

Manly Kennebec

INVESTMENT

Gray Wolf Security:  
Book One

# INVISIBLE

# GRAY WOLF SECURITY

## Book One

By Mary Kennedy



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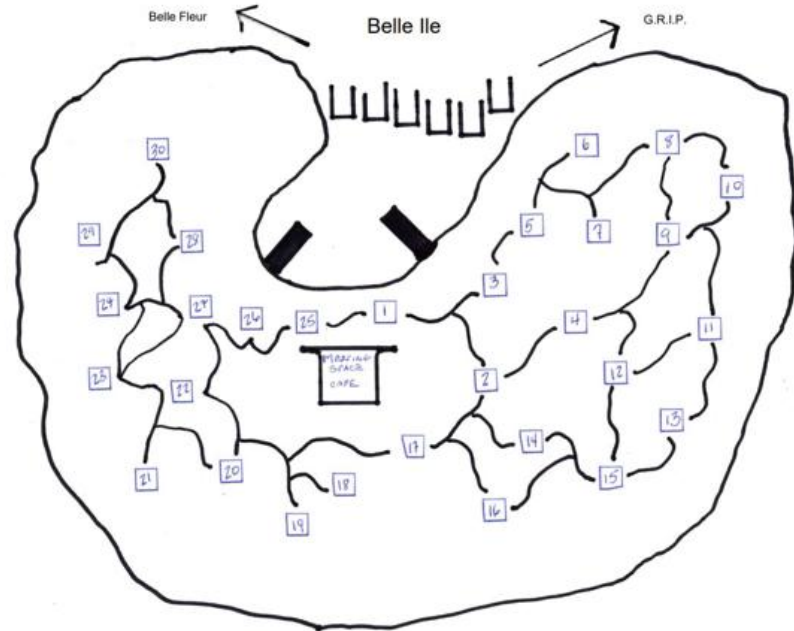
*Dear Readers,*

*This book can be a stand-alone read, or you can read the previous series of REAPER Security, My SEAL Boys, Steel Patriots, REAPER Patriots, and the ongoing series of Voodoo Guardians. Those books will give greater detail about characters you may not know. However, this was written to give you small snippets of backgrounds so that you feel informed.*

*I hope you enjoy this new series. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you are in your twilight or after a certain age you should 'slow down.' Believe me, the men and women of Gray Wolf won't be slowing down any time soon.*

*Enjoy!*

# 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	Kegger
6	Ghost & Grace	23	Pork
7	Ian & Faith	24	
8	Mama Irene & Matthew	25	
9	Ruby and Sven	26	
10	George & Mary	27	
11	Whiskey & Kat		
12	Angel & Mary		
13	Antoine & Ella		
14	Baptiste & Rose		
15	Bull & Lily		

16	Vince & Ally		
17	Code & Hannah		



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# CHAPTER ONE

The rain was coming down on her once again. A cold, stinging rain. Already sick with a cough, sore throat, and good old-fashioned cold, this would most likely seal her fate. She sat outside on the curb in front of the upscale restaurant, her small plastic Mardi Gras cup in her hand. There had been a few kind patrons today, giving her enough for a sandwich and cup of coffee, but now there was nothing left.

On a good night, the maître d' would bring out a box of leftovers, but he wasn't working tonight. Hopefully, one of the servers who had been kind to her in the past would take mercy on her.

Looking up and down the street, she strained to see through the sheets of rain. The soft glow of the neon signs told her that people were still working, or drinking, but nothing else was moving. Usually, there were three girls seated on the curb together. Tonight, it was only her.

Marsha, if that was her real name, was the oldest of the three girls. You learned not to use real names while on the streets. You never knew when someone would try to be a

good Samaritan and call the cops, telling them there was a lost teenager somewhere and her name was 'Marsha.' This way, they could remain safe. Or at least relatively safe.

Marsha had been the one to unite the three girls. Already jumped in an alley twice for her money and food, she knew that they would be safer together. After stealing steak knives from a dirty patio table in a courtyard restaurant, they'd sharpened them against the concrete buildings. None of them knew how to use the knives, but they felt better having them in their small backpacks.

She didn't know much about Marsha. The girl told them she'd run away from home when her stepfather tried to rape her. When they asked about her mother, she only said that the woman had left her with the stepfather, never to return.

Lashon was the baby. At only thirteen, she wasn't even old enough to try and get a part-time job. Sometimes, the restaurants would allow them to work for cash, washing dishes or sweeping floors. But Lashon was too young, and worse, she looked even younger than thirteen. Barely four-and-a-half feet and seventy pounds, there were obvious developmental issues with her.

When the girls asked about her family, she only said her mama couldn't take care of all the children any longer, and anyone over the age of twelve had to leave. It seemed Lashon's mother was good at one thing. Producing children. There were fourteen that Lashon knew of. She'd never met one man. Not one. All she knew was that anyone living in their house was a sibling or half-sibling.

She and Marsha had come upon the little girl late one night while they were searching for any dropped coins or dollar bills. It was amazing what the drunks on Bourbon would leave behind. They heard someone crying and stared down the narrow passage between two of the classic New Orleans shotgun style homes.

Tired, hungry, and terrified, the girls enveloped her in their fold, becoming the three musketeers. Except tonight, the only musketeer trying to make some money was her.

"Erica," called one of the waiters from behind her. "Honey, you need to get out of the rain. Ain't nobody here tonight. I got a good plate of food for 'ya. You got somewhere dry to go?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry," she said with a hacking cough. "I'm all good. Thanks for the food, Albert."

“No problem, honey. You sure there ain’t someone I can call for ‘ya? I know some folks that could probably help.”

“No. Please, don’t call anyone.”

“Where are Marsha and Lashon?” he asked, looking up and down the empty street.

“I-I don’t know,” she replied. The pit in her stomach grew wider as she took the food from the man.

“My offer is always open to you, honey. I ain’t gonna hurt you. I’m a gay man in New Orleans. I ain’t got kids, ain’t got a wife or husband. But I do got a sofa that’s safe and dry.”

“No. No, thanks. I’m good,” she said, moving away from him. “Thanks for the food.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “Okay, honey. You know where to find me if you need me.” She nodded, walking away as quickly as her tired body could carry her.

“Erica!” he called out to her. “You be careful, honey. There’s crazy folks around here.”

She waved at him again and sped up, ducking down an alleyway and making her way toward Dauphine Street, where the houses offered some shelter from the cold and rain.

Sitting beneath an overhang, she opened the box and immediately dug into the oyster po'boy and French fries. She never liked coleslaw, but when you're hungry, you're not very picky. Beneath the sandwich, she saw the five-dollar bill that Albert had placed there for her. She briefly wondered if she shouldn't take him up on his offer. He was older and, as he said, gay. But she had no way of knowing if that was true or not. He could be as crazy as her brother.

Leaving her home and friends at the age of sixteen had never been in her plan, but when her brother, Jimmy, started to drink and take drugs, things got rough. At first, he'd just come home and torment her until she locked herself in her room. Then, he'd bring home friends. With their mom working the night shift at the factory, there was no one to watch out for her.

Erica didn't want to complain to her mother. She had enough to worry about just paying the mortgage and feeding them. The last straw for her was the night he brought three friends home. Threatening to rape and beat her unless she did what they said, she felt completely defeated. It was only by luck that they didn't succeed.



But they'd done enough. Forcing her to strip to her panties and bra, they made her parade in front of them as they reached out, touching her. She cried for her brother to make them stop, but he only laughed. Asking her to dance for them was the luck she needed. So addled by the alcohol and drugs, they all fell asleep, and Erica took her shot at freedom.

She thought about her mother every day. Was she well? Was she still working? She didn't have any answers other than she couldn't go home.

Taking the last bite of the food, she tossed the container, shoving the five in her pocket. Dauphine had half-a-foot of water in the road, so she was forced to walk the somewhat elevated sidewalks. It was something Marsha had taught her. This late at night, try to walk in the center of the road. That way, if someone comes for you, you're out in the open, and they would have to drag you into the alleys or side streets.

Tonight, she didn't have that luxury.

She looked down Ursulines Street and didn't see her friends. Continuing her wet trek, she did the same at Governor Nicholls and Barracks Streets. Nothing. By the time she got to Esplanade, she was shivering with cold and fever. Up

ahead, she saw the patrol car slowly making its way down the street, and she ducked back, out of his sights.

When he was gone, she hurried down the street, hoping to at least get a bed at one of the shelters. She'd lied about her age before, and usually, with weather like this, late at night, they didn't bother to ask any questions. When the car pulled out in front of her, she felt a sense of panic, jumping back.

"Erica, it's me," said the man.

"Shit! You scared the hell out of me," she said, holding her chest. She coughed, and he shook his head.

"You don't look so good, hun. Marsha and Lashon are safe and dry. They sent me to look for you."

"Why would they do that?" she frowned. She didn't believe him for a minute. They'd always said they would go their own way during the day but meet up at night. Neither had been at their usual meeting spots, so there was something wrong with all of this.

"They're worried about you," he said, smiling at her. Two other men got out of the car walking toward her. She shook her head, looking both ways down the street. Where in the hell was that patrol car?

“I-I’m good,” she said.

“Babe, you’re freezing to death. Come on, get in the car, and we’ll take you to see them.” She shook her head again, trying to turn and run. She’d missed the other man working his way behind her. Grabbing her, he shoved her toward the car.

Erica screamed at the top of her lungs, and the men just laughed at her. She tried to scream again, but the heaviness in her chest and the coughing prevented her from yelling.

“It’s useless, honey. No one will hear you. Didn’t you know? You’re invisible.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Nine was trying to remember what brought them here. How did they get to this point of needing to find a new purpose? It was Gaspar that reminded him. They did it because they'd used their faces to fulfill their purpose, placing themselves in danger.

*“Ladies and gentlemen, we welcome you to the trial of Tyler Beckett.” Beckett’s eyes went wide, and he tried to stand. An iron-like grip forced him back to his seat, and he turned to see one of his bodyguards.*

*“What the hell are you doing! You work for me,” he growled.*

*“I work for myself,” said Bull. “Take a good look at the audience, Mr. Beckett. Look at the faces.”*

*Beckett turned and stared at the faces who were glaring at him. They were the faces he knew all too well. These people were his victims. They were the survivors of those who had committed suicide. They were the ones humiliated on his program.*

*“What is happening here?” he demanded.*

*That's when he saw four familiar faces staring back at him. They slowly walked toward him, and he realized how very large they were. They might be older, but they looked as though they could still fight their way out of any situation. He thought he'd get a jump on them.*

*"Well, let me guess. Joe Dougall, Gaspar Robicheaux, Eric Stanton, and Ian Shepard."*

*"Yep," smiled Nine. Beckett frowned, unsure of what to say or do next.*

*"This is an absolute farce," he screeched. "I demand to leave."*

*"Sorry, but you signed our standard contract. In fact, it's the same standard contract you required all of these people or their loved ones to sign. You cannot leave during taping. You cannot request that anything be left out of the taping. You cannot request that the tape be modified. It is at the show's discretion that we broadcast anything and everything we wish."*

*"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, this isn't right. I demand to call the authorities!"*

*“We’re right here,” said a federal agent, stepping forward. “We’re watching and waiting for you.”*

*“Shall we begin?” asked Gaspar. “I believe the whole world has seen the billboards that we were more than happy to pay for. Those billboards allowed the truth of who and what you are to be displayed. Your lies and cheating stem all the way back to your days in high school. The storytelling, the fabricating of lies to make you look better or smarter, only to destroy other lives.”*

*“That’s not true! These people wanted it. All of them! They wanted fame and fortune. They thought that by being on my show, they would catch a big Hollywood break.”*

*“Is that so?” said Ian. “Because we know that almost all of these people didn’t even know they were going to be on your show. They were brought into your studios under false pretenses. You lured them, promised them something, and then broadcast hideous lies about them.”*

*“It’s not true!” Nine slammed the table in front of him and leaned forward, breathing heavily.*

*“We only tell the truth. It is in our code, our DNA. Something you know nothing about, Mr. Beckett. Tell me, did you have something against Michael Beck? Did he harm you*

*in some way?" Beckett stared at him as if completely confused by the question.*

*"You don't even remember him, do you?" asked Ghost.*

*"I have a lot of people on my show."*

*Ghost hit the play button on the remote, and the episode that aired Michael Beck suddenly was on display. They could see Beckett begin to sweat, squirming in his seat. When the video stopped, he shook his head.*

*"I don't remember him."*

*"You paid his ex-boyfriend to lie about him."*

*"I never!"*

*"Yes, you did," said the young man, standing. "If I had known what you were doing, what Michael would do, I would have never accepted the money. I was broke and needed it, and you knew it. He was a good person. He was brilliant and kind and would never hurt a child."*

*"He was a pedophile!" The crack of Ghost's hand was so loud the audience members thought a light had exploded. Beckett's head bounced backwards, then forward. He cupped his cheek, tears in his eyes.*

*“You are a liar. He was a good, sweet, kind young man who did nothing wrong. You held him prisoner on your television show, not allowing him to leave. You brought him there under false pretense. You didn’t get the waiver signed, and you forced him to feel the need to take his own life.”*

*Beckett said nothing, staring at the men, then at the audience.*

*“They deserved what they got. All of them! They were whores, cheaters, liars, just like the rest of them. They deserved everything that came their way.” He reached for his briefcase, smiling. “Just like you’ll get what comes your way.”*

*Beckett waited for their reactions, then frowned as the men laughed at him.*

*“Do your best,” smirked Gaspar.*

*“I will. I will, you know! I’ll show the whole world that you were baby killers and nothing better than modern-day marauders!”*

*“Modern-day marauders? Wow,” smiled Ian. “I’ve been called a lot of things, but that’s not one of them.”*



*“Please,” said Nine. “Show the world what you have.”*

*Beckett could feel the sweat rolling down his belly toward his crotch. If the sweat pooled there, he would have a terrible itch. It was something he couldn't control.*

*“Y-you were all deployed to war zones. You shot innocent people!”*

*“Tell us which people,” said Nine. “Which war zone? Where were these people? What evidence do you have?”*

*“It's in here! I'll show everyone. I swear I will.”*

*“Listen, you're wasting valuable airtime,” said Gaspar. “If you've got something to show the world, we're agreeable to it. Show them.”*

*Long seconds ticked by as the audience watched Beckett sweat. Finally, Ian stood, leaning over the table.*

*“You can't show anything because you don't have anything. You are looking at three United States Navy SEALs and one of the finest Army Rangers ever known to man. We have fought in deserts, the Arctic, jungles, the sea, land, and air. We have risked our lives, the lives of our men, and nearly lost those that we love. All for our country.*

*“In all my time as a SEAL, I never took an innocent life. Never. And I know for a fact that my brothers didn’t either. Did we kill terrorists, drug lords, neo-Nazis, pedophiles, sex traffickers, and other assorted pieces of trash? You’re fucking right, we did.”*

*The audience burst into applause, and Beckett swallowed.*

*“You have nothing inside your teeny, tiny briefcase,” smirked Nine.*

*Beckett reached as if to open the top of the case, and Trak moved so quickly he didn’t have time to scream. He gripped the case, turning it for the cameras to see and opened the top. There was nothing inside. Not even a sandwich.*

*“Impressive evidence,” smirked Ghost.*

*“What do you want?” growled Beckett.*

*“Us? We don’t want anything except for you to suffer humiliation and pain, just like you made your victims suffer. Tell the world what you did. Tell them you fabricated every damn thing that ever crossed your stage.”*

*Beckett looked around and realized there was no way out. He wasn’t going to get to walk away from this one. He*

*would admit his guilt and, hopefully, be allowed to have his day in court.*

*“Fine. I did exactly what the networks and the public wanted. I gave them sensationalism at its finest. I made sure that every story was more ludicrous, more ridiculous than the last. And you people watched it!” he said, pointing to the cameras.*

*“You watched it, and the ratings soared, and the whole world tuned in to watch Tyler Beckett expose the evils of the world. You bought into it all. You’re just as guilty as I am. And the networks, they’re even more guilty. They paid off people, kept their mouths shut so that I could keep making the show, and their number one money maker would remain on the air.*

*“Then you all got panicked when things got a little rocky. Well, too fucking bad! Things get rocky now and then. You wanted to be there. You wanted to have your moment in the spotlight. Guess what? You got it.”*

*Nine stared at the man, seriously wishing he’d gone with the one-bullet approach. All this television bullshit was exhausting.*

*“The networks will have their day in court as well, trust me,” said Gaspar. “Tell me, Mr. Beckett, do you know what happens to a man like you in prison?”*

*Beckett swallowed, staring at the men, then looking into the audience.*

*“I’d think it would make for great television,” grinned Ghost. “The great Tyler Beckett reduced to someone’s bitch in cell block C.”*

*“You can’t do this,” he whispered. “Please. I have money.”*

*“No, you don’t.” Nine stared at the man, then nodded at Gaspar.*

*“Your funds were repurposed to a fund that will help the victims of your television show. They will be divided up equally and fairly amongst the families, giving them some semblance of satisfaction for what you’ve done to destroy their lives.”*

*“You can’t do this,” he repeated.*

*“Oh, we can. And we have,” said Ian. “In this studio today are members of the FCC, FBI, and Homeland. You see, Mr. Beckett, we know that you were partly responsible for the*

*lies, bullshit, and classified document leaks during President Bodwick's first run for office."*

*Now Beckett was really sweating. His entire face was turning red, the hairpiece already listing sideways.*

*"I televised what was provided to me!"*

*"You intentionally tried to sabotage a man's career and, in the process, nearly killed him and his daughter. That man is now the president, someone you could definitely use on your side, but I doubt very much if he'll comply."*

*"None of this will stick," he grinned. "None of it. I know how this works. My lawyers will offer a settlement, and they'll take it. All of them will. You have nothing on me."*

*"Actually, we do." Beckett turned to see his ex-bodyguards, his ex-audio/visual tech, and multiple other ex-employees walking toward him. The tech placed several slip drives on the table, staring at Beckett.*

*"Traitors! I gave you good jobs! I paid you better than anyone else out there!"*

*When the agents stepped forward, Beckett tried to run, but there was nowhere to go.*

*At every turn, someone stood in his path. Handcuffed, he was taken away. The members of the audience all seemed to let out a sigh of relief, and the four men on the stage nodded toward them.*

*“It’s over. He’ll be tried, convicted, and placed in prison.” An elderly woman in the front row nodded, taking a step forward.*

*“Thank you for what you did,” she said. “It’s appreciated more than you know. But it won’t bring my Harry back to me.” She turned and left the room, and Nine felt the pit in his stomach growing by the minute.*

*“Nine, she’s still grieving,” said Gaspar. “Her husband was one of the last casualties of Beckett’s show. He died of a cardiac arrest.” Nine nodded, frowning.*

*“I still say we should’ve used a bullet.”*

*Now, it was time to back away. Time to do something different without being noticed. At least for a while.*



The men around the table smiled at one another, slapping backs and shaking hands. This was their next adventure. After their encounter with Beckett and being

forced to expose themselves to the world, they were relegated to trash duty, babysitting, and nothing else. Until this adventure was laid before them.

The Gray Wolf Security sign was hanging out front, right next to Steel Patriots Motorcycles and Crescent Tattoo.

Joe 'Nine' Dougall, Gaspar Robicheaux, Ian Shepherd, and Eric 'Ghost' Stanton smiled at one another. As the most senior of the men, they knew that this chance at another life of serving was one they never thought they'd have.

Nine, Ian, and Ghost were all former Navy SEALs. Gaspar, along with his brothers, Pierre – known as Miller –, Antoine, Luc, Gabriel, Jean, Baptiste, and Raphael were all former Army Rangers. The youngest brother had served with the CIA but was still living on the main property.

Along with them were other former members of REAPER, REAPER-Patriots, and Steel Patriots. After successful careers in the military, all of the men had started private security companies.

Joe Dougall, known as Nine, started REAPER with his friends and teammates, Pierre 'Miller' Robicheaux, Dan 'Wilson' Anderson, Billy Joe 'Tailor' Bongard, Joseph 'Trak' Redhawk, William 'Bull' Stone, Will 'Code' Erickson, and

Sylvester 'Sly' DiMarco. When their business grew so quickly, they were turning away assignments. They joined forces with the Robicheaux brothers. A team of their own.

With nine brothers who had served, eight as Army Rangers, it seemed a logical thing to do. When their parents, Matthew and Irene, offered a safe haven for them and their families, it was a lock. With Miller already on the team, Gaspar, Antoine, Luc, Jean, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, and Alec joined as well.

Eric 'Ghost' Stanton had served as a SEAL and then was asked to run a team of the finest Special Forces men in the country. Recruiting his teammates, Jack 'Doc' Harris, Wade 'Whiskey' English, Quincy 'Zulu' Slater, Gunner Michaels, Tyler 'Tango' Green, Diego 'Razor' Salcedo, Alex 'Ace' Mills, Ryan 'Hawk' O'Neal, Tyran 'Eagle' O'Neal, and Benjamin 'Blade' LeBlanc.

When his team was forced to resign, he started Steel Patriots. Much like REAPER, their business grew so quickly, they couldn't keep up. Joining forces seemed the smartest thing to do.

For Ian Shephard and his SEAL team, they'd served their country honorably and faithfully. However, their country



hadn't done the same for them. Forced to make a decision they didn't want to, the men resigned and joined REAPER-Patriots.

With hundreds of missions all over the world against some of the worst criminals and terrorists known to man, their success was because of their ability to remain hidden and somewhat anonymous. But when that cover was stripped from them, they had no choice but to go into hiding.

Except, hiding was not all it was cracked up to be. It sucked. Losing themselves, losing their respect for themselves, was killing them slowly. They might be fathers and grandfathers, but they damn sure weren't dead.

Recognizing their struggles, it was their beautiful wives that gave them the gift of Gray Wolf. Now, in their own offices, the men sat around the hand-carved conference table. The legs had intricate wolf heads at the top and huge paws at the bottom.

There were a few other senior members of the team: Teddy, Hannu, Otto, Kegger, Pork, George, and the man they owed almost everything to, Matthew. Each of the men had served in their own capacity.

Matthew was the father of the nine Robicheaux brothers and six daughters. His sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and now, new generations all served their country in some way. Matthew was not a stranger to service. Knowing that these men, these unbelievable men who served at the highest levels for their country, needed a place to escape, he created their Xanadu.

With thousands of acres of land yielding millions in oil, gas, and other natural resources, Matthew Robicheaux secured the future for all of his children. Blood and non-blood.

“Are we ready to take our first meeting?” asked Gaspar.

“Brother, I’m fucking ready. I hope we get to cut our teeth on stolen Mardi Gras decorations or vandalized mailboxes. As much as I’m ready to do something, I think we need to be realistic about taking on more than we can handle. The boys already have their hands full, so we need to be able to manage these cases by ourselves.”

“Let him in,” nodded Nine.

A middle-aged man walked in the door, taking off a worn wool stocking cap. He was ringing it in his hands,

looking at the faces of the men in front of him.

“H-hello,” he said quietly.

“Good morning,” smiled Gaspar. “Welcome to Gray Wolf Security. I’m...”

“I know who you are,” he smiled. “You don’t remember me, Mr. Gaspar, but I went to school with Luke. Y’all helped my mama keep her house. That was a whole lotta years ago. I’m Albert. Albert Doussaint.”

“Albert,” whispered Miller. “Holy shit. Look at you.”

“I know,” he laughed. “Life takes a toll.”

“How are you? Are you married? Kids?” asked Baptiste, smiling at the man.

“No, sir. I’m gay. Luke always knew that and never treated me any different. That’s how I knew he was a good man. Protected me from some of the other boys at school. He doin’ well?”

“He’s great, Albert,” smiled Gaspar. “Married, children and grandchildren.”

“Wow, that makes me feel old,” he laughed nervously. They all smiled at him, waiting for the explanation of what brought him here.

“Albert?” prodded Baptiste.

“Sorry, I was just rememberin’ fondly. I work at Galatoire’s downtown. Have for years now. They were good to me when Mama got sick. Allowed me to change up my hours and such. Anyway, we get panhandlers outside the restaurant now and then. Most don’t mean no harm. Just want leftovers or a few extra bucks.

“About six months ago, I started to notice three young girls in front of the restaurant. One of ‘em, I swear couldna’ been more than twelve or thirteen, if that. Me or Barnard, the maître ‘d, would try to give the girls plates of food at the end of the night. I asked if they needed help. Tried to get ‘em to let me call y’all, but they refused.

“A few weeks ago, I started hearin’ from some of the other workers that kids were goin’ missin’ around the Quarter. It scared me, so I offered for the girls to sleep on my sofa. I know they probably thought I was just a creepy old man, but I was scared for ‘em. When they refused, I didn’t press, but I did go against their wishes and spoke to one of the regular officers that patrols the Quarter.”

“What did he say?” frowned Miller.

“Said he’d try to find the girls and get ‘em help. I don’t think he tried too hard. They were outside the restaurant every night. Anyway,” he said, shaking his head, “a few nights ago, when it was raining like God was pissed off, one of ‘em was outside, soakin’ wet. I tried to get her to come home with me, but she wouldn’t. I gave her some food and five dollars inside the box.

“That poor kid was soaked to the skin, and it was breakin’ my heart, but I didn’t wanna force her to come with me. So, I was off the next day but then back at work. I’ve been seein’ them girls, one or all three, for at least five months straight every night. Suddenly, it was just one, then it was none.”

“You haven’t seen any of them in the last few weeks?” asked Ghost.

“No, sir. Not one. I asked around, asked some of the other servers. They all said they ain’t seen ‘em. I wanted to believe that they’d found another corner, another restaurant. But there’s this pit in my stomach. You know the one.”

“We know the one,” nodded Antoine.

“I was off yesterday and walked around to some of the shelters to see if they’d seen ‘em. St. Louis remembered

seein' Erica. She was the one I saw the most. Said she'd come in lyin' about her age, but they didn't want to refuse her. She never caused trouble. Would use the bathroom to wash up, sleep on the pews, get some hot soup or somethin', and then leave."

"What about the other two?" asked Raphael.

"Marsha and Lashon. Marsha was the oldest, maybe even eighteen, I'm not sure. Lashon, y'all, she's just a baby. I got four sisters of my own. All with their own families and doin' fine now. But if one of my nieces or nephews was on the street, I'd be watchin' for 'em. I can't help but wonder where these kids' families are. I'm sick worryin' about 'em."

"We can check into this for you, Albert. I think it's admirable that you've spent so much time trying to find them. Runaways are tricky. You never know what made them run in the first place, and most want to be sure they never go back to it," said Ian. He nodded.

"I got a knot in my stomach, y'all. I just know somethin' ain't right. They're disappearin', and all I can think about is that the old tale is comin' true."

"The old tale?" frowned Luc.

“Yeah. You never heard it as kids?”

“I don’t think so,” said Gaspar.

“It was a tale the old folks told us to scare us and make us stay put, not think about runnin’ away. Lemme see if I can get this right. It wasn’t a rhyme but more of a story. Somethin’ like this. No place like home. No place like home. It must be true ‘cause Dorothy said it was so. Food and shelter and love aplenty. Then you cross the street, and you’re in a mystery. Your name don’t matter, your mama or daddy. You’re no one now. You’re one of the invisible. You’re invisible. Invisible.”

“Invisible,” repeated Raphael, staring at his older brothers.

“I think that’s what they are now. Invisible. Can y’all help?” he asked. “I don’t have much. Me and the boys at the restaurant pooled together our tips from Saturday night. We got about thirteen hundred dollars.”

“That’s exactly what it would cost,” said Nine. “Why don’t you go with Code and Bull? Give them all the information you have, and we’ll get started right away.”

“I don’t know how to thank y’all. I can’t sleep for worryin’ about these babies.” He left the room, following Bull into another, smaller conference room.

“You believe he doesn’t have anything to do with it?” asked Ian.

“He was a good kid. Hardworking, took care of his mother and siblings. He’s been at Galatoire’s for as long as I can remember. I didn’t recognize him because he looks so much older than Luke. But, no. I don’t think he has anything to do with this.” Vince looked up from his laptop, shaking his head.

“Then we have a problem. Because NOPD reports more than seventy missing runaways in the last twelve weeks.”



## CHAPTER THREE

Seventy runaways in three months' time. That was something to become suspicious of, even if they weren't working this case. Jean and Bull sat across from one of the NOPD detectives, Corey Pitre, as he stacked file after file on his desk.

“Don't y'all use computers?” frowned Bull.

“We do, but we keep paper files as well. This ain't all of 'em. But it's the ones in the last few months,” he said, scratching his balding head. “I've been a cop in N'awlins for eighteen years, y'all. I ain't never seen anything like this. Runaways tend to make their way here thinkin' it's the fun city, party city. I s'pose it is. But they get here and find prostitution and drugs and nowhere for them to go.”

“We're here because of three missing girls that had one of the waiters at Galatoire's worried. He said they used to sit outside asking for handouts or food. He said he saw them every night for probably six months, then suddenly it was just one, and now that one is gone.”

“They coulda’ went on home,” he said with a disbelieving look.

