

Mary Kennedy

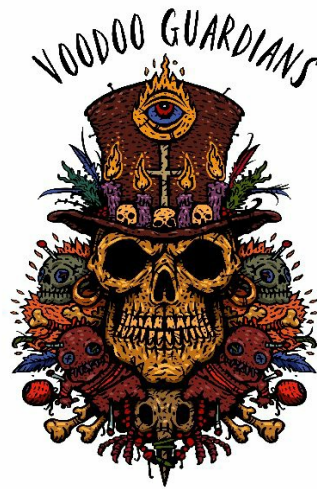
RUSH

Voodoo Guardians:
Book Nine

RUSH

Voodoo Guardians

Book NINE



Mary Kennedy



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Explore... and enjoy!

MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage Assignments

G1-8 = Garçonnière

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

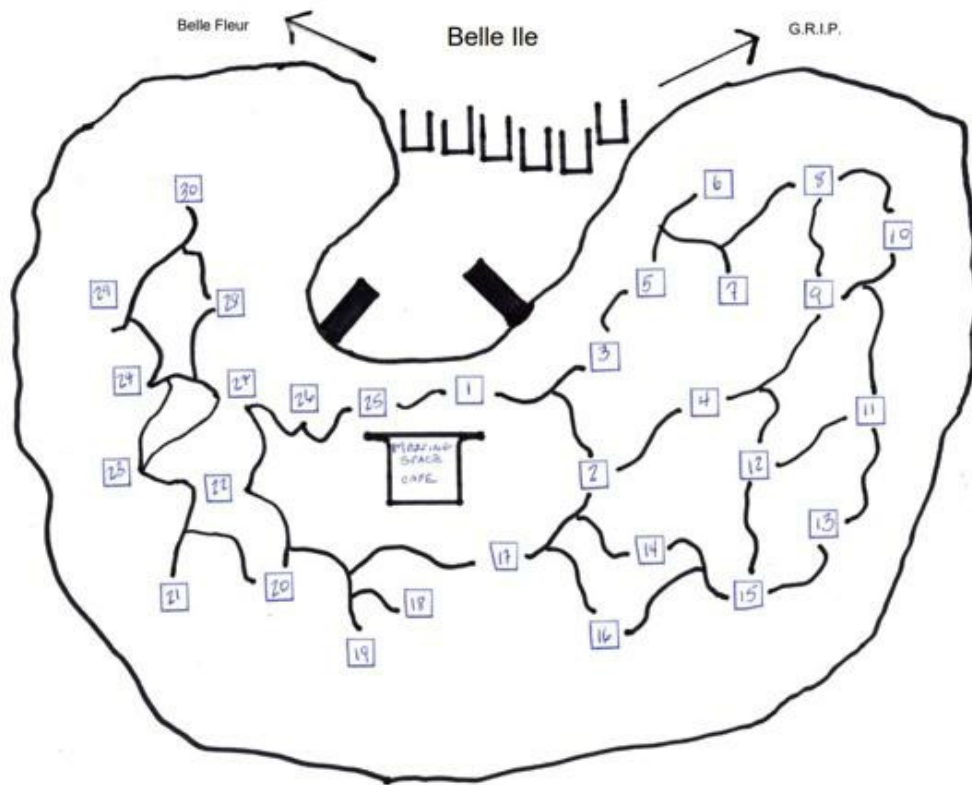
The Grove – where BBQs, picnics, and family gatherings take place



