

Mary Kennedy

OPERATION
PÈRE NOËL

Voodoo Guardians:
Book 14

OPERATION PÈRE NOËL

Voodoo Guardians

Book FOURTEEN



Mary Kennedy

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MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage Assignments

G1-8 = Garçonnière

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

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



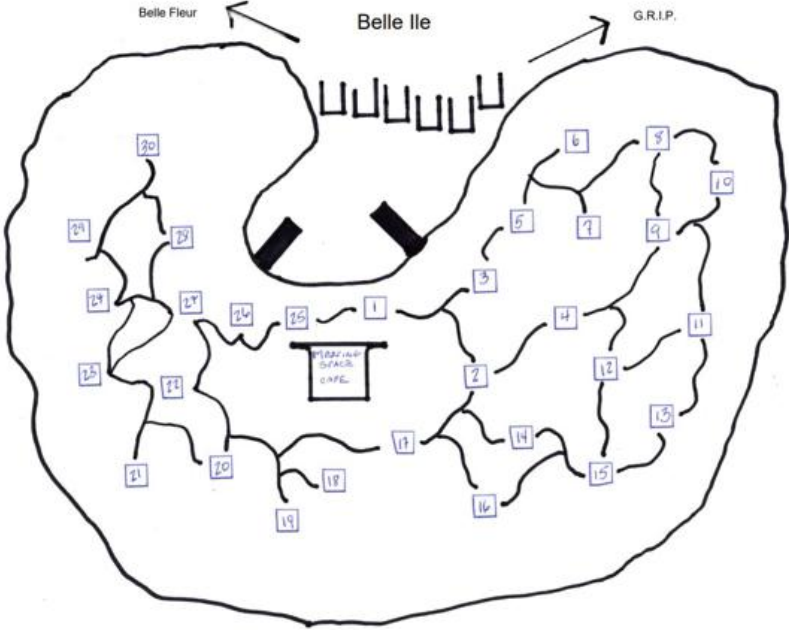
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<u>4</u>	Kev & Tila	<u>39</u>	Doc & Bree	<u>70</u>	Joseph & Julia	<u>100</u>	Milo & Lia
<u>5</u>	Raphael & Savannah	<u>40</u>	Paul & Elizabeth	<u>71</u>	Wes & Virginia	<u>101</u>	Hiro & Winter
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<u>8</u>	Ivan & Sophia	<u>43</u>	RJ & Celia	<u>74</u>	Keith & Susie	<u>104</u>	Duncan & Lindsay
<u>9</u>	Tristan & Emma	<u>44</u>	Carter & Ani	<u>75</u>	Marc & Ela	<u>105</u>	JT & Kennedy
<u>10</u>	Christian & Winnie	<u>45</u>		<u>76</u>	Cowboy & Autumn	<u>106</u>	Torro & Melanie
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>77</u>		<u>107</u>	Bron & Mila
<u>12</u>	Sly & Suzette	<u>47</u>	Frank & Lane	<u>78</u>	Ian & Aspen	<u>108</u>	Fitch & Carsen
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Map of Belle Île & Cabin

Assignments



Cabin Assignments for Belle

Île

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

15	Bull & Lily		
16	Vince & Ally		
17	Code & Hannah		

CHAPTER ONE

Nine handed the cut logs to Gaspar, placing them alongside the other wood they'd spent the morning splitting. In fact, they'd split enough wood to last the entire winter for everyone. They'd felled trees, cut trees, sliced trees, shaved trees, chopped trees, split wood, made kindling. They'd done it all.

When they were finished, they sat on the picnic tables between the cabins, taking a long swig of the hot coffee left for them by Lauren and Sara. There was a plate of warm cookies as well, which were gone before the first swig of coffee. Tailor and Alec finished their pile then it was Miller and Bull. The senior team was all together, chopping wood and feeling completely useless and unneeded.

“Anybody else feel like a useless errand boy?”
frowned Bull.

“Fucking sucks to be retired,” growled Nine. “I don't know what I expected, but this sure as shit isn't it. Chopping wood, washing dishes, cutting grass. I don't mind doing that shit, but when that's the only thing I have to do all fucking day, it starts eating at me.”

“We’re hardly retired,” said Gaspar. “We help the boys all the time. I mean, in a passive sort of way.”

“Not enough,” said Nine. “Fuck, we’re all still in our prime. We’re in great physical condition. We still have our health, eyesight, and, for the most part, speed. Why are we sitting here wasting away?”

“Wasting away?” laughed Antoine. “We’re hardly wasting away. We’re doing what we promised our wives we would do. We slowed down, and we’re spending more time with them. Look, I know it’s hard, but we’ve done our time getting shot at by bad guys, avoiding bullets and knives. I mean, fuck, how many times have you been nearly blown up? How many times have you been shot? Stabbed? Nearly run over or drowned? I, for one, am happy for the pond and the fact that my dick still works and keeps my wife happy.”

“Are you sure she’s happy?” smirked Baptiste. His brother flipped him off as the others laughed, shaking their heads at one another.

“I just think we need to find something to keep us busy. All the time. Maybe volunteer or some shit. I mean, I know we do a little of that, but it needs to be something more. Something bigger,” remarked Vince.

“How do we do that, dumbass. We can’t show our faces like we used to,” said Code. “Besides, if you have a face like Angel’s, no one forgets. And if you have a face like the Robicheauxs, everyone remembers!”

“Thanks. I think,” frowned Gabe.

“Look, it’s the holidays. Thanksgiving is coming up, and we always do stuff for the boys’ home. But maybe we do more this year,” said Angel.

“What do you mean?” asked Ghost.

“I mean, maybe we expand it beyond the boys’ home and do the school as well. We have kids that are in long-term dormitory with one parent, sometimes no parent. We could ask Irene and Ruby if there are some needy kids in the Parish. We have the means; we’re bored as fuck. Let’s do something.”

“Kids nowadays are into electronic shit,” said Miller.

“I have no idea what to buy them, and to be honest, I don’t like getting them hooked on that stuff. Besides, that would be just throwing money at a bigger problem.”

“Yea, you’re right. They like their electronics and games and shit,” laughed Ian, “but we have the most brilliant

tech people in the world. Let's create some next-level electronic shit for them that will blow their little minds. Make it totally about learning and not some jacked-up game that will suck their brains dry, making them dress up and play weird shit.”

“It's not weird shit. It's called cosplay and kids, and adults, really get into it. Those games have their place, and kids learn from those as well. But let's mix it with traditional things,” said Antoine. “Let's build rocking horses for the bebés, maybe make some dolls for the girls, board games made from real boards. That kind of shit. We could put some electronic components to it. Maybe the doll records and speaks back, or the rocking horses actually make neighing sounds or the sounds of hooves.”

“Should we be cussing so much when we're talking about kids?” asked Baptiste with a grin.

“What the fuck? They're not here!” growled Gaspar.

“Fine, but you know that Père Noël is watching,” frowned Gabe. Gaspar stared at his little brother, shaking his head. He started to laugh, and the other brothers laughed with him.

“Inside joke?” asked Ghost.

“No, man. When Gabe was little, he always tried to stay up and wait to see Santa. He would sneak down and sit at the top of the steps every fucking year. He’d watch the plate with the cookies and the glass of milk, waiting to see if it disappeared. One year, he actually drew a line on one of Mama’s good glasses to see if any milk was gone. He’d even put out reindeer food.

“I’d find him around two a.m. and carry him back upstairs. In the morning, I’d come back down, and there he was, asleep on the steps again,” smirked Miller.

“Pierre, you know it was all of us. Alec did it too. Besides, I saw him. None of y’all believed me, but I saw him,” said Gabe.

“That’s true, that’s true,” he nodded. “We all tried to find Santa, but apparently, Gabe was the only one who actually caught him in the house putting out presents. Man, Mama and Pops always made Christmas amazing. No matter how much or how little they had that year, we had a great Christmas morning. And the food, man, y’all know the food was always off the charts.”

“It was great because of the love in our house. They made it special talking about magic and the spirit of

Christmas. Back then, Grandpère Robicheaux was still living here. He was something else. But that love, that was something no one could duplicate or buy. Love between all of us, especially Mama and Pops,” said Gaspar, squeezing his brother’s shoulder.

“That’s what we can’t make,” said Angel, looking at all the men. “We can’t make those children see and feel love if it doesn’t exist in their lives now. We can’t help them to know what a stable home feels like, or the love of a mother and a father.”

“Yes, we can,” said Trak.

“Fuck me!”

“Son-of-a-bitch!”

“Damn it! You’re going to fucking kill me!” yelled Ghost. Trak smirked at them, nodding.

“I might be old, but I haven’t lost my skills. As I was saying, we can create love for them. We’re doing it through this. We’re creating love by showing love.”

The men all stared at Trak, waiting for him to continue. You always knew when he had a lot to say. He would get this big crease across his forehead, his eyes

scanning their faces. Waiting for the perfect moment to speak, but with carefully chosen words and expression. He was deep in thought for a moment. Then he would purse his lips and release a long, slow breath, then begin speaking again.

“When I came here for the first time, all those years ago, your mother showed me motherly love that I didn’t know I needed or wanted. Do you know how?” The brothers all shook their heads, looking at one another. “It wasn’t by buying me things. It wasn’t by telling me she loved me, although she did. That damn woman told me a dozen times that she loved me before I started believing it. But she showed me.

“She made fry bread for me, cooked my favorite foods, gave me the cottage furthest from all the others so I could have my peace. Sometimes, I would be so lost; I would be so deep in thought in a dark place, and she would reach for my hand and squeeze it, smiling at me. That simple act, the simple touch of her hand seemed to right my world. It would bring me back to the present, not lost in the past.”

Gaspar smiled at Miller, nodding his head. The others did the same, knowing what Trak was saying.

“She would hug me. For no reason at all. I would be walking around the grounds or through the big house, and she’d yell at me, ‘Trak, baby, come on over here. I need a hug.’ She didn’t need the hug, I did. But no woman ever had hugged me without reason, and especially a woman that didn’t comment about the scars on my back. She knew they were there. She could feel them, but she said nothing.

“When we left, she hugged me so tightly, I thought she might break my back. Honestly. She whispered in my ear that I was loved. Deeply loved. She kissed my cheek, and then your father stepped forward. Big, strong, somewhat intimidating, even to me. He gripped my shoulders, kissed my forehead, and said, ‘you might be the finest warrior I know, and you are my son. Never forget that.’ That’s how I knew I was loved. And that’s how these children will know. We will show them.”

There was silence in the air. Nothing except the brisk November wind and the sounds of rustling leaves. A crane made a call to his mate while a brown pelican dove into the bayou for his mid-day meal. With a splash, he flew skyward with his daily catch, and they watched the majestic wings span out and take him back to his nest.

“You’ve never shared that before,” said Rafe.

“I never had reason to share it before. Old age is making me reminisce more. Between your parents, meeting Lauren, and all of you, my life changed. We can change the lives of these children,” he said thoughtfully.

“You’re a real puzzle some days, Trak,” smirked Miller.

“I try.”

“Alright, I’d say we begin Operation Père Noël,” said Nine. “But. Let’s keep it quiet from the women if we can. I want everyone to be surprised by this. Let’s spend more time than usual at the school and the orphanage, get a feel for what these boys and girls might truly need.”

“Hey, what if we could find homes for some of them? I mean, I know we have case workers always trying to pair them with families, but if we helped, it could be a holiday miracle,” said Luc.

“I love it,” smiled Gaspar. “Let’s just clear all of that through Calla, Bree, and Ashley. They’ll be handling all of that.”

“Where are we going to hide everything?” asked Ghost.

“The Sugar Lodge?” said Ian.

“No, we can’t. That’s where everyone hides their gifts for our kids. No, we need to find somewhere else. Any storage at the garage?” Nine asked Whiskey.

“Very little, and it would get grease and paint all over it. We could work on shit there but not store it.”

“Let’s just rent a storage unit or two,” said Code.
“There’s a new storage facility just a mile or two up the road. I can rent it under the name of the café, and we’ll just load everything in there until Christmas Eve.”

“I do believe we have a plan,” nodded Ian with a wide smile.

“Now, y’all know it ain’t gonna be that easy,” laughed Tailor. “I love our wives, but they’re about as nosey as they come. And your mama, she knows everything. How are we gonna keep this a secret from her?”

“It’s not gonna be easy,” said Alec with a thoughtful expression. “In my experience, Mama knows when you’re

lying. Just be as honest as you can be without giving it all away.”

“And the ghosts?” asked Teddy.

“Oh, shit. Right,” frowned Nine.

“Don’t you worry about us,” smiled Nathan, walking toward the men. Grip, Tony, Yori, and Franklin were with him. “We’ll make sure Martha and Claudette say nothing. We’ll even help where we can.”

“How will you do that?” asked Gaspar. “Y’all learn to swing a hammer in ghost land?”

“Don’t be a smartass,” frowned Grip. “No. We can’t swing a hammer, but we can divert attention sometimes. Plant a thought that will distract them from what they were going to do.”

“Wait. Y’all can plant thoughts in our heads?” asked Tailor. Grip smiled at the big man that he always loved like a son. “Grip. Grip, you tell me right now. Have you been plantin’ the thought in my head that I should eat more salad? I’ve been havin’ awful cravins’ for lettuce and spinach salads with no dressing. Did you do that?”

“It does seem like a good thought to have,” smiled Yori.

“Grip! Tell me right now!” yelled Tailor. Grip just smiled, waving as he disappeared into thin air. “I seriously want to kill that ghost.”

“You can’t kill a ghost, idiot!” frowned Alec.

“Children, can we focus?” smirked Nine. “The boys will be easier for all of us. How are we going to learn about the girls? What are we going to do about learning what they want?”

“You might try asking questions,” said Miller. “Just a thought. Y’all must be forgetting what it’s like when our wives, sisters, daughters start having aches and pains when they’ve asked for a surprise or something special. You be gentle, you ask the right questions, and you’ll get the answers you want.”

“We might get answers we don’t want,” said Trak. They all looked his way. “Many of these children, especially those in our school, came from abusive situations. We may hear things we didn’t know. I think we should get Doc, Cruz, and Wilson to help.”

“When did you get so fucking insightful?” smirked
Nine.

“I’ve always been this way. I just didn’t want to waste
it on all of you before now.” He stood and winked at the
group. “Time for dinner. We don’t want to be late.”

Trak turned and started walking down the path toward
the docks. The women were already at Belle Fleur, discussing
plans for Thanksgiving. Nine looked at Gaspar, Ian, and
Ghost as the others followed Trak.

“Do you think your mama is making us more
thoughtful?” asked Ghost.

“Fuck if I know,” said Gaspar. “If anyone could do it,
it would be her.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Hi, Ted,” smiled Miller, walking toward the director of the boys’ home. He’d been with them the last ten years, taking over for his father after he passed. With a PhD in child psychology and child welfare, he was a God-send.

“Miller, it’s wonderful to see you. Hello,” he said, waving at the rest of the men. He’d brought along with him Bull, Code, Max, Sven, Otto, Teddy, and Hannu. “Are we in trouble?”

“No, no,” laughed Max. “We’re planning something for the holidays, but we need to get some ideas for the boys. So, we thought we’d come directly to the source.”

“Oh,” laughed Ted. “Seeing all of you usually makes me think there’s something else going on. I know the boys will be open and honest with you. I can tell you that a common ask is for the rooms to be updated. Luke, Cam, Eric, and Hex did it a few years ago, but, well, boys are rough on furniture and walls.”

“Man,” laughed Miller. “Mama would agree with you on that. Poor Pops patched more walls than anyone I know. We’ll take a look at that while we’re here as well.”

“Now is a perfect time,” said Ted. “There’s no school this week since it’s Thanksgiving, so the boys have been having a lot of playtime combined with doing their chores.”

“Any problems we need to be aware of?” asked Max.

“None,” smiled Ted. “They’re really wonderful boys. All of them.”

“I think you’d say that even if they were all hellions from the devil himself, Ted. But that’s why we love you,” smirked Hannu.

Ted led them through the house as Hannu, Otto, Sven, and Teddy stayed back, examining each of the rooms. They took photos, made some drawings, took some measurements, and began discussing options.

One of the many issues was that they didn’t turn boys away. It was only set for thirty-two boys, but right now they had thirty-seven. The girls’ home wasn’t much better. Equipped to hold thirty, it now had thirty-three.

“Damn, this place reminds me of my time in the Army barracks,” frowned Teddy.

“Yea, not exactly warm and cozy. I mean, it’s safe, dry, and clean, but no room for a young boy to have his own

thoughts,” said Hannu.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Otto said, shaking his head as he turned in the small space. “Maybe we need to think about building an addition. A second, maybe even third floor?”

“You know, that’s not a bad idea,” said Hannu. “If we did that, Ted could split the floors by age groups. It might help the teachers and case workers as well. Let me call Grant and see if he can run over here for a minute.”

Hannu stepped away as the others continued looking around. The living spaces needed to be expanded as well. The kitchen was too small for a group this large. They would need two industrial-sized refrigerators and two industrial ovens. The table’s not big enough for all of them to sit and have a meal together, forcing them to eat in shifts. This just wouldn’t do.

Miller, Bull, Code, and Max sat with some of the boys as they often did. With retirement came a lot of time on their hands. Sitting with these young men was one of the only things that made them feel useful. They talked about sports, the news, the military, and often, girls. But it was helping them to understand that their futures were not based on their past. That was the most valuable thing they did.

“Honestly, Mr. Bull, we don’t need clothes or toys,” said Alvin, one of the teenagers. “I mean, maybe the younger boys need stuff, but Mr. Ted provides for us. What we really need is more space, but I don’t even wanna complain about that. This is the first place I’ve ever even had my own bed. Clean sheets, warm blankets, hot water, and three hot meals a day. I’m not complainin’.”

“And we appreciate that,” said Bull, “but we want to provide some surprises for the little ones for Christmas. We don’t want them addicted to electronics. We want things that will help them, maybe that are fun and educational.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?” laughed one of the other older boys, Josiah.

“I guess we do, don’t we?” smirked Code.

“Can I make a request for us older boys?” asked Josiah.

“Of course,” said Miller. “Anything.”

“Well, sir, we’d like it if maybe someone could start a training program for us older boys. Maybe something that would help us with sports in school or just being in good health. You know, running, lifting weights, that sort of thing.

And for those of us that want to join the service, then maybe you can help us with that, too. I mean, train us for that. We know that you all train men who want to be in Special Forces or those who are thinking of professional careers in athletics, but we'd like that as well."

"You boys want to join the military?" smiled Bull.

"Yes, sir. I mean, most of us. We all do okay in school. We're not stupid or anything, but we see what you all do. We hear about it. That's what we'd like to do, too. One day, I hope to come back here and work at the school. Help other boys."

"That's amazing," smiled Code.

"I would be dead if it weren't for y'all," said Alvin. "I was so angry at my mama for bein' strung out on drugs all the time, and there I was robbing people and headed down the same path. Had Mr. Ted not seen me on the side of the road, all busted up from a bunch of older kids, I would have died. I'll never forget that.

"I'll never forget how he didn't lecture me. He didn't make me feel guilty. He got Mr. Wilson and Doc to come patch me up, and they were just as nice as him. Ms. Sara, she brought me the most amazing food every day while I was

healing. But it was Mr. Ted that really changed my life. Working with him and Ms. Bree, I was able to forgive my mama. And myself. I see a future now that I didn't see before."

Bull wiped his eyes, turning to look away from the young man. He knew they were impacting lives, but he just didn't realize how much. This. This is why they did what they do.

Alvin nudged his friend, Josiah. They both smiled, nodding their heads.

"I'm glad we got to tell you this, Mr. Bull," said Josiah. "I'm hoping you can help us."

"We will definitely help you," said Bull. "And I think we might be able to help with the space issue. You boys start talking to the younger ones and see what they might want from Santa." The two boys chuckled, and Bull frowned.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Miller.

"Sir, Santa isn't real. We keep it up for the little ones, but we know it's Mr. Ted and you all that bring the gifts."

"Son, Santa is as real as you or me. Trust me, I walked in on him one night. It wasn't a good thing," said Miller,

shaking his head.

The boys laughed nervously, then gave a serious expression to the older man. They didn't want to offend him, but Santa real? Seriously?

“Sir, I want to believe you. Lord knows we'd all like to believe someone like Santa Claus is out there, but you have to understand where we're coming from. I mean, just you all being here asking about gifts for the boys lets us know it's you that brings them, not Santa.”

Damn, thought Miller. I blew that one.

“I believe I can help you,” said Matthew, walking toward them with a smile on his face, somewhat hidden beneath his full white and gray beard.

“Pops! What are you doing here?” asked Miller, standing to hug his father.

“I hear things,” he smirked. “In fact, I heard that young Alvin and Josiah no longer believe.”

“It's not that, sir. I mean, it is, but, well, you have to see how difficult it is to believe in such a thing,” frowned Josiah.

“I can see where it might be a challenge,” nodded Matthew. “Take a seat.”

The boys took their seats, but Matthew noticed that the older men did the same. He wanted to laugh but knew that it was a compliment to him that they obeyed.

“Centuries ago, there was a man by the name of Saint Nicholas of Myra. Some knew him as Nicholas of Bari. He was a Christian bishop originally from Greece. Now, this was way back during the Roman Empire.”

“Wow,” said Alvin. Matthew nodded, smiling at the young man.

“Some people called him Nicholas the Wonderworker because wherever he went, miracles seemed to follow. Much, much later, he became the patron saint for sailors, merchants, children, all kinds of folks. But he really got his reputation from his secret gift-giving.”

“Yes, but he was a man,” said Alvin. “He died. Right?”

“He did die, son. But true legends, true, good-hearted men don’t die. They live on in their deeds and in their legacy. Did you know that when he was about your age, they said he

rescued three young girls, saving them from a life of prostitution. Every night for three nights, he dropped a sack of gold coins at the window of their house so that their father could pay a dowry for them to marry.

“Generations of men followed in his footsteps. Father Christmas, Jule Nisse, Dun Che Lao Ren, Sinterklaas, Hotei Osho, Papai Noel, Le Befana, Joulupukki, Père Noël, and of course, Santa Claus.”