“You know that’s probably not what happened,” said Bull. “Something happened to these girls. He said he reported to one of the patrol officers, but nothing was ever done.”

“Look, we got a lot on our plates this time of year. Mardi Gras is around the corner, and even if it wasn’t, this place is crazy. I’m not makin’ excuses for him...”

“Sounds like you are,” mumbled Bull.

“I’ll see if I can find the officer,” he said with a heavy breath. “You got names for these girls?”

“Marsha, Lashon, and Erica,” said Jean. “He thought they were between twelve and maybe eighteen.”

“Damn.”

He pushed back from his desk and walked toward another officer. Speaking in a low voice, the officer handed him a folder, and he moved back to Jean and Bull. Opening the folder, he showed a photo of a little girl laid out on the coroner’s table.

“Who is that?” asked Jean.

“She had her name written in permanent ink on her butt cheek. Lashon.”

“Fuck,” muttered Jean. “How? How did she die?”

“Coroner is still workin’ on it. She was found in a motel near the airport. No signs of rape.”

“None?” frowned Bull.

“None. Don’t know anything else about the little girl. Wasn’t even reported missin’. Not like there are a hundred little girls named Lashon on the missin’ list. I don’t get it, y’all. Why haven’t her mama or daddy reported her gone? She can’t be but twelve, maybe thirteen.”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” said Jean. “No other girls found in the motel?”

“No. We searched the rooms, asked the desk clerk about it, everything. That room was supposed to be empty.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” growled Bull.

“I know, man. I get it. We see this shit every day. Someone got that little girl into that room, got her naked, and right now, I don’t know anything else.”

“Well, we’re gonna find out who did this. I’ll keep you informed, but we expect you to do the same.”

“I can use all the help you’ll give,” said Pitre.

“No other bodies?” asked Jean. He stared at the big man, shaking his head. “None? None that maybe aren’t identifiable?”

“None. We got a couple of old drunks, a lady from Tennessee that fell down the levee and cracked her head, but no other kids.”

“Okay, thanks. Just let us know what the coroner says, will ‘ya?”

“Sure thing.” Jean and Bull stood to leave, then turned back to the detective.

“One more question. Anything else happening in the city that’s suspicious? New crime rings? Drugs? Trafficking?”

“Nothin’ more than the usual. I hate to say that, but it’s the truth.”

“What about new businesses? Maybe new factories or industries coming into the city?” asked Jean.

“I don’t think there’s been anythin’ unusual. Most of what comes here is tourism-related or shipping of some kind. Sometimes music related, but that’s usually festivals that come

in and head right back out. Ain't really time for that right now. Mardi Gras. Now, that's another story."

"Mardi Gras," murmured Bull. "Shit. This could have something to do with Mardi Gras. Millions of people coming down here over a two-week period, all culminating in the biggest drunk party in the world."

"One more question, Corey. You ever hear of a tale or story called the Invisibles?"

"Hell, yeah," he smirked. "My folks used to tell it to us when we was actin' up. Scared the shit out of me. My older brother was a pain in the ass. He never listened to 'em. Ended up runnin' away when he was seventeen."

"He doing okay now?" asked Jean.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Never saw him again." Pitre turned, leaving the two men standing there.

"Let's head to the coroner's," said Bull. "I want some questions answered."



"We're here to see the coroner," said Bull to the desk clerk.

“He’s in the middle of an autopsy right now. He won’t be available for a few hours,” he said, looking up at the big men.

“We’ll just join him,” said Jean. He grabbed a paper jacket, wrapping it around his upper body. He immediately tore at the sleeves, and Bull raised his brows at him. Grabbing a mask, he followed the big man into the room.

“Sorry, doctor. I told them they needed to wait.” The old man looked up and shook his head.

“It’s alright, Petey. These boys don’t have any manners, in spite of what I know Miss Irene taught you.”

“Sorry, Higgy,” smirked Jean. “We needed to talk to you.”

“It must be important if you’re willing to stand over me while I’m opening up a man’s bowels.”

“Uh, could you maybe hold off on that for a minute?” grimaced Bull.

“He’s not goin’ anywhere,” said Higgy. “What do you have for me?”

“The little girl brought in a few days ago with her name inked on her butt cheek. Lashon. Can you tell us

anything about how she died?”

Higgy set down the scalpel, covering the dead man with a sheet. Removing his gloves, he tossed them in the bin and nodded for the men to follow him.

“I’m takin’ a break, Petey. Hold my calls.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The girl was brought in a week ago, and they asked me to rush it. I didn’t wanna rush a child. Breaks my heart.”

“The detective said she wasn’t raped,” said Bull.

“Nope. From what I can tell, she wasn’t touched at all. I mean, she had a bruise or two, but it looked like maybe she ran into something.”

“How long was she dead when y’all found her?” asked Jean.

“Two days. Maybe three.” They stepped into the ice-cold room with hundreds of steel doors. He walked down the long row of names and nameless, finally coming to the one he wanted.

“We still don’t have a last name. Just the first name, and we’re not even sure that’s right.”

“It’s right,” said Bull. “Someone came to us to help find this little girl. She had two friends as well. Any other young girls here?”

“None that don’t have full names and aren’t claimed.” He opened the steel door and pulled out the drawer. The two men could already see the small frame beneath the sheet. When the doctor pulled back the sheet from her face, their hearts wept for her lost life.

“She’s just a fucking baby,” growled Bull.

“Yeah, and they all look like babies to me anymore. She had Turner syndrome. It affects the pituitary gland, which is why she’s so small. She’s a bit malnourished, has been for probably her whole life. Her teeth are already rotting out of her little head.”

“Wait. Are you saying she was malnourished before she became a runaway?” asked Bull.

“Looks that way. I have no idea when she hit the streets, but unless it was at the age of three, this little girl hasn’t had enough her entire life. Up until now. Her last meal was a good one. Cheeseburger, fries, apple pie, milkshake. Someone gave her some food, and she enjoyed it.”



“Okay, so if she wasn’t raped, wasn’t beaten, and had food, what killed her?”

“Allergies.”

“What the fuck? Are you shitting me?” asked Jean.

“Nope. She was allergic to cinnamon. Maybe didn’t even know it. The apple pie had a lot of cinnamon in it. I’m going to guess that whoever had her didn’t know about the allergy, either. She probably started getting short of breath, and they didn’t know what to do.”

“Fuck,” muttered Bull.

“So, we’re back at square one.”

“Not necessarily,” said Higgy. “Every burger place in the city uses certain types of seasoning in their meat. Most of it’s just salt and pepper, maybe some Cajun seasoning. But one place, only one, uses cardamom. That little girl ate a burger that had cardamom in it – Nell’s on Canal.”

“Cardamom.” Bull shrugged, looking at Jean. “I’ll take any fucking clue I can get.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Trak and Code had been wandering the streets around Bourbon for hours. Just when they'd find a few teenagers to speak with, they'd run in the opposite direction. It seemed they weren't as innocent-looking as they thought.

"I think we need some help," said Code.

"No."

"Trak, we're scaring these kids. We can't keep walking up to them and saying 'hi, don't be afraid, we just have a few questions.' That's how every horror movie starts. We're big, scary men to these kids. We're going to need some help, or at the very least, different tactics." Trak stared at Code. He'd been the boy wonder when the team first started. Young, blonde, blue-eyed, and energetic. Now, he still looked young, at least to Trak. He was still energetic, still the boy wonder. But maybe not such a boy any longer.

"What do you suggest?" asked Trak.

"We give them what they want." Trak watched as Code walked toward the window of the take-out restaurant. A

few minutes later, he walked back with a bag full of roast beef po'boys and bags of potato chips.

“That’s your idea?”

“Just watch. They’re hungry, Trak. You and I both know that kids swarmed to us in a lot of war zones because we had food, and they were hungry. Watch and learn,” said Code. He walked toward three boys sitting on the steps around Jackson Square. He stood in front of them, allowing the wind to carry the smell of the sandwiches toward them.

“Hey, mister. You gonna eat all them po’boys?” asked one of the boys.

“Nope,” said Code, giving a playful smirk to the kid. “I’m gonna sell them.”

“How much?” asked another boy.

“Free. With information.” The boys looked at one another, then back at Code.

“What kinda information?”

“Three girls that are missing.”

“Two,” said Trak, staring down at the boys. “One was found dead a few days ago. A girl named Lashon.” Code held

his breath, wondering if Trak was like this with his children and grandchildren. Always direct. Always to the point.

“Lashon?” frowned one of the boys. “Naw, that ain’t right. She was just a baby, and she was a little slow. She didn’t know much. Besides, Erica and Marsha was takin’ care of her.”

“So, you know the girls?” asked Code.

“Do I get a sandwich?” asked the boy.

“You can have the whole bag if you tell me where the other girls are,” said Trak.

“You’re kinda old for them, ain’t you?” sneered the third boy.

“Very old,” said Trak. “We’re trying to help them. We don’t want to hurt them, but we might hurt whoever took them. They disappeared, and someone is worried about them. That’s all. One is now dead, and we’d like to find the others.”

“Lotsa kids disappear around here. Nobody cares about us, mister. Sick people out there. You know what I mean, mister?”

“Unfortunately, I do. When was the last time you saw them?” asked Trak.

“Saw Erica about two weeks ago. She was real sick. Got a bad cold from livin’ on the streets and bein’ in the rain. She was coughin’ somethin’ fierce. It was before then that I saw Lashon and Marsha. We usually see each other during the day and then again at night in the shelters. ‘Cause we’re kids, they don’t keep us separate.”

Code handed the boys the po’boys, and they dug into them, devouring them.

“Whoa, whoa, there’s plenty of them in there,” said Code. “Do you guys need help? A place to stay? No cops. Just safety.”

“I ain’t goin’ with some old dude,” said a boy.

“I get it,” nodded Trak. “And I’m not that old. Well, maybe to you. Just know that we’re offering help if you want it. It’s dangerous out here, and it’s going to get more dangerous with all the crowds coming in. If you need help, find the priest at St. Louis Cathedral and tell him to call Gray Wolf.”

“Gray Wolf? Is that your name? You ain’t got no gray hair.” Trak smirked at the young boy, nodding.

“I have some. Just call if you need us.”

The three boys stood with their bag of food and started to walk away, then stopped, whispering to one another, and turned back to them. One of them walked toward the two men.

“There’s this guy that drives around at night in an old car. He’s always lookin’ for kids who aren’t protected. Says he’ll take care of them, but then we never see them again.”

“Where does he take them?” asked Trak.

“I’m not sure. I’m not stupid enough to get in the car with him. Lashon, she was real small. Couldn’t have fought ‘em off. Marsha is bigger. Tall and muscular, you know, like a gymnast or something. Erica was small, really skinny. When she was covered up, tucked her hair in, she could look like a boy.”

“Do you know what this man wanted with them?” asked Code.

“What all old men want with young girls, I guess.”

“He wanted to have sex with them?” frowned Code.

“That and pictures, I suppose. Nobody cares about us, mister. Didn’t you know? We’re invisible.” The three boys wandered off with the bag of sandwiches. Trak couldn’t help

but worry about them as they ran down the street. It looked as if it were going to rain again, and they had no protection, barely a coat to keep them warm.

“There’s that word again. Invisible.”

“I know,” said Code. “Invisible. What the hell does that mean? Is someone screwing with the homeless?”

“Homeless kids. We’re not seeing any adults. It’s all just kids,” said Trak. He stared at the Square, watching, looking. Was there someone who didn’t belong? Someone who shouldn’t be there? There were tourists and musicians, palm readers, and spiritual healers. There was even a woman claiming to be a voodoo priestess.

Hundreds of people in New Orleans to eat, drink, and be merry. They wanted to see naked breasts and toss beads to strangers. They didn’t care about what was happening around them. They didn’t care at all.

No one cared about the Invisible.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Noah, brother, I know that you’re still a part of the VG group, but we could use your help with this,” said Nine.

“Anything I can do, I will,” said the stoic Viking, staring down at the face of the little girl on the steel slab. “She’s so very young.” Nine nodded, knowing how difficult this would be for the big man. Children always were the worst.

“This little girl was found dead from an apparent allergic reaction. The only problem is, she was naked with her name in permanent ink on her buttocks.” Nine swallowed the bile rising in his throat. The last hours of this child’s life must have been horrible. “I’m just wondering if she has a message or if she’s already passed on.”

Noah nodded at his friend. He pulled the rolling stool closer to the table, his big hand touching the head of the child. He said nothing, just sat there quietly as the others watched.

“You are at peace now, child. There is nothing to fear.”

“Where am I?” asked the little girl hovering above the slab.



“You are in a place where they bring those who are no longer alive. I’m sorry.” She looked around the room, the only man seemingly able to see her, sitting before her.

“Can they see me? Can they hear me?”

“If you like, they can,” he said, nodding. “They are good men, and we are trying to find out what happened to you. It is alright. Do not be shy.” The vision of the little girl suddenly appeared before the other men. They all smiled at her, nodding.

“Hello, little one,” said Trak.

“Hello. Why do you care what happened to me? No one has ever cared what happened to me before. Why would you care?”

“Because someone was worried about you,” said Gaspar.

“My mama?” The men looked at one another, almost wanting to lie, but they just couldn’t. Not now. Not to this child.

“No, little one. Your mother didn’t ask us to find you. Where is she?”

“I guess at home,” said the little girl, shrugging her shoulders. “We live in Algiers. Mama has a bunch of kids, and she can’t feed them. When we turn thirteen, we all have to leave the house and try to fend for ourselves. It ain’t easy. We ain’t old enough for jobs.”

“I’m awful sorry to hear that,” said Nine. “Will you tell us your last name? Can you tell us who took you?”

“My last name is, I guess was, Prescott. The man in the car took me,” she said, looking at them. “I sure wish you’d been there. You’re big enough to make ‘em not take me. It wasn’t awful. I thought they was gonna touch me like the drunk men touch the ladies on Bourbon Street, but they didn’t.”

“What did they do?” asked Noah.

“They asked me to get naked, and I was scared that they’d hurt me if I didn’t. So, I did.” Noah nodded.

“Go on.”

“Then they asked me to jump on the bed. It was kinda fun. I wasn’t able to jump on the beds at home. They put my name on my butt and told me to turn around so they could take a picture. I fell asleep after that, but I knew they was takin’

pictures of me. It didn't bother me none. They kept promisin' me we'd get to play games, and I'm real good at games.

“When I woke up, it was dark again. I was real hungry, and they said they'd get me whatever I wanted. I forgot to tell 'em I was allergic to cimanon – cinammen – cinnamon,” she stammered. Noah's heart was breaking for the child. She was underdeveloped for her age, both mentally and physically.

“Do you remember anything after the cinnamon made you stop breathing?” asked Noah.

“The men got real nervous. They took all my clothes, laid me on the bed, and covered me up, and then they left. I was lonely then.”

“I am sorry you were lonely,” said Noah. “I promise that you won't be lonely any longer. Do you know what happened to your friends? Marsha and Erica.”

“Oh,” she said as if suddenly remembering that she had friends. “They were good friends. They watched out for me. I don't know about Marsha, but I saw Erica. She was in the car with the men. She was real sick, mister. Coughin' and breathin' hard. I don't remember much after that.”

“Do you know the names of the men that took you?”  
asked Noah.

“They had silly nicknames, but I don’t remember. I’m sorry. I’m not very good at rememberin’ things. I think the men figured that out, and that’s why they wanted me to play the games. Are you mad at me?” she asked, staring up at Noah.

“No, my sweet girl. I am not mad. You can go now if you like. You can move on. It’s time.”

“Will I be okay?” she asked tentatively.

“You will be perfect, sweet girl. You are going to be very happy where you are going. Protected. Loved. You will have all that you need.”

“Thank you, mister. I hope you find Erica and Marsha before it’s too late.” Her image began to fade, and Noah reached out again.

“Wait! Too late for what?”

“Before they become invisible.” Then, she was gone.

“Shit. If I hear that fucking word one more time, I swear I’m gonna fucking punch someone,” said Nine.

“Do we think they were taking pictures to sell? Maybe film her jumping up and down and put it on a website?” asked Ghost.

“It’s possible. They didn’t touch her, which seems strange for this kind of business. But what the fuck does ‘invisible’ mean? What the hell is that?” asked Ian.

“Brother, I wish I knew,” said Nine. “We’ve got one dead girl and two missing. We have no idea how many others they’ve taken and murdered. We have no idea what all this invisible shit means. And we have no fucking idea where to go next.”

“We could start with the car. That seems to be a theme here, and as we all know, you follow a theme, and you’ll get to the plot eventually,” said Ghost.

“What do you mean?” asked Antoine.

“Well, the boys in the park with Trak and Code and that little ghost just said they were in an old car. We have no clue what that means, but maybe we can find those kids again and get a better description. Your boys know cars, Ghost. Maybe we start there.” Nine nodded.

“Let’s start with the car.”

## CHAPTER SIX

The younger boys from the park weren't a great deal of help with the car. One thought it was blue. The other thought it was green. One said it had a big, pointed vee at the front. The other said it was flat. They clearly were not boys who knew a great deal about cars.

"I have those reports from the DMV you wanted," said Code. "It's a lot. There are about one point five million cars registered in the state. Approximately four hundred thousand are in this area alone, but there are an estimated one hundred thousand not registered."

"Great," frowned Gaspar.

"Let's just assume that the car is more than ten years old," said Code. "That would narrow down the list. Then, if I assume that the boys were half right, and it was either blue or green, I can narrow it down again."

He tapped on the keys, enjoying the excitement of working with his old teammates. Although they'd been together for decades, working in their small group once again was exciting.

“Well, we’ve got about seven hundred cars that would meet that description,” he frowned.

“What if we narrowed it down to male owners, say under the age of forty?” asked Miller.

“That might make a difference. I’m not sure,” said Code. They let him get to work on the cars while they reviewed everything they had on the missing girls. Miller walked in, frowning at the men, including his two younger brothers, Rafe and Baptiste.

“Did you find her? Did you find the girl’s mother?” asked Rafe.

“I found her.”



Miller traveled across the bridge between New Orleans and Algiers, moving into an area that was high on crime and low on patience with snooping white men. He wasn’t worried. Being a Robicheaux, born and raised in New Orleans, just his name often made people feel more at ease.

Lashon Prescott was a baby. A baby who’d been set out into the world in spite of her mental and physical

challenges, not to mention her age. All Miller wanted was some answers.

When Katrina hit, Algiers was one of the areas that was most devastated. Many of the homes were still condemned, unable to afford to rebuild. Even if you could afford flood insurance, you were lucky if the company gave you coverage. It was one of the biggest scams in New Orleans. Ridiculously high premiums to have coverage from floods, then when the flood hits, your deductible is so high you can't afford to meet that.

It was a crime. Maybe a crime they should look into thought Miller.

Turning on Roosevelt, he passed the shotgun homes with their doors and windows wide open in spite of the chilly temperatures. It was still winter, but most of these homes probably didn't have central air conditioning or heating.

Many had wide front porches with the residents sitting on folding chairs or lawn chairs, watching the neighborhood. It might not be the Garden District, but it was theirs, and they were going to make sure people behaved themselves.

Finding the Prescott home, Miller parked out front and stared at the home.



“Holy shit,” he muttered. He wasn’t sure how anyone was living there, let alone more than a dozen children. A large African American woman was sitting in a chair, staring at his truck.

“You park that there long, it ain’t gonna be there. It’s a nice truck. Boys around here like nice trucks.”

“I’m not too worried,” said Miller. He engaged the locks, then initiated the shock cover. Anyone touching the truck would get a nice little jolt. It wouldn’t kill them, but they’d think twice about touching his truck.

“Are you Ms. Prescott?” he asked.

“If you’re a bill collector, I ain’t. Already don’t have heat or water. Not sure what else you can turn off,” she said, frowning in his direction. This was when he really wished Baptiste or Rafe was with him. His younger brothers had much better empathy than he did.

“I’m not a bill collector, but maybe I can get your water and heat turned back on for you. If. If you answer some questions about your daughter.”

“Which one? Was it Courtney? Did she give you a blow job or somethin’?” Miller wanted to curse at the woman

but just didn't have the energy.

"No. I don't know your daughter Courtney. I'm talking about Lashon," he said through a clenched jaw.

"Lashon," she said thoughtfully. "Oh, yeah. She's been gone from the house a while now. Got a lotta kids, mister. Can't afford to feed 'em all. The state only gives me so much money, and it don't spread like it used to."

"Well, just a thought, but you could consider not having children any longer. There are several clinics in the city that can handle that for you with a small procedure." He knew he was overstepping, but this was really pissing him off.

"I ain't gettin' no procedure done. Whachoo want with Lashon?"

"I don't want anything. I'm here to let you know that she died." He waited for the wailing and crying, the dramatic theatrics that he thought for sure would come. But there was nothing.

"Died? How'd she die? Girl didn't have any common sense at all."

"The *girl* was a child. A thirteen-year-old child who was taken by two men. They fed her but didn't know she was

allergic to cinnamon when they gave her a piece of apple pie.”

“Pie always was her weakness,” chuckled the woman.

“Do you have no feelings at all?” growled Miller, taking a step toward the woman. She reached beside her, grabbing a shotgun.

“I’m no fool, white boy. What do you really want?”

“I wanted to tell a mother that her child had died.”

“Got a lotta kids who died. Got ones that lived, too.”

She looked behind him with a smirk, shaking her head. Three teenage boys were eyeing his shiny truck. When one reached for the doorhandle, he yelped like a little girl, falling backwards. Miller only grinned, not even bothering to turn around. The woman stared at him, wondering if he was really human.

“She’s in the morgue if you want to bury her,” said Miller.

“Can’t afford to bury her. The city’ll do it.” Miller could only shake his head. He thanked God for being born to Irene and Matthew. This wasn’t about wealth or privilege. This was about compassion and common sense.

“Do me a favor, Ms. Prescott. The next time you decide it’s time to send your children out into the world at the tender age of thirteen, just call me. I’ll find a decent home for them to live in. One where their mother or father or both love them and feed them. Get them to school every day. You shouldn’t continue to have children, and if you do, I’ll make sure the state is aware of it and takes every penny they’re giving you.”

That got her attention. She stood with her shotgun in her hand, gripping the barrel.

“You threatenin’ me?”

“You’re damn right I am. People like you shouldn’t be allowed to have children, Ms. Prescott. Not the way you treat them.”

“Like me? You mean black and poor?”

“No. Inhumane. You being black and poor has nothing to do with it. I can knock on any door in this area and find families that are black and poor, but they’re trying. They’re taking care of their children, feeding them, getting them to school, and putting clothes on their backs. It might be second-hand clothes, but it’s clothes all the same. Nothing wrong with it. I wore my brother’s hand-me-downs for years.

“You’re using children as an excuse to collect checks. Do you even know how many you’ve given birth to?” She stared at him, wondering if she could remember. The truth was, she enjoyed sleeping with men, and she didn’t like birth control. Simple as that.

Miller shook his head in frustration, then noticed that other mothers and fathers, grandparents were watching and listening from their front porch. From the looks on their faces, they didn’t approve of the woman either.

“I’m going to do something for you. Something I probably shouldn’t, but I feel for your children. Your water and heat will be turned back on by the end of the day. I’m going to put enough in the account to draw on so that it won’t be turned off for two months. Then I’m coming back here. If I find out that you’ve sent another child on their way or that you’ve had another child, I will rain fucking terror down on you and take every one of these kids. You understand me?”

She stared at him, then looked at her neighbors.

“Y’all bein’ nosy? Ain’t none of your business,” she yelled. They didn’t move, just stared at her. She looked at the big man, his expectant expression waiting for a response. “I understand you.”

“Good. One more thing. Clean the fucking shotgun. If you tried to fire that thing in the condition it’s in, you’ll blow your hand off.”



“Did you find her? Did you find the girl’s mother?” asked Rafe.

“I found her,” he growled, taking a seat. “I’m sending Mama and Pops the biggest bouquet of flowers and fruit I can find. That ain’t even enough.”

“That bad?” asked Gaspar.

“She doesn’t give a damn about those kids. Her neighbors are every bit as poor as she is, but their kids were clothed properly or in school. The yards were clean, the house as well-maintained as you’d expect. To her, it’s all a money game. She likes having sex, getting pregnant, and getting paid for it. I made some vague threats to her if it continues.”

“Vague?” smirked Baptiste.

“Alright, not so vague. I’ll check in on her in a few weeks,” he said. Turning, he looked at Code, then at Doug seated beside him. “By the way. The new theft devices on the trucks work. Kid got sizzled trying to open the door.”

“I love it when the girls get creative,” smiled Doug.

“The girls?” frowned Gaspar. “The girls invented that?”

“Yep. Sophia Ann. I’m not sure what goes through her head sometimes, but it’s scary.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The list of older model blue or green cars turned out to be longer than they expected. It would take them weeks, if not months, to search for all of them. It just wasn't a viable option. One of their challenges was not being close to the city.

“I think we should consider renting an apartment and taking shifts,” said Angel. “It's not ideal, but at least a few of us could always be close. If we see kids huddled together, running around, just doing kid shit, we can either talk to them or follow them.”

“Yeah, because following a bunch of kids around when you look like us doesn't raise any suspicions,” said Luc.

“You got a better idea?” frowned Angel.

“No. Which is what pisses me off. I think you're right,” he smirked. “Angel and I can go see what's available. We don't need anything fancy, just a place to rest and put our feet up. We can stock the fridge for the next team and leave the keys.”

“Alright,” nodded Nine. “Find something reasonable. We're not making a permanent residence down there.”



“Hey, I just got off the phone with the coroner’s office. Higgy said that Albert came by and offered to pay for that little girl’s burial. I guess a bunch of the staff at their restaurant and surrounding restaurants pooled some money together. Nothing fancy, but she’ll be in a box with a marked grave,” said Code.

“When is it?” asked Ghost.

“This afternoon. 1600.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “You two find an apartment. Meet us at the cemetery, and then we’ll try to figure out what’s happening to these kids.”

They didn’t change into suits but did wear dark jeans or cargo pants, dark shirts, and jackets. It was the best anyone was going to get from them today. Standing graveside, they saw Albert standing with several other servers and cooks. The little girl was lowered into the earth, not even knowing what her life could have been like.

When the service was done, Albert walked toward the men.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, nodding at them. “I didn’t know her well, but she was just a lost baby.”

“I know, Albert,” said Gaspar. “Pierre spoke to her mama. That didn’t get us anywhere. Any word from the other girls?”

“Nothing. I watch for ‘em every night. I just don’t understand any of this.”

“Neither do we,” said Ian. “That’s why we do this. We’ll find them, I promise.” Albert nodded, turning to wave as someone told him they’d see him at the restaurant.

“We’re doin’ a little light lunch at the restaurant. Everyone is upset about this. Y’all are welcome to come. You could speak to some of the others while you’re there.”

“We appreciate that,” said Ghost. “We’ll be along shortly.”

“All these people caring for those kids, but not one of them reached out to the cops when they knew they were underaged or in trouble. Why?” Nine turned to look at the other men, perplexed by his own question.

“It’s not like when we were kids,” said Angel. “You’d go out and play, and every neighbor watched out for you. They yelled at you, told you to behave, fed you, then made sure you went home when the street lights came on. People

don't do that anymore. Everyone thinks the right thing to do is mind your own business. Man, Mama and Pops had some friends that never minded their own business, and I'm damn happy for that now."

"We do," said Ian. "We care. We watch. We listen."

"We do because we live so close. We work so close. It makes sense for us. It doesn't make sense for everyone. People tend to stay out of one another's business, thinking they're invading their space. We've become so paranoid of what other people might think about our behavior, our parenting styles, we avoid them. Hell, even when Mary was pregnant with triplets, women would stop and rub her stomach then give her all kinds of parenting advice.

"She came home one day sobbing because a woman in the grocery store shamed her for not wanting to breastfeed the babies. She's got three in her belly and only two boobs. Even I can compute that math."

"I hate that she went through that," said Antoine.

"Come on," said Angel. "Luc and I have found a good place to rent."

Working their way out of Holt's graveyard, classified as a potter's field, they made their way toward the Quarter. Parking near the Square, they followed Angel and Luc to a narrow door along Henriette Delisle, near Esplanade. It was closer to Tremé than the Quarter, which was fine by them. They wouldn't hear all the foolishness at night, and they'd avoid the drunks and prostitutes.

"I can't fit through the door," frowned Tailor.

"Turn sideways, dumbass," smirked Luc. Tailor turned sideways, sucking in his breath to get through the narrow doorway. Up the flight of stairs, Angel opened the door to the apartment, and everyone crowded inside.

It was an open plan with two double beds separated by a nightstand. There was a long green sofa and armchair with a small television. On the wall was a small kitchenette, complete with a refrigerator, cooktop, sink, and dishwasher.

"No oven?" frowned Alec.

"You planning on cooking Thanksgiving dinner?" growled Gaspar.

"No," he smirked, "but it's nice to have options. And stop bein' so grumpy. No wonder your wife scolds you all the

time.”

“She doesn’t scold me!”

“Does too.”

