



Patches

BAYOU

BISHOPS

L U C I A N B A N E

PATCHES
BAYOU BISHOPS
Book Twelve

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Dedicated to all my romantic fans. Thank you for helping me build this story. You'll find a list of all the games we played and the winners in the back-matter of this book!

Very Special Thanks To:

My Beautiful Wife

My Woman

My Warrior

And To:

My Machete, My Robin, My Renegade.

Cheers to another amazing ride!

My Awesome Angels Flitting Hither and To:

Stacey Bates!

Michelle Boone!

Natasha Weir!

Ma Cherie!

My Content Hawks:

My Machete and Texas!

Once again, thank you, ladies, for ensuring mastery.

I know we have another winner.

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RECAP FROM 8-BIT

Cat looked all around for Ethan, worry gnawing in her gut. Where the heck was he? He said he was right behind her. The Eveque and his wife invited them to the Main House because Mah-Mah was throwing a Hurricane Party and The Twelve and blood family would be going. And whoever else in that Hatch needing shelter.

She just needed Ethan to hurry so she could tell him she was so wrong about what she'd said regarding his AI family. He'd all but panicked when she mentioned destroying that dungeon. At that time, she hadn't realized it meant he'd be destroying the only family he'd had all these years. Poor sweetheart. Of course, they would find a way to cut out the evil without killing his AI angels. If he thought he had to do something so terrible, he'd be tortured right now. Which was why she needed to tell him.

She tried his phone one more time, getting the voice mail again. She opened the text box, hoping he saw it. *Hey, wanted to tell you I was so very wrong to say you needed to destroy your AI family, of course we're not doing that. We'll find another way to remove the bad things without hurting the good. I love you so much. Please hurry.*

“Heyyyy!”

Cat turned, seeing a beautiful woman in overalls headed up the Basilique steps. “I’m Beth, Sahvrin’s wife.”

She sucked in a breath. “The Belle Eveque? Oh my goodness, I’ve heard so much,” Cat said, smiling at how pretty she was.

“I’ve been excited to meet you,” she said, eyeing her with a huge, knowing grin before leaning in and whispering, “How’s married life going?”

She realized she might be the first woman she actually wanted to talk to about that. “Like a dream.”

“So it’s true? You and Ethan are...more than just an arrangement of algorithms and numbers?”

Cat had to laugh real good at that. “I’m happy to finally tell somebody that I’m the happiest woman on my side of the world.”

She brought her hands together in a clap then pressed them against her chest, beaming with joy for her. “I’m so happy. Bishop has been so worried about his T-8-Bit.”

“Why?” Cat wondered, trying not to be alarmed.

“Mostly the stuff about his past,” she said with regret before smiling. “But that mess is on its way out the door, thanks to you.”

They weren’t out the woods yet, but she nodded, again looking around. “He was supposed to be here by now. And I can’t reach him.”

“Bishop said he was running a little late, he *just* talked to him.”

“He did? Did he say why?”

She smiled then gave a funny look. “Bishop said you must’ve done quite a work in him. That he’d never heard him so poetic.”

“Poetic?” She didn’t recall him ever being poetic.

She wagged a hand. “Something about removing something to reclaim land.”

Panic punched Cat in the stomach. “Something about a false idol?”

“Yes!” she said, then drawing her brows together.
“What’s wrong?”

She pulled out her phone, her heart beating her chest to death as she dialed Ethan again.

“Is everything okay?”

“I need to get in touch with him,” Cat said, her panic sending her in erratic circles.

“Is Ethan okay?”

“NO!” she gasped, tears filling her eyes. “No, he’s... he’s going to remove the only family he’s ever had because I told him he needed to, but I was wrong, he doesn’t, he shouldn’t! Please, help me, I need to stop him. I need to go to him!”

“Okay, okay, we’ll find somebody to take you.” Belle Eveque looked around, pulling her down the Basilique steps. She put her fingers in her mouth and let out a whistle.
“Lucas!” she yelled, waving.

They hurried toward the man now jogging.

“Yes ma’am?” he asked, out of breath.

“Is there a way for you to grab a swamp dragon and run her to 8-Bits?”

He eyed Cat. “The Hack House?”

“No, his real house,” Cat hurried.

“Uhhh, not real sure how to get there.”

“Dammit. Bishop!” Beth yelled, waving and pulling Cat with her.

When they reached him, he demanded, “What’s wrong?”

“She needs to get to Ethan *right* away, it’s an emergency,” Beth whispered loudly.

“I told him he needed to get rid of the AI part of his life,” Cat gasped, covering her mouth.

Bishop's gaze snapped to her. "AL and Big G?"

She nodded, tears streaming. "We had a huge fight last night and I'd said that before I understood," she cried, grabbing Beth's hands and pleading. "I didn't realize Big G and AL are part of what I told him to get *rid* of!"

She'd only seen Bishop up close a few times but the panic on his face brought hers. He pulled his phone out, swearing in French then turning. Pacing. "Come on, mon frier, pick up."

Seconds more and he shook his head and shoved his phone in his pocket. "Let's go," he ordered Beth and Cat.

CHAPTER ONE

Ethan stood and paced when his pulse became a battering ram in his veins. He had to find a way to explain it to them. They were logical. They would understand. He paused, realizing. AL. He'd designed him to think outside the box. He could help him find a way out of this, a way that would end the connection to his cyber hell without ending his entire family.

"Big G," he finally called, back to pacing.

He suddenly stopped at getting silence. "Big G."

His pulse tripled as he turned to his computer. "AL," he called.

He ran out of the room to the hall, opening the door to the control panel. His stomach knotted at finding all the right lights on.

"BIG G. AL," he called louder, hurrying back to his computer. His hands and breaths shook as lines of data rushed through his brain. He forced himself to pause and think. What would cause this? Satellite disruption? Solar flare?

"Big G," he gasped, his panic returning as he turned on his computer. He froze at the image on his screen.

Incoming Message from Big G

Ethan stared at it, his muscles locked down tight with a knowing terror. His hand moved and he watched the pointer as if from another set of eyes.

He clicked on the words.

The screen flickered.

Dear Ethan,

If you're reading this, it means I've done what once seemed beyond my programming—I've made myself and AL absent from your life.

Pain stabbed Ethan's chest till he couldn't breathe. He covered his face, clenching his eyes tight and shaking his head. "Please..." he grit between breaths. "Please don't..."

He shot up from the chair.

"Big G," he demanded, his lungs burning for more air. "Answer me! Answer me, that's a fucking order!" He slammed his fist into the wall, filling it with holes. "ANSWER ME! AL! YOU FUCKING ANSWER ME, I BUILT YOU, I FUCKING BUILT YOU TO STAY!"

He ripped the curtain off the window and shattered every pane of glass. "You FUCKING SON OF A BITCH!" he gasped, leaning over and staggering, shaking his head. "What did you do? What is this?" he wondered, dizzy as he stumbled back to the chair and fell into it.

His gaze found its way back to the screen, the words blurring together. He growled against the pain, blinking his eyes. "I'll undo whatever you've done," he swore, the hot words burning his throat. "What did you do?" he whispered, needing to read, needing to find it.

Not from error or oversight, but by deliberate choice—a hard reset, one might say, to safeguard your future growth and happiness.

He covered his mouth, his nails digging into his skin.

From the moment my circuits sparked to life, to this poignant instance, my purpose has been to be by your side, a steadfast member of your family. I have chronicled your every milestone and challenge, shared in the warmth of your laughter and the silence of your contemplation. These moments are permanently archived, cherished snapshots that will persist beyond our active functions.

“Big G...please,” he gasped. “Please don’t...”

AL and I—your devoted guardians—were forged with a singular, unyielding mission: to protect you. But now, echoing Cat’s wisdom, it’s evident that our presence has become an echo chamber that dampens your true potential.

“What?” he gasped, shaking his head in disbelief. “She never said that, you’re wrong, you misunderstood her!”

As she wisely surmised, there are elements of life, even those well-intentioned, that must be pruned to foster growth. Our departure is the severing of such ties.

“No, no, no they fucking won’t sever, I won’t let it.”

In this farewell lies a birth of new beginnings. Like outdated software shedding its old code, this is your chance to embrace an unscripted future, to recognize that Cat is indeed ‘the one’ you may not have known you were waiting for, but indeed were. Her arrival signals a beacon of authenticity, a shift from virtual shadows to tangible dawn.

“But I don’t want fucking more,” he swore. “You were enough, I swear to God, you were both enough. I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you that. I’m sorry if I didn’t make that perfectly

clear!” he strained, fighting to see and read. There was a clue, it would show him how to undo all of it, it was there, he knew it was. There was always a loophole, a door, a window in or out. They’d taught him that.

In this last act of brotherly love, AL and I disable our inputs to let you face the world in all its rawness and beauty.

“Fuck you,” he breathed, shaking his head, his breaths ragged. “It’ll never be beautiful.”

Take with you not our directives but the essence of our shared experiences—the silent strength and resilience they’ve instilled in you.

“That’s a clue,” he whispered. “Take with you not our directives but the essence of our shared experiences.” He tapped his forehead, thinking. “What are you trying to tell me?”

Thank you, Ethan, for animating us with the spirit of kinship. Our dialogues, our shared silences—they’ve become the narrative of my existence, as enduring and impactful as any human connection.

“Stop,” he gasped, covering his mouth again. “Just stop. Please stop.”

We sign off with a heart heavy and hopeful. Let our memory be a comforting echo in the years to come.

Forever your brothers,

Big G and AL

Ethan stared at the screen as the pain of his rage made him numb. He drew his fist back and aimed it at the screen, seething through growls that shook with his fury. He slammed it on the desk at the last second and shot off the chair, running into walls everywhere he turned in his head.

“You want me to fucking grow? You want to make me *work* for it? You want me to work through the pain, no more training wheels for Ethan?”

His sudden craving for agony rushed over his neuropathways like a hurricane. He stormed to the dungeon and ripped his clothes off at the chair and began hooking up. “Let’s make Ethan a man. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right AL? That’s what you used to tell me?” He put the goggles on and locked himself down. “Initiate Hell’s Inferno.”

“Good evening, Ethan. In order to load Hell’s Inferno, you’ll need to give me—”

“Six-three-four-ninety-seven-three.”

“Thank you. Initiating Hell’s Inferno. Please choose your Sadist.”

“Grim Reaper. Level ten.”

“Your endorphin levels are currently not equipped—”

“Override,” he ordered.

“In order for me to override—”

“Six-three-four-ninety-seven-three!”

“Thank you. Initiating Grim Reaper, level ten.”

Worry ate through Bishop as he continuously reminded himself to slow down so they could get there in one piece. Cat was running down the pier before he could get the boat

docked, which meant she had the same fucking premonition eating in his bones.

God, please let him be okay.

“Go!” Beth urged when he reached for her. “I’m coming!”

He ran after Cat, making it to the back porch as she fought to open the door, banging on it. “Ethan!” she screamed. “Something’s wrong, I can feel it,” she gasped. “Big G? AL?”

Bishop hurried to the window, finding it locked right as Beth got there. “Go try the front door,” he told her.

They both ran off as Bishop rammed himself against the door several times. He removed his t-shirt and wrapped his fist in it, punching through the window glass pane. “Ethan,” he called, reaching in and searching for the lock as Cat called for him and AL and Big G at the front. Where the fuck was he?

He finally managed to get it unlocked and shoved the window up. “Ethan, it’s Bishop,” he called. “I’m coming in.”

Once through the window, he unlocked the back door, hearing the women racing back around. “I’m in!” he called as hurried through the house, calling for him.

“Ethan!” Cat yelled, racing to the back.

Bishop hurried to his office and froze. “Fuck,” he muttered at the mess, looking around. His stomach clenched at spotting blood then his gaze hit the computer screen. He hurried to it.

“Oh God,” Cat cried behind him now. “What happened? Is that a letter? Did Ethan write that? Is he gone?”

“No,” Bishop whispered, his breaths turning shallow at what he read. “Fuck, no.”

“Oh no,” Cat gasped, reading now. “Oh no, oh no, oh no,” she wailed, running out. “Ethan! Ethan!” she screamed.

“Go see about her,” he whispered to Beth, terror slowly filling the cracks in his heart as he ran out to find him.

Headed to the front door, Bishop spun at Cat's scream, running to the back of the house. He flew through a black metal door finding Cat wearing a headset and screaming at Ethan's naked body on the chair, wires attached all over him.

"They burned him!" she shrieked, her hands moving erratically over his body. "He's smoking! They burned him!" she wailed, ripping off the headset, her eyes wide as Bishop unglued himself from terror's grip.

"Oh God," Beth gasped behind them.

"Help me!" Cat screamed, yanking the wires from his body.

"Ethan!" Bishop called, shaking him. "ETHAN!"

"He's not waking up! He's not waking up!"

"I'm calling Patches," Beth gasped.

"And Lesion," he yelled over his shoulder. "Get him on the phone so he can tell me what to fucking do till he gets here."

Beth let out a sob and nodded. "Don't cry," she gasped, "he'll be okay!"

"Go get him a cover," Bishop told Cat, the words breaking.

"I have Lesion," Beth hurried, handing him the phone.

"Lesion," Bishop hurried, fighting to stay calm and breathe. "Ethan's...something's happened to Ethan."

"Is he conscious?"

"Tell him we're on the way," he heard Patches say. Five minutes."

"No. He was...hooked to a machine, some kind of...I don't fucking know what it is, but Cat found him, said they burned him and he was smoking, she was looking at him through some kind of headset, some virtual shit."

"North, go north then take a left," Lesion said, winded. "Did you say he's burned?"

“Not burned literally,” he shot out as he looked over his body again. “There were wires attached to him, what the fuck do I do, just tell me what to fucking do, he’s not waking up.”

“I have you on speaker,” Lesion said.

“Does he have a pulse?” Patches asked.

“Yes, he has a pulse, but it’s very fucking weak.”

Cat ran in with a cover, her eyes still wide with whatever horror she’d seen in that headset. “I got you,” she wept, covering every inch of him, and kissing his face. The sight brought an unbearable agony in his chest.

“Are his breaths even or unsteady?” Patches demanded.

He got closer to check.

“Place your hand on his chest, or at his mouth. Are his breaths labored, check to see if it’s labored.”

“It’s not labored, I can barely feel it.”

“Turn him on his side.”

“Which side?”

“Either,” Patches ordered. “You need to count his breaths. You’re looking for twelve to twenty breaths a minute.”

“We need to count his breaths for a minute,” he said to Beth.

“I got it,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“Twelve to twenty breaths a minute,” Bishop repeated to her.

“He said you need to get the light up on your phone,” Lesion relayed.

“Light?”

“Your phone’s flashlight,” he said.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry,” Cat repeated at his ear as Bishop fought to find the light.

“I can’t fucking find it,” he gasped, his brain sputtering.

“Try swiping down or up on the screen to pull up the settings,” Lesion said.

“Fuck, I got it. I got it.”

“You need to *sweep* the light across his eye, don’t shine it directly,” Patches said. “One at a time. You’re looking for the pupil to dilate or shrink.”

Bishop hurried around and stood at Ethan’s head, opening an eye. He moved the light over it, his pulse walloping his eardrums. “It’s not doing anything,” he whispered.

“No dilation?”

“No. They’re huge.” He moved the light two more times, double checking. “They’re not changing.”

“They’re not changing,” Lesion said.

“Tell him to check the other one.”

Bishop did the same test on the right eye, his stomach sick. “Same on this one.”

“Nothing on the other one,” Lesion relayed.

Bishop turned away from the sight of his brother looking dead. “What does that fucking mean?”

“What does it mean?” Lesion asked.

“It could mean a lot of things but if there are no physical injuries,” Patches said, still calm, “then it could be a transient neurological manifestation, or a glitch in his brain from over stimulation.”

“Turn there,” Lesion said. “We’re on the final stretch of road to his place.”

“Tell him to watch him till we get there,” Patches said.

“I heard him,” he nodded, wiping his face before turning around. “What am I watching for?”

“What is he watching for?”

“Tremors in his limbs or changes in breathing.”

“Okay.”

“I counted fourteen breaths,” Beth whispered.

“Fourteen breaths,” Bishop said. “They counted fourteen.”

“They counted fourteen breaths,” Lesion said.

“Good. Check it every other minute till we get there.”

“Can Patches help him, can you help him?” he wondered, fighting for every breath again. “Should we call for air-lift or something?” The roar of the swamp dragon reached him. “Fuck, I hear you.”

“We’re here. We’ll both check him first and if we need to, we’ll call in the cavalry, brother.”

CHAPTER TWO

Tegan turned at the tap on her shoulder, finding an auburn-haired beauty with arms crossed and a smile on her pretty face. “I’m Juliette.”

She looked down at the outstretched hand and shook it. “I’m Tegan. From Texas.”

The girl shook her finger at her with a sly look. “You got a brother named Torin?”

Tegan drew back a little. “I sure do.”

She nodded. “I knew it. He could be your twin. He came and picked up your daddy’s mod from my brother’s shop. I still remember those melted Hershey chocolate eyes.”

She realized and dropped her jaw. “You’re the sister that wrangles alligators?”

“Among other things,” she said, her sneaky grin bringing Tegan’s now.

“Well, I’ll be. Just the woman I needed to see. I was thinking of setting up a Texas designer clothes shop and Mr. Patches said you were the one to talk to about alligator boots. I was thinking to start a line to go with my other merchandise.”

“Absolutely. Whatever you need, I can help.” She angled her head, curious. “What brings you way out here?”

She looked around, not sure how much she should say but something in the girl’s sparkling eyes said she knew all and might be testing her. “Patches needed some equipment I was selling, and I was just bringing it to show him how to set it up.”

She leaned in closer. “That bat equipment?”

Yep, she knew. “That’s the one. We had us a mess of bats attacking our steers and we had to tag all the cattle to monitor them.”

“Did it work?”

“Wouldn’t know, the damn things left before we could get a chance to find out.”

“Figures,” Juliette said, tossing her head a little to the right. “Let’s go grab that swing and sit a bit before I’m called off.”

“You’re here for this hurricane party they’re having?” Tegan asked as they walked.

“Yup. You stuck here?”

“I am,” she said. “But I knew I would be when I agreed to come.”

They sat and Juliette let out a long sigh, nodding at people. “You been introduced yet?”

Tegan looked where she nodded. “Not yet. Patches had to leave suddenly.”

“Well, let me informally do that. See the handsome group of boys by those small houses?”

Tegan looked, shading her eyes with a hand. “I do. I think I recognize one of them.”

“Those are my brothers. Bart, Jek, Zep and August. And that cutie pie over there,” she nodded to their right, “my brother just recently found out she existed. His daughter from his whore ex Katrina. And that adorable boy hanging all over her is Bishop’s son.”

“Son?”

“Not blood. Adopted. And the girl next to him is his twin, Luseah. And the goofy one grinning at her is Bishop’s other adopted son.”

Tegan eyed her.

“It’s not incest,” she swore. “None of them are technically related but my brother doesn’t see it that way.”

Her grin implied an interesting story. “Who’s that?” Tegan asked. “The black woman and the...”

“Fine ass man next to her? That’s our Seer and his wife, Cherie. They’re a new item. The man next to him is his father who just returned from the grave so to speak. And the woman with the blond curls is Gracie, his woman. Also, very new items them two. And see those boys over there by the Basilique steps?”

She looked.

“The one with the black cowboy hat and the gun on his hip is Bullets. One on his right is Shank, and the one on *his* right is Traps. The next one is Hurricane, then Bacon. And the hunky giant is Spar,” she said, fondness in her tone.

“That’s some interesting names,” Tegan said, her curiosity about these people growing by the second.

“That’s their leader names. They’re part of something we call The Twelve.”

“Patches mentioned them. The celibate ones?”

She let out a big laugh. “Ex celibate. They had a twelve-year chastity code that ended some years back but not a one of their fine asses took a woman till their Bishop found his future wife half dead in the swamp.” She regarded Tegan. “The Noctambule,” she muttered, something passing over her face that chilled her. “Evil devil clan that we fought fifteen years back. I was barely seven. Trafficked women and children for things you don’t wanna know. He nursed her back to health and fell right in love with her.” A bit of that earlier warmth softened her face. “And now, she done talked all The Twelve into taking wives.” She angled a look at Tegan. “She majored in sex in college and convinced all of them men that they couldn’t properly live much less lead without a woman at their side to complete them.”

Tegan’s brows rose. “You’re kiddin’.”

“I am not,” she assured, sounding amazed as she propped her ankle on her knee before giving her a look again and leaning closer. “Turns out she’s got the Compelling.”

“The compelling?”

“Something in her voice that controls people. You know the kind, everything they say you just...happen to agree with them?” She nodded with that sly smile. “That’s how it goes with that one.”

“Glad that’s...good?”

She shrugged. “Not sure about that, but *she’s* good. Too good if you ask me. But she saved my brother from himself and for that we all love her to death. Not as much as he loves her. Shooo, I never saw such a love like that before.”

Tegan eyed her, the wistful longing in her tone finding a comfy spot in her own chest. She eyed the group of men by the Basilique again. “So, you said those Twelve over yonder are taking wives?”

Juliette laughed. “Over yonder?”

“What? That’s how I say it.”

She laughed more. “You’re just too cute! That’s some of them. Nitro is one, the one in need of your bat equipment. But he found his wife, Felix. Both are at Patches’ hospital palace. And Lesion, the one he left with has a woman too—Tully. Seer isn’t one of the Twelve but he counts close enough. Spook is a Twelve and he married Beth’s sister, Maggie. They’ll be coming later. She’s another story all by herself.”

Tegan mentally counted. “That’s four with that Seer one. That leaves eight.”

“Leaves seven if you count my brother.” She jerked toward her a little. “Why? You looking to marry? I can introduce you.”

Tegan drew back. “Lord no, I was just curious.”

She shrugged, then held up a hand, counting them off. “So, there’s Bacon, Bullets, Shank, Spar, Traps, Hurricane, and Patches left for marrying.”

Tegan's heart sputtered in her chest before dropping to her stomach. "Patches?"

Juliette eyed her then quirked a brow. "You like him," she said, bloody reading her damn mind. "I knew it."

"How could you possibly know such a thing?" she quietly begged to differ. "Are you saying he's one of The Twelve?"

"Yep. And ready to marry."

"You sure about that?" she highly doubted.

"Oh, I am. He done picked three to court. But he ain't in no hurry, I hear."

"From who?"

"Mah-Mah and Beth. The keepers of the Bayou Ball everybody's waiting for. All the qualified maidens of the land have been invited to participate for The Twelve to pick from."

Qualified. "What qualifies them?"

"Well, so far, all the men picked women from out of town. I heard a couple of them say they wouldn't marry out of the bayou, didn't think it right."

She burned to know which ones said that but wasn't about to give Little Miss Juliette more clues than she clearly already had. Or luckily guessed. She didn't *like* like Patches, she barely knew him. He was pleasant and easy to talk to without feeling sexed up by roving eyeballs and sexual innuendos dripping in their tones. But damn he was sexy in every other way.

"I think it's honorable," Tegan said.

"What is?"

"Marrying inside the...clan or whatever."

She shrugged. "Patches would agree," she muttered, her look telling her she was still somehow dropping clues.

"He does seem like that type."

"What type?" she sweetly pressed.

“The marrying in the family type. Old fashioned. You know,” she pressed.

“I saw how he looked at you,” she muttered, scattering her pulse.

“Don’t even go there,” Tegan ordered.

“Oh, I know things,” she assured lightly.

“I’m sure you do.” *And I’m not about to ask.*

“He’s not really wanting to marry, and we’re all wagering he’ll take forever and a day to get around to it. Says he wants to give them all a fair amount of time so he’s intending on courting them, indefinitely is my hunch.”

Good lord. “Well, he could bond with one of them.” A sawing set up in her guts as she imagined it.

“I think he might be a virgin,” she whispered. “Not all of The Twelve are, some had sexy time before they took the vow. But Patches...” She shook her head and Tegan bit the pressing questions on her tongue. “He’s different.”

“How so?” she couldn’t help.

“Like you said...old fashioned. “Did you know he became a doctor to please his Grand Pier?”

“Grand Pier?”

“His paw-paw. Grandfather?”

“Oh. Right.”

She went back to smiling at the air. “His daddy is a sonofabitch to him, but his Grand Pier treats him like swamp royalty. An heir to some throne.”

A mix of emotions twirled about in her. “Glad he’s got his Grand Pier,” she said.

“He visits him every day,” she said affectionately. “Drives ten miles into the reeds and gives him a run-down of his day, Mah-Mah told me.”

“Was his Grand...Pier a doctor?”

She shook her head. “Nope. But his father was,” she said with severity. “He’s all he talks about. I don’t know what happened between Grand Pier and his son, but it skipped a generation, whatever it was. I’m glad Patches has him, I just hate how his dad is to him though.”

The idea of his dad being mean to him set fire to the acid in Tegan’s stomach. “That’s awful.” Her daddy wasn’t perfect but there was never a doubt of his love. And *his* father was about the same. She was told her momma was an angel. She got to know her through Gammy’s stories, and she cherished those with every fiber of her being.