“I never knew he had so many names,” said Miller. Matthew smiled at his son, nodding. He knew. He just didn’t remember.

“Oh, he has many, many names.”

“Then, why don’t all kids get gifts, sir?” asked Alvin. “I mean, I don’t want to sound ungrateful or disrespectful, but not everyone gets a Christmas gift. I didn’t for a long time. In fact, the first real gift I ever received was when I got here.”

“I know, son,” said Matthew, nodding at the boy. He gripped his shoulders, doing what had become his trademark. He kissed his forehead. “He knew you were suffering. He also knew that if he left a gift for you, it would be taken and sold. It was not the time.”

The older men stared at one another, then back at Matthew. How could he have known that?

“When the time is right, he attempts to leave gifts for all. Traveling around the globe has become a challenge. As the population has grown, getting all those gifts to children really became impossible. So, he did what any man would do. He asked for help. He asked for help from parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other men and women inclined to give of their time and pocket.

“Yes, sir,” smiled Matthew. “It’s the time of year when miracles seem to just float through the air. They pass by you in a way that makes you feel as though electricity has passed through your body. You get tingles and chills. A feeling unlike anything else. Your heart is warm and full, your spirit at its greatest. It is truly a miraculous time of year.”

“I want to believe you, sir,” said Josiah.

“I know you do, son,” nodded Matthew. “Well, we have time to have some more conversations. Between now and then, you help my boys help all of you. Your good deeds will be rewarded well.”

“Yes, sir,” said the boys in unison. As Matthew began to walk away, squeezing the shoulder of each of his ‘sons,’

Josiah called out to him.

“Mr. Matthew? I wish. I wish you’d been my father or grandfather.” Matthew smiled at him, nodding.

“I am, son. I am.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Man, your father is something else,” smirked Bull as the men walked toward their cabins. “I’ve never in my life met anyone like him.”

“He’s pretty incredible, isn’t he?” smiled Miller. “I don’t think any of us boys appreciated him like we should have when we were younger. He was always there. Always. Just like you saw today, him walking up out of the blue. He used to do that with us. When my first wife died, he always seemed to know when I needed his big shoulders. When I almost married the wrong one the second time around, he never let me fall. And when I almost walked away from Kari, his big hand was there to guide me.”

“He’s important to us all,” said Hannu. “Even us older men. He’s a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. He always makes time for everyone. So does Irene, but Matthew does it with quiet grace behind the scenes.”

“Do you think he’s Santa?” asked Bull. Miller looked at him, almost laughing, then sobered.

“I mean, if we think Mama is voodoo or some shit, why can’t we think Pops is Santa?” said Miller. He shook his

head, zipping his jacket tighter. “I don’t know. I don’t think I want to know. I’m just damn glad I was born to them.”

“What did Grant say about the orphanage?” asked Max.

“It’s gonna need a lot of work. We’ve done a good job trying to make sure everything was up to code, clean, functional, that sort of thing, but it’s seriously shy on space,” said Teddy. “I think we should move the boys to the Sugar Lodge, find somewhere else to hide the residents’ gifts, and just start from scratch. Grant said that he could call in extra teams and have this done by Christmas.”

“Let’s do it,” nodded Nine. “I want those boys to feel as though it’s truly a home, not just a house.”

“Looks like Ryan beat us here,” smirked Angel. “Hey, man. Thanks for coming out here.”

“Happy to do it,” smiled Ryan. He hugged his father, Antoine, kissing his cheek, and smiled at the others. They rarely noticed his prosthetic arm any longer. It looked so real, you had to really pay attention to know that it wasn’t his own.

“We want to do something really special for the boys in the orphanage, as well as the kids at the school. We’re going

to try and stick to old-fashioned things with a modern twist, but we'd love to create some things with technology as well."

"Interesting," smirked Ryan. "So, keep it old school, with a modern twist? I like that idea, although toys aren't usually our thing."

"Yea, I guess that describes what we want," said Gaspar. "Do you think you can help?"

"Definitely," he smiled. "I'm thinking advanced forms of checkers and chess with an electronic component and artificial intelligence voiceover. Something like a comms team in your ears. If you go to move your knight, your headset says, 'You have a thirty-five percent probability of failure with that move.' It will teach the boys to really pay attention and be patient but also to trust their gut."

"Hey, Grant," said Gabe, watching as their friend walked toward them. "We hear that the house can be done by Christmas."

"Hi, everyone. Yes, I think with my extra crews, we should have it ready by then. Georgie is working on bypassing the usual bullshit with the permits. With any luck, I can get started tomorrow. I couldn't help but overhear. I was thinking about making this a smart home. Automatically call

911, if necessary, automatically turn lights on and off, that sort of thing.”

“I love it,” nodded Gaspar. “It will save us money in the long run on utilities but also give the boys an extra sense of security.”

“We did it a few years back at the girls’ home, and it’s worked extremely well,” said Grant. “We’re doing some minor updates over there, but Lauren, Erin, Grace, and Faith authorized a remodel about two years ago.”

The men looked at one another, smiling and nodding. Of course, their wives beat them to the punch at the girls’ home. They should have known.

“We’ve got a couple of old, broken-down cars behind the garage that we were going to scrap,” said Whiskey. “I spoke to Razor and Skull, and they both think we can fix them up and give them to the older boys. They need some serious engine work, which we can handle, but the rest is cosmetic. We can definitely handle that.”

“I like that,” said Miller. “I want them to feel a bit of independence. The two older ones have definitely taken on leadership roles at the home. Those boys deserve this.”

“I’ve got two storage units reserved for us,” said Code. “We should be able to store everything in those until the house is ready.”

“Anything we need to do to get the Sugar Lodge ready?” asked Ghost.

“No. It’s all set with the cots. The kitchen is fully stocked out there, and Dylan is sending out some of the staff to stay with them. The boys know the deal on keeping the location quiet. They’ll be taken out the back gates for school, so they don’t realize how close they are to the main compound. Gunner and Hunter are going to help with all of that,” said Gaspar.

“Sounds like we’re all set,” said Nine.

“We just have to keep the women out of it,” said Ian. “And that will not be easy. I have a hard enough time not telling Faith what I get her for Christmas. Keeping a big secret like this is going to be traumatic.”

“Traumatic? What are you? A thirteen-year-old girl?” frowned Miller. Ian flipped him the bird, and they all just chuckled.

Johanna, Robin, and Alexandra were walking the paths, laughing and talking in an animated way. They waved at the men, and they all waved back.

“Look innocent,” muttered Ghost.

“We are innocent, asshole!” screeched Nine.

“I know, but they smell us planning shit a mile away. They know when we’re up to something, and they always guess it before we get to it.”

“Alright, the first man who cracks gets a beating,” said Nine.

“You’d have to catch me first,” grinned Baptiste.

“I know where you live, dumbass.”



“They’re cute when they think they can hide things from us,” smirked Alexandra.

“All men think they can hide things from their wives,” smirked Robin. “Presents, money, affairs. It doesn’t matter.

They all think they're smarter, and the reality is, they're all wrong." The women laughed, nodding their heads.

"Let's let them have this one," said Johanna. "They really are cute when they think they're better at this than we are."

"Agreed," nodded Alexandra.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Why are we here?” asked Rafe. “It’s fucking cold, the wind is picking up, and I’m still full from Thanksgiving dinner.”

“Stop your bitching,” groaned Gaspar. “We’re all cold and full from dinner. I swear to God, Mama works harder every year to make us explode from food.” He rubbed his slightly protruding stomach, and his brothers laughed at him.

“Just what is this place?” asked Ghost.

“We used to use it as one of the islands for part of the training locations,” said Gaspar, “but we stopped a few years back after we built the full training facility. It’s a great little island, higher than some of the others, so it doesn’t flood as often. There are some ready-made trails on it, along with some treehouses and shacks for shelter in case of bad weather.”

“Is this one of the famous boys’ clubhouses?” smirked Ian.

“No,” laughed Miller. “Pops always said Halo Island was special, and we couldn’t use it to separate ourselves from

the girls. Besides, it's easy to get to. It's the last of the islands that we own. If you look toward shore, you can see some of the old homes that belonged to sharecroppers in the area. Super easy to get to by small boat or canoe."

"People still live in those?" frowned Ghost.

"It looks like it," said Gaspar. "Y'all know who lives there?" He turned to his brothers, all of them shaking their heads.

"Maybe we need to pay a visit," said Antoine.

"They're awful close to our land, but I'm more worried about the condition of those homes. One good wind, and they'll be gone."

"I'll ask Pops about it," said Luc. "He seems to know everyone in the area."

"Why are we here?" asked Nine as they stepped onto the island.

"I got to thinking about the boys and kids at the school," said Gaspar. "Giving them an updated home is awesome. Giving a few gifts for them that they need, great. But Mama and Pops always gave us experiences."

"Experiences?" asked Ian.

“Yea. We got to go somewhere, do something that we’d never done before. What if we gave these boys an experience here? What if we created an island where they can climb and jump and run, where they can experience different games in a different way. We’ll make this amazing, like a theme park without all the noise.”

“I can see that,” grinned Luc. “We could put up a holiday theme for the first event. Trees everywhere, lights, ornaments. Epic!”

Gaspar laughed at his little brother, shaking his head. Miller gave him a smirk. Luc was always the one that got so excited at Christmas he made himself sick. For some reason, Miller was feeling nostalgic. Being the second oldest had a lot of responsibility when there were fifteen children.

With Gaspar only a year older, they were the ones that put together bikes and dollhouses to help out Matthew. It gave them pride and joy seeing the happy faces of their siblings on Christmas morning. He looked toward Alec, the ‘baby’ of the group. He was the last one that allowed them to play Father Christmas.

“What do you think? Pierre?” asked Luc.

“What?”

“I was asking what you think about making it a full Christmas park. Romantic walks for couples, kids playing on Ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds, that type of thing. Thousands of lights, maybe a food stand over there, games, all of it!” he said excitedly.

“I think it’s a great idea,” smiled Miller.

He looked across the narrow bayou and saw a young boy standing on the front porch of one of the battered shacks. An old man stepped out, touching the boy’s shoulder, nodding at him. He got into a pickup truck and drove off as the boy just watched.

“Shouldn’t he be in school?” asked Hannu.

“It’s Thanksgiving break,” said Nine. “But I think we should speak with him. Those places should be condemned. Who owns them?”

“I’m not sure,” said Gaspar. “Just five hundred yards back is the start of our property line. You can see our fences in the brush.”

“I’ll send Tailor and Alec to speak with them. See what’s going on,” said Nine. “No one should have to live like that.”

“Hey, y’all see that tree?” asked Antoine. Gabe squinted, looking off into the distance on the edge of the tree line on the island. “That big branch could easily hold two, maybe three thousand pounds. We could place swings over the branch, line the ropes with lights. Kids would love it; adults would think it’s romantic.”

“I think we’ve got some great ideas,” smiled Gaspar. “We just need to put them all into action and get this shit done. We’re now counting down until Christmas Eve.”

By the time they made it back to Belle Fleur, their wives were already wondering where they were.

“Why won’t you tell us where you’ve been?” asked Erin.

“Baby, it’s Christmas time. Just go with it, okay?”

“Fine, but so help me God, if you’re doing something dangerous, you’re going to be asking Santa for something to keep you warm at night because it won’t be me.”

“Agreed!” yelled Lauren.

“Same,” said Alexandra. Faith, Grace, Lena, and the others all nodded.

“Well, shit,” muttered Ghost. “We’re trying to do something nice and getting our asses chewed.”

“They’ll thank us in the end,” said Gaspar. “This will all be worth it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Mornin’,” said Alec, walking toward the gray, run-down shack.

“Mornin’.”

“I’m Alec Robicheaux, sir, and this is my friend, Tailor Bongard,” he said, holding out a big hand to the older black man.

“I know who ‘ya are. Somethin’ wrong?”

“No, sir. I was just wondering who owns these homes,” he said, pointing down the row of shacks.

“Mr. Couvillion,” he said. “Owns everything here. Owns the fishin’ boats we work on. Gives us these places as part of our payment.”

“Part of your payment? What do you mean?” asked Tailor.

“Mean he gives me pay plus this to live in. Gotta have a roof if I’m gonna take care of my grandson.” He turned toward the door and yelled for the boy. “Joshua! Come on out.”

The young man walked out, looking down at his feet. This was a boy who was either used to being in trouble or used to being bullied. He did not want his face seen by these men.

“Sir, these places don’t appear safe. Do you have plumbing and electrical?” asked Tailor.

“Got plumbing out back,” he said, jerking his thumb toward the outhouse. “Electrical is spotty. We use the fire to cook most of our meals. You an inspector or somethin’?”

“This is fucking archaic,” said Alec. “No one lives like this any longer.”

“Mr. Couvillion won’t let us do nothin’ to the places,” said the old man. “Says they’re good just like they are. Wouldn’t matter. He don’t pay us enough to do nothin’ to the houses. Don’t care about me. Care about my grandson stayin’ dry and warm. We do alright together.”

“What does he pay you?” asked Alec.

“Four dollars an hour and a small allotment of the fish we catch. Plus the house,” said the old man. Alec looked at Tailor, who was shaking his head. What he was doing was illegal.

“Joshua, is it?” asked Tailor. The boy nodded. “You attend school?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. That’s good. Would you mind letting us take a look inside?” he asked.

“Go ahead. Ain’t nothin’ to see.”

That might have been the understatement of the year. There were two small twin beds against the wall with tattered sheets and blankets on them. If it were possible, the inside was colder and worse for wear than the outside. The floorboards were weathered, splintered, and damn near falling apart. There was no insulation between the floor and the earth below, causing cold drafts to rise up between them.

“Jesus,” muttered Tailor. “It’s like we’ve stepped back two hundred years.”

“This ain’t right,” said Alec. “We can’t let them live like this.”

“You know this man? Couvillion?”

“No, but maybe Pops has heard of him. I think we need to ask him what to do about it. We have to help these

folks. Let's go look at the others." Stepping back outside, the boy was now seated beneath a tree, reading a book.

"He seems like a good boy," said Alec.

"He tries," nodded the old man. "Folks left him with me about five years ago. Never came back. I can't let him go to a home, so I went back to work for Mr. Couvillion on the fishin' boats. Out there ten, twelve hours a day, sometimes longer. Gives us food on the table, though."

"Sir, working that many hours should give you a good living. This house is uninhabitable."

"If you mean it ain't worth livin' in, neither is starvin' on the street. I do what I can, young man."

"I meant no offense, sir. I can see that you're trying to provide for both of you, and I applaud that. We'd like to help. All of you. We think these homes should be updated."

"Well, if you could do that, it would be good but don't hold your breath. Couvillion is mean as a snake. Don't ask for nothin', or he'll fire you on the spot. That's what we've learned. Folks are lookin' for work. He can replace us in a minute."

"I didn't get your name," said Tailor.

“Ray. Ray Bell.”

“Mr. Bell, it was nice meeting you. We’ll be back soon.” He shook the old man’s hand and walked toward their truck, waving at Joshua as they passed. Stopping, he backtracked and looked at the book in the boy’s hand.

“*Tom Sawyer*. You thinking of sailing down that river?”

“No.”

“I see. Maybe need a little adventure?” he asked.

“No. Don’t cause no trouble for my granddad,” he said, glaring up at the two big men. He might be small, but they could tell he would defend his grandfather to the death.

“We have no intentions of causing him any problems,” said Tailor. “We want to help all of you.”

“Yea, that’s what everyone says, and then someone gets in trouble. Just leave things as they are. We’re doin’ okay.”

“But you should be doin’ better than okay,” said Alec. “That’s what we’re gonna try to make happen.” The boy just stared at them, nodding as they walked away.

“That’s a bitter boy,” said Tailor. Alec nodded.

“Yep. And we may have just made him our enemy.”

Alex and Tailor visited four other shacks along the narrow dirt road. All were the same. Weathered, cracking floorboards, gaps in the walls, no heat, no indoor plumbing. These were slaves’ shacks that this man had basically made somewhat habitable.



“You ever hear of this man, Pops?”

“I’ve heard of him,” frowned Matthew. “He’s a bitter, bitter man. His father owned the fishing company and all the boats and, when he died, left them in debt. The son, Tyler Couvillion, he wanted to sell the whole business, but the boats aren’t in the best of conditions.”

“Will you come with us, Matthew? Will you come and speak with him?” asked Tailor.

“I can try.”

It wasn’t hard to find Tyler Couvillion. He was sitting outside the office of his dockside business. The building

looked as though it might fall over with one good shove. He was leaning back against the building, chugging down a beer. His fourth if the empties on the table were any indication.

“Mr. Couvillion? We’d like to speak with you about those shacks you own along Bayou Trail,” said Matthew.

“Them assholes complain? I give ‘em a place to live for free. They can find themselves another job!”

“No one complained,” said Matthew. “We saw the homes, and they’re not habitable. If the Parish authorities came out here and inspected them, they’d tear them down.”

“Let me guess. That’s what you’re gonna do,” he said, snarling at the three men. He didn’t even seem to care that Tailor and Alec could swallow him whole. He slammed the chair forward, now sitting on all four legs, and stood with some effort.

“We’re not here to cause trouble, Tyler,” said Matthew.

“How do you know me?” he asked, jerking his head backwards.

“I knew your father. He was a good man that had a few bad years. Nothing to be ashamed of there.”

“Yea. Says you, old man.” Alec kicked the table in front of the man and took a step forward.

“Have some respect. We’re here as neighbors.”

“Right. Neighbors,” smirked the man.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere. How many boats do you have that run, Mr. Couvillion?” asked Matthew.

“I got six boats. Five run but are on their last legs. This will all be a bad nightmare by March. Ain’t gonna last longer than that.” Matthew took out his checkbook and wrote a check with more zeroes than there should have been.

“That’s a fair price for your business. You want out. That’s the only offer I’m going to make.”

He grabbed the check, staring down at the numbers. This must be a joke. The business wasn’t even worth a third of that price.

“This check good?” he frowned, staring at the three men.

“It’s good,” said Matthew. “Take the money. You won’t get a better offer. It’s for the business, the houses on Bayou Trail, all of it.”

Couvillion never even replied. He tucked the check in his pocket, grabbed his truck keys, and sped away.

“I guess that’s a yes,” smirked Tailor. “Looks like you own a fishing business.”

“I’ve been meaning to branch out,” smiled Matthew. He looked at the building, then back at the boats sitting in their berths. “See if Grant can send one of the boys over to begin repairs on this building and the shacks. Go back and let those folks know they’ll be taken care of for the next two months and that they’ve all received pay raises. Fair, marketable pay for the work they do. We won’t be sending any men back out there until I can be sure we have all the right equipment to do this correct. I also wanna make sure the boats are safe, and if they’re not, we’re gonna get new ones.”

“You’re something else, Pops,” said Alec, kissing his father’s forehead.

“That’s what your mother says.”

CHAPTER SIX

“He bought a what?” screeched Jean.

“A fishing company,” laughed Alec. “The place is a mess, but Pops was just trying to help the folks that live on Bayou Trail. Those shacks are a damn mess. He’s paying them for two months of work while we get the boats in better shape. I think Mr. Ray is too old to run the place, but there are a few others that are just as good and been doing it a long time.”

“Well, I guess we eat enough fish that it makes sense to own a fishing business,” shrugged Jean. “One more thing to add to the books.”

“How are we doing on the research for the toys?” asked Antoine. The entire senior team was meeting on Halo Island, away from prying eyes. They’d already cleared the island of debris, ensuring that the paths were safe to travel.

“Rafe and Baptiste have been spending a lot of time at the boys’ home. Keith is helping us with everything we need to know for the kids at the school. Ryan and Doug are working on some things on the side, so everyone doesn’t know. They already developed a new plastic material that’s

weatherproof, sunproof, and windproof. Our facility in Michigan is manufacturing thirty artificial Christmas trees using the material.

“When they’re done, we’ll put the trees on the island using concrete bases. They’ll be permanent but can be decorated for any time of year and provide shade. Ian and Ghost wanted to go big, so they’ll be twenty-foot trees.”

“Twenty feet? Do we have enough ornaments to decorate trees that big?” asked Luc.

“We’ve got Zeke and Max going to all the usual spots that Noelle visits to get decorations for Mama. They bought out the lights at the first two places. The owner wasn’t sure whether to be pissed or grateful.”

“I suppose we’ll have to figure out a way to secure the ornaments to the trees so they don’t blow off if we get bad weather,” said Tailor. “Man, I can’t wait to see the look on the kids’ faces when they go out there.”

Miller, Sven, and Vince walked up, shaking their heads as they argued.

“I told you I didn’t know anything about little girl stuff,” said Sven.

“How hard can it be to find doll shit?” growled Miller.

“What’s wrong?” asked Nine with a smile.

“We have a lot of little girls at the school,” said Miller.

Nine nodded. “They all want the same thing. Some damn doll that’s the hottest fucking toy in the country right now. Eleven dolls are what we’re looking for. Eleven! These idiots couldn’t find one.”

“You were with us, idiot,” laughed Vince.

“Okay, okay, we’re professionals. We do this shit all the time. We know how to source shit out and find what we need. It can’t be that hard,” said Ghost.

“It’s fucking hard,” sneered Miller. “They’re these damn dolls that cost a fortune, have a whole wardrobe you can buy with them, and they have their own books.”

“Where are the stores?” asked Nine.

“Everywhere. We have two off Canal, one in the mall on the riverfront, one in the Galleria, one in Lafayette, and one in Baton Rouge.”

“Okay, then we divide and conquer. Everybody takes a store. Find those damn dolls and buy everything you can to go with them. Clothes, books, everything,” said Ghost.



If stores weren't already on high alert for shoplifters during the holiday season, seeing massive, handsome older men walking through their stores looking as though they were trying to find hidden IEDs was probably not making them more comfortable.

"I don't see one," whispered Baptiste. Gabe nudged him, pointing to the top shelf.

"Look. There are four!"

"Get on my shoulders," said Baptiste. "We need all four."

