suze’s shoulder.

“Autumn, honey, there is nothing to feel stupid about,” said Viv.

“Sweetie, you’ve heard us talking, and you know some of our stories. I was stupid enough to believe a bunch of bullshit from my own father. Who, by the way, was willing to force me to marry someone that was probably going to beat me to death or force me into prostitution.”

“Oh, God,” whispered Autumn.

“She’s not alone, Autumn. My sister was sleeping with a psychotic biker and white supremacist. He was helping to steal art for the Nazis. She was killed, but he certainly came after me as well.”

“I’m so sorry,” she sniffed, pulling back from Suze.

“We all have our stories,” said Harper. “Had it not been for Ben, my own brother would have forced me into a wet t-shirt contest and probably something more.” Juliette nodded.

“If I hadn’t convinced Callan to go on my law school’s cruise, I would have been raped and murdered,” said Juliette. “God, how I love that man and all those gorgeous tattoos.” The women all smirked at her, nodding.

“Bogey came back to our little town and helped me to save the ranch my family owned. He also helped me to find my sister’s killer. If he hadn’t been there, I probably would have been stupid enough to try and do it all myself,” said Alice.

“See,” smirked Stormy, “we all have our stories. And the best part of it is we don’t judge one another. In hindsight, we could all say that we were naïve or blind, but the reality is, you can’t always see evil even when it’s right in front of you.”

“Jalen saved you?” asked Autumn.

“I like to think we saved one another,” she smiled, “but he damn sure loved me like no other man. I melt when I’m around him, Autumn. Simply melt.”

“I still melt for Nine,” smiled Erin.

“You know I wither into nothing around Trak,” grinned Lauren.

Big cracks of lightning and thunder sounded overhead, and the women took off running toward the cafeteria. Dylan came out with glasses for the wine and extra plates for the sweet treats.

“So, is it the same for all of you that have been married for a long time? Do you all still love your husbands like the day you were married?” she asked.

“No,” said Sara, smiling at the younger woman. “I love Wilson more. He’s my entire world. He taught me to not be afraid to ask for what I want, in and out of the bedroom.” The women all laughed, nodding.

“Wow,” giggled Autumn.

“Honey, you have no idea. He is wiser, stronger, and more handsome than the day I met him.”

“Holy cow,” said Autumn. “He’s incredibly handsome, so that seems hard to imagine. What about you, Suze? Did you and Blade always love one another?”

“Oh, honey, I always loved him, but he dated my sister in high school. I loved her, but she wasn’t a good person back then. When Benjamin joined the military, Samantha just couldn’t stand to be alone and not have someone showering attention on her.

“He showed up at the house, and I knew exactly where she was. With another man. Her fiancé.”

“Ouch,” whispered Autumn.

“It crushed me to see his face when he walked in on the two of them pawing one another. He walked away, and I never thought I’d see him again. Sam, she married and had a good life. Then their daughter got sick and died. Sam, she wouldn’t let it go, and the people responsible made sure

she was gone as well.

“I was with the FBI, and I knew something was going on. I just couldn’t prove it. I went to Benjamin hoping for help.”

“And he helped you,” smiled Autumn. Suze laughed, the other women laughing as well.

“Well, not at first. He was still pissed at what my sister had done, but he was even more pissed at his reaction to me. The grown-up me. In the end, yes, he helped me. We lost one of our own during that time, but Noah found Tru.” The women all smiled at her, and she wiggled her eyebrows.

“Yes, ladies. I got the big Viking, and he can conquer me any day of the week,” she smiled. “It’s going to be fun watching Rush find his girl.”

“I think our point in all of this, Autumn, is to say you’re not alone. Although you might feel as though they took advantage of you or that you were naïve, I can assure you, you were not. Evil is a very hard thing to see when you’re the one that believes the world is good,” said Suze.

“But that’s just it. I never believed the world was good. My parents were terrible people. Walking away from an eleven-year-old kid and never coming back. Who does that?”

“More people than you might think,” said Marie.

“I guess,” she frowned. “I just thought that Constantine and Annette

were good people. They seemed like good people. How could I have been so wrong?”

“Because they were good at lyin’, baby,” said Mama Irene, walking toward them. “It’s hard sometimes to pick out the good and the bad, the liars and the truth tellers. It ain’t easy. After a while, you get a gut feelin’ for it, and you just know somethin’ ain’t right. You knew it when you saw the bodyguard arguin’ with Dimitri in the car. You didn’t know what was eatin’ at you, but you knew it wasn’t good.