COTTAGE Assignments

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <u>1</u> | Matt & Summer | <u>36</u> | Gunner & Darby | <u>G3</u> | Pork | <u>97</u> | Jalen & Stormy |
| <u>2</u> | Alec & Lissa | <u>37</u> | | <u>G4</u> | Hex & Gwen | <u>98</u> | Chase & Kennedy |
| <u>3</u> | Gabe & Tory | <u>38</u> | Zulu & Gabi | <u>69</u> | Kiel & Liz | <u>99</u> | Sam & Mia |
| <u>4</u> | Kev & Tila | <u>39</u> | Doc & Bree | <u>70</u> | Joseph & Julia | <u>100</u> | Milo & Lia |
| <u>5</u> | Raphael & Savannah | <u>40</u> | Paul & Elizabeth | <u>71</u> | Wes & Virginia | <u>101</u> | Hiro & Winter |
| <u>6</u> | Jak & Mattie | <u>41</u> | Luke & Ajei | <u>72</u> | Dalton & Calla | <u>102</u> | Ryan & Paige |
| <u>7</u> | | <u>42</u> | Fitz & Zoe | <u>73</u> | Nathan & Katrina | <u>103</u> | Chase & Maeve |
| <u>8</u> | Ivan & Sophia | <u>43</u> | RJ & Celia | <u>74</u> | Keith & Susie | <u>104</u> | Duncan & Lindsay |
| <u>9</u> | Tristan & Emma | <u>44</u> | Carter & Ani | <u>75</u> | Marc & Ela | <u>105</u> | JT & Kennedy |
| <u>10</u> | | <u>45</u> | | <u>76</u> | Cowboy & Autumn | <u>106</u> | Torro & Melanie |
| <u>11</u> | King & Claire | <u>46</u> | Trev & Ashley | <u>77</u> | | <u>107</u> | Bron & Mila |
| <u>12</u> | Sly & Suzette | <u>47</u> | Frank & Lane | <u>78</u> | Ian & Aspen | <u>108</u> | Fitch & Carsen |
| <u>13</u> | Rory & Piper | <u>48</u> | Tailor & Lena | <u>79</u> | Doug & Miguel | <u>109</u> | Bogey & Alice |
| <u>14</u> | O'Hara & Lucia | <u>49</u> | HG & Maggie | <u>80</u> | Dom & Leightyn | <u>110</u> | Irish & Lucinda |
| <u>15</u> | Titus & Olivia | <u>50</u> | Bryce & Ivy | <u>G5</u> | Remy & Charlotte | <u>111</u> | Tanner & Mic |
| <u>16</u> | Max & Riley | <u>51</u> | Wilson & Sara | <u>G6</u> | Magnus & Addie | <u>112</u> | AJ & Skylar |
| <u>17</u> | Stone & Bronwyn | <u>52</u> | Mac & Rachelle | <u>G7</u> | Chipper | <u>113</u> | Mo & Ophelia |
| <u>18</u> | Jazz & Gray | <u>53</u> | | <u>G8</u> | | <u>114</u> | |
| <u>19</u> | Ham & Sadie | <u>54</u> | Clay & Adele | <u>81</u> | Aiden & Brit | <u>115</u> | Ethan & Koana |
| <u>20</u> | Phoenix & Raven | <u>55</u> | | <u>82</u> | Callan & Juliette | <u>116</u> | Bone & Londyn |
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| <u>29</u> | Eli & Jane | <u>64</u> | Adam & Jane | <u>90</u> | Robbie & Carrie | <u>125</u> | |
| <u>30</u> | Grant & Evie | <u>65</u> | Ben & Harper | <u>91</u> | Cade & Cassidy | <u>126</u> | |
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| <u>34</u> | Razor & Bella | <u>G1</u> | | <u>95</u> | | <u>130</u> | |
| <u>35</u> | Tango & Taylor | <u>G2</u> | Kegger | <u>96</u> | Will & Brooke | <u>IM</u> | Ham, Sadie, Christopher, Ramey, Patrick, Margo |

Map of Belle Île & Cabin Assignments



Cabin Assignments for Belle Ile

| | | | |
|----|----------------------|----|-----------------|
| 1 | Trak & Lauren | 18 | Dex & Marie |
| 2 | Nine & Erin | 19 | Hannu & Johanna |
| 3 | Miller & Kari | 20 | Otto & Robin |
| 4 | Luc & Montana | 21 | Teddy |
| 5 | Gaspar & Alexandra | 22 | |
| 6 | Ghost & Grace | 23 | |
| 7 | Ian & Faith | 24 | |
| 8 | Mama Irene & Matthew | 25 | |
| 9 | Ruby and Sven | 26 | |
| 10 | George & Mary | 27 | |
| 11 | Whiskey & Kat | | |
| 12 | Angel & Mary | | |
| 13 | Antoine & Ella | | |
| 14 | Baptiste & Rose | | |
| 15 | Bull & Lily | | |
| 16 | Vince & Ally | | |
| 17 | Code & Hannah | | |

CHAPTER ONE

William Rush Anders stared at himself in the full-length mirror of his bedroom and cursed under his breath. He removed the jeans and tossed them on the floor, then reached for another pair.