“Children, could we settle this another time?” asked Ghost. “This will do. Space for two men to sleep, three if we have to. It’s clean and quiet but close to the action. Do we need to stock the fridge?”

“Already done,” said Angel. “Water, energy drinks, a few sodas. No alcohol. We’ve got some breakfast cereal, eggs, sausage, and bacon. Hey, where’s Trak?”

“He asked to help out with whatever is going on with Mike’s girl. Something about an old score,” said Ian.

“Oh, shit,” muttered Nine, Angel, and Miller.

“What?”

“Any time Trak has an old score to settle, it’s a big one. He doesn’t leave loose ends or old scores. If there’s one out there, it’s a big one,” said Angel.

“Well, he’s out there. I’ll let him handle his business. He damn sure doesn’t need us.” Ghost looked around the room one more time. “You guys did good. This is great. Who’s taking the first shift?”

“Angel and me,” said Luc.

“Sure, why not? Just send the pretty boys out to attract all the girls,” smirked Alec.

“Dude, we’re grandfathers! Not like we’re trying to attract any chicks. I’m happy with the one I have at home,” said Luc.

“You’re not a grandfather,” frowned Miller.

“Might as well be. All of you reproduced like rabbits, making little rabbits that reproduce more rabbits. I’m as much a father or grandfather as any of you.”

“True,” smirked Rafe.

“Alright, we’re gonna head back. We’ll have your replacements here by 1600 tomorrow. Be careful, and call if you need us,” said Nine. Angel looked at Luc, giving a nod and a smirk.

“Yes, Dad.” Nine flipped him the finger, turning to leave the apartment. They could hear him muttering as they left the room.

“Fuck all of you.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Angel and Luc walked the streets of New Orleans, ever watchful of their surroundings. They'd forgotten how loud and chaotic it could be at night. It wasn't just about it being close to Mardi Gras. New Orleans was this way all the time.

"You grew up here, right?" asked Angel.

"Yeah. More or less. I mean, we all left at eighteen for the Army. Most of the time, we stayed close to home, but we came down here now and then."

"Did you ever sneak into the strip clubs?" asked Angel.

"Once," frowned Luc. "Have to be honest. It made me sick to my stomach. I came with a bunch of other guys who were egging me on. I was seventeen, but we all looked older in high school. Back then, you could get into the clubs if you were eighteen. Nobody even checked my ID."

"Was it the smell that made you sick? I mean, I can smell the stale beer from the streets."

"That," smirked Luc. "But really, it was more that the girls were young. Some looked younger than me, and all I could think about were my sisters. I'd hate it if they had to

strip like that for a living. I know Miss Ruby tells us that her girls were treated well, and I believe her. None of them were forced to strip, and they were paid well. Hell, I've known women who stripped so they could pay their way through college. It's not unheard of, and I'm not judging."

"I get it, Luc," said Angel. "I've got four sisters, as you know. It would have killed me to see one of them dancing on the pole. I would have done just about anything to keep them from working there. But. Like you said, I also don't judge a woman who's trying to feed her kids or finish her college education."

"There are good ones and bad ones here. I walked into a bad one," said Luc. "My friends were all laughing and yelling at the girls to take it all off. I'd fooled around. A little. Nothing all the way. But this woman, about twenty-five or so, strips it all off, gets on all fours, and backs up to my face. I was humiliated."

"I hate to ask, but did you fire..."

"Nope. Don't go there," said Luc. "I was embarrassed because it wasn't appealing to me. I went home that night and cried myself to sleep. I thought I might be gay." Angel laughed, shaking his head.



“Brother, that doesn’t mean anything.”

“I know that now, Angel. You have to remember. Gaspar and Pierre were already gone to the Army. Antoine is my twin, of course, but he didn’t come that night. It was Jean that calmed me down. He was always the quiet nerd, years older than his age.

“I think what I realized in that moment was that I didn’t want just any woman in my face, so to speak. I want *the* woman in my face. I was lucky as shit to find Montana.”

“I know what you mean,” smiled Angel. They stepped around some horse shit in the street, the mounted police casually riding up ahead. I guess they figured one more pile of shit in the road didn’t matter much.

“Believe it or not, Luc, I had a hard time finding the right woman.”

“You? I mean, I know what you looked like before the scar, but even with the scar, most would consider you a good-looking man.”

“I appreciate that, but you should know there’s a problem with that. Plus, wearing the uniform. Especially a Special Forces uniform. Knowing I was a SEAL, women

were coming on to me all the time. Never asking about me or what I wanted out of life. They'd comment about my hair or good looks. All nice things for a while. But I wanted substance."

"Mary is definitely a woman of substance," smirked Luc.

"Don't I know it, brother. You know how I met her?" Luc shook his head. "Walked into a fucking children's clothing store to buy baby gifts for Trak's twins and Nine's little girl. I was lost as shit. There she was, standing behind the counter with all those perfect, lush curves and auburn waves. Fuck, man. That woman knocked me over."

"Just like that?" smirked Luc.

"Just like that. It took me a few days to convince her, but I knew she would always be my wife. When she announced she was pregnant with triplets, I fucking knelt down and begged her to be my wife." They both chuckled, just watching the drunks dance in the street. "Man, I just think we're both lucky. Seriously lucky."

"Let me ask you something. Did you come down here or see Mama before you met Mary?"

“Well, yeah. We had an op and passed through to see Gaspar.”

“Did she talk to you?”

“Of course,” he laughed. “She wanted to know if I needed her to introduce me to any nice girls in the area. She said it would be a shame if I didn’t spread my good looks to another generation.”

“That’s Mama,” laughed Luc. “I wish we knew what her magic was. She knew before I did that I was gonna fall in love with Montana. It was at Bull’s wedding. I just wish we knew.”

“Why?” asked Angel. “We don’t need to know what magic she possesses. Just that she possesses it.”

“She won’t be here forever, Angel. I know we all think she will be, but her and Pops are seriously gettin’ up there.”

“Well, that makes me want to drink,” frowned Angel.

“I’ll buy you a beer, baby,” said a young woman, running her hands up his arm.

“No thanks, I need to get back to my grandchildren tonight,” he frowned. Luc just chuckled. It was funny that Angel believed that would deter a woman.

“Honey, all that tells me is that you’re as good as you look.”

“Back off,” he said with assertiveness. She held up her hands, blowing him a kiss, and then walked away. “That’s what it used to be like. I hated it then. I hate it now.”

“That’s because we’re not wired that way,” said Luc. He nudged his arm, nodding toward a man and woman tonguing one another, practically having sex on the side of a building. “See that couple? That’s Fred Bombier and Holly Trumble. We went to school together. Both are in their sixties, at least. Both are married to other people. Have been for years. And for years, they come down here a few times a month, act like they were in high school again, screw around, and then go home and pretend all is well.”

“Everyone knows?”

“Even their spouses,” said Luc. “I’d have to kill someone. Not the life I want, which I guess is why I couldn’t handle the strip club.”

“Happily married. Both of us, and I think that makes us better at what we do,” said Angel, slapping his back.

“Come on, let’s make another round toward Jackson and the levee. Then we’ll try out those new beds.”

“Let’s do it, brother.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Mary and Montana sat on the front porch of the cabin Mary shared with Angel. Moving from Belle Fleur to Belle Île had been difficult originally. But it was for the safety of the older men who'd been on the original REAPER team.

REAPER had been in more hot zones, more wars, more conflicts, and stopped more terrorist activity than just about anyone in the world. Forced to expose themselves to stop someone, their anonymity had been compromised.

Not wanting to endanger other members of the team, Matthew Robicheaux came to their rescue once again. With dozens of islands dotting his land, he chose one that he thought would be perfect. Shoring up her elevation, placing small flood barriers and levees around her, she became the perfect second home for all of them. Just a short boat ride to the main property, and they could see their children and grandchildren without a problem.

Hoping all of the seniors would slow down a bit, the wives were shocked to find out how miserable they were after

being removed from all the action. After all, these men were getting up in age. Shouldn't they be slowing down?

It occurred to all of them that they were unable to do anything of the sort. The men had no sense of purpose, completely lost. That's when the wives surprised them with Gray Wolf Security. They could continue to do what they loved, just a little closer to home.

Mary and Montana were just as guilty as their husbands. With a background in profiling with the FBI, Mary had been an invaluable part of the team for years. Montana still worked every day at G.R.I.P., helping to develop some of the most advanced weapons and tools used in their industry. A brilliant weapons engineer, she and Doug founded G.R.I.P. together.

Now, their technologies were wanted all over the world, and they had the luxury of accepting or denying offers for business.

"How do you think they're doing?" asked Mary, sipping the hot green tea in her hand.

"I think they're secretly enjoying whatever they're doing. Not the kids being lost, but whatever the details are. Luc has been making me crazy for months now. He'd just

show up at G.R.I.P. at the worst times, wanting to have lunch or just talk.”

“I know what you mean. Angel was spending a lot of time at the island mansion with the grandkids. I know that the kids appreciated it, but he was feeling a bit useless.”

“I don’t understand how any of these men could feel useless,” said Montana. Her hot drink preference was coffee. She liked it strong but with a heavy dose of flavored creamer. In fact, Mama Irene made some of the best homemade creamers in the world. She’d buy half-n-half, put a little spice in it, some extract, and before you knew it, you had chocolate peppermint creamer. Or, Montana’s favorite, vanilla bean mocha.

“Do you find it hard to sleep at night when Luc is gone?” asked Mary.

“Sometimes,” nodded Montana. “It’s been decades, but I still see that man in my apartment downtown with that knife at my throat. I knew then that Luc was going to be the man for me. He never hesitated to put himself between me and that maniac. That, and he is magnificent in bed.”

Mary spewed her green tea over the side of the porch, laughing at her friend.



“Well, he is.”

“I know what you mean. I swear, Montana, I never thought our sex life could get better. Not at our age, but he still rocks my boat several times a week. And I do mean rocks it. All the issues women talk about after menopause, the issues they have, I haven’t experienced it.”

“Me either,” said Montana. “I wonder if the pond helps us with that as well. I know my sex drive has never been higher, my body has never been more responsive, and my husband’s equipment has never been more perfect.”

There was a pond on each of the properties. Years ago, they’d discovered that the waters contained unusual minerals, unexplained organisms, and other unidentifiable things that helped to heal and keep them all feeling young and vibrant. It wasn’t explainable, but then again, they didn’t really need an explanation.

“You know, I fell in love with Angel for some of the same reasons you fell in love with Luc. He put himself between me and a madman. A knife-wielding madman.” Montana stared at her, knowing a bit about the story. “I’d helped to profile a murder case. I knew it wasn’t the man who confessed, but no one would listen to me. Turned out, he was

the brother of the killer. He was mentally underdeveloped. That poor man spent years in prison, eventually dying because of his brother.

“Unfortunately, that wasn’t the way the brother saw it. He saw me as his brother’s killer.” Mary was silent for a moment, remembering all the details. “God, it was Pigsty that really got the brunt of it that night. I thought we’d lose him. It was bad enough that Angel got that scar on his beautiful face. But he never loved me more, cherished me more, and held me tighter. I’m a lucky woman.”

“We both are,” said Montana, reaching for her hand. “You know what? The guys are spending the night in town. We should do our own little sleepover.”

“I love that idea,” smiled Mary. “I haven’t done a sleepover since the kids were little. Well, except when we’re forced to go to the Sugar Lodge.”

“Well, tonight isn’t about floods or bad guys. Tonight, it’s two old friends...”

“Two well-preserved, mature friends,” smirked Mary.

“Right,” laughed Montana. “Two well-preserved, mature friends enjoying some girl talk, food that’s terrible for

us, and a movie.”

The two women sat on the porch for another hour before the chill of the night forced them indoors. Relaxed in their most hideous flannel pajamas, they decided on a movie, only to realize they’d chosen one that their husbands probably would enjoy. Bombs, guns, bullets, blood, and things that go boom.

“We’ve been trained well,” smiled Mary.

“I think we have. And you know what? I love it.”

Mary laughed, nodding at Montana.

“Me too, girl. Me too.”

In the morning, despite the wee headache from the night before, they dressed and walked the well-worn trails around the island. It was a perfect morning, sunshine and birds singing. Several times, one of the other men passed them on their morning run. But the two women continued at a leisurely pace, arm-in-arm.

“Last night was fun. We should let the other girls know. Maybe it will become a tradition when the guys partner up and have to stay in town.”

“I agree,” nodded Montana. “We all know one another and are comfortable with one another, but it’s so nice to have someone to talk to who shares your experiences. I think we forget that sometimes.”

“Let’s not forget ever again,” said Mary.

“Deal.”

On the porch of cabin eight, Irene and Matthew Robicheaux held hands, rocking back and forth as they drank their morning coffee. She smiled at her husband as he kissed the back of her hand.

“Looks like that was a good idea,” smiled Matthew.

“I think they forget that they need support, too,” said Irene. “Easy thing to do, plant a thought in someone’s head. Girls need girl time. We outta know. We had six of ‘em.”

Matthew laughed, nodding his head. Six daughters in the house at one time. He thought he’d never make it through. Fortunately, his wife was an expert at talking to them and raising them right. They never once did anything that caused him shame or themselves. He was proud of all of them. Fifteen children. A man couldn’t be more blessed.

Nine big, strong, intelligent boys who served their country. Six beautiful girls, smart, educated, and now serving others as well. If you counted grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and all the children on the property that they considered their own, Matthew and Irene were doing better than Gideon himself.

“Do you think the boys will figure this one out?” asked Irene. Matthew looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, we both know that they will. Just let them do this. It will be good for them.” Irene nodded, standing from the chair. She stretched her one-hundred-year-old body, touching her toes and then reaching for the sky again. The massive dog beside her stood, his tail already wagging.

“Alright, Zeus. Let’s go for your walk. But no tuggin’. I ain’t as young as I used to be.” Matthew could only smile as his wife walked away with the nearly two-hundred-pound animal. She was special in so many ways. More ways than he could ever explain to any man or woman.

Yep. She was special.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Jesus, where are the parents of these kids?” frowned Luc, staring at the dozens of children, ranging in ages from ten to seventeen, running around the Square. “My mama would have kicked my ass if I were out this late on a school night.”

“I’m not sure these kids give a shit about school, Luc,” frowned Angel. “I’m seeing everything. Prostitution, drugs, all of it. I wish I could sweep an arm and make it all go away, but we’d be making a tiny ripple in a huge pond.”

“How does it get this bad?” asked Luc. “Mama and Pops knew where we were every minute of the day. Hell, even when we were Rangers, Mama seemed to know what country we were in even when we didn’t!” Angel could only laugh, nodding at him.

“I have no clue, brother.” Seeing a small pop-up coffee bar, they stood in line, waiting for the people in front of them to order their coffee. Two college-aged girls were arguing with the poor barista about how they wanted their coffees made.

“No. You didn’t get it right,” she said, twirling her hair. “I want a half-caf, no foam, half-oat milk, half-almond milk, splash of sugar-free vanilla latte.”

“Look, all I have is black coffee. The creamer and sugar are right there. We don’t serve that shit you’re talking about. We serve coffee. Dark, strong, and hot. Anything else you want in it, you’re gonna have to do yourself.”

“What a waste!” screeched the young woman. “Let’s find a real coffee shop.” The two women slammed their cups to the ground, spilling coffee all over the cold, wet stones. Angel stepped up, grinning at the young man.

“One of those nights, huh?”

“You have no idea,” said the guy, rolling his eyes. “My wife and I thought this cart would help to pay our student debts, but I’m struggling with my customer service skills and patience. Sorry. What can I get you?”

“Two hot black coffees,” smiled Angel.

“God, thank you.” Both men laughed, then noticed that no one was behind them any longer.

“Hey, big tip if you can answer a few questions,” said Luc, holding up a hundred-dollar bill.

“As long as I don’t have to take my clothes off or yours, I’m in,” he grinned.

“All these kids, where are they from? What are they doing out this late?” he asked.

“I wish I knew. They run around the Square here and then over on the other side by the levee all night. Sometimes, I see them out as late as three or four in the morning. I usually close down around two, but sometimes, the drunks walking back to their hotels will stop me. If I’ve got coffee left, I’m selling it.”

“We’re trying to find two missing teenage girls. A third died, and we’d like to avoid that with these two. We had information about a couple of guys in an older model car taking them. Have you seen anything like that?”

“There’s a car club that operates over in the Seventh Ward. Mostly young guys and girls. Maybe mid- to late-twenties. The cars are classics, sixties and seventies for the most part. I’ve never heard of them causing any trouble, but now that you mention it, kids definitely hang around them.”

“Have you ever heard them talking about the invisible?” asked Luc.



“No,” he said, shaking his head. “That doesn’t ring any bells for me. Sometimes, weird messages will be put on the board outside St. Louis Cathedral. Free clothes at a certain location, free food, shit like that. The kids will gather around and take off. But I’ve never heard ‘invisible’ used.

“Listen, you seem like good guys trying to help these kids. I hope you can. They’re just lost, you know? My wife and I both went to the University of New Orleans. We’re in student debt up to our eyeballs, but we got that degree in hand. For all the good it does us. From what I can gather, these kids don’t have anyone that gives a shit about them. I hear them talking about a parent or both parents working night shifts, so no one is home. I don’t even think half these kids go to school. If you ask them, they’ll say they’re home-schooled. I wouldn’t put any money on that.”

“The degree will do you some good. You’ll be glad you have it. What’s your degree in?” asked Angel. He looked down at his feet, then back up at the two men.

“Advertising.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” said Luc.

“It wouldn’t have been fifty years ago. No offense.”

Both men laughed, shaking their heads.

“None taken,” he smirked.

“Today, you have to specialize in things like digital marketing or advertising, social media, television. No one told me that.”

“That sucks,” said Angel. “What about your wife?”

“She has a degree in theater arts. She’s got a decent job working at the ballet and opera houses. I just need something so we can get right again.”

“It’ll come, man,” said Luc. “Listen, if you hear of anything about missing kids or the invisible, call us at this number. Someone always answers, and they’ll get you in touch with us.”

“Thanks,” he nodded. “I think I’ll close up for the night. Appreciate the tip.” Kneeling behind the coffee bar, he began stacking his supplies inside, ready to roll the cart all the way home. While he wasn’t looking, Luc and Angel shoved another five crisp one-hundred-dollar bills into his tip jar. He’d discover that when he got home, and hopefully, things would begin to turn for him.

“Let’s head home,” said Luc. “I think everything is pretty dead around here now.”

As they passed St. Louis, there were a few kids hanging around a bulletin board. When the two men got closer, the kids scrambled. Reading the notices, they just shook their heads, unsure of what they were even looking at.

“It’s like it’s written in a cryptic ancient language,” said Angel. Luc frowned at his friend.

“Yeah, and we’re old as shit and still can’t read it.”

The good thing about sleeping in the city was that waking up early meant you got a run in without anyone bothering you. Businesses generally didn’t open until nine or ten, and the tourists were all sleeping off whatever they did the night before.

Both men had their running clothes with them and ran the distance from Esplanade to Decatur and then down to the bridge. Turning on Tchoupitoulas, they worked their way back toward the apartment.

Exercise done, they showered, shaved, and dressed. But with absolutely nothing appealing for breakfast, they broke their cardinal rule and ate in a restaurant, not of their own making.

Monty's on the Square had one of the best brunch and breakfast menus in the Quarter. The mix of rustic Creole foods and traditional breakfast food made everyone want to return.

"I've been thinking," said Luc. "Where do these kids sleep at night?"

"Albert said some of them sleep in shelters, lying about their age. Others just sleep on the streets."

"I can't imagine that," he said, shaking his head. "Just the cockroaches and rats alone would make me want to run home."

"Not if you had a shitty homelife," said Angel. "We were lucky, Luc. I had a wonderful mother and sisters that kept me grounded. You had your parents and siblings. Not everyone has that."

"You're right. I'm just wondering if maybe our team doesn't need to do something more after all this is over. Maybe a shelter for kids under eighteen, right here in the city."

"It's a damn fine idea," said Angel. "First, let me finish my shrimp and grits so I can get started on the praline cinnamon roll. I'm a growing boy. I need my energy."

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

With Angel and Luc's time done, they tagged out, and it was Otto and Hannu's time next. As a former SEAL, Otto was thrilled to get back to work doing something that made him feel valued. Hannu Frode was a former physician and sailor, once based in Finland. In a strange set of circumstances, he and his wife, Johanna, had come to live in America to be nearer to the son he thought was gone.

As the father of Magnus, he had no clue that his son was still alive until contacted by Addie, Magnus's then fiancée.

Magnus's birth mother lied about where his father was, even lying about his name. In fact, she'd told Hannu that Magnus was dead. It was more than evident that they were related when the two men, both six-feet-seven, stared at one another across a table.

"You were a Navy SEAL, weren't you, Otto?" asked Hannu as the men walked the streets in the warmth of the afternoon sunshine.

"I was. You were in the Finnish Navy, weren't you?"

“Yes, but only for two years. The Navy is not meant for a man my size,” he grinned. “I did my duty and then went to university to study medicine. My family was wealthy, and we had a trust that built a hospital in our town. It’s one of the many things I love about our group of residents. Everyone gives back and works with others. That was something important in my family.”

“I loved this place the minute we came.” Otto looked around at the old buildings. He loved the nod to French architecture everywhere you turned.

“We?” asked Hannu.

“Oh, yeah. Kegger, Pork, and me were all part of a SEAL team. A former teammate was the father of Annie, Benji’s wife. He shot me in the gut, nearly killed me. I was brought to the compound, saved by the glorious genius medical team we have,” he grinned at the man, knowing he understood his statement. “Then, I helped out on an op and met my beautiful wife, Robin.”

“Was she in trouble?” asked Hannu.

“She was, but they’d met her and her sisters years before. On the op when Gaspar and his brothers met Luke, Adam, Ben, Carl, Violet, and Lucy. Robin and her sisters had

been taken by the same trafficking ring. They went home to their parents, and Luke and his siblings were all adopted by Gaspar and Alexandra.

“I think everyone thought of it as a happy ending for all. Then they got a call. Suddenly, all those years later, she was in trouble again. Her sisters had been killed, and she was alone.”

“But you fell in love with her,” smiled Hannu.

“I did,” smirked Otto. “I figured an old dog like me was done. I’d never find love again. But when I saw Robin, I just knew my life was about to change.”

“I regret that I didn’t listen to my instincts with Magnus’s mother. She was not a good person, but she was beautiful, and I was young and stupid. I cannot tell you how devastated I was when she told me he was dead. Something inside me knew it wasn’t true.”

“We were all young and stupid, brother,” laughed Otto. “As a SEAL, you’re often approached by all the wrong kind of women. You’re young, lonely, horny, and ready for anything. Some of the guys really got the shaft in the marriage and dating department. No matter how much your

commanders tell you to wear a condom, we all think we're smarter. Dumbasses are what we are, brother. Dumbasses."

"I like that you call one another brother," he smiled. "It's not a common practice in Finland. It's one of the many things I've enjoyed about being in America. That and the food."

"Mama Irene's cooking put ten pounds on me almost immediately," laughed Otto. "I think it's why the younger team works so hard to keep the pounds off. I knew some of them when they were REAPER, and I knew of Ian's SEAL team because we were all in San Diego."

"When they became REAPER-Patriots, I got to know Ghost and the team better. Then suddenly, there were hundreds of us."

"It's a wonderful thing that they've created here," smiled Hannu. "It's a shame that not all former operatives could be a part of our little family."

"That's a good thought, Hannu, but even I hate to admit that not all former operatives should be a part of our family. Sometimes, the damage is too much."



“You’re speaking of traumatic brain injuries and PTSD?”

“That, and other things. I know you’ve seen enough to know that combat changes a man. We spend months, sometimes years, learning to fight. We’re taught to take a life when necessary. Then, when the time comes, we don’t hesitate. We do our jobs. But a few hours or days or weeks later we start to really think on it. Did that man have a wife? Children? Was he only doing what he was told? What if he was innocent?”

“You cannot let things like that eat at you, Otto. You did what your country asked of you.”

“I know. But my point is, some of the men who leave the service don’t know that. They didn’t get the help when they needed it the most. That’s the combat-related shit. The other part is that some men are just not good men. It doesn’t matter if they’re Special Forces or not. That doesn’t determine a man’s heart or soul. Nine and the others are experts at seeing through all that. This generation of service men and women are different than you or me.”

“How so?” asked Hannu.

“Did you hunt with your father?” asked Otto.

“Oh, yes,” he laughed. “It was one of the many things my father and I enjoyed doing together. We hunted, fished, hiked. It was a wonderful upbringing for a boy.”

“But he taught you to shoot?”

“Yes, of course. My father was an excellent shot. So was I.”

“How do you suppose young men and women today are taught? Let’s just say between eighteen and twenty-five?” Hannu stared at Otto, thinking about it a moment.

“I’m not sure. Do Americans not hunt?”

“We do,” nodded Otto. “In certain parts of our country, it’s a mainstay of their lives. People enjoy hunting for food, as well as for sport. Not so much my thing, but I won’t judge. My point is that most young people today are learning to shoot from video games.”

“Video games!” Hannu’s eyes went wide, and he stared down at Otto. Otto wasn’t a small man, but at six-feet-seven, Hannu stared down at almost everyone.

“Kids are brought up playing those damn games and don’t ever really play outside. They don’t get fresh air. When I was kid on school break or in the summer, my mother would

open the front door and say ‘go play and be home by dark.’ You didn’t sit inside the house and look at a box with pictures on it.”

Hannu nodded at Otto. Life in Finland was much different. Yes, children today had video games, but playing and sport was part of the culture. They were active in and out of school. Skiing, skating, hiking, climbing, fishing, and hunting were all a part of it. He looked around the area and frowned, turning to Otto.

“Then why are all these children out playing here in the middle of the afternoon?”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Otto. “We need to find out where these kids come from and what they’re doing. If there’s a connection to those missing girls, I wanna know about it. Look, there’s a coffee cart. My treat.”

“Coffee. I’ve become addicted to it,” he smiled.

“Two hot black coffees,” said Otto. The young man looked up at the men, then up and up at Hannu’s face.

“Hey, are you guys working with the two men that were here last night? They said they were looking for two missing girls?”

“Yes,” smirked Otto. “How did you know that?”

“It was a hunch. I don’t get a lot of people that look like y’all. Most are in terrible touristy clothes, or the locals are dressed in a way that I know. Anyway, can you please thank them for me?”

“Sure. Did they order coffee?” asked Otto.

“They didn’t just order coffee. They tipped me six hundred dollars. Biggest tip I’ve ever received. I was complaining about the student loans my wife and I have. I didn’t even see the tips until I counted them this morning. I took it to the bank first thing, paid four months’ worth of loan payments on the spot. I got back home, checked my e-mail messages before coming here, and suddenly I have an interview with one of the tour companies for an advertising job.

“I’m not sure if those guys had anything to do with it, but they definitely changed my luck. I’ll never forget it.”

“I’ll be sure to tell them,” said Otto. “Have you heard anything about the missing girls?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “In fact, two kids who are regulars around here earlier were talking, and I overheard

them say that one of their friends was missing. They hadn't seen him for three days. Those men last night asked if I'd heard the term 'invisible' used. Those boys said their friend was now one of the invisibles."

"Damn," muttered Hannu. "Are they here? Are they amongst the children here in the Square?"

"You know, you guys should start your own wrestling network. You're about the biggest men I've ever seen." He looked around the Square but didn't see the two boys. "I don't see them right now, but if you wanna hang close, I can let you know if they come back."

"Why are these children not in school?" asked Hannu.

"I ask that question every day," he started.

"Hey, buddy! Are you gonna stop gabbin' and pour coffee or what?" yelled a man standing behind Otto. Hannu turned, slowly straightening to his full height, and looked down at the man.

"We are having a conversation. Do not interrupt us again."

"Yeah, okay. Okay, sorry, old man."

“You are a dumbass, aren’t you?” smirked Otto. “You don’t call a man his size ‘old,’ even if he is. Apologize.”

His buddies nudged him to apologize, but the man just laughed. By all indications, and according to his t-shirt, they were on a bachelor party trip. Hannu pushed past Otto, gripping the young man’s shoulder. His face slowly started to turn purple, his voice unable to come out.

“There is a particular grouping of nerves in the neck that when compressed prohibit your vocal chords from functioning and your ability to breathe ceases.” He released the hold on the young man, staring at him. “You would be wise to never call me old again. I do not like it.”

Grabbing their friend, the young man’s friends pulled him away, walking in the opposite direction.

“Damn, Hannu,” laughed Otto, “you’re handy to have around.”

“I know a few things. Back to the children, do they have parents?”

“I really don’t know,” said the young man. “When I’m out here working, I’m literally focused on keeping the coffee going and making sure it’s hot and fresh. It was a simple idea

when my wife and I bought this. Hot coffee in the winter, hot chocolate, and iced coffee in the summer.

“I don’t do any of the fancy stuff, other than some flavored creamers now and then or whipped cream. Too many kinds of milk don’t last, especially in the summer. Plus, I don’t have the fancy machines that I would need to do gourmet coffee. With any luck, I won’t have to pour coffee for much longer.”