“Good men and women are everywhere. But there are days that it seems impossible to find them. Our sweet Christian knows that,” said Mama Irene, nodding at Ally.

“What happened with Christian?” asked Sara.

“Nothing happened. I mean, he’s okay. He had been dating a young woman for almost a year and was talking about bringing her home to meet all of us. I’m not sure of the details, but he found out she was stealing from his teammates. I guess when they would go to their homes for barbeques or parties, she was taking things from their bedrooms, that sort of thing.

“It devastated him. Then just when he thought he was moving on, he walked into his friend’s apartment, and she was doing two guys at once. I honestly believe it’s why he’s stayed in so long. So, you see, even

professionals don't always see the bad when it's right in front of them."

"I'm so sorry that happened to him," said Autumn. "I was never very good at the whole dating thing. I met Ray while I was flying Constantine back and forth. He was managing one of his hotels in Reno. He was good-looking, polite, all those things, but he never really made my body burn."

"Like my son," smirked Suze.

"I hate to say this, but your son makes my body feel like an inferno," blushed Autumn. "I never thought a man could be so wonderfully gentle and yet commanding at the same time. It's like you all give lessons or something." The woman all laughed, nodding their heads.

"You know," said Erin, "in all the years I've been around these men and women, I've never heard one couple complain about their sex life or their spouse being abusive in any way or anything of the kind. It's as if we all have an innate sense of what's right and wrong, what's good and bad, and what one another needs."

"Maybe my innate abilities will get better with time," smiled Autumn.

"Baby, you got nothin' but time," said Mama Irene. "Now, I'd say with more rain comin', this is the perfect night for gumbo, hot bread, and all the wine and sweet treats we can handle."

With a hundred cheers echoing in the cafeteria, Autumn smiled at all

the women, then looked out at the incoming storm.

“I found my home, Grandma. I’m home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The women were more than a little tipsy by the time the men made it to the cafeteria for gumbo. They were all laughing so hard they honestly thought they were high. But to see them happy, supporting one another, was a gift none of them could have imagined as single men.

“Should we start pouring coffee down them?” asked Cowboy.

“Are you kidding me?” said Antoine. “No way. Those women are going to be ready for sex in an hour or so. Wild, crazy, jump-my-bones sex. I, for one, will be enjoying my wife tonight.”

“I didn’t think about that,” laughed Cowboy. “I always tried to stay away from the women who had too much to drink.”

“Good idea,” smirked Blade. “But in this case, it’s really not about the liquor. It’s about the sisterhood. They’ve had a little wine, but it’s more about the comradery.”

“Hey, Cowboy,” said Ace, walking toward him. “Someone has been leaving messages on Autumn’s old cell phone. We gave her a VG phone with all the protections, but this old one was sitting in a drawer. Pigsty pulled it out to download her contacts for her, and the thing started buzzing like crazy.”

“Who is it?” asked Cowboy.

“I didn’t want to listen until you said it was okay or she heard them, but the number is Dimitri’s.” They looked at Autumn laughing as Charlie read something to the group.

“No. Don’t give it to her just yet. Let’s listen to them first.”

Ace nodded, taking the phone back to the office. Cowboy walked toward Autumn, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her passionately, tasting the wine and chocolate on her tongue.

“What was that for?” she giggled.

“Because I love you,” he said with a serious expression. “You keep having fun. We’ve got some work to do at the office. I’ll come back over and walk you home when we’re done.”

“Sounds perfect,” she whispered against his lips. “Charlie gave me some new lingerie and this little device that I put...”

“No! No, no, don’t tell me, or I won’t be able to walk out of here. Just surprise me with it.” Cowboy shook his head as he walked away. Whatever Charlie had given her, he was certain he would need to send her a bouquet of flowers to thank her.

In the auditorium, three dozen men waited while Ace connected the phone to the speakers. He looked at the men and nodded as he started

playing the voicemails. There were a few from her friend that was watching the horses, then the litany of calls from Dimitri.

“Did you think you would get away? I killed your grandmother. I’ll kill you too. I want the pack.”

“I want the pack, Autumn. Give it to me, or when I take it, I’ll make sure to take that sweet body of yours as well.”

“You fucking cunt! Pick up your damn phone. I’m going to enjoy feeding you to the wolves. There is no place you can hide from me. No place!”