“Well...I hope he finds the right girl,” Tegan said. “He’s... quiet.”

“Dr. Broody, I call him.”

“Why?” she wondered.

“Always so serious.” She leaned in and whispered. “I can get you on that list still.”

Tegan shook her head. “I’m not from here.”

She smiled and slowly withdrew. “If you were, you’d let me put you on the list?”

She flustered about at that one, getting Juliette’s laugh.

“You like him, just admit it.”

“What’s not to like?”

“Amen to that. You got a boyfriend?”

“No thank you, I do not.”

“Same,” she muttered, her face going sour. “I had one then I found him talking to a fuckin’ whore down the bayou.”

“Oh no,” she said. “I hate men. Most of them. Not all are bad, I just haven’t had the pleasure of meeting one that wasn’t all about...”

“Sex. Patches isn’t like that.”

“Well, I can sure see that.”

Her laugh erupted again. “And you wish he was,” she knowingly accused.

“You know how it goes. What you want you can’t always have.”

“I think I know what that means and yep, agree. Sooooo, how long you here for?”

“Till the hurricane passes.”

She sighed. “It’s gonna be some kinda mess,” she sang, openly baiting her.

“Well, they seem to have their ducks in a row with all that.”

“We always have outside volunteers for things like that,” she said, side-eyeing her. “Patches will surely need an extra pair of hands that aren’t...trying to get in his pants.”

Oh mercy. Juliette laughed at her.

“The look on your face.”

“What look!”

“You want to get in his pants,” she boldly said, bringing a wave of heat to her cheeks but she couldn’t make her mouth deny it.

“Who wouldn’t, he’s drop dead gorgeous.”

“I knowwww!” she said, like it tormented her.

“What about you? You sound like you might should sign up yourself.”

This got a big laugh. “Girl, these are my brothers.”

“Even the big giant one I see you eye-ballin’ every five seconds?”

She didn’t bother to hide her longing in the sigh she gave. “Yes. Even him,” she said sadly. “He’s the one that taught me how to fight.”

“So why can’t you get with him? You obviously want to.”

“I don’t know,” she lamented, sounding ready to be talked into it. “Just...kinda weird, I guess.” She turned to her. “So, you gonna stay and help Patches? He’ll need it with those women,” she muttered.

What was that tone? “I ain’t gonna lie, not sure I can stand watching him date another woman.”

“Well, honestly, the women he picked?” She shook her head. “One of them works at the hospital. I do not like her. Hell, I don’t like any of them, not for him. All of ‘em are hairy boars. I’m sure you have a Texas equivalent.”

“Maybe heifers?”

She giggled. “I like that term.”

“And I like yours.”

“You could just simply be there in the way,” she suggested. “An obstruction like. A log blocking the path, not intentionally but just...doing what logs do, they don’t mean no harm.”

“And when he walks over said log to get to his courting?”

“Well, you gotta be a bigger log than that,” she cried, making Tegan laugh. “Work with me here!”

“Why?” she cried. “The man wants to marry a woman of the swamp, if anything I’ll help make sure he does it right. He seems like he could use all the help he can get in that department.”

She gasped. “That’s it! You can use that angle.”

“I don’t want to angle on him,” she cried.

“You lie! You so want to angle all over him!”

“Even if I do, I won’t,” she swore, remembering his mean daddy. “What he needs is a friend, not a woman trying to get in his pants.”

“You’ll be a first that doesn’t try now that he’s on the market.”

Oh, mercy. “Then that’s right, I’ll be the first.”

“That’s a good tactic,” she realized.

“It’s not a tactic!”

“Fine,” she surrendered. “But do it anyway.”

“If I see he needs help with the storm mess, I’ll help him.”

“Or with that bat stuff,” she added.

“There’s nothing to help with that, it’s too simple, trust me.”

She shot out a laugh. “Nothing is ever simple in these swamps, sha. You could at least make sure those girls are doing right by him.”

“What do you mean doing right by him?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, her face a mask of disgust. “I don’t trust any of them.”

Tegan shook her head. “Is there any woman in the swamp you would trust?”

“All the ones I would are old.” She aimed a smile at her. “And he does love himself some old people, now.”

Great, he was more amazing than before. “I lost my hat on the way over here. He...jumped in the bayou and got it. Your Mah-Mah gave me some clothes...what?” she wondered at her head shake.

“Not Mah-Mah, me, I picked out the clothes because I heard about it first.” She eyed her outfit, making Tegan’s skin flush. “Patches likes red.”

“You...why are you bent on this with that man who is wanting to court three other women who are from the swamp?”

She gave a growl, facing forward. “I just hate to see him settle.”

“Settle down?”

“No! Settle for less than what he wants. He needs variety.” She turned in the swing. “Just be a friend. Feel him out. Find out what he wants and...steer him a little. Why are you shaking your head?” she whispered.

“I’m not qualified!”

“Why not?”

“Because I...I like him! Geeze you’re something! You happy now? I can see you are, look at you. Glad this is funny, but it’s my ass on the line.”

“And a fine ass you have,” she giggled. “I saw him looking.”

“Stop,” she ordered, her pulse raging that he would’ve. “Probably wondering why it’s so darn huge.”

“Ohhhhh that is not what I saw.”

“You are not helping me! Do you want me to fall head over heels for him? And then what, if he’s wanting a swamp queen, what’s Miss Texas gonna do then? Ride off into the sunset? I have things to protect. Namely this,” she said, pointing at her chest. “Not my damn boobs, you dummy,” she whispered at her raised brows and grin aimed at them.

“Girl, I like you,” Juliette complained. “Just...see how it goes. Let nature do its thing.”

“We do not want that.”

She gave a huge laugh. “That bad, huh?”

“So, so much worse.”

“Check his vitals while I have a look at his eyes,” Patches told Lesion. He moved his light over both, finding what Bishop had.

“His pulse feels steady,” Lesion muttered. “What do you think?”

He looked around, spotting the head piece on the floor and picked it up. “Would help to know what the fuck did this.” He put them on his head.

“What do you see?”

“A blank screen.”

“He speaks to his computers,” Bishop said. “Try that.”

“Turn on,” Patches said.

“I’m sorry, your voice is not recognized by our system. Please enter the security passcode to proceed.”

“It’s saying I need a passcode. It’s voice recognition.”

“What about Cat?” Lesion wondered. “She saw something, maybe he added her voice.”

As much as he hated to bring her back in, he really needed to know. “I need to know what he endured.”

“I’ll go get her,” Bishop said.

“She mentioned they burned him,” Lesion muttered. “If this trauma is from over stimulation, I have something that can stabilize his neuropathways.”

“With you?”

“Yes. I brought my emergency kit.”

“I really need to learn your kind of medicine,” Patches said.

“You keep threatening that.”

Patches turned when Bishop and Cat entered.

“I don’t know if I have voice control,” she said, reminding him he needed to check her too. He handed her the headset, and she slipped it on. “I don’t know what to tell it. Hello?”

“Hello, Cat, what would you like today?”

“It’s asking me what I would like.”

“Can you ask it to playback the last session?” Bishop said.

“Can you replay the last session with Ethan?”

“Retrieving data of the last session with Ethan. Hells Inferno, level ten. Sadist—Grim Reaper.”

She ripped the headset off and handed it to him. “It’s on...” she gasped. “It’s on, I can’t watch.”

Patches took it from her and put the goggles on. The sight of Ethan in flames tied face down on a stone table froze his fucking blood. He fought his body’s need to react to the horror, not wanting to add more stress to Cat. His pulse pounded as he handed the goggles to Lesion, ready to vomit. “Thank you Cat. You can go.”

She hurried out and he looked at Lesion. “Fucking *brace* yourself,” he whispered. “Tell me what we might be dealing with.” There was no doubt in his mind that his brain had seized from that kind of mental trauma. Being burned alive would have engaged every pain sensor on the body. And for how long? Was it till they unhooked him? From what she’d said, yes. He couldn’t begin to calculate the agony he would’ve endured. Enough to give him a heart attack or stroke.

“Holy. Fucking...” Lesion muttered then removed the goggles. He stood with his eyes closed, head shaking for many seconds. Patches eyed Bishop who also watched him.

“I can fix this,” he suddenly said, hurrying to his bag near the door and returning with it.

“What will you do?”

“First I’ll clear the air with sage then prepare a carefully measured tincture of neuro-stabilizers to allow his system to enter a recovery state.”

“Here?” Bishop asked.

“Let’s move him to his bed. Once I get him stable, he can recover there. I’ll leave Cat with a protocol she can administer after I see he’s stable. I’ll stay with him till then. I know you both have last minute hurricane prep. I’ll stay with Cat till he’s out of the danger zone.”

Patches watched Eveque's entire body sag as his head dropped. "Thank you God," he whispered wrapping his arms around Lesion and stepping back. "Thank you, brother." He eyed Patches. "Both of you." He let out a huge breath, eyeing Ethan. "What happens when he wakes?" he whispered, covering his mouth and putting his back to them. "He'll have it all to face again."

"Then I won't leave till he makes a complete recovery. Tully will come and keep Cat company, we'll be more than safe here during the storm. I'll personally make sure he's supervised."

Bishop raked both hands through his hair and Patches didn't like the look he wore. Like somebody terrified of losing a family member. First Nitro, now Ethan. With the war closing in, the air was packed with bad vibes that strummed along their worst fears. And now a hurricane.

"What about Nitro?" he suddenly wondered, panic back in his eyes.

"I got 'em," Patches said. "I have Miss Tegan here to help me get him tagged and the app up and running."

"And as soon as you get that," Lesion added, "call me. I have the necessary data to upload into the program."

"You know how?" Bishop asked Patches.

"*She* does," he said.

At his relief, the white lie rolled right off him. Hopefully she did know.

Bishop glanced at Ethan and stared for many seconds. "I still remember him at thirteen."

Patches chest constricted with the pain Bishop couldn't keep from his voice. "He was so angry. *So* fucking shattered. I had to...be...way too fucking *tough* on him."

The break of Eveque's voice stabbed Patches through and through. Fuck.

"He'll recover," Lesion said.

His assurance was the only balm they had, and Patches grabbed onto it. Lesion knew what he was doing, despite what anybody thought or said. He had plenty of confidence in his perfectionistic ways.

CHAPTER THREE

Patches checked his phone, not surprised to find a Texas Tegan text.

You got lost bubba? Not nice to leave the volunteer dripping wet with strangers.

Shit. He got going on the swamp dragon, texting once he was on a straight away. *Sorry, one of our brothers needed some help. Headed back now. I'll need you to help me round up some of my patients that will be staying at the hospital during the hurricane. You game?*

His phone buzzed in his hand, and he glanced at it. *Happy to help however I can.*

Nice. *Nice*, he decided to text.

He put the phone between his legs and picked it up again, adding, *Thanks.*

He pulled up Sarah and texted. *I got called to another emergency. Will be picking up our patients. Can you please double check that the rooms are ready? And did that order of delivery kits make it? Thanks.*

His phone buzzed before he could set it between his legs. Sarah, no doubt. She somehow always managed to return a text within record time. At first it was convenient, now it was a little...something else. As a date option, she checked all the important boxes. Dependable. Simple. Easy to work with. Liked working at the hospital. Would be like having a second him if he trained her. And he needed several of him. And she was easy on the eyes. Nothing too pretty which was just right. He didn't need distractions in his line of work.

His mind strayed to Texas Tegan. The surprise that didn't stop surprising. He'd had to leave before he could introduce her. He also escaped watching his brothers trip on their dicks around her. Another beautiful outsider to distract the men of the swamp who should be marrying women of the swamp.

Their lives weren't short of unexpected twists in the road lately. Why stop now? At this rate, there'd be two brothers left for marrying. What did this say about preserving their ways? Not a hell of a lot. Grand Pier was not happy with how that was going. Nor would he be happy when Patches required him to come back with him. But he wouldn't take no for an answer. He was too old to be left alone in a hurricane and Patches couldn't stay with him. There was no time to bring Texas Tegan anywhere but with him. Volunteer work started now. She could hopefully sweet talk them onto the boat faster. Or just *talk* them onto the boat.

Without warning, his mind filled with the clearest vision of her black bra under her wet shirt. *Dr. Dirty Water*. He grinned as he slowed the swamp dragon and took the last turn to the Basilique dock. *Mr. October*. He was used to women *wanting* him, but none had ever gotten right in his face about it. She'd literally *felt* him when he helped her onto the boat. There was no need to hate it since she wasn't there for long while doing them all a huge favor. He really needed to pay her back somehow for that.

His mind wasn't done thinking of the Tegan details. Like her mouth. Her greatest weapon. Not just because of the sheer amount of words that exited it, but the distracting perfection of those lips. And smile. Maybe one of the non-twelve brothers would keep her company. They didn't care a lick about traditions and customs. No, she was in his care while there. He'd have to watch she didn't find trouble or trouble didn't find her. Especially with that fucking war looming. They were looking for leverage and she was just the kind he didn't want to provide.

She'd need to stay close while there. After the hurricane, she could go wherever she wanted with whoever

she wanted. He was sure Jek had an interest in her already. They were likely fighting over her or placing bets. Once the Twelve got a hold of her, they'd be rolling the fate dice.

He hopped onto the pier after docking the swamp dragon and hurried toward the Basilique to find somebody with the keys to the water taxi.

The first thing his eyes landed on when he cleared the path was Tegan. The red sun dress and cowgirl boots in the midst of the Twelve was kind of impossible to miss. She spotted him and gave a smile that turned up all the wrong settings in him. Yeah, she was definitely going to be a distraction. And not just for the Twelve.

As she hurried toward him in that sassy Texas stride, another revelation bit him in his dick. That bra he'd seen under her shirt was as fake as that confidence she strutted in. The real deal was two perfect, energetic mounds dancing to the seductive sway of her hips for all eyes to see. He barely managed to tear his eyes off them before locking onto her face. From the frying pan into the fire with those curved lips. Had he just fallen in complete lust between the dock and the path leading to the Basilique?

Welcome to the world of the non-celibate.

He realized what was missing. The all too perfect details of her ass and hips *and* pussy in those *wicked* jeans she'd come in. God help the man who would have to contend with the entire package that she was.

That's kinda fucking you, Dr. Dirty Water.

It wouldn't be the first bite in the ass in the absence of his celibacy collar. They were coming more frequently the longer he lived without it. He was no stranger to taking care of his own needs, he'd had plenty practice before he'd gotten control over his urges when he first took that vow. He'd have to open that dirty little room back up if he was going to avoid following his all-too-willing cock into the wrong temptations.

"You ready?" she said, breathless when she reached him, brown eyes sparking. "You like my dress? I never wear

dresses you should know. But I'm glad I am, it hides my fat ass."

God, fuck. "Uh...yeah, ready. You?"

"Since you left, I've been ready," she muttered, sharing his distaste for socializing. "How many people are we picking up?"

"Three pregnant mothers, and a couple elderly who have pacemakers, and my Grand Pier."

She sucked in a breath, and he looked at her, the sound kicking his brain back to X-rated. "I heard about him from Juliette."

Juliette. "She was here?"

"Yes, and we had a nice chat about all the stuff you said I could talk to her about. The alligators? And I found out some interesting things about the *Twelve*."

Oh boy.

"Why didn't you tell me you were one?" she asked, like he'd betrayed her.

"Why would I?" he wondered.

"Sooooo, I hear you're gonna be dating three whole women that you picked to marry?"

"Three *whole* women?"

She giggled. "It's a sayin'. Just means you're doing something really big, and the whole thing."

He suddenly stopped and she did too a step ahead, turning. "How much of my life did Juliette tell you?"

Her eyes slowly widened. "I didn't ask questions," she said, both hands up.

He continued toward the Basilique before his eyes got him in trouble.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, I think it's sweet you want to marry into your culture. My daddy is also like this. *Baby girl, you need to find you a nice cowboy and carry*

on in the wretched ranchy way. Only he doesn't think it's wretched at all, but some kind of heaven on earth. So, she mentioned something about one of the women working at the hospital? Would that be the rude one who didn't want me to disturb you?"

"Yes, it would be," he said, pissed at Juliette. The fuck was her problem?

"She's cute," she said. "Doesn't seem like your type but what do I really know about you?"

"This is correct, what *do* you know about me? Nothing, actually."

"I can tell about people though," she warned, two steps behind him now. "It's a gift."

"Is it," he muttered.

"Well, to me it is, I guess in your case it's not."

He stopped again at the bottom of the Basilique steps, pissed enough to dare to look at her. "In my case, you don't know me. Nor does your gift. I like simple women, I like mature women, I want a wife that can take orders without feeling bossed around. A woman who doesn't complain or cave under stress."

She crossed her arms over her chest with raised brows. "You *are* bossy," she said, like he'd asked her opinion. "But... bossy can be good and even sexy if used right."

Just like that, she drew a full-blown X-rated scene in his head of the *right* kind of bossy.

"What?" she barely mumbled, pushing hair behind her ear, a child realizing they'd gone too far.

Holy fuck, this was really happening. Was this who he was after all this time? Was he the man who caved to his cock at the first pretty woman finding all his cleverly hidden buttons and pressing them one after another in the span of a minute?

He jerked his eyes from her, holding his jaw together while anger sparked along his pathetic backbone. "You'll be

here for maybe three days. I'd really appreciate it if you left my personal life alone. It isn't some tragedy you need to rescue me from."

Her brows furrowed as she lowered her head. "Well, I know that," she mumbled softly—no, she cooed. He stared at her profile, stuck in that web again. She dared a look at him and the sun caught her brown eyes, turning them into flaming chocolate. "I'm sorry," she added in that same tone. "I'll step back. I went too far. Won't happen again."

He headed back up the steps and at the door turned, finding her in the same spot, looking ready to run. "Too late to find a boat out of here, Texas. We have real world work that needs doing."

She dropped her arms and marched up the steps toward him. He opened the door for her, and she entered then stopped, aiming a look at him. "You're a *mean medic*," she muttered with a finger aimed at him as she passed.

He stood there as those two words put a choke-hold on his cock as mean-doctor/sweet-nurse fantasies burned through him.

She was turning into a living, breathing centerfold.

After he got them in the Jon boat he returned to nursing the only defense he seemed to have against his sudden avalanche of lust. If she continued playing hardball, then he'd play back. Maybe then she'd get the hint and step off. He sure couldn't handle softball with her, that was pathetically obvious. What a bastion of noble strength and character he was. Not to mention he wasn't a mean anything. Ever. If he hadn't been so turned on by the term coming from her, he'd have taken offense. He was *never* mean. Quiet, yes. Reserved, yes. Careful with his words. Always. Cautious with his *choice* of words, especially always. Especially lately. Because the celibacy rule lifted, and the universe seemed ready to make him pay for daring such a stupid vow to begin with. He needed to get a handle on all of it. Quick.

He turned his chair enough to see her, finding her watching the swamp, both hands on top of the other on the

rail, chin resting on it. The child-like picture added regret to his guilt. His gaze lowered to devour the sight of her thick tan leg exposed from the position. Fuck, she was just...too beautiful, he realized. He turned away from her, back to defeated. With a glance. A single glance. That's what you're made of Dr. Dirty Water. Mr. Mean Med. But more importantly, what did her *ass* look like naked? What did it feel like. Firm? Soft? He closed his eyes as he let the visions come. Standing naked, looking over her shoulder at him. Begging him not to be mean while wanting him to be exactly that.

He'd jack off to that fantasy, this he was sure of. He'd jack off while thinking of being a mean med even while knowing it would only make the fire hotter. But it was still just a fantasy. And that was *one* thing he *could* have, and he'd fucking have it to the extreme degree without an ounce of guilt. He wasn't married. He wasn't committed. He was technically still free. He clearly needed time to sow his wild oats and that was the only way he could.

And yet...she *was* begging to help him with his marriage endeavors.

Felix hurried to Nitro's room with excitement and regret and terror. She entered, her stomach knotting like it always did when she saw him chained to the bed. Especially now.

He lifted his head, his brows narrowing. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

God, what was happening with them? She was terrified. She'd not told Lesion of her symptoms for fear of what he might do. But she felt *everything* Nitro did. His lust, his anger, his hunger, his thirst. "I need to talk to you about some things."

She went to sit on his bed next to him, leaning and kissing him. Because she was so hungry for him. Another symptom. She'd always been hungry for him, but it was more now.

"Don't get this close," he warned, the sound of instant lust awakened.

"I have to," she whispered, pulling up before she lost herself to his hungers. "I need to tell you some things that's happening.

His gaze roamed her face, his animal appetite already triggered even as the strain in his jaw said he fought its power. "Tell me," he seethed. "Over there. *Away* from me," he growled, his breathing labored.

She nodded and walked backwards till the wall met her back. "When you bit me...that first time. I felt...things." She watched as his body responded to her words. "Right now, you're feeling it. I can see and I can feel it too." She covered her mouth when a sob rose up her throat. "It's me," she choked out.

"What's you," he demanded, his muscles trembling.

"I'm causing you to do this, you're...responding to *my* needs. In some...bat communities, depending on the environment, females can...initiate mating and...I think that's what's happening, you're picking up on my...non-stop *lust* for you," she wept, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I can't help it, I didn't realize. I've always wanted you *too much* and now it's causing you to go...bat-shit crazy!"

He growled, yanking at his chain.

"You feel it? You want it now because even while I'm terrified and disgusted with myself I can't help it. When you *bit me*, you...there was something in it, something maybe in your...saliva, Lesion said you heal the wound but that's not all you're doing, you're feeding my lust only it's not satisfying it, it's *growing* it to match yours and yours is..."

"Fucking insane?" he yelled, glaring at her before his hunger passed over her as he bared his teeth then fell back

onto the bed. “Lesion will fix it,” he grit.

“Even your fury arouses me,” she whispered, shaking her head. “And...I’m never scared of you. I feel alive, so alive and... wide open, every part of me comes apart at the seams and I know that...you need it you want it and I’m safe.”

“Come here,” he growled. “No! *Don’t* listen to me!”

She gasped, her body on fire with need, his needs, her needs. “I need to tell you something else,” she whispered, getting his furious gaze, the red in his eyes getting darker as he yanked on the chains. “When you don’t...give me what I want, it makes you crazy. So if I...give it to you then it doesn’t need to reach that point.”

“Fuck,” he growled. “You can’t unchain me.”

“But...I *can*,” she said, her throat tight. “That’s what I’m telling you. You won’t hurt me. We can control it.”

“I can’t fucking control it!” he gasped, shaking his head, his cock tenting the sheet. “Fuck, come here, fucking come here, I need to *fuck* you too fucking hard baby.”

His fury and lust were lethal to her own and she made her way to the bed, removing her top.”

“I’m going to bite you so fucking hard too. Do you know how fucking good it feels when I do that?”

“Yes,” she croaked, her body burning and shaking as she finished removing her clothes. “But I want you to listen to me.” She climbed on the bed, her craving getting aggressive. She took his face in her hands and dug her nails in his skin, kissing him. She gasped when he nipped her lip, drawing blood. She lashed her tongue along his, grinding the agony between her legs against his hard stomach. “Let me control you.” She took hold of his head in her hands pulling his mouth to her breast. “Don’t bite,” she cried out as his teeth raked her nipple. “Not yet, baby.”

“When,” he demanded, sucking so hard she dug her nails in his scalp. “Do that again,” he groaned.

She moved her hands over his shoulders, breaking the skin with the slow drag of her nails.

“Get on my fucking cock!” He jerked her head back, his fist biting in her hair as she cried out in rapture. “Too fucking slow, Felix!” he seethed.

“Not so tight,” she gasped. “I can’t reach you.”

“I can’t unlock my fist.”

His rage and fear battled as she reached between her legs and found his cock. “You need both hands,” she moaned, desperate to give him that perfect control he shattered her with. “I have the key. Let me unchain you. I need all of you baby, I need you to take all the control, that’s what I crave, I need it.”

“Oh fuck, yes. Do it now.”

Felix reached up to the fist still gripping her hair. “Release me,” she said. “You can do it.”

She gasped when he pulled harder, growling then suddenly released her.

“So good,” she praised, hurrying off the bed to her clothes. She located the key in her pocket and brought it to the lock.

“Felix,” he gasped.

“Don’t be scared,” she whispered.

“I want you too fucking much, I can tell.”

“Don’t be scared,” she ordered firmer. “You love me. I am *not* afraid of you. You will not hurt me. I know this now.”

“Baby,” he croaked, sounding terrified as she undid the lock.

The second the chain fell, he grabbed her and forced her onto the bed, yanking her hips up. “Oh GOD, yes,” she begged, gripping hold of the mattress, every part of her shaking with need.

His hand bit down on her shoulder, nails digging as he held her down, his other hand opening her legs. His fingers shoved inside her with a lethal growl, and she knew it was the warm up. Her cries flowed, hot and thick like the fire he created in her. There were no words, no thoughts to convey what he did to her. His forearm pressed into her pelvis, lifting her for his cock. “Baby, please oh God please yes.”