“Rush! You’re gonna be late for your first day of school!” yelled his mother. She turned to Noah, frowning. “Noah, go speak with your son, please. I have to get to the big house and meet with Mama Irene about the fall décor.”

“I’ll speak with him,” he grinned. He kissed Tru, leaning her backwards with a passionate embrace. “I love you, woman.”

“I love you, man.” She giggled as she walked out the door. Noah turned, walking down the hallway toward his son’s room. It was cracked open, but he could see the pants tossed on the floor and his son becoming more and more frustrated. Tapping the door, he opened it and stepped inside.

“Rush? Is there a problem, son?”

“Nothing fits, Dad. Nothing! It’s my senior year. The biggest year of my school career, and none of my blue jeans fit!”

“What is wrong with them?” asked Noah.

Rush pulled on a pair of the pants and then pointed downward in

frustration. They were at least three inches too short. Then he pointed toward his groin, where the outline of his balls and dick made Noah squirm. The jeans were definitely too short-waisted for his son, causing discomfort for him.

“They’re pathetically short, and the crotch is killing my balls,” he frowned, pulling on the jeans. “I can’t go to school like this, Dad.”

“Okay, okay, just relax. Someone will have jeans that fit you, or maybe you can wear a pair of mine for today.”

“Dad, it’s getting harder to hide,” he said with frustration, plopping into his chair. He shoved his thick blonde hair back from his face. Noah looked at him, confused, then realized what he was talking about. “I know you’re big, Dad. I’ve seen you in the shower or changing to swim at the lake or the pond. But I’m really, really big. I don’t know why guys think this is awesome like I deserve some prize. It’s annoying and hard to hide. No girl is ever going to want me.”

Noah tried to suppress the laughter bubbling in his chest. He knew others had experienced the same thing, himself included. Remembering that Eric was in the office now, he texted him and then sat with his son.

“Try these,” he said, handing him a pair of his own jeans. “We bought all of those at the beginning of summer, right?”

“Yes. But that was almost three months ago. Apparently, my body is kicking into overdrive or having some sick growth spurt. It’s not funny.” Rush looked as though he might cry. He pulled on his father’s jeans and nodded at him. “They’re a little big in the waist, but I can wear a belt. Thanks, Dad. I’m sorry I got so panicked.”

“Good morning,” said Eric, standing in the doorway.

“Morning, Eric,” said Noah and Rush.

“Everything okay, Rush?”

“No, and I guess I know why my dad texted you,” he blushed.

“Rush, your dad and me, and several other guys here have had a similar issue. Did you know that I almost refused to marry Sophia Ann because I was worried I would hurt her?” Rush shook his head. “It was the dumbest thing I almost ever did. The size of your manhood doesn’t define you as a man, Rush.”

“Yea, well, other guys think it does. Do you understand what it’s like to change in the locker room with everyone else and have them all stop and stare?” Noah raised a brow at his son.

“Actually, I do,” said Eric. “When I joined the military, we were all required to shower together in open shower stalls. Guys gave me all kinds of nicknames. Part of the test of becoming a man is learning to ignore those

names. Your name is Rush Anders. Not big dick Anders or anything else.”

“Eric, how can I possibly ask a girl out? I can barely look at girls without my dick having a mind of its own and going crazy! There’s no girl that can survive me,” he said.

“That’s kinda cocky, Rush,” smirked Eric. “You’re probably about my size or your father’s or my father’s.” Rush stared at him, frowning, then lowered his trousers.

“Oh.” Noah and Eric said it at the same time.

“Yea, oh.”

“Okay, so you’re a little bigger,” frowned Eric, “but it still doesn’t mean you can’t have a meaningful relationship with a woman. You’re just a senior in high school, Rush. You don’t have to have sex now. Wait until you meet a woman that can truly handle you, and you can handle her with patience and kindness. As adults, you’ll be able to have the conversation much easier than as eighteen-year-old kids.”

“Please. Please, tell me you won’t tell the others about this. Please, Dad. Don’t tell Mom about it.” He was nearly in tears, shaking his head.

“Rush, I would never divulge such a thing to your mother or any other person here without your express permission. You are a fine young man, Rush. You are intelligent, strong, handsome, and kind. If your worry is that

you would hurt a woman, you will not. I know. I have had women who were unable to accommodate my size, and I immediately stopped, despite many giving their encouragement for me to continue. I have no doubt you will do the same.”

Rush stared at the two men, nodding. He knew they were right, but when he got hard, damn it was painful.