“Alright, Autumn, let’s do it this way. You discard the copies you have, and I’ll make sure the attorney changes the will to my liking. I’ll forget all about you having the pack. It won’t matter any longer. I get the businesses and the money. You get to live. Fair deal, right?”

“Call me, Autumn. We have some details to work out.”

“He left his number and a few more messages, but most weren’t as aggressive as the first few. We obviously couldn’t put her in front of him. He’d kill her just to get the pack. What I worry about is how he’s going to get an attorney to change the will,” said Sly.

“That’s not our issue,” said Eric. “The bigger issue is that he wants the shipping line to transport his goods. All things we stop.”

“A friend of ours in Africa thinks he knows how he’s getting the furs. It’s the same as any other asshole. He’s hiring poachers who kill the animals, skin them, and send the furs to a manufacturing facility where they make the coats for the countess,” said Dex. “He’s setting a trap for them tonight, and believe me, if he’s setting the trap, they’ll be caught. That will end one problem but create another.”

“Yea, but that’s okay,” said Cowboy. “He’ll be pissed. He’ll start making mistakes. The more things that go wrong, the worse it will be for him.”

“Agreed,” said Luke. Cowboy grinned at the other man.

“How long has it been since we’ve sunk a ship in a harbor?”

“Hmmm, I think the last one was with Torro. Anyway, it’s been too long,” smiled Cam. “I’d be all about that.”

“I’d say we have our work cut out for us. We sink the fleet of ships and find a way to make the sale of the casinos happen sooner rather than later.”

“I think we have a plan,” smiled Hex. “And I want in on it.”

After another hour of making their plan, the men walked back to the cafeteria to find the girls still giggling and eating. It turned out they really weren’t drunk. They were just happy and feeling good about their lives.

Cowboy hoped to keep it that way for Autumn.

“Babe, tomorrow we’re going to be going out and hunting down Dimitri. I know you wanted to be part of this, but it’s really too dangerous. We work fast and try to remain in the shadows. I hope you won’t fight me on this,” he said, kissing her naked body.

“I won’t fight you,” said Autumn, smiling at him. He gave a questioning look to her, and she laughed. “It’s alright. The girls were a big help tonight on a lot of things. I understand what you all do and that you rely on one another. I’m not trained. Not like you.”

“I’m so fucking glad to hear you say that. Now, what about this device that Charlie gave you?” he grinned.

“Oh, that,” she blushed. She pulled out the tiny rubber device and placed it inside her vagina. There was a thin neck that curved toward her clit, and Cowboy grinned. She handed him a small flat disc.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“That, controls this,” she said, pointing to it. “You press the button, and I get... AH!”

“Oh, you get that,” he laughed. “That’s fucking hot. Charlie is selling these now?”

“Charlie, oh my gosh, uh, Charlie is. Damn, what is Charlie doing?”

she said, squirming in the bed.

“Charlie is selling,” prompted Cowboy with a grin.

“Charlie is selling lots of things,” she said breathlessly. “Cowboy! Oh wow!”

“Damn,” he muttered, watching her writhe with satisfaction. “This is fucking cool. I wonder how far away I can be when I press this button. Don’t move.”

He stood in the door of the bedroom and pressed it, and she squealed. Then he moved to the kitchen, and it was the same. Finally, he stood on the front porch in the blowing rain and wind. Again, she screeched with excitement and pleasure.

When he went back into the bedroom, she was stretching like a cat on the bed. He grinned at her.

“The night of our wedding, I want you to wear that beneath your gown. Every time I see you, I’m going to hit this button and watch you squirm beneath my touch, even from across the room.”

“I hate to say it, but this kind of torture I can deal with,” she laughed. “Now, come take it out. With your teeth. And give me that big cock instead.”

“Fuck yea, woman.”

It was still dark by the time Cowboy left the bed, showered, and put his tactical gear on. He smiled at the naked body of Autumn spread out on their bed. Her hair was all over her face, a small line of drool dripping down her cheek. He wanted to laugh, but it was so damn cute he just snapped a photo to use later.

Kissing her forehead, he left the cottage, making sure it was locked tight with the alarm system in place. With the others, they quietly made their way to the jets. When their gear was loaded, the two dozen men were in the air, watching the replay of the video in Africa.