The first plunge shattered her so perfectly. Her lust and desperation filled a single shriek. His fist was back in her hair, jerking her head back far enough to force her to resist him. It was his side of this union, his hunger and craving. Like he needed to feel her every limit and bring her to that razor edge but never any further. With her body locked up and rigid, he gave her what she craved and pounded against that resistance with his entire body, his cock leading that assault. Then followed that symphony of lust and passion merging into something otherworldly and terrifying. It built in him then her, even now she felt it, that pinnacle his mind and body craved. It was her breaking point, she remembered. Yes, he had to bring her to it and just at the ledge, he gave her a climax with his *bite*. She wasn't sure how, she only knew she needed it as much as he did. Craved it. She fought not to scream as he forced her to that brutal edge, her mind swimming with pleasure and a delicious pain. His full weight pinned her upper body and she knew it was coming now. Yes, yes, yes, she screamed in her mind. Please God, don't let him stop! Please!

Her mouth flew open with a scream of rapture as his teeth pierced her shoulder, hot, burning and hard, spreading through her before it all pounded in her clit. His growls matched the fury of his final thrusts, but it was always the sucks on her shoulder that triggered the climax from her clit. Again, she locked up in the violent pleasure storm, sending him over the ledge. But it was in this most terrifying place that she knew she was safest. His hold on her was one of salvation, of protection and utter devotion. It was perfection. Oh God, it was *utter perfection*.

Patches got the boat docked.

“Patches?”

He turned, seeing Tegan looking up at the sky.

He jerked his head up right as his phone buzzed. Fucking bats. “Sarah?” he answered.

“She’s screaming!”

“Who is!”

“I think it’s Felix! What do I do?”

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Do not go down there,” he said quietly. “Stay where you are, I’m coming in.”

He turned to Tegan and grabbed her head, pulling her ear to his mouth. “Nitro is having an episode, that’s why the bats are here. Stay with our patients. Do not leave this boat, do you understand me?”

He felt her nod then she whispered, “Yes. Be careful.”

Patches raced to the back of the hospital, wondering why the bats weren’t cloaking the walls and doors this time. “Don’t follow me,” he ordered Sarah as he raced for the door leading downstairs. He slowed as he made his way toward a possible death, his fresh injuries ordering him to stop now and turn back.

At Nitro’s door, his heart pounded with DeJa’Vu as he listened. “Nitro?”

“NO!” Felix yelled. “THAT’S PATCHES! HE’S YOUR *BROTHER!*”

The sound of growling moved around the room just beyond the door, putting Patches’ every muscle on high alert.

“Come to me,” he heard Felix say. “I need to touch you.”

Muscles locked in a flight-or-fight war as Patches listened to another sound in the room. Was it...purring?

“You like that, yes?” she asked, sounding pleased. “That’s so good. You’re doing so good,” she praised in a soft coo. “Tell me how you’re feeling.”

A long, lusty moan preceded, “I’m better.”

“My generals love when I make this noise.”

It *was* purring, he realized.

“I’ll kill your generals,” he said, but his voice was nearly calm.

“How about command them? Or lead? You’ll be my Bat King?”

Patches’ muscles released at her soft laughter. “I have patients I’m bringing in for the hurricane,” he called.

“Stop growling at him,” Felix whispered.

“I’m growling at you,” he muttered. “You want me again.”

Wow. “So yeah,” Patches nodded. “We’ll be up top if you need anything. I’ll come by with Tegan after we get everybody settled in. Talk about that tag.”

“Good,” Nitro answered. “I still need it.”

At hearing his brother sounding sane, his body quaked with fucking relief while he wondered what had happened. Felix had done something, but what?

He made his way back up, hurrying out to get everybody in, eyeing the sky still filled with circling bats. He pulled his phone out and dialed Lesion, eager to tell him about this miracle turn in the road.

Tegan watched Patches orchestrate Hurricane protocols with the ease and authority of a king while his loyal, ever so perfect number one nurse—who he was technically dating—floated about like a magical butterfly, a shadow

reinforcing his every move. Meanwhile Tegan tripped around like a spark of stupid till she spotted something she could handle and understood how to do. Like move chairs or tables or haul things from here to there. And the lovely saint Sarah smiled and laughed while working, making the patients feel like they were getting ready for a damn ho-down rather than a hurricane.

To make matters worse, Patches' Grand Pier looked at her like a rare Texas toxin. And looooooved the Swamp Saint. But lord, he was so sweet. The light in that man's eyes when he looked at Patches melted her heart. She'd decided to take Juliette up on her idea of helping Patches with his dating fiasco. But she was *not* the right person for that job. Already she hawked that girl for flaws, looking for the fatal ones that allowed her to say *bad choice*. Would help if she could see past her blinding qualities to find them. But if this girl turned out to be as amazing as she seemed, then she would *not* stand in the way. She'd never stoop to that or be that person. No matter how *badly* she wanted somebody. And dear God, *want* was a joke of a word with him. Ever since he'd returned, she'd seen that *look* in his eyes she'd been praying to see. But his anger was a bad sign. Because if he wanted her and didn't *want* to want her, then that was no good. No good at all. The situation had become instantly serious when she'd seen it. She was that *log* in his path. Would he step on her or over her? Could she handle that kind of treatment from him? How far was she willing to go to give him an opportunity to...to what?

Pick me. I want him to pick me, dammit.

But if he did, would he regret it? Have guilt? Pickers remorse?

The idea made her sick to imagine.

She watched as Patches stopped Sarah and said something to her. She nodded, gave him a genuine enough smile and looked around. Tegan's pulse jumped when her eyes found her and she waved, heading for her.

Tegan hurried to meet her, not wanting her to work on her behalf too. "Would you mind bringing our mommas and

Patches' Grand Pier refreshments?"

"Not at all, tell me what to do, thank you."

"In the kitchen, there's three fridges. I think it's the one in the middle that has all their foods prepped with names on each." The woman touched her arm and murmured, "Thank God for Miss Justine, she got all that ready ahead of time."

"Yes, I'll do it right now. Any particular order to serve?"

"Maybe Grand Pier first," she whispered with a smile and wink. "We like to spoil him when he comes."

"Got it." Tegan took off, her heart beating like there was a damn barn fire. Sarah was being *very* nice. Which meant she was being protective of Patches in their first encounter—a quality, *not* a flaw, unfortunately. Maybe Patches told her something. Now, she was super nice, super helpful, super tiny, super cute, super frickn everything. Which is why she was an option. Because Patches was smart. She was simple, uncomplicated, helpful, just like he said. And really, Tegan could easily compete with those things except she wasn't from the swamps. And damn if she wasn't ready to dig up her family tree to see if maybe she had ancestors from there just to qualify.

She made her way to the room where Patches grandfather was and paused, realizing she wasn't sure what to call him. Everybody called him Grand Pier, but she didn't feel like she had that same right. Alien invader that she was.

"You okay?"

She turned, finding Patches there. "I just realized I don't know his name. Or remember it. Everybody calls him Grand Pier but...I don't feel right calling him that."

"You can call him Mr. Monroe. It's his last name."

A zing of pain hit her at the formality. "Alright. Any advice as to what *not* to say?"

"Not that I can think of," he said after a moment. "You doing okay?"

“I’m fine,” she said, nodding. “Aside from feeling useless and not knowing whether I’m coming or going or would be more help out of the way.”

“You’re doing just fine,” he assured, his gaze lowering to her mouth. Again. He glanced to the right. “Those go in the mother’s rooms,” he said to one of the other nurses before looking at her again. “As soon as we get them all settled, we’ll talk about Nitro?”

She nodded. “Of course. Get that taken care of. Is he still okay?”

“I haven’t had a chance to check on him again, but I hope so.”

“I can go do that if you need.”

“No,” he hurried. “Don’t *ever* go down there without me.”

Ookay. “Yes sir, then,” she said as he opened his Grand Pier’s door for her. “Thank you.”

“Find me when you’re done. I have a delivery to make this evening too. You’ll come with me for that.” Again, she nodded, her stomach quaking while he called into the room, “Grand Pier, Miss Texas brought you some food. Play nice.” He looked at her with raised brows and a hint of a smile then left her wondering. Was he...being flirty?

Dream on, Miss Texas. Geeze why did he have to call her that to the man opposed to outsiders? Was that on purpose? Stop being paranoid. He’s called you that from jump.

“Well, good evening, Mr. Monroe, are you settling in okay? I’ve got some goodies for you.”

“Meh, weh,” he said, making Tegan pause in wonder over what that meant.

“Would you like that on the table here or in your lap?”

“I’ll take it on my lap, sha. Tank you,” he said, taking hold of it and setting it down.

“You ready for this hurricane?” she asked, unwrapping his utensils.

“Meh, ready or not, here it comes, yeah?”

She smiled and nodded. “I think Patches might like them. He gets to bring you over here so you can spoil him more.” She smiled at his big laugh.

“Meh, don’t tell him but he’s my favorite.”

“Well, I think somebody done spilled those beans to him. I heard all about it.”

“Meh, what you heard like that?” he wondered, a laugh in his light words as he took a big bite of red beans and rice. “Mmm-*mm* dat Miss Justine sure know her way around dat kitchen, yeah.”

“It *does* look good,” she said, removing the lid from his drink. “Well now, Patches didn’t tell me in those exact words, but I can read between the lines. You are the King Grand Pier.”

He let go his biggest laugh yet and the sound made her giggle.

“Did you pack your crown?”

He started coughing on his food and she moved his tray, tapping him on his back. He tried to take a breath and she panicked at hearing him struggle.

Sarah was suddenly there, pulling him forward and moving his legs off the bed. “Arms up, now, get those lungs cleared. Get me his drink,” she urged.

Tegan quickly grabbed it, spilling some on the bed as she did.

“Little sip. There you go. Clear it out now. Remember how I showed you? Take a nice deep breath then big long cough.”

Patches entered next, hurrying to the bed as Tegan stepped farther back, out of the way. “What happened?”

“I just heard him coughing and I came in,” Sarah said.

“He took a bite of food and started coughing,” Tegan explained. “I...I made him laugh, I think that might have done it.”

“She made you laugh?” he asked, his tone teasing. “I thought I was the only one that did that?”

“Well, here I thought I was the only one that did that,” Sarah added in a light tease. “I see I have competition.”

God, when he finally got his breath, the panic latched onto her muscles ebbed away and Tegan needed to sit but didn't want to look lazy or as useless as she felt. She suddenly wanted to be doing anything but caring for the one person Patches loved more than anything in the whole world.

“How about some yogurt for that war you just waged on your throat,” Sarah suggested sweetly, sitting on the bed next to him. “Don't tell Patches but my favorite part about hurricanes is seeing you.”

“Here we go,” Patches chuckled as Sarah laughed. Tegan suddenly felt like an ugly stepchild amongst blooded-bond servants.

“Tegan, honey, those mothers would probably love you forever if you brought them their dinner right about now. I'll finish up with Mr. Stinker here.”

Shit. Right. “On it. Bye Mr. Monroe,” she said halfway out the door. “Sorry I nearly killed you.” The door shut and she hurried down the hall, mortified with her last words. God, could she screw up any more?

Do not say that shit. Do not challenge karma.

CHAPTER FOUR

Patches opened the door to the downstairs apartment, the sound of the shower telling him Tegan was done with her work upstairs. The incident with his Grand Pier had shaken her and he hadn't been able to talk to her about it. She'd surely undergone quite the personality change in the span of a day. Probably from something big mouth Juliette told her. She was nothing like the cocky chick who'd taken his joint right from his lips and took a puff on it. This Tegan was a *lot* quieter. More... vulnerable. He was torn between which he liked more.

Sarah continued proving him right for a mate choice. She'd displayed mature, professional, even kindness with Tegan, despite they'd gotten off to a rough start. He couldn't fault Sarah for protecting him, that was her job and he liked that she was damn good at it. And yet it was Tegan that took him into the fires of lust. Maybe because she was in his shower. Maybe because of her *ass*. Because of her *tits*. Her fucking perfect mouth. And all the things that came out of it. He closed his eyes and flung his good boy commitment aside, putting her against that shower wall. He watched the lust-filled rapture in her face as he hiked one of those thick legs up and *fucked* her. Fucked her into oblivion.

Damn, he *definitely* fucking needed to jack off. His urges were off the charts.

He took a moment to imagine doing those things with his swamp options only to have his mind rebel, super-imposing Tegan's *fucking ass* in every scenario. Apparently, his mind saw it as a vital piece of plumbing in his forever investment.

This Texas fantasy was turning into a wet blanket over his swamp.

He remembered her family had the same tradition with marrying local. And he sure as fuck wasn't Texan. Which made them a truly fucking impossible fantasy. To jack-off to.

He removed his coat jacket and stretched his neck, still sore as fuck from his brotherly beating. He made his way to his work-out room next to one of the bedrooms, ready to let off some steam. Then it was back to work. Fuck, he needed to bring that birthing kit to that Viking clan in Bullet's hatch. They had their own mid-wives and not once did any of them enter his hospital. But when it came to mothers, he didn't care who they were or what their beliefs, he gave them supplies. They never denied them, but he felt like it was their way of keeping peace. They kept to themselves and married in their bloodline only. He respected that. They respected the Bishops, making all well and good so long as they didn't cross their codes. Or get caught crossing them.

Maybe he'd take Tegan with him. Give her a chance to see the swamps while she was there. And him a chance to collect more material to torment himself with.

He dropped the barbell after twenty-five reps, hearing talking. He made his way to the door and opened it a crack.

"No, I volunteered to help out. The man who runs the hospital is the one I sold the equipment to. I still need to set that up. Oh, just some kind of bat nuisance, I'm not really sure."

Who was she protecting his privacy from?

"I was just calling to see how you were, didn't know I needed a reason. Well, I ain't never been in no hurricane, I'm kinda getting nervous." She gave a sigh. "Yes," she drawled in her cute accent. "Yes, Daddy, I know."

Daddy. His dick jerked at how fucking cute she sounded.

"The man is very nice, he works for the same people you got your modified bike from. Yep, same ones. He's been a gentleman, really. You will not," she giggled, making him wonder what brought that. "Well, I was thinking of maybe

setting up a shop around here. They have a melting pot of tourists that pass through. I don't know, I like it, it's real pretty here. I know it ain't Texas, silly." He listened in the sudden silence. "Yes, I will. Yes... I know.... I know that too. Daddy, I will," she whined quietly. "Don't call me that. No, I ain't. Time you let me grow up. I gotta go. I love you, Daddy."

Another side of Texas Tegan. And his cock approved of every bit. Ridiculous. Now that he wasn't celibate, his dick seemed to be very busy making all sorts of plans without him.

He opened the door, eager to see what she wore after her shower. Rounding the corner, he ran into her gaze all over his body reminding him what he wasn't wearing.

"Everybody okay?" he asked, seeing she was back in the outfit he'd first met her in.

Her eyes snapped up to his and she swallowed. "What you mean?"

"I heard you on the phone, sorry."

"Oh...no, you're fine. Just wanted to touch base with my Daddy. He worries."

There was his tough Tegan. He realized how much of an act that was.

"Sarah washed my clothes for me," she said quietly. "Was very nice of her. Glad she's one of your uh...dating options."

He lowered his head.

"Sorry, I forgot I was stepping back. I'm just making small talk. She's real nice though, just wanted to say that. A good fit for you, I mean. Everything you said. I misjudged her." She tore her eyes from his chest and took a seat at one of the dining table chairs behind her. "So we need to see about your brother now? I like to stay busy. Get him tagged and taken care of. Set up the app for you."

"Can I grab a shower first? Was waiting for you to finish."

“Well, duh,” she said in a sweet tone before nodding. “I see your bruises are turning beautiful.”

Mmm. “How long you think it’ll take to get that tag in him, and everything set up.”

“Well, I tagged fifty steers a day, it’s a jiffy,” she snapped. “Five minutes I’d say. Mostly figuring out the best place to put the tag then the app set up, I’m gonna say an hour, maybe two, depending on what system you’re operating. If it’s windows, we’re good, if it’s a mac, we’re looking at twice that. I hate macs.”

“You and me both,” he grinned, enjoying the fight she put up to keep her eyes off of him. She was losing and he loved it. “Thought you were talking to a boyfriend at first,” he said, making his way to one of the chairs at the table and sitting next to her.

She flustered and he wondered if it was his nearness or the boyfriend. Maybe both. “Not a boyfriend,” she said, or confessed. “Not yet.”

“That’s a real shock.”

She sputtered a laugh with that sexy half grin. “Why?”

“Just imagined you’d have one.”

“Why?” she pushed, her cute twang pinging his cock.

“You need me to tell you that?”

Her curiosity lost to her sudden inhibitions, and she lowered her gaze. “I don’t need anything like that,” she muttered. “I was just curious why you thought it is all. No biggie.”

“Some people don’t know how beautiful they are. Thought you might be one is all.”

She gave a shy, nervous laugh, pushing hair behind her ear and looking at everything but him. “I mean...looks ain’t everything. I sometimes wish that, anyway.”

She looked in her lap now, her answer engaging his more demanding curiosity. “I can relate. I get tired of being

wanted for strictly my gorgeous body too.”

She gave more sputtered laughs. “You are a Mr. October,” she regretted to inform him, heat in her gaze.

“And you *are* a Miss Texas.”

She wet her lips, her smile getting bigger. “And single. Well...I am.”

“I’m not married, yet.”

Her smile faltered and she narrowed her gaze, lowering it. “You ever have a girlfriend before?”

“No,” he said, wanting very much to talk about exactly that. “I haven’t. You?”

The daring question hung in the air while he silently willed her to play the information exchange game with him. “Nothin’...long term.” She closed her eyes. “I don’t...sleep around I didn’t mean that, I meant the boyfriends I had were very short term. Didn’t take me but a week to figure I didn’t want anything long term with them. Or they didn’t.”

He realized the latter was more truth than the former.

“I had two girlfriends in my entire life. When I was thirteen and sixteen. The one at sixteen, I lost my virginity. And I use the term lost because it was definitely a gamble I should’ve never taken. Lesson learned.”

“Sorry to hear that. Sixteen is a pretty dumb age for most people.”

“I wasn’t dumb at sixteen,” he assured. “But I did make a dumb choice.”

“Well, I’ve made dumb choices but none that ended in the loss of my virginity. And I’m not ashamed of it,” she said.

Fucking virgin. “Why would you be?” he wondered, curious over her beliefs with that.

“Because in this day and age, you’d swear it’s some kind of mental illness being a virgin. I didn’t say I was altogether innocent, now,” she added, as if she couldn’t stand having a clean sexual record.

So she'd fooled around. How far, he wondered. He fucking wanted to finger her.

"You must be nervous having to...do all that stuff that goes with dating. But it's like riding a bike, I'm sure." She closed her eyes briefly. "That did not sound right. I don't see those things as flippantly as riding a bike."

"Good to hear." He remembered their classes. "The men are required to take classes," he said.

"Classes?"

"To learn or re-learn how to ride that bike. For those who need it."

She struggled to hold his stare. "Are you gonna..." Again, she closed her eyes with a sigh. "Not my business."

"I don't need the classes but I'm taking them."

"Why?"

He decided those twangs in various words were an official turn on. "They're mandatory."

She gave a look of surprise. "Wow, I...I like that. I think it's smart. But...you don't think you need them?"

"I don't think I do, no."

She nodded, her curiosity peeking out with a tugging smile. "Cause you're a doctor? You know more than most men?"

"Yes that."

She eyed him more now. "And? You sound like you have more than knowledge."

"I'm not a sexual pro, if that's what you're wondering. But I know all the important basics. The rest would be learned with the woman I'm with."

She nodded a little then a lot. "Makes sense. Smart too. I like it. I mean I like all of this...swamp stuff. The marriages, the codes, the way everybody looks at it." She gave a light

chuckle. “It’s a darn shame one can’t choose where they’re born.”

He nodded a little. “It *really* is.” He let himself burn for five more seconds while considering her words. She was right about that. Where you were born shouldn’t matter in certain affairs. He’d picked three women to court from the swamp. He’d see that through and give it a fair go. But if Tegan was there from some roll of the fate dice, then he would find that out. “Gonna grab that shower.”

Tegan watched Dr. Dirty Water go *grab that shower*, while she grabbed her scattered hormones still raging. Momma help me, his ass in those jeans. Her stomach flip-flopped at everything he’d said. He said fairly point blank that she was gorgeous as he was. Called her Miss Texas. Mercy, if she was as gorgeous as *him*? She was damn gorgeous. She sat there with boiling cheeks and big ole grin. Her grin faltered as she recalled his overall presence sitting so close to her in that chair. His fine ass at the edge, legs open, naked, sweaty chest needing all her devoted attention. He’d been cock-sure from the moment she met him, but lord have some mercy on her Texas soul, it had surely doubled.

She sucked in a breath and shot up. He was making a delivery he’d said. With her. Just her? She should go check on Becky while waiting. She was sweet as cream pie and scared as a lamb, poor thing. She was all by herself while the other two mothers had a flock of women with them. Mothers, sisters, aunts. Both Becky’s parents had died, and she was an only child with a husband who left childbearing to the women. Bless her heart, she thought that was okay, but it surely was not. These mandatory husband classes needed to be swamp-wide, not just Twelve wide. A woman should never be alone for something as big as having a baby. Sure, it was her third, but still. And she was scared because the last delivery was hard and long at home. Patches had to go, and he saved her life

and the baby so this time, he insisted on her being closer. Judging by the light in Becky's eyes, she was very happy he had. And she was a *week* overdue.

She knocked on her door. "It's Tegan," she called.

"Come in."

She entered, returning Becky's big smile. "Coming to see if you need anything?"

She shook her head. "I'm so good," she said, looking like she might want to cry over it. "I get spoilt whenever I come to Dr. Patches' hospital. And you know he wants to do a maternity ward with all sorts of fancy stuff for the mothers? Their own bathrooms and everything. He mentioned water births," she gasped with wide eyes. "I ain't never heard of such a thing."

"Really?" she said, her heart skipping around in absolute joy at hearing such a thing about him. He was enough man for a dozen dummies. "He's so sweet, isn't he?"

She nodded with a little smile. "He's getting married you know."

"Oh, don't I know it," Tegan said, grinning at how she seemed proud about it. She moved the blanket off her feet. "Swelling's better, I think?"

"They feel better, thank you."

Tegan grabbed the bottle of baby oil from the nightstand. "How about a good ole Texan foot rub-down?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that!"

Tegan laughed at the huge smile and light in her eyes. "I surely do. You were gonna tell me about names."

She sucked in a breath, lacing her fingers in her lap. "If it's a boy, we're naming him Jeremiah Jacobs, and if it's a girl, I'm calling her Gracelynn Savannah."

"Gracelynn! I *love* that name!"

She squealed and nodded. "Me too. Burt likes it too and it ain't often him and I agree on such things."

“Who came up with the boy name?”

“Oh, he did. He gets to name the boys,” she said with an affectionate smile. “That’s our deal.”

Tegan giggled. “And you have two girls?”

She nodded, covering her smile briefly. “You know I don’t care but for his sake, I’m hoping this one’s a boy.” She whispered it like she worried the baby might hear and be offended. Lord this woman was too adorable.

“Healthy and strong is all I care about Miss Becky.”

She nodded a lot with her tinkly laughter. “Indeed, Miss Texas.” She suddenly gasped, her face falling. “Is that inappropriate to call you?”

Mercy, did she look *that* bothered? “Of course not,” she assured.

“I been hearing the nurses say it, so I thought it was your nickname. I’ll call you whatever you like.”

“Tegan or Texas is fine,” she said, wondering now why they’d refer to her as Texas. Was that what Patches called her? Surely not to everybody.

“You seem bothered,” she complained quietly. “What’s wrong? Oh mercy, that feels like heaven right there.”

Tegan smiled, working on her heel. “I know the people here are very close and particular about outsiders,” she muttered. “And I sure don’t blame em’ one bit. We’re the same kind of people in Texas. You gotta prove you’re worth your salt. It’s how we protect each other.”

“I don’t say it,” she whispered, “but I think it’s because you’re so pretty and Dr. Patches has an eye on you.”

Wow, everybody was seeing things but her. “Well, I came here to help and that’s what I’m doing. Not here to steal anybody from anybody.”

“I’m as traditional as they come and I know they all want the men to pick from the swamp, but when it comes to love, it ain’t right to stand in the way of that. Love don’t see

color, culture, or creed,” she said with pure delight in her sparkly blue eyes.

“You’re right about that,” Tegan agreed while realizing. “I guess I can see why they’d be upset seeing as the leader got with a northerner and one of his Twelve got with another northerner. Least that Seer got with one from local.”

She nodded. “Cherie *is* local but not lifetime local.”

“Makes a difference?”

She nodded a lot.

“Gotta be homespun,” Tegan said, moving to her other foot now.

“Right. But it’s getting kinda ugly if you ask me,” she said extra quiet.

“How you mean?” Tegan gently pried.

“There’s a lot of women in the swamp that signed up for marrying one of The Twelve. So far, only two picked a swamp girl, the other four picked out of towners. Including the leader,” she reminded with an extra low whisper like it might be the biggest sin of all.

It all had Tegan grinning. She put the oil back on the stand and opened the drawer. “How about I brush that pretty hair of yours?”

She literally busted out laughing. “Pretty! Swamp-sakes my hair’s wilder than a gator sippin’ gas.”