“It sounds to me like you won’t need to do this for much longer,” said Otto. “Maybe this interview will really turn things around for you and your wife.”

“I hope so. Although, in some ways, I’ll miss it. I mean, I get to meet cool ‘old’ dudes like you guys.” He smiled up at Hannu, and he graced him with one in return. Hannu shook his head, grinning at the younger man.

“You get that one for free.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Robin walked toward the cabin of Hannu's wife, Johanna. She was a beautiful woman for her age. Lush silver and blonde hair, with big blue eyes and the palest skin she'd ever seen. Extremely intelligent, she was a bit intimidating to her.

Their cabins were right next to one another, but that made it sound like they could see through one another's windows. There was enough land separating them that you couldn't see or hear anything. Plus, the trees between them prohibited anyone from knowing if you were home.

"Hi," she said, waving to Johanna.

"Robin! It's so lovely to see you. I guess it's our turn to be alone tonight. Should we do a sleepover like Mary and Montana did last night?"

"I'd love that," smiled Robin. "I came prepared." She held up a small tote bag that had a wine bottle peeking out from the top.

"Oh, you're already my best friend," laughed Johanna. "It's a lovely night. Should we sit out here?"



“I think that’s perfect,” smiled Robin. “I made some brownies as well and brought Charlie’s new book.”

Johanna nodded at her, pulling the book from beside her. Charlie Mills was the wife of Ace, a member of the team at Belle Fleur. A talented and gifted writer, she’d been writing romance and suspense novels under the pen name CC Robot for years. Every time a new one was released, the women would gather and discuss the details in them. They’d talk about the plots, the characters, and most of all, the sex.

“I wonder if they’ve heard anything about those two missing girls,” said Johanna.

“I don’t think so. Not yet, anyway.” She looked around their private island and smiled. “It’s so quiet here sometimes. I was just getting used to the noise of Belle Fleur when we moved out here.”

“Don’t you like it?” asked Johanna.

“Oh, no. I love it! Being out here is peaceful and feels safe and comfortable for me. I love everything about being here. Besides, the younger generation needs to have their time to figure out life as well.”

“You’re not old, Robin,” smiled Johanna.

“Neither are you. Did you help Hannu at the hospital?”

“Yes, it’s how we met. I was a nurse. I eventually moved into administration, finding that my need for keeping things in order was better served there,” she laughed. “He’d been in America, and when he returned to his training, I was awestruck. He was such a beautiful man, but we were both very young.

“I noticed a change in him. He was happy, then sad. Melancholy. When he became a surgeon, I asked him if he would like to have coffee with me one day. Coffee turned into a three-hour conversation. I felt as if I could tell him everything,” she smiled.

“What did you tell him?” asked Robin.

“I told him that my parents were gone. I was an only child, and due to an illness in my teen years, I was unable to have children. I thought he would leave, but he didn’t. I knew how important family was for him. His family was very important, very influential, so I knew that him having an heir would be important.

“But he just smiled at me. He said he was sorry about my illness, but it didn’t matter to him. I fell in love with him

right then, Robin. The Finnish people are not known for being extremely passionate in public. My Hannu blew all those assumptions out of the water. He never missed a chance to hold my hand, kiss me, hug me, all in front of our peers and family.”

“I’ve always liked him,” said Robin. “Was it hard for you when you met Magnus?”

“No. I knew how desperately Hannu needed to find out about his son. He always knew he was alive, and when Addie called, I thanked God for answering that prayer. It has made him whole and happy. Happier than I could have ever done on my own. Besides, I got the chance to be a mother. A mother to a six-foot-seven baby, but nevertheless. And I’m a grandmother.”

“I forget about that sometimes,” smiled Robin. “I think it’s wonderful. Leif is a beautiful little boy, although he’s definitely not little any longer.”

“No,” laughed Johanna, “he’s definitely not. Tell me about you. I know so little about how you came to be with this wonderful group.”

“Well, it’s rather a long story, but here’s the short version. When I was very young, my sisters and I were

kidnapped and taken to be sold by a trafficker.” Johanna covered her mouth, tears coming to her eyes. Robin reached out, touching her hand. “I should mention it has a good ending. You see, we didn’t know it, but angels were on the way to save us. All of these men here.

“My sisters and I were literally sitting on an auction block with men bidding on us when suddenly, this huge man placed a winning bid on us.”

“How awful!”

“No, how fortunate,” she smiled. “It was Antoine. He, Mac, and Clay were the men that rescued my group. There were several that night, including Luke and his siblings, who were in another location. Antoine actually met Ella that night.”

“My word!”

“She was with her nephew, and they were trying to sell them both. Antoine fell in love with her and adopted Ryan.”

“It’s absolutely remarkable. But how did you come back here?”

“My sisters and I were reunited with our parents and lived relatively healthy, normal lives. We all were in therapy

for a long time. Then evil hit us again, and my sisters were killed. I didn't know who to turn to, so I called the men here. I always knew I would see them again. I just hoped it would be under better circumstances.

“Otto was the man who appeared on my doorstep. I was taken aback by him. I could barely breathe. Remarkably handsome, strong, there was just something about him. All those years of waiting for a man I thought I could trust, and he walked up to my door to rescue me.”

“That's the kind of love story I enjoy,” laughed Johanna. “I feel that I'm so incredibly fortunate to have joined this family. I always knew that Hannu was my future. I am blessed to have all of you.”

“We're lucky to have you, Johanna. You're a wonderful woman, intelligent, beautiful, and you lend a calming environment to us. I've enjoyed being able to get to know you, and I'm very happy that Otto and Hannu were paired together tonight.”

“Me, too,” she smiled. “What should we do first? The book? A movie? Wine?”

“All of it!” laughed Robin.

They sat on the porch a while longer, watching as the sun set over the bayou. It was something they all did almost every night. The glow of pink, orange, and purple always seemingly unnatural. It was the most beautiful thing in the world, setting them all in the mood for a good night's sleep.

Inside the warmth and coziness of Johanna's cabin, they watched a movie together, shocked by the ending.

"I don't understand. They were in love, and she left him! Why would she do that?" said Robin.

"I guess not all women are as certain as you or I are. Although, it does seem odd that she would just walk away from such a great love."

"Never," said Robin, shaking her head. "I could have never just walked away from Otto."

"What were you doing when you met Otto? For work, I mean."

"My sisters and I decided to run a foundation that helped at-risk kids. We all did something different with the kids. My job was mostly around ensuring they got the healthcare they needed, prescriptions, doctor's appointments,

that sort of thing. My sisters did outdoor training events, counseling for those addicted, it was an all-inclusive facility.

“When they were killed, Johanna, I thought I wouldn’t be able to move on. I wasn’t dating anyone. I’d been married once in my twenties, but it was a terrible mistake. I just thought it was something I was supposed to do. I was divorced within a year and using my maiden name again.”

“Then you met Otto,” smiled Johanna.

“Yes. I really do wonder if there isn’t some magic in the universe stemming from this place.” She spread her blanket on one end of the sectional, Johanna doing the same on the other as they rested their heads on the pillows. Johanna smiled at her, nodding.

“I hope there is, Robin. I want desperately to believe in magic again, like when we were children. If there was ever a place for that to happen, it would be here.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The new Gray Wolf team met in the offices on Belle Île, reviewing the information from Luc, Angel, Hannu, and Otto.

“Kids everywhere, no adults, and no one seems to give a shit,” said Luc. “It was frustrating as fuck.”

“I agree,” said Otto. “I think we need to be more assertive in trying to find the information. Maybe kick open a few doors.”

“Do we have anything on the old car idea?” asked Ian.

“The boys are working on it, but it’s a long process. We did follow up on the car club that the coffee guy told you about. It’s a legit club of young twenty-somethings. They all have money from legitimate jobs in the tech industry. Not sure what, but they’re legit,” said Gaspar. “They attend car shows, go to parades with their vehicles, everything. The cars are old, but judging from their website, they’re impeccably maintained.”

Code displayed the website on the screen, and the room was suddenly filled with whistles and moans of envy. A



green 1969 Oldsmobile 442 glimmered in the sunlight. Beside it, a 1954 OSCA MT4-2AD. It was by Maserati and a classic in every sense of the word. On another page, they drooled over a 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle SS and a black 1969 Chevrolet Camaro RS.

Dozens and dozens of classic cars worth thousands of dollars. The OSCA was worth more than a million, and they all seemed to be in mint condition.

“I don’t think those are the cars we’re looking for,” said Gaspar.

“It’s the car I’m looking for,” smirked Ghost. “I can see taking Grace out in that ’62 Thunderbird convertible. Let the wind blow through our hair, have a little make-out session on the levee. Yeah, brother. I can see myself in that car.”

“Just take her on the bike,” smirked Miller. “It’s the same damn thing.”

“My point is,” said Nine, “that’s a fuck-lot of money sitting there. It all seems legitimate. We can car shop later. We’re running out of time. Antoine? Did you check in the shipyards? See if there was anything suspicious going in and out.”

“I did, and there’s not. It’s all oil, gas, consumer goods, nothing shitty for a change. Those guys have gotten to know us well and were open to me looking at any of the manifests. It all seemed good.”

“They’re happy to help because they don’t want another sunken ship blocking the channel,” smirked Miller.

“If you weren’t so fucking trigger happy with the ‘boom-boom,’ we wouldn’t have had a blocked channel,” said Antoine. His brother grinned at him, flipping him the bird.

“Okay, children,” said Nine. He shook his head, laughing.

“What? What’s so funny?” asked Ian.

“What’s funny is we’re all old as fuck, and I’m still calling you ‘children’ because you act like children,” he laughed.

“Brother, we’re never too old to act like children. My wife especially likes it when I act thirty years younger,” smiled Miller.

“Don’t gross me out,” said Baptiste.

“I think we’re all past the grossed-out stage in our lives,” said Otto. “Luc and Angel were discussing the

possibility, after all this, of building a shelter for those kids downtown. Maybe a place where they can hang out that's not on the streets."

"We've got the boys' and girls' homes," said Gabe. "Is that not enough?"

"I wish it were," said Hannu. "This is very far from the city, so many of those children couldn't get here. If we had something right near the Square and the river, they might be more inclined to come. Perhaps a main floor with games, books, a place just to, what do you say, hang out. The upstairs could be divided into girls' and boys' dormitories.

"Otto and I were both disturbed by the number of children with nowhere to go and no one to care where they were. I think we could do this."

"We'd have to have someone trustworthy to run the place, but we've had good luck with that in the past," said Ian. "It's a good idea. We can have Grant look into some properties in the area and see what it would cost. I'll get with legal to find out what kind of permits we would need, legal requirements, that sort of thing."

"By the way," smirked Luc, "have you guys noticed that every time a pair of us goes out, our wives are doing

sleepovers and girl talk?”

“I noticed,” grinned Otto. “Robin said she had an amazing time with Johanna. I, for one, fucking love it. We already know that they’re the backbone of everything for us. Now that we’re moving into a new chapter of our lives, they need each other even more.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Ghost. “Our wives have known one another a very long time, but over the years, they’ve taken on the role of mentors to all the younger women, and I think in some ways lost touch with one another.”

“Agreed,” nodded Nine. “It’s good for all of us, and it’s fucking great to be back at this. But none of that helps us find those two girls.”

“And the others that have disappeared,” said Antoine. “So, what now?”

“Now, I think we need to start passing around photos of the girls,” said Ghost.

“We don’t have photos,” said Gabe. “That’s part of the problem. We don’t have anything to identify these girls other than the descriptions from Albert and the other waitstaff.”

“Then I think we need to find their parents. Maybe they know something we don’t,” said Gaspar. “Code? Can you check the databases for any hits on their names? Also, whoever is on shift tonight, see if the waiters can give you clearer descriptions. Scars, tattoos, anything.”

“Tattoos? On kids?” frowned Ian.

“You’re showing your age, brother. Believe me, some of these kids have tattoos, piercings, all kinds of shit. Who’s on tonight?”

“Whiskey and me,” said Bull, grinning at his friend. “This should be fun.”

“Try not to bust any heads,” frowned Nine. “Bull, maybe you could pick a bench and play your guitar and sing for a bit. Kids are always attracted to music.”

“I’m happy to do that, but remember that these kids may not even recognize the music I sing. I’d be considered some old-timer to them.”

“Well, give it a whirl and see what happens. The Pied Piper had success.”

“The Pied Piper was kidnapping kids if I remember right,” smirked Bull. Nine shrugged at his friend.

“Okay, you two get going, and we’ll see what we can dig up about the girls. They can’t have just disappeared off the face of the earth. They’re out there somewhere.”

Whiskey and Bull gathered their gear and took the boat to the main compound, where they jumped in the truck and headed into the city. Bull didn’t bring his guitar, worried that it would get damaged. He also didn’t want to haul it around all night long. If the mood struck him, he’d stop and sing at some point.

The rest of the team updated the leaders of Voodoo Guardians, the new security agency that their children and grandchildren were running.

“Sounds like you’ve got an interesting case for sure,” said Luke, Gaspar’s oldest son. “If you need our help, let us know.”

“I think we’re good right now,” said Gaspar. “We might tap into your tech boys at some point, but for now, we’re just trying to find a lead on the girls.”

“Luc and Angel had a good idea, though,” said Nine. “There’s a need for a shelter just for kids in town. We were thinking about looking at some buildings in the warehouse district near the Square and the river. Make a place for them

to hangout, play games, and if they need it, a bed at night. Just somewhere safe for them.”

“I think that’s incredible,” said Cam, Nine’s son.

“Who would run it?”

“Well, we’d have to find someone to live and work there. It would need to be manned twenty-four-seven. That’s going to require a lot of commitment by one, if not more people.”

“What about us?” They all turned to stare at Molly and Asia. “We’ve been teaching for years now, y’all. Both of us are ready to do something different, and Asia does not like it when I join the team on missions. This could be a mission we’d both enjoy. We have military experience, so we could make sure the place is safe. Our son is grown and gone. We could live downtown, no problem at all.”

“Molly, are you sure? That would mean you’d leave us. You’d leave Belle Fleur,” said Gaspar.

“Gaspar, it ain’t like we can’t come out here if we wanted to. We could still be part of the celebrations, weddings, anything that happens here. We just wouldn’t live here.”

“I want you guys to think about this,” said Nine.

“Don’t make any decisions right now. As Grant starts to look at properties, maybe go with him and really get a sense of what this project would entail. We’d hate to lose you both, but we understand if you want to do something different.”

“You won’t lose us,” said Asia. “We’ve loved teaching the kids all these years. We’d still be teaching but in a different way.”

“Okay,” nodded Ghost. “Think about it and get with Grant. See what y’all think about the properties and really noodle on this one. No quick decisions.”

“No quick decisions,” smiled Molly. They started to walk away, and Molly turned back to the men. “Ghost? All of you. Thank you for giving us a chance all those years ago. You opened your arms to both Asia and me, letting us be a part of something amazing. We’re not leaving you. We’re just doing something different for you.”

The men watched as the two women walked hand-in-hand out of the cafeteria. For Ghost, who recruited Molly to Steel Patriots, there was a pit in his stomach.

“I feel like one of my kids is leaving me,” he growled.



“Brother, they’re women in their sixties,” laughed Antoine. “They’re grateful, and I’m damn sure grateful for them and what they’ve done at the school. I can’t think of two people more perfect for a shelter if we go through with this.”

“Agreed,” nodded Gaspar. “Now, we just have to find these children.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Whiskey tossed his bag on the floor of the apartment and immediately checked the refrigerator. Fully stocked, he nodded, making a note to give thanks to Hannu and Otto. Grabbing a bottle of water, he opened the cupboard and took out an energy bar, biting into it.

“We’ll probably have time for some dinner,” smirked Bull.

“I know,” he said, chewing the bar. “I’m hungry now. I’ll be hungry again in about fifteen minutes. I’m not worried.” Bull laughed, walking to the French doors and opening it onto the balcony. It was traditional for many of the buildings in New Orleans. Small, wrought iron balconies with picturesque flowers and plants hanging from them.

“What the fuck?” he muttered.

“What?” asked Whiskey, walking toward him. Bull pointed to the balcony across the street, and Whiskey just shook his head. Where the picturesque flowers and plants should have been was a blow-up sex doll straddling the railing with a rubber dildo in her mouth.

Below, tourists were walking by, taking pictures. What bothered Whiskey were the families with children. Kids young enough not to understand, pointing up at the strange doll and the 'thing' in her mouth. When a couple of college kids stepped out on the balcony laughing, Whiskey growled.

“Can I shoot them?” he asked.

“No,” said Bull. “But you can throw that bottle of water at them.” Whiskey grinned at his friend, winding up and firing the full bottle of water at the head of the kid across the street. Slamming into the side of his face, he fell backwards, cussing.

“Who the fuck threw that?” With the streets so narrow, you could easily have a conversation with your neighbor on the other side.

“I did,” growled Whiskey. He leaned forward on the balcony railing, his arms rippling with muscle, his wide chest seemingly wider.

“You old fuck! You want a piece of me?”

“Oh, yes. Please. Shall we meet downstairs?” The two kids took off, and Whiskey turned to head down as well. Bull was right behind him.

“Remember, no one dies,” said Bull. “We promised.”

“I was crossing my fingers behind my back when I promised.” As they made their way into the street, the two college kids walked out and realized they may have made a mistake. But it was too late. If they backed away now, they’d lose face with their friends, observing from above.

“I’m here,” said Whiskey. “Something you’d like to say?”

“Why the fuck did you throw the bottle at my head, old man?”

“Call me old man again, and I’m going to crack that hard head of yours,” he whispered. “Your disgusting display of juvenile humor is ruining the experience for people with kids. They don’t need to see that shit.”

“It’s New Orleans, dude. They shouldn’t bring their kids,” he smirked. Bull looked at Whiskey, seeing the desire to slam a fist into the guy’s face. He gripped his arm.

“Just don’t kill him,” he said calmly. The kid looked at the two men, giving a nervous smirk and laugh.

“Take it down,” said Whiskey.

“Make me,” dared the younger man. That’s when Whiskey finally smiled. Turning to Bull, he nodded at him.

“He dared me.”

“He did. I was a witness. He dared you. Go ahead.” Not wanting to leave any marks, Whiskey slammed a fist into the kid’s gut, then a knee into his groin. As he started to fall, Whiskey grabbed him by his hair, his cowardly buddy stepping back. Pulling out his knife, he pointed it at the doll.

“I did ask nicely.” With a flick of his wrist, the knife sailed into the doll, the sounds of air leaving, quickly deflating her. Whiskey pulled the younger man up to face him. “Don’t disrespect me or anyone here again. If I come back tonight and find that out there, I’ll do more than destroy the doll. I’ll destroy you. Kids are exposed to enough shit. They don’t need to see that as well.”

His friends pulled him back, wisely not saying anything to the ‘old’ man. As Whiskey and Bull walked away, Bull leaned toward his friend.

“You know, he did have a point. I’m not sure why you would bring your kids to New Orleans during Mardi Gras season. You know you’re gonna see some sick shit.”

“I’m not here to judge parenting styles,” said Whiskey. “That kid was intentionally creating a scene because it shone a spotlight on him. That pissed me off.”

Deciding that they would try a different route than the others, they made their way toward the river, walking the levee and the shops in that area. Away from the Square, the crowds were thinner, but the kids still seemed to be everywhere.

Between Café du Monde and the old Jax Brewery, there was outdoor concrete theater seating on the levee. Bull and Whiskey grabbed a coffee and some beignets, taking a seat to watch the groups. Every time they tried to approach the kids, they would turn and run.

“I think they believe we’re cops,” said Bull.

“Don’t know how to change that,” said Whiskey.

“Hey, look.”

Bull looked up to see three young boys dancing for money. They wore tap shoes, dancing on a worn piece of plywood. He smiled, watching them move with grace, rhythmically tapping their toes and heels together. A few people put money in their can, but most just passed them by.

Standing, he walked toward the can, and the boys looked up at him with fear at first. He just smiled, dropping a twenty into the bucket.

“Great job, boys,” he grinned.

“Hey, thanks, mister.”

“No problem.” Bull looked around at all the tourists eating their beignets or ice cream. They could afford to drop some cash into the bucket for these kids. “Hey. How would you like to fill that bucket?”

“That’s the idea, mister. Can’t get what people won’t give.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Today? ‘Bout six hours. My feet are tired, and so are theirs.”

“Are they your brothers?” he asked. The boy looked at him, then stepped back, pulling his brothers behind him.

“Yeah. We’re good.”

“I know you’re good,” he smirked. “Listen, I sing a little. What do you say I sing and see if we can bring more folks over here? Whatever they drop in the bucket, it’s all yours. On one condition.”

“We don’t do none of that, mister,” said the boy suspiciously.

“No. I don’t want what you’re thinking. My condition is this. I’m looking for some girls who are missing. You get your bucket filled, and I get some questions answered. Deal?” The boy looked back at his brothers.

“Are you tired? Can you do one more?” They both nodded, their t-shirts clinging to their thin bodies with sweat. “Okay, mister.”

Bull cleared his throat, taking one more sip of his coffee. He needed to sing something modern but also something the boys could dance to. Having recorded and sung with Amanda, some might actually recognize his voice. They never did live shows.

Whiskey watched, waiting to see what Bull would belt out. The man had the voice of an angel, and when he sang, children seemed to follow. Or fall asleep. He hoped it would be the first one tonight.

“Ready, boys?” They nodded at him as he opened his mouth. Whiskey was surprised when he started singing “Happy” by Pharrell Williams. The boys immediately smiled at him, tapping their toes on the board beneath them.



Crowds began to gather, and Whiskey could only shake his head as people dropped change, dollar bills, fives, tens, and twenties into the bucket. One man dropped a hundred-dollar bill. The boys' eyes went wide, but they kept tapping as Bull kept singing.

When he was done, the crowd went wild. Whiskey could hear the whispers of people, saying he sounded like someone they knew, but they couldn't put their finger on it. Bowing, he waved to the boys to take a bow, and the crowd went crazy again.

“Okay,” said Bull. “Deal's a deal. You got a full bucket.”

“That was awesome, mister. You sure you don't want part of it?” he asked.

“Nope. I don't need the money. I need to ask some questions,” he said. The boys nodded, folding the money up and placing it securely in their backpack. The older boy turned the bucket upside down and sat on it while his brothers sat on the plywood. Whiskey handed them all bottles of water and bags of beignets.

“Thanks,” said the youngest boy. “Do you play football?” Whiskey could only laugh. He was at least forty

years on the other side of football days.

“No, but thank you.”

“We’re looking for two girls who went missing. Their names are Marsha and Erica. One is about seventeen. The other is probably sixteen or so. They used to hang out in front of some of the restaurants on Bourbon and Royal, that area.”

“I don’t know. We see lots of girls hanging out in that area. Lots of boys too.”

“Have you ever heard of the invisible?” asked Whiskey.

“Yeah. They call lots of kids that. I thought it was a club or somethin’, but one of the older boys said we don’t wanna be a part of that. I don’t know nothin’ about it, though.”

“Are you boys here every night?” asked Bull.

“Almost. Our mama works at the Creole store down there. We do this to try and help her out. She don’t get paid much,” said the boy. His little brother tugged on his shirt.

“We gotta go,” he said.

“Sorry, mister. Mama is gettin’ off in a few minutes. She gets worried if we’re not waitin’ for her outside the store.”

“Well, don’t let her get worried,” said Whiskey.

“We’re going to watch you until you get to the store. You got a lot of money in there.” The boy turned to his brothers.

“How much did we get?”

“More than seven hundred!” said the boy excitedly.

“That’s the most we ever made, mister. Thanks!”

“You’re welcome,” smiled Bull. “If you hear of other kids gone missing, will you let us know?” He handed the boy a plain white card with a number on it. He nodded and then waved as he and his brothers carried their plywood and bucket down the street. They watched until they were standing in front of the store, and a young woman walked out. She hugged them in spite of their sweaty bodies, kissing their foreheads.

They watched as the boys talked to her, animated in their description of their day. Turning, they pointed to Bull and Whiskey and waved. The two men waved back, then walked up the stairs toward the levee.

“Why does no one know about these missing kids?” asked Whiskey.

“I’m not sure. Either they’re all scared to talk about it.  
Or there are so many that go missing, no one can keep track of  
it.”

“Fuck.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Although Whiskey was now considered part of the senior team, Kat was still working every day with the legal team at Belle Fleur. Lily, Bull's wife, worked on projects behind the scenes when it was about art or art history. She'd been helping a little with a recent case involving Mike Redhawk's new wife, Trak's grandson.

Finally done for the day, Kat poured herself a glass of wine and then heard a knock on the door. She was happy to see Lily's beautiful face.

"I come bearing gifts," she grinned. "Homemade lasagna and wine."

"Woman, you are speaking my language tonight. Come in. It's been a day. Sometimes, I think the team looks for shit to test my law degree."

"I know what you mean," smiled Lily. "I never thought an art history degree would lead me here. But then again, I never thought I'd be married to a man like Bull."

"How did you two meet? I mean, I sort of know the story, but not all of it," said Kat, curling up on the other end of

the sofa. Lily put the lasagna in the oven to warm, poured herself a glass of wine, and sat at the other end.

“I was working for a shipping company that was allegedly handling shipments of artwork for a major auction house. I was promised that I would get to use my degree eventually but was hired really just for administrative work. I noticed something off on the manifests and brought it to my boss.”

“Oh, oh.”

“Yep. Next thing I know, I found myself inside a shipping container beaten, starved, and left for dead.”

“God, Lily,” said Kat, reaching for her hand.

“Kat, when that container door opened and I saw Bull standing there, I thought he was sent to kill me. I had peed on myself, I smelled awful, I looked like a monster. But he kneeled beside me and carried me out of there, holding me until EMS arrived. Daisy was there, too.” Daisy was one of the many dogs on the property, although the original Daisy was long gone. They were on Daisy VI or VII now, neither could remember.

“What happened?” asked Kat.

“I was in the hospital, but someone tried to get to me. Bull, he wasn’t having any of it. He brought me back here to his cottage. He was still living in Virginia with the REAPER team at the time but had been here for a case. Mama Irene had him all set up in his own place. I swear that woman knew I was coming.” Both women laughed, nodding.

“Anyway, he nursed me back to health, loved me, lord how that man loved me. My parents were murdered by the men I was running from, and he even helped me get their estate and things settled. He thought he was too old for me,” she smiled. “Can you image that?”

“I can,” nodded Kat. “Whiskey is a lot older than I am. He definitely thought he was too old for me. I know this might be TMI, Lily, but that man set my body on fire the first time I saw him.”

“I get it,” laughed Lily. “I felt the same about Bull. Weren’t you running from your uncle? I seem to remember hearing that.”

“Yes. At the time, I thought he was my father. I’d been raised to believe that’s who he was. I was never so happy as the day I found out he wasn’t my father. He was going to give me to a man, a trafficker, as payment. I ran

away and found Whiskey. Well, he found me first, but I had to find the Steel Patriots, which wasn't easy."

"You must have been terrified."

"No more so than you. I was angry. I literally asked them to kill my uncle and Omar, the man who wanted me. They were taking children, young girls and boys, and selling them. I didn't want any part of that. I was never sure why he allowed me to get a law degree. Maybe he thought I would protect him. I don't know. I know that meeting with Whiskey, and Zulu was there, was the only time I ever felt safe."

"My parents were good people," said Lily. "I didn't get to tell them that before they were killed. They didn't have a lot of money. We lived in a small bungalow, probably smaller than these cabins. Both of them worked hard, lived a good lifestyle. I sent them something that had evidence on it about what was happening in the shipyards."

"Oh, honey," said Kat, reaching for her hand.

"I shouldn't have. I know that now. The strange thing is, I thought my parents were completely void of any knowledge of technology. Yet my father kept the drive I sent him. We couldn't believe it when we found that."



“He knew it was important to you,” said Kat. “If you hadn’t studied art history, what would you have done?” Lily smiled at her, shaking her head.

“You won’t believe it, but I might have become a police officer.”

“I can believe that. You would have been amazing.”

“What about you?”

“Well, I was a successful ballerina. That is until my uncle decided to have his men break my legs. He thought I should be focused on being a wife to that terrorist, Omar. I was never able to dance again after that. Although Lissa has been extremely helpful with giving me an opportunity to at least dance for fun.” Lissa was the wife of Alec Robicheaux. A former ballerina herself, she owned a studio at the front of the main property.

“I was never a dancer,” laughed Lily. “I’m content listening to my sexy husband sing every night.”

“He sings for you? Every night?”

“Every night,” she smiled. “I usually fall asleep before the song is done, but it’s just so beautiful and peaceful. It reminds me of when I was in that hospital bed, all alone,

terrified. He held my hand and sang to me, and all the fear went away.”

“That’s so beautiful,” said Kat. “We’ve been lucky girls to find these men. Some days, I wonder what it would be like if we didn’t have one another. We all understand what their sacrifice was like and what they continue to try and do. But what if we had to be out there, in that world.”