Dex's friend and his team laid their trap perfectly. The poachers were chasing three male lions, leading them straight into a trap. Unfortunately, it was the poachers who found themselves trapped. Making a safe escape for the lions, the game wardens lay in wait, trapping the men between two ridges that led to a dead end. Literally.

The poachers were prepared to die, unwilling to lay down their weapons. With a truck loaded with furs, skins, and ivory tusks, they were ready to go to war for the money it would bring in. It crushed Dex and the others to see the dead animals mutilated for cash.

These men were going to hell for their actions. Although the wardens were more than happy to help them with their travels to hell, the lions took

that choice from them.

It took less than an hour for the lions to kill the men and pick their bones clean. They would never raise a weapon to another animal. With a few well-calculated roars and calls, the entire pride fed off their aggressors. It all seemed fitting.

“I’d say that was justice,” smirked Cowboy. Cam nodded.

“Agree. Now, let’s deliver a little justice to our friend Dimitri.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“How many ships are we looking at?” asked Cowboy.

“Five total,” said Hiro. “One is sitting in the Gulf of Patras. The other four are all docked at Patras. I hacked into the video footage from the docks last night, and they loaded two of them with unmarked crates. We have to assume stolen goods or drugs.

“There’s a warehouse that belongs to the shipping line just over here,” he said, pointing to the map. “We’ve seen men going in and out of there all morning. By the time we get there, it will be evening, and if the warehouse has women or children, that’s when they’ll try to load them.”

“Alright,” said Luke. “Moose, you go with Hiro, Red, Tanner, Fitch, and Remy. Get inside that warehouse and disable any men that are there. If it has women and children, find a way to get them out of there and to another area and call the authorities. Then leave. We don’t want anyone seen.”

“Sounds like a party to me,” smirked Moose.

“Cowboy? You, Wade, Sam, Magnus, and Bodhi take the *Athenia*. Tiger, Jalen, Chief, Bron, Dom, and Frank, you guys take the *Olympus*. Dunc, Garrett, Adam, Ben, Ian, and Carl take the *Fortuna*. And Will, Chase, JT, Bogey, Bone, and HG take the *Minotaur*.

“Cam, Eric, Hex, and myself are going to take care of the one in the gulf,” smirked Luke. “We’ve been getting dusty and would like a little action. AJ, Irish, Ethan, and Mo, you’re with us. The rest of you will be watching and waiting for trouble because it will probably come.

“We know that the Greek authorities are notorious for accepting bribes, so we can assume that Dimitri has been bribing them to look the other way. Watch for them, and if you have to, give them a diversion.

“I know I don’t have to say this, but everyone comes home. I want not a scratch on any of you. You’re too good, too careful, too smart to allow them to get the best of us. Watch your six, and watch your brother’s six.”

“Yes, Dad,” they all sang.

“Jesus, I hate you guys sometimes.”

Savannah and Evie were able to land the Osprey near the docks. In whisper and stealth mode, she barely made a sound, and no one saw her. When the men felt it was dark enough, they started to move in.

“Autumn? Can you hear me?” asked Luke.

“Yes. I can hear you.”

“It’s time, honey. Make the call.”



Resting in his family's Greek mansion for a few days before truly getting down to business, Dimitri grinned at the young woman salivating over his body. Of course, they had no choice. They either gave him pleasure, or he would release the guards on them. And they would not be so gentle.

"Boss, we have a problem," said the man at the door.

"Fix it. I'm busy."

"Boss, it's the warehouse at the docks. Someone got in, killed the boys, and they have our merchandise."

"What? That's impossible! There are more than a hundred bodies in that warehouse. Where did they go?" he asked, shoving one girl to the floor and kicking the other in her side. He reached down for his trousers and shirt, getting dressed as he moved toward the door.

Half-dressed, he stood on the balcony overlooking the sea. In the distance, he could see his favorite ship, the *Odyssey*. Feeling better that she was there, he started to turn, then heard the awful sound of an explosion and metal crying out.

"No," he whispered. "No, this isn't possible." When the phone rang, he debated on not answering it, but seeing the number, he grabbed it.

"Hello, Dimitri," said Autumn. "Are you enjoying the view?"

“What the fuck did you do?”

“I did what needed to be done. The women and children are safe, the poachers are dead, thanks to the lions, by the way. Rather apropos, don’t you think?”

“I’ll fucking kill you!” he screamed.