Placing his foot on his brother's thigh, he stepped up and onto his shoulders, steadying himself using the shelving unit for balance. Baptiste gripped his ankles, balancing him as he grabbed the dolls, tossing them down one by one. He jumped off his shoulders and picked up two of them.

"You've put on weight," said Baptiste, cracking his neck left then right.

“Fuck you,” growled Gabe. “I weigh exactly the same as I always have.”

“Whatever,” smirked Baptiste. They turned down the next aisle and were completely overwhelmed. “Holy shit.”

“What the fuck? How do we know what goes with what?” asked Gabe.

“That’s easy,” said a little girl standing near them. “Everything is colored to match. See the triangle on the box?”

“I see,” said Baptiste.

“Just look for that color triangle, and everything will go with her.”

“Thanks, kid.”

“You’re welcome.” She skipped down the aisle, disappearing around the corner.

“Okay, an orange triangle. Grab everything with that.”

“We’re gonna need a fucking basket,” said Gabe.

Rushing back to the front of the store, he grabbed a basket, and they began clearing the shelves of everything with an orange triangle. Then, it was all the books belonging to this

doll. When they got to the register, they almost choked at the final bill.

“Christ, we could have bought them a car for this price.”

“They don’t drive, asshole,” frowned Gabe. “Just pay the woman.” Walking out to the truck, Baptiste sent a text to the others.

Four down. All the supplies with them.



“They got four,” said Luc. “We can’t let them win.”

“It’s not a contest, dimwit!” Miller stared at his younger brother, still seeing the little boy who desperately wanted a bicycle for his eighth Christmas, taking on extra chores for a whole month to prove he deserved it.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I was just remembering the Christmas that you wanted the bike,” chuckled Miller. “You were so fucking

cute. You took on everyone's chores so you could prove to Santa that you were a good boy."

"Yea, had it not been for that little fight with Morris Lefevre, I would have been home free," he grinned.

"It wasn't a little fight. You practically tore his arm out of its socket, if I remember right."

"He deserved it. He was touching Camille and Claudette. I didn't like it." Miller nodded, gripping his brother's shoulder.

"You're a good brother, Luc. If I haven't told you that enough, I'm sorry. You're a damn fine brother, and I'm proud of the man you've become." Luc looked at Pierre and smiled.

"I probably haven't told you enough what a great big brother you are. You were always my idol, Pierre. Always. I wanted to be just like you and Gaspar. Thank you for being such great examples of good men."

"There were times we weren't always good," frowned Miller.

They made their way up and down the aisles, finally finding the one that they needed. The one with screaming little girls and harried mothers trying to control them.

“Fuck me,” muttered Luc. “Can we go back in the field?”

“I think we are back in the field,” growled Miller.

There was a desperate-looking manager coming toward them with a box of the dolls. They allowed the little girls in the aisle to grab one each, then looked down at the box to see only two.

“Is that all you have?” asked Luc.

“Buddy, I’m exhausted. If you want this doll, you need to grab them now, or they’ll be gone.” Miller took the two dolls and tucked them beneath his arms.

“You have more in the back?”

“Look, I can only put out so many a day,” he said, shaking his head.

“So, you do have more in the back? How many?” asked Miller.

“Another four dozen,” he said. “But I can’t put out more until tomorrow.”

“It’s tomorrow. I need five more.”

“Buddy...”

“Don’t, son. Don’t piss me off. Get the dolls, and we’ll be out of your hair. You’ll have your biggest sale day in company history because we’re buying all the matching shit with it.”

That got the man’s attention. Nodding, he went to the back and brought out the additional dolls, then pointed to all the items that matched them.

With his shelves empty, at least for the night, he would be able to restock in the morning and maybe get home in time for a late-night dinner with his wife.

“I think that was more than my first paycheck,” whispered Luc.

“Yea, but it’s done. Text the others that we have them all.”

Carrying the seven large bags to the truck, Miller had that feeling at the back of his neck. He nudged his brother and saw the imperceptible nod. He opened the lock box on the truck, tossed the bags inside, then swiftly turned to see two young men with knives.

“Hand over the bags and your wallets, old man,” said the kid.

“Son, you do not want to do this,” said Miller, giving a dangerous look of warning.

“I will cut you!”

“With that?” laughed Luc. “No. No, no, you can’t cut someone with that. Now, this you can cut someone with.” He pushed back his jacket, revealing the long buck knife at his hip and the nine-millimeter automatic pistol.

“Let me tell you how this is gonna go,” said Miller. “You’re gonna drop those knives, turn, and run. If you don’t, I will send you home in a box of coal so your mommy and daddy know exactly what a piece of shit you both are.”

There wasn’t even a second thought given. The two young men dropped the knives and ran for their lives. Miller bent down, picking up the dull steak knives, shaking his head.

“Let’s go home,” said Luc. “We still have more to buy, and this shit is exhausting.”

“Yea, but the day is looking up. I almost got to shoot someone.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Do we want them all the same color?” asked Teddy, staring at the train cars he was painting.

“No,” said Nine. “I say we do every color we have. I asked Elizabeth, and she said kids are stimulated by colors. Whatever the fuck that means.” Teddy nodded, laughing at the man as he continued to paint the wooden cars and trains.

“You know, I had a toy like this when I was a boy,” said Teddy. “It had all these tracks it sat on and little buildings and houses alongside the tracks. It was still sitting on my dresser when I got home from World War II. It was blue with shiny silver wheels.” Nine smiled at him, nodding.

“Yea, my old man worked his ass off to make sure I had everything I wanted. One year, I was desperate for this set of plastic soldiers. You know, the ones that have like fifteen men, plastic guns, tanks, everything.” Teddy nodded, chuckling. “They weren’t that expensive, but it was a lean year. I’m not sure how he got that set, but it was under the tree on Christmas morning. I played with that thing for years. Even when I was a teenager, I would arrange the men on a table, prepared for whatever battle they were headed into.”

“Strategist even back then,” smiled Teddy.

“I guess,” he nodded. “I don’t think I ever got the chance to thank my old man for all he did for me, Teddy. I’m not a man that lives with regrets, but that’s one that haunts me.”

“He knows, Nine. We all know. Now, my son was a piece of shit, but my grandson damn sure made up for it. That boy doesn’t miss a day to tell me he loves me or that he thanks me.”

“When Ellie was born, we didn’t think we’d have any more children. I nearly lost Erin, and I wasn’t willing to risk her life to try for another baby. But I guess God had other plans for us. Cam came along, and suddenly, I was the father to a daughter and a son,” he smiled.

“I did so many things wrong those first few years. I was gone more than I should have been. I left Erin to make some tough decisions about them both. It’s a miracle she’s tolerated my ass all these years.”

“It’s not a miracle,” said Teddy. “All of you were meant for one another. Each of you was meant to find the other. First, as friends, as brothers. Then as friends finding

their wives. I'm with Irene. I don't think there is any such thing as coincidence."

"We got all the dolls into the storage unit," said Miller, walking toward them. "Hey, those are looking good. I had a whole set like this when I was a kid. We all did. We also had those blocks with the letters on them. I guess that's old-fashioned, but they were cool."

"Maybe we could make them with some sort of electronic piece to them," said Teddy.

"How so?"

"I don't know. With the trains, it could announce the next station or make other announcements. For the blocks, maybe they could make it so if the little one spelled something out right, it would pronounce it. Like if they lined up the blocks for d-o-g, it sounded out 'dog.' You know, like it was congratulating them."

"Fucking great idea," said Miller, nodding his head.

"Let me get with Ryan and see if it can happen."

"How are we on the bikes?" asked Nine.

"We've got about half of them. Still trying to figure out how we're going to get the rest. We're buying shit up

everywhere we go. Antoine is looking for some used bikes that we can refurbish and make look brand new.”

“We should have started earlier,” said Nine.

He heard the sounds of hammers and looked across the bayou to see Grant’s team working furiously to improve the shacks. They already had new roofs on each of the homes. The floors had been replaced, insulated, and secured. Now, they were working on filling the cracks in the walls and running electrical and plumbing.

“You’d think Ray’s grandson would be happier since we’re upgrading the houses for them,” said Teddy. “That boy looks mad as a hornet’s nest all the time.”

“Or scared,” said Miller. “He’s got reason to be pissed. Alec said his Mama and Daddy left him with the old man about five years ago. Just walked away and never came back. He seems respectful to the grandfather. Doesn’t appear to break any rules.”

“Well, it was a smart idea to put part of the storage on the Halo Island. We can’t leave everything here in case it floods, but some of this, we can. We’re gonna need a damn big sleigh to deliver everything on Christmas Eve.”

“What are we gonna do about Mama’s Christmas Eve ball?” asked Miller.

“Good question,” frowned Nine. “I suppose we do what we’re good at. Sneak around.”

“Ted is putting together a list of sizes for the boys to get some new clothes. They’re all out at the Sugar Lodge, enjoying a larger space. Less privacy but more space. They’re gonna love the facility when it’s finished. Grant and his team are doing amazing work over there.”

“He must have ten crews working with him right now,” said Miller. “They’re working on the boys’ home and those shacks over there as well, plus something for Mama and them.”

“Those shacks are gonna be amazing when he’s done with them. They’ll still be small, but everyone who lives there is either couples with no kids or singles. Ray and his grandson will each have their own room. It won’t be big, but it will hold a double bed. A new double bed.”

“We’re going all out, huh?” smirked Miller.

“Why the hell not? We’ve got the time and the money. We’ve ordered new appliances, furniture, everything

for them. When it's all said and done, those four hundred square feet of hell are going to be eight hundred square feet of warmth, modern comforts, and homes to be proud of. All thanks to your father," said Nine.

"He's something else, isn't he?" said Miller, shaking his head. "It's like he sees no end to the giving. I mean, we have the money, don't get me wrong, but I worry sometimes that he'll be taken advantage of."

"Your father is a smart man," said Teddy. "No one can pull the wool over his eyes. Did you know that he already has three of those boats running with new engines? Their decks have been repaired, the kitchens fixed, new nets, the whole nine yards. The men can't wait to get out in them, and he's got more applications coming in than he can handle for extra help and the new boats he's purchased."

"Sometimes, I think he knows way more than he lets on," said Miller.

"Brother, I think we can pretty much guarantee that." Nine looked around Halo Island, then back at Teddy and Miller. "Where the hell are the others?"



“Why is there so much fucking pink?” asked Code.

“Don’t little girls wear any other color but pink?”

“Yes, they wear lots of colors,” said Angel. “This is society saying little girls should be soft and sweet. Pink, lavender, white. Some little girls like black and brown.”

“Then why the fuck is everything here pink and purple?” Angel just laughed, shaking his head.

“I have no fucking clue. Let’s just get all the things on the list.”

“I don’t understand these sizes. 4T? 13? What the hell kind of sizes are those? Whatever happened to small, medium, and large?”

“Dude, you’re stressing yourself out. Look, that rack over there has everything for the smaller girls. Just grab as many things as you can in those sizes. I’ll stay here and get some of the older girls. Dex and Ian are working on the stuff for the teen girls.”

“Oh, shit,” smirked Code.

“What?”

“Teenage girls? That means bras and panties. I would not want to be near them right now.”



“What the hell are these sizes?” frowned Dex.

“I think they’re bra sizes,” groaned Ian. “What the hell? I’m gonna kill Angel and Code for giving us this half of the list.”

“Gentlemen, you look as though you could use some help,” smiled a young salesgirl. Dex looked at her name tag and nodded. She didn’t appear to be any older than twenty or twenty-one, but she was pleasant and certainly recognized their pain.

“Leanne? Yea, Leanne, we need a lot of help. We need a bunch of clothes in these sizes. As much as you have.”

“Oh,” she said, lifting her brows. “Are you sure? I have a lot. Why don’t you tell me about the girl?”

“It’s several girls. We’re buying as secret Santas,” said Dex. She nodded, smiling at the men.

“Okay, why don’t you have a seat? I’ll put together all the things on the list in the right sizes. Do you have a budget?”

“Nope. You get that shit, I mean, uh, stuff, together, and I will be in your debt,” said Ian.

“We get a lot of weekend dads in here who are trying to buy for their daughters but don’t know a thing. You take a seat, and Millie will bring you a couple of beers. If you pull back that curtain, we have a television. Watch the game, and I’ll be right back with you.”

“I take it back,” smiled Ian. “I think we won the lottery on this draw.”

An hour later, their saving grace walked back toward them, smiling.

“Well, I have everything from the list and a few things I just thought they might need. I’ve already rung everything up. This is the bill. It’s a hefty one,” she said, shaking her head.

“This is worth every penny,” smiled Dex.

At the register, they ran their card, then grabbed the fifteen bags of clothing, shoes, and other items, thanking the

staff for all their help. Outside, Code and Angel were waiting by the SUV.

“Wow, that was faster than I thought,” smirked Code.

“Yea, you little shit. You thought we’d be stuck in there. Guess what? They have an expert staff happy to take our money. We had a beer, watched the game, and relaxed. Jokes on you, fool!”

Code laughed at the two older men, shaking his head.

“Alright, let’s get all of this to the storage units. Sooner or later, we’re going to need to get it all wrapped up.”

“Another day,” said Dex. “Another day.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What are they up to?” frowned Kat, watching the men at a table in the corner, whispering as if they were planning the takeover of the world.

“I have no idea,” said Lauren, “but I can tell you that Trak has been gone a lot lately, and it’s really bugging me. I mean, I don’t think he’s fooling around or anything. He wouldn’t do that. Would he?” She looked at the other women.

“No. None of them would,” said Erin. “And if you’re suspecting that of him, it would be thirty men fooling around because we’re all seeing the same thing. They’ve been sneaking around the island and taking the boat out every damn day. What the hell are they doing?”

“Maybe you should just let them do their thing,” said Matthew, standing behind the table of women.

“Oh, good morning, Matthew. Do you know what they’re up to?”

“Not entirely, but I know it’s good. Let them be. Let them have this. I don’t think any of you realize how hard it’s been for these men to just step back and do nothing.”

“No offense, Matthew, but it’s hardly nothing,” said Lena. “Tailor and the others are still involved in many of the projects and missions we do around here. No one is going to fool me into believing that they’re not putting their lives in danger.”

“I know, I know,” he nodded.

He took a seat at the table, the women all turning to face him instead of their husbands. Behind his back, Matthew gave a thumbs up and a wave, the seniors quietly moving out of the cafeteria.

“Listen to me. Being an operative at the level of these men isn’t easy. It’s like driving on the autobahn for your whole life, then being told you have to drive in a school zone for the rest of your life. You all know that. But not doing it, not being an operative, is harder than doing it. They’ve been going non-stop at a thousand miles per hour for their entire lives. Suddenly, we all say stop, and we want them to do nothing. Can you imagine how difficult that must be?

“They sit here watching their sons and daughters contribute at the highest levels to the organization, to G.R.I.P., to the missions. Yet they’re relegated to ‘soft’ jobs.”

“They’re not soft!” said Lauren. “I need Trak to do some of the things he’s doing.”

“Yes. You *need*,” smiled Matthew. “Honey, I know that you need him, and he knows that you need him, but what he needs is to still feel like a useful man. He needs to feel like a man who has a purpose other than loving his wife and children and grandchildren.”

The women nibbled on their bottom lips, staring at the wise man. Matthew was still as handsome as ever, but it was his commanding presence, the way he spoke that made them all listen intently. It was like George C. Scott delivering the famous speech from Patton.

“Did you know that Tailor and Alec spend two hours every day at the school reading to children?” Lena and Lissa stared at one another, shaking their heads. “They do. Them big boys crawl down on the floor so as not to frighten the children. They spread those long legs out, kids huddle up to them, holding on for dear life as they read book after book, giving the teachers a break.

“And Antoine and Luc. Were you aware that they serve meals every day at the homeless shelter downtown?” Montana and Ella smiled, shaking their heads. “Yes, sir. They

show up every day. They serve those men and women, sit and talk to them. Just their presence lets them know that they matter and that there are people who understand.

“Here’s a good one for you. Ghost, Ian, Nine, and Gaspar are guest speakers at three of our universities in the city.” Erin, Faith, Grace, and Alexandra went wide-eyed. “That’s right. Your big, tough, no-nonsense husbands are molding minds by teaching military history and strategy.”

“They’re supposed to stay out of sight,” whispered Faith.

“Out of sight is as good as dead,” said Matthew. “These men need to feel needed, need to feel involved. Let them have that feeling. They’re all off serving our community in the only ways they know how.”

“But how do you explain Baptiste, Bull, Rafe, and Vince disappearing at night?” asked Lily. “I just know there’s someone else.”

“There is,” said Matthew. “A mama with five hungry mouths to feed who has been running from her abusive husband. They’ve been watching that house for weeks now, leaving groceries, doing minor repairs. Anything to lessen her burden. Two nights ago, the husband showed up with several

weapons in his truck. Our boys took care of him. That mama and her babies can sleep better now, knowing they will always be safe.”

“I can’t believe this,” whispered Rose. “How could I have been so silly?”

“That such men still exist, still live amongst us, is a gift that we will not soon understand,” said Matthew.

“Is that a famous quote?” asked Lauren.

“It might be,” he grinned. “One day.”

“Matthew,” said Erin, shaking her head. “I should have known. I’m sorry.”

“Me too, Pops,” said Marie. “I knew Dex wouldn’t cheat on me, but it was all so weird. All of them going off at the same time, whispering, moving about like thieves in the night. I should have known.”

“Now you do,” said Matthew. “They’re good men. All of them. If they weren’t, I’d straighten them out. So would George or Sven or Teddy. No need to worry about them.”

“But there is a need,” said Grace. “We didn’t realize how difficult all this hiding was for them. Maybe we need to

find a way to help them participate but still remain hidden and safe.”

“I think that sounds like a Christmas miracle they might want and need.” Matthew walked around the table of women, kissing their foreheads. Faith turned, seeing the empty tables behind them.

“They’re gone,” she said, turning to speak to Matthew again. “Damn. He’s gone!”

“Why do I feel like something else is going on here?” asked Marie.

“Is something wrong, Aunt Marie?” asked Luke.

“No, not really. Do you know what your uncles are doing? What’s going on with all the seniors that they’re being so secretive?” Luke shrugged his shoulders, kissing his aunt’s cheek.

“No clue. Love y’all.”

“Are we being selfish?” asked Kat. “I mean, I feel like I’ve really been riding Whiskey lately to do some things around the cabin, but he always says he’ll do it, and it doesn’t get it done. Maybe I’ve been pushing him too hard.”

“I think, for now, we let them have their secrets,” said Alexandra. “We know what kind of men they are. Good men. The best. Let’s let them be who they are.”

“Agreed,” said Lena. Lissa and the others all nodded. As they left the cafeteria, Faith couldn’t help but say one last thing.

“Although I sure am curious as to what they’re doing.”

CHAPTER NINE

“I think the wives are getting seriously nosy about what we’re doing,” said Whiskey. “I’ve been trying to avoid Kat and her questions, but she’s a fucking lawyer! I’m being scrutinized in everything I do.”

“Just hold on a little longer. We’ve got the wedding for JB and Dana coming up on Christmas Eve, so maybe they’ll keep busy with that,” said Rafe.

“Well, I need something to keep Kat off my back about the shit that needs to be done around the cabin. I don’t want to miss the deadline for these kids.”

“We won’t miss it,” said Rafe. “Believe me, none of us wants to miss anything. Help me get the shit into the storage unit.”

Whiskey nodded, lifting one of the boxes as Rafe moved toward their numbered locker. He stood in front of it, staring at the lock, then backed up.

“What’s wrong? This shit is heavy. Open the door.”

“I think someone already has,” said Rafe. “The lock looks like it’s been picked. Do you have gloves in the truck?”

“Always.” Whiskey set the box down and ran back toward the truck, grabbing several latex gloves. Rafe stared at the lock as he donned the gloves, then opened it up. Both men gasped.

“It’s gone. All of it is gone,” he whispered. “Open the other one.”

Whiskey opened the second locker, discovering the same thing. Everything was gone. Taking out his phone, he texted the team then tapped his earpiece.

“We have a problem.”



Thirty men stared at the empty storage units as if hoping they could fill them again with their minds. Sly and Code worked the locks, lifting fingerprints from them.

“Anything on the cameras?” asked Nine.

“Apparently, they aren’t working,” said Hiro. “We were told they had their own system, but they neglected to tell us the cameras weren’t operating.”

“They took it all, Dad. All of it. There’s absolutely nothing left for those poor kids. What do you want to do?” asked Luke.

Luke stared at his father, wanting to cry for the first time in many, many years. All the toys they’d purchased for the orphans, the clothes, the new bedding, the bikes, all of it was gone.

“Damn,” muttered Gaspar. “Who the fuck would be stupid enough to do this?”

“Someone inexperienced,” said Cam. “The lock was picked, but it must have taken them an hour to do it. As Hiro said, the cameras don’t work at that place. We should have just had our own unit on the property.”

“We’ll find him,” said Parker. “If they’re breaking into those storage units, we’ll be able to figure out who did it. In the meantime, I’ll get some of the guys to go out and buy new stuff, although it’s going to be ridiculously expensive, and we may not find some of those things again.”

“It’s not the money for buying new things,” said Gaspar, “it’s knowing that people are willing to do this shit at Christmas. Those little boys and girls got nothing except us.

They don't have parents, grandparents, no one who cares.

This was the one thing we could do for them.”

“And we still will,” said Eric. “Don't worry, it will all work out.”

“Hey, I think you guys need to see this news story,” said Code. “Some kids were caught breaking into storage units all around the city. I think we might have caught our bandits.”

“Kids? Shit, that's the last thing I wanted. I don't want to beat the hell out of some kid,” frowned Hex.

“We won't beat any children,” smirked Luke. “Let's go talk to these kids and see what's going on.”

“Everybody still working out at the island?” asked Miller.

“Yep. I don't know why we didn't think about it before. It's a great use of the space, far enough away from all of us, close enough to shore that folks can just take a pirogue or canoe out there. It's gonna be epic.”