“I don’t like to think about that,” said Lily. “I know how fortunate I am to be here and be surrounded by all of you. I’ve learned so much from everyone, especially Mama Irene and Matthew. That’s what I want my marriage to look like.”

“I know what you mean,” smiled Kat. “Honestly, I watch everyone, taking bits and pieces that I find I can change in my own relationship. It was tough on Whiskey to have to back down after they were exposed. I don’t think I was very sympathetic to that. I’ve apologized to him, but still. I should have known better.”

“Well, how about we eat, drink more wine, watch a movie, and sleep?”

“Sounds perfect,” smiled Kat.

The truth was by the time they ate and had another glass of wine, both women were falling asleep during the movie. They didn't care. Happy to have a friend with them tonight, they curled up together on the sofa. By morning, the movie was long since done, the wine gone, and the two women were happy to walk to breakfast together.

“Last night was fun for me, Kat. We need to do it more often, even when the guys aren't out on patrol,” said Lily.

“You know, I was thinking the same thing. They have their new gig. Maybe the wives need to find something as well. I know that some of us are still working for the team on the main property, but not all the time. I'd love to have something that was all my own to work on.”

“Let's talk to the others and see what we can come up with. I know there will be opportunities for us to help out the guys, but maybe the ladies need something of their own.”

“Count me in!”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Code and I have a hit on one of the names,” said Kegger. A former SEAL who served with Otto, Kegger had an on-again, off-again relationship with a woman Irene knew. She didn’t want to be married again, and with six children of her own, Kegger wasn’t sure he wanted that burden. They seemed satisfied, satisfying one another on occasion, but neither was looking for anything permanent.

“You found her?” asked Nine.

“No. We found the parent. Erica Eno is one of our missing girls. Albert remembered that she had worked washing dishes at the restaurant. It took a while, but they found her last name. Although they pay the kids in cash, they always track the names, just in case someone comes around asking questions. She’s sixteen. She ran away from home six months ago.”

“Any idea why?” asked Nine.

“Not sure, but we’re headed that way to find out. She was living in Donaldsonville. Her mother works at a factory

there on the night shift, but she's off today. We've called her, and she's willing to speak with us."

"Alright. Let us know if you need backup."

Donaldsonville, Louisiana, was a small community to the northwest of New Orleans. Situated on the Mississippi River, it was filled with historical sites from the beginnings of the French occupation through the Civil War. When it was settled, the population was primarily French. Today, it was a mix of the same cultures seen all around the state.

"What do you think we'll find?" asked Code.

Although Code was older than Kegger, he stared at the man, thinking he was at least a decade younger. With a boyish face and head full of blonde hair, albeit laced with silver, he still looked youthful.

"I'm not sure," said Kegger. "If the mom works nights, maybe a father or someone did something to the girl. Or maybe she just had a bug up her ass, as a know-it-all teenager, and ran."

"Doesn't it seem strange that the mother didn't file a missing person report until recently?" asked Code.

“Definitely, and that will be one of the many things I’ll ask her. You and Hannah never had children. Can I ask why?”

“I don’t know. I mean, we talked about it. There were so many kids on the compound at one time when we were first married. I think we both thought it was crazy to bring another one into the group right now. Hannah was busy with her career. I was busy with the team. It just never happened.”

“Do you regret it?”

“I don’t regret it. I think about it sometimes, but I don’t regret it. I’ve been the ‘cool’ uncle for dozens of kids, and that’s enough for me. What about you? Never married? No kids?”

Kenneth ‘Kegger’ Burke was an exceptional SEAL. That is until an IED took his leg and rattled his brain cage enough to cause them to put a steel plate in his head. Struggling with balance sometimes, he was no longer capable of doing what he was born to do. But he still had a lot of skills and a lot of good years left, and he was determined to use them.

“I was engaged when all this happened. I think the leg wouldn’t have mattered to her, but the steel plate in the head

was an entirely different thing. When it all first happened, I had trouble just walking without tipping over. I was suffering with headaches, mood swings, I was a fucking mess. She just couldn't do it any longer, and I couldn't blame her. She married, had a few kids, and lived a good life. I think.

“Honestly, I'd like to find someone, but I'm too old to be raising kids at this age. I'd just like a good companion to spend time with. I'd love what Otto found with Robin.”

“Maybe you will one day,” smiled Code.

“Maybe. Either way, I'm happy to be where I am with the team. My family.”

“There,” said Code. “That trailer park.”

“It's not the worst one I've ever seen. Lots seem well cared for. Plants, flowers. Some need work, but for the most part, they're not bad.”

The Eno trailer was painted a pretty light blue with flower pots on the front porch. It could use a good power washing, but other than that, it looked to be in good shape. Knocking on the door, they heard someone say they were coming and waited patiently, backing up a bit. The door swung open outward, making them back up even more.

“You the men that called?” asked the woman.

“Yes, ma’am. Are you Mrs. Eno?” asked Kegger.

“Ms. Eno. I ain’t been Mrs. in a long time. Come on in.” The trailer was neat and clean, smelling like she’d just washed everything with bleach. The sofa was torn a bit but comfortable. There was a decent television on a stand, and two other chairs. Pictures of a boy and girl were scattered around the small space.

“You said you were coming to talk about Erica. You find her?”

“No, ma’am. Is that her?” asked Code. The woman nodded, handing him the photograph. “May I?”

“Sure. Take whichever one you want.”

“Ms. Eno, why didn’t you report your daughter missing right away?” asked Kegger.

“My shift makes us often not see each other for days on end. It was probably a week before I realized she wasn’t here. The school called and said she hadn’t been to class, and that wasn’t like her. She liked school. Did you find her?”

“Not yet. But we’re looking for her. When did you last speak with her?”



“I don’t know. Months back. She was a typical teenager, only interested in her computer and phone. I work the night shift at the plant, and her older brother was supposed to be looking out for her. Like I said, sometimes I go days without seein’ her. I just thought she was busy with school, and we were passin’ in the night.”

“Where is he? Your son. Does he live here?” asked Code.

“Sleepin’. Boy don’t do shit all day. I come home, sleep a few hours, get up, and clean, and he’s still sleepin’ from the night before.”

“Mind if I go speak with him?” asked Code.

“No. Feel free, although he ain’t very nice first thing in the mornin’. Second door on the left.” Code stood, nodding at the woman.

“Did Erica say anything to you? Maybe she was upset by something? Bothered about something at school or even here at home?” asked Kegger.

“We didn’t talk much. I was always workin’. She was always at school. I know she didn’t like her brother havin’ his friends over, but they weren’t doin’ nothin’.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Kegger.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, usually when a young girl is upset about her older brother’s friends being around, it’s because they’re doing something that makes her uncomfortable. Maybe the boys were touching her, Ms. Eno.” She seemed to be thinking hard on that, staring at the man across from her.

“She didn’t say anything,” she said quietly. “I feel like she would have said something to me.”

“Sometimes, they don’t. If your daughter was worried about you and how you would react, she might have held all that in. Or maybe her brother asked her not to tell. Siblings have a powerful hold on one another. Good and bad.” She nodded, standing to move toward the kitchen.

“I think I’ll make some tea.”



Code opened the door of the bedroom and was met with the horrible odor of a young man. He remembered his own mother complaining about it at one time. There was something funky about a boy turning into a man and the smell

he let off. He flipped on the light, frowning at what he saw. It was in complete contrast to the rest of the home.

The young man was face down, the pillow over his head. It appeared that his entire wardrobe was tossed around the room. Beside him were several pornographic magazines. On the bedside table was a bag of marijuana and a few pills. Code kicked the bed, and the boy groaned. When he didn't move, he gripped the sides of the mattress, yanking it until it was on the floor.

“Hey! What the fuck?” he yelled. Jumping up in his gym shorts, he stared at the big man looking back at him.

“Who the fuck are you? Ma!”

“Your ma is with my friend. We're here about your sister.” The boy immediately looked away, swallowing as he did. He grabbed a t-shirt, pulling it over his head. Code knew something was wrong.

“What did you do to her?”

“Nothing! I didn't do anything. She's such a fucking baby. I was just havin' fun with my friends, that's all. We were just havin' fun.”

“Who was having fun?”

“Look, it was just me and a few friends. They thought she was hot and were willing to pay to see her dance in front of us. She got bent out of shape when I asked her to do it in her panties and bra. Not like I asked her to do it nude or something,” he laughed.

Code open-handed slapped the boy. He fell to his knees, looking up with anger but also tears in his eyes.

“You forced her to leave. Now, she’s missing in New Orleans, and we fear she’s dead,” he snarled. “Get up.”

The boy didn’t move, just staring at him.

“I said, get the fuck up, or you won’t like what I do next.” Standing, Code gripped his neck, shoving him out into the living room.

“What’s going on?” asked Ms. Eno.

“Tell her,” said Code. The boy just shook his head, but his mother stepped forward. “Tell her, or I will, and you won’t like it.”

“It’s nothing! Okay, it’s nothing. You know how Erica is. She got all pissy when my friends and I were havin’ a party. We just asked her to dance for us.”

“In her bra and panties,” growled Code.

His mother stared at him, gasping as she covered her mouth.

“How could you? How could you do that to your sister?” she asked. “Did you touch her? Did you touch your sister?”

“What? No, that’s sick,” he said, shaking his head.

“I’ve put up with your shit since you graduated, but no more. You have two days to find a job. I don’t care what kind of job it is, but find a job. Then I give you one month to get out. I’m done with you.”

“Ma, wait, I’m sorry. I’ll help find her.”

“How will you do that? You have no fucking clue where she went,” said Code. “Had you been a decent brother, you would have never allowed this to happen. You’re pathetic, and I pray to God that your sister is okay. Because if she isn’t, I’m coming back, and I’ll beat the ever-loving fuck out of you.”

Code was still shaking when they were an hour down the road. Kegger turned to him.

“Pull over, Code.” He shook his head, but Kegger gripped his arm. “Pull over.”

Code pulled to the side of the road, shaking his head. Slamming his hand on the steering wheel, Kegger just watched as the man unleashed.

“Who does that to their own sister?” he asked. “I can’t even imagine doing something like that to anyone, let alone my sister.”

“It’s not new to us,” said Kegger. “I hate it too, and maybe it’s good that we’re not used to it. It’s why we keep doing what we’re doing. The good news is, if we believe him, she wasn’t touched.” Code nodded at his friend.

“Yeah. Let’s hope that stays true. If it doesn’t, I’m gonna kill that kid.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Baptiste and Vince had duty tonight. Both men were ready to find the young girl at all costs. The weather had turned colder, rain threatening overhead. If it rained too much, they would be stuck inside the apartment, unable to get out and question people.

“Do you have the photo of Erica?” asked Vince.

“Yep,” he said, handing one to Vince. “Tonight is probably a night to visit some of the restaurants and shops since we have a photo. Someone had to have seen this girl.”

“I’m still puzzled by the ‘invisible’ bullshit. Why can’t anyone tell us what that means?”

“I don’t know, brother. All I know is that there are no gangs with that in their name, no ships, not even a shop in the area with that name. Maybe it means nothing,” said Baptiste. “Either way, let’s try to hit some places before the rain comes.”

Walking away from the Square and river, they tried to cover some of the seedier outlying areas. Shop after shop shook their head, claiming they’d never seen the girl before.

A few restaurants remembered her with other girls outside their establishment begging for money or food. But none had seen her in a while.

When thunder roared above them, and big raindrops slapped against their skin, they ran toward a local café and took the last table. It seemed everyone was trying to avoid the rain and get something delicious to eat. They both shook the rain from their jackets, placing them on the chairs.

One of the cool tricks that G.R.I.P., their weapons manufacturing facility, came up with was stealth protection for their weapons. They weren't visible to the naked eye. The little invention that they loved the most in settings like this, where they needed to remove an outer jacket, were industrial magnets that held their jackets against the chairs. If someone attempted to steal them, they'd get a terrible surprise. With a flick of a small button in their pockets, the magnet would release for them and only them.

“What can I get you, boys?” asked the waitress.

“Diet soda for me,” said Baptiste.

“Same,” said Vince. “I'll have the oyster po'boy and fries.”



“Shrimp remoulade for me,” said Baptiste. “Also, I need to ask you a question. Does this girl look familiar to you?” She stared at the picture, truly giving it a moment.

“No. I’m sorry, she doesn’t. But some of the others have been here longer. I’ll ask them to take a look as well.” She left them and returned with the soda and some warm bread a few minutes later.

“You know,” said Vince, “it occurred to me that maybe she’s hiding out in one of the riverboat casinos. Or she could be working there illegally.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Baptiste. “If the rain lets up, we can head over there. If not, we could always try tomorrow, or the next team can work those.”

“It’s terrifying to me that one little girl can disappear so quickly without anyone seemingly concerned about her or having seen her.”

“Yeah,” frowned Baptiste. “Like she was invisible.”

“You don’t think that’s it, do you? That once this person or people take them, they’re invisible.”

“All I know is her mother should have known where her daughter was and what she was doing, and what the fuck

her son was doing.” He shook his head as the waitress set their meal down. “You know, I never thought I’d be a father, Vince.”

“No? But you’re so close to Liz. I can’t imagine you not being a father.”

“I think you know Liz isn’t my biological child. I was just helping out, putting in security cameras at the women’s shelter. They asked me to try and speak to this quiet, totally introverted woman, Rose.” Vince smiled at his friend, seeing the light in his face as he spoke of his wife.

“She was terrified of everyone and everything. Kari was trying to help her with her divorce, hoping we could do it remotely, but it wasn’t possible.”

“Wasn’t her ex-husband a cop?” asked Vince.

“Yeah. The bastard was an abusive piece of shit. Rose was about eleven weeks pregnant and didn’t even look like it. I just made the decision she was coming home with me. That first night, I asked her to join the team for dinner, and I couldn’t believe it. She walked out of the bedroom dressed in this beautiful sundress, and my heart stopped.”

“Sounds like a man in love to me,” grinned Vince.

“Damn if I wasn’t. Alec and Lissa had just married, and of course that big ape was the first man approaching her on the property. Nearly seven-feet of Robicheaux, and I thought she might die of fright. But he was so fucking gentle with her, Vince. I couldn’t be mad at the bastard,” he chuckled.

“Top all that off with the fact that she had all the answers we’d been looking for. In all the chaos, crime, and sick machinations of her ex was the answer to Alec being taken by the Russians, Mac being taken captive in the sandbox, and drugs.”

“That’s when you knew she was yours?” smiled Vince.

“No. I knew she was mine when a former acquaintance approached us at The Well.” The Well was a remote bar and restaurant that the family had been going to for years. Three levels of down-home dancing, food, and entertainment.

“Ouch. How did she react?”

“I warned her that others, meaning other women I may have dated in the past, might be there, and she did not disappoint. I even told the woman to back off because I was with my partner, and we were having a baby. She made some

nasty comments to me, and my Rose stood up and confronted her, touting my amazing abilities.” Baptiste and Vince both laughed, shaking their heads.

“When she gave birth to Liz, my heart melted, and I knew that little girl was mine, Vince. I thought I would never be able to give her to a man in marriage, but when Kiel asked for her hand, I couldn’t say no.” Kiel Wolfkill was a former Green Beret and the son of Zeke Wolfkill, also a Green Beret. Both men still lived on the main property, working with the VG team.

“You’ve got a beautiful family, Baptiste.”

“So do you,” he smirked. “I can’t imagine what you went through to get to happiness. I mean, just knowing what happened to your wife and daughter... I’m sorry, Vince.”

“Don’t be. When I think about it today, it’s more like reading it from a book or seeing it in a movie. I don’t think of it as my history. It was so long ago. I’ve been on all sides of the law, Baptiste. Working with Miguel when he was dealing drugs was my only way to get to his brother. That bastard was the one that sent them both to their deaths.”

“How is it working with Miguel? I mean, he’s done a lot for us over the years, providing funding for a lot of what

we do, but it has to be hard to forget what his brother did.”

“I have to remind myself all the time that it wasn’t Miguel. Although he provided the drugs to make all of it come to a head. I was an old man when I met Ally, Baptiste. I’d put on twenty-five pounds of muscle, bulked up to look like the badass one-percenter biker I was portraying.

“When I brought that poor little girl into the clinic, I never expected to meet Ally. She was young, but there was wisdom in her eyes. All I wanted to do was keep her safe. The team decided we needed to get back to Virginia, and I practically tied her to my motorcycle to make sure she was safe.”

“I can understand that. A lot was happening around that time. Because of what you helped with, Alec and Lissa adopted Keith.” Keith had been found in a predator’s home, naked, afraid, and unable to communicate because he was completely deaf. Vince nodded at him.

“My life with Ally has been spectacular. Being blessed with a son, Christian, is only the cherry on top. I think that’s why I’m struggling with this. These kids are all throwaways. It’s as if no one cares where they are or what they’re doing.

Hell, Christian is a grown man, and I still wonder what he's doing all the time."

Baptiste laughed, nodding his head.

"Liz and Kiel have triplets, and I still worry about them," laughed Vince.

"Here's the check," said the young girl. "These are the people who work the most shifts. Do you have that photo?"

"Oh, yes. Here. Have you seen this girl?" asked Baptiste.

"I don't know," said the girl. The guy picked up the photo and stared at it.

"She looks familiar, but honestly, I can't tell. We see so many people here in the restaurant and on the street. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"It's okay," said Baptiste. He laid down some cash for the check with a generous tip and stood, grabbing his jacket.

"Rain has stopped. You ready for more walking?"

"I'm ready," said Vince.

The waitress cleared the table, pocketing her tip and setting down napkins and plastic wear for the next patrons.

Turning, her fellow waiter came towards her.

“Did they leave?” he asked.

“Yeah, they went left,” she said. He ran out the door, looking up and down the street, but didn’t see them. “Did you remember something?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s crazy, but maybe. If you see them again, let me know.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hi, Rose,” smiled Ally. She was carefully walking through the puddles on the pathway to her cabin.

“Hi, Ally. Are you okay for a girls’ night? I know you had a shift at the clinic today. If you’re too tired, I understand.”

“Actually, I could use some girl time today. Come on up and get out of the rain.” Rose stomped her boots on the top step, shoving the umbrella into the stand. She set her tote bag by the door and took the seat next to Ally. “I really love the rain sometimes. It gives me an excuse to just sit here and do nothing.”

“I know what you mean,” smiled Rose. “Usually, when it’s raining, Baptiste will whip up something in the kitchen, and we eat on the porch together, just watching everything turn green before our eyes.”

“How are the grandsons?” asked Ally. “I assume they’re still in service since we haven’t seen them in a while.”

“They’re all Green Berets, just like their daddy and granddaddy. I tell you, Ally, I’m glad I met Baptiste after he



got out of the Rangers. I'm not sure I would have made a good military wife."

"You would be an amazing wife, no matter what your husband was doing. You've proven that time and time again."

"So have you, Ally. I've watched you be an incredible mother to Christian and still pull twelve-hour shifts at the clinic or hospital. You're amazing, and I should have told you that sooner."

"Rose, that means so much to me. I think these partnerships with the guys are good for us. I love having some girl time with all of you, but this many women in one room makes it hard to hear anyone or anything." Rose laughed, nodding.

"I know what you mean. I'm much more introverted than some of the women, so when we're altogether, it can be overwhelming." Ally looked at the other woman and smiled.

"You know, I think you and Baptiste were already married when I came to the team. How did you meet? I know I've heard the story, but remind me."

"I was running from my abusive ex-husband, who just happened to be a cop."

“Oh,” said Ally, wide-eyed.

“Yeah. Oh. He was also manufacturing drugs for a woman that, as it turned out, had arranged for the kidnapping and torture of both Mac and Alec.”

“No way!”

“Yep. I didn’t know it, but that first night that Baptiste brought me out here, I was so overwhelmed by everyone’s kindness, I didn’t say much. I think sometimes, when you’re the quiet one in the room, you hear things, and they just click into place for you. That’s what happened that night.

“We were all sitting on the front porch of the big house. Baptiste was right beside me, making sure I was okay. I can’t even remember what was said, but suddenly, it all started to make sense for me. My ex was connected to what happened to Alec and Mac. I wasn’t sure how at the time, but it turned out to be true.”

“That’s just crazy,” said Ally, shaking her head. “Did you fall in love with Baptiste right away?” Rose smiled at her, blushing even at her age.

“I couldn’t figure out why he was being so kind to me. I mean, here he was, this big, tall, handsome man with his

whole life before him. I was running from an abusive husband, carrying his baby. What in the world would he want with me?"

"Everything," smiled Ally.

"I found that out pretty quickly," laughed Rose. "At first, I knew that he was thinking he wouldn't be able to love another man's baby. Then everything changed. He felt her move, and suddenly, I wasn't allowed to move without a dozen pillows surrounding me and men with machine guns." Both women laughed.

"They all were amazing handling my divorce. I'll never be able to thank Kari enough for the work she did on that. But all of the men, Trak, Tailor, Alec, all of them were wonderful. I thank God every day for giving me this second chance, Ally."

"I know what you mean. I got my second chance with Vince," she said quietly.

"Were you married before?"

"No. But I was involved in a one-percenter club. I didn't know it at the time. I was young and stupid and thought I knew way more than my parents." Rose nodded with a

knowing grin. “It was a nightmare, and I was lucky that I was able to run. My mother wouldn’t let me come home, so I had to figure it out on my own.

“I finished my high school degree and then applied for loans to attend nursing school. The night Vince found me, I was working the late shift at a late-night clinic. He came in with a young girl who’d been beaten and raped by a motorcycle gang. I thought he was one of them.”

“Was he?” frowned Rose.

“No. No, he was undercover, working to stop a pedophile. When they finally tracked the man down, he had Keith.”

“That’s right,” said Rose. “I remember Alec bringing him home. I wasn’t as proficient with sign language back then, but Mama Irene made sure we all had lessons. That little boy hit the jackpot when our team walked in to save him.”

“He did,” smiled Ally. “He’s grown into a wonderful man. I tell you, Rose, I never thought I’d have this life. To meet a man like Vince and be enveloped in his protection and love seems like something that wasn’t meant for a girl like me.”

“Why would you say that?” she scolded. “Ally, you are one of the most amazing women I know. You’re an unbelievably talented nurse, an amazing mother and wife, and you’re a great friend. I’m so grateful for you every day.”

“That means so much to me, Rose. It’s hard sometimes to find the time for each of us to have alone time or special time with another wife. I’m glad we got to do this.”

“Me too. Now, would you like to know what I have in my bag?” she smiled.

“Woman, if you didn’t bring junk food, I might have to make you leave,” laughed Ally.

“I love that as a nurse, your kryptonite is junk food,” she laughed. “Of course, I brought that. I also brought the ingredients for a ridiculously over-the-top pizza. After that, it’s cheese puffs, nacho cheese chips, popcorn, and soda with sugar.” Rose raised her brows up and down, and Ally burst out laughing.

“Oh, Rose, I needed this night so much. It looks like the rain is letting up, and it’s getting cooler. What do you say we go make that pizza and start the fire?”

“I think that sounds perfect.”

After making their pizza with extra cheese, extra pepperoni, mushrooms, olives, onions, peppers, and anchovies, after all there were no men tonight, the women started in on the junk food.

“Oh,” said Ally excitedly. “I just remembered I have a half-gallon of chocolate peanut butter ice cream in the freezer.”

“Ally, what if we mixed the popcorn with the ice cream?”

“You are evil,” said Ally, staring at her. “And absolutely perfect.”

With empty soda cans, chip bags, and kernels of popcorn everywhere, they decided to forgo the movie, instead opting for karaoke. After renditions of Pat Benatar, Whitney Houston, and Bruce Springsteen, they ended up doing a duet of Donny and Marie Osmond.

Laughing so hard they could barely breathe, both women fell onto the cushiony sofa, hugging one another. With the lights out, only the fire lending illumination in the room, they closed their eyes.

“Thank you for this, Rose.”

“Thank you, Ally.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I’m starting to get really tired of this bullshit,” said Gaspar. “We’ve been chasing down these kids for almost a week. We know the odds of finding them get smaller and smaller as time goes on. Maybe we’ve lost our touch.” Nine, Ian, and Ghost looked at him, shaking their heads.

“We haven’t lost our touch, Gaspar. We’ll find the girls, I promise you. The boys are making little baby steps. At least we know why Erica left home. Code wanted to fucking beat the shit out of that kid, and we should have let him,” said Ghost.

“Maybe another time,” smirked Nine. “I say for now, we continue doing what we’re doing. See if we can get those kids to talk to some of us.”

“We could offer candy or money?” said Ian.

“Yeah. Let’s take candy and money from the big scary men and see if we all get arrested for solicitation.” Ian grinned at Ghost.

“Sorry. Wasn’t thinking about it that way. I do think we bribe them, though. If they give us something useful, we



pay for a meal for them. Nothing over the top. Pay for it and leave. I can let the sheriff and chief of police know what we're doing," said Gaspar.

"Okay. Who do we have on tonight?" asked Nine.

"Well," smirked Ian, "these two wanted to be part of it, even though they're still living on the property. Tailor and Alec."

"Children searching for children," frowned Ghost.

"That could work out for us. Maybe we can send Zulu and Rory next."

Zulu, a former SEAL and massive human being, along with Rory Baine, a former MARSOC, were about as badass as they come. Sending them to query children probably wouldn't yield the results they wanted.

"If we need them, we can always call. Let the big goofballs see what they can come up with."



"How are we supposed to fit on those beds?" frowned Alec. As the youngest child and brother to the Robicheaux boys, Alec was beyond compare to his brothers' own hulking sizes. Six-foot-eight and more than three hundred pounds, he

was a goliath. Standing next to him was Billy Joe ‘Tailor’ Bongard, one of the original members of the REAPER Security team. Tailor was just a smidge shorter and a few pounds heavier.

Both men had height, bulk, and a childlike attitude that often got them in trouble. Staring at the two queen-sized beds, they knew it would be a bad night’s sleep for them.

“I don’t think they got the room so the beds would fit us and be comfortable. It’s just convenient,” said Tailor. “Although, my legs are gonna hang off that thing and touch the floor.”

“Well, I guess we spend more time on the streets tonight. At least there’s no rain. It’s cold as a bitch, but no rain. Bundle up.”

“I’m hungry,” frowned Tailor.

“Don’t start that now. I’m hungry too. Come on, let’s see what we can find.” Alec and Tailor ducked through the door, realizing in the buildings around here, they would be ducking a lot. Out in the streets, they immediately attracted attention from children and women alike. The crude things being spewed at them by the young and old women were making them incredibly uncomfortable.

“When did women start to be so forward?” asked Alec.

“They’ve always been this way. You know that. It was one of the reasons I fell in love with Lena. She didn’t say anything rude. She looked up at me from the nurses’ station in that hospital she was workin’ at in New Mexico and said, ‘you sure block the light.’” Alec laughed, shaking his head.

“I guess we do, don’t we? She was the one that helped Sniff recover, right?”

“Yeah. We found that boy bein’ held, those fools doin’ experiments on him all because he thought he would be earnin’ a living. Boy was homeless, Alec. Served his country and ended up homeless.”

“Fucking burns me up,” said Alec.

“He helped us on that op, and I never forgot it. Carried that boy outta there and got him help. I was surprised when Lena was there. She’d been at Trak’s grandfather’s funeral a few days before with Ajei. That little girl stole my heart, brother. I got her to eat her vegetables, and she waved at me with a big smile. Damn. I was cooked.”

Alec smiled at the big man. Ajei was Lena’s little sister. She’d been taking care of her since their parents died,

but they were unhappy in New Mexico. Meeting Tailor changed their lives. Now, Ajei was a nurse at their clinic and hospital, married to Luke, Gaspar's oldest son.

“She was always worried that her little bitty size would make me unhappy. Brother, I'd carry that woman around on my back just to be close to her.”

“You two make a great couple,” smirked Alec. “She keeps you in line and makes you eat what you're supposed to. Until you cheat.”

“You cheat with me, don't forget,” laughed Tailor.

“I know,” laughed Alec. “You know, for a long time, I was ashamed of my size. When I had that growth spurt and everyone was accusing me of using drugs, I just didn't know what to do. It's part of what made me lose my shit on them college boys in Baltimore.”

“You lost your shit with them college boys because they were touching them girls. It's hard bein' men our size,” said Tailor. “I do remember that big Russian bein' nearly as big as you.”

“Yeah. We get a postcard from him every year tellin' us that they're doing well, him and his little girl. That was the

weirdest shit ever.”

“Brother, watchin’ you and Lissa fall in love was the weirdest shit ever,” laughed Tailor. “You acted like you’d never been with a woman before.” Alec didn’t say anything, just looking down at his big feet.

“Alec?”

“I had been. I mean, you know how it is. Women wanna know what we got. At six-foot-eight they should have a good guess. I suppose they wanna see it for themselves. It just was never a good experience for me.”

“I know what you mean. I’d had a lotta bad hook-ups as well.” He looked at his friend, then smiled. “Be honest. Anybody on our team you’d be afraid of?” They both looked at one another and answered in the same breath.