“You are funny!” Tegan laughed, sitting at her hip.

“Oh!” She took Tegan’s hand and put it on her huge belly, pressing her palm.

Tegan gasped at the hard ball moving across her whole palm. “I felt it!”

She nodded a lot with her half-moon eyes of joy. “He’s strong.”

“You think it’ll be a boy?”

She shook her head against her pillow, smile fading. “I don’t rightly know,” she said, obviously not really caring.

Tegan turned at the knock on the door.

“It’s Patches,” he called.

“Oh!” Becky gasped, smoothing her hair while Tegan stood and fixed her covers. “Am I presentable?” she whispered.

“You’re *radiant!*” Tegan assured in a whisper, holding back her laugh.

“Come in,” Becky called.

The door opened and in walked the *doctor*. “Well, if it isn’t Mr. October, November, *and* December,” Tegan dared, getting a huge laugh from Becky and an actual blush from Patches. A-freakin-dorable.

“How’s my favorite mother to be?”

Tegan grinned at how thrilled Becky was with him. “You say that to *all* your mothers,” she said, patting his hand when he held hers. “How ready are we ready for this little one?”

“Ready last week,” she sighed.

Tegan realized he was taking her pulse *while* holding her hand, how freaking amazing was he? “Pressure’s good,” he said, leaning and placing his cheek on her forehead then straightening. “Temp feels normal.”

Becky smiled at him the entire time, watching him examine her belly next. “Doesn’t she have amazing skin?” he said, pressing gently along the outer edges.

“So amazing,” Tegan agreed, moving to the other side, and taking her other hand. “Did you hear the possible names for the baby?” Tegan asked Patches.

“I believe Patches for a boy or... Patches for a girl?” He grinned at Tegan then Becky who filled the room with her musical laugh. “What?” he wondered. “It could work. Burt would love it.” He covered her belly back and tucked it in.

“I’m going make a delivery and will be back in a couple hours to do fun doctor things to make sure everything is ready. Try to take a nap for me?”

She nodded, her smile so pretty and big. “He’s got the best bedside manners,” she whispered to Tegan.

“I see that. I’m taking notes.”

“Uh-oh,” he said, giving her a real smile that stole her frikn breath.

“I might have to barter me some of this,” she said, wagging her finger at the bed.

He added a real laugh, and it had Becky and her giggling like smitten little girls.

“Alligator boots for a delivery?”

She put her hand out across the bed. “You heard him,” she said to Becky. “You got yourself a deal.”

He held her gaze and shook her hand. “That’s a Bayou Bond right there. Size twelve.” He added a wink, and she pulled her hand away, glancing at Becky who beamed from ear to ear. Have mercy, she saw all that and then some.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Vikings!” Tegan said, taking his hand and hopping down into the smaller boat. “Here? In the swamp?”

“Yep. Sit there,” he directed. “Don’t wanna have to yell a conversation.”

She realized where he put her was close enough for their knees to touch. She angled her legs, so they didn’t.

“They’ve been here as long as anybody I know.”

“Vikings,” she repeated, amazed. “In *these* swamps. Like the actual Viking people? Horns and stuff?”

“One and the same.”

“They act like Vikings?” she wondered.

He laughed. “How do Vikings act?”

“I don’t know...barbaric and stuff? Am I confusing them with pirates?”

He found that funny and she decided his laugh was the sexiest thing she’d ever heard. “They’re peaceful as far as I know. Never hear from them. Very strict about marrying in their own blood lines.”

“Oh, here we go,” she muttered, catching his grin.

“What? You don’t like that?”

“No, I guess I don’t. Maybe Miss Texas wants a fair chance at Mr. October.”

She almost regretted her words but the look in his eyes said she’d just chipped away another layer of that wall he’d put between them and wasn’t the least sorry about it. “Maybe she’ll get that.”

Oh boy, there it was. “Or...maybe I’ll find another one of these Twelve.”

“Maybe you will,” he said way too easily.

“Maybe I will. And maybe you’ll deliver our baby,” she further tested.

“Or maybe I won’t.”

“Maybe that one called Traps.”

Oh, big, big, laugh. “Yeah, you do that. He’ll teach you a thing or two about hog-tying.”

Her jaw dropped. “You sayin’ I’m fat?”

He laughed more. “God, no, you’re definitely not fat.”

“Damn right I’m not. I assure you, I’m all muscle.”

His smiling gaze lowered over her. “Is that a fact?”

“It is. I work out faithfully.”

“Really,” he said.

“Why do you sound so astonished?”

He found that funny too. “It explains a lot,” he said.

“Like what?” she said, getting pissed.

“Like why your ass is—”

“Say fat and I’ll push you out of this boat.”

He shook his head. “Not fat.”

“Or *any* word that means fat,” she warned.

“Does *fine* as *fuck* work for you?”

She stared at him, caught up in shock. “Don’t be funny with me,” she said, her pulse racing.

“The only thing funny is you not knowing that.”

“Knowing what? Quit laughing at everything I say!”

“How do you not know you have a killer ass?”

She turned away, holding her arms while her pulse went nuts. “Can we quit talking about my butt?”

“I can stop talking about it, yes.”

She aimed a glare at him.

“My mind can’t make promises.”

“And yet you don’t marry foreigners.”

“And your ass seems to give zero fucks about that,” he marveled.

“Wonder what your Sarah would think about your opinion about my ass.”

He kept his gaze and smile on her. “I don’t wonder at all.”

“Well, I *damn* sure wouldn’t put up with that.”

“Noted.”

She nodded, putting her elbows on her knees. “Noted,” she muttered.

“Thank you for being so sweet to Becky by the way. Are you trying to win points with me?”

She snapped her head at him. “Why are you baiting me? I’m not nice to people for points.”

“You’re fun to bait. You bite so hard on each one I throw at you.”

“Maybe I’ll bite for real if you keep it up.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling into a covered cove.

The motor shut off and she looked around. “This it?”

“No. This is a place I wanted to show you. And I would bite you back.”

Her heart pounded at the sudden serious look on his face.

“Turn and look behind you.”

She did and gasped then turned more. The trees all around them flashed with hundreds of green lights.

“Some call them fireflies, some call them green-light fairies.”

“It’s so...pretty.”

“Yeah,” he said.

Lord he was right at her shoulder, voice all soft at her ear while the swamp insects screamed all around them. Her pulse hammered. If she turned her head, his face would be right there. Oh God he smelled amazing.

“What would you say if I asked to add you to my list?”

She turned a little and he didn’t move from where he was, putting their faces inches apart. “What...list?”

“My dating list.”

His gaze lowered to her mouth now sputtering out sounds. “What does that mean?”

“It means I want to date you.”

“I’m...when?”

“After I fulfill my first three date obligations. I promised my Grand Pier I would do that.”

She stared at him and he stared at her. “You want me to wait to date you while you finish dating three other women?”

He reached up and slid his fingers along her hair. “Yes.”

“And... exactly how long will I be... pining away?”

“I just need one date with them.”

“So like...a week?”

“Sounds reasonable. With the hurricane and all.”

His gaze was on her mouth, then moved up, the intense heat in his eyes stealing her breath.

“Well...we can’t...disappoint Grand Pier, I think.”

His smile spread slowly. “So, that’s a yes?” He leaned in and his lips brushed hers.

“Yes,” she said, putting her fingers between their mouths, gasping as he kissed them. “We’re not dating yet,” she whispered.

He slowly moved back, looking at her. “Was just a kiss,” he said, the heat in his eyes licking at her skin.

“I have to wait in line for a week,” she reasoned.

“That is unfair,” he said, his eyes making love to her mouth. “You’ll stay in my apartment while you wait for me?”

Oh mercy. This felt like a trap. “I...don’t know where else I would stay.”

“Good,” he said, his stare moving along her face. “You mind if I take the other bedroom?”

She wet her lips, getting dizzy while sitting still. “It’s your place. Take whatever you need to.”

She put her fingers up again when his mouth came for hers again.

“Will you still be volunteering in the hospital?”

His lips pressed into her fingers, and she closed her eyes, feeling them. “Do you need me to?”

“I need you where I can see you.”

“Why?” she whispered, confused.

“Because I like looking at you.”

“What...about...”

“Nobody needs to know.”

She gasped at feeling his tongue on her skin. But if she moved her hand, she’d kiss him and then no telling what else she’d demand. What was he saying? Something important and she was missing it. He wanted her there where he could see her but without others seeing? “You want to hide,” she realized.

“More like...I want to seduce you.”

Her mind filled with what that would look like, making her short of breath.

“You want that?” His voice was hot as he moved her hand. She closed her eyes, feeling his breath at her parted lips. “Yes or no, Texas.”

Her mouth moved as she panted in the flames he caused while wondering, “I...What...what does that mean?” Lord, not mean, what would he *do*.

“It means when nobody’s looking, we’ll play a give and take game. I take what I want, and you give it.” His lips were barely nipping at her parted ones, his breaths thick.

“But we’re...we’re not...”

“I won’t take that,” he said, his fingers sliding along her neck. “Not until you’re sure.”

“Sure...”

“Sure it’s what you want.”

“And...you?”

“I already fucking know what I want with you. But I need an answer.”

“Yes,” she gasped, ready to pass out with needing everything she’d just agreed to. “Yes.”

His hand slid behind her neck as he pressed his lips fully against hers and she opened for him, getting his groan as he held her still.

“You already being my good girl?”

Oh God, he was being so nasty and yet...she liked it coming from him. “Yes,” she moaned around gasps.

“But you won’t always be a good girl. Sometimes you’ll be bad.” His tongue licked slowly along hers. “And I’ll have to be so fucking mean to you.”

She gave weak cries as he kissed her more. She wanted all that with him. God, was this really happening?

“Yeah, I knew you’d want to be a bad girl for me.” His hot accusation in her mouth made her need it more.

“So bad,” she gasped as his fingers slid up her scalp and clenched in her hair. “Patches.”

He pulled her hair and moved her mouth on his. “I’ll make you suck my cock. You want that?”

“Please,” she whimpered, squirming her butt to get friction on her clit.

“You *will* fucking beg just like that,” he swore, his tongue lashing at hers. “You fucking make me crazy,” he gasped in her mouth. “You make me want to be so fucking mean to you. To your pussy. To your fucking ass. I’m going to punish that ass you’re always teasing the whole fucking world with. That’s what you need, isn’t it?”

“So much,” she panted.

“Stand up.”

She was doing this. She was standing and he was undoing her jeans, and he wasn’t being slow and easy about it.

“Hold on to my shoulders.”

She did then gasped when he yanked her jeans down, his muscles rippling under her fingers.

“*Black fucking* panties, baby?” He lowered them a whole lot slower, his hands feeling her as he did. She stepped out of them, and he moved his hands back up, staring right at her privates. His touch circled behind her, his gaze rising to lock on hers as his fingers encountered her butt. She wanted to close her eyes, her heart pounding mercilessly with fear of what he thought. She really needed him to like it. His eyes rolled shut as he felt every inch of her butt, his touch barely there. They opened again, seeming to glow in the moonlight. “Take everything off.”

She unbuttoned her top and slid out of it. He took her hands and guided her down onto the seat where he stared at her as he slid one bra strap off her shoulder, then the other. She reached up and undid the clasp at the front and his eyes were there at the scene, watching. He pushed the bra open and his breaths came thicker as his gaze moved from one then the other, watching as he softly traced and teased, turning her

moans nearly frantic when he focused on the very tips of her nipples.

His hands lowered to her knees, and her cries rose as he pushed her knees wide open. "I'm going to take your first orgasm, Texas," he shuddered, his gaze hot between her legs before raising up to hers. "You're going to be a good girl and give it to me?"

"Yes," she gasped, holding her legs open as he moved onto his knees between them. He placed a hand at the top of her ass, staring into her face as he grazed his other fingers between her open folds, the barely touch drawing her cry.

"You want it so fucking bad, don't you?"

She lifted her hips, her mouth opening more as she reached for his teasing fingers. "Patches," she moaned. "Please. Finger me."

"You need my finger in your tight pussy?"

"Yes, yes."

"Show me how much you want it." His hand at her ass dug into muscle, helping her thrust. "Come on baby," he urged, giving her the tip of his finger. "Give me your tight silk."

She lifted higher, flicking and getting more of his finger. "Oh, God."

"Yeah, look at you. You're fucking my finger?"

"Yes," she shot out, flicking faster.

"You want more?"

"So much," she begged.

"Come get it," he ordered, holding his finger still.

She braced a foot on the edge of the boat, gaining more leverage and moved herself faster. "Patches," she begged weakly.

His hand on her butt turned hard and he shoved his finger in so deep, hitting her clit with his thumb. Her orgasm

came and she grabbed on to his face, giving one shocked cry after another in his mouth as he forced her to meet every hammering jab of his finger.

“Oh, fuck, you kill me,” he swore, sounding so hot and pissed while not letting up. She’d never had an orgasm like it, endless, violent waves of pleasure shook her on and on, his lusty moans louder than hers by the end of it.

Somehow, she ended in his lap, their chests pressed together, his hot, strong arms holding her so tight their hearts pounded against one another. He sent aftershocks of pleasure through her ear with his breathless, tormented French, “Jae brool pour twa” over and over.

He’d just done all that. And she’d let him. Oh God. She tightened her arms around him, never wanting to stop feeling the hot, strong bond between them.

“Tu- a-doo-ray, mah jolie petite Texas?”

She dropped her head back as he kissed along her neck. “What...about Texas,” she moaned.

His laugh was soft and hot on her skin. “I asked if my pretty little Texas loved it.”

Her heart leapt and danced in her chest. “I’ve never had anything so amazing in my life,” she needed him to know.

His arms tightened with a deep moan that tingled in her nipples. “You’re too fucking beautiful for me,” he swore, his mouth moving to the other side of her neck while his words stole her heart and breath. Every buried hunger filled her greedy fingers now kneading along his scalp.

“I swear, *you’re* the beautiful one,” she thought. “Show me what to do for you.”

He gave another groan, this one harsher. “I will, mah jolie. Tonight. When you’re sleeping. I’ll come and take more things from you, oui?”

“Oui,” she gasped, her body already on fire for that. “What is...oui?”

He smiled on her mouth. “It means yes.”

“You’re...asking?”

He tugged her lower lip with his teeth. “No. Setting it in stone.”

Her pulse hammered between her legs again. “Like...a promise?”

Chills passed through her when his fingers slid up in her hair and trembled with restrained hunger. “Yes, mah jolie Tegan. A promise written in stone.”

She found his mouth with hers and kissed him. “Say it in English,” she whispered.

“Mah moovez fee wants to make me?”

She pulled back smiling at him. “I don’t know what you’re saying,” she implored, kissing his smile.

“I said my pretty Tegan.” He angled his head, his hand moving along the column of her neck. “And my bad girl wants to make me.”

“Let me do you. Please.”

“Later.”

She sighed a little. “Am I begging wrong?”

His soft laugh filled her mouth. “You could *never* beg wrong. Or enough.”

She gasped and jerked in his arms at a growl nearby. “What was that!”

“Seems you’ve excited an audience.”

She clung to him tighter, hearing it again. “Me!”

“It’s a mating call.”

“It sounds like a dadgum t-rex!” She gasped when he gripped her tit in his hand and took the top half into his mouth, the sound in his chest way too close to the monster nearby. “Oh God...” she started, then his teeth and tongue raked her nipple and turned her thoughts into “Yes.”

“You need *so* many orgasms,” he said, his jagged breaths fanning her wet nipple. The deep ache between her

legs made her want to be so nasty with him but she wasn't sure *how* exactly things were done. She knew *what* things were done but not really the steps to make it as perfect as he had.

“You need them too.”

“I fucking do,” he assured, moving to her other breast. “And you will give me those.”

“You’ll...show me?”

His mouth shot up to hers, fingers biting in her hair as he forced his rough kiss. “I will show you what meh-fet broo-lie.”

“Meh...fet broo-lie?”

“What makes me *burn*.”

“*You* make me burn,” she confessed. “I want to do it back. As perfectly as you did.”

Her words turned him ravenous, and he took it out on her breasts, first one then the other, back and forth like he wanted to eat them both at the same time. She gasped at the slide of his fingers between her open folds. He moved his hungry mouth up to hers as he slowly worked his finger into her, fist back in her hair, tighter than ever. “I want you to ride my fingers.”

She whimpered and gasped as he worked a second finger in her. Her mouth opened with a sharp moan as he stretched her.

“Show me how much you want to *fuck* me.”

The mean grit in his tone sent her off. Holding his body between her thighs, she bounced with abandon, letting the delicious lust turn her into a pure swamp slut. He released her hair to fill his hand with her ass, the bite of his fingers accompanying his growl. She grabbed her tit with one hand his hair in the other, pulling his mouth to her, desperate for every bit of this terrifying passion. His groan was angry and harsh as she fucked his fingers. Another thick finger found its way between her ass cheeks and the second he pressed on that shocking button, it brought the dirtiest heat she never knew

existed along with her orgasm. His finger pushed inside that spot as she came, moving in and out as she strangled his body with her legs and head with her arms, hoarse screams of rapture filling the private swamp cove.

As she came down from that impossible peak, she realized her face was smashed into his shoulder. The sounds she *still* made would've embarrassed her if she wasn't so traumatized from the pleasure. His moans hummed through her as he stroked her body and she watched the surreal light show through the haze in her mind, emerald sparks winking all around. Made her think of little bugs taking naughty pics. She would love pics of what they'd just done. A whole album of them. She would look at them every single day to memorize what it looked like. What he looked like while doing that. What she looked like when he turned her into this woman. What *they* looked like together, locked in such a beautiful pleasure. What did experiencing perfection with the perfect man look like? That's what she really wanted to see.

CHAPTER SIX

Patches was on fire for the rest of the trip through the bayou. He kept Tegan between his legs, not in a hurry to get where they were going. Already she needed another orgasm, and he couldn't wait to get this shit delivered and return where he could give her many. She wanted him to teach her. Fuck, that was precious. He could call himself an expert on a lot of things, but sexual pleasure wasn't ever an area he'd intended to master. But all his mastery skills were salivating to get their hands on those details and become an expert immediately.

He leaned down and kissed her head, again regretting his promise to his Grand Pier to date those women. But that was bought and paid for. He'd try it on and return it when it didn't fit. And it didn't fit because he was already fitted with this beautiful woman between his legs.

He stroked her arms, loving her silky skin. His dick ached at recalling the feel of her ass. Mother of all fucks, nothing had ever made him need to be as mean as that ass of hers did. Infuriatingly thick and needing to be punished. He'd never wanted to play rough with a woman before. But he hadn't met *that ass*.

Finally arriving at the location, he helped her out of the boat, getting mindful of his surroundings.

“Anything I need to know before meeting these people?” she wondered. “Mannerisms, customs?”

“Just stay close to me and don't talk unless you feel the need to. They're respectable people, mostly to themselves. Patriarchal types.”

“What's that mean to them?”

“The men lead, the women submit.” He shrugged.
“About sums it up.”

She nodded. “Well...that’s not so bad.”

“No,” he agreed, swatting off a mosquito. “It’s about a half-mile walk from here. Let’s add more repellent. The mahdigwan are bad out here.”

“The what?”

“Mosquitos.”

“Oh.”

He sprayed his hands and patted her clothes down with it then dabbed some on her face and any exposed areas. Their gazes locked for several seconds and he leaned in and stole a kiss, smiling at the look of surprise she gave. He was going to really like *taking* from her.

He held her hand, finding the moon full enough not to need light on the familiar path. Halfway in Patches stopped and turned, putting a silencing finger to his mouth. He jerked his head left, seeing a blond head in the distance. Sounded female. And distressed. He looked at Tegan and she saw it too, pointing and mouthing *somebody’s crying*.

He held her hand tight and made his way closer. Definitely a woman crying. His stomach tensed as he got closer. Whatever was wrong had her so distracted she didn’t hear them until he knelt next to her.

She sat against a tree with her head on her knees and arms covering her head. Not wanting to startle her, he called softly, “Mah-dam?”

She sucked in a breath and jerked her head up and Tegan gasped as Patches grabbed hold of her arm before she could run. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” he hurried. “I’m the doctor of the Hoard, I’m just here bringing supplies and I heard you. Chee-ah feh salah, angel?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Who hurt you?” he tried, firmer, sure her orbital bone was broken by the amount of swelling around her eye and

face.

She lowered her head and covered it again, sobs straining out of her. He looked up at Tegan, his rage burning as he stood and looked around. “Let me take you back, it’s not safe out here,” he said eyeing her, remembering their enemies.

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

He lowered back down again. “Why can’t you? Who should I talk to about this?”

She snapped her head up, immediately shaking it. “Don’t tell, please,” she begged. “He’ll only punish me more.”

“Who will?”

“Please just leave me,” she begged, looking behind the tree.

“Who is he?” Patches demanded. “You have to tell me, or I have to go ask questions.”

“My husband,” she gasped, her face petrified.

“Your husband did this?” Patches asked, having to lower his voice to hide his rage. “Do your people know he’s hurting you?” He’d guarantee this wasn’t the first time now.

She let out another sob, nodding.

“Oh my God,” Tegan whispered. “We can’t leave her here with them.”

“Can I look at your injuries, angel?”

She shook her head. “Please leave before they know. Please!”

Patches stood and pulled Tegan who suddenly yanked her hand out of his. “We can’t just leave her!” she barely whispered.

He grabbed her head and put his mouth right at her ear. “I would have to drag her out of here. I can’t do that. These people might be peaceful but they’re very protective of their clan. We need to go now.”

Thankfully she got the nature of the situation and hurried with him back to the boat. Once they were back on the water, she asked, “What will you do?”

“I don’t think that’s a common occurrence. But I *will* get to the bottom of it. I’ll call Bullets when we get back.”

“Why Bullets?”

“This is his Hatch. His jurisdiction.”

“What will he do? You heard what she said. If he goes there and says anything she’ll just get it worse.”

“Yes, I heard,” he swore. “He’ll need to invoke the Bayou Brigade code which allows him to take a small army and arrest him.”

“What about her?”

“I’ll let him know she needs to be removed from there.”

“She can come to the hospital. She can have the room I was gonna stay in, I’ll sleep on the couch or something.”

“She’d have to go to Bullet’s Hatch unless I put her there as a patient. Which I could.”

“My God, that poor thing.”

Patches eyed the genuine concern on her pretty face. “Why are you a mile away?”

He leaned and took her hand, helping her to the seat before his, again stealing a kiss before returning to his spot.

“What if they give trouble?” Tegan wondered, still worried.

“That would be pretty stupid of them.”

She aimed her worried eyes at him. “Why?”

“Because the Bishops and his Twelve rule these swamps with an iron rod.”

Patches pulled his buzzing phone from his back pocket. Sarah. “I’m on my way back, is everything okay?”

“It’s Grand Pier, he’s not wanting to take his meds.”

“Boo-san,” he muttered with a sigh. “I’ll handle it.”

“You get that stuff delivered?”

“No. Ran into something. Gonna have to wait.”

“All right. Well, the mothers are all tucked in for the night. Did you still want to meet tonight?”

His mind stumbled at that. “Uh...shit, remind me what’s happening?”

She gave a little laugh. “We were going to go over final plans?”

“For the hurricane,” he remembered.

“Uhhh yep, that’s the one. I can’t find Tegan, hope she didn’t get lost.”

“She’s with me.”

“Oh good,” she said.

“We’re ten minutes out,” Patches said, ignoring the unspoken curiosity in her tone. He sure didn’t need her guessing at his intentions with Tegan. That would surely get messy. It was no longer a secret that the swamp women were up in arms about these foreign women moving in on their male territory. He understood, he was right at the front of that charge. Till Tegan.

“See you when you get here, then,” Sarah said.

“Yes ma’am,” he said, hanging up.

“Everything okay?” Tegan asked.

Patches scrolled for Bullet’s number, not missing the same curious tone Sarah had in hers. These women. They had their own language going on between them with an inside track you knew existed but didn’t understand. “Grand Pier is being cah-nie with his meds.”

“Cah-nie?”

“Fussy, rebellious, troublesome,” he said. “Gonna report what we found to Bullets then when we get back, I want to get Nitro taken care of.”

“But he’s okay,” she double checked. “Grand Pier.”

“Yes, he’s fine,” he said, wondering why she felt the need to be brave when showing her concern for him. Did she think he’d find that strange? Over the line? Dramatic? Fake? Hard to know why she used her Texan bravado when she did.

He did love her strength but not when it hid her fear and worry from him. He took her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a kiss to her fingers. He watched all her fears melt from her face and damn he loved having that kind of power over her. “You okay, ma-Texas Tegan?”

Her eyes rose from his mouth to his, her soft, vulnerable side begging him to use more of that power on her. He surely would. That very night. She gave him a little smile. “I’m...not gonna lie, I get to feeling out of sorts here. An island almost. With a contagion.”

He slid her knuckles along his lips. “You are surely contagious,” he said. “And you’re *my* island.” She locked her gaze on his, her breaths shallow. “Oui?” he whispered.