“Good,” nodded Gaspar. “Alright, let's go talk to our bandits. I'm gonna try to be nice since it's the holiday season.” Luke nudged Eric and Cam, pointing to his father.

“Hey, Dad? Maybe leave the gun at home. We don’t want any accidents.”

“I’m a professional. If I shoot someone, it’s never an accident.” He walked toward the waiting SUV and grinned at his son. “Fine. I’ll leave it in the car. Let’s go.”



“Kids. Fucking kids. Jesus, we all did stupid shit as kids, but stealing toys and clothes earmarked for someone else for Christmas is not one of them,” said Gaspar.

“Let’s just try to remain calm,” said Angel.

The juvenile detention facility was not giving off happy vibes. The fifteen-foot fences covered in razor wire, windowless brick buildings, and the cold rain made it feel more like a horror movie.

But to put kids into a regular facility with adult males would have been cruel. At least this way they kept them from general population as long as they could.

“Mornin’, Gaspar, Nine, all of ‘ya. This a family affair?” asked Sheriff Palmer.

“Sort of. We heard you caught some boys that had been breaking into storage units. We think two of them were ours,” said Gaspar.

“Oh, shit. Don’t think these boys knew that. We’ve got ‘em separated in rooms right now. One of ‘em is awful young or seems young compared to the others. The other boys were beatin’ up on him when we found ‘em. Don’t know what it’s about.”

“That’s the one I want to talk to,” said Nine. Cam pulled back on his father’s arm, staring at him. “He’s a kid. I won’t kill him.”

Nine and Gaspar walked into the room, and sitting at the table, his face swollen, his lip busted, was Joshua.

“You.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, shaking his head. “I didn’t know it was your storage unit. I realized it when we opened it.”

“Why? Why did you do it?”

“The man said I couldn’t be in the group unless I did this. He said some rich dudes were buying up all kinds of

stuff and keeping it for themselves. He said we were gonna be like Robin Hood and his merry men, giving stuff away. I just wanted to do that. Give stuff away.”

“What man?” asked Nine.

“Says his name is Thompson, but I know he’s lying. His real name is Tolbert.”

“How do you know that?” asked Gaspar.

“He worked with Mr. Couvillion on the boats that my grandfather was on. I think he’s just mad ‘cause Mr. Matthew told him he couldn’t work for him any longer. He said he won’t have men who are drunk and on drugs on the boats. That they put the other men in danger.” Nine and Gaspar stared at the young man, waiting for more. “I-I sort of eavesdropped.”

“Where is this man now?” Joshua shrugged his shoulders, wincing as he did. “Did someone from medical come and look at you?”

“No, sir, not yet.” Nine texted Angel to come into the room with Wilson. A few minutes later, they were kneeling by the boy.

“Who did this to you?” asked Gaspar.

“The other boys.”

“Why?” He said nothing at first, then looked at the men with big tears.

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take the stuff to Mr. Tolbert. I knew what y’all were planning. I wasn’t happy about other kids getting all that stuff, and I was getting nothing, but I wasn’t gonna punish them.”

“So, where did you put all the stuff?” asked Nine.

“They asked me to drive it to a warehouse downriver, but I couldn’t do it. I picked the locks on two empty storage units in the same space and put them in there. I’m sorry. Am I going to jail? Please, I don’t want to leave my grandpa.” He started crying, and Wilson looked up at his two friends.

“You did a very brave thing, Joshua,” said Nine. “The first part was stupid. Following boys just to get popular isn’t smart, but it was brave of you to return the items to a safe place. What are the unit numbers?”

“Six-twelve and Twelve-six. Grandpa’s birthday and mine. June twelve and December six.”

“Smart,” smirked Angel. “It’s a good way to remember things.”

“Those boys are gonna kill me,” he said. “I just wanted friends.”

“Don’t you have friends at school?” asked Angel.

“Some. Not many. One. I might look like some stupid, poor black kid, but I make good grades, and I want to be a doctor one day. The other boys made fun of me, and I just wanted friends. This was what they asked me to do to be part of their group. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t. Please don’t take me from Grandpa. He needs me.”

“We’re not taking you from him, son. I don’t agree with what you did, but the outcome was the right one. I’m going to talk to the sheriff and see if we can get you out of here. Since all of the items are returned safely, we can verify that you stole nothing.”

“Them boys will kill me. Mr. Tolbert told them to kill me if they caught me doing anything wrong.”

“You let us worry about Mr. Tolbert,” said Wilson, placing the bandage over the cut on his arm.

“What if they come to our house? Mr. Grant and the others have been workin’ real hard to fix the house up. It’s gonna be real pretty when they’re done.”

“We’ll take care of that too,” said Nine. “For now, let’s get you home.” Gaspar looked at Nine, grinning with that scary grin he often had.

“I tell you what,” said Gaspar. “Why don’t you help us with all of this?”

“Really?” he said excitedly.

“Really. I think you could help us figure out what some of these boys and girls need. You’re what, sixteen? Seventeen?”

“Sixteen, sir. I’ll be seventeen in a few days.”

“Alright, then, you’re old enough to understand how this works. You help us get all the things we need to finish this surprise for the children, and that will be your debt paid.”

“Are you gonna tell my grandpa what happened?” he asked with a frown.

“Nope,” said Gaspar. “You are.”

“Damn.”

CHAPTER TEN

Ray stared at his grandson with tears in his eyes as he retold the story of what he'd done. He apologized after every sentence, swearing it would never happen again. When he was done, he told him that he'd be working for the men to repay the debt.

“Why didn't 'ya tell me?” asked Ray.

“I couldn't, Grandpa. You have enough to worry about. You didn't ask for this. You didn't ask to have a kid at your age and have to go back to work. What Mom and Dad did to you wasn't fair. I'm a burden, and those other boys said if I told anyone I'd be dead, or they'd hurt you.”

“Who the hell told you that you're a burden?” he scoffed. “You ain't no burden, Joshua. You're the only thing keepin' me goin' most days. You make me feel useful again. Helpful. I have a purpose every day 'cause I get up and know I'm providin' not just for me but for us. You're my whole world.”

“Grandpa,” he said, falling against the old man, hugging him fiercely. “I'm so sorry.”

“I know ‘ya are. You’re a good boy, and you’ll pay your debt to these men. But he’s right,” he said, looking at Nine and Gaspar, “them boys and Tolbert will come back and try to take what’s theirs.”

“Let them try,” said Nine. “They’re going to have quite a surprise. Do you know where he put all the other things he stole?”

“An old fishing boat,” said Joshua. “I think it mighta been one of Mr. Couvillion’s old boats. It don’t run anymore, but he was letting Tolbert live on it.”

“Where is it docked?” asked Nine.

“It’s not really docked. It’s run aground near Lighthouse Lodge in Venice.”

“Venice? That’s about as far south as you can get without swimming,” frowned Gaspar. “He’s not going to give that stuff to other people. He’s going to sell it. Is it just toys and things for kids?”

“At the boat, yes, sir. But the older boys steal televisions, cell phones, all kinds of things, and those go somewhere else. I just don’t know where.”

“Okay. That helps. Thank you.”

“What do I do if those boys come lookin’ for trouble?” asked Ray.

“We’re going to put some security cameras on the road,” said Nine. “Grant and his team are putting up a gate. It will give all of you some security being here. You are now officially part of Belle Fleur property since Matthew bought all of this. You’re going to have the same security as we do.”

“Ain’t that overkill considerin’ the size of these places?” said Ray.

“Maybe, but your safety is worth it. Besides, your home is as important as mine or anyone else in my family. My brothers will be over later to speak with everyone,” said Gaspar. “Joshua? Stay close to your grandpa, son. We’ll make sure you get to and from school safely until all these boys are caught.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said, nodding. Nine nudged him, having another silent conversation.

“In fact,” he continued, giving a head jerk to Nine, “we think you should switch schools and come to our school.”

“But it’s private. I can’t afford that,” he said, looking at his grandpa.

“We offer scholarships, and if your grades are as good as you say, it won’t be a problem.”

“Really!? Grandpa! I’ll get into a good school if I do this. Please! Please, can I?”

“If Mr. Robicheaux and Mr. Dougall says it’s okay, then I say it’s okay. Thank you. Thank you, both.”

“Our pleasure.”

They spoke to Ray and Joshua for a few more minutes, then checked in with Grant to be sure everything was progressing as it should.

“The gate is up,” said Grant. “The only people who have an entry code are us and the residents. Sly and Pigsty are installing the security cameras now, and we’ll be watching the cameras. The fence will be electrified the instant we see something suspicious. We’ll explain everything to the residents.”

“Good man, brother,” said Gaspar. “Now, what do we do about that damn boat down in Venice?”

“Well,” smirked Nine, “it’s been a while since we sunk a boat.”

“Let’s go piss off an asshole.”



Gathering a few more of the senior team, the men made their plans at dinner, ready to head out after midnight. Their plan was to get as much of the merchandise off the boat that they could, then sink the rest. They'd report it to the sheriff, who would find a sunken vessel with stolen merchandise.

“Whiskey? When are you going to move that dresser for me? I want to get the new chair in place before Christmas.”

“Oh, yea,” he nodded. “I’ll get to it tonight, babe.”

“You said that last night. What the hell are y’all doing so late at night?” Kat stood staring at him, her hands on her hips, and Whiskey swallowed, trying to find his words.

“Babe, it’s Christmas. We can’t tell our secrets.” Kat frowned at him, not believing a word he said, but she turned and went back to the other wives.

“She’s been on me like crazy to move that fucking dresser,” he growled.

“It’s just a fucking dresser. Move it,” said Sly.

“It’s one of Irene’s old pieces. That thing must weigh three hundred pounds, and it’s full of shit. Kat doesn’t want to empty it, just move it. I’m worried I’ll scratch the floors.”

“I’ll see if we can get Tailor, Eric, Alec, and Keith over there. Between the four of them, they could move it,” said Nine.

“Then she’ll know something is up,” said Whiskey, shaking his head. “I’ll get to it. She just needs to be patient.”

“Okay, remember, we’re meeting at the east dock at 2300. Miller? Pack the explosives, but try not to blow it to smithereens. We need enough of it left to prove what they were doing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t blow shit to smithereens. I’m more delicate than that. I’m careful. Precise.”

“Yea, like a fucking elephant at a ballet,” smirked Antoine. Antoine turned, feeling the ghostly presence of Yori and Nathan. The two men were smiling at them.

“What are the grins for?” asked Gaspar.

“We’ve discovered something interesting,” said Yori. “When your father bought that land, we inherited a few new friends.”

“Fuck,” muttered Gaspar. “More ghosts?”

“Be grateful. One of them will be especially useful. He’s been able to cause a little mischief on the land every now and then. In fact, he’s responsible for Couvillion not being able to make a living from those boats. He’s been somewhat of a protector to the residents.”

“I don’t understand,” said Baptiste. “How is it possible for him to do that?”

“It seems he’s a relative of Martha’s. A cousin who was attempting to make it back to Belle Fleur in a storm when his boat capsized. He was lost at sea, or so they thought. Turns out, he made it to shore but died.”

“Do we have a name?” asked Rafe.

“Yes. Aloysius Marcel Beauvais Robicheaux.”

“Can we just call him Al?” asked Miller.

“He prefers Marcel,” smiled Yori. “He’ll be waiting for you near the boat. The other wonderful skill our new

friend has is that he has free reign of the entire bayou now that you own that piece of land.”

“Interesting. I know this might be a stupid question, but how will we recognize him? I mean, other than he’s a ghost.”

“You’ll recognize him. Our friend Marcel had the stellar genetics of a Robicheaux. One in particular. He is as big as Alec,” smiled Yori. “I think you’ll like his company. He’s quite funny.”

“Funny? Great, that’s all I need, another seven-foot Robicheaux who thinks he’s funny,” smirked Ghost.

“I’m not seven-feet,” said Alec. “I told you. I had a late growth spurt.”

“Right. Didn’t we all.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Mama, what is going on with the seniors?” asked Marie.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron. “Hand me the icing for the snowflakes.” Marie handed her the piping bag, watching as she expertly decorated the cookies lining the sheet pan. Claudette was assisting, and Marie smiled at her.

She was happy that Claudette and Jake had taken over the big house and the duties that went with it. She and Dex loved their life together, and although it might seem selfish, she didn’t want to have to watch out for everyone else. Between the three oldest girls, Marie, Claudette, and Camille, Claudette was definitely the more maternal of the three.

“Claudette, you look just like Mama when we were little girls helping in the kitchen,” smiled Marie.

“I’ll take that compliment,” smiled Claudette. She kissed her mother’s temple, giving her a little squeeze.

“Now, Mama, what are the boys doing?” repeated Marie.

“Marie, I got a million cookies to decorate. I have to finish the preparations for the ball. I have a wedding to get ready for. I do not have time to babysit them boys. They’re all big enough to get into trouble by themselves.”

“Okay, Mama. But you’re not fooling me. There isn’t a damn thing that happens on this property that you’re not aware of.” Marie walked away, and Claudette looked at her mother, grinning.

“Mama.”

“What?” frowned Irene.

“Mama, you know something. Why aren’t you telling us? Even Jake has been sneaking out. Now, don’t get me wrong, I trust my husband without reservation, but it would be nice to know what he’s doing.”

“Sometimes, you don’t need to know,” said Irene. “Just trust your husbands and be okay with it. They’re not up to anything stupid.”

“Okay, Mama,” smiled Claudette. “You go meet with Sara and George while I finish the cookies.”

Irene wiped her hands on the apron, setting it on the counter, then moved around to the other side. She looked at

Claudette, nibbling on her bottom lip as she watched her expertly pipe the cookies. Just like she taught her.

“Claudette? If I haven’t told you lately, I love you, and I’m so proud of the life you’ve created for you and Jake. You’re gonna be a fine matriarch to the family one day.”

“Mama, don’t make me cry,” she sniffed. “I won’t be the matriarch, Marie will be. She’s the oldest. I’ll just be the ring leader of this circus.”

“Well, either way, you’re gonna do a fine job.”

“Mama? Don’t go yet,” said Claudette quietly. Irene stared at her daughter, knowing exactly what she was saying. “It’s not time, Mama. I know how old you and Pops are, but you’re still young in body, mind, and spirit.”

“We’re not goin’ anywhere, baby. Not yet.” She turned and left Claudette still piping the cookies as Suzette, Rachelle, Adele, Camille, and Marie walked back toward her.

“How about some sister energy over here?” smiled Camille.

“I’d say we need all the sister energy we can get,” smiled Claudette.

With more than a thousand cookies to ice, she needed all the help she could possibly get. With everyone working, they'd be done in no time. Even the women who had no skills in the kitchen at all were able to fill the piping bags and hand them to the decorators. Within a few hours, the cookies were done and ready for the holidays.



Marie looked up and noticed that, as usual, the men had all disappeared.

“Where in the hell did they disappear to now?” she asked.

“No clue,” said Rachelle. “It’s after midnight, and none of the lights are on in the cottages. These guys are seriously up to something, but I have no clue what’s going on. Do you think they’re doing something for all of us for Christmas?”

“All of us?” frowned Calla.

“Yea, you’re right. I don’t know what it is, but it’s making me crazy,” said Adele.

“Why?” All the women looked at Mary. “Why is it making us crazy? I mean, I’m sure of the response to this

question, but has any of us ever had our spouses do something horrible to us? Cheated. Lied. Stole. Anything?”

All of the women smiled at the older woman, shaking their heads.

“No. Nothing,” smiled Tila. The baby was swaddled to her chest, sound asleep, and the others all smiled at her. Sadie, Margo, and Ramey had their triplets in three-seat strollers, all sound asleep by some strange miracle.

The women looked around at their friends, the little ones either sleeping or wide awake thanks to sugar.

“We have a pretty amazing group of women here, don’t we?” smiled Carsen.

“We do indeed,” said May. “You know, I never really had a lot of female friends. I was the geeky girl who didn’t shop a lot. I wasn’t into cooking or baking. I didn’t want to go to bars and clubs. I was just me. Then I came here, and you all embraced me in such a way that I never wanted to leave. Well, that and Thomas.”

The group of women laughed, hugging one another, realizing that they all felt the same way.

“If you think about it,” said Erin, “we were all misfits in some way. Smart, talented, beautiful, but not quite fitting into the mold of other women around us. It was these men that helped us to feel as if we were perfect. They made us feel loved, beautiful, important for the very first time in many of our lives. I’d say that’s pretty miraculous. We are perfect.”

“Perfect for them,” laughed Katrina.

“Yes, perfect for them,” nodded Grace. “How lucky are we? How fortunate are we beautiful, smart, amazing women? Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters. All of us wives. You know what? I know they’re doing nothing wrong. I don’t care what they’re doing. I just know Ghost will be home soon and right beside me like he always is.”

“Agreed,” smiled Faith. “Ian has never given me a reason to doubt him, and I will not start now.”

“Agreed,” came the chorus of voices.

“Although,” smirked Lena, “I am curious as hell.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You must be Marcel,” said Nine, staring at the giant ghost. He had the whiskey-colored eyes, auburn hair, and massive shoulders and chest of a Robicheaux.

“Yes,” he smiled. “I must admit, I was happy to connect with my fellow spirits and learn that you all were accepting of us. I’ve been alone a long time now.”

“You’re not alone any longer,” said Gaspar. “We’re happy to have you in our family.” The ghost smiled, nodding.

“I believe it’s the other way around,” he grinned. “I’m happy to have you in my family. You must be the direct descendants of Raphael Alfonse Robicheaux. You look identical to my cousin.”

“We look identical to you,” smirked Gaspar. “In fact, you and my baby brother seem to have inherited the growth spurt genetics.”

“Yes, I was an anomaly in my time, but that made men fear me. Which is why I am here. My ship was coming back from Barbados, loaded with tobacco and other goods when

one of Jacque Couvillion's vessels side-swiped us in a storm. It was intentional."

"Wait, do you mean the Couvillion that owned the fishing vessels and the village?" asked Rafe.

"One and the same, my young relative. I have been plaguing their family with bad luck, storms, vessel issues for two hundred years. It was rather fun, I must say," he smiled, running his hand through his hair.

"Do you know where the vessel is located that has the stolen goods?" asked Nine.

"Indeed. He was heavily involved until Matthew purchased everything from him. He took the money and left the other man, Tolbert, to fend for himself with the young thieves. They return to the boat four or five times a day with merchandise pillaged from local shops and vendors."

Rafe and Baptiste smirked at the man's use of language. It was obvious he hadn't had any conversations in the last two hundred years.

"Sorry, Marcel. We're pretty relaxed around here with our language. You'll forgive our profanity. It gets, uh, heated at times."

“That’s good to know,” he smirked. “After all, I was a sailor. I know the language well.”

“A young man we know said that they were stealing electronics, televisions, cellular phones, and other things. Have you seen anything else?” asked Nine.

“Yes. Cases of what I believe are weapons.”

“Weapons? Guns?”

“Guns, knives, those hand-held objects that you throw,” he said, imitating the movement.

“Grenades?” frowned Miller.

“Yes, I believe that’s what they’re called. I’ve counted seventeen crates just this week.” Nine tapped the comms device.

“Pigsty? Check with the local bases and see if anyone is missing weapons. Crates of weapons.”

“Crates?” he screeched.

“Yes. Crates.”

“Are you speaking to someone?” asked Marcel.

“We have a lot to teach you about this world,” smiled Luc. “I’d take it as a personal favor if you allow me to be

your instructor.” The ghost smiled, nodding.

“I believe I should like that very much. According to your friends, Yori and Nathan, I should be able to venture with you toward the grounded vessel.”

Luc couldn't wait to pick Marcel's brain. After finding the lost treasure in the Sugar Lodge years ago, he wondered if there wasn't more treasure hidden on some of their islands. Instead of following the path of the Mississippi River, they took their own route through Robicheaux lands until they were near the location just north of Venice. Working their way through Barataria Bay, they finally saw the stranded ship.

“Put stealth mode on,” whispered Miller. Max nodded, pressing the newly created stealth mode for the boats. It was similar to the one on the planes, but this ensured that the engines didn't create any wake behind the vessel.

“This is a remarkable ship,” nodded Marcel. “It would have served me well while transporting merchandise past pirates and the law alike.”

“Were you transporting illegal goods?” frowned Gaspar.

“No. But the law back then wanted their cut of whatever you were carrying. Remember, it was based off Napoleonic law. Everyone believed they were entitled to a piece of the pie.” The others nodded, realizing how good he must have been in his former job. “There. Do you see up ahead? I’m surprised it hasn’t sunken completely. It must have hit a sandbar and is somehow wedged in place. All the hurricanes and storms. I can’t believe it hasn’t ripped it apart.”

“I thought that it was one of Couvillion’s ships?” asked Miller.

“It is. One of his great-grandfather’s. That is an Orion fighting vessel. She would have had fourteen guns on her at one time. I believe the elder Couvillion sold them. That is the sister ship that rammed me and sunk my vessel.”

“That ship!” gasped Baptiste. “That ship has been sitting like that for two hundred years, and no one has claimed it or tried to recover any treasure.”

“Remarkable. But the Couvillion men have guarded it well. Which begs the question. What is on that ship?” asked Gaspar.

They watched in silence as two late-model windowless vans pulled up to the rickety dock. Young men, boys really,

who didn't appear to look any older than seventeen or eighteen, began to unload the televisions and other stolen merchandise.

“Those are just kids,” frowned Miller.

“Maybe, but they're kids who've stolen merchandise. Look. That must be Tolbert sitting on the deck of the boat. Does he look familiar to you?”

“Sort of, but I'm not sure from where,” said Antoine. “Didn't we have a case with a guy named Tolbert?”

“Brother, we've had more cases than my brain can wrap around,” said Luc, shaking his head. “Pigsty? You there?”

“That's a stupid question.”

“Right, sorry. Didn't we have a case with a guy named Tolbert?”

“Yep. We disposed of him.”

“Did he have a son?” asked Luc.

“No, but he had a much younger brother. I have him as living in South Dakota, but maybe he came down here to pick up where his brother left off.”