“Well, you should probably tell your men to get off the other ships. They’re going to blow in exactly two minutes.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, shaking his head. He grabbed the binoculars, trying to get a look at the ships docked, but it wasn’t clear from here.

“You’re willing to risk all those lives for your ego? Interesting. I wonder what the authorities will do when they discover your cargo. Won’t that make for interesting headlines?” He laughed at her, shaking his head.

“The authorities. Really, Autumn, you are naïve. I own the Greek authorities.”

“Maybe,” she said with a grin, “but I doubt if you own Interpol, the United Nations Security Forces, the CIA, MI5, and various other nasty, nasty organizations. They’re going to be very interested in why your uncle’s will was changed, after he died.”

“I didn’t change his will,” he said, breathing heavily.

“No. But it looks that way. You’ll be dead soon, Dimitri. My only regret is that I didn’t get to do it myself. For my grandmother.”

The line went dead, and Dimitri screamed like a child as his bodyguards watched.

“Call the ships! Tell them to search for explosives,” he yelled, running toward the vehicles. As they sped away, the bodyguard shook his head.

“Communications are down. No one is answering.”

“No! This cannot be happening.”

“Boss, it’s not a big deal. The ships will sink completely. No one will see the cargo.”

“You idiot! The bay is shallow. They won’t sink completely. If they put the explosives in the right places, the cargo will float to the surface. We’ll be done!”

Rounding the bend toward the docks below, four massive explosions went off, perfectly timed within seconds of one another. The groan of steel bending and burning rattled through the windows of his SUV. Men were jumping from the ship into the bay, swimming for dear life.

When he pulled up to the dock, he was so shocked by the scene he never saw the dozens of cars pulling up with the authorities. When the Greek

officer gripped his arm, he pulled it away.

“Don’t touch me, Kristof!”

“I’m sorry, Dimitri. This time there’s no paying anyone to look the other way. We’ve been ordered to turn you over to Interpol.” The man looked behind him, then whispered to Dimitri. “They know what’s on the ships, and they’ve already got divers ready to bring the cargo up.”

“No. No, this can’t be happening,” he whispered. He stared at the ships as they creaked and moaned, tilting and sliding into the water. A glimpse of a familiar face set his heart racing. A man that he’d seen before. A man he knew.

Cowboy walked along the dock in a black scuba suit with an Interpol logo on it. He looked directly at Dimitri and smiled, nodding his head. Then he flipped the middle finger at him.

“That’s what you get for fucking with my girl.”



It was hours before everyone was arrested, including several local police officers. The women and children had been taken from Greece, her surrounding islands, and nearby nations. They were destined for a bidding block in Russia. Now, they were being cared for, and arrangements made for their safe return.

The cargo included illegal furs, drugs, electronics, and stolen weapons from the military of Great Britain, Spain, Italy, and Turkey. As the story unfolded over the next few days, everything was revealed.

Dimitri Stepanapolos had attempted to change his uncle's will to get control of the ships and other businesses. Due to a strange set of circumstances, the ships received catastrophic damage and would never sail again.

At this time, the news could report that the Stepanapolos Shipping lines were bankrupt, the casinos owned by Constantine Liconitis had been sold, with the money being donated as he instructed. Poaching groups across Asia, Africa, and Europe were arrested and now in custody, spilling their guts to anyone who would listen for a plea bargain.

For the men of VG, it was a good week. A very good week.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

On the following Friday, Moose walked Autumn down the aisle per her request. He'd never been so moved by a request in all his life. He sobbed in Matthew's arms, wondering why she would want to choose him. A broken-down, widowed [PC3]SEAL with anger issues. Autumn didn't see it that way.

She saw the man that had helped to kill the men who killed the only woman she ever loved. Her grandmother. It surprised Autumn that the morning of her wedding, her parents called.

"Autumn? It's Dad, honey." She stilled, not saying anything, as the women in the room stared at her. Keegan was working on her makeup and hair while Winter was doing her nails. "Autumn."

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

"Honey, that's no way to talk to your father," he said calmly.

"You're not my father. You haven't been my father for twenty years. What do you want, Francis?"

"Look, we went up to see Mom and noticed the place had burned down. Asking around, we heard the news that she was gone. I'm sorry. Really, I am."

“What. Do. You. Want?”

“Jesus, Autumn, can’t you just talk to me? I mean, I’ve lost my mother here as well,” he said.