“Are you concerned about getting hard in public?” asked Eric with a side glance.

“Yes. All the time. I mean, most of the girls here are like sisters to me. Not all. Even some of the wives are so pretty, and they wear shorts and tank tops, and, well, I can’t help it!”

“Don’t be ashamed, Rush. I’m married, but believe me, it happened to me as well. Beautiful women make a man’s body react. I’m glad you’ve hidden it from the others, but one day, you’ll meet a woman, and only she will make you react in that way.”

“Promise?”

“I promise,” said Eric.

“Thanks, Eric. You too, Dad. I’m sorry I got so freaked out.”

“It is alright,” smiled Noah. “Go. You should be able to catch the bus with the others.” Rush ran out the front door, and Noah looked at Eric

with a wry grin.

“I guess that is my son,” he smiled.

“Yes,” laughed Eric. “I feel sorry for him, Noah. I remember crying in the gardens over what to do about my affection for Sophia Ann. You know who set me right? Trak. He knew I was in love with his daughter, and he told me that he also knew I would never hurt her. It was the confidence I needed.”

“He is right about one thing,” said Noah. “My entire life, men have looked at me and thought my size defined who I was as a man. I never used my manhood to get more women. I never wanted more. I wanted one.”

“Maybe that’s what makes us good men,” said Eric. “Neither of us wanted anything more than what was right in front of us.” Noah nodded at the younger man, grabbing his shoulders and hugging him. They walked to the offices together, happy that the crisis was averted.

Rush did feel better after having the conversation with his father and Eric. He didn’t even talk about the fact that he was experiencing knee and hip pain because of his rapid growth.

After Rush joined the Army then became Delta, it became harder and harder to get home on leave. He knew that he wouldn’t do twenty years. He couldn’t. His body wouldn’t be able to take it.

His proficiency with martial arts, handguns, long-range and short-range rifles, knives, and everything else made him a demon of one. As he prepared to go out on another long deployment, he made the decision to return home for just a few days. He needed to see his parents, and even if from afar, he wanted to see someone else.

“I’m so glad we can see you, even if it’s just for a few days,” said Tru.

“Me, too, Mom,” he smiled.

He looked around the cafeteria, happy to be home with family and friends. Some were still deployed, others off to college. But most were home and right where they belonged. He’d missed everyone. Eric gave him a smile and head nod, and Rush just laughed, nodding back. Remembering their conversation, he couldn’t help but feel foolish now, knowing that he was more than capable of stopping himself if a woman couldn’t take him.

“Who is that?” he whispered to his mother, swallowing hard.

“Caroline. Sniff and Lucy’s daughter. Isn’t she beautiful? I mean, all of our children are beautiful, but she’s really grown into an amazing young woman. She’s already in her second year of veterinary school.”

“She definitely got all the good of both parents. She’s changed. I hardly recognized her,” he said, still staring at her.

His mother nodded, leaving him at the table. He barely noticed, watching every move Caroline made. When she laughed, she tossed her thick, auburn hair over her shoulders. The curve of her jaw toward the elongated neck was electrifying. The swell of her full breasts pressed against the t-shirt, and those fucking little white shorts were killing him.

Suddenly, she was walking toward him, smiling with a little wave. She reached down, hugging him before he could stand, and he smelled the jasmine and magnolia of her perfume.

“Rush! It’s so wonderful to see you,” she smiled.

“Uh, yea. Great to see you, too, Caroline. I hear you’re getting close,” he said in a croaky voice.

“Yes, I hope so. I know Mom and Dad are anxious for me to get back here and help at the animal center. What about you? Are you getting closer?” He nearly choked on his coffee, coughing and nodding his head.

“Yep. I’m getting close,” he said, looking up at her. She smiled, wondering what was wrong with him.

“Well, a bunch of us are going to The Well tonight. Will you join us? I could use a good dance partner.”

“Yea. Yea, sure. That would be great.”

“Great,” she grinned. “Remember, you’re in Louisiana now. It’s hot

even at night, so you might want to drop those pants.”

“Drop my pants,” he repeated. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

He watched her leave, her sweet ass swaying in his face. When he started to stand, he realized that for the first time in years, his dick had taken control of his brain. He went through the series of thoughts in his brain.

I love my mother. Mama Irene cooking for me. Baseball is a game played with balls and... nope. Dogs. I love the dogs. Caroline loves the dogs. Shit!