“Get the kids away from the boat,” said Nine. “Max? You and Angel board on the starboard side. Gaspar and I will take the leeward side. The rest of you clear the kids, cuff ‘em if you can, but try not to kill them. They’re still just kids.”

“Do you often kill children?” frowned Marcel. Gabe laughed, shaking his head.

“No, brother. Not until we’re forced to.”

“Brother? He understands that we are not brothers, right?”

“You have a lot to learn, Marcel.”



“Get everything unloaded!” yelled Tolbert. “We need to get all this shit ready for sale. It’s holiday shopping time, kids.” He laughed as the boys brought the merchandise on board the doomed ship. Too bad Couvillion’s ancestor wasn’t a better sailor. The ship was well-made and could have lasted another hundred years had he taken care of it.

“Jordan? Where’s the shit from the storage units? Did you find it?”

“It’s gone. We looked everywhere, and we couldn’t find it. The kid is protected now, and we can’t touch him.”

“Protected by who?” he asked, narrowing his gaze.

“Dunno. Some big dudes that bought all those shacks.”

“Fuck!” he screamed. The boys stopped, then slowly began moving the merchandise again. “That means they know. They know, and we’re sitting ducks. Get that shit on board now!”

As the boys began to walk back up the dock, they stopped cold, staring at the shadowy figures behind Tolbert.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Get that shit on board!”

“Maybe they don’t want to put that shit on board,” said Nine.

Tolbert turned quickly, staring at the two men behind him. He would never be able to outrun them. His was portly and suffering from gout. The boys attempted to turn and run, but at the other end of the dock were a dozen men with fierce

expressions, weapons, and size that told the boys they would swallow them whole.

“Set the shit down,” said Miller.

The boys obeyed, obviously having no choice whatsoever. Miller zip tied each one as Luc and Antoine led them back toward the waiting vans. They lined the boys up, forcing them to take a seat in the empty cargo holds where the sheriff would soon find his own loot.

“What are you gonna do?” asked Tolbert. “Kill me like you did my brother.”

“Your brother deserved to die. Come to think of it, so do you. You’ve destroyed these boys’ lives while you were benefitting from what they stole,” said Gaspar.

“We were only stealing stuff cause you all give all them boys at the home everything!” yelled one boy.

“What are you talking about?” asked Angel.

“The boys at the home and those kids with no parents. You give them everything. We don’t have anything. Most of us don’t have a mama or a daddy, but nobody gives us shit. We don’t get enough food. We don’t have places to sleep, but ain’t nobody worried about us.”

Angel stared at the boy, then back at Nine and Gaspar. The boy was right. There were hundreds of kids in their part of Louisiana who had nothing or little to nothing. But how do you provide for everyone? How do you spread your wealth in a way that does the most good to the maximum number of people?

“Pops will know,” whispered Gaspar. “Pops will have an answer to this.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Miller and Angel placed the charges on the old sailing vessel. Angel stared at it, shaking his head.

“It’s a shame, you know. Sinking a beautiful thing like this. Imagine the places she’s been and the things she’s seen. It’s really sad.”

“It won’t sink all the way,” said Miller. “Besides, we left some of the merchandise on board for the sheriff to see what was there. The rest is stacked by the vans for him to find along with the kids and Tolbert.”

When the red and blue lights of law enforcement appeared, the men hid on their own vessel, waiting to be sure all was good. The sheriff knew every detail that had transpired, but they weren’t sure if his deputies could be trusted or not.

As the sheriff and his men arrived, the vessel was splintered into a million pieces, scattering five hundred yards in every direction. What was left was the hull, showing some of the merchandise that had been stashed.

By the time they were back to Belle Fleur, Marcel had loosened up considerably. Already learning some of the slang familiar to the men, he was feeling a part of a team for the first time in decades. When he stepped onto Belle Fleur property, he wept.

“Hello, cousin,” smiled Martha. “We have much to catch up on.” Martha and Marcel disappeared with the other spirits, the team laughing at the group.

“We might be the only people in the whole world that have a bunch of ghosts who help us catch bad guys, raise our children, and warn us of danger,” smirked Angel.

“I’d like to think we’re the only ones,” smiled Nine, “but damn if stranger things haven’t happened. I like him, though. Maybe because he was a sailor, I have to believe that man would have made one helluva SEAL.”

“Please,” huffed Gaspar. “He’s a Robicheaux Ranger all the way.”

As the men made their way back to their cabins and own personal little island, they prayed that the wives were asleep. Although it seemed highly suspect, not one of them moved when they crawled into bed. Nine was almost worried that Erin might gut him in his sleep.

The next morning, each wife kissed her husband and then went off on one of the boats to Belle Fleur for breakfast.

“Anyone suspicious of that behavior?” frowned Alec.

“I damn sure am,” said Antoine. “Do you think they know?”

“Not sure how. Come on. We need to see the finished houses and make sure that the security is up and running.”

While one group of men continued to Halo Island, attempting to finish their woodworking and toy building, another went to the motorcycle shop to work on some things there, and another went to visit Ray and the others.

“Well,” smiled Baptiste, “this is definitely an improvement from our first visit.”

“It’s wonderful,” said Ray, shaking his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever lived in anything so fine. Come on in. You gotta see this.” Baptiste grinned, nodding his head. Joshua was sitting in a chair with an open book but immediately stood, almost at attention.

“Good morning, Joshua. Nice to see you again,” said Rafe.

“Nice to see you again, sir. Saturday, sir. No school today.” Rafe and Baptiste laughed, nodding at him.

“We know, son. You don’t have to be so formal. We’re not here checking up on you. We just wanted to be sure the house turned out alright.”

“Oh, it’s wonderful! The new appliances are amazing. Grandpa doesn’t burn anything anymore.”

“Hey, I’m right here,” frowned Ray. “But he’s right. That’s the finest stove I’ve ever cooked on.”

“I have my own bedroom! I’ve never had my own bedroom,” smiled Joshua. “Even my parents didn’t have a big place, so I slept on a pull-out sofa. Now I have my own bed, dresser, and we have a real nice bathroom with a tub and shower. We don’t get any bugs or mice or rats, nothing. It’s amazing!”

Baptiste wanted to cry. The boy was excited for things that were so basic it shouldn’t have been a big deal. Instead, he was grateful for those basic necessities. They would make sure that this never happened to someone on their property again.

“Mr. Grant even let me paint it the color I wanted.”

“What color did you choose?” smiled Rafe.

“Dark green,” he grinned. “I always wanted a dark green room, you know, like one of those fancy libraries you see on television with all the dark wood and books. Hundreds and hundreds of books everywhere.”

“I love that,” said Baptiste. “Our mother has a library like that.” Joshua’s eyes grew wide, and his mouth opened in a gasp.

“Hey, are you guys going to look at the rest of the places?” asked Parker from the steps. He stared at the book in Joshua’s hands and smiled. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*. No finer piece of literature on the planet.”

“You know it?” asked Joshua excitedly.

“One of my favorite books of all time,” said Parker.

“We’re gonna leave you book lovers to gossip while we check out the rest of the places,” said Rafe. “Will you walk with us, Mr. Ray?”

The old man nodded, turning to give his grandson a smile. Stepping into the cold air, he wrapped his weathered jacket around him, and Baptiste made a mental note of the old man’s need for winter clothing.

“I’ll never be able to thank y’all enough for what you’ve done for him. He’s a good boy. Works hard, studies hard. I didn’t realize he was so lonely. He’s only been at your fancy school for four days and already has five new friends that he talks about all the time.”

“I’m glad it worked out for both of you. You promise everything is okay with the place?” asked Rafe.

“It’s heaven. Mr. Grant put that new television in there, and there’s so many channels a man would die before seein’ all of ‘em.”

“What about work? Are you back on the boats yet?”

“Mr. Matthew said he wanted to be sure all the vessels were up to code and safe. He’s paid us all through December. We don’t go back until January. Longest period of my whole life that I ain’t been workin’, but it’s the most damn money I’ve ever made at a job. Only period of my whole life where I’m gettin’ paid to do nothin’.”

“It’s not nothing,” said Baptiste. “You all needed a rest. Downtime is good for you every now and then. How are your neighbors doing?”

“All good,” said the old man, shaking his head.

“We’re gonna do Christmas together. I can finally afford to buy some things for Joshua. That boy’s growin’ like a weed and needs new jeans and shoes. Headed to town tomorrow to pick ‘em up. Do I need to worry about them other boys?”

“No, sir. They’re all taken care of. Tolbert is in jail, so are some of the other boys. The younger ones are in juvenile detention but singing like beautiful canaries.” Ray nodded.

“Amazin’ how a boy who thinks he’s a man reverts back to a boy when facin’ jail time.” He pointed to a few of the other homes, all the owners sitting on their beautiful new front porches.

“Thank Mr. Matthew again for us!” yelled one older couple.

“Yes, ma’am. Yes, sir. We sure will.”

“Well, Ray. It looks like everything is good here. You enjoy these few weeks with Joshua before you have to get back on the boat.”

“Oh, I ain’t goin’ back on the boats.” Baptiste and Rafe frowned, looking at one another. “Mr. Matthew has me doin’ the daily routes, orderin’ supplies, that sorta thing. Nice

young fella, He-ro. He's been helpin' me learn the computer system. Ain't as hard as I thought. Amazin' what technology can do."

They shook hands with Ray, meeting Parker and Dom back at the SUV. Next was to figure out where those boys in the detention facility were from and how to get them back on the straight and narrow.

"Pops always knows exactly what to do, doesn't he?" grinned Rafe.

"Yep. And that scares the hell out of me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Where are we at with everything?” asked Nine.

“Cars are almost ready. I’m just waiting for the new tires,” said Whiskey. “Skull and Razor are killin’ it on the paint jobs. We reinforced the bodies with extra steel just to make sure if they were in an accident, nothing would happen to them. These kids are gonna be the most popular in school.”

“Man, I love that,” smiled Gaspar. “I remember my first car.”

“And Judy Guerin,” smirked Miller.

“Shut up.”

“No, no,” laughed Angel. “Tell us more of this Judy Guerin.” Gaspar frowned at his brother, then nodded.

“She was my first real girlfriend. It wasn’t super serious, but I damn sure was hoping it would be. Not marriage, but I wanted her to be my first, and she wanted it too. Damn, she had a chest. I swear to God, it was like two flotation devices sitting on her rib cage.”

The men all laughed, shaking their heads.

“Anyway, I got that car and thought, I know what I’ll do. I’m gonna take her up to the levee and park, and we’ll have a little fun. I had it all planned out. Watch the sunset, romantic river floating by, maybe bring a cooler with some food and sodas or something. I even had a blanket in the damn car, despite it being a hundred degrees. Right before I leave, Mama says, ‘Gaspar, remember to do the right thing.’”

“Oh, ouch,” smirked Angel.

“Damn,” said Nine.

“That had to hurt,” laughed Whiskey.

“Honestly, I barely heard it. I ran out the door in my tight jeans and t-shirt, praying Judy was wearing a skirt or a dress. And damned if she wasn’t. This little mini-skirt thing that barely covered anything, and her blouse was busting at the buttons. I asked her if she was okay going up to the levee, and she nodded, running her hand up my leg. I knew I was going to finally lose my virginity.”

“What happened?” grinned Whiskey.

“We’re all hot and heavy, kissing and touching. I might also add, afterwards, I realized that Judy knew a whole lot more about what to do with my body than I knew what to

do with her body. Anyway, she unbuttoned that blouse and started to take her bra off and...

“And?” asked Angel.

“And I heard Mama’s voice,” he said, shaking his head. “I love my mother, but damn. That was all that was in my head. I felt like she was watching me. I froze. Judy was grabbing my hands, putting them where she wanted them, but it was no use. I was done.

“Damn, she was pissed at me. Yelled at me the whole way back to her house. Told all the girls at school I had a little dick. Didn’t do her any good. The guys in the locker room knew what I looked like and laughed at the girls when they asked about me. I hated that car after that. Hated it. Saved enough money to sell it and buy a new one.”

“Did Irene ever say anything to you?” asked Nine.

“No, but I swear to God, she knew. She knew something.”

“I think we all do. Shit, I remember Cam and his man-whore ways. I thought I’d have dozens of grandchildren wandering around when it was all said and done. I was never so grateful as the day he said Kate was the one. Ellie? I knew

she loved Jax. She was afraid to say it out loud, so was he. So, I just waited. I'll never forget when he finally told me. Honestly, I was happier than fuck."

"Jax is one of the best, brother," said Miller.

"Yea, we've had a few close calls with our kids. Thank God nothing we couldn't recover from," said Gaspar.

"Can't say I wasn't disappointed in Georgie's behavior," said Angel. "I understand why she did it, but sleeping with Carl while he was so drunk he didn't know any better, that was dangerous."

"She was doing it for the right reasons. Sort of," said Gaspar. "Besides, we all knew that Carl loved her, and it would work out."

"Yea, but if the tables had been turned, technically, Carl could have been accused of rape. She's lucky he didn't file charges against her," said Angel.

"Listen, they're all good kids," said Gabe. "Good adults. Tori and I have loved being aunt and uncle to everyone, now great-aunt and great-uncle. It's been a good life."

"A great life," nodded Gaspar with a smile.

“Thanks to your Mama and Pops,” said Nine. “I mean, we would have all had a good life if we hadn’t moved here, but moving to Belle Fleur, brother, that was the catalyst for everything. I remember being here that Christmas before we moved and thinking, I wish we could all be together all the time.”

“You made a wish?” asked Gabe.

“On a fucking shooting star,” smirked Nine.

“Hey, you don’t think...” started Miller.

“Don’t say it. Don’t even fucking say it.”

“Not saying it doesn’t make it any less real,” said Whiskey. “I’m gonna head out to Halo Island and see how Teddy and Sven are doing. By the way, kick-ass job by Ryan and Doug to make those blocks work. Fucking things scare the shit out of me.”

“Why?”

“Because I spelled out *shit*, and it repeated it! They went back and deleted all the curse words. We wouldn’t want anyone coming back at us for that little error. Fucking amazing, brothers.” He waved over his shoulder as he walked out the door.

“Still a lot to do,” said Gaspar. “Let’s get busy.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hey, Gaspar? The sheriff is coming up the road. Wants to speak with you and Nine,” said Code.

“Everything okay?”

“I don’t know. He just said he wanted to speak to the two of you.”

“Show him into the conference room, will ‘ya?” Code nodded, walking out of the offices to meet with the sheriff. They’d been through at least ten since moving to Belle Fleur and were fortunate that not one of them questioned their involvement in local things.

“Morning,” said Nine. “What can we do for you?”

“I thought you boys might like to know that Tolbert wasn’t the head of that operation. We found him in his cell last night, hanging from the bars.”

“Damn.”

“Yep. Problem is, the bars ain’t high enough to hang from. Someone strangled him, then tied him to the bars. Cameras didn’t catch a damn thing. We questioned all the boys about Couvillion’s potential involvement, but they all

said the same thing. He wasn't smart enough to figure out what Tolbert was doing and didn't give a damn. He just wanted out from under the fishing boats."

"And Pops got him out," frowned Gaspar.

"Yep. But I think we're all glad he's gone. Someone else was moving that merchandise," said the sheriff. "I think y'all are gonna have a very pissed-off enemy. Just thought you'd wanna know."

"Great. Just what we need," said Gaspar. "Any other storage unit robberies? Smash and grabs at the high-end stores?"

"Nothing yet, but it's possible it will happen. I've got all my men out there working, but I gotta tell 'ya, we're stretched thin this time of year. The rest of them boys at juvie? Most were livin' on the streets. No parents, no homes, nothing. They'll be in juvie for a while, but we're gonna try to find a place for them."

"I know y'all are stretched thin," said Gaspar, nodding at the other man. "We'll try to keep an eye out as well. Maybe send up a few drones to see if anything is going on."

“One lead I do have comes from one of the boys. He said that a man on a motorcycle came to see Tolbert a few times. Said he was big, bald, lots of tattoos. He wasn’t wearing a leather with any emblems, which I think is strange. He never spoke to him but said Tolbert always stood up right away when he got there and looked nervous.”

“Maybe this guy killed Tolbert,” said Nine.

“Or Tolbert knew he was coming for him,” said the sheriff. “Either way, it’s the only lead you have. Maybe the boys in the shop could do a few patrols. See what comes up.” Nine nodded, looking at Gaspar.

“Any word on the street about new gangs? New clubs that have come into town?”

“None yet, but I’ll let you know. You boys take care. What you did for them folks in them shacks was amazing. I expected nothing less from the Belle Fleur boys.” He chuckled all the way out of the office, waving at the rest of the men as he passed their offices.

“This doesn’t seem like something a biker gang would get into,” said Gaspar. “Even the rottenest bastards on the planet typically do toy drives and shit for Christmas. Is this just some weekend warrior?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see if a few of the brothers will do some road work this week. Get Razor and Skull to finish those cars. I want both of them out there, along with some of Team Big. Send Noah, Noa, Magnus, and Dom. Visit the biker bars, go into the city, anything they need to do. I want to know who this guy is and what he’s doing.”

“You know,” smirked Gaspar. “It’s been a few years since I was active on the bike. I kinda miss the wind blowing through my beard, messing up my hair. We could take a few turns.”

Nine gave him an evil grin, nodding his head up and down.

“You might have something,” said Nine. “We’re doing all this because we’re bored as shit. Let’s get out there and do something. We’ll have a face covering. No one will know who we are. We should get Ghost and Ian, too.”

“Get Ghost and Ian for what?” asked Ghost, walking into the room with Ian.

“A little two-wheeled road trip,” smirked Nine. “Seems the head of this little theft ring is a guy on a bike. Thought maybe we’d do some snooping around. The others have the toys handled. What do you say?”

“Oh, brother. The bike’s been callin’ my name lately,” said Ghost. “Grace doesn’t want me riding as much, but I fucking need to feel the road beneath me.”

“Same. You know how Faith feels about the bikes, but it’s a thrill ride all the way for me. I’ll do it. We’re gonna have to be careful taking the bikes. Aren’t they locked up behind the garage?”

“They are, but we’ve got so many bikes in there right now, they shouldn’t notice even if they went looking for them. Let’s head out early tomorrow morning and see what we can find,” said Nine.

“This is gonna be epic,” smirked Ghost. Gaspar nodded, then sobered.

“Yea. As long as we don’t break a hip.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Faith, Erin, Alexandra, Lauren, Grace, and Mary were busy wrapping gifts in Mary's kitchen. Staring out the cabin windows, she saw twenty men walking toward the docks. That wasn't suspicious lately, but several of them were wearing leather chaps, motorcycle boots, and hoodies with leather jackets over them.

"Okay. Not to panic anyone, but what the hell are they doing?" she asked the room. The women rushed toward the window, and Faith gasped, racing back toward the front door.

"Ian! Ian Shepard! Where do you think you're going?" she yelled.

"Sorry, babe. I can't hear you. Too windy."

"Ghost! Eric Stanton, you stop right there!" yelled Grace.

"Love you, babe! Don't worry, I'll pick up milk on the way back," he called.

"I cannot believe this," frowned Alexandra. "I've asked Gaspar to not ride as much. I'm worried about him."

“This is really annoying,” said Erin. “It’s one thing that they’re sneaking around, but now going off on their bikes in the middle of winter. That just seems reckless, and they’re not reckless.”

“You know what?” said Lauren. “You’re right. They’re not reckless. Whatever they’re doing has a purpose, and they need to have a purpose. I know my husband, and I know he’s doing something good. I’m okay with this.”

The women all stared at her, nodding as she put the final bow on a package. They really were trying to be patient, but curiosity was getting to them all.

“I promised I wouldn’t tell,” said the sweet voice of their little spirit, Claudette. “I promised I wouldn’t give any details. But you’re all so nervous and worried. I can feel it.”

“Do you know what they’re doing, Claudette?” asked Erin.

“I know. And I won’t break my promise, but I will tell you that what they’re doing will change lives.”

“Our lives?” asked Grace.

“No. Lives that are far more in need, far more desperate. Your husbands are helping those that will save

humanity.”

“What do you mean, Claudette?” asked Faith.

“They are helping a future heart surgeon who will revolutionize ways to save children with heart defects. They are helping a future engineer who will vastly improve the process by which oil and gas are removed from our earth. They are helping a woman who will become the leader of the greatest nation in the world.

“In that mix are also professional athletes, a producer of documentary films that will change the way we see our earth, a mother of five sons who will all become police officers, a father of three daughters who will all become teachers of special needs children.

“And finally, they are helping seven young men who will serve their country at the highest level, collectively saving the lives of more than one hundred people and will help to lead a desperate country toward peace.

“You have nothing to fear, nothing to worry about. Your husbands are men unlike any on this planet. Your sons, your grandsons. I am blessed that you found me in the island mansion, and I was able to find my way back to Belle Fleur

and to my wonderful Tony. And I am blessed to know all of you.

“Let them serve. It was what they born to do. It was what they were made to do, and I have it on good authority that God and Santa Claus need all the help they can get.” She gave a ghostly smile, her youth seemingly gone, replaced by a wise woman. The women smiled at her, then looked down at their hands.

“I feel ashamed,” said Erin. “I know better. I know he’s not doing anything wrong. I’ve trusted that man my entire life. Why on earth would I doubt him now?”

“Maybe we’re searching for a purpose as well,” said Grace. Her friends turned, staring at her in awe. “We’ve taken care of our children and, to some extent, our grandchildren. We’ve damn sure taken care of our husbands.”

“And one another,” smiled Faith, reaching for her friend’s hand and giving it a squeeze. Claudette disappeared in a haze that smelled suspiciously like Christmas cookies.

“Okay, ladies,” said Alexandra, standing on the chair. After all, she was the shortest woman in the room and could barely be seen above the others. “I say we let the men do their thing. Bless it from a distance, and maybe we start focusing

on our own purpose. The dormitories at the school sanctuary desperately need a makeover. I say we buy new bedding, pillows, everything.”

“I love that idea!” said Grace. “We can decorate for Christmas in there, Hannukah, Kwanza, anything that applies to the girls and mothers. How many do we have?”