“Yea, you seem really broken up about that. Don’t bullshit me, Dad. You left us, and I haven’t seen you since. What do you want?”

“Fine. That ranch should go to me. I mean, it’s mine. I’m the only child. And if she had any money, well...”

“You can stop right there. The ranch was left to me in her will, and I’m going to keep it going as a wilderness guide and horseback riding center for the mountains. Someone will run it for me with the inheritance she left me. It wasn’t much, but it’s enough to keep it going for the first year. She left you nothing. Zero. Nada.”

“It’s mine, Autumn. We need it. Your mother and I are in a bad place.”

“What’s the matter, Dad? Didn’t you hit it big on the roulette wheel last night? Were the cards not kind to you? Or did Astra buy another expensive handbag? Which is it, Dad? Actually, never mind. I don’t want to know. I don’t care.

“Grandma gave me everything. Love, comfort, food, shelter, an education, and so much more. She made me into the woman I am today. The

woman that's going to be married today. You won't have the good fortune of meeting him. Nor will you ever see my face again. If you attempt to touch one thing that belonged to Grandma and now belongs to me, I'll sic so many attorneys on you, you won't know what happened."

"You used to be a sweet girl," said her father.

"I used to be a lot of things, but whatever I am now, you can blame on you and credit Grandma." She hung up the phone, and the women all watched as she closed her eyes, taking in deep breaths.

"Honey?" whispered Suze.

"I'm okay. In fact, I didn't realize how much I needed to do that. I'm good now," she smiled. "I'm really good."

Later, as she was dancing with her husband in front of their family and friends, she didn't feel the stab of loneliness at not having a father-daughter dance. She felt the stab of sadness at not having any of her own family there. Then she realized she did. Every person here was her family. Her friends.

Moose danced with her, beaming with brotherly pride and adoration.

"I wish you really were my brother or father, Moose," she smiled.

"Hey, I'm not that old. Brother is fine, but I damn sure couldn't be your father," he smirked. "But I know what you mean. How about I be your

surrogate brother. If Cowboy gets out of line, I'll make sure to rein him back in."

"Deal," she said, squeezing him.

"Can I have my wife back now?" asked Cowboy.

"Maybe," frowned Moose. He winked at Autumn, giving her over to her husband. "Remember what I said. Just one call." Laughing, she wrapped herself in Cowboy's arms, dancing across the room.

"Happy?" he asked.

"Happier than I ever thought possible," she said, shaking her head. "I start training on the Osprey next week. This is like Christmas for me."

"I guess it is," he laughed. "What do you say we exit to our cottage? We can lock ourselves inside for a few days."

"Oh, no way, buddy. I heard there's this amazing wedding breakfast tomorrow, and then Mama Irene has games planned, and Claudette is making all my favorite things for lunch, and..."

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "I guess family wins." Autumn smiled up at him, nodding.

"Don't they always?"

"Indeed, they do, baby. Indeed, they do."

CHAPTER THIRTY

A few days later, Ace went into the leadership room and closed the door. Hex, Cam, Luke, and Eric all looked at him and frowned.

“What the fuck?” murmured Cam.

“Hiro found some interesting shit in a chat room. Seems a group of Syrians moving through Turkey captured an American military man. No name, no branch of service. He escaped, but they shot him and know he’s wounded. They’re offering a reward.”

“Okay, but is he ours?” asked Hex.

“He might be,” said Ace thoughtfully. “I just have a feeling. I reached out to Caroline to see if she’d heard anything while helping at the zoo, and she said she hadn’t, but there had been a lot of military activity around the area because of the earthquake. That was yesterday. Today when I tried calling her, I got nothing. The phone didn’t even ring.”

“Fuck me,” said Luke.

“Pigsty sent a mass text to all our boys in the field. We’ve heard back from everyone except one. Rush.”

“Oh, fuck. No. No, no, no,” muttered Eric. “We need to get Dad and the other members of Team Big here. We’re not going to be able to stop him

from going after him.”

Sending the message to Team Big, the rumbling sound of footsteps came down the hall as they entered the big conference room.

“What’s wrong?” asked Max.

“Ace and Hiro found some chatter on the web about an American military man taken, but he escaped and was shot. They’re looking for him, and there’s a bounty on his head. We reached out to all our boys, and the only one that didn’t respond was Rush.”

“Oh, fuck,” said Tailor, shaking his head. “No. Nope. We will not be able to contain him.”