“Trak!” Laughing, they turned into the north side of the Tremé neighborhood, watching as kids played kickball in the street. The street lights were already on, at least the ones that worked. When the ball was kicked past the boys, Tailor stopped it with his foot, looking at Alec.

“Mister! Kick it here,” yelled a boy. Not wanting to frighten the kids away, Tailor kicked the ball back to them,

then kept walking closer to them. When they were a few yards from them, the two men stopped, crouching low in the street.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” asked Alec. The boys turned to stare at them, then looked at one another.

“You one of them creeps that likes little boys?” asked one of the kids.

“No,” said Alec. “I’m married with a son of my own and grandchildren. I just want to ask you a few questions about two girls that are missing.”

The group of boys moved a little closer but stayed a distance away. Alec noticed that two of the boys wore sandals despite the cold.

“You boys don’t have warm clothes?” he asked.

“We got enough,” said one of the boys. Tailor just nodded.

“You know, when I was a younger man, I had a hard time finding clothes to fit me. I had to sew everything myself. It’s how I got my name. Tailor.”

“Really? Don’t only girls sew?” asked the boy.

“Well, I’m not a girl, so that should answer your question.” He smiled at the boy, knowing he meant nothing by

the comment. He pulled out Erica's photo, holding it up.

"One of the girls we're looking for is this girl, Erica. She used to hang out with a girl named Marsha. Did you know them?"

"I saw her a few times," said one of the boys. "She was always nice. If she had extra food, she'd give it to us."

"That is nice," said Alec. "Do you know where they stayed? Was there a house or a park where they usually slept?"

"We sleep all over, mister. Don't stay in the same place twice, or someone might get you."

"Do you boys not have a home?" asked Tailor. The knife in his gut was killing him. These kids needed a safe place to stay.

"Some of us do, but it ain't worth goin' home to. I go home if it's too wet or cold, but that's all. Ain't worth the spankin'."

"And the rest of you?" asked Alec.

"We go to the shelters or sometimes sleep on the back porch at his house. He gets us a blanket, but when his daddy wakes up, he chases us off."

“Let me ask you something. Have you ever heard of something called the invisible?” asked Tailor.

“Invisible? No. I ain’t never heard of that. Hey, mister, you got any food on you? You look like someone that eats a lot.”

“Come with us,” said Alec. The boys immediately started to back up, but Alec put his hands in the air. “We’re just going over to the Creole Kitchen. Come on.” They walked toward the small corner restaurant, not even looking to see if the boys were behind them. A small store next to them had souvenirs, clothing, and other items for sale.

“You get ‘em some food,” said Tailor. “I’ll get ‘em all some sweatshirts and warm socks.” Alec could only nod at his friend. They might be giants, but their hearts were nearly as large. When Alec walked into the restaurant, he pointed to a table, and the five boys took a seat.

“Can you read?” he asked the boys.

“Course we can. We ain’t stupid,” said the oldest boy.

“My apologies,” smirked Alec. “Take a look at the menu. Order whatever you want.”

“Is this a trick, mister?”



“No trick. Fill your bellies.” The boys started rattling off orders to the waitress, who only smiled at Alec. A few minutes later, Tailor walked back in carrying two large sacks of sweatshirts, socks, and stocking caps.

“Put ‘em on,” he said. “It’s gonna be cold tonight. If you want us to find you a safe place to stay, we can do that.”

“No,” said one of the boys adamantly. “They’ll send us to a state home, and that’s worse.”

“Okay, okay,” said Tailor. “But it’s dangerous out here on the streets.” The boys all shrugged, shoveling food into their mouths. When they were done, they pulled on their new clothes, marveling at how much warmer they were. The waitress returned with three bags of takeout food that the boys had ordered for later.

“If you need help, promise you’ll find it,” said Alec.

“We promise, mister. Thanks!” The boys went running toward the street again, carrying their next meals. The oldest stopped and turned back, running back toward the restaurant.

“Hey, mister. Erica was always runnin’ from some guy in an old blue car. Don’t know anything else, but that might

help you.” He waved and ran back to his friends, disappearing between two houses.

“That fucking blue car again,” said Tailor. “We need to find that car. How hard can this shit be?”

“Clearly a lot harder than we think. I don’t think I’ve ever run into more dead ends in my whole life.”

“Well, we’re not gonna solve it all tonight. Let’s do another walk-through. The streets are startin’ to clear, and the wind is picking up. Tomorrow morning, we’ll see if we can talk to some of the waiters and get more information.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Lena and Lissa walked toward their cottage on Belle Fleur. Although their husbands were considered part of the senior team because they both had businesses on the main property, they still lived in the cottages. Knowing they were going to have their night together, they'd gone to the Robicheaux General Store and purchased some items for the evening.

Both women were extremely health conscious, Lena a registered nurse, and Lissa a dance teacher and former ballerina. They would have their dessert, but it would be frozen yogurt with fresh fruit. Waving at the others when they passed their cottages, they walked toward Lissa's cottage, where they would spend their evening.

"It has been a day," said Lissa, setting the items on the counter.

"Girl, I agree. The hospital has been so busy this week. I think every fool going to Mardi Gras tripped and fell, scraped something, broke something, or ate something they

shouldn't. I'm tellin' you I think we should shut down over Mardi Gras." Lissa laughed at her little friend.

At nearly six-feet tall, she towered above the tiny five-foot-two Lena. It was impossible to look at either one of them and imagine they were with the giants on the team.

"It happens to me every year after Christmas. Parents or grandparents that buy a years' worth of dance lessons for their little darlings, who really don't want to dance at all. They only want to listen to their kind of music and jump around the studio. One little girl just sat on the floor making 'snow' angels on the wood. I couldn't even get her to stand up."

"I'm sorry, Lissa. That must be awful for you. I know how much you love dance and take pride in your craft. Maybe you do interviews before people buy the lessons. That way, you could judge the kids' interest and whether or not their parents or grandparents are wasting their money."

"That's a good idea. I might start to do that."

"Do you have any kids showing promising futures in dance?" asked Lena. She took out the ingredients for their salads and began chopping as Lissa made the dressing.

“One. She’s a lovely young girl, only thirteen. That girl is absolutely amazing, but I can tell she’s getting to the age where she doesn’t want to put the work in any longer. It makes me so sad. I poured myself into dance, praying I would be given a chance. This girl has *it*. You know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean,” nodded Lena. “When Ajei was little, I had her enrolled in all sorts of indigenous dance classes. She enjoyed it for a while until she was about fourteen.”

“What happened at fourteen?” asked Lissa.

“Luke,” smirked Lena. “I’m telling you, Lissa, we knew the moment those two met that they’d end up together. Luke was this tall, handsome, all-star athlete, then Navy SEAL. Ajei, well, she’s Ajei. She’s so beautiful. She reminds me every day of our mother.”

“She looks like you, Lena. All that beautiful black hair and your dark eyes. She’s just taller than you.”

“Thank you for saying that. Taking care of her prepared me for having my own children.” Lissa gave a pain-filled smile, looking down. “Lissa, honey, I’m sorry.”

“No. No, don’t be. I’m not usually sensitive about it anymore, but every once in a while, I wonder if Alec regrets not having a child of his own DNA.”

“You know that he doesn’t. Hell, I think he would have adopted every kid the team saved if you’d let him. As awful as Keith’s start in life was, he was a blessing for both of you.”

“He truly is,” smiled Lissa. “When Alec called and said he’d found a boy in that pedophile’s house, and he was deaf, my heart broke. I suffered from my own attack and abuse, but I was an adult. To do that to a child, it just didn’t make any sense to me.”

“It’s why all of these men do what they do. I’m so proud of them all,” said Lena. She set the salads on the counter, then nodded toward the sofa. “Let’s break my rule tonight and eat on the sofa. I just want to be comfortable.”

“Good idea,” smiled Lissa. “Keith has been such a blessing to us both. He’s taught me patience and love, kindness and understanding. Now, he’s a father and will most likely be a grandfather one day.”

“Jak is a very handsome young man,” smiled Lena. She took a bite of the salad, moaning in satisfaction. They ate

in silence, just listening to the wind pick up outside. Standing, she started the fireplace and turned up the heat.

“When Tailor is home, I can’t kick the heat up. He’s always hot, which is great when we’re in bed. But when I’m there alone, I’m freezing.”

“I know what you mean,” said Lissa, laughing. “Alec refuses to put the thermostat above sixty-five. I just can’t. I’m cold all the time as well.” Lena looked at Lissa, then had a perplexed expression on her face.

“What are you thinking?”

“Well, I’m just thinking that you and I both should have gone through menopause. I haven’t had any hot flashes, have you?”

“None,” said Lissa. “I always thought it was because of the damage to my female organs.”

“No. I mean, possibly, but you still should have experienced something. I’ve had nothing. No hot flashes, no night sweats, nothing. In fact, I haven’t treated one woman on this property that experienced that.”

“Do you think it’s our magic pond?” On the property was a mysterious thermal pond with minerals and composites

no one was able to identify. However, it had amazing healing properties and seemed to keep them all young and able.

“I think it could be,” she smirked. Holding up the glass of white wine, she clinked glasses with Lissa. “Cheers to the magic pond.”

For dessert, they had strawberry frozen yogurt with sliced berries on top. Feeling satisfied and guilt-free, they curled up on the sofa with their blankets, just talking. They played two rounds of Monopoly and then two rounds of Trivial Pursuit before they admitted they were exhausted.

“It must be midnight, right?” said Lissa, yawning. Lena looked at the clock above the stove.

“Oh, honey. We are old. It’s not even ten.”

“God, I am old! You know what? I don’t care. I’m tired, and I know you are. Let’s get a good night’s sleep and go for an early morning walk.”

“Deal,” grinned Lena.

When the light finally crept across their faces, they both smiled at one another.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well?” asked Lissa.



“I slept like a baby. Warm and cozy. What time is it? I’m sure we beat everyone getting up.” Lissa turned to look at the clock and burst into laughter.

“Lena, I think our bodies might not be signaling menopause, but our body clocks are. It’s almost nine. We slept in.” Lena just stared at her friend, open-mouthed.

“Well, damn.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

Erica looked at the other kids around her and just shook her head. Why did they not seem to mind being here? She didn't ask for this. She damn sure didn't want it, but trying to run was futile. They'd been good to her so far. Plenty to eat, plenty to drink, but the hours were brutal.

"You're being requested," said the man behind her.

"I don't want to do this," she said.

"It's a request. Twice as much involved when someone requests you." She stared at him, hating him for drawing her into this.

"I hate you."

"You can hate me all you want, but you're making a fucking lot of money. When this is done, you'll be just fine. No worse the wear."

"Says you," she frowned.

"Just get yourself made up, sweetheart. They won't wait forever."

God, she hated him. He'd been nice to her when she first arrived in the city, offering to give her rides wherever she, Lashon, and Marsha wanted to go. He would buy them meals and even bought them warm coats. She knew it was wrong, but he sucked them in.

Taking the girls to the warehouse to show them around made sure that Marsha and Lashon were hooked. After all, when you have no money, this much money being thrown at you is a lot. Poor Lashon, she wasn't bright enough to figure it all out, but she was more than willing to learn.

It ate at Erica. None of this would be happening if her damn brother had just left her alone. Now, she was forced to do what another man wanted, all for money.

"Just do it," said Alanna, the girl seated next to her.

"I don't want to do this anymore," said Erica. "I know you like it, but I don't."

"You're good at it, Erica. You're making a lot of money for them and for you. This could be a big break for you."

"A big break? I don't want this kind of big break."

“There’s something wrong with you then,” she said, shaking her head. She put her headphones on and just smirked at the other girl.

Lashon. Did anyone even find her? Was she alive? Dead? Buried? She knew nothing, and no one would tell her anything. So far, no one had hit her, but she still had to sit here and wait, day after day, hour after hour.

She knew that she didn’t have a choice at this point. She was returning the favor to him, but when she was done, she would leave and go somewhere far, far away.

“Erica! You’re on, let’s go!” She nodded, taking a deep breath.

“Let’s go, boys. I hear you asked for me specifically. Let’s make it good.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

Hannah smiled at Lauren as they walked toward Hannah's cabin together. They'd missed out on their chance for a girls' night, so they were taking the opportunity to do so now. Both women had been part of the original REAPER team. Lauren was the second wife to join.

"It's been too long, Lauren," smiled Hannah. "I feel like there's always something that needs our attention with the teams, ops, our families, weddings. It's always crazy around here."

"I know," nodded the other woman, "but I kind of like it that way. When Trak and I were first married, he never let me out of his sight. Even today, I'll be sitting somewhere reading or talking to someone, and he'll come up behind me and scare the hell out of me." Hannah laughed, nodding at her friend.

"When I got pregnant with the first set of twins, I wanted to cut his penis off in the middle of the night. But it's such a lovely penis," smirked Lauren. "Then, when the

second set of twins came, I said no more. We have to be done.”

“Did you get your tubes tied?”

“I did. I wasn’t taking any chances with Mr. Redhawk and his super-sperm.”

“Oh, Lauren, you make me laugh,” said Hannah. “It’s wonderful for you, though. Now you have four grown children, all married with amazing spouses, and you’ve got grandchildren. That has to be comforting for you.”

“It is, believe me, I love it. And Trak is just a big pushover with all of them. He acts all serious and tough, but that man has a gentle side that very few ever get to see. I’m so lucky he found me, Hannah.

“That night of Erin and Nine’s engagement, I was in that pub begging for food and a job. My arm was broken, my face was a mess, there were bruises around my neck. I was just falling apart. Erin was the one who had the courage to reach out to me in the ladies’ room. She made me feel so comfortable.”

“Did you ask for help right away?” asked Hannah.

“No. I was frightened when I saw them all. I walked out and saw Trak standing at the end of the bar. I remember everything so clearly. He was holding an ice-cold glass of tea, the beads running down the side of the glass. He stared right into my soul, Hannah. I didn’t think it was real, so I walked out.”

“You didn’t? Lauren, he was going to help you,” said Hannah. Lauren laughed at her.

“Oh, honey, he followed me. Scared the crap out of me as I got to the car. I dropped my keys, and he wasn’t about to let me leave alone. We went back inside, and the others started to ask me what happened. Big, strong, handsome Wilson immediately kneeled beside me, looking at some of my wounds.

“When I told my story, none of them were about to let me leave.”

“I don’t think I know the whole story,” frowned Hannah. “If it’s too painful to talk about it, you don’t have to.”

“That pain is long gone, Hannah. I was dating someone that was really pressuring me for sex. I just knew he wasn’t the right man. His family was very rich, and as it

turned, very corrupt. They were trying to tag and track American military men and women.”

“Wait, is this the group where we found Sniff?”

“Yep. I fell in love with Trak immediately. I was terrified, hurting, scared, but I knew that if I left that man, I would hate myself forever. Although thinking back on it, I’m not sure he would have allowed me to leave,” laughed Lauren. “Did you know that I actually met his grandfather while he was still alive? Not the ghost Nathan, the live Nathan.”

“Wow! Was he as amazing as he is now in ghost form?”

“Even more so. He was so kind. That’s also the trip we discovered that Erin is Trak’s cousin. We all connect, Hannah. Every last one of us connects in some way.” The other woman nodded at her, smiling. “You know, I remember when you and Code fell in love.”

“Me too,” smiled Hannah. “I remember it every day, and how lucky I am that he didn’t just walk away from me. I was so hideous to him. I should have known that he was a good man. If Angel trusted him, I should have trusted him.”

“You came to help review banking records, right?”



“Yes. That was my field, but I’d been laid off. It was perfect timing. Several months before that, at your wedding, in fact, Code and I danced, and he kissed me. I was heavier then. Not feeling good about myself, and when we kissed, he just pulled back and said ‘thank you.’”

“Oh. Not cool, Code.”

“Actually, it was cool. He didn’t want to ask me out until he spoke with Angel. Then, when I came back for Angel and Mary’s wedding, I’d lost sixty pounds, cut and colored my hair, changed my style, everything. I was hoping he would notice me and come and talk to me. When he didn’t, I figured he didn’t really like me.”

“Why didn’t he?” asked Lauren.

“He didn’t recognize me,” blushed Hannah, looking down. “God, I was so awful to him. He should have slapped me or something, but he just calmly told me to basically get my shit together and that he liked me the way I was, even heavier.”

“I find that to be true with all these men, Hannah. Each one of our team is beautiful or handsome in their own way. But it’s not what attracts us to one another. It’s

something different. Something I can't really put my finger on."

"We all know it's Mama Irene's magic, Lauren," laughed Hannah.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "Any more, I keep thinking that it's our own magic. I think we are a group of like-minded individuals who found one another. We all have a sense of duty and pride, high ethical values, high family values, and a blood oath to always do what's right."

"Maybe," nodded Hannah. "Or maybe she was stirring pots and making wishes all the way back sending them to Virginia."

"Well, if she was, I owe her flowers every week for the life she gave me."

"I know what you mean, me too. The only regret I have is that Mom and Tommy didn't stay with all of us here. They wanted a life outside of all of this, closer to other family. I love that they had thirty years of happiness together."

"They only passed recently, right?"

"Yes. Tommy died on a Tuesday morning, and Mom died on Wednesday afternoon. I think that's the way it was

supposed to be.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without Trak,” said Lauren. “He’s older than I am, and I do worry about that all the time.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about it,” said Hannah. “Whatever is in the mineral hot springs at Belle Fleur and here on our island is definitely magical. I don’t know how long we’ll all live, but Mama Irene and Matthew definitely seem to be breaking all records.”

“How about some food?” smiled Lauren.

“That’s why I came! That and your magnificent company,” grinned Hannah. “What do we have?”

“Well, I was thinking I miss the old classics when we used to have barbeques at the Virginia site. The simple things of hot dogs, potato salad, things like that.”

“Ooohhh, I can’t remember the last time I had a hot dog,” smiled Hannah. “I love a good one, especially in the summer or when we go to a ballgame.”

“Well, you’re gonna love these. Matthew made them from venison. They’re lean, cooked perfectly, and so good with a little spicey mustard. When we’re done, we have

Mama Irene's coconut cake, a bottle of wine, and Charlie's new book to review."

"Oh, my God, you just made my entire month! Let's get to it."

When Code and Trak showed up the next morning after working all night with the tech crew, the two men smiled at their beautiful sleeping wives. There were remnants of the sleepover left everywhere, but what made them grin even more was the smudge of cake on their lips.

"We're lucky bastards, brother," said Code. Trak grinned at his friend, nodding.

"The luckiest."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Gaspar and Dex decided to hit the casinos. Not to lose their money but rather to track down anyone who might have given the girls work or seen them. With several in the New Orleans area, it was going to be a long night for the two men.

Only in the last few years had casinos been allowed to build on land. Previously, they had to be water-based, and when gambling was occurring needed to be away from their docks. Now, it was much easier to get into them and see what was happening.

“Where the fuck did all these people come from?” asked Gaspar.

“Brother, it’s carnival season, you know that. Even when it’s done, the crowds hang around. We just need to find the people who might have seen the girls or spoken to them.”

The first casino was built into a reputable hotel chain, and from the outside looking in, it appeared everything was on the up-and-up. It bothered Gaspar to see so many senior citizens and those with limited incomes betting their entire

checks at a slot machine or roulette wheel. He wasn't a gambler, except maybe with his life a time or two.

"Let's see if we can speak with someone in human resources," said Dex.

"Won't they be gone for the night?"

"No. They run this operation twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five. Someone is always here." After asking a few people where they could find the human resources person, they were finally led down a private hallway and asked to wait outside. A few minutes later, a woman who appeared to be in her eighties stepped out.

"Good evening, my name is Gaspar Robicheaux, and this..."

"I know who you are," she said, staring him up and down with a derisive sneer.

"You do? I'm afraid I'm at a loss. Do we know one another?" asked Gaspar.

"That figures," said the woman, shaking her head.

"We were seein' one another, Gaspar. On and off. Then you met that tiny little blonde and never called me again." Gaspar

swallowed, and his head kept repeating the phrase ‘oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.’

“Amber Theriot,” he nodded. “I’m sorry I didn’t recognize.”

“I haven’t aged as well as you, it seems,” she said, staring at him again. “Are you looking for a job?”

“No. As I said, this is my colleague, Dex Lock. We’re looking for a couple of missing kids and wondered if maybe they’d been hanging out here, maybe looking for part-time work.”

“We don’t hire anyone under the age of twenty-one. It’s our policy, and we don’t break policy. Sometimes, kids will stand outside the hotel waiting for a few bucks or wait outside the restaurant for food. A lot of them hang by the dumpsters at night and take whatever gets tossed.”

“And you didn’t call anyone to help them?” frowned Gaspar.

“Look, I got enough to worry about with three thousand employees. If someone can’t feed their kids, it ain’t my problem.” She stared at him as he looked at her,

perplexed. “You know, you should have given me an explanation for why you weren’t calling me anymore.”

“What you just said is explanation enough,” he frowned. “You and I met a lifetime ago, Amber. I never promised you anything. We were having a good time, that’s all. How you speak about those kids would have made me run as fast as I can from you. They’re not throwaways. They deserve a shot at life.”

“God, you were always such a bleeding heart. Mr. Army man. Off to save the world again. I shoulda’ known a good Louisiana girl wasn’t gonna be good enough for you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Where a girl is from doesn’t matter to me. Her heart, courage, and attitude do. You might remember that.” They started to walk away, and they heard the woman clear her throat.

“Gaspar? Check with the pit boss. He sees everything.” He nodded at her, then walked away with Dex.

“Damn, brother. You are aging fucking well,” smirked Dex.

“Apparently so,” said Gaspar. “I would have never recognized her in a million years. She looks twenty years



older than me.”

“Were you really dating her when you met Alexandra?” asked Dex.

“Calling it dating is a bit of a stretch. We would hook up when I was in town or needed, you know, relief.”

“Ah, I see,” nodded Dex. “No judgment, Gaspar. After my pelvis and leg were shattered, and I couldn’t continue in the teams, I was pretty much working my way through the female population. I was a male whore of the highest variety. Trained by the government. And I damn sure knew how to use my equipment. Meeting your sister changed my world.”

“You changed her world, too, Dex. I wouldn’t have let you near her if I didn’t know you were a damn fine SEAL and a good man.”

“I appreciate that,” he nodded. “To be continued. I think that’s our pit boss up there.”

The two men walked confidently toward the gentlemen, carefully watching all of the tables around him. When he spotted Dex and Gaspar walking toward him, he

immediately tapped on security to make sure he wasn't about to be attacked.

“We don't want any trouble,” said Dex. “We'd like to ask some questions about a couple of young girls that disappeared.”

“Oh,” said the man, raising his brows. “Well, if they're over twenty-one, I can help. Otherwise, they wouldn't be allowed on the floor.”

“Your HR director said that sometimes the kids would hang outside for handouts or near the dumpster for food.”

“That's true, but I rarely saw them. We have to exit through the employee parking garage, which is in the opposite direction. I see kids hanging outside the hotels, all of them, all the time. Folks will usually give them a few bucks and hope they move on, but they usually don't.”

“If you hear of anything, will you let us know?” asked Gaspar, handing him the white card.

“Sure,” he said, looking around. “But if you want a possible lead, head over to Belle Creole, the riverboat. They hired a lot of young girls who weren't twenty-one. Not sure how they got away with it, but I know for a fact they were

doing it. My own daughter got hired over there until I found out and made her quit.”

“Thanks for the tips,” said Gaspar.

“Okay, so you were seeing that woman on and off, then met Alexandra.”

“I didn’t exactly meet her,” said Gaspar. “Tony found her in one of the old tree houses on the islands. She’d been raped, sodomized, beaten nearly to death. Her attacker threw her into the bayou, and she was able to get herself to the island and climb up into that tree.”

“Fuck me, brother. I’m sorry.”

“Me too, but we took care of the bastard. In fact, he was the same animal that attacked my sister, Rachele. She was the one who finally shot him. But not before he stabbed Tony and killed him. I’ll never be able to repay that kid.”

“I think we are, in a different sort of weird way. He has his own family now. Albeit a family of ghosts,” smirked Dex.

“True. Alexandra was so tiny, so helpless and lifeless, I couldn’t leave her alone at that hospital. I was supposed to meet Amber that night. That’s why I didn’t call her. She

started blowing up my phone, and I just couldn't deal with it right then. I could have handled it better."

"You were a bit preoccupied. Don't beat yourself up. Besides, I could have handled things with Marie better. I knew something was horribly wrong, but she was a tough nut to crack." Gaspar laughed, shaking his head.

"You try being the oldest sister of fifteen, third in line behind me and Miller. She grew up a tough nut. If Mama wasn't available, it was Marie who jumped in to handle the kids. All of us. Miller and I were already gone when she left for college, but when she said she wasn't coming home, damn. It about killed us. We wanted everyone to come back."

"I can't imagine what's that like. Well, I can now because I have all of you, but I couldn't before. It was always just me and my team."

"Sometimes, that's enough, brother," said Gaspar.

They had to wait in line for thirty minutes just to get on the riverboat, but once they did, they headed straight to the main gambling rooms. Both men were shocked at what they were seeing. Most of the cocktail waitresses couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen years old.

“Where is Alcohol Beverage Control? Doesn’t the state come in and check this shit out?” asked Dex.

“They’re supposed to. Unless of course the casino is paying someone off.” Gaspar frowned at the room, then spotted two men who were staring at them. He walked calmly, confidently toward them, never letting his vision sway.

“Two behind us.”

“I know. They’re slow and stupid.” Standing above the two men who thought they had sized up the men walking toward them was enjoyable. Both backed up, looking at the gray-haired men with chests wide enough to still play linebacker for the Saints.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” asked one man.

“Yeah, you can tell me why there are underage girls serving alcohol on this boat.” They both laughed nervously, shaking their heads.

“Old man, those girls are all over twenty-one,” he smirked. Gaspar took another step toward him, so close his hot breath blew the stray hairs from the man’s forehead.

“You call me old man again, and I’m going rip your fucking head off.” The other man swallowed, looking at his

partner, then shook his head.

“What do you want?”

“I want to know about two kids that went missing. Girls. They’d be probably sixteen or seventeen. One is Erica. The other is Marsha. I don’t know her last name.”

“We have a Marsha who is relatively new. She’s working the slots area on deck two. But she’s eighteen.”

“She’s still not legal,” said Dex. “But guess what? As long as she’s unharmed and not being held against her will, I’m going to let you live.” He nodded, turning to the other man beside him.

“Take them to her.”

On deck two, people were popping pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters into slot machines at an alarming rate. Every now and then, you’d hear the telltale signs of someone hitting a jackpot, at least a small one.

“There. That’s her over there,” said the man.

“Appreciate it.” The two men walked toward the young woman, who immediately plastered on a fake smile.

“Are you Marsha?” asked Gaspar.

“Y-yeah. Who are you?” she asked.

“We want to ask you about Erica.”



“I can’t believe it. I went back to find her after I got this job, but she and Lashon were gone. They gave me an advance so I could get a ratty little place in the warehouse district. It’s awful, but it’s dry and sort of clean. I’m working on that.”

“She went missing a few weeks back. Albert, one of the waiters at the restaurant you guys would stand outside of, he came to us worried about all three of you.”

“Albert,” she smiled. “That old queen was the sweetest. He offered for us to sleep on his living room sofa, but we were all scared. You hear such horrible stories.”

“I understand,” Dex said. “Listen, Marsha, Lashon died. It was totally an accident, we think. She ate something with cinnamon in it.”

“Jesus, she was allergic. She told us that all the time. Did they hurt her? She wasn’t right in the head. Erica and I tried to watch out for her.”

“They didn’t hurt her, from what we can tell. But we’re very concerned about Erica and several other missing kids.”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “We went our separate ways usually during the day. She might have met someone, but I just don’t know.”

“Okay, thanks. If you think of anything else, please give us a call.”

“Hey, you’re not gonna call my stepdad, are you?” she asked. “Please don’t call him.”

“You’re eighteen, right?” She nodded at them, knowing she was supposed to be twenty-one. “No. We’re not going to call him. Did he do something to you?”

“He tried, but I left before he could. My mom ditched us a while back. I think he was pissed that I was left behind, then kinda got happy that I was.”

“Would you like us to pay him a visit?” asked Gaspar. The girl smiled up at the two older men, then shook her head.

“I’m okay now. Let him live his miserable existence.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

Marie and Alexandra took another turn around the gardens, chatting and laughing about anything and everything. Although she had no children of her own, she lived vicariously as a mother through her nieces, nephews, and great-nieces and -nephews. Alexandra and Gaspar had adopted six children after her attack, all biological siblings.

Now, all of those children were giving her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Yet to look at the beautiful little pixie, she didn't appear to be more than forty or forty-five.

As the oldest Robicheaux daughter, Marie looked very much like the rest of her siblings. She still had the thick, gorgeous auburn hair, her whiskey-colored eyes sharp and large. Her curves held true, everything seemingly where it should be. At least Dex never complained.

“Do you ever sit back and think about all that we've come through?” asked Marie. Alexandra nodded at the other woman.