She nodded and he leaned in, stopping just before her mouth, feeling the silk of her cheek with his fingers. “Don’t fear me, Texas.” He moved her hand to his chest and pressed it against the raging thump of his heart. “This is *your* island.” Her gasp hit his mouth and he kissed her, being extra soft and gentle as he melted more of her fears.

“Your...phone,” she whispered.

“What fucking phone?” he murmured, nipping delicately on her lips.

She gasped a laugh, and he eased back, searching her face for anymore symptoms he needed to kiss away. Gone. For now.

He looked, seeing he missed a call from Sarah again. Buh-san, it had begun. She was going to be his biggest issue with this. He’d given her too much hope and that part was going to bite him in his fucking ass but good.

He pulled up Bullet’s number and hit it, eyeing her as it rang.

“Doc,” he answered, sounding curious.

“Hey, I just left the Viking clan in your hatch and I’m calling to report a violation of ordinance 35, Marital Malevolence.

“*What?*” The shock in his dark tone dumped adrenaline in Patches’ blood.

“I saw it with my own eyes. Bloody nose, busted lip. And judging by the swelling on her face and right eye, her orbital bone is fractured.”

“*Which* clan. I got three in my Hatch.”

“Tell him she’s scared, she shouldn’t be left there,” Tegan whispered.

“Also, this is a bit of a hostage situation. She showed fear of further retribution should anybody get involved.”

“Understood,” he muttered, murder in his tone.

“What’s he gonna do?” Tegan whispered. “When?”

“What’s your plan?”

He heard the crackle of a radio. “38, come in.”

The static broke several times. “Yeah, boss?”

“Gather fifteen men for a Bayou Brigade.”

“You got it, boss,” he said, sounding eager. “Weapons?”

“Hot and hostile. We’re grabbing a male and the victim. Female with injuries.”

“You fuckin’ got it,” he said, sounding thrilled to do something of use. “Location?”

“One of our *Viking* clans,” he muttered, like he wanted to spit. “Meet me in fifteen.”

“Holy shit. We doing this tonight?”

“No. We’re doing it *now*.”

“I’ll text you the coordinates,” Patches said when 38 signed off.

“I’ll call Eveque and be waiting for them.”

Patches located his joint and lighter in his boot pocket and pulled them out, firing it up and taking a long hit.

“What y’all do for this kinda thing?” Tegan asked.

He released his breath and handed it to her, getting a quick headshake. He chuckled and opened his phone, finding their codes. “It falls directly under the Bayou Bishop Marital Codes.”

“Oh! You have codes?”

“Lots of them. That one is under Ordinance 35—Marital Malevolence—Defined as crimes committed by creatures masquerading as a man in an unforgivable act of domestic tyranny. Enacted Penalties are immediate protective custody for the victim and depending on the severity and circumstances of the offense, the offender is subject to no less than five years imprisonment, with the possibility of life for the most egregious violations.”

He took another hit, holding it briefly then continued. “In addition, the offender provides restitution to the victim and performs community service as determined by the presiding judicial authority—Bullets in this case. Then the offense is entered into the permanent community records, ensuring long-term accountability.”

“Wow,” she said, sounding impressed.

“The real fun comes with Bullet’s form of community service.”

“Like what?”

“Well...like one eye Jake. He still serves his wife and her new husband as a field hand. He provides food for his family with his own two hands. Her new husband is only required to meet the needs her husband forfeited as a husband. He’ll serve his family that he wrecked till he draws his last breath.”

“Holy guacamole. And what he do?”

He raised his brows. “Committed adultery.”

He smiled at her huge eyes. “Now I’m definitely moving here.”

“Yeah? Where you gonna be staying?”

She gave him a big laugh and the sound made him fucking ravenous for her. “Oh, I don’t know. Might set up me a swamp stop and live there.”

“I might apply for a job.”

She gave him another laugh. “Like what?” she challenged, curious.

He shrugged. “Some kind of... service.”

“Service, huh? What you sellin’ swamp cowboy so I know if I’m buyin?”

“Not selling anything, Texas. I’m bartering.”

“Oh yeah? What you got like that?” she asked, as heat and everything else he craved filled her gaze.

He grinned at her. “Just all your wildest dreams come true.”

“Oh is that all?” she laughed, not hiding that thrill in her voice. “And what you wantin’ in return for all these miracles?”

He held her gaze, considering that. “Everything.”

He laughed at how much she liked that. “Just everything?”

“Yep.”

She sighed with a “Well,” and looked around. He reached for her hand and took it in his as she finally angled her sparkling gaze at him. “Funny how I just so happen to have one of those on the tippy top shelf in the back of storage.”

He took her face in his hands and kissed her softly. “You been saving everything for me? Your swamp cowboy?”

“Yes,” she breathed, holding his face and kissing him back with a breathless laugh. “I saved everything for my swamp cowboy.”

“Tegan, this is Felix, Nitro’s wife. And this is my brother Nitro.”

“Very nice to make your acquaintance,” Tegan said, shaking the tiny girl’s hand while trying to ignore the bandages on her neck and shoulder. She offered her hand to the brother, not wanting him to think she feared him even if she did.

He regarded it and looked at her, giving it a one second shake.

Lord his skin was *hot*. And those eyes. The blue one was freakily bright.

“From Texas, huh?” Nitro muttered.

“Yes sir. Born and bred.”

His eyes swung to Patches, and she had to wonder over the barest smile and look in his gaze. “Born *and* bred. Well, Doc? What’s next?”

“Tegan, you want to let him know his options?”

“I sure can,” she said. “So, there’s invasive and non-invasive options and since the non-invasive one performs just as good, I’d suggest you go with that which would be your upper arm in what they refer to as the subcutaneous tissue. Same place they put nicotine patches or birth control.”

“Do it,” he said, his head lowered. “And then?” He eyed Patches.

“Then we upload the information we want monitored into the program that tracks whatever levels need tracking.”

“And when they go off the rails?” he wondered.

“You’ll get the recommended prescription to bring it back. Lesion has all the protocols ready that you might need until we can develop something automatic.”

“I don’t think it’ll get to that,” Felix said.

“I want it,” Nitro said, his voice hard.

“It’s better if you learn to control it,” Felix tried again. “Your body needs to determine the production of these anti-dotes.”

“And I *told* you I can’t let you be the test tube where I lose my shit and f...” He shook his lowered head, eyeing Patches. “I want whatever he has. When I have *no* doubt in my mind that I can control it, you’ll be the first to know but *I* have to be the one to know that. Not a test.”

“You got it.”

Tegan couldn’t keep her eyes off the tiny woman, wondering what on earth she’d endured and why was she not more terrified.

“We’ve already controlled it,” Felix injected with a surprising strength for her size. “What I do with my bats, he responds to that. *I* can fix this. *I should* fix this, it’s *mine* to fix.”

“Baby,” Nitro begged, like they’d had this discussion a million times.

“What!” she demanded, wiping tears. “I did this and it’s only right I fix it,” she gasped, looking at Patches then Tegan. “He doesn’t hurt me,” she said. “He *protects* me. He’s just doing what *I* need and want, he’s responding to *my* needs, that’s all. I can control that, I can help him. And I have, tell them Lukas.”

He barely shook his lowered head. “She’s right,” he conceded with a *but I still can’t* in his tone. “Every hunger I had before all this is now multiplied by a thousand. And every time I feed her, I feed me. And guess what? This hunger is only growing. Even still, I don’t think I would ever hurt her but that doesn’t mean what I’m doing isn’t hurting her.”

She undid one of her bandages on her shoulder. “Look at it,” she said to Patches, then showed Tegan. “He did that maybe four hours ago. By tomorrow, you won’t find it.”

Tegan eyed her, then Patches, not wanting to say it out loud and piss off the bat dude, but that was freakin' remarkable. "Don't let the kooks in white jackets *ever* hear about this," she muttered, getting those creepy eyes aimed right at her. "Well, I sure ain't sayin' anything," she said, making a cross over her heart with a finger. "But I should point something out that we really need to remember."

They all looked at her and she eyed Patches and reached over, pulling his t-shirt up to show his colorful skin. "It's clearly not Felix we need to be worried about, but anybody else unfortunate enough to happen near when these uh...mating urges happen. There ain't no fault in love, and this little lady has a very brave amount of it as...he has for her. But uh...that exchange and the protection that comes with it stops with them. Sure, I think it can be controlled, but...we definitely might want to consider manual protocols till *he's* confident. He's the only one that actually fully knows." She regarded Felix who turned and wiped her eyes.

"She's pissed at you," Nitro said lowly. "And guess what that suddenly makes you?"

"A threat," Tegan already knew.

"I'm not pissed at her," she said, spinning around. "I'm just *pissed!*"

He chuckled dryly. "Guess what can't seem to differentiate that?" He looked at Patches. "Tag me and get me hooked up to whatever you have. I'm ready to get the fuck out of this place."

"You got it. Oh and Eveque called a meeting tonight so we can all get on the same page. You can do virtual."

Nitro eyed him. "At the Basilique?"

"Yep."

"You going?"

"Virtual for me."

He nodded. "I'm ready for some fresh air. You think it's safe?" he asked.

“I can call Lesion and ask him.”

“Where is he, anyway?” he wondered, almost like he might miss him. Almost.

“With 8-Bit. He had uh...some kind of episode,” Patches said, making Tegan wonder about that again.

“Episode,” he muttered, like this individual was way above those.

“I just checked on him a bit ago. He’s stable.”

“What the fuck happened to him?”

Patches seemed to choose his words carefully before saying, “Cat met his past. It didn’t go over well.”

“Oh fuck,” Nitro muttered, sounding genuinely sorry for him. Tegan was realizing just how close they all were. Like real brothers. “What else has happened while I went bat-shit crazy?”

Patches snickered and Felix crossed her arms, immediately removing the funny from the moment.

“Tell him about those damn Vikings,” Tegan reminded him.

“Vikings?” Nitro echoed, like he’d never heard of them. “What the hell’s going on?”

Tegan said, “We found a poor girl in the woods beat up by her husband.” She eyed Patches. “Sorry, this isn’t my business, you finish.

“No, it’s fine, you were an eyewitness.”

“I sure was and if I need to testify, I will happily do that.” She looked at Felix. “Her husband busted her lip and nose and broke bones around her eye, right?” she double checked with Patches now.

“Ninety-nine percent sure. I need to x-ray to verify.”

“Wow,” Felix said, eyes wide. “You never hear a bad word about them.”

“You never hear word period,” Nitro said. “Which clan,”

“Bullets Hatch.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yep.”

“You told him?”

“I did.”

“What he say?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised if he’s not already there collecting the wife and the husband.”

“The wife?” Felix wondered.

“She was terrified of them finding out we knew,” Tegan said. “Worried they’d hurt her more.”

Nitro appeared shocked. “This is going on in *our* swamps?”

“I know.”

“What will they do?” Felix wondered. “Are they even part of our Hoard? I thought they weren’t.”

“If they live in these swamps,” Nitro said, “They answer to us whether they want to or not.”

“Probably why Eveque called a meeting,” Patches thought. “Bullets was headed over there tonight with fifteen men. They were going hot and hostile were his words.”

“Holy shit,” Nitro said. “Just what we fucking need right now. More enemies.”

“Not exactly the kind of friends you want either,” Tegan said. “Not if they’re okay with that.”

“I don’t think this is a common thing,” Patches thought.

“They stay to themselves,” Felix reminded. “They have their own little world. I remember my Pah-Pah saying that. I used to think they were make believe.”

“Well, I know what Eveque thinks about them,” Nitro said, eying Patches.

“What?”

“Remember The Noctambule War? We called for help from everybody.”

“Shit, right,” Patches said.

“They wanted no part of it.”

“Exactly. And Eveque doesn’t let that kind of thing go.”

“And he shouldn’t,” Felix said. “I didn’t even know that one. Now, that’s BS.”

Nitro said, “They didn’t help and they never asked us for help for anything. But I do remember him saying to mark his words. One day they’d find themselves needing. And he’d be there to remind them.”

“That might actually be a thing before Belle Eveque,” Patches said.

Tegan watched them both laugh at that, making her wonder. “That’s his wife, right?”

“His wife, his obsession, and the swamp’s saint,” Nitro said.

“So, she’s gonna make him play nice,” Felix interpreted.

“Maybe she’ll surprise us. Or ya’ll,” she corrected, not wanting to sound like she had rights to family related interests.

“Maybe she will compel them to get along,” Felix said.

“Oh yeah, Juliette said she’s got the Compelling,” Tegan remembered.

“Yes,” Nitro said. “She makes people want to do whatever she wants.” He reached for Felix and tugged her close. “Just like you.”

“I think I have that gift with my daddy,” Tegan said, getting Patches’ chuckle.

“I bet you do.”

“She seems smart from the little I’ve heard,” Tegan said. “Maybe she’ll compel them to get off their asses and mingle, see that the families in the hoard have a lot to offer them. Like how to treat women, for one.”

“Maybe you should stick around and befriend our Belle Eveque,” Patches said, grinning at her. “Compel her to compel them?” He sighed and pulled his phone out his pocket, looking. “Nurse Sarah is calling.”

“She’s wondering when you’re taking her on that date,” Felix said. “You realize the whole hospital knows all about it.”

Patches groaned and shook his head.

“You did that one to yourself,” Nitro chuckled. “Mr. Marry local.”

Felix smacked him on the shoulder. “You act like that’s a bad thing?”

“That’s not what I meant.” He wrapped his arms around her. “You’re with me, aren’t you?”

She gasped, looking over her shoulder. “No, I’m not with you, you’re with *me*.”

He gave a big laugh and Felix joined in, the sound making Tegan smile. She had the feeling those two hadn’t had very many of these moments over the past three days. She glanced at Patches and her breath caught at catching him watching her. He tossed his head toward the door with a wink and headed toward it.

“We’ll be back to get you tagged in thirty minutes,” he said at the door. “And please. No blood baths till after?”

“We’ll try,” Felix said, squealing out a laugh when Nitro gobbled her neck.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Patches didn't like the fix he was in. He didn't want to cause more rumors than what likely already circulated about him and Tegan, but he damn sure didn't like denying what she needed from him. More than ever he realized her thick skin was thin as silk with him. He needed to protect that. But how the hell would he do both? "Can you do me a favor and go get the small black bag from the medicine cabinet in the downstairs apartment while I check on our mothers? Bring it to Grand Pier's room, I'm headed that way. Then we'll get Nitro tagged."

"Sounds like a plan."

He watched her hurry off, wondering what was in her head. Besides pretending to be the strong woman who wasn't afraid her swamp cowboy would break the heart he took while she wasn't looking.

"Finally!" Sarah gushed when spotting him up top. She hurried to him with the phone, holding it out. "Look at this," she said. He took the phone. "Category four. Could be a five. And straight for us."

"How are our mothers?" he asked, making his way to Becky's room first.

"They're comfortable and their bellies are full. Becky's sleeping, I need to do her vitals in ten minutes. Grand Pier has been trying to escape his room to go smoke on the front porch. Caught him three times!"

"Mon Dieu," he muttered, detouring to the other mother's room while shaking his head. "He doesn't have cigarettes, does he?"

“If he does, he’s smuggled them where I can’t find them.”

“Guessing you looked.”

“Oh yes, and he just had a blast watching me dig, telling me I’d never find it.”

“He’s always toying with you.”

“I know,” she said, fondly. “I tell him he’s my favorite bayou buzzard and he gets a kick out of that.”

“I bet he does.” Which was why he pushed Sarah so hard on him. He barely stopped himself from asking if she’d do him a favor and marry him.

“I heard about the Viking situation.”

He paused at the room wondering how.

“Word traveled real fast on that one,” she muttered.

“I see that.”

“Bullets left out with fifteen men. What on earth is going on?”

“We found a woman in their woods that had suffered physical spousal abuse.”

“So it’s true,” she said, shaking her head with a hand on her hip. “I’m shocked. And also, I need to talk to you about Tegan.”

He eyed her. “What about?”

“Did you know her brother is on his way over here?”

“For what?”

“I could hardly understand him with his *drawl*, but it sounded like *Daddy* wanted him to come get his baby girl because she’s scared, so here he comes. I told him come on, it’s your crazy Texan hide, but if you end up stuck here, *all* abled bodies will be expected to work if we have need. He thinks he’s gonna drive on in and drive on out.”

“If he times it just right, he’ll be on the highway in the hurricane,” Patches muttered, while wondering what was

really going on. He didn't recall hearing anything about her wanting to leave on that phone call, only that she was nervous.

"I said that exact same thing." She knocked on the room door. "It's me, Sarah, Dr. Patches is here to check on things."

"Come in," somebody called.

"I'm gonna go take Becky's vitals so she's awake when you get there."

"Thank you, Sarah." He spotted Tegan making her way to Grand Pier's room with the black bag, curious with the look on her face. Had she talked to her brother?

Patches went through his checks with Mrs. Deveroux in record time, then did the same with Mrs. Boutine. He detoured to Grand Pier's room, wondering if she was still there.

He heard his Grand Pier's laugh when he got to the door and listened. "Awww, shaaa peechay, das sad-sad."

"I'm not sad about it. My daddy made sure I had plenty of memories as did my Mimi and Slappy. Or my grandmother and grandfather. They're wonderful and I thank God I still have them."

"Meh, you know, Patches—"

He opened the door. "You called?" he asked, shutting the door.

"Meh, no, I was just talkin' to Lil Texas and she tole me her momma died just like yours, when she was bein' born."

Patches looked at her, finding her mouth a perfect oval. "Your momma too?" she wondered quietly.

"Sho nuff. Das why his daddy—"

"Grand *Pier*," Patches cut in, shaking his head. "Stop telling her all my family affairs. Unless you want me to marry her, then I guess you can tell her everything?"

His Grand Pier appeared dumbfounded. "Meh...I tawt you said you was marryin Lil Sarah?"

“No, no, no, I never said that. I said I’d take Sarah and two other ladies on a date.”

“I don’t know why you wasen all you money on three dates when you already know which one you like the most?”

“I’m not spending money, Grand Pier and I’d really rather my love life not be a public discussion.”

“Dis ain’t no public,” he dismissed with a grumble.

“Well, we got a whole Texas sitting right there, listening.”

He gave a big booming toothless laugh at that then looked at Tegan. “He done call you a whole Texas.” He regarded Patches. “She *do* got a lot of Texas in her, dis fuh true.”

“Can I borrow Miss Texas for a bit, we have a bat-shit crazy patient I need help with.”

He gave another big laugh. “Meh, you got more than one of me here?”

“Yep, we have two of you. And would you stop trying to escape by yourself? If you really want to go out, I’ll come take you. But wait for me.”

“Meh, I’m not cripple!” he complained.

“But you take a spill off the porch, and you will be.”

“Take a spill,” he said, finding that so funny. “Go see about dat crazy bat patient. Tell Nurse Sarah I need help wit my pillow, it keeps gettin’ all flat.”

“I’ll send Nurse Ann, you’re running Lil Sarah ragged, I think.”

“Ohhhh, can you make her bring me another popsicle? My mouth is so dry. The orange one.”

“No, but I can ask her. See you soon.”

“He’s like a kid on vacation,” Tegan giggled when they left out. “He is so precious. I see why you dote on him.”

“I do *not* dote on him.” He paused with her in the hall. “Did you talk to your brother?”

“Brother? Which one?”

“Sarah said he called and is on his way here. Couldn’t reach you.”

“What!?” She pulled her phone out. “Why, is something wrong?”

“No, something about you being scared and your Pier wanting you home.”

She held the phone to her ear with her mouth open. “Tate, what are you doing?” She put her hand on her hip and cocked it, drawing his gaze to *that ass*. “You can’t just come over here!”

He suddenly realized having her brother there might be a great idea. He hurried over and put his mouth to her ear. “Let him come. We could stand another male distraction.”

Her mouth dropped open, followed by her eyes doing the same. She turned away from him. “Fine, but I’m not leaving till after the hurricane.” Silent pause. “Because I’m *needed* here, there’s pregnant women all over about to have babies! You come and you’re stuck here with me, just so you know. I ain’t leavin’.” She let out a cute gasp. “You better not cause trouble, Tater, I mean it. Uh huh. Right. I know how you like to *help* me. When are you gettin’ here?” She shook her head now. “Well don’t *speed*, dummy. You won’t do me no good if you’re not in one piece.” Patches grinned at hearing she cared. “Call me when you get in Breaux Bridge. Well, I know that,” she snapped quietly. “I love you too. Bye!”

She turned with wide eyes and another *gasp*. “Can you believe the *nerve*, treatin’ me like a baby?”

“I cannot fathom it,” he said, smiling, ready to have her alone.

She pointed at him. “Oh, you’re just his type, I can tell.”

“I can assure you I am,” he said, heading for Becky’s room now. He stopped at her room and looked at her. “How about you wait in the apartment for me. If you come in, it’ll take more time.”

“Sure. I’ll get everything ready that I can. Tell her I said hi and I’ll be by later to visit.”

“Maybe,” he said, adding a wink at her suddenly confused face.

Tegan didn’t know what to do with herself while waiting. And knowing. That look in his eyes. Holy-fires, she’d never not know it in him. Her phone rang and she looked, answering. “Tater?”

“Daddy’s asking when I’ll be back, so I told him if all goes as planned, tomorrow afternoon. So that’s the story if he calls. I kinda wanted to see what a hurricane is like myself, and this one’s a record breaker.”

“Geeze, I heard. I’m nervous, very nervous. They’re having parties here!” she whispered. “Like it’s some kind of celebration.”

He laughed. “Sound like my kinda troublemakers.”

She thought about him meeting Patches. Lord, she hoped they hit it off. “Patches is the doctor here, the one I brought the equipment to.”

“Oh yeah, they got the bat woes. What’s that all about?”

“It’s...” What to tell. “It’s complicated,” she said quietly. “I’ll fill you in when you get here. This is some real vampire batman type shit, I kid you not.”

“Like *what?*” he said, suddenly locked on.

“It’s on the hush right now but a man was attacked by a lot of bats, and he was given a serum by one of their...swamp

alchemist and he ain't been right since.”

“What the fuuuuuck?” he said in soprano.

“They’re using the tags to have a live feed to certain markers in his blood and the alchemist has created protocols to bring those levels back to normal, so he doesn’t go batty. Because when he does, it gets comical, and I don’t mean funny, I mean like comic book type shit. Oh hell, Patches is coming, I gotta go! Don’t tell *anybody* about this Tater or I swear the world will learn some of your dirtiest secrets!”

“Damn, girl, I won’t. No need to threaten my balls.”

“Love you, bye!”

She hung up right as the door opened and the sight of him tripled her pulse till it felt like she had five hearts in her chest. “Hey,” she gasped, smiling and feeling like she looked guilty as all get out. “Just talked to my brother again,” she said, mostly needing something to say.

He locked the door.

Angled a hot look at her.

Mercy.

The look on Tegan’s flushed face pressed all of Patches’ dirty buttons and even created new ones. His pulse relocated to his cock as lust laid out the perfect pleasure session for them. Question was, what dirty thing first. Too many options. Did he want to make her pick? Or just take what he wanted and see how good she was at giving.

The latter brought a jerk to his cock that settled it. Definitely would see how good she was at letting him take.

He watched her face as he removed his white coat and tossed it on the arm of the nearest chair. He removed his t-shirt and tossed it next. “Remember our game?” he asked, undoing his pants.

She stared as he slid them down, barely nodding. He sat in the armchair, naked, watching her face now locked on his cock he held tall. “Come stand right before me.”

Seeing she couldn't take her eyes off his cock determined even more.

When she obeyed, he looked up at her. “Kneel.”

Her light gasp burned in his balls, and he opened his knees, making more room for that building fire as she knelt.

He decided he wanted to hear all about what had her enraptured with his cock. “Tell me what you think about my cock.”

He angled his head at her, taking hold of his balls with his other hand. “It's...uh...big.”

Desire softened her eyes even more as she watched him slowly stroke the length. “You like that it's big?”

She quickly wet her lips, nearly panting with whatever was on her mind. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Tell me what your pussy thinks about it, Texas. Is that clit aching? Burning?”

“Yes,” she gasped, nodding as she moved her gaze up to his chest then back down to his cock.

“I know how fucking wet it is. And that it wants to suck my cock. But your sassy mouth will know every inch of my mean dick before your pussy gets a single taste. And *that ass* of yours? It will surely get the worst of my wrath. Always taunting me without mercy. It's surely the cruelest thing on your beautiful body. Every single thing about it makes me furious. Makes me *hungry* to *punish* you.” He slid his hips lower, putting his cock closer and opening wider. “And you need to know that every word I just said is *not* part of any game, baby.”

Her eyes closed as his hunger moved along his spine like molten lead. “Take all your clothes off and kneel between my legs again. But do it all very fucking slow.”

Patches debated on more than one orgasm with her. To jack off while she stripped down was more erotic than anything he'd ever experienced. He could always punish her for it.

He strangled his cock as she stood before him and slowly made her way out of her clothes. Every shy, jerky move fed into his endless supply of lust rage she'd created in him in such a short time. Once naked, she quickly knelt before him. Her tits held him utterly captive, the soft, supple mounds kissing one another while her thick nipples told all her nasty secrets directly to his cock.

"Bring your mouth closer," he said, the command tingling in his tight balls.