“He’ll tear the whole fucking world apart,” said Alec. “Where is this happening?”

“Somewhere in Turkey. We called Caroline yesterday, and she hadn’t heard from anyone and didn’t know anything about it, but she said there was a lot of military presence because of the earthquake.”

“We have to find him,” said Luke.

“Turkey’s a big place, brother. We can’t just land and start turning over rocks,” said Hex.

“What the fuck do you think Noah is going to do when he finds out?”

He's going to destroy the whole damn place!"

"No. I will not," said Noah, standing in the doorway. "You all forget that I have a connection to the spirit world. They like to tell their secrets. My son is safe for now. If I storm into the country, it may only put him and Caroline in danger. I would not do that."

"We're sorry, brother. We just didn't want you to lose your shit," said Luke.

"I have never lost my shit." They all stared at him, raising their brows. "Okay. I have lost my shit a few times, but I will control myself in this. I have to. There are two children involved in this."

"Dude, they're adults," said Eric.

"Yes. And I will treat them as such. We will continue to attempt to reach them, and if they need us, we can be there. I might even suggest that if we do not hear from them within twenty-four hours, we take another leisurely plane ride to Greece and park ourselves within shooting distance."

Luke grinned at the big man's calm demeanor. He wasn't sure he would have been the same way had it been Garrett.

"Alright, Noah. Thank you for keeping your head in this. We'll wait and then head to Greece if we don't hear from him."

"I kept my head," he said, turning to leave. "But do not count on my

wife doing the same.”

EXCEPT from RUSH

“Caroline? Would you mind getting the Mandrills into the pens? We need to get them fed before we load them to head to Istanbul.”

“Of course. Just give me a moment.”

Caroline cleaned the rolling cages and then opened the doors to the rock enclosures. The Mandrills, a type of monkey, would be happy in their new home away from the broken debris caused by the earthquake. Their enclosure hadn't been damaged too terribly. They'd been able to stay in their habitat, cared for by the dedicated zookeepers and veterinarians.

“Come, Chookie, let's go, honey. You're the last one,” she called. The female Mandrill stared at her, then looked behind her for a moment. Slowly, she moved into her temporary home, grabbing the fruits and vegetables left for her.

The workers wheeled the last of the monkeys toward the waiting caravans, and Caroline went into the enclosure to be sure nothing was left behind. As she started to leave, she heard a moaning from inside the rock enclosure.

“Who's in there? Babbi, are you playing hide-and-seek again? Come on, honey. You have to get to the other zoo.” Caroline stared at the trucks

and saw the small Mandrill that she thought she was speaking to. Backing up, she knelt down and peered inside the darkness.

“Hello? Listen, if you’re a thief, you’d better leave now, or I’m calling over the military guards,” she called. When no one answered, she stood. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“N-no,” whispered the voice. Turning back to the entrance, she knelt once more, trying to see who had spoken to her.

“Who are you?”

“H-help me. Please.” Caroline knew her family would skin her alive for this, but she couldn’t ignore the pain in the man’s voice.

“Alright, I’m coming inside,” she said. Crawling on her hands and knees, she entered the dark enclosure and turned on her flashlight. Shining it against the walls, she scanned the small space and realized why it felt so small.

“Rush,” she whispered. “Oh, shit. Rush.” She scrambled towards him, seeing the blood-soaked shirt.

“C-Caroline,” he whispered. “I need you to get the bullet out.”

“Bullet? I’m a veterinarian, not a surgeon,” she whispered.

“Please. It’s getting infected. You have to get it out. They’re after

me, and you're in danger being here."

"I'm leaving tonight," she said. "We're all heading to the zoo in Istanbul. Who is after you?"

"It doesn't matter. Bad guys."

"I can call home," she said. He gripped her wrist, causing her to release the phone. It clattered to the floor, sliding down the concrete opening and straight through the grates of the sewer drain.

"Sorry," he smirked in pain.

"Alright. Let me get some things from my kit," she said.

"Can't tell anyone," he said, shaking his head.

"I'm not an idiot, Rush. I was raised in the same family that you were. I know what to do. Just let me get my kit, and I'll get the bullet out and give you some antibiotics. Then you can run, just like you always do." He still held firmly to her wrist.

"I didn't run," he growled. "I did the right thing."

"No. You did the safe thing," she whispered. She could feel the tears building behind her eyes and cursed herself. "I don't know why you couldn't just tell me you weren't interested."