He felt like a child picking out the right shorts and shirt for the evening. When he looked out to see the others dressed in cargo shorts and t-shirts, he followed suit. Meeting them all at the dock, he nearly fell overboard when Caroline stepped aboard in a little sundress.

“I’m so glad you decided to join us,” she smiled, sitting next to him.

“How could I resist? So, tell me about school.”

For the entire ride, she spoke about what she was doing and how much she enjoyed vet school. Rush didn’t hear a word of it. He focused on her mouth and those beautiful lips.

When she pulled him to the dance floor, he didn’t remember any of the steps. When they shared a basket of fries, he wanted to lick the ketchup from her lips.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, seeing his flushed face. They were dancing to a slow song, and she took his arm, pulling him around to the back porch where it was quieter. No one else was there, and he was relieved and worried.

“Yea. Yea, I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. Turning, he looked down at her.

“Rush. I’m so glad you came out with us. With me. I don’t know if you know this, but I’ve liked you for so long,” she whispered.

Standing on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his head downward. The moment his lips touched hers, Rush knew he was damned.

The soft flesh molded to his own, her sweet tongue sliding into his mouth, tasting the beer and barbecue. His arms wrapped around her waist, intuitively pulling her against his body. It was the throaty, need-filled moan that brought him back.

“Caroline,” he whispered. “Honey, we have to stop.”

“Stop?” she asked, bleary-eyed. “Why?”

“We just do. It’s not right.”

“Not right?” she repeated with pain in her eyes. “I see. Right. Of course. The big bad Delta warrior probably has someone in every port.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t say that.”

“No. You said more than enough,” she said, pushing back from him. He tried to reach for her, but she just shook her head, wiping away the tears. “Take care of yourself, Rush. I’ll see you soon.”

Rush couldn’t find his words. Hell, he could barely breathe after that kiss. How could she possibly think he wasn’t interested. Didn’t she feel his cock pressing against her body? Didn’t she feel the heat searing her skin?

“Breathe,” he said calmly. “Breathe.”

“Rush?” called Jak. He looked up at his friend, who was home on leave as well. “Brother, are you okay?”

“No. I’m not.” He wanted to cry. He was a grown man. An elite Delta operative and he wanted to cry over a woman.

“What happened? Caroline just asked Tobias to take her back home, and she looked upset by something.”

“Fuck. Not him.” He shook his head, feeling his cock immediately deflate. “It was a misunderstanding. I’ll make it right.”

But he never had a chance to make it right. The next morning, she was gone back to school, and he was flying back to base. He thought about talking to Sniff but never felt the time was right.

Now, he found himself deployed once again in the middle of nowhere, given a one-man mission that would either kill him or earn him a medal.

None of it mattered when all he could think about was a blue-eyed, auburn-haired siren who was back home, hopefully not dating anyone he might have to kill.

CHAPTER TWO

Caroline Willa Mullins was the perfect combination of her parents. She had a love of animals. A compassion for mankind. Her mother's auburn hair, blue eyes, and curves. Her father's humility, height, and humor. She was the perfect package.

Unfortunately, BJ, Tobias, JB, and Rush didn't think so. She was trying to play baseball with them, and they weren't letting her. All a few years older, they just thought she was an annoying girl. But when she threw the baseball to them, the sound of it hitting the leather glove echoed in the grove. With a look of smug satisfaction, she turned and walked away.

It was years of attempting to prove that she could play ball, or she could fish, or she could run as fast as they could. Then, one day, she realized she had nothing to prove. She was amazing in her own right, and the boys her age at school were definitely seeing it.

As a freshman in high school, she went to the same school with the very boys that once didn't want anything to do with her. Now, they were treating her differently, looking at her differently. All but one. The only one she was interested in.

“Hey, Caroline, why don't you stay after school tomorrow and watch baseball practice. I'm one of the best on the team,” said Carter Hebert.

“No, thanks. I have things to do at home,” she said politely.

“Well, maybe we should do some things together,” he grinned, rubbing her arm. She jerked away from his touch, glaring at him.

“I said, no thank you, Carter. I have to help my parents with some things.”

“Such a good girl,” he mocked. “Are you always a good girl, Caroline? Or is there a bad girl in there waiting to get out?” She hated him. He was two years older than her and thought he should be able to get any girl he wanted. Caroline wanted nothing to do with him.