“I was there yesterday,” said Mary. “We have fifteen girls and six mothers. Four of the girls have been with us over a year and attending our school.”

“Do they need a permanent residence? Maybe something like the boys’ home?” asked Alexandra.

“We already have the girls’ home, but it’s full. I think we need to focus on what we have. Besides, Grant said he’s doing a bunch of projects right now, so I’m not sure about his bandwidth.”

“We’re good at a lot of things, ladies. We’re intelligent, self-sufficient, and we know how to support our husbands and one another. Maybe when we asked the guys to stop, we sort of stopped as well,” said Faith. “I mean, I admit that I’ve been a little bored as well. We have so many women here now. We don’t all have to be involved in planning the

weddings or the parties. Maybe we punished ourselves in all this.”

“I think I have an idea,” smiled Erin. She stood, pacing back and forth. “Yes! Yes, I have an idea. An amazing idea!”

“Well, are you going to share it?” smiled Grace.

“I am. And we’re going to give it to our husbands for Christmas. This is going to be an amazing holiday!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I don’t have a lot of crew members available, Erin,” said Grant. “I’m sorry. I can get someone in here to paint, sand the floors, move furniture, but anything big will have to wait until after the new year.”

“No, that’s fine. If we could do that, it would be wonderful. We’re going to order some new furniture and appliances, but the delivery company will set it all up for us. We just have to get these walls painted.”

“Have you thought about wallpaper?” he asked. “I know it was out of fashion for a while, but I’m seeing it come back in a big way. The right pattern could really make this whole place pop.”

“That’s a great idea,” smiled Lauren. “We could do something bright and fun in the bedrooms but do something a little more elegant and darker for the common areas. Maybe not all the walls, just a statement wall.”

“I love this,” nodded Grace. “Thank you, Grant. When can we get started?”

“I’ll have José and Bobby come by first thing in the morning. If you go to this address,” he said, handing them a piece of paper, “Trisha can help you pick out the furniture, appliances, wallpaper, everything. They’re my choice for remodels. Good luck with this. You guys are really going to make this Christmas special for these girls.”

“Oh, there you are,” smiled Evie. She kissed her husband as he lifted her off the floor, swinging her around.

“Now, that’s how a woman wants to be greeted,” laughed Erin.

“We haven’t seen much of each other these past few weeks,” said Evie. “Grant is working until seven or eight most nights. I have to head to New York tomorrow with a team. Can we spend the rest of the evening together?”

“Baby, that sounds perfect,” he smiled. “Ladies, let me know if you need anything else. Right now, I need to take care of my wife.”

Waving at the couple as they left, they all smiled at them as they practically ran from the room.

“You know, we have several girls sharing rooms, but that doesn’t give them a lot of privacy,” said Faith. “What if

we did privacy screens, or maybe we had furniture that created natural divides?”

“I love that,” said Lauren. “Or what about drapes? We could hang the rods from the ceiling and have these floating drapes. Then the girls could open them if they wanted to or close them.”

“Another fantastic idea,” said Erin. “How about we go speak with the mothers that are here? Mary? Do you know them?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “Let me give you a little run down before we go in there.” Leaving the dormitory area, they moved into the common room. It was a massive space stretching from one end of the building to the other.

At one end was a fully equipped kitchen that had seen better days, but the other end had multiple couches, chairs, and bean bags for everyone to watch television or play games. With the girls at school, the women were all sitting quietly, reading, or watching television.

“Good morning,” said Mary.

“Good morning,” they called to them quietly.

“Everyone, these ladies are my friends who help to do the upkeep on this home. Ladies, this is Cassandra, Imara, Delphine, Fawn, and Fauna. Wait. That’s only five. Where is Isabelle?” asked Mary. The women all looked away, then back at the woman. “Cassandra?”

“She was in a lot of pain, Mary. Bree and Rachelle were with her yesterday all day. They thought that she was doing better, but she just couldn’t live with what had happened.”

“I don’t understand,” whispered Grace, understanding all too well the terror of your ex-husband killing your children.

“Her husband. Her ex-husband killed their children to try and force her to return to him. He was obviously sick and twisted, something we all know about. She thought it was her fault. Bree gave her something to help her sleep. We all watched her, made sure she was okay. She went to bed early, appeared to be sleeping just fine, but didn’t wake this morning.

“We called the clinic, and Doc came right away. She must have gotten up in the middle of the night and taken the acetaminophen.”

“Acetaminophen. But that’s not a controlled substance,” said Lauren.

“It doesn’t have to be to kill you,” said Erin. “In excessive doses, you can overdose. How much did she take?”

“Doc said that judging from the bottle, about sixty pills.”

“Good God,” whispered Mary. “I’m so very sorry. How are all of you?”

“We’re doing okay,” said Imara. “Bree, Rachelle, Calla, and Ashley were all here this morning to speak with us. It may not make sense to all of you, but she was in so much pain most days she could barely breathe. Knowing that he might still be out there wasn’t something she could handle. Her children were gone, her parents gone. In her mind, she had no one.”

“This is a terrible time,” said Faith. “We can come back.”

“No, we could use some company and good news,” smiled Imara. “What can we do for all of you?”

“Well, it’s what we’d like to do for all of you and the girls.” Mary proceeded to explain their plan, and the looks on

their faces said it all. They were excited. Maybe for the first time in years, they were excited about an upcoming holiday.

“So, if you could give us some ideas for the girls. Colors they like, things they really want or need, that would be wonderful,” said Erin. “We hope to be able to have everything done in one day. Ideally, they would be at school and come home and find it. But we’d also like to learn more about the five of you.”

“Well, there’s not a lot to tell,” said Imara. She looked at the other women and knew what they were thinking. There was a fucking truckload of shit to unload and tell, but they didn’t want the memories.

“You two must be twins,” said Lauren, looking at Fawn and Fauna. They nodded. “I have two sets of twins. Boys, then girls.”

“We had seventeen half-siblings,” said Fawn. “Our father was a polygamist in Wyoming. He had a ranch and forced all of us to work on the ranch. Fauna and I obviously had the same mother, but he had seven wives altogether.”

“I’m sorry. That must have been very difficult for you both.” They looked at one another, holding hands.

“It became dangerous for us when our father expected that we reproduce. With him.” The women froze, unsure of what to say. “We knew we had to run. It was a Sunday night when he had all the wives in his bedroom. Fauna and I chose to escape. We ran to another ranch about five miles from ours, and the man and his wife called the sheriff. He got us to safety, then made sure we were protected by calling one of your men. These two big men, Titus and Phoenix, they came and picked us up and brought us here.”

“Of course they did,” smiled Lauren. “What happened to your father?”

“He was arrested and is awaiting trial. All the wives, including our mother, are going to testify.”

“Is your mother safe?” asked Faith.

“Yes. Thank you for asking. She and the other women are in a group home in Wyoming where the trial will take place. We’ve already given our dep-, what’s it called?”

“Deposition,” smiled Erin.

“Yes. Deposition with those nice ladies, Kari and Maggie. Until then, Luke and Cam said we should stay here.

When it's all done, we'll be able to start a new life somewhere."

"What will you do?" smiled Grace.

"We want to become teachers," said Fawn. "Mary is helping us to study for our GED. Once we have that, we can apply to a college."

"I think that's wonderful. What about you three? Cassandra, Delphine, and Imara."

"My daughter and I came here because we were living on the streets and were constantly in danger. These two sweet older men found us and told us they had a safe place for us," said Imara.

"Really? What were their names?" asked Grace, sure that it was most likely Matthew.

"Teddy and Jake. I've seen them around here, so they must live close. We were so scared, but they got us in the truck, wrapped us in blankets, gave us food, and then brought us here. They saved our lives."

"It was the same for me," said Delphine. "I have two little girls, ten and twelve. Jake and George picked us up. A man was trying to force the girls into his car. That big man,

Jake, he was really amazing. I've never seen an old man move like that."

"Jake," whispered Alexandra, shaking her head. "It seems we've really missed the mark, girls."

"Same for you, Cassandra?" asked Faith.

"Not quite. I was working at the Pig and Whistle, that little pub near Wills Point, downriver. It closed, and I couldn't find work that would let me bring my daughter. Mr. Joe, he used to let her sleep upstairs in the store room while I worked the bar in the evenings. I had no one I trusted to watch her.

"So, I was sitting in the café on the River Road down there, and crying in my coffee, when this white-haired man, Sven, came over and started talking to me. A minute later, this man named Matthew came in and sat down. An hour after that, we were here. Safe, clean, and already in training for a new job. I'm going to be the new waitress and assistant manager at the café." She smiled at the women, and they all nodded, laughing.

After speaking with the women for another hour, they left the dormitory and walked back toward the main cottages of Belle Fleur.

“Anyone else feel like a real bitch?” asked Alexandra.

“Yep,” said Grace. “But I’m so proud of all of them.”

“We’re very lucky women,” smiled Erin. “And this lucky woman can’t wait for her husband to get home tonight. I know just what I’ll be wearing when he walks in the door.”

“Me too!”

“Let’s do this, ladies!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ghost, Ian, Nine, and Gaspar rode their customized Harley-Davidson Fat Boys along the River Road. It was cold as fuck, but the biting wind and frigid temperatures told them they were alive. All four of the men had black face coverings, warm clothes, and leather on their legs, hands, feet, and torso.

Ghost nodded toward a bar with a dozen motorcycles sitting outside. They pulled in and stepped off the bikes as two men stared at them. Nine could tell that they were admiring the motorcycles, but he also saw the vests they were wearing. This was a club hangout. The Krewe.

Stepping inside, they could smell the grease from French fries and burgers. Taking a seat, the waiter asked what they wanted, and they all ordered beers and burgers with fries.

“That was fucking awesome,” smiled Ian. “It’s been ages since we all went riding.”

“I have to say, I missed it more than I thought,” said Ghost, nodding at them. “I’m not sure if this will get us anywhere, but I’d do that again, all day, every day.”

“Sorry to bother you, fellas,” said a middle-aged man standing near the table. “Those your bikes out there?”

“They are,” said Ghost.

“Mind if I ask who did all the customizing? That’s some fucking amazing work,” he said admiringly.

“Steel Patriots Cycles,” smiled Ghost.

“Man, they’re the best right now. It’s a year’s wait to get your bike in there.” Ghost nodded, staring at Nine and the others.

“I tell you what, you help us with something, and I can guarantee your bike will get in there next week.”

“What? No fucking way,” he laughed. “I appreciate it, but those guys are serious as fuck and don’t jack around. I want my bike done, but I’m finding it hard to believe.”

“Call them,” said Ian. The man stared at him, others now standing around their table. “I’ll tell you what, I’ll call them.” Ian dialed the number, showing everyone the number on his phone. He then put it on speaker.

“I’m busy as fuck, you old goat. What the hell do you want?” said Tango.

“Hello to you, too, asshole. Listen, I may need you to take on a few bikes as a courtesy. If they’re willing to help us out, they want some customization done to the bikes.”

“They gonna help with the op?” asked Tango.

“Judging by the looks on their faces, that would be an affirmative,” said Ghost.

“Yea. We’ll take care of it. We’re taking on some apprentices from the Vo-tech school. Great talent, and they can do a lot of the little work while we do all the customization.”

“Thanks, brother. See you soon.”

“Believe us now?” smirked Nine.

“Fuck yea! What sort of help do you need?” he asked.

“First, what’s your name?” asked Gaspar.

“I’m Crawdad. That’s Tater, Badger, and Stu.”

“Stu? They couldn’t come up with something better than that?” smirked Ghost.

“Uh, my actual name is Stu,” he said, shrugging.

“Way to go, dumbass,” laughed Gaspar. “Listen, we’re looking for a guy on a motorcycle, bald head, tattoos

everywhere, no vest. He's probably buying and selling stolen goods. He was working with a man named Tolbert."

"I'm not sure you want to find him," said Tater.

"Why not?"

"Bad things happen to people who are around him. He sucks you in, makes you think he's helping you, and then you get slammed in the face with a sledgehammer. The dude is definitely not who you think he is."

"That's just it. I don't think he's anyone because I don't know him. I need a name and a location."

"Okay, but you're not going to like it."



"A fucking cop," growled Ghost. "This guy is a fucking cop."

"Tater said he wasn't working with anyone else. That he preferred to work alone, but he has to be selling this shit to someone. Who?" Nine looked at his three best friends and shook his head.

“Hey, we made some calls,” said Crawdad. “He’s been seen a lot near the White Kitchen Preserve.”

“That’s a fucking swamp,” growled Gaspar.

“It is, but some developer put a bunch of glamping cabins over there. You know, those cabins that make people think they’re roughing it when they’ve actually got central air and heat, a working stove and refrigerator, and a designer mattress.”

“If he’s staying there, then he’s not from here,” said Nine. “He doesn’t have a residence.”

“I’m not sure,” said Tater. “He just said he’s in one of the cabins over there. Sticks to himself. You have to take your car or bike to a lot. Then they give you a boat to get to your cabin. Sounds like a lot of effort to me, but I guess that tells you he’s hiding something.”

“Yea,” nodded Ian.

“Can I ask what he’s hiding? I mean, I don’t mind helping you guys. You seem like solid dudes. But what is he doing?”

“Stealing toys and other things that are earmarked for kids for Christmas,” said Gaspar.

“What? That’s fucking sick,” said the young man.

“Dad! Hey, Dad, come hear this.”

It turns out Crawdad was Tater’s father. They never suspected that, but it was kind of cute. He explained why they were looking for the man. Then his father grabbed a chair.

“You guys walked into the right bar. Our club, Krewe, we buy toys every year for the kids at the boys’ home in Lafourche Parish. I grew up there and had a great life because of those folks. We gather things every year and take them over on the bikes on Christmas Eve. Our stuff was in a storage shed at the back of our club.

“We went on a ride, got back, and the whole thing was gone. Shed and all. The only thing we saw were motorcycle tracks. Not sure how he got that shit out of there, but he took the whole damn thing.” Ghost looked at Nine, then Gaspar and Ian.

“A chopper,” he muttered. “He has help, and he’s using a fucking chopper to get that shit out. You’ve been very helpful. Very. You boys take those bikes to SP. They’ll take care of you.”

“You know what,” said Crawdad, shaking his head.

“We’re happy to help on this one. Let us know if you find our

stuff, and that will be payment enough. I'll go visit with your boys and see when they can get my bike in. No rush."

"Thank you, brother," said Ghost. Leaving the bar, they sat on their bikes, looking at one another. "A fucking cop."

"Maybe several cops," said Ian. "What if that chopper is a police chopper?"

"See if Sly can track the choppers and find where they were. If this guy is a cop, he might have had access to Tolbert to kill him. Which would mean he definitely has help."

"It's late. We need to get back. Tomorrow, we find that glamping place and see if we can get some information about him."

They enjoyed their casual ride back, letting the wind chap their skin, causing it to be red and raw. They parked the bikes behind Steel Patriots Cycles and walked back up to the big house of Belle Fleur. Taking the boat back to Belle Île, they waved at one another, planning to meet again in the morning at 0700.

Nine stomped his boots on the porch, trying to get as much dirt and mud off. When he walked inside, he kicked

them off, setting them on the weatherproof mat. He hung up his coat and then called out.

“Erin? Baby, are you here?” he called.

“I’m in the back,” she hollered.

He grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and made his way down the hallway. He smelled candles burning and thought maybe Erin was in the bath. When he turned the corner, he was shocked to see his gorgeous wife lying back on the bed in a bright red lace teddy, garters, and a smile wrapped in red lipstick.

“Welcome home, Santa. Time to open your stocking.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Anybody else confused as fuck by their wife’s behavior last night?” frowned Ian.

“Yes. But happy as shit,” chuckled Ghost. “Grace has always been an amazing lover, but last night seemed larger-than-life, even for her.”

“I’m damn sure not complaining,” said Gaspar. “I’m hungry and ready to head out and find this asshole. Let’s talk to the others.” Filling their plates with food, they walked toward the table with Noah, Noa, Dom, and Magnus. Skull and Razor were fixing their plates but would join them soon.

“Did you guys find anything?” asked Ian.

“Not sure,” said Noa. “We talked to two clubs who do toy drives for different sections of the city. Good dudes. A little shady, but all-in-all, good dudes. They all said the same thing. Someone told them it was a cop taking their shit but couldn’t identify him. We’re heading to Houma to see if another group can give us more information.

“They bought a hundred bikes for kids, had them stored and locked in a storage unit, and they were all taken.

These dudes are pissed and want answers.”

“My question is, where is this man holding all the merchandise?” asked Noah.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” said Ghost. “Any spirits sharing information? Maybe our new friend, Marcel?”

“Nothing so far,” said Noah, “but he does feel unrest around the new village. He is not sure why, but he is keeping an eye open for us.”

“Cool. A ghost lookout. Learn something new every day,” smirked Nine, taking a huge bite of his omelet. “Stay vigilant and alert. No one gets hurt.”

“We know, Dad,” smiled Magnus.

“I will fucking kill you right here in the cafeteria,” said Nine. His features softened, and he shook his head. “But thanks for saying that. I think I needed to hear it.”

The ride to White Kitchen wasn’t an easy one. They had to fight rush hour morning traffic in New Orleans to cross the Twin Span Bridge, then make their way east toward the location.

Following the GPS coordinates sent by comms, they drove the tiny, muddy backroads until they saw the signs for the White Kitchen Glamping World.

“Glamping? There was no fucking glamping when I was serving,” scoffed Gaspar. “A tent if you were lucky.”

“Same,” said Ghost. “Jesus, these things look like high-end cottages.”

“Good morning,” said a middle-aged woman sitting on the porch. She had a cup of steaming coffee in her hands, white rain boots on her feet, and a warm sweater-coat wrapped around her shoulders. “You boys looking for a place to stay a few nights?”

“No, ma’am. We’re looking for a man that did a favor for us, but we didn’t catch his name. He said he was staying here, and we just wanted to thank him properly.”

“That’s pretty vague,” she said, shaking her head. “I like to keep my guests’ information confidential.”

“I don’t need anything personal. I just need to know if he’s still here,” said Ian. “He’s about six-feet, tattoos, bald, rides a motorcycle, something like ours.” She shook her head.

“I know who you’re talking about, but his motorcycle wasn’t like yours. It was a police motorcycle.”

“He rode his fucking department bike to this shit?” murmured Ghost.

“You know your bikes,” said Gaspar quickly. “Sorry, most people just say it was a motorcycle, very generic. He does usually ride his department bike.”

“Well, I’m sorry, he checked out this morning. I haven’t even had time to clean the cabin,” she said.

“Damn. Do you mind if we take a look? There might be something that will help us.”

“Listen, this would go a lot better if you told me what you were really doing here,” she said, standing with her hands on her hips.

“You’re right. We’re sorry,” said Gaspar. “Let me explain.”

The woman listened intently, nodding occasionally. When he was done, she sat back down and let out an exasperated breath.

“I knew he was too good to be true,” she frowned. “Gave me a new television at the end of his first week here.

Said he got a lot of stuff for free from the evidence lockers at the end of the year. I didn't have a reason to not believe him."

"I'm sorry," said Nine.

"Cabin twenty-two," she said, handing him a key.

"Just take the boat around the first bend, and you'll see it. Dock it and walk up the steps. I haven't been out there, so don't know what condition he left it in."

"Thank you."

"One more thing. He said his name was Lou. Lou Rawlston. I don't know if that's real or not, but that's what he said."

"Comms, did you get that?"

"Got it," said Pigsty. "I'll have Cam and Luke go speak with Mr. Ray. We can see if that name rings any bells. In the meantime, I'll do some searching."

Taking the small flat-bottomed boat around the bayou, they found the cabin and let themselves in. It was neat as a pin. The sheets had been changed, the bed made, and the dirty linens placed in the bin. Dishes were done, the trash taken outside, and everything was spotless.

"Well, Lou is a neat freak," said Ian.

“Yea. Or she lied,” said Ghost.

“I don’t think she was lying. Time to do some digging in the trash,” said Nine. He opened the bag, dumping everything on the counter. They separated it into piles, dumping the food waste back into the trash can.

“Lots of diet soda,” said Ian. “Hmmm. Diet soda and two discarded insulin pens. Our boy is a diabetic.”

“Interesting,” said Ghost. “I thought that would prevent him from being on the force.”

“Maybe no one knew,” said Nine. He held up a slip of paper. “Bingo. A receipt for a storage unit in Hopedale.”

“Hopedale? That’s nothing but a fishing village. There’s hardly anyone there any longer. Katrina completely destroyed it.”

“Well, there’s a storage facility there, and it was just rented a week ago. I’d say that’s our next stop.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cam and Luke took the smaller boat over to Bayou Trail. No need to drive an extra thirty minutes when the boat would drop them right at their doorstep. The difference between the old places when they first found them and now was astounding.

Smoke billowed in perfect curls from the chimneys, fires burning brightly inside the homes. Their front doors were a rustic wood with glass on the upper halves. They'd all been painted a light gray with black trim, but the front porches made each one unique. Some had swings, others just lawn chairs. There were flowers and potted plants, outdoor rugs, and painted wood floors.

“Damn, Grant really does great work,” said Luke.

“He does,” nodded Cam. “There’s Mr. Ray.”

They waved as the old man walked down his porch steps. With Joshua back in school, Ray had a lot of time on his hands and was enjoying his new home. He knew that Joshua would choose to leave after the next school year, heading off to college, but for now, he was grateful for this time.

“Mornin’,” he said as they walked toward him. “How are you boys?”

“We’re well, Mr. Ray. Just checking in to see if you’re doing alright.” A few of the other neighbors came over, shaking Luke and Cam’s hands. They spoke casually for a few minutes, then Luke asked the men his questions.

“We think we might have an idea of who the man is that was helping Tolbert,” he said. “Have any of you ever seen a man on a police motorcycle come through here?”

“He’d be about six-feet tall, tattoos, bald. He goes by the name Lou Rawlins, but that could be an alias.”

“I don’t know him personally, but a man on a motorcycle drove up to the gate two nights ago,” said Ray’s neighbor, Buster. “He was hollering at me to open the gate, but I told him I couldn’t do that. Said it was controlled by security. Fool reached out and touched it.” He laughed, shaking his head.