“I do, which is highly unusual for me. I’m considered on the autism spectrum, although you really wouldn’t know it anymore. Gaspar changed so much inside me. I didn’t understand certain kinds of humor or sarcasm, I had trouble distinguishing emotions, and I was such a mess physically. It’s shocking to me that he wanted me.”

“He loves you,” smiled Marie. “He’s always loved you. I remember when Mama called and said I should come home for your wedding. Lord, I wanted to. I wanted any excuse to get away from that man I was married to, but I knew if I tried, he’d kill me and maybe some of my family.”

“Marie, you know that your brothers wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. They would have stopped him before he ever got on-property.”

“I know, but I was so humiliated, Alexandra. I mean, my brothers were these big, badass Rangers in an elite security team, and I had let a man force me to do illegal things.”

“But you paid all the money back, Marie. Do you understand how unusual and admirable that is? I think he got exactly what he deserved. And so did you. You got Dex out of the deal.” Marie laughed, nodding her head as they took a seat in the island gardens.

Much like the huge maze and gardens on Belle Fleur, it had been recreated in a smaller form on their little escape island. It still smelled amazing, it looked beautiful, and it still felt as though it could heal your heart, soul, and mind.

“I remember walking into that auditorium to tell the team something and nearly ran over Dex. I could feel myself blushing from head to toe. All I could think was, don’t make a fool of yourself. I didn’t want to embarrass my brothers or the rest of the men.”

“You all were living in Shreveport, right?”

“No,” said Marie, shaking her head. “Lake Charles. I had no idea who and what that man was when I married him. I’d been writing grants for his family’s foundation, which turned out to be bogus. All the while thinking these veteran grants would help my brothers. When he hit me that first time, I was all set to leave. Then he told me what I’d been doing. The money I basically stole from the government and the organizations that could save my brother’s lives.”

“You didn’t know, Marie,” said Alexandra, touching her hand.

“I know. But I had to make it right. God, Dex was so amazing. That first time we made love, I realized that this was

what it was supposed to feel like. This is what love felt like. All those years of missing out on it, and suddenly, I knew exactly what it should feel like between a man and a woman.”

“I’m sorry you had to wait so long,” said Alexandra, “but I’m glad you found it in Dex. He’s an amazing man.”

“Did you fall in love with Gaspar right away?”

“I’m not sure. As I said, I have a hard time with emotions. He was the only man I ever allowed to get so close to me. I knew I had a long road to recovery, but when he asked me to marry him before we’d ever even been intimate, I knew I had a winner. In fact, he was carrying me and asked me. I didn’t realize the whole team was standing behind us and blurted out, ‘but we haven’t even had sex.’”

“Oh, gosh,” laughed Marie.

“Yeah, but he just kissed me and begged me to marry him. How could I refuse that? How could I refuse such a man? The night before our wedding, I finally made the decision to try and have sex with him. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I could.”

“Did you?” asked Marie with concern. It wasn’t that she wanted the details of her brother’s sex life, but she wanted

to know about their start in their marriage.

“We did. I won’t be specific. I know that would feel awkward, but he was so beautifully kind and gentle with me, Marie. I’m very tiny, and your brother is, well, not. That man has loved me only the way a Robicheaux man could.”

“That makes me very proud of him,” smiled Marie. “But then again, as the children of Irene and Matthew, I expected nothing less. I wasn’t here when the kids were brought in. Mama called to tell me that y’all were adopting six kids, and I thought I heard her wrong.”

“I know,” laughed Alexandra. “I told Gaspar I wanted five, and then he turns around and brings me six. I couldn’t believe it, Marie. My wish came true. I became the mother of six of the finest, most beautiful, intelligent children in the world.”

“But you’re not biased or anything.”

“No, not at all,” she laughed. “It’s been my greatest honor, next to being Gaspar’s wife.”

“Oh, Alexandra, my brother could not have chosen better than you. I’m sure you know that the clubhouse that you were found in on the island was one of the many Pops

built for us. It used to be that the boys had theirs, and the girls had a separate one. Then, one day, Pops says it's too many. We have to share.

“The boys were instantly protective of us. They were worried we might fall because their clubhouse was higher than ours. Then, they were worried about the younger girls. It was amazing to watch them grow into these wonderful men.”

“You were lucky to have all of this,” said Alexandra. “I know it was probably chaotic, but I'm sure it was wonderful as well. Instant friends, instant companions, and playmates.”

“Instant fights,” smirked Marie.

“Oh, really?”

“Really. I thought Gaspar and Pierre would kill one another over girls. They were in the same grade despite being eleven months apart. Camille and Claudette fought constantly over clothes. Baptiste and Rafe fought over everything. But it would peak and then go away for a while. You'd suddenly look out the window, and they were hugging like they were best friends.”

“That's because you were,” smiled Alexandra. “I can still see that. But you are right about your parents. They

taught you to envelop others into your family, make them family. That's probably the most remarkable thing I've ever been witness to."

"They are special people," smiled Marie. "What do you say we head inside and enjoy the gumbo I have on the stove? I made some cornbread, greens on the side."

"I'd love that."

After enjoying their meal together, the two women stayed up well past midnight just talking. It had been ages since either one had done that, and it was like you were a schoolgirl once again. It was the realization that despite their ages, they still needed girlfriends, good friends, to talk things through. Life, love, happiness, sadness, and menopause.

When Marie left in the morning, they promised to do it again soon, even setting the next date for their sleepover.

"Doesn't matter how old we get, Marie, we all need a little girlfriend time. You are the best, and I'm so blessed to have you as my sister-in-law," said Alexandra. She hugged the other woman, laughing.

"Ditto, honey. Ditto."

## CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

“Well,” said Nine, looking at everyone, “the good news is we found Marsha, and she’s safe. She had no idea where Erica was and didn’t know about Lashon. So, we’re down to looking for one girl now.”

“I think we should go to the fairgrounds this weekend,” said Code. “They’re having a car show, and that group we looked at earlier will be there. I know it’s a long shot, but it’s the only one we have right now. Even if they have every car in their club, we might be able to find out something. It’s at least worth a try.”

“I agree,” said Ghost. “I can go and take a couple of boys from the garage with me. We’ll make sure these guys are legit.”

“They’re having a bike show as well,” said Code. “I was thinking we could send you guys on the bikes, maybe draw some of their attention.”

“Okay, we can do that,” nodded Ghost. “I’ll get Skull and Razor from the garage with a few of the new bikes we just



created. That should definitely bring in some views. Of course, if we start getting asked to build more bikes, we're gonna need more people."

"Not a bad thing," smirked Nine. "You guys create some beautiful machines. I think we need to do more to advertise that."

"That's for another day," said Ghost. "For now, let's make sure we get this girl back and find out what happened to the others."

"What about the restaurant workers? Is anyone going back into town today to speak with them?" asked Nine.

"Teddy and Ian are on their way in," said Ghost. "It's Monday, so most of the restaurants don't open until four. That should give them plenty of time."

"I hope so," said Gaspar. "Time is the one thing we're running out of."



Teddy and Ian parked the car and started walking toward Albert's restaurant. After phoning him this morning, he promised he'd have as much of the waitstaff ready as possible.

“What do you think about all this, Teddy? You’re kind of the senior statesman in the group. What do you make of it?” asked Ian.

“Ian, that’s a nice way of saying I’m the old man of the group,” he smirked. “You boys know that I was never Special Forces, nor was I ever involved in security. But I do have common sense and a feeling for what’s right and what isn’t.

“Taking children is just so foreign to me. When I was a kid, hell, even when my own son was a boy, we’d open the front door and tell them all to go play until the street lights came on. Nowadays, parents have to monitor their kids’ phones, their electronics. I even heard someone say the other day that they put tracking devices in their backpacks. What kind of world is that?”

“I know, Teddy. Believe me, I ask myself that question every day. When we find kids, it’s the toughest thing in the world. I always watched my men extra closely after an op like that. They couldn’t handle it. Sometimes, I wouldn’t let them enter the room if I knew the kids were in bad shape. I just didn’t want them to see it.”

“But you did,” said Teddy quietly. “I know why you did it, Ian. Because you’re a damn fine leader and man. The

problem is that it left you with all the visions and nightmares.”

“You had a few of your own, didn’t you? I mean, you were in WWII, Teddy. I know that wasn’t a piece of cake.”

Teddy nodded, not saying anything for a few minutes. Ian wasn’t about to push him. He knew that many from the greatest generation didn’t want to speak of their service.

“It was a different time, Ian. It was a time when we did what we were told, completed the job, stuck our chin out, and said, ‘there, it’s done.’ We didn’t talk to anyone about it. We didn’t have any breakdowns, at least not on the outside. And we damn sure didn’t feel the need to take drugs for nightmares we were havin’. Again, we probably should have, but we didn’t.

“Losing my wife was devastating for me for a lot of reasons. She was my rock. The person I told everything to. I thought one day I could share some of that with my son, but he damn sure didn’t want to hear about it. I tried to like my daughter-in-law, but that was more than anyone should expect of a man.”

“But you have your grandson,” said Ian.

“I do,” smiled Teddy. “Milo’s folks turned into Jesus freaks. Again, nothing wrong with that. Except they were shovin’ it down that poor boy’s throat. He just rebelled, like I knew he would. They were terrible to him, and I covered for him as much as I could. Those fools thought he would become a reverend.

“Now, I don’t mind giving my share to the church, but they were giving so much they had nothing. They were living with me, in my house, and complaining about it. Neither one of them stopped for a minute to see that their faithful minister was driving new cars, had a beautiful home, and they were eating on my social security and veteran’s benefits.”

“I’m sorry, Teddy. That had to have sucked.”

“It was worth it to have Milo with me every day,” he smiled. “When he went off to join the military, I was so damn proud of him. His folks refused to even say goodbye. So, we planned a trip before he had to leave. Fished, hunted, everything. It was wonderful. I was never so proud as when he came home with that trident.

“When he met Lia, I knew that he’d met a good one. Then, when they asked me to move to Belle Fleur, I was packed within an hour. Everyone here, all of you, have made

this transition amazing for me, Ian. Matthew and I have so much in common, and Irene is just the best.

“Of course, having access to the pond has improved my life immeasurably. I can walk without pain from my arthritis, my blood pressure is down, I’m healthier than I’ve been in forty years.”

“We are very lucky indeed,” smirked Ian.

“Remind me how you met Faith,” he asked.

“I had been shot and needed a place to stay. I’d been couch-surfing when we weren’t deployed. Long story, but I was in a six-year relationship and never once asked her to marry me. She took everything, left me with an empty apartment, and empty bank account.”

“Ouch.”

“I sort of deserved it, Teddy. I should have left long before. Anyway, I didn’t want to live on-base with the kids, and I was just kind of lost. My CO tells me there’s this ‘older woman’ who needs someone to stay with her. Fuck. I knocked on her door, and there’s this gorgeous redhead in little white shorts with paint stains everywhere, and I almost died.”  
Teddy laughed, shaking his head.

“For the first few weeks, we were just friends. I couldn’t go back to duty until the shoulder was healed, and she was waiting for her semester to begin to start teaching again. During that time, she was trying to rebuild her house, and it was a mess. The day I went back to duty, and she went back to work, we kissed and planned to meet my team that night.”

“What happened?”

“Our instructor walked into the SEAL training center, and my mouth dropped. It was Faith.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Teddy. “I can tell you we never had instructors that looked like your wife when I was in the service. No disrespect intended.”

“None taken,” laughed Ian. “I’m a lucky man, and I know it. She’s unbelievable. We got it all worked out, but then someone was threatening her. Seems the previous owners of the home had been renting out the place for partying drug dealers, and they left some of their product behind.

“When that asshole took her and was holding her hostage, I thought I’d blow up the whole universe to get to her. Turns out I didn’t have to. I had an amazing team that helped me get her back. By that time, they all thought of Faith

as their big sister. I've never loved anyone like I've loved her, Teddy."

"I see it," he smiled. "I see it on your face every day. And I love the way you treat her daughter. Like she's your own."

"She is, in my mind. I mean, Kelsey was in her twenties when we met, but I still thought of her as my daughter. Lord knows her father was for shit." Ian stopped looking up at the sign. "This is the first place. Albert should be meeting us here."

"Hi, we're here to see Albert," said Teddy to the man at the stand.

"Oh, are you guys here about Erica and the other girls?"

"That's right," said Ian.

"Please, come right this way. We've set up one of the private rooms for you. Everyone is really sad about all of this. Those girls were great."

"Well, good news is we know what happened to Marsha," said Ian as they walked into the room. All eyes turned to him, waiting with anticipation. "She has a job at the

riverboat casino. She didn't want anyone to know because technically, she'd not old enough to be there. But she's well. That just leaves Erica, and we're still working on that."

"Well, it's good to know Marsha is okay," said Albert. "Maybe I'll go see her soon, just to be sure she doesn't need anything." Ian nodded at the other man, then took his seat to address the others.

"I know we've asked you a million questions, but you never know when something you didn't think of before could be important. For instance, we keep hearing from the kids around here about a blue or green, older model car. They say an older guy drives it, but they don't know how old. It's pretty vague, but it might help."

"That is vague," nodded one of the chefs. "I mean, I drive a late-model blue car, but that could be anyone."

"Do any of you know about the car club that's not far from here?" asked Teddy.

"Sure. They do a lot of the shows around here, participate in parades, that sort of thing. I've never heard anything bad about them, but I don't know a whole lot," said another waiter.



They sat with the staff at Albert's restaurant for an hour before realizing they were asking the same questions over and over again. Moving on to the next one, they did the same. Six restaurants, six different groups of staff, and not one clear answer.

“This is so fucking frustrating. I'm starting to wonder if we've all lost our touch,” said Ian.

“You haven't lost your touch, son. This is like looking for a needle in a haystack. We just have to find out which haystack and start digging more.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Faith stared at the data she'd been provided for a case the Voodoo Guardian team was working on. She still consulted with the major government agencies, military training facilities, and others. But her main job was to help their own team, and she loved it.

“Faith!” called out Lily, jogging toward her. “Hi. I’m glad I caught up to you. I know that Ian is with Teddy tonight, and since he’s not married, I thought you might want to do a girls’ night with me.”

“Oh, wow. Yes, thank you,” she smiled. “I thought I was going to be the lone bride on this little experience.”

“No way,” smiled Lily. “No one left behind. Or alone. Besides, I’d really love to learn more about your story and how you met Ian.”

“Come on inside,” she said. “I was just tying up some e-mails about a few things I found. I’m ready to shut it down for the night. I’ve got some shrimp and corn chowder on the stove and hot French bread in the oven. If you’re good, I’ll let you have a taste of the king cake I’ve been saving.”

“You are evil,” smirked Lily. “But I love it.”

Taking their piping hot bowls of soup and sitting in the living room, they chatted casually for a while, just catching up. When the dishes were in the sink, they sat down again.

“Well, you wanted to know how I met Ian.”

“I do,” smiled Lily. “You know my story, but I don’t know yours.”

“I was divorced and working contract, like I do now. But I’d written a number of books on military strategy and international studies, and they were doing well. I was finally able to afford my dream home in Coronado. It was beautiful, Lily. Nine bedrooms, eleven bathrooms. Built in the early 1900s. It was wonderful. Way too big for me, but I didn’t care about that.

“I’d met Ian’s commanding officer and his wife, and I mentioned that I wouldn’t mind renting a room to a service member that needed a place to live. Next thing I know, I got a call saying Ian had been shot and needed someone to help take him to doctors’ visits, shower, that sort of thing.”

“Shower?” smirked Lily. “That doesn’t sound like a chore at all.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t,” laughed Faith. “My ex had been pretty unkind to me. I didn’t have much confidence, so I couldn’t see someone like him wanting me.”

“Wait, so he just showed up, and you gave him a room?”

“Oh, no. Sorry, I’ll back up. I agreed to meet with him, and when he did show up, I was shocked. I couldn’t believe that he was in the Navy and that he was so damn handsome. It was rocky at first, but we found our rhythm and started to become friends. He was wonderful company.

“The night before we both went back to work, we became more than friends.”

“Oh, nice.”

“It was. It was beautiful, but we never talked about our work. He left in his uniform, looking as sexy as sin. I left in my business attire, headed to teach a SEAL team.”

“Oh, no. No. Don’t tell me he was on that team.”

“Yep. When I walked into that classroom, and he saw me, I thought he’d die. I ran from the room, unable to even breathe. I thought I’d lose my job, respect, everything.”

“Faith, you poor thing,” she said, rubbing her hand.

“What did they say?”

“Well, after Ian threatened his commander,” she laughed, “they assured me it was fine. But it’s what happened afterwards that was the best for me. See, I only had Kelsey, and her father had done a pretty good job of screwing with her head and turning her against me. I was lonely for kids, and suddenly, I had an entire group of ‘boys’ in my home. I loved taking care of them, cooking for them, all of it.”

“I can see that,” smiled Lily. “You’re an amazing cook. You’re loving and always trying to help everyone. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There is when you send your SEAL team to work with homemade lunches and cookies,” she blushed.

“Oh, wow. You’re awesome, Faith. I bet they loved it.”

“They did, but I think Ian was worried I was taking the edge off them. But when Kelsey was in trouble, it was Ian who sent Noa to check on her. And they fell in love.”

“Yes, they did,” smiled Lily. “Doesn’t it all make you think? I mean, you meet Ian because of his commander. His

team includes Noa, who falls in love with your daughter. The entire team knows the Robicheauxs and Nine and his team. Then we all end up here.”

“I try not to think too hard on it all,” said Faith. “I know that something more is at play, but I honestly don’t think I want to question it. If I hadn’t met Ian, I would have died. See, the previous owner of my home was having drug parties at the house. He’d left a stash in a hidden staircase. My house was being ripped apart, little by little. I was kidnapped by the drug dealer’s brother.”

“Oh, my gosh, Faith.”

“Yep. But Ian and the boys were there for me. They rescued me, got me to safety, and I never looked back. I was sad when we left my dream home, our dream home. By that time, we’d bought other properties to be able to spread out. But it was the right time to leave. Garcia had committed suicide, and the team was just shattered.”

“I remember that,” nodded Lily. “I remember Bull talking about how difficult it was because they all felt guilty that they should have seen something.”

“I felt that, too,” she said. “I felt as if I should have seen his sadness and confusion. Losing a team member is

never good, but to lose one from suicide is inconsolable. It brought Ian and I even closer, though. We held one another tighter, loved one another harder. Strange that he gave us that gift.”

“Again, I wouldn’t question it,” smiled Lily. “What do you say we get in our swim in the pond this evening and sleep in late tomorrow?” Faith smiled at the other woman, nodding.

“Now, that is something I can get on board with.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

Erica just wanted to sleep. That's all she wanted. That's all she needed. It had been more than fifteen hours of going non-stop, and her body was exhausted, as well as her mind and spirit. She closed her eyes for just a moment and then was jolted awake when someone kicked her foot.

"Wake up!" said the man. "You have to be back on in fifteen minutes, and I need you fresh."

"I can't be fresh when I need sleep. Please, just let me get some sleep."

"I can't afford that. Listen, you're making a shit ton of money for us right now. I need you to focus and do your fucking job. It's not that hard."

"Says you," she mumbled.

"Make yourself pretty and get your shit done."

She looked at the other young girls and boys around her and just shook her head. They were all staring at her, wondering why she was the one always causing trouble for them.



This isn't what she wanted for her life. It wasn't what she asked for. There was more out there, way more. All she wanted to do was find it and have a decision in how her life would look. Not this. Not this twisted idea of a life.

Only allowed to move away from her spot for short periods of time, she went to the ladies' room and washed her face, reapplying the makeup she'd been given. Unsure of what to do with her hair, she pulled it back and secured it with a clip. It would have to do. Whatever role these weirdos wanted her to play, it would need to be with hair up.

Staring into the mirror, she wished her brother were in front of her right now. She'd beat the hell out of him. She should have done that anyway. He wasn't that much bigger than her, but she didn't want to worry her mother.

"Damn," he muttered. Her mother was probably frantic thinking about her. She might not ever see her again the way things were going. And what about Lashon and Marsha? Were they okay? They weren't in the room with her, so maybe they got away. There was banging on the door, and she jumped.

"Let's go! You're on!"

“I’m coming,” she said, shaking her head at herself in the mirror. “I’m coming.”

With the lights swirling and the music playing, she held her stomach, forcing the bile to retreat. Just keep fighting, she told herself. Just keep fighting, and you’ll find a way out of this. She wanted to believe that. She wanted to believe that all of this would work out.

Too bad she didn’t.

## CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

Nine and Gaspar stood at the window, watching their wives laugh with the others in the garden. They were always close, but it seemed since starting Gray Wolf, they'd become closer. They knew that they were doing girls' nights when they were on patrol, so maybe that had something to do with it.

"They look happy," smiled Gaspar.

"I was just thinking the same thing. They damn sure deserve to be happy. We're fucking hard to live with, brother."

"I couldn't agree more. I often wonder how Alexandra has put up with my ass all these years. I mean, I'm great in bed, but I'm an asshole sometimes."

"You're average in bed from what I hear," grinned Nine. "And we're all assholes, all the time. I don't know, man. As much as Mama Irene talks about how special we are, I think it's the girls that are the ones that are special. They're the ones holding all this together. Making us work harder. Making us better men."

“Fuck if that isn’t right,” said Ghost, stepping up behind them. “Grace is my anchor. My true north. I wouldn’t survive if something happened to her.” He sucked in a deep breath, gripping his chest.

“You okay, Ghost?” asked Nine.

“Yeah. Just saying it out loud made me hurt.”

“We’re all good, brother. We get our physicals. We do our workouts. We eat right, and we’ve got the blessing of the pond. I’d say we’re all going to be okay.”

“Who’s gonna be okay?” asked Ian.

“Oh, hi. Us. We were just looking at all of them and thinking how lucky we are. How did it go with Teddy?”

“First, we are fucking lucky. Because no one else would put up with our pathetic asses. Second, Teddy is fucking amazing. He’s got so much in that head of his, and that man is sharp as a tack still. He remembers every mission, every step he took in WWII. I say we use him more often.”

“Did you find out anything new?” asked Ghost.

“No,” frowned Ian. “Not one damn thing. How long before we admit that this girl might be lost to us?”

“Never,” said Nine, shaking his head. “I will never admit that. If this were your daughter or mine, we would be turning over every stone out there. So far, we’ve been pretty fucking nice. Maybe it’s time to not be so nice.”

“We don’t have any idea who to not be nice to,” said Gaspar. “We can’t threaten little kids. They’ll never speak to us again. We can’t use our own grandkids or great-grandkids to pump them for information. Our wives would kill us. I don’t know who to put pressure on.”

“Well, I’d say we start with Albert,” said Nine. “He brought this to us, but what if he’s really responsible for all of it? Marsha knew him but didn’t seem too bothered by him. But what if he knew about Lashon’s allergy? What if he wanted Erica for some reason?”

“We can definitely apply a little more pressure,” said Gaspar, “but I think we’re barking up the wrong tree. I don’t think he has anything to do with it. Besides, that doesn’t help us with all the other kids that are just disappearing into thin air.”

“When is the car show?” asked Nine.

“Tomorrow,” said Ghost. “I’m going on the bikes along with Skull and Razor. We’ll do a little snooping, try to

find an older model blue or green car, and see what we can turn up.”

“Okay. Let’s wait until we hear from you guys, and we’ll see what else we can do. Until then, let’s make sure we have all of the boxes checked. I don’t want to leave anything to chance on this.”



The custom motorcycles gleamed in the midday sun. Their chrome shined from polish, and the paint jobs were mesmerizing as they pulled into the parking lot. People stopped, staring at the three men as they stepped off the bikes. Several men came over, admiring the work, nodding at the trio.

“Holy shit. These are Steel Patriots bikes,” said one man.

“That’s right,” nodded Skull. One of several men that were on the Voodoo Guardians team, Skull spent his non-team time helping build custom motorcycles in the garage.

“Damn, you guys have been on every bike magazine for years. Stellar fucking work,” smirked the man. “What’s this paint job?”

“Just something of my own creation,” said Skull.

There were swirling colors of blue, green, brown, and red. He didn't want to tell anyone that it was his vision of what their sheets looked like after a lovemaking session with Avery. Her makeup smeared on the white sheet, the blue, green, and brown of her eyeshadow, and the bright red of her lips. He thought it was sexy and erotic. She thought it was more work for her on wash day.

Either way, it made for a beautiful gas tank on the motorcycle.

With hundreds of cars lined up, they had to find the car club they were looking for. They seemed to be displayed by their criteria.

There were rows and rows of muscle cars. Big engines, loud, and classic bodies. Some were exactly as they'd rolled off the assembly line. Others were custom bodies, motors, and paint jobs.

Then there were the speedsters. Cars made for going fast on race tracks or the autobahn. Take your pick. Further down were the true show cars. They were next level everything. And still further down were cars displayed by their model year.

“We’re never going to figure this out,” said Razor.

“The cars are displayed by category, not by car club. We’re going to have to try and find someone with that club and ask questions.”

“Or just look for blue or green cars,” said Skull.

“Let’s split up,” said Ghost. “Keep comms open, and let me know if you see anything. Don’t scare them away, just try and figure out what this group does. If they can afford the cars we saw, we need to know how they can afford it.”

For Skull, this was a dream job. He loved working on custom anything. Although Steel Patriots Cycles did mostly custom motorcycles, they occasionally did cars as well. So, this assignment was like putting him in a candy shop. As he walked, he’d see something that was fascinating about a car, stop and talk to the owner, and chat for a minute.

Remembering his purpose, he’d hurriedly move on, cursing himself.

When the three men met up again, they all just shook their heads.

“Couldn’t focus?” smirked Razor.



“Not one fucking bit,” muttered Ghost. “I promise I tried, but some of these cars are fucking amazing.”

“What about the club?” asked Skull.

“I couldn’t find anyone belonging to Seventh Ward Wheels. All of the cars are listed by owner, not club. We need to find another way,” said Razor.

“Let’s head back. It’s getting dark, and we’re not accomplishing anything here.” Finding their bikes, they straddled the beautiful machines, strapping their helmets on their heads. As they pulled out of the grassy parking area, Skull stopped his bike, nodding up ahead.

“Is that an old green car?” he asked.

“It looks green or blue,” said Razor. “But it’s really old and a piece of shit. Didn’t the kids say it was a nice older car?”

“I don’t know,” said Ghost. “Let’s try to follow.”

They made an attempt to pull out, but four cars were pulling in. Skull followed the direction of the car, making sure he didn’t lose sight, but when they pulled out of their spaces, they were blocked by two more cars coming into the lot.

By the time they made it to the main road, the car was gone from sight.

“Fuck me,” muttered Skull.

“Alright, at least we might have some idea of what we’re looking for,” said Ghost. “Let’s head home.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

Nine and Sven leaned against the old Quarter building, watching as people passed them by. Most would look up, staring at their size and height. Both men were big, muscular, and still quite handsome for their age.

Nine had been the founder of REAPER years ago. After a successful career as a SEAL, he decided that he wasn't done yet. And neither were many of his teammates and peers. Starting a private security agency, he was able to take only the ops they wanted and get paid handsomely for it. He never expected to meet the woman of his dreams on a rescue.

At six-feet-three and still a solid two-thirty-five, he was not a man to screw with. But standing beside Sven, who was nearly six-feet-seven, made even him feel small.

“Do you remember meeting your Erin?” asked Sven.

“I remember every detail of it,” smirked the man. “She was supposed to be a man.”

“Come again?”

“We were sent in to rescue a Dr. E.G. Richards. Shit for information, with only a basic description, we had no idea it was a woman. Sven, when I saw her lying on that cot, beaten, bloody, I was ready to kill every man and woman in that village.”

“I can understand that,” said Sven, grinding his teeth.

“I was a total asshole to her those first few hours. Actually, I believe she called me an ‘asshat.’” Sven chuckled, nodding. “She was a fucking mess, and I was falling in love with her. From the very first sight. I couldn’t help myself. Turns out, she was falling in love with my stupid ass as well.”

“That seems easy,” said Sven.

“I wish it were that easy. The man who hired us was a general. Who, as it turned out, was pretending to be Erin’s father, when, in actuality, had murdered her parents. She had no idea that she had control of a company that was providing contracts to the military. He’d kept her pretty sheltered, dictating her entire life to her.

“I wasn’t about to let her out of my life after that, Sven. I knew she was going to be mine, and the better part was so did my teammates. They fell in love with her at first sight as well. In fact, in the beginning, there was this really

weird vibe between her and Trak. Man, I couldn't figure it out, and it was eating at me. I guess I was a bit jealous and insecure, but in the end, we found out they were cousins. One more thing the good general had kept from her.”

“But you've had a wonderful life together,” smiled Sven. “You've got your children, grandchildren, and all these amazing friends. I'd say that's a successful story.”

“Damn sure is. I almost lost her when she had Ellie. I swore I could never do that again. Then she got pregnant with Cam. Completely unexpected. She's given me more than I deserve.”

“You've both given one another a wonderful life,” he said.

“I already know that you have Cade and Bodhi, but what about their mother?” asked Nine.

“She died of breast cancer,” said Sven, looking away for a moment.