Even in all his pain, Rush reached for her neck, pulling her closer.

“Does this tell you anything?” Gripping her wrist, he laid her hand across his hard cock and pulled her mouth to his own. Forcing his tongue between her lips, he inhaled the scent of her, tasting her, teasing her. When she moaned against him, falling into his lap, he held her tightly. Then, he stopped.

“Rush? Rush, why did you stop?” she asked.

Adjusting to the darkness, she saw that his eyes were closed. He’d passed out. Caroline frowned at his handsome face, then tried to free her wrist from his hand. She couldn’t budge it.

“Perfect.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 1	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
RS 2	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
RS 3	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
RS 4	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
RS 5	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
RS 6	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
RS 7	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
RS 9	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
RS 9	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
RS 9	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
SP 19			Violet	Striker Michaels
RP 6			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins

RS 10	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
RS 11	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 12	Raphael Robicheaux	Savannah O'Reilly	Ian Luke	Aspen Bodwick
			Katherine Gray "Kate"	Cameron Dougall
	Doug Graham	<i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos		
RS 13	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
RS 14	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
RS 14	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
RS 15	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
RS 16	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
RS 16	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
RS 17	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
RS 18	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
RS 19	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
RS 19	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
RS 20	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
RS 20	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
RS 20	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
RS	Chad Taylor			
RS	Woody "Doc" Fine			
RS	(d) Tony Parks			
RS	(d) Alan Haley			
RS	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
RS	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
RS	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
MSB 1	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
MSB	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		

2				
MSB 3	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
MSB 4	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
MSB 5	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
MSB 5	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
MSB 6	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
MSB 7	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
MSB 8	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
MSB 8	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
MSB 8	(d) Anthony Garcia			
MSB	Eric & Anna Tanner			
SP 1	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
SP 2	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
SP 3	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
SP 4	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
SP 5	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
SP 5	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
SP 7	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
SP 8	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
SP 9	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
SP 9	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
SP 10	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
SP 11	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
SP 12	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	

SP 13	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
SP 14	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	
SP 15	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
SP 16	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
SP 17	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		
Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
SP	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
SP	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
SP	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
SP	James Scarlutti			
SP	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
SP	Ian Laughlin			
SP	Conor Laughlin			
SP	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
SP 19	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux	Grayson Matthew	
RP 1	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
RP 2	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
RP 3	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
RP 4	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
RP 5	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
RP 6	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
RP 7	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
RP 8	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
RP 9	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
RP 10	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
RP 11	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
RP 12	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	
			Michael Douglas	

RP 13	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
RP 14	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
RP 15	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
RP 16	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
RP 17	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
RP 18	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
RP 19	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 20	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
RP 21	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
RP 22	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
RP 23	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fornet	Claudette Robicheaux		
RP 24	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
RP 25	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
RP 26	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
RP 27	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	
RP 28	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
RP 29	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
RP 30	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
RP 31	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
RP 32	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
RP 33	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
RP 34	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
RP 35	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
RP 36	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
RP 37	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
RP 38	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
RP 39	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
RP 40	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	

RP 41	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
RP 42	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
RP 43	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
RP 44	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
RP 45	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
RP 46	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	
RP 47	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
RP 48	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
RP 49	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 50	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
RP 51	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
RP 52	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
RP 53	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
RP-54	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
RP-55	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
RP-56	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
RP-57	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
RP-58	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
VG-1	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
VG-2	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
VG-3	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
VG-4	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
VG-5	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
VG-6	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
VG-7	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	(preg)	

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Sean – Book Fourteen

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

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I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!

[PC1] I know it seems wrong to have two "to" in a row. Actually, adding a comma is incorrect. In my opinion the comma might make a lot of people stumble while reading, so I rejected the comma. Of course, if you feel strongly about it add it back in (not that you need my permission ☺)

I had another thought, what if it was changed to:

Look, who do I need to talk **with** to get someone off their asses and out there looking for my girl?

It's a little more formal, but it makes it easier to read.

[PC2] Doesn't the date 21SEP01 mean Sept 21, 2001? And isn't 1550, 3:50 pm in 12-hour time?

It's military time - so the year is always first, but you're right about the time

[PC3] I thought he was actually a widower. Didn't his wife die while they were still married and he came to surprise her in Florida and the reverend had beaten her almost to death?