“I bet that made him happy,” smirked Cam.

“Madder’n a hornets’ nest,” said Buster. “Told him only residents could get in. He said he was lookin’ for a kid

that stole from him. We all told him there weren't no kids livin' here."

"Did he buy that?" asked Luke.

"He drove away, but that don't mean he bought it."

"If he comes around again, we need you to alert our team, just like we told you. They can see everything on the cameras, but if they don't know there's a problem, they just assume someone got turned around."

"Searching the tapes now," said Pigsty in his ear.

"We'd do 'bout anythin' y'all want. Your grandpappy is a good man. Got all new fishin' boats and fixed up the old ones like they are new. Chère, there's gonna be a lot of fish hauled in when we finally get out there," smiled Buster.

"Grandpa is the best man I know," smiled Luke. "We appreciate that you all chose to stay and stick it out with us. If that man comes back, remember to call us. Now that he knows the fences are electrified, he won't be able to get in that way, but he might try to come through the bayou."

"Isn't that your land?" asked Ray.

"Yes, sir. It definitely is, but desperate men do stupid things." Ray smiled at the two men.

“Seems I’ve heard that somewhere before.”

“Do y’all have your decorations up? Trees? Lights?”
asked Luke.

“Don’t you worry none about us,” smiled Buster.

“Your granny, Miss Irene, she came by three days ago with a load of decorations that thirty houses couldn’t use. Had them big boys of hers, Alec and Tailor, put all the trees up. Best Christmas of my life, Luke. No lie.”

“Mr. Buster, that makes me very happy.”

“Luke, Cam, what are y’all doing here?” asked Jake.
He was walking toward the two men, rolling a wagon behind him with Sven at his side.

“Just checking up, Jake. What are you doing?”

“Well, we thought you can’t have a Christmas dinner without all the fixin’s, so Mama Irene sent us over with three turkeys and three hams, sweet potatoes, regular potatoes, green beans, brussels sprouts, two pumpkin pies, two apple, and some sorta cake that smells delicious. She said for y’all to keep it cold, and it would be good for Christmas day.”

“Hot damn,” smiled Ray. “Best Christmas ever.”

After the food was delivered and stored, Luke, Cam, Jake, and Sven walked back toward the docks and their small boats.

“That man been around botherin’ them again?” asked Jake.

“Seems so,” said Cam. “I’m surprised he didn’t use his badge to get through the gates. That’s what I would have done.”

“You would have done it if you were from here,” said Jake. “I think that man ain’t from here. I expect he’s from another part of the state or maybe even further away. Otherwise, he woulda flashed that badge in a heartbeat.”

“Damn, Jake. You sure you’re not the one that should be chasing him down?”

“Oh, no,” he laughed, shaking his head. “I have it on good authority from your Aunt Claudette that if I do anything foolish like that, she’ll have me in a grip. If you know what I mean.”

“We know what you mean,” laughed Cam.

Following one another back to Belle Fleur, they passed Halo Island, where many of the seniors were still busy

working furiously to get it ready for Christmas Eve.

The trees had arrived, permanently placed in concrete bases.

Their limbs and needles looked so real; you would never know they'd been produced by G.R.I.P. and would last through anything.

The paths were lit with colorful lights, the small stands for food and souvenirs were all ready. Beautiful carved benches lined the paths for couples to sit, watching their children play or just enjoying a quiet night alone.

“That’s gonna be amazing,” smiled Cam. “I’m glad they’re gonna use the island for something like that. Think of all the parties we can do out here. Christmas, New Year’s, Mardi Gras, Easter Egg hunts. It’ll be awesome.”

“Yea, we’re lucky men, Cam. Our parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, all of them. They’re amazing people, and we got to be born into this family. I tell you, I’m grateful every damn day of my life. This is the life we get to live.”

“I know what you mean. We’ve all been fortunate, which makes what we’re doing right now all the more important.”

Jake and Sven waved at Luke and Cam as they veered off toward Halo Island. They waved back, smiling at one another.

“That will be us in forty years,” grinned Cam. Luke laughed, shaking his head.

“It’s us now, brother. It’s us now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Where is this club located?” asked Noah as they slowed the bikes near four long rows of metal industrial buildings. He stared at the buildings with no signage or indication that they were being used. “Are they inside these?”

“I’m not sure,” said Noa. “We followed the directions. It doesn’t feel like a trap, but keep your eyes open.” They parked their bikes at the end of the last building and peeked around the corner to see a bunch of people milling about.

Walking together, they made their way around the last building and were surprised to see picnic tables, a barbeque pit, and windows along the side of the metal building.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Afternoon,” said a man, walking toward them. “Can we help you?”

“We sure hope so,” said Magnus. The bikers gave the four men a solid once-over, staring at the bulk and mass before them. They knew these weren’t ordinary men. They’d seen men like these before.

Magnus told the man their story, and his face froze, then looked frustrated, then pissed off.

“We don’t want to interfere in your business, but we want this man found and the toys and things returned to these families, especially the children.”

“Come with me,” he said, walking toward an open garage door. There were dozens of men inside the garage, leaning on their bikes, working on them, or just sitting around talking. “Falcon? A minute.”

An older man with a long gray beard walked toward them. He was a big man, but not from training or from weights. He was big because of hard work.

The man explained what Magnus and the others had already told him, and as he did, the other men gathered around. Noah wasn’t feeling nervous. Neither were Noa or Dom, so they knew it was all going to be okay.

“You’re a big fucker,” said a man standing next to Noa.

“Thank you.”

“Those your Steel Patriot bikes out there?” asked another.

“They’re ours,” said Magnus.

“Fucking amazing bikes, dude. They’re the best.”

“We know,” nodded Dom. “A friend of ours owns the company.” That brought smiles and nods from the group.

“Fellas, this is Falcon, our club leader. We’re not a one-percenter or club that does anything illegal, so don’t get your panties ruffled.”

“I do not wear panties,” frowned Noah.

“He’s joking, brother,” smirked Noa. Noah nodded, looking directly at the other man, who gave him a smirk.

“We’re honestly just a bunch of retired oil rig workers. We all bought bikes when we were working on the rigs and would come back and ride together. We gather once in a while to meet, shoot the shit, and eat.

“A few years back, we found a woman with six kids begging for food outside a restaurant. We asked her what was going on. Turns out, her house was falling apart, no food in the refrigerator, so we fixed it up and did what we could.

“From then on, we’ve done something every year for a few single mothers. This year, we went all out. Bikes, televisions, a few new microwaves, everything we had in our tills. Stored it in the first metal building you walked past.

“We came back the following weekend to put some more shit inside, and it was all gone. Everything. Fella across the street, that runs the metal shop, said he thought he saw a motorcycle cop here. We called the police, but they said they never had anyone down here.”

“We’re trying to get it all back,” said Noa. “You boys are retired, right?”

“Yes, sir,” said Falcon.

“Feel like lending us a hand?” smirked the big Islander.

“Damn straight. That boy over there said he thought he heard a chopper late one night. He lives only about a half-mile from here.”

“We think this could be several police officers robbing these places and using a police chopper to haul things off. No one would be suspicious of that,” said Dom.

“I’ve never wanted to harm a man in uniform,” said Falcon, “but I’d be willing to change my mind in this.”

“We know what you mean,” nodded Noa. He looked at the barbecue pit and rubbed his stomach, licking his lips.

“You hungry, big fella?” smirked the old man.

“I’m always hungry, as you can tell. My wife is a nurse, so my pleasure foods get limited.”

“Take a seat. Billy’s got the chicken and ribs ready. Brisket will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“We appreciate it,” smiled Magnus. “Can you tell us about the families you chose this year? What made you select them?”

“To be honest, we all came from rough backgrounds. This part of the country has an interesting love-hate relationship with oil riggers and unemployment,” he smiled. “A few of us are still married, but that life destroys a marriage. I suspect you boys know about that.”

“We’ve been very fortunate that our wives haven’t kicked our asses out,” said Dom. “But we know what you mean. We’re all former military.”

“Son, you’re not regular military. You walk different, you talk different, you look different. I can tell you this. Every man here appreciates your service. Several of us served four-year stints. Others have sons and daughters in the military.

“But you were asking about the families. Honestly, after the first one, we started looking for single moms struggling. Some of us came from that, and others, well, we were gone so much our wives probably felt like single mothers.”

“We understand that,” nodded Noa.

“I know you do. We usually ask around, see if anyone has seen a mother with kids asking for help, food, that sort of thing. Charlemagne owns a small little market on the other side of town. She’s a softie and always gives what she can. These women know that and will come in asking for bread or milk until their checks come.

“Throughout the year, she’ll let us know if anyone is really in trouble but keeps tabs on them. This year, there seemed to be more than usual. Last year, we did five mothers. Year before was four. We had seven this year. Seven mothers with a total of thirteen babies. Babies that won’t have nothin’,” he said, sniffing. Noa reached out, gripping the man’s shoulders.

“They will if we have anything to say about it.” All of them were quiet for a few minutes. Noah finally broke the silence.

“The ribs and chicken are excellent,” he smiled.

“Some of the best I have ever had.”

“Thank you,” grinned the chef.

“Listen, we don’t want you boys to get yourselves in trouble, but we’d appreciate it if you did some casual riding around the area. See if anyone has had break-ins to their storage units. Maybe large smash-and-grab situations. Anything like that.

“If you see a man on a motorcycle that looks like a police motorcycle, call this number, and someone will put you through to us,” said Magnus, handing him the white card.

“We’d be happy to,” nodded Falcon. “The boys get restless, and we were feeling pretty damn helpless after all this. At least we’ll feel like we’re doing something.”

Noah gripped Magnus’s forearm, squeezing it so hard the other man thought it might break. His face blanched, and there was a pained look on his face.

“Hey, is he alright? Did the food make him sick?” asked one of the men.

“No. No, I think there’s something wrong, though,” said Dom. “Noah? Noah, brother, look at me.” Noah stood

and moved toward his friend. Standing nearly eye to eye, he gripped his shoulders, forcing him to look at him.

“Noah, what is it, brother?”

“There is a woman. A d-dead woman crying for help,” he whispered.

“Did he say a dead woman?”

“Noah, who is she? Does she have a name?”

Noah moved around his friend, walking to the back of the lot where the marsh began and the swamp continued. He stood there, nodding his head, speaking softly.

“Hey, man, is your friend okay?” asked Falcon.

“I know it’s difficult to believe, but he can see and hear dead people. It never fails, and it’s overwhelming for him. He says he can hear a dead woman crying for help.”

“Jesus,” whispered the man. The others all stared at the huge Viking, unwilling to not believe him. “Should we go to him?”

“No,” said Magnus, shaking his head. “It’s best if we let him handle this. There’s nothing we can do.”

A few moments later, Noah walked back to them, stumbling and nearly falling. Five of the riggers were there to help steady him, smiling at him.

“You know?” he asked.

“Mon frère, we’re from the bayou. Lotsa strange shit happens out here, and we don’t question it. You say you talk to dead ladies, I believe you.” Noah gave a grateful nod.

“Who is she, Noah?”

“Levette Marquess,” said Noah. “She was kidnapped and murdered about ten years ago.”

“Shit,” muttered Falcon. “That was all over the news. They suspected her husband killed her.”

“He did,” said Noah. “He dumped her body back there. When we leave, please call the police and tell them you think someone spotted the body in the marsh. A stranger, and the stranger left. She claims her husband’s DNA should be on her body.”

“Is that what she wanted?” asked Noa.

“That and to tell us that our police officer is from Picayune, Mississippi. She heard his conversation. I believe it is close enough to get here quickly if need be.”

“It is indeed, big man,” smiled Dom. “We got ourselves another lead. Pigsty? Lou Rawlston with the Picayune PD.”

“Got it.”

“We’ll let you know if we see anything,” said Falcon. “Either way, it was a damn pleasure to meet y’all. Honored.”

“Same,” nodded Noa. They all looked at Noah, wondering if he was okay.

“My apologies for my strange behavior,” he said to them. One of the men grinned at him, shaking his head.

“Brother, ain’t nothin’ strange about seein’ dead people in South Louisiana.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“So, we have a name and possible location,” said Gaspar. “Do we need to go up to Picayune?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” said Sly. “We did our research. Lou Rawlston has been a sergeant with the PPD for nineteen years. He was put on administrative leave three months ago for suspicion of tampering with evidence.”

“Fuck,” muttered Nine.

“Yep. They decided to take a look at the sergeant’s stellar arrest history and dig really deep. No surprise, they’ve found some pretty disreputable things. He’s either withheld evidence or produced evidence that convicted more than thirty men and women of crimes in the last eleven years.”

“I’m confused,” said Magnus. “If that’s true, and they didn’t know what he was doing, this guy should be ranked higher than sergeant. Why is he still at the lower rank?”

“Good question. He’s still there, mostly because he was always doing something that didn’t make his promotion go through. According to the Police Chief, Toby Beauregard, Lou is a bit of a showboat. Always wants to be the hero.

They even suspect that he set a house on fire, only to rescue the children and be seen as the hero.”

“Holy snowballs,” frowned Ghost.

“Snowballs?” said Gaspar with a look of confusion.

“Grace has asked me to try and taper the cursing in front of the grandkids. I’m working on it.”

“I bet a thousand he won’t be able to do it,” laughed Nine.

“I’ll take that bet,” grinned Antoine.

“Assholes. Look, how do we catch this guy in the act? Also, how the fuck is he getting a helicopter.”

“That’s an easy one,” said Sly. “His brother-in-law has a commercial chopper business giving tours for land developers.”

“Okay. Then, I say again. How do we catch him?”

“I have an idea,” said Whiskey. “The Marines do a Toys-for-Tots drive every year. They keep the toys locked up in the backroom of the recruitment center, then take them by truck to a distribution center where they’re sent to the needy families.”

“We’re familiar with it,” smirked Ghost.

“I know, asshole, but they’re willing to help. I spoke to the guy in charge this week, and he said they are definitely all in on this one. He made the suggestion that they contact the television news and talk about what a haul it was this year, people being more generous than ever, records broken, all that shit.

“He’s even going to mention that they’ll be moving everything to the warehouse sooner than expected because they have so much. When they arrive...”

“We’ll be waiting,” smirked Nine.

“No. A room full of pissed-off Marines will be waiting,” smiled Whiskey. “Including me. We can, of course, be there, watching, but they would like first shot at him.”

“I’m loving this idea,” said Gaspar. “Let’s get this rolling. We still have a lot to do for our boys’ home and for the families we’ve found around here.” Whiskey dialed the number to the Marine recruitment center.

“We’re in. Yea, brother. Contact the television crews now.”



“Look at his place,” smiled Erin. “It’s just beautiful. I can’t believe what a little paint and new furnishings did to this.”

“We’re so grateful,” said Cassandra. “The girls are so much happier now that they have their own space, although they rarely close the drapes between them. We’ve all started taking turns cooking with the new appliances. It’s just so much easier.”

“Well, it looks beautiful,” said Lauren. “We’ve placed the gifts for Christmas day in the storage room. Janet, the director, has the key and will open it for you to place the things beneath the tree.”

“I don’t know how we’ll ever thank you.”

“You’ll thank us by finding your way and giving those girls an amazing life,” smiled Faith. “This will be the beginning of happier times for all of you.”

Making their way back toward the cafeteria to help with holiday preparations, they could all see men moving something in the distance, back behind the family plot. It

appeared to be Wilson and a few other men, but they couldn't see what they were doing.

“I swear they must think we're dumb as a box of rocks,” said Erin. “We know they're doing something, and they know we're doing something. We should have all worked together.”

“I think they didn't want to tell us they were involved in something,” said Grace. “I haven't said anything to Ghost. I'm letting him do his thing, and honestly, it's been kind of fun having our little secrets between each other. You know, kind of spicing everything up.”

“I agree,” blushed Lauren. “Our sex life has always been pretty amazing, but it seems to have gotten even better lately. At first, I thought it was the holidays, but I think it's all of us feeling as though we have a purpose.”

“I couldn't agree more,” grinned Faith. “Have you all met Tobias's girl, Gail?”

“She's lovely,” said Erin. “I just hope they can find their way as well.”

“Oh, I think they will,” said Lauren. “I don't think either one of them was looking for anyone, but that seems to

be when we find one another.”

As night settled, the lights illuminated the entire property. Trees were covered, the columns of the big house were covered, wreaths, greenery, red and green ribbons, gold and silver. It seemed this year there was something for everyone.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” smiled Grace.

“Stunning. We are so fortunate to be here and be with one another.” Erin looked toward the bayou and, in the distance, saw a glow of lights. Thinking it was either G.R.I.P. or their own island, she shrugged it off as they went inside to help with all the baking for the Christmas Eve ball and wedding.



“Are we almost done?” asked Antoine.

“Almost,” smiled Tailor. He picked up the walkie-talkie and looked across the short span to the village.

“Joshua? Do you read?”

“Yes, sir. It looks amazing! It’s like a dream come to life. All the lights and the trees. It makes everything look awesome!” The men chuckled at the teenager’s enthusiasm. Just outside their property line was a dock with three boats waiting to take the children across for the Christmas adventure.

“Who’s bringing the gifts over here to lock in the storage on the island?” asked Alec.

“It will be all of us,” said Max. “We’re the letting the seniors, I mean, the senior seniors, handle the situation with the toys. I think they need this.”

“Agreed,” smiled Baptiste. “It’s been fun watching them get back to work. Just a few more things here to work on. Gabe? Did y’all get the carousel painted?”

“We’re still working on it. It was a pain in the ass to get over here. Then we had to get that damn thing back together. Repainting a hundred-year-old carousel ain’t all that easy. Thank goodness I got some advice from Ellie and Megan. We even had to use a special paint and coat it in weather-resistant paint. It’s been a beast to do, but the kids are gonna freak out.”

“Kids? Hell, I want on that thing,” said Luc. “I can see us using this as date night space. A little place for all of us to get away and have a romantic evening. It’s a big island. There could be several people out here at once.”

“I hope Mama and Pops approve,” said Rafe. “I know Pops always said this island was to be used for something truly special. I hope he sees this as special enough.” Tailor laughed, shaking his head.

“What?” asked Alec.

“I was just thinkin’. Remember the old cartoon about Santa and the island of misfit toys?” They all nodded, smirking at him. “I feel a bit like that’s us. We’re all a bit misfit, and yet we’ve found our island, and we’re just waitin’ for Santa to appear.”

The men stood quietly for a moment, looking at the work they’d accomplished in less than a month. It was truly remarkable. Across the narrow stretch of water were the once falling-down shacks, now glowing with lights of their own. Their owners were chatting on their front porches, laughing, and enjoying life instead of fearing it.

Teddy stared at the younger men, shaking his head.

“I don’t think we’re misfits at all,” he said quietly. “I think I’ll go with Irene’s thought. We’re silent warriors. Sometimes, that requires a weapon. Sometimes, it requires a hammer. This past month, we chose a hammer and nails instead of a gun and bullets. It felt good to feel useful again. I feel pride when I look at all this, and I truly couldn’t be prouder of the fact that I was able to do it with the finest men I know.” Sven slapped his friend on the back, nodding at all of them.

“Amen to that, Teddy. Amen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

“We’re ready, sir,” said the Marine to Whiskey.

“Son, I’m retired. You do not have to call me or anyone here sir.”

“Sir, I beg your pardon, but we’re not stupid. We know who y’all are. We know the names. They’re like the names from Valhalla or Olympus. Whether you outrank me or not, you will be called ‘sir’ by me and all of my men.”

“We thank you for that,” said Gaspar. “You’re all doing fine work here, and we’re always looking for new team members when your time comes.” The men nodded their appreciation.

“We watched the television broadcast. You did a fine acting job, showing your enthusiasm for the haul. Hopefully, our friend saw that as well,” said Nine.

“He did,” said Noah, walking through the doors.

“Holy shit, what is that?” whispered a Marine. Noah stared at the young man, realizing he was younger than his

own son.

“It is not polite to speak of men in such a way. I am Noah Anders, retired SOG.”

“Oh, shit,” muttered the Marine. Noah just gave a smirk, shaking his head.

“As I was saying, Lou Rawlston saw the broadcast. Our motorcycle friends saw him snooping around another site. He received a phone call and immediately turned in the other direction. This one. He should be here soon.”

“Alright, everyone. Lights out and to the back.”

The Marine turned the lights out at the front office space of the warehouse. They shuffled through the door into the massive empty space. All of the toys and donations had been moved to another location for safekeeping.

“Hawk? Eagle? You got him yet?” asked Ghost.

“Yep. He just pulled up and has a friend with him. A friend from the alarm company. That’s how he’s getting into those buildings that have alarms. This guy is turning off the systems for him.”

“Two for one special,” smirked Gaspar.

They could hear the sound of the alarm beeping, then it suddenly stopped. Next was the front door lock being picked, opened, and quietly shut.

“No cameras,” they heard someone say.

“This will be easy. Frank is a few miles away in a field.”

Noah looked at the others and texted their friends on the motorcycles. They had the helicopter in sight and would take it with ease.

“Fucking Marines,” scoffed Lou. “Always neat as a pin and everything exactly where it should be. They’ll shit their pants when they come in tomorrow. Think about it. I’ll be able to show everyone where the toys were taken and be the hero.”

“I don’t know, Lou,” said the other man. “You’re already suspected of being a glory hound. This might not be such a good idea.”

“Are you kidding me? That hick police chief of mine won’t ever know. I’ve covered my tracks, and this will be the feather in my cap. Hell, I’ll probably have women throwing themselves at my feet. Get me a few single mamas that need a

little holiday comforting.” When he laughed, Noa and Noah started to move toward the door, but Nine and Gaspar held them back, shaking their heads.

“In time,” whispered Ian.

As the door into the warehouse opened and shut behind them, the two men moved inside, searching in the darkness for some light.

“Find the switch,” said Lou.

“I can’t find one,” said the other man.

“It’s not that fucking hard. Remember, these idiots are just Marines. They eat crayons for fun.”