“Leave me alone, Carter.”

“You’re all the same. All of you who live behind those gates. Rich, stuck-up snobs. You think you can be a cock-tease and not have something happen to you sooner or later?”

“I’ve done nothing! I told you to leave me alone, and I mean it!”

Carter started to reach for her again and felt the vice-like grip of a hand on his arm.

“Do not touch her,” said Rush. “If you ever so much as speak to her again, I will rip your arm from your body.” Caroline just watched Rush, not saying anything. She wanted to cry with joy that he’d stepped forward to protect her.

“Fine. Fine, but just stay out of my way, tease,” he sneered.

“Thank you, Rush,” she said, stepping closer to him.

Rush stared down at the tiny girl. She was tiny to him, and once upon a time, she’d been a *little* girl. Except she wasn’t a little girl any longer. She was in high school and had filled out, nearly to a woman. He hadn’t realized how very pretty she’d become.

“You’re welcome. I’d stay clear of him for a while. He’s going to be angry,” he said.

“I wasn’t anywhere near him,” she said defensively. “I was just waiting for the bus like everyone else. He came toward me. I tried to back up and get away.”

“I saw,” he said, nodding at her. “Just be careful.” He turned and boarded the bus as the others boarded behind him. Caroline was the last to board, and the only seat left was next to Rush.

“Can I sit with you?” she asked nervously.

“Of course,” he frowned. “You don’t have to ask me that, Caroline.”

“I feel like I do. I feel like you’re mad at me for some reason, and I don’t know why,” she said, looking up at him. He might be a high-school boy, but he was already six-feet-five and more than two hundred pounds. To Caroline, he was a full-grown man. She knew that he would leave just like

all the others and head to basic or boot camp.

“I’m not mad, Caroline. I promise.”

He gave her a friendly smile, and they rode on in silence, stopping when someone needed to get off. As they drove the final leg down River Road, someone sped out of their driveway, cutting off the school bus. The driver swerved, and the kids screamed, tumbling out of their seats to the hard floor.

Rush grabbed Caroline, holding her protectively in his arms as he hit the floor with her on top of him. Her head was tucked into his shoulder, the mass of wavy hair all over his face and neck.

“Is everyone alright?” yelled the driver. The kids gave a thumbs-up, staring at the man as they rose.

“You guys okay?” asked Tobias, staring down at Caroline and Rush.

“Y-yes,” said Caroline, standing. “Sorry, Rush.”

“It’s fine. Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

She nodded, but when he took the seat in front of her, she wanted to cry. They exited the bus a few moments later, and Rush strode toward his house, the others walking behind him.

“Sometimes, he can be a real jerk,” said Caroline.

“He doesn’t mean to be,” said Tobias. “He likes you, Caroline. But you’re a lot younger than us.”

“I’m two or three years younger than all of you, max. That’s not a lot younger,” she frowned.

“It is at this age. I know you don’t get it now, but Rush is doing the right thing,” said JB, grinning at her. “See you at dinner.”

Caroline saw Rush on and off that year but never in an intimate, one-on-one setting. She hoped and prayed that he’d ask her to homecoming or to his senior prom, but he didn’t attend either dance. When he quietly left for boot camp, she didn’t even get to say goodbye. But when he returned several years later, and she was home from school, she knew this was her chance.

They weren’t children any longer. They were both adults. She could feel his eyes on her and turned, smiling at him. He grinned back but looked confused. Maybe he didn’t recognize her. She was wearing her hair different and had lost a few pounds. Needing to hear his voice, smell his cologne, feel his touch, she had to move toward him and see him close up and in person after all this time.

“Rush! It’s so wonderful to see you,” she smiled, reaching down to hug his neck. She inhaled his scent and felt her body tingle beneath the touch of him.

“Uh, yea. Great to see you, too, Caroline. I hear you’re getting close,” he said in a croaky voice.

“Yes, I hope so. I know Mom and Dad are anxious for me to get back here and help at the animal center. What about you? Are you getting closer?” He coughed, nodding his head.

“Yep. I’m getting close,” he said, looking up at her. She smiled, wondering what was wrong with him.

“Well, a bunch of us are going to The Well tonight. Will you join us? I could use a good dance partner.”

“Yea. Yea, sure. That would be great.”

She felt as though she was forcing him to do some horrific chore and almost regretted asking him. But she knew that Rush would never say yes if he didn’t really want to come.