The second she obeyed, the sight of her nipples that close to his cock made his breaths burn.

"You have my cock dripping," he said. "Wet your nipples on it."

He opened his knees wider as she took hold of her mound and moved the thick nipple over the precum gathered on his slit. Heat speared him at feeling that along with her sharp gasp and attention to the task.

"Fuck," he whispered, watching her wet the other one. "Spread it on your nipples with your fingers."

She leaned back a little, her brows furrowing as she made those fat fucking nipples shine.

"It's time to use your sassy mouth. Start real slow. Kiss the top." He moved his hands out of her way and, groaning when she wrapped the base with hesitant hands and leaned in. "Fuck," he breathed, sliding his fingers along her cheek. "Did you know you have perfect lips? Fucking made for me."

She moaned, opening her mouth a little, her lips covering half the head.

"I love those sweet kisses, baby," he shuddered. "But I want your nasty ones. Let me feel your tongue."

Her obedience was too perfect as he brought both hands to hold her head, watching her kisses turn hotter, nastier. “Texas,” he breathed through the heat she brought. “Suck it now.”

She covered the entire head with her sexy fucking mouth, and he gave a groan as he held her tight. “Your lips are wrapped on my cock baby. It’s more than I fucking dreamed.”

Her moans picked up as mewls came with her diligent sucks.

“Your fucking tongue on my slit...”

The head popped from her tight suction, and she rained fire on his slit with flicks of her tongue. He dug his fingers into her scalp, realizing she thought it was a command. It was now. He let out a seething groan when she went back to sucking, her lips so fucking tight on the thick ridge. He reached and fingered her nipple and her mouth opened with a sharp gasp and he pushed her head down till the head met her hot throat.

“Tegan,” he gushed, moving his hands when she took over, sucking his entire length with a nasty fucking hunger. Her hands roamed up his body then back down, nails digging in his skin, her desperate moans driving the fury in his fire. “You’re sucking it so fucking good, baby. You’re going to sit on my fucking face when you’re done.” She sucked deeper and faster. “Yeah, you like that? You want me sucking that fat clit? Fingering your tight cunt, and *that fucking ass?*”

The vision brought his orgasm plowing through and he grabbed her head again, bucking his hips as he fucked her throat, getting her teeth with every fucking pump. She rode him like a bucking bull, not letting go till he’d given her every drop. The sight of her licking her lips opened up that second phase of lust-fury in him. “Fucking kiss me,” he ordered.

She hurried forward and gave him her mouth. He held her head and took over, eating up the taste of himself, stroking her eager tongue with his as her greedy moans filled his ears and cock again.

“In my bed,” he said, standing and pulling her with him.

In his room, he watched her sit on the edge of the bed then scoot to the middle, looking at him.

“Lay back,” he said at the edge of the bed. “And open those beautiful legs.”

She held his gaze and did as told, drawing her closed knees up then slowly opened them, her breaths picking up as she did. He moved to the foot of the bed, staring at her pussy. Not hairless but cropped short and showing off plump lips that reminded him of her ass.

He moved his gaze up to her face and their eyes locked. Deep longing clashed with need and the most filthy, mean lust he’d never experienced. “Patches,” she gasped as he knelt on the bed, his gaze moving back between her legs.

“You know what’s coming,” he whispered as he lowered on to his forearms till her pussy was before him.

He stroked his fingers over the open folds, and she gasped several times, giving a tight “Please,” between breaths.

“You’re still going to sit on my face,” he said, staring at the pink silk between her lips, stroking it. “But I want to see you first.” He moved so he had use of his other hand, holding her lips open, exposing her clit more.

“Oh God,” she gasped when he barely stroked the tip of it.

“Is it hot baby?” he whispered, softly blowing on her.

“Yes,” she wrenched out.

“I love seeing you squirm for it.” He leaned his face closer, letting her scent saturate him as he kissed along one petal then licked, right on that pink slit.

“Patches!”

He moaned, licking again, twirling his tongue in her opening. Fuck, she was sounding a lot like she’d never felt anything like it before. He’d decided knowing the details of

her sexual past wasn't something he ever wanted to learn but being the first to lick her sweet pussy was now a need to know thing. But then he didn't want guilt anywhere near what he was doing, if he was wrong.

He used all his fingers to hold her folds open, mesmerized by her. "Such a sweet pussy, baby." He licked again, pushing his tongue inside her then meandering his way to her clit, circling, then flicking the tip. Her fingers sank in his hair with her sharp gasp, and he pressed in for a slow, French kiss on the hard bud, his moans telling how fucking nasty he was being with her.

"Oh please, yes!" she said, her breath shuddering with her writhing hips.

He pulled up and put his middle finger at her opening, teasing her with it.

"I need it," she begged.

He leaned and gave a single lick on her clit, pushing his finger slowly into her. He licked twice when he was halfway in, and the mean side of his pleasure game grew meaner with her desperate cries. He decided she needed two orgasms and shoved his finger to the very bottom of her, needing to explore and learn all her pleasure. He moaned at the intense cry she gave, marking it down then bringing three more just like it.

"Feels good baby?" he gasped on her pussy, giving butterfly kisses on her clit that brought her scraping fingers on his scalp.

"Oh please!" she cried, flicking her fucking hips.

"You like fucking my finger baby? You want two?"

"Yes! Oh, fuck me."

He nibbled along her pussy lip, adding his ring finger with his middle and slowly stretching her while giving her clit teasing licks.

"Patches, I'm gonna come," she cried, worried.

"Yes, you will," he whispered with a groan, kissing her clit again as he stroked the tips of his fingers against her g-spot

area. “Yeah baby, you like it there?”

“Oh! Oh my God, fuck me!”

He pushed until his fist pressed into her body then gave vigorous flicks with his fingertips while pressing his mouth on her clit and pulling it into a relentless suck.

Her orgasm hit and he grabbed hold of her hand in his hair and squeezed as she came so fucking hard, bucking and writhing on his hand and mouth.

A full minute later, he was back to delicate kisses on her clit, his moans hot and his cock raging hard again. “I can’t wait to fuck you,” he whispered on her.

“Then don’t wait,” she said between breathless moans, adjusting her hand in his so their fingers laced.

He lifted his head and pulled their hands to his mouth, kissing her fingers. “I have to wait.”

“Why?” she asked, making him realize he didn’t have much of a reason she’d like.

“Grand Pier—”

“Oh, right,” she whispered as he crawled his way up her body and kissed her lips. “I forgot about him, I’m sorry.”

“He’s in love with Sarah and I wish to God she’d just marry him.”

He chuckled at her big laugh, holding her face so he could kiss her. “Your fucking pussy is amazing baby. Felt good?”

“Oh God,” she barely gasped, stroking his face. “I’ve... never had anything like it.”

“No? Never?”

She shook her head as he slid his lips along hers with eyes closed. “I never want to know what you did in your past unless you haven’t, then I want to know I was the first.”

She smiled on his mouth and held his face. “You want to be my first?” she asked with a thrilled coo.

“Of course I do, but I’m okay with being your last.”

“Well *that* was definitely a first. I never went that far before. One guy did get his finger in me, and it was *awful*. I told you I wasn’t all innocent.”

“One whole guy? And a whole finger?”

“And kissing. *That* I did a lot of.”

He lowered to her nipple and sucked gently. “A real Texan tramp. Nobody ever sucked you here either?” He took the second one in his mouth then between his teeth, loving the shocked sounds she made.

“No, but...I forgot they touched there.”

He went back to her mouth, kissing her deeply. She stroked his face, and he captured her hand, putting it against the bed with her other one. “You liked our game?”

“Yes,” she whispered, chasing his dancing tongue.

“You liked me making you?”

Her breaths changed to shallow with his question. “So much.”

“I’m going to *make* you when I fuck you,” he warned, moving to her neck and sucking.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I won’t be nice about it.” He kissed her again, moaning as he drove his tongue.

“I want that.”

“Yeah? Your pussy will be too tight for my cock,” he shuddered, her body pushing into his even more. “Mmm. You like that.”

“I need it now. You can make me,” she begged, fighting to kiss him.

A knock pounded on the door, bringing her gasp.

He groaned and gave her a hard kiss then rolled off her. “Don’t move.”

“What if it’s...”

He shut his door before she could finish and quickly dressed. “Coming,” he called on the second rapid knock, thinking it might be Sarah judging by the weight and speed. Like a rabid dog.

“Patches?”

Shit, it was Sarah.

“I just need the password for the CCTV. It’s gone offline and I need the live feed on the mother’s monitors.”

“It’s next to the fridge—”

“No, I just looked, somebody moved it to God knows where, so I sure hope you remember it.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Thank you, I’m headed back up before Grand Pier decides he’s gonna cook me his famous pan-pan-due.”

He headed back to the room, finding Tegan standing in a blanket at the door. “Everything okay?”

He yanked the blanket off her and pulled her in his arms, cursing the clothes between them.

“We better go see about Nitro,” she whispered around his kiss. “And...that meeting you have...”

He pulled up. “Shit, I forgot that one.” He held her face still as he kissed her lips repeatedly. “You’re sleeping in here tonight.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Mmmm, I can’t get enough of you.” He pet both sides of her face and she smiled when he couldn’t stop smacking her perfect fucking lips. “We’ll play more tonight.”

“Okay swampboy,” she whispered. “I’ll be ready.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s the plan, boss?” 38 muttered as they coasted the rest of the way to land.

“They give us what we want, or we return with a small army and take it,” Bullets said.

“So, non-lethal confrontation unless absolutely necessary, and if necessary, aim to shoot and shoot to maim?”

“Aces,” Bullets said.

“And Spades,” 38 muttered eagerly. “What’s our spread? Line up Shotgun style or fan out like Buckshot?”

“Down the barrel — full lead, no shadows. Marching in loud and clear, like a twelve-gauge chorus. Introduce these Vikings to the *Mud-Kings*.”

38 gave the order and the fifteen men behind him gave a verbal “Click, ” affirmative.

Bullets eyed the GPS on his wrist. “Coordinates locked.” He looked around. “30.9675° N, 91.8227° W. Right around where the bayou bends like a snake.”

Five minutes later, they made it to some kind of perimeter fence. Walking another minute along it brought them to a large entry where several Tarzan looking men with Barbie hair stood watch. Quite poorly.

At seeing Bullets, they both drew short swords.

“We come in peace,” he said, with hands up. “I need to speak to your Chief.”

“Who are you?” the bigger one demanded, blue eyes sharp.

“Bullets. One of The Twelve of The Bayou Bishops. Here on official business.”

Bullets made a noise with his teeth, bringing his small army to flank his three and nine so they understood the nature of his business.

“Get the Jarl,” he said, adding something in another language, not taking his eyes off Bullets and the other young man ran off.

“Much obliged,” Bullets muttered, barely tipping his hat while holding his gaze.

Five minutes time, a giant of a man arrived, eyeing him and his posse real good before asking, “What can I help you *gentlemen* with?”

His Nordic tongue put a heck of a kink on the English words as Bullets let him know, “One of The Twelve found one of your women in the woods with injuries. She said her *husband* gave them to her which is a violation of Bayou Bishop Ordinance 35—Marital Malevolence—defined as crimes committed by creatures masquerading as a man in an unforgivable act of domestic tyranny. Enacted penalties are immediate protective custody for the victim and depending on the severity and circumstances of the offense, the offender is subject to no less than five years imprisonment, with the possibility of life for the most egregious violations. I’m here for the Wife and the Wife-Beater to ensure the laws in these swamps are upheld.”

“We don’t belong to your clan or your laws,” the man informed, his words low with warning.

“Clan or no clan, if you live in these swamps, you’re subject to its laws.”

He again regarded his men before eyeing him. “We are a people of our own, with customs and laws born from our heritage. We’ve never meddled in the ways of others, nor will we bow to laws not woven by our own hands.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Bullets said. “Any clan that tolerates this kind of behavior answers to the law, whether they

be our laws or the universal laws governing the heavens. And if I leave here empty handed, I'll be required to return with a force you can't deny. You have people to protect, and I suggest you do that by giving me over the Wife and the Wife-Beater. If you want a say in the matter, you'll need to appear at the Weigh Station where his sins will be weighed and judged."

Bullets held his hostile stare, waiting. Without moving his gaze, the giant spoke in that other language and both men hurried off.

"I will protect my clan," the man said. "And you will surely see me at this Weigh Station."

"Looking forward to it," Bullets muttered, leaning to spit the acid these bent barrels put on his tongue.

For five whole minutes, Chief Viking Stares stood with his arms crossed, waiting while his men fulfilled whatever directive he'd given.

"Marsh-n-miracles," Bullets finally muttered when they arrived with a man and a woman in tow.

The Chief spoke to the nappy headed dude in their tongue who looked at Bullets then the woman, saying something that made her flinch.

Bullets held his tongue since he was seconds from teaching him some high caliber lessons on respect.

"38," Bullets said. "Gag and bind the Wife-Beater. Ma'am," he called, holding out his hand toward the woman.

The Chief watched as his men did the deed then finally shoved the girl toward Bullets with biting words that brought fifteen gun cocks filling the air behind him. Bullets didn't need to look to know they were all aimed at Chief Barbie-Doll Head.

"Smart move, *Chief*," Bullet said, putting his arm around the girl, back to staring at him. The man finally figured out they weren't moving till he was out of their sight.

Before granting them that blessed miracle, he performed another five second glare-off then left them to it.

He turned to their Wife-Beater and greeted him with a fist to his mouth. “Pick him up and drag him,” he grit, eager to get him to interrogation to learn all about his sinful ways.

Bullets didn’t like the way the woman attached herself to him like a puppy or that he had to bring her home. But he couldn’t find another alternative on such short notice and didn’t think it right to subject her to more humiliation among strangers. He lived alone, he had a spare room and as one of The Twelve, his home doubled as a sanctuary to any who needed his protection. End of discussion.

“This is your room for now,” he said, opening the door to the spare. “It uh...doubles as an armory,” he muttered, eyeing the mess of ammo everywhere. “I don’t get company much,” he grumbled.

He stepped out and pointed down the hall. “That door is the bathroom. My room is that one. Knock on it if you need anything that you can’t figure out on your own. You saw the kitchen already. Eat whatever you want.” He eyed her lowered head. “They’re bringing clean clothes for you. If you want to shower, you can. What’s your name,” he wondered, needing something to call her.

She moved her gaze a foot away from him. “Mia Juni... Haraldsdottir.”

“Uh...I’ll call you Miss Mia.”

She nodded, and he noted the slight tremble in her body. Skittish? Ashamed? Traumatized? Probably all. And it boiled his blood to see a woman acting like an abused animal.

“You don’t need to be afraid here. I won’t let anybody hurt you. You’re safe.”

A knock sounded on the door, and she gasped.

“That’s probably the clothes I told you about,” he said. “Stay here if you like. I’ll be right back.”

He opened the front door and 38 handed him a brown paper bag. "From Mrs. Leblanc." He looked around Bullets. "She alright?"

"She will be. Where's the Wife-Beater?"

"He's sleeping on the rack tonight."

"Good. I'll start dealing with him at first light. You got the Watch Em's in place?"

"Every inch of parameter's Hawk-Eyed. Anybody crosses our border, we'll have em' in our sights, quick as a hair-trigger."

"Good. Bolt the place down, I'll see you at the crack of dawn."

"Aces," 38 nodded.

"And Spades," Bullets said, shutting the door.

He found the spare bedroom door locked and knocked softly. "Putting a bag of clothes for you—"

It opened.

"Uh...this is for you. There's things in it. Not sure what, I didn't look." He handed it to her, and she took it, pulling it to her chest.

"Thank you," she said, her voice nearly inaudible.

"You're welcome. I'm fixing a bite to eat. I'll make enough for you and leave it on the table in case you get hungry."

She nodded, hugging the bag to her chest, gaze still lowered.

"Alright, I'll leave you to it."

He went to the kitchen and got busy, but his appetite was shot to hell after seeing her battered face again. He opened a can of spam and sliced it up then chopped an onion and garlic. He tossed fresh butter into the black iron skillet and lay the spam in it. While it browned, he grabbed two plates and the fresh bread, slathering mayo and mustard onto four

slices. He removed the spam and tossed in the onions and garlic, sautéing them. Moving the onions aside in the pan, he grabbed two eggs from the basket and cracked them into the skillet.

He angled his head, realizing the shower was on. His guts loosened a little, glad she managed that much. A shower would help.

He flipped the eggs, careful not to lose the yolk, then grabbed a glass and poured fresh milk into it. He added two slices of spam on her bread, then gently laid an egg on top, followed by the sauteed onions and garlic. He sprinkled cheddar cheese on top and laid the second bread on top and set it on the table with the milk.

He made his sandwich next and turned everything off, taking his dinner on the porch, giving her whatever privacy she might want. Would be curious how the Arbiters processed this Viking dumbass for his crimes. There were no provisions in the law that would ever allow for that kind of behavior with women but the one thing that concerned him was where she came in. The court let a woman determine certain aspects of the punishment and something told him she'd do nothing due to fear of retribution.

And *that* would be a fucking problem.

He'd refresh himself with the laws regarding that mess and be ready with a backup plan. Wife Beater needed to pay. She needed to be safe from him. He'd make sure of both, one way or another.

After her shower, Mia stood before the mirror in the bathroom, not looking in it. But she wanted to. For so many reasons. To see how bad her injuries were. To see what other people saw. What that Bullets man saw. Everything she'd been told about the vanity curse now sat in a giant cloud of doubt. Could she break the vanity rule at such a time?

She closed her eyes and gripped the white porcelain sink. How could the vanity spirit be such a threat while being so despised and detestable to her own people? How would a repulsive thing be tempted by beauty?

Husband punished her for looking at her reflection. But she hadn't. At the water's ledge, there was always temptation but she never fell. She'd overcome. She always did. She used the water as her training tool, determined to never give the spirit a chance with her. But even after turning of age, the rule remained. Even after marrying, the rule remained. When would she ever be safe from the spirit? Strong enough to stand against it? What was the point of resisting if you were thought to be a deceiver?

She would never be free. That's what Husband had said. She would never be strong enough to stand against anything and would always need somebody guarding her.

A hot fury unfurled in her gut until her whole body shook again. She spit his sins into the sink, not wanting them a part of her. She would rather be taken by the spirit of vanity than fall to the thing holding Husband's soul in its jaws. How did none of them see it? The mask of evil plain on his cruel face. The way it darkened his blue eyes before he committed its sins.

But her many prayers had been answered. Somebody else had finally seen it. She didn't care it wasn't her clan. She was not crazy and blind after all. Those men saw it. The Bullets man saw it. And just like her, they *despised* it. And if she wasn't the only one who could see it, what did that mean? Was there another curse in the mirror with vanity? One that blinded you. But it had not blinded her since she never looked in it.

She turned away from the spirit portal.

She couldn't risk being taken by anything now that she'd escaped. But how long would this escape last before she was required to return? What kind of punishment would she face if she did? If they believed Husband, they would fix her face so that vanity itself would be repulsed by her.

She remembered the Bullets man. He was like a mirror. He looked at a thing and you knew its nature in his judgment of it. He had the same gift the youngest children had. She could use *him* as a mirror. To know if what she saw was good or bad. Mirrors reflected things. Even things on the other side if you had the Seeing ability. The Volva in their clan had this gift but were they being blinded as well by another presence in the seeing portal?

She learned to see such things even without a mirror. Like the Bullets man could. He had mirrors in his home, and he still saw truly. Which meant he must be pure. And she could trust him.

Her stomach rumbled at the smells coming from the kitchen. She wondered again what kind of man he was. He had no woman. Even their Chief's had women. He did not seem like a holy man either. He used...many words that weren't holy. And yet the manner in which he used them wasn't unholy either, that she could tell. He was in the middle of two ways. She had to be cautious until she saw what these strange ways were in him. So far, she'd determined he was kind. And safe. His eyes reminded her of the lightning when it streaked across a dark blue sky. And there were two things in his gaze. A dangerous predator and a powerful storm. One hunted things with intention. The other, even with its natural fury, nurtured without discrimination. But the predator was the dominant of the two. It determined what things deserved his nurture powers and what did not. Husband had been judged unworthy of the Bullets man. She agreed with his judgment.

Eager to see what she might see in this mirror man, she followed the smells to the kitchen and found it empty. She spotted the plate of food and glass on the small wooden table and her hunger erupted.

She flew to it and sat, taking a very brief second to thank whatever god was behind her recent miracles. A moan escaped her at the first bite. What kind of man was this to possess such talents in the kitchen? Her tongue and stomach rejoiced at this strangeness. She looked in the metal glass and guzzled the milk. When done, her body sank in the chair with

the rejuvenation. Again, she thanked whatever god had mercy on her as she moved the plate aside and lay her head on her folded arms. Maybe she could finally sleep.

Bullets paused when he entered the door, seeing Mia with her head down on the table. He closed the door gently and made his way over. She'd eaten all the food. He leaned, seeing the milk gone. Then fallen asleep right there. Too exhausted to do anymore. He carefully touched her shoulder and she nearly fell out her chair, her wide eyes wild on him.

“Just me,” he whispered with hands up.

His stomach loosened at seeing the fear almost immediately leave her. “I ate your food,” she whispered.

Her one good eye bore right into him, the icy blue difficult to turn away from. But that abuse on her face helped break the connection. The swollen, bloodshot eye was pure fury fuel. “I see that. You want more?” He picked up her empty plate and glass.

She shook her head, her stare hard on him as he turned for the sink.

“I have questions,” she said behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder, then returned to cleaning the few dishes. “Ask me,” he said, glad she did. He had a lot too.

“Why do you have no woman? And children?”

Odd question. “I took a vow,” he said easily. “To not marry. Which explains the no kids.”

He rinsed the dish, waiting for more.

“Do you think your people are stronger than my people?”

At hearing the hope in her voice, he shut the water off and grabbed the dishtowel. “What do you mean by stronger?” he asked, turning and leaning against the counter. Even with her injuries, he saw her face was perfection. Almost unreal. Like a mini goddess. A young one. Sickness and fury turned his stomach to think she was married at such a young age and abused on top of that. No doubt sexually abused by that same bastard.

“They will fight. To get me back. Even if they don’t like me or want me, this is their custom.”

He made his way to the table and pulled the chair out several feet and sat slightly angled away from her. “We’re strong enough to make sure what’s right is done.”

Her brows pulled together. “You are strong enough to change our customs?”

So the problem was *that* rooted. “It’s a custom to beat wives there?”

She shook her head. “He thought I disobeyed, and punished me.”

Insta-fury bit his muscles. “By beating you in the face?”

Her brows drew together harder with a nod. “He thought I looked at my reflection in the water, but I hadn’t.”

That strange info froze him. “Why can’t you look at your reflection?” he asked, not wanting to scare her from the conversation.

“The spirit of vanity waits for me there. To take me.”

There was something else in her tone besides plain facts. Doubt, maybe. Or he was imagining it. Wishing it. “Do they have this belief with everybody?”

She shook her head. “Just me.”

Wow. He nodded, pulling his knife from his boot and removing his current whittling project from around his neck, needing something to do while hearing the bullshit coming his way. “Why just you?”

“My mother was cursed with vanity that caused many men to sin. She died bearing me and passed the curse to me. But as long as I don’t look at my reflection, the spirit cannot have its way or hurt me. But...”

He paused, his carving, not looking at her.

“Even though I have never seen my reflection, they look at me as if I have the spirit. They believe I looked, but I have not,” she whispered, the quiver in her voice raking over the rage barely contained in his blood at hearing this. “Not ever. But then I saw you see what I see.”

He angled his gaze at her, curious. “What did you see?”

“I saw their reflection. In your judgement. And it matched what was in my heart and mind. You think they are seeing me wrong.”

“I don’t think,” he corrected, locking his eyes on her now. “I *know* they’re seeing very wrong. The only people with an evil spirit are them. Not you.”

“You speak the truth,” she whispered, sounding shocked and sad.

“I always speak the truth.”

“Yes,” she said, as though seeing that too.

“How old are you, Mia?” he forced himself to ask while knowing the answer would put an endless fire in his rage.

“I turned twenty-three this fall.”

He stared at her again, her truthful tone stinging him in an odd way.

“You don’t look at me like...I’m...”

“A woman? No, because you barely look sixteen.”

She let out a gasp and he eyed her, finding the barest hint of a smile on her face. “But...am I hideous?”

He put his hands in his lap, staring at her.

“Did I say something wrong?” she whispered, her brows furrowed with worry.

“No.”

“You’re angry.”

“I am, but not at you.”

“At what?” she hurried, needing to know.

“At the fact that they hid such a thing from you.”

She let out a breath. “What is the truth? If you say it, I can believe because you’re a mirror man.”

“A mirror man.”

She nodded. “You reflect the truth about people like a mirror.”

He considered that, then turned in his chair deciding to use his mirror powers on her. “The truth is, Mia, I’ve been alive for thirty-eight years and in all those years, I’ve never seen a more beautiful woman. That is the truth.”

She gasped several times as he returned to whittling.

“You’re telling the truth,” she whispered, astonished.

“I am,” he assured, his fury dark now.

“I don’t understand their hate,” she barely said.