A blast of lights illuminated the room, the two men covering their eyes. As they tried to turn and leave, they were met with a wall of unforgiving chests. Max, Noah, Noa, and Whiskey stood with arms crossed.

“Take it easy. I’m a police officer,” said Lou.

“And I’m a fucking crayon-eating Marine,” said Whiskey.

“It was a joke,” laughed the man. “I was just joking. We heard this is where the stolen toys were being held.”

“Stolen? In a Marine-owned warehouse?” asked Nine.

“Let me clarify some things for you. You’re Sgt. Lou Rawlston of the Picayune, Mississippi Police Department. You’re on extended administrative leave while under investigation for tampering with evidence and possibly suffering from delusions of heroism. Don’t worry, though. Your leave is about to end. Permanently.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he growled.

“Us? We’re just a group of old crayon-eating, fish-swimming, dirt pounders. The guys behind us, though,” he said, swinging his thumb toward the twenty young Marines, “these are the guys that are truly pissed off, and they’re about to take your head off.”

The young Marines stepped forward as Rawlston and his companion tried to leave again. No such luck. Rawlston was in for the beating of his life.

“Don’t we get to join in?” asked Max.

“We promised the wives we wouldn’t hurt ourselves. Let’s let the young bucks get their licks in.”

“Our friends have the helicopter and its pilot,” said Noah. “They have informed the sheriff, and they are on their

way to both locations.”

“Please!” yelled Rawlston. “Please, make them stop!”

“Where are all the toys?” asked Ghost. “Where did you put them?”

“They’re in a warehouse on Beauregard. I swear. It’s all there,” he panted, spitting blood on the floor.

“Comms? You hear that?”

“On our way,” said Hiro.

They sat Rawlston and his friend up against the wall, not bothering to zip tie their hands. They weren’t going anywhere. The man with the alarm company had already pissed his pants and was crying for his mother. Twenty minutes later, they heard what they needed to hear.

“Nine? Gaspar? We have it. This thing is huge, and there’s shit in here that definitely isn’t for the holidays. I’ve got cars, motorcycles, televisions. Shit, there’s even building materials. We need to see if Grant is missing anything.”

“Thanks, Hiro. Get some trucks over there to get out what’s ours. We’ll have the sheriff send a crew as well.”

“Please, I told you where it was. Let me go,” said Rawlston.

“Let you go? Asshole, you created more problems than your pathetic ass is worth. What were you doing with Tolbert?” His one eye that could still open went wide, and he stared up at the big man. “That’s right, you bastard. We know.”

“Tolbert wanted fast money and was willing to take some of the shit into Mexico. He lived on that ratty-ass boat but had a friend that ran barges down there. He didn’t question what was put on his barge.”

“And did you kill him?” He looked from one man to the next, realizing he wasn’t getting out of this.

“I didn’t, but I knew a convict on the inside that owed me a favor. I jacked with the evidence for his murder trial, and he got off. Dumb ass got put in for a possession charge.”

“I think I’ve heard enough,” smiled the sheriff. “Your Chief is gonna be real happy to be done with your stupid mug.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “Look! Look what they’ve done to me!”

“Ghost? Nine? Y’all see anything?”

“Nothing. We heard some noises as we were helping these fine young Marines. Didn’t see anything.” He turned to the Marine.

“Anything from you, Marine?” asked the sheriff.

“No, sir. We were too busy eating crayons.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

They'd done it. They'd found all of the merchandise, returned it to the appropriate charities, and were able to get their things stored out on Halo Island. Christmas was officially back on, and the children would get exactly what they all deserved. A night to remember.

But getting all those gifts back to their rightful owners was going to be tougher than they thought. It took all of them and five big trucks, plus the biker club and the Marines. On Christmas Eve, they finally woke at a decent hour and had breakfast with everyone.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” smiled Erin, kissing Nine.

“Merry Christmas Eve, baby.”

“I'll be helping with the wedding today, but do you want to exchange gifts today or tomorrow?” Nine swallowed.

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow, for sure.” Erin kissed him again and left him at the table with the other men.

“Fuck us,” said Ghost. “I didn't think about gifts for my own family. What kind of asshole does that make me?”

“Tell me you love me,” said Jake, smirking at the men.

“Jake, you’re a nice guy, and I love you like a brother, but that grin is making me nervous.”

“Cool your jets, big man. I love my wife, and I damn sure don’t wanna see you naked. I’ve learned a few things from Matthew and Irene. If y’all will make your way to the library in the big house, I’ve got several of our favorite vendors waiting for you.

“We got the jeweler here, some of Ela’s paintings, Gwen’s latest designs, a travel agent,” he said, staring at them. “Don’t give me any shit. Y’all need to take them girls on a vacation.”

“Jake, you’re the best, man,” smirked Ian. “I do love you, brother.”

“I know,” he nodded. “Now, go. The women are in the tent prepping for the wedding.”

As they all disappeared, Claudette walked over and kissed his cheek.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I know, woman. I love you, too. They’ll be fine. They just got busy saving the world and forgot about their own families.”



The wedding was stunning. JB and Dana asked that Gail and Tobias be their witnesses. Wanting a formal feel that would transfer to the Christmas Eve ball, they asked everyone to dress in black tie.

Gail wore a beautiful black column dress with long sleeves and a high neck covered in black fur. Tobias and JB were both in traditional black tuxedos, while Dana was wearing a white satin gown with a black sash and white fur shawl.

They looked stunning.

Beneath the lights of the tent, they danced, ate, laughed, and danced some more. When it was nearly midnight, Gail watched as Taylor, Gaspar, Nine, Miller, and a dozen other men slipped out of the tent.

“Now, where in the hell are they going?” frowned Alexandra.

“They’ve been sneaking around here for weeks now,” said Kat. “I’m at my wits end with them. This isn’t funny anymore. What are they doing?”

“Maybe it’s time we did a little recon of our own,” said Erin.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” said Gail.

A dozen pairs of eyes stared at her as she squirmed in her seat. Tobias looked at her, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“Gail, if you know something, please tell us,” said Sara.

“Maybe I should show you,” she said. “We’re gonna need a boat. A big one.”

Tobias brought around the largest barge that Belle Fleur owned, loading it with dozens of people to make the slow, steady drive.

“It’s on Halo Island,” she said, looking at Tobias. He stared at her, shaking his head.

“How in the hell do you know about Halo Island?”

“Your grandfathers. And a few others,” she smiled. “I hope they won’t be angry with me for telling you.”

“What exactly are you telling us?” said Lena.

“That,” smiled Gail.

She pointed up ahead to the island. There were dozens of Christmas trees lit up, shining brightly in the darkness. Cleared paths lined with gravel wound through the island, guiding all to a covered pavilion where the men were all standing. In the distance at the shore were small shacks all lit up with holiday lights.

“What on earth?” whispered Lauren. “What are they doing?”

“You know,” said Gail, “sometimes, we don’t need to know. Sometimes, we just have to trust. It will all come to light tomorrow. Trust me.”

Tobias looked at Gail, shaking his head. Laughing, he hugged her tightly.

“I love you, Gail Mackenzie,” he smiled, kneeling on the deck of the boat. He pulled out the rich black velvet ring box, opening it to reveal a stunning emerald surrounded by pearls. “You are the most perfect woman in the world, and I want you in my life forever. It doesn’t have to be now. It

doesn't have to be next month or even next year. But will you, please, please, be my wife?"

The women all stared at Gail as she gasped, shaking her head.

"You can't possibly mean it," she whispered.

"He means it," smiled Julia. "You're his choice, honey. Don't leave him miserable."

"Tobias, are you sure? Me?"

"You and only you, Gail. I'll wait forever if I have to."

"Oh, Tobias," she sniffed. "Yes. Yes, I'll be your wife. I love you. I love you so much!" He lifted her, hugging and kissing her as the women clapped. Grace, Faith, Erin, and Alexandra stared at the island, then at the shacks lining the shore.

"You know what," smiled Grace. "They'll tell us when they're ready. I think we should all get home and be ready for Christmas morning."

"I agree," nodded the others. He turned the boat, heading back toward Belle Fleur.

Tobias docked the boat, securing it in the slip. As the others all walked toward their cottages, softly singing

Christmas carols, JB and Dana retreated to their home.

Irene and Matthew watched their children making their way home. Laughing and singing Christmas carols.

“Another year, my love,” said Matthew.

“I know. Can you believe it?” she whispered. “We’ve had more years than we deserved, Matthew.”

“Nonsense, my darlin’. You deserve to live on this earth forever. To see what you’ve grown.”

“What we’ve grown,” she smiled, hugging him tighter. “It’s gonna be another long night. I’ve made you some hot cocoa and packed a few snacks. I’ll be waitin’ for you when you get home. Be careful. I love you, my sweet Matthew.”

“Oh, my precious,” he said, kissing her. “Not nearly as much as I love you. I’ll be home soon enough.”

He was gone in the blink of an eye, disappearing into the night. Irene stared up at the sky, seeing the magnificent twinkles of the stars. She looked for the north star and smiled, nodding. Yes, sir. It would always guide him home. Always.

“You okay, Mama?” asked Claudette.

“Oh, I’m perfect, my love. Just perfect. I’ll be makin’ my way back home now. I’ll see y’all in the mornin’.”

Claudette watched as she walked away and then hollered after her.

“Mama? Where is Daddy?”

“Sorry, baby, I can’t hear you. Merry Christmas!”

Claudette shook her head, smiling at the older woman.

“Merry Christmas, Mama. Merry Christmas.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Are the boys all sleeping?” whispered Alec.

“They are,” smiled Ted. “Put the gifts out, and I’ll wake them.”

It took nearly an hour to get everything under the tree. Whiskey and Razor brought the two cars that had been restored, parking them out front with large red bows. The two older boys would be flabbergasted.

“Okay, let’s hide in the kitchen,” said Nine.

They heard the thundering sound of footsteps coming down the new second and third floors. As the boys entered the common room, there were screams and squeals, and even a few ‘holy cows.’

“I believe Santa is going to hand out the gifts,” said Ted.

“Santa,” said Gaspar. “Fuck! Who is Santa? Who has the suit?”

“I didn’t bring it,” said Tailor. “I thought y’all were bringin’ it.”

“Shit, who’s...”

“Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!”
came the jolly voice.

“Who the hell is that?” asked Baptiste.

“It’s Santa, dumb ass,” said Gabe.

“I know that, but who is it under the suit?”

“It’s Santa,” insisted Gabe. “I told y’all. I saw him
one night. That’s him!” Gaspar smirked at his little brother,
gripping his neck. He knew it was Matthew, and so did Gabe,
but why ruin the magic of the moment?

“What are y’all lookin’ at?” asked Matthew.

Every man slowly turned, staring at the old man, then
turned back quickly to see the laughing face of Santa. His
snow-white beard was long, hanging to his chest, his eyes
twinkling in the lights. His cheeks were rosy red.

Turning back to Matthew, he smiled at the boys.

“Merry Christmas,” he smiled. “I need to get goin’.
Lots to do.”

“Pops,” whispered Gabe. His father walked toward
him, touching his rough, wrinkled hand to his cheek.

“Never stop believing, Gabe. Believing is what makes all of this possible.”

“Believing in Santa?” asked Baptiste.

“No, son. Believing in good.”

He kissed each and every man, hugging them tightly, then turned and left the room. As they turned back, Santa was gone, and the children were tearing through their packages. Ted came into the kitchen smiling at them.

“Y’all made them so happy. The older boys cannot believe they got cars. Thank you all, and please thank Matthew for his stellar performance as Santa.”

“It wasn’t Pops,” said Gaspar. Ted laughed, shaking his head.

“Sure it wasn’t. Merry Christmas, y’all.” Ted went back out with the boys, and Gaspar looked at all of his friends.

They stood there a while longer, watching the boys look at their gifts, holding up their shirts and pants for the other boys to see. One of the boys was so excited that he got his first brand-new pair of running shoes ever. Another was thrilled that he’d received the entire collection of books from

his favorite author. It was magical. And Santa, or someone, had helped to make it even more magical.

“B-but, it wasn’t Pops. Was it?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Merry Christmas!” said George, raising his glass to the three hundred people in the room.

“We have a surprise for everyone,” said Nine. “Get your coats and head to the docks.”

The children were the first to run to the dock. All bundled and ready, several men steered the boats toward Halo Island. Waiting for them were Joshua and Ray, along with several other villagers. Children were already running around, playing on the island.

“What have you done?” whispered Erin.

“We’ve made something special, I hope,” said Nine. “Welcome to Halo Island. A new sanctuary for anyone who wants a break from the world. A little fun and heaven wrapped up in one nice bundle.”

“This is what y’all have been doing?” asked Marie.

“Well, it started with the village,” said Max, pointing across the water.

They all took turns telling the story of what they found and what happened. They skipped the part about chasing the

toy thief, but the women understood that there was something else there.

“We invited several families here today. In that glass-enclosed atrium over there are gifts for all of them. Would y’all like to help us pass them out?” smiled Gaspar.

“I love you so much,” said Alexandra. “Yes. We’d love to.”

Cam, Luke, Hex, and Eric herded all the families toward the atrium as the doors were opened and the scent of cookies, hot cocoa, and peppermint wafted through the air. Ray smiled at the big men.

“Y’all are somethin’ else,” he said, shaking his head.

“Oh, it’s our pleasure, Ray,” said Ian.

“No, I mean, you do all this, our homes, the fishing company, and you still had time to deliver gifts and food to more than a thousand families in the parish.”

“Food? We didn’t deliver food,” said Nine. Ray laughed, shaking his head.

“Course you didn’t. It musta been Père Noël. Y’all are the best, absolute best men I’ve ever known,” he chuckled, walking toward his grandson.

“But, we didn’t,” said Ghost. “Did we? Am I losing my mind?”

“A thousand families. How in the hell would we deliver to a thousand families? I didn’t do it,” said Antoine. His brother smiled at him, nodding his head.

“No. Santa did it,” he said, smiling. He pointed toward one of the benches where Irene and Matthew were seated, their heads cradled against one another, their eyes closed.

“Are you saying...”

“I’m saying Santa did it.”

As they looked at one another, then back at Matthew and Irene, they all shook their heads. It wasn’t something they needed an answer to. For once in their lives, they would ignore the itch to investigate, ignore the urge to know all the answers. In this instance, it didn’t matter. Good was served and good won the day.

“We have your gift,” said Grace, walking toward the men. “Will you come with us?”

They nodded as the women took them on the boat back to their own little island paradise. Halo Island was in good

hands with the younger men and women. It was time for them to have some peace and quiet.

“First,” said Erin, “we’d all like to apologize.”

“Apologize? For what, baby?”

“We didn’t realize how terrible it was for all of you to be forced into retirement. We didn’t recognize what was happening and how it affected you. And for that, we’re all sorry.”

“We love you. All of you,” said Ian. “We knew you were worried. But we were starting to lose our minds.”

“We know what you did,” said Grace, “and we love you all the more for it. The boys’ home, the village, all of it. It was amazing, and that’s the kind of thing you should be doing. Not shooting bad guys in a desert, but maybe something a little tamer.”

“Okay,” nodded Gaspar. “What’s the present?”

“This,” said Faith, pulling back a tarp. Behind it was a large wooden sign.

SILVER WOLF INVESTIGATION

“Silver Wolf?” smirked Ghost.

“Well, Silver Fox seemed a bit sexist and sneaky. Wolves are far more resilient and incredibly loyal, faithful, and intelligent. They are great protectors, and that’s what you all are. We think you should start your own investigation firm that looks into non-combat crimes.”

The men all chuckled, nodding their heads.

“We want you to help those that can’t help themselves. Serve them. Protect them. If you need the younger boys, they’ll be there. But this is your purpose. We know that now.”

“You’re all amazing,” nodded Ghost. “This is fucking perfect.”

“I agree,” said Nine. “Let’s head to our cafeteria for dessert, and we can give you all of your gifts.”

The excitement went on all day, but as always, something interrupted the fun. Code heard the alarms at the café and knew it was closed for the holiday. Grabbing Tanner, they took one of the ATVs to investigate.

The front door had been tampered with and was slightly ajar. As they entered with weapons drawn, they saw the blood on the floor. There was no broken glass, nothing to indicate that someone had hurt themselves.

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

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

“Who is that?” asked Tanner.

“Abraham. It’s Razor and Bella’s son. Shit, we haven’t seen him in probably ten years. He must have been trying to get home.”

Wilson and Cruz came through the back door, followed by Gabi. When they saw the face, they all gasped, staring at the young man.

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

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

“Let me die.”

EXCERPT from ABE

Abraham Diego Salcedo was considered one of the best covert operators in the SEAL teams. On the teams for more than twenty years now, he was considered a dinosaur amongst young pups waiting for their turn to die.

Tapped for a special team in cooperation with Homeland Security, he decided it was the right time to do something different. He didn't tell his father, didn't tell his mother, didn't tell anyone. If he had, they would have told him to come home and join their team.

He would. He would join their team, eventually. But first, he had to find the woman who had been haunting his dreams for fifteen years. The one he had to leave behind. The one that couldn't be saved. The one that called to him in the night.

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

"I'm going mad," he whispered. "Mad."

Forced to take mandatory leave, he didn't want to go home, but it was the holidays. It was where he should be. He would surprise them. He would come home to them and, hopefully, get his head straight. Maybe the pond would help, he thought.

He should have paid attention. He should have been listening to the streets, not to the voices in his head. He felt the piercing stab of the blade, the low rumble of a voice.

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

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

Home.

SERIES AND FAMILY

GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RS 1</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<i>RS 2</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<i>RS 3</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<i>RS 4</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<i>RS 5</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
	Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 6	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
RS 7	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
RS 9	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
RS 9	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
RS 9	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
SP 19			Violet	Striker Michaels
RP 6			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins
RS 10	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
RS 11	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
RS 12	Raphael Robicheaux	Savannah O'Reilly	Ian Luke	Aspen Bodwick
			Katherine Gray "Kate"	Cameron Dougall
	Doug Graham	<i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos		
RS 13	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
RS 14	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
RS 14	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
RS 15	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
RS 16	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RS 16</i>	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
<i>RS 17</i>	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
<i>RS 18</i>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<i>RS 19</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<i>RS 19</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<i>RS 20</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ('Kiel)	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<i>RS 20</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<i>RS 20</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB</i> 5	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
<i>MSB</i> 5	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
<i>MSB</i> 6	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB 7</i>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
<i>MSB 8</i>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
<i>MSB</i>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
<i>SP 1</i>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
<i>SP 2</i>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
<i>SP 3</i>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
<i>SP 4</i>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
<i>SP 5</i>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
<i>SP 5</i>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
<i>SP 7</i>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
<i>SP 8</i>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
<i>SP 9</i>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
<i>SP 9</i>	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
<i>SP 10</i>	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
<i>SP 11</i>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<i>SP 12</i>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	

<i>SP 13</i>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<i>SP 14</i>	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	
SP 15	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
SP 16	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
SP 17	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlatti			
<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	
RP 13	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
RP 14	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
RP 15	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
RP 16	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
RP 17	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
RP 18	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
RP 19	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 20	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
RP 21	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
RP 22	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
RP 23	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fernet	Claudette Robicheaux		
RP 24	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
RP 25	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
RP 26	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
RP 27	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	

RP 28	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
RP 29	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
RP 30	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
RP 31	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
RP 32	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
RP 33	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
RP 34	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
RP 35	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
RP 36	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
RP 37	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
RP 38	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
RP 39	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
RP 40	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	
RP 41	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
RP 42	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
RP 43	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
RP 44	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
RP 45	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
RP 46	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	
RP 47	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
RP 48	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
RP 49	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<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		

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Noa

Carter

Lars

Trevor

Fitz

Chris

O'Hara

Steel Patriots

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Doc – Book Two

Whiskey – Book Three

Zulu – Book Four

Gunner – Book Five

Tango – Book Six

Razor – Book Seven

Ace – Book Eight

Hawk & Eagle – Book Nine

Skull – Book Ten

Blade – Book Eleven

Noah – Book Twelve

Tristan – Book Thirteen

Ivan – Book Fourteen

Griff – Book Fifteen

Bryce – Book Sixteen

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Striker – Book Nineteen

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Jean – Book Two

Jax – Book Three

Hunter – Book Four

Carl – Book Five

Sniff – Book Six

Cam – Book Seven

Keith – Book Eight

Eric – Book Nine

Joseph – Book Ten

Ryan – Book Eleven

Nathan – Book Twelve

Ben – Book Thirteen

Sean – Book Fourteen

Kiel – Book Fifteen

Ian – Book Sixteen

Adam – Book Seventeen

Marc – Book Eighteen

Wes – Book Nineteen

Aiden – Book Twenty

Parker – Book Twenty-one

Dalton – Book Twenty-two

Frank – Book Twenty-three

Hiro – Book Twenty-four

Dom – Book Twenty-five

Bron – Book Twenty-six

Fitch – Book Twenty-seven

CC – Book Twenty-eight

Callan – Book Twenty-nine

Duncan – Book Thirty

Remy – Book Thirty-one

Garrett – Book Thirty-two

Robbie – Book Thirty-three

Cade – Book Thirty-four

Bodhi – Book Thirty-five

Magnus – Book Thirty-six

Hex – Book Thirty-seven

Wade – Book Thirty-eight

Sam – Book Thirty-nine

Tiger – Book Forty

Jalen – Book Forty-one

Chief – Book Forty-two

Matthew – Book Forty-three

Milo – Book Forty-four

Torro – Book Forty-five

JT – Book Forty-six

Chase – Book Forty-seven

Will – Book Forty-eight

Benji – Book Forty-nine

Bogey – Book Fifty

Tanner – Book Fifty-one

Mo – Book Fifty-two

Ethan – Book Fifty-three

Irish – Book Fifty-four

Hoot – Book Fifty-five

AJ – Book Fifty-six

Bone – Book Fifty-seven

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Christian – Book Ten

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JB – Book Twelve

Tobias – Book Thirteen

Strange Gifts

Dark Visions

Dark Medicine

Dark Flame

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website insatiableink.squarespace.com. Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

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