“I'm so fucking sorry, brother. I didn't mean to bring up something so painful.”

“No. No, it's been decades now. I've got Ruby, and my life is good. It was painful back then. We didn't know as

much about breast cancer back then. She was young. Not even thirty yet. But the worse part was that her parents were trying to take the boys from me.

“The boys were the toughest to manage. They didn’t understand why their mother had left us. I mean, how do you explain cancer to a child? All they want is their mother’s love. We were so young when we got married. We just didn’t know any better.”

“Brother, cancer of any kind just sucks. I wish we could invent something that would cure that and take it all away, but nothing seems to work for it. Yet.”

“Yes. Yes, it would be wonderful. I remember being so sad for the boys. Cade hardly knew her. Bodhi remembered, though. My big, strong boys were marshmallows when it came to speaking about their mother. It was unfortunate that their grandmother was the one that truly left them. I don’t think my wife’s father wanted it to end the way it did. We moved, and he would send birthday and Christmas gifts. I don’t think she ever knew it. He signed it from both of them, but I knew that she didn’t know.”

“How did they handle it when you started dating Ruby?”

“Well,” laughed Sven, “I think they thought I was unaware of Ruby’s history. She was very honest with me. I remember speaking to her in the grove, asking her to dinner. She looked right at me and said, ‘listen here, Sven Norgenson, I got a past, and it ain’t pretty.’ She proceeded to tell me her story and how she ended up as a high-priced call girl, then owning strip clubs and sex shops.

“It was never my thing. I didn’t have any trouble finding a woman when I needed one, but I understand the appeal. She is an amazing woman. I love her freedom and spontaneity. She isn’t afraid to talk about her feelings, her desires, anything. It’s very exciting.”

“I imagine it is,” laughed Nine. “Erin is that way to a point. Between just us. But I notice Ruby isn’t afraid to talk about it anywhere.”

“No,” he smiled. “She is not. The boys have learned to be okay with it. Although, I suppose I should stop calling my grown men boys.”

“I still call Cam a boy,” said Nine. “In fairness, he acts like a boy sometimes. He’s damn lucky he found a wife to love him.”

“We all are, friend, we all are. I know it was hard for Bodhi when Ruby and I got together. He kept thinking she was leading me astray. Truth is, I was definitely using all I had on her,” he laughed. “I didn’t really date much after my wife died. I was more concerned about making sure the boys were okay.”

“Every now and then, I would find a woman, another single parent, who only wanted to have some adult fun. But I always felt horrible about it afterwards. I didn’t want the boys to know about it, and I damn sure didn’t want them to think it was acceptable behavior for a young man. So, I remained alone for a very long time.

“When the boys invited me to join them here, I didn’t need to think twice about it. I just wanted to be close to them. The fact that I met all of you and get to work with all of you is only icing on the cake.”

“We feel the same, Sven. You’ve been a great addition to our family,” nodded Nine.

He stared across the street, watching as a bunch of kids huddled together around something. Walking toward them, Sven followed, wondering what he was doing. He didn’t want



to scare the kids. He just wanted to know what the fuck they were looking at.

The closer he got, the excitement rose, feeling as if they'd finally have a clue. Instead, they were looking at some stupid video game on a kid's cell phone.

"Fuck," he muttered, turning to Sven. Both men shook their heads.

"I don't understand the appeal of those video games," said Sven. "In my day, you played outside, or board games, or in a tree. Staring at a screen all day is not exciting to me in the least."

"I know what you mean. It's only gotten worse over the years as the games have improved. Hell, our tech boys create gaming systems to pass the time. They've gamified almost everything we fucking do."

"It's a whole new world, Nine, and I feel that I've been left behind most days. I crave for simplicity. In fact, Ruby and I decided to get rid of any television we had. We only watch movies now. I don't want to hear the news. I don't want to know about any wars or conflicts. Hell, I don't even want to know about the weather any longer. I feel as if the boys will let me know if I need to get to safety."

“I can appreciate that, Sven. Well, we’ve done our time here. What do you say we grab some dinner and walk to the other end of the Riverwalk?”

“Sounds good to me, as long as I get dessert.”

“I’ll buy you dessert, big man,” smiled Nine. “It was worth the price for the conversation.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“Ruby? Are you home?” called Erin, standing on the cabin porch.

“Right here, honey, right here,” called the woman from behind her. “Sorry, I was over at the cafeteria usin’ their ovens. I like gettin’ everything cooked at the same time. Havin’ stuff come out at odd times, some of it hot, some of it cold, makes me crazy.”

“Let me help you,” said Erin, grabbing a few of the trays. “It smells delicious.”

“Fried chicken, fried okra, crispy pan skillet potatoes, glazed carrots, and hot cornbread. And for dessert? Bread pudding with whiskey caramel sauce.”

“Ruby! I’m going to gain twenty pounds,” laughed Erin.

“You can afford it. Listen, my Sven likes my curves and rolls and softness. God love him. He doesn’t ever complain about my size, which is why I love that man. Your man feels the same about you. I see him. He hugs you around

the waist, and his hand is already massagin' your little muffin-top."

"Oh, wow, you really are observant," smiled Erin.

"About some things," she nodded. "I definitely notice things about sex and intimacy. For instance, I know every man and woman here has a great sex life. I can tell by the way they talk and walk. A lot of that has to do with Charlie's books. Some of it just has to do with their surroundings. The gardens, the smells, the sights, all of it."

"I have to admit. I didn't think I'd have this kind of a sex life with Nine this late in our lives. It hasn't changed much since we were first married."

"That's good," smiled Ruby. "My first husband was just an awful man. I'm not even sure why I married him other than he asked. I had all those babies, all those mouths to feed, and then he walked out on me."

"You know, I don't think I've ever told you how much I admire what you did for yourself and your children, Ruby. I don't know if I could have done it, but you did. You fed them; you kept them safe, and most importantly, you kept them together."

“I appreciate that. Really, I do. It was awful hard, Erin. Havin’ a man pump into you that you didn’t know. All for money. And back then, it wasn’t a lot of money. Ironically, I learned from one of ‘em what I could do for myself. How I could take control and make it more enjoyable for me.”

“Really?”

“Yep. He taught me how to make myself happy and how to ensure that I enjoyed myself with other men. In the beginning, I couldn’t take control of that. As I got more and more clients, I started makin’ my rules. Funny thing was they wanted the rules. They liked it. I never dreamed that I would become the ‘sex queen’ of New Orleans,” she laughed.

“When I was able to buy the strip club, well, that really put me on the map. I could stop entertainin’ men on my own and instead do it in the club. But I really wanted to create a safe place for my girls to be with men if they wanted.”

“And you did,” smiled Erin.

“I did. I also took some sound advice from some good people and opened my sex shops. Lingerie, toys, all kinds of things. It brings a woman a sense of freedom.”

“You know what’s funny, Ruby? I didn’t use those before I was married, not really. When Nine and I married, we started experimenting with them. Man, did that elevate our bedroom life. He loves them. I love them. We have fun, even at our age.”

“Honey, good sex don’t have no age limit. Good sex is for everyone. My Sven, he’s got a body made for ridin’, and I damn sure don’t turn down any rides.” Erin laughed, shaking her head.

“I love that you speak so freely about it. We all know it’s natural, yet we’re shy about talking about it.”

“That’s why I love Gabi and Ani over at Belle Fleur. They both say what’s on their mind and don’t care if anyone gets embarrassed by it. Sex is as natural as anything. It brings you into the world, and if you’re lucky, it’ll take you out.”

“Oh, my God! I love that,” laughed Erin. “Are you happy here, Ruby? I mean, I know you have your own children and grandchildren. But are you happy here?”

“My kids are all retired now doin’ their own thing, livin’ in Florida or Arizona. I’m happy for ‘em. My grandkids are the same. I got Carsen here, and she’s more like me than I care to admit. But it’s all of you I love bein’ around,

Erin. Matthew and Irene, I wouldn't have survived without the two of them.

“I was shunned by the community, made to feel like I was less. Them two stuck their necks out, showin' folks that I was their friend, and if they didn't like it, they could move on. It was a beautiful, brave thing for them to do durin' that time. I'll never forget it. Never. They're my family.”

“I think that's wonderful. I feel the same about all the women here. Without Nine, I would have never known that Trak is actually my cousin. It seemed all so strange that we felt this instant connection, but it wasn't like Nine and me. It was different on every level.

“I wish I would have known my real father and his father. Another thing we had in common. Our fathers dying far too young.”

“It makes children grow up fast, that's for sure,” said Ruby.

Talking as they dug into the delicious food, the women laughed and cried, told stories, and reminisced. When it was time for dessert, Ruby warmed the whiskey caramel sauce, pouring it over the bread pudding and serving a huge spoonful to Erin.

“This might be as good as sex, Ruby.”

“Child, there is nothing as good as sex if it’s done right.”

With the dishes done, the women poured hot cups of coffee and sat on the front porch of the cabin, watching everyone enjoying their evening. For Erin, it was as if she had the mother or aunt she never got to know.

Ruby was full of wisdom, charm, and humor. But she also had lived a life that wasn’t easy yet overcame her barriers at every turn. Many would have turned their noses up at a woman who’d once laid on her back for a living. But if you knew the whole story, you would know what a good woman Ruby truly was.

“I’ve learned a lot from you, Ruby. I need you to know that.”

“Oh, honey. I learned a lot from you, too. You’re one of the smartest women I’ve ever met, Erin. I don’t have no college degree. I’m not some fancy professional. My smarts are street smarts. But you, you got book smarts. But it’s not just that. I love how you love your husband, your family, your friends. You’re a good woman, and if your mama had lived, she’d be proud of you.”



Erin wiped the tears on her cheeks, reaching for Ruby's hand.

“I love you, Ruby.”

“I love you, too, honey.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Ghost, Ian, Gaspar, and Nine stared at the roster of men available, scratching their heads. This was getting old fast.

“Who is on duty tonight?” asked Nine.

“We are,” came the voices at the end of the table. The senior team looked up, staring at the two men, unsure of what to say. It wasn’t that they didn’t have their own prolific military careers, but something about this felt wrong.

“Pops, George, I don’t know,” said Gaspar. “Sending y’all out there seems wrong.”

“Why?” asked his father, his arms crossed over his chest. George stood sentinel beside him with the same gruff expression.

“Pops, you’re both like a hundred.”

“And?”

“Matthew, George, we’re very glad that you’re part of our team, but this is Jackson Square and the Quarter area at

night. I'd feel horrible if something happened to either one of you."

"The risk of something happening to one of us is the same as something happening to one of you," said George. "You forget, boy, I spent a long time in the Army fightin' everyone, including my own country. I know what I'm doin'."

"George, it's not that we don't think you both know what you're doing," said Ghost. "Hell, I'd trust you to protect my wife, kids, and grandkids. I have trusted you with that. But this is different."

"It's not different," said Matthew. "We train on weapons. We're physically fit. And did it ever occur to you all that maybe these kids might be more inclined to speak with me and George than to speak with y'all?"

The four men stared at one another, unsure of what to do. Miller, Antoine, Baptiste, Raphael, Gabe, Luc, and Alec stared at their older brother, then back at their father.

"I tell you what," said George. "I can see that this is botherin' y'all, worried about decrepit bodies. How about you send Gabe the wonder boy and Rafe the super boy along with us? They can stay in the background and just watch."

“I would agree to that,” said Gaspar. “At least if something gets out of control, you have backup.”

“Fine,” said Matthew.

“Fine. Let’s go, Matthew.” Rafe and Gabe started to follow, and the two older men turned, shaking their heads.

“Y’all ain’t ridin’ with us. Find your own car.” The two brothers smirked at one another, watching them leave. Gabe turned to his older brother, shaking his head.

“They’re wearing weapons, Gaspar.”

“I know. They need to feel like they have a purpose, too. Besides, they could be right. These kids might be more inclined to speak with them instead of us.”

“We look like grandpas,” frowned Miller.

“No. We look like old badasses. They look like grandpas.”

By the time Gabe and Rafe made it to the apartment, Matthew and George were already headed out of the building, walking to the Square. George was carrying something, and so was Matthew, but they couldn’t tell what it was.

As they hit the Square, they finally understood. The two older men had small stools and a folding table between

them. They set up a chess board and began to play.

“They’re playing chess,” frowned Gabe. “What the fuck are they doing?”

“I think they’re trying to blend in with the others,” said Rafe. “Let them do their thing.” The two brothers took a seat on some steps near the Square and just watched for more than an hour. As the Square became more crowded, they started to worry for the older men, but they seemed more than capable of handling themselves.

Two hours in, kids started to come toward the table, asking the older men about what they were doing. Matthew and George were known for their patience and kindness to the kids, and this was no exception. They explained the game, even the letting the kids make moves during the game.

“I’ll be damned,” muttered Gabe. “We’ve been spinning our fucking wheels, and they have them eating out of their hands.”

“Watch and learn,” muttered Rafe, nudging his brother.

Suddenly, both men were turned from the board, leaning forward on their knees. There were a dozen boys

sitting on the concrete, looking up at them with adoration as they wove story after story.

“They’ve been at this for hours now, Gabe. How much time do we give it?” His brother nodded toward George, wiggling a finger for the boys to walk toward them.

“I guess that answers our question.” They walked slowly toward them, trying not to startle the boys.

“Now, tell me again about this game,” said Matthew.

“It’s really cool,” said a little boy. “You have to pick a character, and they dress up how you want and fight all these battles and do all this cool stuff. Then, when they win stuff, you can win money, lots of money. If you don’t win, then you turn invisible.”

The hair on the back of Gabe and Rafe’s neck went up. Tapping their comms, they spoke to the team back home.

“I need everyone to listen to this,” said Gabe.

“We got it,” said Nine.

“So, is this game only played online?”

“Kind of. I mean, they have a studio here where they get gamers to come in and play for hours on end. Right now, there’s this really cool tournament happening, and if you win,

you win like a million-trillion dollars.” Another boy nudged him, shaking his head.

“That’s stupid. They win a million dollars, mister.”

“Do you know where the studio is?” asked George.

“It’s by the WWII Museum, down on the river.

They’ve been playing for weeks now, and it’s almost done.”

“Boys, you’ve been very helpful,” said Matthew. “I think this deserves a full meal for everyone. Where are the other boys?” The kids looked at the two old men, then looked down at their feet.

“Come on,” said George, “we know there’s a bunch o’ya. We ain’t gonna hurt ‘ya. Just feed ‘ya. Where are they?”

One of the boys whistled, and twenty little boys came running. Matthew could only laugh, shaking his head.

“Okay, now listen. We’re going right over there, and we’re all eating like gentlemen. You’re gonna wash your hands, come back, and sit with a napkin in your laps.”

“Sure, mister,” said the boy. “We’ll try.”

“Now, in a few months, there’s gonna be a safe place for all of you to play and sleep. We’re building it, and I

promise you, no one will bother you there. But it will get you off the street at night. You can shower, wash your clothes, and have a hot meal. Promise me you'll all go there.”

The boys looked at the two old men, then at one another.

“We promise, mister.”

“Come on, boys,” said George. The boys followed the older man, and Matthew was right behind them. He turned to his sons.

“Go find that girl.”

“How did you do it, Pops? How did you get those boys to talk to you?” Matthew smiled at his boys, touching their cheeks.

“Easy. We showed them love.”



While Gabe and Rafe made their way to the area the boys told them about, the rest of the team was speeding toward the city as well.

Around the WWII Museum were dozens of warehouses, unmarked, no signs, nothing. There were a few



cars around some of them as they walked the long rows.

“This is going to take forever,” said Gabe. The rest of the team pulled up, walking towards them.

“What do we have?”

“We just know that the kids said the studio where they’re filming this game is somewhere around here.”

“Hey,” said Code through comms. “I’m online now and trying to get into this game. I think I found our girl, or at least the avatar of her.”

“The ava-what?” frowned Ghost.

“It’s a cartoon-like character made to look like the individual. Kids do it all the time when gaming. This one looks like her, but she has to play whatever role the competitor wants. If he wants her to dress like a Viking and fight, she wears a Viking helmet. If they want her to be a bad schoolgirl, that’s what she has to do. The interesting thing about this is that this game is made to literally take a real-time image and make it an avatar.”

“Code, I love your geekiness, brother, but if you don’t fucking back up and speak English, I’m gonna kill you,” said Miller.

“I’m looking at her online now, dressed like a schoolgirl, fighting with a sword against the gamer.”

“A real sword?” asked Gaspar.

“No. She’s probably fighting against a green-screen image or something. I’m not sure. Listen, just get to her.” Code leaned back in his chair, frustrated that he had to explain all of the technology. Maybe he was too young for this team, he smirked to himself.

“Hey!” yelled Antoine. “Down here!”

They ran toward him, down the long rows of warehouses. Standing in front of the one at the end of the row, they looked down the side to see dozens and dozens of cars. A man was at the door taking tickets as people entered.

Pushing their way to the front of the line, the doorman put his hand on Ghost’s chest.

“Tickets.”

“We don’t have tickets.”

“No tickets, no entry.”

“How much?” growled Ian.

“We’re sold out.”

“Listen, you fucking asshole. There’s an underage girl in there being held against her will. If I go in there and find her harmed, I’m cutting your balls off and feeding them to you with a spoon. Let us in.”

“Geez, fine. You don’t have to get your panties in a bunch, old man.”

“Call me old man again. I beg you,” sneered Ian. The man just stepped aside, letting the group of men enter.

Inside were six roped-in spaces, similar to boxing rings. There were individuals in different costumes in the ring, swinging hammers, swords, spears, and other items. Each one wore these strange goggles. Spectators were on the outskirts sitting in chairs, but they could see on a screen above the rings the action that the players were seeing. It all looked so real. It was completely creepy.

In the center ring, they saw her.

Stepping into the ring, Nine grabbed the girl’s arm, ripping the goggles from her head.

“Erica?” She blinked several times, just staring up at the older man. She didn’t recognize him, but right now, she was about to fall over.

“Yes, who are you?”

“Albert and Marsha have been worried sick about you. We’ve been searching for you for a while now. Are you alright?” She nodded, then shook her head.

“No. I didn’t want to play this stupid game, but they made me because I’m really good at it and the gamers like my look. They made me get into the car and brought me here. I played once before, and I knew I was really good, but I hate it. I hate this game. I’ve tried to get them to let me leave.”

“Who?” asked Nine. She pointed to two men standing by a table.

Alec gripped one of them by his neck, dragging him toward the ring as action screeched to a halt. The other man at the table tried to run but met with the left boot of Ghost.

“She is making us money! She’s the best there is at this game. You can’t let a talent like that go to waste. Besides, the participants wanted her. Everyone wanted to play her. She’ll be paid well. There was no reason for her to want to leave.”

“Have they paid you?” asked Nine.

“Nothing yet, but by my calculations, I should be at around three hundred thousand right now. If I win this, I could win the million.”

“Three hundred? What the fuck? Do you want to finish this?” asked Nine. She thought about it a minute, but she was exhausted and hadn’t seen the light of day for weeks.

“No. I want a shower, I want food, and I want to find a warm bed. Oh, and I want my money.”

“Did they force you to do this?” asked Ian.

“Yes. They made me get in the car, telling me Marsha and Lashon were here. Obviously, they aren’t. I hated playing this game. I was only good at it because my brother made me play with him and his stupid friends.”

“She’s a natural. Everyone wants her as their warrior,” said the man. Miller stood in the ring, cupping his hands around his mouth and turning to the others.

“Is anyone else here against their will?” he asked. Two other kids raised their hands, causing him to give a deathly glare to the men.

“Get the other kids, and let’s leave. Give them the money you owe them now,” said Gaspar.

“But it’s not over. We need her to finish the game. If she doesn’t, we’re gonna lose millions on sponsorship.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Give them the money, or I’m calling the police, FBI, and state gaming commission. I’m sure they’d love to see your little operation here.”

Nodding, he turned and began counting out money in stacks of hundred-dollar bills. Miller rolled his eyes, grabbing a duffel bag that was filled with props. He emptied it, handing it to the men to place the money inside.

“You go near her again, and I’ll break every fucking bone in your body,” said Antoine.

Finally done, they left the building that had suddenly become empty. Outside the building, Erica took in a deep breath and started to cry.

“It’s alright, honey. Let’s get you somewhere safe so you can shower and sleep.”

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” she sniffed.

“Sweetie, you have more than three hundred thousand dollars on you. We’ll get you to a hotel and then wait until morning to help you open a bank account.”

“What then? Where do I go? Where is Marsha?”

“Marsha is working at the riverboat casino. She’s living in a crappy apartment, but I bet she’d like a roommate. We can help you find a decent place,” said Ghost.

“Where’s Lashon?”

“Why don’t we explain while we get you to the apartment? I’ll have one of the other guys go get Marsha.” She nodded, happy just to be in fresh air.

An hour later, the two girls were seated in the rented apartment of the team in Tremé. It was ten times nicer than what Marsha had, so they were relieved to be there. After showering, they both slept soundly for the first time in weeks, cuddled together on one bed in spite of there being two.

Early the next morning, Gaspar, Nine, Ian, and Ghost took the girls to the bank to deposit the money and start their account. Working with the manager of the apartment they already had, they were able to extend the lease for the girls, ensuring they had a place to stay for at least a full year.

“I guess I need to go back to school, right?” she said, looking at Ghost.

“It’s probably a good idea. We can get you enrolled again, or if you want to take your GED, we can arrange for

that as well.”

“Can I think about it?”

“You have some time,” said Nine. As they walked toward the apartment, Erica stopped in front of the restaurant.

“Can I have a minute?” They nodded, watching as she asked to speak to Albert. When the man walked out, he screamed, running toward her and hugging her.

“I was so worried about you! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she smiled. “I should have trusted you, Albert. I’m sorry I didn’t. I’m okay, though, and so is Marsha. We’ve got a place not far from here, thanks to these guys.”

“I knew you could do it, Mr. Robicheaux. Thank you.”

“Our pleasure, Albert. You girls take care of yourselves. If you need anything, you go to Albert. He knows how to find us.”

“Thank you,” they both said, waving at the girls.



Back at the island, the men were enjoying a celebratory dinner for their first successful case with Gray Wolf Security.



The wives watched them as they laughed, slapped each other on the back, and retold the stories of how they got here.

“All those kids who were knocked out of the game called themselves the invisibles because that’s what the game made you. Invisible. So fucking easy,” smirked Code.

“Not to the rest of us, Code-boy,” grinned Nine. They laughed together, continuing to celebrate their victory.

“Do you think they did this after their first case all those years ago?” asked Erin.

“I can picture that,” smiled Faith.

“Me too,” said Grace. “But somehow, they look even happier.”

“I’m happy for them,” said Alexandra. “They needed this. They needed to know that they could do this. No shots fired. No drugs. No one bleeding. I’d say that’s a win, ladies.” The wives all raised their glasses, smiling at one another.

“To us. The wives of the gray wolves.”

“To us!”

# EXCERPT from COOKED

“If you can’t do this, I’ll find some who can. I will not tolerate fools and idiots in my kitchen! Is that clear?” he screamed.

“Yes, chef!” came the cry of the people in the room.

“Idiots! You’re all fucking idiots! Does this look like a béchamel?”

“No, chef.”

“Then remake it!”

“Yes, chef.”

He walked the line, staring at the food that was being prepared. He picked up a handful of cucumber slices.

“These are too thick. Do it again.”

“Yes, chef.”

Further down the line, he nodded at the diced onions and peppers, then dipped a spoon into a sauce. He tasted it, tilting his head sideways, then tasted it again.

“Well done.” The young woman let out a sigh, nodding.

“Thank you, chef,” she said softly. He stared at her, wondering why she wasn’t yelling it the way the others did. A ‘well done’ from him was like getting an A+ from Einstein. Or at least he thought so.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Casey, chef.”

“Casey. When did you start working here?” he asked, staring at her.

“Two weeks ago, chef.”

“Where did you train?” he asked.

“I finished culinary school in Paris, then worked at the Plaza in New York for two years. I moved back to New Orleans to be near my father.” He nodded, still staring at her. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck standing up as he watched her.

“Okay. I’ll be watching you. You have promise.” He walked away, and she just stared at him. Quietly, she finely responded.

“Thank you, chef.”

# TEAM & FAMILY GUIDE

*This guide will help you to identify characters that may be referred to in Gray Wolf Security. Since all of the characters had their starts in previous series, I hope this guide helps you.*

**Key – Original Series:**

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
<b>RS 1</b>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<b>RS 2</b>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<b>RS 3</b>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<b>RS 4</b>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<b>RS 5</b>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
	Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan		
<b>RS 6</b>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
<b>RS 7</b>	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<b>RS 8</b>	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
<b>RS 9</b>	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
<b>RS 9</b>	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
<b>RS 9</b>	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
<b>RS 9</b>	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
<b>SP 19</b>			Violet	Striker Michaels
<b>RP 6</b>			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins
<b>RS 10</b>	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
<b>RS 11</b>	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
<b>RS 12</b>	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		
<b>RS 13</b>	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
<b>RS 14</b>	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
<b>RS 14</b>	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
<b>RS 15</b>	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
<b>RS 16</b>	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
<b>RS 16</b>	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
<b>RS 17</b>	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
<b>RS 18</b>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<i>RS 19</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<i>RS 19</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<i>RS 20</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<i>RS 20</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<i>RS 20</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
<i>MSB 5</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
<i>MSB 5</i>	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
<i>MSB 6</i>	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
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<b>MSB 7</b>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
<b>MSB 8</b>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
<b>MSB 8</b>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
<b>MSB 8</b>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
<b>MSB</b>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
<b>SP 1</b>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
<b>SP 2</b>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
<b>SP 3</b>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
<b>SP 4</b>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
<b>SP 5</b>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
<b>SP 5</b>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
<b>SP 7</b>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
<b>SP 8</b>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
<b>SP 9</b>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
<b>SP 9</b>	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
<b>SP 10</b>	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
<b>SP 11</b>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<b>SP 12</b>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
<b>SP 13</b>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<b>SP 14</b>	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		



<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlutti			
<i>SP</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
<i>SP</i>	Ian Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Conor Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
<i>SP 19</i>	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux	Grayson Matthew	
<i>RP 1</i>	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
<i>RP 2</i>	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
<i>RP 3</i>	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
<i>RP 4</i>	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
<i>RP 5</i>	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
<i>RP 6</i>	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
<i>RP 7</i>	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
<i>RP 8</i>	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
<i>RP 9</i>	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
<i>RP 10</i>	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
<i>RP 11</i>	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
<i>RP 12</i>	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	

			Michael Douglas	
<b>RP 13</b>	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
<b>RP 14</b>	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
<b>RP 15</b>	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
<b>RP 16</b>	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
<b>RP 17</b>	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
<b>RP 18</b>	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
<b>RP 19</b>	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<b>RP 20</b>	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
<b>RP 21</b>	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
<b>RP 22</b>	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
<b>RP 23</b>	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fernet	Claudette Robicheaux		
<b>RP 24</b>	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
<b>RP 25</b>	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
<b>RP 26</b>	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
<b>RP 27</b>	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	

<b>RP 28</b>	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
<b>RP 29</b>	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
<b>RP 30</b>	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
<b>RP 31</b>	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
<b>RP 32</b>	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
<b>RP 33</b>	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
<b>RP 34</b>	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
<b>RP 35</b>	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
<b>RP 36</b>	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
<b>RP 37</b>	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
<b>RP 38</b>	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
<b>RP 39</b>	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
<b>RP 40</b>	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	
<b>RP 41</b>	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
<b>RP 42</b>	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
<b>RP 43</b>	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
<b>RP 44</b>	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
<b>RP 45</b>	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
<b>RP 46</b>	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	
<b>RP 47</b>	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
<b>RP 48</b>	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
<b>RP 49</b>	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

<b>Book</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Spouse</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Child's Spouse</b>
<i>RP-50</i>	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
<i>RP-51</i>	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
<i>RP-52</i>	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
<i>RP-53</i>	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
<i>RP-54</i>	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
<i>RP-55</i>	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
<i>RP-56</i>	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
<i>RP-57</i>	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
<i>RP-58</i>	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
<i>VG-1</i>	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
<i>VG-2</i>	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
<i>VG-3</i>	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
<i>VG-4</i>	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
<i>VG-5</i>	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
<i>VG-6</i>	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
<i>VG-7</i>	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	Willa Avery (Wavy)	
<i>VG-8</i>	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
<i>VG-9</i>	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		
<i>VG-10</i>	Christian Martin	Winnie Pasko		
<i>VG-11</i>	Billy 'BJ' Bongard	Janine Corvallo		
<i>VG-12</i>	Joseph Billy 'JB' Redhawk	Dana Vaughn		
<i>VG-13</i>	Tobias Franklin Redhawk	Gail Mackenzie		
<i>VG-14</i>	Operation Père Noel			

<b><i>VG-15</i></b>	Abe Salcedo	Lyra Wolford		
<b><i>VG-16</i></b>	Nate Redhawk	Harlow Judge		

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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.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website [insatiableink.squarespace.com](http://insatiableink.squarespace.com). Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!