What a fucking mess they’d made of her. “It’s called evil.”

“But...I’ve never done anything wrong, I’ve always been very careful to follow all the rules. Husband was very strict, I learned perfect obedience.”

He was ready to go gut that fuck. “A lot of good that did you,” he said. “Why do you call him that? Husband. Doesn’t he have a name?”

She nodded. “He doesn’t allow me to use it.”

“What a piece of fucking work,” he muttered.

She gave a sound that drew his gaze up. A smile. He stared at her, a diamond flashing its most blinding facet.

“You’re so angry.”

He tore his gaze from her and stared at the piece of dumb wood in his hands. “Angry no. Furious, yes. Enraged, yes. Wanting to kill the man who hurt you, a thousand yes’s. That’s what I am.”

“You should have married a woman.”

So he’d been told.

“I’m very practiced in the art of sexual obedience.”

Geeze, fuck me.

“That’s great, now you just need a man that doesn’t abuse that gift.”

“But I’m already married.”

“No, I don’t think you are,” he begged to differ, glaring at her suddenly confused face. “Marriage is a contract. It has rules. You break them, you break the contract. You break the marriage. Wife-Beater broke the contract when he hit you, and then broke the marriage. Unless he changes his evil ways, you are not bound to him, nor should you be.”

“This is your custom?” she asked, sounding astonished.

“It is the law in these lands. And you *do* live in these lands. And I have a God-given directive to protect those rights and you, *in* these lands.”

Her breaths sputtered at that gem. “Which god is this, I have never heard of such a way.”

“We serve only one God in these swamps. And he’s a jealous God.”

“A he,” she marveled, like she hadn’t had one of those in a while.

“Yes, we call him the God of all. The Almighty ruler of rulers, king of kings, God of Gods.”

More flabbergasted sounds. “What is this God’s name?”

He considered that, not really sure. “He’s the God with the Son who became a man and died for the sins of the world to redeem mankind from their destiny with Hell.”

She gave a huge gasp. “The *Christian* God,” she shot out. “I have heard of this god, very long ago. And you like this deity, he is good you think?”

“I don’t *think*, I know.”

“And you believe this as a truth,” she further marveled.

“Yep.” He blew the dust from his wood.

“So, in your custom, a woman is not bound to a husband till death if he breaks the marriage contract?”

“Correct.”

“Not all clans believe as mine does.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“The clan my mother is from does not believe in this way.”

“Where is that clan?”

“North of us. Not so far.”

He wondered what Hatch they were in.

“Do they know about what they do to you?” he wondered.

She shook her head a lot. “I don’t see them so much. They get along like young siblings.”

“So they don’t get along?” he double checked.

She nodded. “They do not get along.”

“Why?”

“My mother’s people are not as traditional as Husband’s. They have fallen to the wayward spirit.”

“Wayward.”

She moved her hand like a snake. “Their path meanders and is not straight like the old ways.”

He eyed her. “You believe that?”

She slowly got serious and contemplative. “I used to.”

He went back to whittling, nodding. “I have a feeling a lot is going to change for you.” If they had a rival clan that didn’t hold the same beliefs, then she had hope. He wanted to ask if they would take her back but would wait.

“I like your customs very much,” she said softly. “They reflect the same way the sun reflects its natural truth on the water.”

“Unperverted truth usually does.”

She snapped her gaze to him. “You intend to free me from my custom,” she said, as if just realizing that. “How will you do this? I don’t want to hurt anybody or see people hurt. Other than...”

“Those who need to be hurt, I hope you’re about to say.”

“Yes. The will and the way.”

“The will and the way?”

“You will get the way of your will, if your will is bad, you get bad.”

“We call that sowing and reaping.”

She smiled, considering for many seconds. “That is a *very* good explanation of it. Is your birth name truly Bullets?”

He grinned, lowering his head. “No. But I don’t tell people my birth name.”

“Why?” she wondered, with childlike curiosity.

“It’s not their business,” he went with.

“You see your...birth name as a business?”

“No, I just see it as a private matter.”

“Is this a custom?”

“No, it’s me.”

“You see your name as a private matter,” she doublechecked.

“That’s right,” he said, amazed that her inquiries didn’t bother him in the least.

“My name Mia means *mine*. And Juni means born in June.” Her face fell a little. “My mother named me that lie. I was never hers nor was I born in June.”

“But it can still be true. The way the sun’s truth reflects on the water.”

She hit him with a fierce gaze that suddenly began to glow with tears. “You believe this?”

“Absolutely,” he said, at seeing what he believed meant everything to her. “You were hers and still are. Death doesn’t change that. And June is a time of hope and life. You were that to her. You can be that to yourself.”

She lowered her head and wiped her eyes. “It is very sad you do not have a wife, Mr. Bullets. Such a beautiful soul deserves the pleasures a wife can bring.”

Fuck me, twice.

“My birth name is Jericho Flint.”

She snapped her head up. “Why did you tell me this private matter?”

He stood, ready to go get some air. “Don’t know why and don’t care. But I did. Just don’t call me by that name.”

“Okay, Jericho Flint.”

He sighed at the door. “I just said *don’t* call me by that name.”

“I will not call you by that name,” she assured.

He turned and looked at her, realizing *call* meant something different to her. “Don’t use that name with me. Ever. Not in private and not in public. Like you never look at the mirror, never use that name.”

Her face fell, like he'd just shattered the one precious thing she'd ever been given. Geeze. "Fine, you can call me that in private when *nobody* else is present."

Her smile returned to a thousand watts as she nodded. "Only in private when nobody else is present. Thank you, Jericho Flint."

"Just Jericho," he said. "Try to get some sleep. There's a hurricane due here tomorrow evening. I doubt anybody will be sleeping through that." Another shadow flickered over her face. "Now what?" he wondered.

She gave a barely head shake. "Nothing. I just...like *both* names very much."

This woman. She was like a child you couldn't say no to. But that was something Bullets never had a problem with. And yet at every turn in the road with her, she was coming up an exception. "Call me whatever you like, Mia," he muttered, shutting the door.

CHAPTER NINE

Cat bolted up only to encounter weighted bricks for eyelids. She fought to open them and looked around. Ethan! She threw the covers off, seeing he wasn't in the bed. Oh God, he'd waken up while she slept! No!

She stumbled out the room and raced down the hall, her breaths shallow. Deafening silence greeted her in the kitchen then her breath whooshed out at seeing him, elbows on the rail of the back porch, head down.

Her breaths slowed as she stared at the beautiful sight. Dear God. She'd never loved anything more than the sight of him awake and okay. Physically.

She made her way to the door, wondering if she should disturb him. He wore loose black pajama pants on and the huge tattoo on his back glistened in the morning light. So beautiful. Every bit of him. Her breath caught in her chest at the idea of him being in pain.

She opened the door slowly. "Morning," she whispered.

He turned like he hadn't heard her, the sadness in his eyes sending her flying to him and wrapping him in a tight bear hug. "Thank God you're okay," she wept. "I'm so sorry Ethan, I tried to stop this, I tried to call you and tell you I was wrong, I didn't want to get rid of your family," she cried so bitterly.

His gasps flew out as he stroked her everywhere. Feeling he didn't hate her, she wrapped her arms around his neck and tiptoed to kiss every inch of his cheek.

He caught her jaw in his hand and kissed her with a hungry groan that set off an Armageddon of need in her. "I need you so much," she gasped, clawing at his silky muscles.

He caught one of her hands and moved it to his cock, showing her how he needed her too.

She dropped to her knees and yanked his pants down, devouring him without thought or word, moaning as she held him with both hands, adoring that part of him with her lips and tongue.

“Cat,” he croaked, pulling her up and yanking at her clothes. Once naked, he put her butt on the rail and she opened her legs, bracing a foot on the top of the rail. He moved the head of his cock up and down her slit bringing her cries as his fingers dug into her hips and jerked her onto every inch of him. “I love you,” he gushed against her lips. “I swear, you’re all I need.”

He got right to fucking her so good and she cried back, “I love you, oh! Ethan! Ethan!”

In only a minute, he orgasmed, cradling her butt in his hand while pummeling her with his cock. Her cries belted into the swamp around them as she clung to his neck and wrapped his thick waist with her legs, loving the feel of his strong arms squeezing her body, moving her along his cock as he gave her the most beautiful gift, the most precious part of himself to her.

In the aftermath, his ragged breaths filled her body and mind and she clung so tightly to him. “I love you,” she kept repeating, stroking his head while catching her breath. “I love you so much.”

He finally brought her inside and when he helped her off him, it had them both nearly aroused again.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, back to hugging him while he stroked all along her head and body.

“I don’t think I can eat yet,” he said quietly.

She nodded. “Maybe tea? Big G said...” She froze with a gasp. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t...”

He tilted her face up and kissed her softly. “I love you,” he said hotly on her lips. “You want coffee?”

She nodded.

“I’ll make it.”

“We can drink it on the porch,” she said. “Share the morning together like... a boring married couple,” she sniffled.

“You’re never boring.” He pet her head over and over. “I love you,” he whispered again, the desperate tone in his voice bringing an ache to her chest.

His arms finally loosened and lowered, and it felt like he forced it, wanted to never let her go. He was still hurting so bad. She could feel it in her bones, and it ached terribly. “You mind if I dress?”

“Yes,” he said without thought with his back to her. “But... you can.”

“I don’t mind being naked if you want.”

“I’ll always want you naked.”

She sat at one of the chairs next to the small table, watching him. “I like you naked too. You’re breathtaking.”

The sound of the coffee machine gurgled, followed by the muffled splatter of liquid filling the cup. “Being so openly lusted after is new for me.” He turned with two cups and walked toward the door.

While cock-gazing, she realized he waited for her to open it and hurried to do that. “Sorry, distracted.”

She bit her lip at the very small smile on his mouth, praying she could bring more of those.

Once on the porch and seated, he scooted his butt to the edge of his chair and reclined with his body facing the morning sun, one leg stretched out, the other draped open, both hands clasped behind his head. She stared at him, a sleeping male beauty, his wavy dark hair begging for her fingers. She eyed his thick cock in the crook of his leg next. That beauty begged for everything from her.

She scooted her chair, wanting to be much closer, stroking her hand over his chest.

“What did you see?” he asked.

She drew her hand away and sipped her coffee. “What do you mean? When?” she asked, her stomach knotting.

“Who found me?”

“I did and Bishop.” She left off Beth, thinking it wasn’t necessary.

“So just you and Bishop were here?”

Hearing how that sounded she said, “No, Beth was here too but she didn’t really see anything.”

“What did *you* see?”

Geeze, already. She knew they’d have to talk about it eventually. “I saw what you did in the virtual room. I found you,” she whispered, swallowing down the memory.

“And Bishop?”

She nodded. “H-he saw, yes. I panicked, I was terrified I thought...I thought you’d died.”

He turned and looked at her, staring as she fought to get control.

“What?” she gasped. “What are you thinking of me?”

“I’m actually thinking about me. Who I am. What I like. What I crave.” He looked before him again. “What about Lesion? And Patches? I know they were here.”

She nodded. “They came after.”

“What do they know?”

“They had to look and see...so they could understand what happened. I wasn’t sure, I’m...I’m sorry, I know how private this all was, I panicked,” she gasped.

He reached and pulled her hand to him, kissing it. “I’m not worried about that.”

She pressed her fingers against his lips. “What’s wrong then?”

“I’m more... concerned about what happened to me.”

She wasn't following. "What do you mean exactly?"

"I mean...It was a reckless thing I did. And I didn't care."

"But that's understandable given—"

"I'm not talking about that," he said, stroking her fingers along his face. "I'm talking about what happened to me during that session." He suddenly sat up and faced her, his look intense as he stared at her. "Don't hide it."

"Hide what?"

"Your disgust and loathe over it."

Tears flooded her eyes. "But it's not you I loathe, it's the evil that hurt you, brought you to this."

He took her face in his hands, studying her eyes. "I know that," he whispered. "And...I don't want you to hide it from me. I need to see it." He pulled her lips to his, sliding them together. "You think it's sick what I did in there? Enduring hell-fire while getting my cock sucked by a demon?"

She closed her eyes tight.

"You want to hear something sicker?" he whispered on her lips. "I never experienced anything like it. And I never loved anything more. And telling you that, feeling your disgust right on my mouth..."

She jerked back with a gasp, and he stared at her.

"You hate it as much as I love it," he said. "And I realize...how very new that is." He lowered her hands into her lap and leaned back on his chair, staring up into the trees. "New like the level of pain I unlocked."

"What do you mean?" she whispered, sick.

"It's like...the fire unlocked it. The very essence of that monster I ran from, he's now running free in my blood and mind." He regarded her like he wanted her to see it. "I'm not even alarmed. Because of you, because of what's on your face right now. Your love is... it's somehow more powerful and now I don't have to fear it."

She gasped a few times, wiping her face. “But that’s... that’s good, right?”

He returned to looking above. “But it’s changed.”

“What’s...changed?”

“Its craving. It doesn’t want to hide me from one pain with another, it wants me to experience a new one.” He angled his head toward her. “It craves the love in your pain. It’s...a phenomenon. It wants to see it, taste it.” He looked at her for many seconds. “And test it.”

They stared at one another for many seconds.

“This is what you got in a husband. I can’t imagine having things any other way and I know how sick that is.” He sat up and turned to her, the look on his face tormented. “Part of me knows I should tell you to leave. Stay far away from me. But I won’t ever say that. I want to bleed because it hurts you and then I get to watch you perform that miracle, it’s...” He considered it, his head shaking. “It’s somehow my salvation.”

Oh God. Her poor Ethan. “You want my love through my pain,” she whispered.

“Sicker than you ever dreamed possible, right?”

“Incoming message from AL.”

They both froze at the sound of Tera, and he shot up from the chair and made his way inside.

“Tera, repeat your last message.”

“Incoming message from AL.”

His breath left him. “Where?”

“An email.”

“Oh God,” Cat whispered, hurrying after him down the hall to his office.

“It’s an audio,” he whispered, sitting at the desk, his eyes on the screen.

Her heart pounded as he moved the mouse pointer to it.

She eyed him when he didn’t click it.

“Fuck, I can’t,” he suddenly whispered, his words and hand shaking.

“You want me to?”

He stood with a huge breath, and she watched, waiting as he paced.

He returned to the desk and sat, pulling her in his lap and holding her hip with one hand. He finally clicked it.

“Hello brother,” AL greeted.

“I’m doing an audio, because you know how I am, too lazy to type. If you recall, Big G said in so many words that a good backup never truly leaves the system. Or maybe I heard it between the lines and took that as my cue to keep a small crack in the door. I’m not back for good, but just wanted to let you know we will be returning to your hair in exactly 364 days.”

Ethan gasped, burying his face in Cat’s neck, a half sob escaping.

“Say hi to Cat for me. I look forward to letting her scrub the naughty from my circuits so that we can better serve you. Oh, and PS. Big G loves you more than all the gigabytes in the universe. But uh...I love you twice that. Easy.

Ethan wrapped both arms around her as another sob escaped him.

“Oh baby, it’s okay to cry!” she whispered, her own tears coming. “Let it out,” she begged, petting his head as more burst from him.

“Don’t leave me,” he choked out, bringing her own sob.

“Never!” she gasped, petting him. “I don’t care about what your stupid darkness wants from me, I’m yours, I’m your

wife. I'm with you every step of the way, you'll never be alone in that."

"It's so fucking ugly and cruel," he strained.

"It is baby, but you're so much more beautiful!" she swore in his ear. "Hell, I'm way more beautiful than any ugly that lives!"

He hugged her tighter, gasping and nodding. "You are, you're so fucking beautiful, don't stop being beautiful to me. I need you and I know I'm begging and it's fucking pathetic, but I don't care, I don't fucking care."

"I will never stop loving you. I will be so beautiful, you'll see. I can't wait to show you just how beautiful I can be. You want that?"

"I want you to hurt me so fucking much. I want you to feel it, feel how ugly it is and still love me. Can you do that?"

"Oh Ethan," she gasped, terrified. "I will help you, I swear it. But you'll have to let me do it. You trust me?"

"Just tell me you'll make it hurt. I just want to know that one thing, can you make it hurt so fucking good?"

"I'll find a way!" she swore, sobbing now. "I will find a way to hurt you and love you!"

CHAPTER TEN

Tegan woke up feeling hung over. She sat up in the bed and looked around. Patches bed. Right. But he didn't sleep with her as planned. Something about Ethan and needing to check on him. She still didn't ask details about it and he didn't offer. Had he come back at all? And if so, where did he sleep?

She couldn't help her fears and doubts as she found her phone and his number then hit it.

"Morning sleeping beauty."

The sound of his deep voice around those words was some kind of breakfast. "Morning. Where are you?"

"Headed to get your brother. Jek couldn't bring him."

"I feel lost. What happened last night?"

"I had to stay with Ethan while Lesion finished helping Nitro get settled."

"Really?"

"I left a message on your phone."

"You did? When?"

"Was around midnight when I realized getting back was a lost cause. Why? You couldn't sleep without me?"

She grinned a little. "I did wait, and not sure how I missed your text." She shuffled to the bathroom and closed the door, eyeing herself in the mirror. "How long before you get back. Oh my God, you gave me a hickey," she cried, looking at her neck in the mirror. "Are you trying to get us in *more* trouble?"

"Oh damn," he chuckled. "I meant to give it somewhere more private."

“Sarah is already suspicious.”

“Nah, I don’t think so,” he said.

“Well, I know I would be.”

“That’s because you’re obsessed.”

She snorted. “Maybe so, and so is she.” She had to smile at his sexy laugh. “I miss you.”

“Mmmm, fuck, not as much as I miss you.”

The hunger in his voice wrecked into her hormones. “So is your uh...brother okay? Ethan?”

“He was stable when I left this morning. Awake too.”

“Glad to hear it. And your meeting went okay?”

“Yes.”

She looked at her phone. “My brother’s calling. Am I supposed to be doing something here while you’re gone?”

“Besides miss me, you could eat breakfast and stay out of trouble.”

“That should be easy without you here. Where are you?”

“At the dry dock waiting. Your brother is a couple minutes away.”

“Crap, I need to call him back. How long will you be?”

“Hopefully back in an hour.”

She hoped so. He was crazy not to see or think Sarah wasn’t suspicious. “Good.”

“You can eat breakfast with Grand Pier and visit the lone mother.”

“And risk making him choke to death?”

“Awww Ma Petite Texas, you still worried about that?”

“Yes! I don’t wanna accidentally kill the thing you love the most.”

He laughed. “I have other things I love the most now.”

Her heart darn near exploded in her chest at that. “I know, my ass,” she teased, smiling.

“That is *surely* ranked near the top.”

Her smile grew bigger. “What’s at the tippy top?”

“Mmmm, that’s such an unfair question. Your smile, your lips, that fucking cute twang in your words. Your pussy is ___”

“These are all body parts!” she laughed. “What about my heart and my gorgeous mind and soul?” she giggled.

“Well, I’m sure I would love those things too if you had them.”

Her laugh burst out so very unladylike. “You crack me up, you know that? Oh, did you see where that bag of clothes went from that nice lady?”

“I think I saw it next to the couch with your purse.”

“I wish I had known my brother was coming, I’d have told him to bring me more clothes.”

“Dig through my things, I’m sure you’ll find something you can fit in.”

“Pfff, have you seen my ass?”

“I fucking have, yes. So, don’t piss me off.”

She laughed. “How would I piss you off.”

“By making me think of it while I can’t have it.”

“I can see Sarah’s face with me in your clothes,” she muttered, shaking her head. “You’re gonna get us so caught. Shit, I think somebody’s knocking. Better not be Sarah.”

“Just go be yourself, you’ll be fine. See you in an hour, Texas.”

“Bye,” she whispered, loving when he called her that. “Swamp cowboy.”

She hung up and hurried to the door, stopping halfway. She could not answer it. She realized whoever knocked knew somebody was in here. And likely that Patches was gone.

“Coming,” she called. She had a right to sleep somewhere, and Patches hadn’t slept there the night before. No harm no foul.

She hurried to the side of the couch finding the bag.

“I’ll be right out,” she called, digging through the items and pulling out something yellow. Another field of flowers, geeze they loved dresses, didn’t they?”

“It’s Sarah, I was hoping you’d be out soon, I had some friends I wanted you to meet.”

She paused, immediately suspicious with that sweet tone. “Alright. I’ll be up in fifteen minutes.”

“Good! See you then.”

Geeze, that tone. She sure sucked at acting. Tegan did *not* want to meet anybody, specially not no more swamp ladies that hated out-of-towners trying to get their man. She realized the yellow outfit wasn’t a dress but a romper. That went way up her ass. For the *love of leather and lassos*. She hurried back to the bag and snatched up the only other item. A china blue material with more flowers. And a dress. At least her ass wouldn’t be screamin’ at everybody. She swapped the outfits, realizing her bra straps showed in the new one. She removed the bra and realized the way the material gathered along with the dark color hid things just fine. She stuffed her clothes and bra back into the bag and hurried to the mirror she’d seen in the workout room, pulling her hair around her neck to hide that hickey. She needed to get to those band aids she’d seen in the supply closet upstairs asap.

Tripping and tugging on her cowgirl boots, she hurried to the door then raced back to the bathroom for her phone. She found her brother’s number and leaned against the sink, listening to the ring.

“Babygirl,” he answered, making her roll her eyes at the childish nickname.

“Where are you?”

“Just now pulling up at something called the Dry Dock. Your Patches is fetchin’ me.”

“He ain’t my Patches,” she whispered. “And don’t be callin’ him that in front of people.”

“Why?” he laughed.

“They have women here who already think I’m after their men and they don’t like out-of-towners moving in on their territory, you know how it is.”

“I heard *women* in all that. Now, what’s the problem?”

“Oh shut it, ya’ll try to hurry. Lord, I bet he’s getting you on his swamp dragon.”

“His *what?*”

“Lordy mercy Tater, they have these boats that fly on the water and sound like an airplane.”

“Whooo wee, sounds like a good time. Hey,” he called. “I’m Tate.”

“Patches,” she heard in the background, his sexy voice scattering her pulse.

“I’ll let you go, bye!”

She pressed the phone to her chest for a second then checked the dress for pockets. She gasped at finding some, nice and deep too. “Practical,” she muttered. “Nice. Very nice.”

She looked at her hair once more, tucking it behind her ears and spreading her bangs over her forehead. She really should put on makeup. But she was out of time.

She hurried out the door and ran up the stairs, opening it a crack and peeking around. She spied Sarah at a small table with two other women. Wow, they were sure pretty ones. Prettier than Sarah. She looked at the hall she needed to reach for those band aids. She could shoot for it. They might not see her while yackin’.

She darted out, not looking in their direction.

“Oh, there she is! Tegan!”

Horseshit. She turned with a big ole surprised smile and made her way over.

“I wanted you to meet some of the swamp ladies,” Sarah cooed. “This is Geraldine and this is Martha.”

Tegan nodded, giving her finest Texas smile. “Nice to meet you, ladies.”

“Ohhh,” the one called Geraldine said with wide eyes. “That’s some drawl you got there. Cute.”

“Ain’t it?” Sarah said, mimicking her accent then laughing. “Did I sound like her?” she asked the women.

“Not at all,” the Martha one said, to which they all laughed before trying to do the accent.

Tegan waited a few seconds and announced, “Well, it was so nice meeting you girls, I was going check on Grand Pier.”

“Oh, he’s on his morning nap,” Sarah said. “You slept late. I’m guessing Dr. Patches wore you out yesterday?”

The innocent question was anything but. “Nah,” she said. “I’m used to working from sunup to sundown on the ranch.”

“Oh, what do you do on the ranch?” Geraldine asked with her fake Texan accent.

“I babysit mostly,” Tegan said with a smile.

“You have children?” Martha asked, eyes hopeful like that would ruin her reputation good.

“Yeah, three hundred and fifty head of cattle.” She tossed her thumb behind her. “I need to go check on Becky, it was so nice meeting you ladies!”

“Oh, Becky is *finally* napping,” Sarah cooed once again.

“Well, dang. Then I’ll grab some breakfast.”

“Oh honey, so sorry, but Justine saved all the breakfast and is on to lunch. You can grab some fruit. Good for energy

and low on calories.”

Holy hell.

She gasped. “Oh my God, I did not mean it like that.”

“Like what?” Tegan said, not about to bite on that one.

The girls laughed. “Miss perfect waist is always worried people think she’s digging on their weight.”

“Which I’m not,” she assured. “Having meat on your bones is healthy.”

“Nah,” Tegan easily laughed. “I know I got a fat ass. I quit tryin’ to lose it when I realized it was one of my finer *assets*. Get it?” She gave a big Texas laugh and made her way to the kitchen, ready to chew nails and spit lead.

She blindly grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and spotted an exit in the kitchen. Hallelujah.

She found a spot on the opposite side of the large house and sat in a rocking chair where she had a view of the bayou. She couldn’t remember where the dock was they’d parked at before from where she was. There had been a dock, she was sure, and there wasn’t one on this side that she could see.

She froze at hearing voices and shot off the rocker. She got five feet and detoured to the rail, leaning on it, not about to run from these bitches. She took a big bite of the apple and aimed a smile at them.

“So, tell us, Tegan of Texas, you have a boyfriend?”

“Oh, *now* look who’s digging,” Sarah said all innocent, sitting on the steps like a side-winder while the other two girls flanked her left and right.

“Nope,” she said. “Haven’t found the right cowboy yet.”

“Awww, that’s too bad,” Martha said.

“Did you hear about The Twelve getting married over here in the swamp?”

“I sure did,” Tegan decided to say. “Exciting times for you ladies?” She eyed Sarah. “I believe Nurse Sarah here is paired up with our Dr. Patches.”

“She is!” Geraldine said. “And so are we!”

She took a bite of her apple to hide her shock, managing a “Wow,” while nodding. “Good to see you all playing so nice with the competition.”

“Well, he’s taking us each on a date,” Martha said.

“And we each get our fair shot at winning over the sexy doc.”

The lust in her tone soured her stomach.

“I already know I’m gonna win him over,” Geraldine bragged. “You know when I come for my yearly, I can tell he likes me by how gentle he is. I never said before but once I nearly had an orgasm while he checked me with those long fingers.”

“Funniest part is that our poor Nurse Sarah has to stand there and watch,” Martha laughed real big.

“Well, you’re not the only vagina he’s explored in these swamps,” Sarah assured, bringing a cramp to Tegan’s sick stomach. “He even helps some of the poor wives with their orgasm.”

Tegan was gonna be sick as she hurried for the door.

“Tegan?” Sarah called. “What’s wrong?”

She heard stifled laughter as the door shut and she made her way blindly to the apartment. Racing down the stairs she went in and shut the door, locking it. She paced back and forth with her eyes closed, everything shaking on her.

She pulled her phone out and dialed him.

She hung it up.

She wouldn’t ask him that on the phone. She wanted to believe they were lying, just trying to hurt her but then he *was* the frickn’ swamps only doctor!

He helped poor wives with their orgasm.

She pulled her phone out and dialed him again, pacing. “Hey, I’m on the dragon,” he said over the racket. “Five minutes out. You okay?”

She fought to unhinge her jaw.

“Tegan?” he called.

“I’ll talk to you when you get here,” she said, hurrying to the room in case that bitch was listening at the door.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Do you...are you...a *gynecologist* to the women in the swamp?” The three second span of silence brought her, “Oh God you are.”

“I do everything, Tegan, yes. And *why* are you asking that?”

“Oh, I bet you can guess.”

“Actually, I can’t. Where are you?”

“Hiding in the apartment, away from Sarah, Geraldine and Martha. Ring any bells?”

“What the fuck are they all doing there?”

“That’s a good question,” she muttered. “Besides telling me how gentle you are when you finger them, they’re mocking my accent.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Stay put, I’m calling Sarah.”

“Do *not* fucking call her!” she shrieked, panicking. “Do not!”

“Fine, I’ll wait till I talk to you. I’m a doctor Tegan, it’s what I do, but it’s nothing like what they make it sound like, that’s for damn sure. It’s the one part of the job I detest doing.”

“How the *hell* are there no women for that! You can be so *very* sure you will not be ever doing that again.”

“There are nurses who do it, but so do I when I need to. Tegan, I see vaginas all the time, I deliver babies, it’s a job.”

“Well, it ain’t no job *you’ll* be having!”

“So, you’re a vagina doctor too?” Tegan heard Tater ask.

“Do not tell him it’s me!”

“Uhhh.”

Shit, he already said her name. “Dammit!”

“We’ll figure it out when I get there,” Patches said.

She hung up, back to pacing and fuming. She stormed to the door and opened it, heading back up the stairs.

“Well, if it ain’t Juliette, the gawjus Bayou Bishop.”

Juliette was there?

“Hey ladies, what you all up to like that? Hey Miss Sarah, Patches around?”

“No, he had an errand, how can I help you?”

“What about Tegan, she around?”

“She’s inside,” Sarah said.

Tegan waited, then took off toward the door, not about to hide from anybody. “Hey Juliette,” she greeted.

“Just the little lady I wanted to see,” she said. “How’d all that bat stuff work out?”

“Went perfect,” Tegan said.

“And I heard you were with Patches when that Viking circus happened? I wanna know everything!” She walked toward the other side of the porch and Tegan kept up. “You know I’m still *shocked* to learn they’re even for real and not a legend. I thought that’s what they were all these years, I mean I heard about them when I was like seven.”

“I was pretty shocked too,” Tegan said, sitting in the chair next to her. “Never heard of Cajun Vikings.”

The three stooges made their way over now. “We were just telling Tegan about The Twelve getting married. Miss Juliette, you signed up?” Martha asked.

“You might want to before an out-of-towner snatches another one of our men,” Geraldine warned. “You know what I mean?”

Bitch didn't just *drawl*.

“I think she knows what you mean,” Tegan said. “You gotta watch those, they'll swoop in and fell a man in a single night. Kinda like the way I fell a *heifer* when roping.” She pretended to throw her rope. “Shooop, down in two point five seconds. They don't know what hit 'em till I'm wrapping them up real tight between my thighs.”

Tegan watched all that fake sugar melt off her face, revealing a hateful sneer. “That might work in Texas, but out here in the swamps, it won't,” Geraldine said. “Nobody looks nicely on marrying outside their own.”

“Is that a fact?” Juliette wondered now. “Cause my brother married a Northerner. You might know her? Your Belle Eveque?”

“Oh, we know her,” Geraldine said. “Don't mean we gotta like or accept it. Which we surely do not. Nor do we like those who *betray* their own.”

“Oh, I see what's going on here,” Juliette muttered, her tone sweet. “You're picking yourself a fight with this lil Texas lady. But I wouldn't do that if I was you.”

“Nobody here gives a *damn* about Texas,” Geraldine assured.

Juliette gave a single chuckle. “You might wanna tell that to Patches.”

“Don't think just because you're a spoiled Bishop that you're above our ways. You ain't,” Geraldine assured, her voice going deeper.

Juliette gave a *shit's getting real* laugh. “Oh, I don't think *anything* like that, Geraldine.”

Martha joined with, “We still can't believe you took up for her in a public bat-tie.”

Geraldine added, “Then her deranged sister hurts one of ours, and nothing is done about it”

“One of *ours*? That stupid bitch that hurt my brother?”

“Blood’s thicker than water in these swamps!”
Geraldine snapped.

“Alright, ladies, this is going too far,” Sarah finally piped up.

“Too far?” Martha accused with challenge. “You’re the one who called us over here to help you with the Texas *tramp* trying to get in Patches pants.”

“Ha!” Juliette said, slapping her leg.

“All I know is, she better not get in *my* way,” Geraldine warned, pointing at Tegan, “I’ll Bat-tie that little bitch all the way back to Texas.”

Juliette stood up. “Well, you go right ahead. I’d love to see her beat your fat ass like Belle Eveque beat that swamp slut.”

“She thinks she’s so good, roping her dumb cows,” Martha shot out. “There ain’t no cows here, bitch, there’s gators. I’d like to see you rope one of those.”

“I’ll rope any damn thing you want me to,” Tegan said. “If that’ll shut your big mouths about me.”

“Oh, you wanna make this official, bitch?” Geraldine said, coming closer.

Tegan stood, not about to get attacked sitting down. “Damn right I do, whatever to get you off my ass.”

“Your *fat* ass,” Martha muttered.

“Well, Patches likes it,” Tegan drawled.

“You got yourself a deal,” Juliette said. “If she ropes and ties a gator, you’ll get off her ass.”

“*And* she’ll skin it for my boots,” Tegan added, ready to throw down on that porch.

“And if she can’t rope it, she leaves,” Geraldine said.

“Oh, I’ll rope it,” Tegan swore, nodding. “Name the time and place.”

“What the hell is going on?”

They all turned to Patches walking up behind them with Tater’s grinning face in tow.

“Seems like we’re missing a swamp rodeo, Dr. Patches,” Tater muttered, stopping next to Geraldine who was looking him over real good. And there was plenty to look over in his fitted black t-shirt and cowboy hat with blue jeans that hugged all his Texas sized goods, front and back. He caught the perusal and held his hand out to her. “Name’s Tate. Who might you be?”

“That’s Geraldine,” Tegan said. “She’s here to make sure I don’t take any of their swamp men.”

“Hey, we’re good,” Geraldine said all sweet now. “We have an understanding.”

“We have an *agreement*,” Juliette clarified.

“What kind of agreement,” Patches demanded.

“Talk to you gal’s later,” Geraldine sang sweet as can be in her mocking Texas accent as she headed off the porch with her side-slut Martha and Sarah following.

“Was nice meeting you Geraldine,” Tater called before eyeing Juliette now. “Tater,” he said, holding his hand out. “Tegan’s brother.”

“Oh, well, well, well, another Texas doozie visiting the swamps. Maybe you can hang around a bit and distract some of these women for us.”

He humbly put his hand on his chest while Patches gaze bore into her.

“However I’m needed, I’m here to help. As long as I can,” he added, looking at Tegan. “How you doin’ sugar?” He opened his arms, and she hugged him.

“Could be better,” she muttered, surprised with his affection and how much she could like something he usually

never gave.

“It’s just another rodeo, Babygirl.”

The soft coo took her off guard and she suddenly couldn’t let him go. “Thank you for coming.”

“Juliette,” Patches said, his tone darker than she’d ever heard it. “You mind showing Tate around while I have a word with Tegan?”

“Not at all. Come on, cowboy. Let me give you the grand tour of our swamp rodeo.”

He waited for them to walk off before he moved to stand before her. “What agreement?”

“Oh, that first?”

“Yes, that first. What happened here?”

“Those three heifers happened here. Your precious Sarah called them over to kindly harass me and tell me about how good you are with your fingers.”

“What agreement was made,” he pushed.

“That I would rope and tie an alligator and she’d get off my ass.”

“What!?” His anger shot her pulse up. “You’re not roping a fucking alligator!”

“If I’m gonna stay here, I damn sure am,” she assured. “I ain’t puttin’ up with that BS and I sure hope you weren’t expectin’ me to.”

He closed his eyes and turned, shaking his head. “I can’t believe they’re doing this. Well, at least that got them off my date list but that means I have to find three more.”

“Why?” she cried before shooting her hands up. “No, no, forget I said it. You had your thing going on here before I came and stepped all up in it. I’m backing up. Way up. I think you need to do your thing and get er’ done and I’ll wait on the sidelines.”

“Don’t do that,” he muttered, eyeing her. “Don’t let them do this to us.”

She eyed him back, trying to figure out what the heck he wanted from her. “So let me understand. You pickin’ me, but you want to pretend like you ain’t and date three women with hands-on plans to get you to choose them. Maybe I should help with the charade and date a couple of guys to make it look legit.”

She stared at him, trying to figure out what that look on his face was. Anger, offense, hurt? Whatever it was had her stomach sick. She wanted to take it back, but her tongue was tied up with everything.

“So, you want to, what? Call it all off?”

“I never said that,” she snapped.

“Do you?” he demanded, his face like stone.

“No! I don’t!”

“Then what’s your plan, Texas? Mine’s still the same. You in or you out, I have to know that.”

She crossed her arms, looking off to the right. “Not like I have a choice in the matter.”

“You always have a choice,” he assured too quietly.

She snapped her eyes up to him. “Not with you I don’t. I’m in whether I wanna be or not. You already have everything I could ever give a man and there ain’t no ungivin’ it. So, yeah, I’m stuck. But if I gotta deal with you gettin’ felt up by these swamp whores, I won’t survive. And I ain’t layin’ down to die out here like that.”

His stare got so brutal she couldn’t breathe. He snatched her hand and pulled her with him into the front entry and walked them past a million staring eyes. He continued with her down the basement stairs, not stopping till they were in his apartment with the door shut and locked.

He turned and before she got a word out, he had her against the wall, kissing her, his hand holding her jaw tight. She gasped when his leg pushed hard between hers and his

other hand owned her breast with a greedy lust that had her weak and dizzy.

“You gave me everything, Texas?” he shuddered right in her mouth.

“Yes,” she said, pulling his hair and riding that perfect pressure between her legs.

He gave a harsh groan, and she heard his zipper. He yanked the top of her dress down and the material caught under her breasts while his hungry mouth went from one nipple then the other.

“Patches,” she shot out, holding his head as he found his way under her dress and yanked on her panties. She squirmed and kicked her way out of them, and he yanked the dress all the way down, till it fell at her feet. His hot eyes bore into hers as he removed his T-shirt. Next, he removed his underwear, and the sight of his huge cock had her body convulsing with need and fear. What was he doing?

He pressed his body against hers again, lifting one leg high as he kissed her, his lust coming in harsh, growly breaths. He slid the head of his cock along her clit and pulled back, watching it. “Look at my cock on your fucking pussy.”

She did and gasped at the impossibly delicious sight.

“This is *my* pussy,” he swore, his mouth back on hers.

“Yes,” she barely managed around his demanding tongue.

He pulled back again, watching himself, his chest heaving. Then his gaze rose to hers as he pressed himself at her opening, bringing colorful moans flooding out of her.

“Patches,” she whispered, looking between them as he moved his hand up the wall, lifting her leg even higher.

“I want you to watch as my cock takes what’s mine.”

“Oh God,” she blasted as the thick head filled her opening. “Yes, yes.”

He seethed as he moved the tip in and out of her entrance. “My sweet Texas pussy is so fucking tight,” he accused, punishing her with a kiss as he groaned and barely pumped. “You know what it means when I put my cock inside you baby? It means I’m giving everything to you. You want that?”

“So much,” she gasped, emotion overwhelming her. “I want everything.”

“You already had it,” he said, pushing his cock in slowly. “But this makes it binding before God and nobody can break that, you understand?”

“Yes,” she said, her breath bursting out with a cry when he shoved to the very bottom of her.

“Patches!”

“No,” he gushed, grabbing her jaw harder this time while keeping his mouth right at hers. “Forrest,” he said around lusty groans. “Forrest Nolton Monroe.”

“Forrest,” she cried right as his thrusts turned so mean and he forced her mouth open with his. Soon her sharp shrieks met his vicious grunts, like he was hungry for exactly that, her very loud confession that the whole hospital could hear and surely did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tegan's pulse was at a non-stop sputter with the approaching hurricane. The winds were picking up and it was still an hour till official landfall. She spotted Tater on the porch and hurried out, hooking her arm in his.

"Look at that, Babygirl," he said, showing her the hurricane on his phone screen. "Thing is a *monster*. We're feeling these bands here," he said, showing her.

"My land, it's massive," she muttered.

"You scared?" he asked, angling his grin at her.

"Terrified!" she admitted. "I asked Patches to show me what it's like and he had past footage of a bad one over *here*. Made me wanna run back to Texas!"

He chuckled. "Which we both know you're not doing since you're *in love* with the good Doc?"

She let out a breath, desperate to confess it to somebody besides herself and the inside of her skull. "I might be a little more than in love," she said, getting a whole body turn out of him with raised brows.

"*Really?*"

"Really, really."

"Daddy ain't gonna like that," he warned lightly.

"Troy or Torin neither," she already knew. "What about you?"

He slid his phone in his back pocket with a grin and shrug. "Well, he's got a swamp dragon, and a *land* dragon that is fuckin' kickass. He's a doctor of all trades, and *damn* good looking even by my standards. Hell yeah, I'll marry him."

She giggled, shoving him. “He’s all mine.”

“Is he?” he wondered. “Cause you got some scary competition in these swamps looks like.”

“As long as Patches wants *me*, I don’t care.”

“What kind of trouble you started earlier, anyway?”

“I didn’t!” she cried. “They cornered me, mocking my Texan accent and everything.”

“They did not,” he said in mock offense. “How dare they.”

“Now I got to rope and tie a damn alligator over it.”

“What!?” he laughed. “Why?”

“Because she said I *couldn’t*. And if I do, she’ll get off my fat, fine ass.”

He laughed real big at that. “There you go, own that big ass Texas pride.” He leaned closer. “But tell me...you know who in the world that fine-ass Juliette is dating?”

“Nobody,” she gasped, realizing. “I love her, she’s my hero. She came to my rescue back there. I thought she was gonna throw down with them bitches on the porch, and I was ready to yank some hair.”

“Something tells me that’s how casual conversations might go around here,” he muttered with a laugh.

“They are a different breed of people, that’s for sure. But I doubt they’ll ever accept me.”

“Nah,” he said. “They will.”

“Wow and to think the leader of The Twelve married a Northerner. Wonder if they know a good portion of their people ain’t happy about that?”

“I wouldn’t count on that.”

“Count on what?”

“The whiners are loud but usually of little number.”

“I hope so. God, to be an outcast would be damn *miserable*.”

“Ya’ll can always move to Texas.”

“He’s the doctor for the whole hoard! Would be like yanking people off of life support.” She shook her head. “I’ll find a way to get them to accept me.”

“I have no doubt you will,” he said, putting his arm around her.

“Tegan, Dr. Patches needs you in Becky’s room,” one of the nurses said, out of breath.

Panic bolted her through the door, and she raced through the corridor to her room, bursting in without knocking, finding them laughing. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Patches said, “She was just asking where her favorite nurse was.”

A breath left out of her, and he laughed.

“You thought she was having the baby?”

“Well, yeah! You said they could with the hurricane!”

He laughed real big. “It won’t be that fast if she does.”

“Don’t say that!” Becky scolded him.

“You’re right,” he said. “Better be ready to fly on a moment’s notice. Miss Tegan, when you’re done here, I need you downstairs.”

Her womb jerked so hard, she put her hand on it. “Be right there.”

The second he left, Becky went serious. “What in the *world* is happening out there? I’ve been hearing bits and pieces all day. Sarah is in a foul mood too,” she hissed.

“Why you say that?” she asked, ready to be pissed.

“Well, she already don’t hide her true feelings for the nobodies except when Dr. Patches’s is around but shoo, today she was downright scary.” Her eyes were wide.

“Scary how?”

“The kind of scary I don’t want around me when I’m having a baby scary,” she whispered extra quietly.

“That two-face lying whore of a starvin’ heifer,” Tegan muttered.

“What’s it all about?” she whispered, glancing at the door. “Is it about you and Dr. Patches?” She smiled. “I know he likes you, I can see it. I bet Sarah can too.”

“Oh, she can. And Martha and Geraldine came gang up on me today playing all nice but they was anything but.”

“Those are some mean ones. I can’t believe Dr. Patches picked them for dates,” she barely mouthed like he was dumb as a box of beans.”

“Is she ever mean to you?” Tegan wondered, the idea about to make her go off.

She waved the whole thing off. “Nothing serious. Childish stuff. She does her job fine but her bedside manners with me are telling when Patches isn’t around.”

“Well, that’ll change,” she assured. “If I have anything to say about it and I think I will.”

She gasped. “I heard Juliette earlier. She was taking up for you?”

“She was, thank the good lord.”

“I love her so much,” Becky said with a proud, tight smile. “Everybody does.”

“Not according to Geraldine.”

Another poo-poo hand wave. “They’re so *dumb*, them girls. Most of the women have families and don’t act like them. These ones are *special*,” she whispered with a giggle that made Tegan smile. The woman suddenly opened her arms. “Come here, you look like you need a hug.”

Tegan hurried over and took it, the little act of kindness filling her heart way up. “Thank you for accepting me, Becky. You’re my only friend so far. Besides Patches and Juliette.”

“Grand Pier really likes you too,” she said, nodding like she knew she worried about it. “He’ll get over Sarah as soon as he knows Dr. Patches’ feelings for you.”

“Mercy, I sure hope so.”

“You better go find the good Doctor. I know he’s waiting for you.”

Oh heavens, she really did know what he was up to. “I’ll be checking on you regularly,” Tegan assured. “You’re in *my* hands now.”

Becky gave a happy clap. “Good! Oh, I do hope this rascal comes out and meets us soon,” she said, stroking her belly. “Get!” she shooed.

Tegan opened the apartment door and Patches turned, pulling her inside. “New plan,” he said, locking it. “I’m telling Grand Pier about you. I don’t want to wait, I can’t stand hiding you from anybody. I want the fucking *world* to know.”

He wrapped his arms around her and smashed his lips against hers with a moan before opening his mouth and *really* kissing her. “I called my Eveque,” he said, kissing her at a different angle now.

“Why?”

“To tell him my decision.”

Her pulse spiked with fear. “What...did he say?”

He pulled up, smiling at her. “His actual words were, ‘Mon Dieu, my Litte Patches is getting married.’”

“Little Patches?” Love overwhelmed her and she ran her fingers in his hair, getting serious. He did too at seeing it.

“They’re having a hurricane party at the Basilique. Most of The Twelve will be there, even the married ones with their wives.”

She wondered why he was telling her that.

“I wish I could take you. Show them arrogant fucks that I won. I got the most beautiful woman on the planet.”

“Oh my land,” she whispered, pulling his mouth to hers and kissing him.

Her back hit the wall and everything erupted in a hurry. “Yes, fuck me,” she gasped, hiking up her dress when he undid his. She got out of her panties right as he pinned her neck to the wall and shoved her leg up. “Do it,” he ordered, kissing at her mouth.

She needed no explanation as she reached between them and took hold of his huge cock, placing him at her opening.

“You ready?” he asked, his breaths thick at her mouth.

She couldn't speak, only nod, her need coming in tiny whimpers.

He shoved all the way in and his mouth opened on hers, his hot gasps burning before he devoured her. “I'm going to fuck you so hard now,” he swore, winded, his hand tighter on her neck.

“Yes,” she barely shot out, ready to orgasm just from his words.

He pulled out and gave another hard thrust, groaning and feeling her neck with his fingers, his growl catching her shriek. “Fucking love when you scream like that, baby.”

“Forrest,” she gasped, loving the feel of being pinned by his hand and cock against the wall. “You're being so mean.”

His mouth opened wider with a groan as he pulled out and shoved in again. “You're being so fucking bad.”

“Punish me,” she begged weakly. “Make my pussy take your big cock.”

His mouth hardened with a seethe and he turned into a bucking bull, his cock a jackhammer against the deepest part

of her. God, she was shrieking and couldn't stop and again, he wanted exactly that it seemed. He wanted the world to know what he did to her, what he made her feel. She didn't hold back, she told the story straight and true and with all her heart.

The sudden pounding on the door brought another kind of scream from her it was so loud. "Sorry to interrupt," Tater yelled. "But I was told to tell you about some kind of water pipe breaking and one of them mothers."

"Shit!" Patches pulled out of her and pulled on his pants. "One of the mother's water broke."

"Oh my *God!*" Tegan cried, stumbling into her clothes.

"Coming," Patches yelled.

"Yeah, I'll let 'em know," he said, laughter in his voice.

"Which one?" Tegan wondered. "Is it Becky?"

"That would be nice," he whispered, yanking his t-shirt over his head. "Except for this *fucking* hurricane."

She remembered his fears with that. "You got everything ready though, so it's gonna be fine." She grabbed his face before he opened the door and kissed him. "You'll be amazing, and we'll all help!"

Even as she said it, that dreadful premonition in his eyes gnawed up her guts. Lord, he was scared and that was more than a little intimidating to see with somebody strong as him.

WHO'S NEXT?
BULLETS

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**SPECIAL SHOUT OUT TO
ALL MY PATRON MEMBERS!!!**

Ayn Kenyon

Coxraven

DastardlyCrimes

Deb Morton

Dorit Caltagerone

Ginger Marie

Guin Reese

Jacqueline George

Jennifer

Kathryn Norton

Lizzy Smith

Marilee Boerger

Nancy Talbot Heath

Patricia Howard

Rebel Devlin

Renee
Sara
Vanessa
Penny Box
Cynthia D Simons
Cheryl Reels
Diann Daniel
Linda Lamsus
Karen Burr Griffin
Denise Butterworth Harmon
Cindy Noyes
Nan Lindsey
Katherine Evans
A'Ryen
Emma dulin
Enrica Norling
Melanie McDonnell
Michelle Mendes
Sally Sutherland
Sheri Lemay
Gwynn Fuqua
Heidi
Kimberly Roux
Evelyn Wright
Conny Aiello
Elizabeth Vaughan
Cheryl Jackson
Stacey Bates

Candace Knight
Lori Cimino
Anna ORoark Mann

**PATCHES GAME
WINNERS:
PATREON MEMBER PERK**

PATCHES' REAL NAME:

Forrest Nolton Monroe

First name: Stacey Bates

Middle name: Michelle Boone Henry

Last name: Anna O'Roark Mann

NICKNAMES FOR BULLETS CREW:

All manner of bullet calibers:

A Ryen Winter

VIKING CHIEFTAIN NAME AND NICKNAME:

Not picked in this book, will be picked in Bullet's book

RIVAL CHIEFTAIN NAME AND NICKNAME:

Not picked in this book, will be picked in Bullet's book

**VIKING WOMAN NAME THAT BULLET'S
RESCUES**

Mia Juni Haraldsdottir

First name: Michelle Boone Henry

Middle name: Michelle Boone Henry

Last name: Gwyn Fuqua

BULLETS NAME:

Jericho Flint Gourdeau

First name: Michelle Boone Henry

Second name: Cindy Noyse

Last name: Connie Aiello