“Great,” she grinned. “Remember, you’re in Louisiana now. It’s hot even at night, so you might want to drop those pants.” *Stupid!* Of course, he knows he’s in Louisiana. God, get yourself together, Caroline!

“Drop my pants,” he repeated. “Sure. I’ll do that.”

She gave him another smile and turned to go back toward the others. Feeling his eyes on her, she looked over her shoulder and saw the crimson blush on his cheeks. Did he like her? Did he not like her? They weren’t

children any longer, and he shouldn't be worried about any age difference. They were adults, and they should be able to profess their affection for one another. Assuming he had any affection for her at all.

Tonight, she was going to find out.

Caroline must have tried on ten outfits before settling on the sundress. It would be cool enough but slightly sexy without being overtly so. She just wanted Rush to notice her. To give her the time of day.

"I'm so glad you decided to join us," she smiled, sitting next to him.

"How could I resist? So, tell me about school."

Caroline rambled on for twenty minutes about school and the labs she was taking and how close she was to finishing. She talked about the dog training and the horses and then cursed at herself for boring the shit out of him.

When she pulled him to the dance floor, he seemed awkward and acted as if he didn't want to be there. When they shared a basket of fries, he ate slowly, like a man who wasn't sure he should be eating at all.

"If you don't like the fries, we could get something else," she said.

"No, the fries are good."

He stood and pulled her to the dance floor when a slow song came

on. She thought this was going to be the opportunity to steal the kiss, but when she looked up at him, she was concerned.

“Hey, are you okay?” she asked, seeing his flushed face. She took his hand, pulling him around to the back porch. No one else was there, and she was relieved.

“Yea. Yea, I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. Turning, he looked down at her.

“Rush. I’m so glad you came out with us. With me. I don’t know if you know, but I’ve liked you for so long,” she whispered.

Standing on her toes, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his head downward. The moment his lips touched hers, Caroline knew that her world would never be the same. There would be no other man in her life except Rush Anders.

His strong lips caressed her own, his tongue dancing with her. She heard him moan and then grind his hips into her abdomen. She felt the steel rod against her body, and chills ran up her flesh, thinking about the things this man would do to her body.

His arms wrapped around her waist, pressing her harder into his body, and Caroline was ready to go overboard. She moaned a throaty, needy moan.

“Caroline,” he whispered. “Honey, we have to stop.”

“Stop?” she asked, bleary-eyed. “Why?”

“We just do. It’s not right.”

“Not right?” she repeated. Feeling the stab of disappointment and pain, she tried her hardest to not cry. “I see. Right. Of course. The big bad Delta warrior probably has someone in every port.”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t say that.”

“No. You said more than enough,” she said, pushing back from him. He tried to reach for her, but she just shook her head, wiping away the tears. “Take care of yourself, Rush. I’ll see you soon.”

Caroline ran back to the others, searching for someone who would take her home. Tobias walked up, looking at her.

“Hey, are you alright?” he asked.

“No. No, I want to go home, Tobias. Please, will you take me home?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said, taking her hand. Turning to his brother, he told him what they were doing. “I’m taking her home, and I’ll be back for you guys.”

She cried the entire way home, and when Tobias helped her onto the

dock, he held her hand.

“What happened, honey?”

“I was stupid. That’s all. I actually thought Rush liked me, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Caroline, maybe just try to talk to him tomorrow,” said Tobias. He liked Caroline as well, but he knew long ago that Rush had stolen her heart. “He likes you, Caroline, but there are things you need to talk to him about.”

“I’m done making the first move, Tobias. Be safe. I’ll be going back to school tomorrow. Write when you can.”

He watched as she practically ran toward her parents’ cottage and wondered if Rush Anders knew just how bad he’d fucked up.

CHAPTER THREE

“Ari Grigoryan? You want me to go in alone and kill fucking Grigoryan?” repeated Rush.

“Listen, Anders, he’s rallying insurgents, not really insurgents, just kids, that are coming in from everywhere. Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Belarus, Cyprus, Georgia...”

“I get it,” said Rush, raising his hands. “He’s collecting all the bad guys to have a full set. I understand, but we’re talking about a man that has had at least a half-dozen attempts on his life and has survived them all.”

“Yes, but one of them was not made by you,” smirked the colonel.

“Flattery won’t win me over on this one, sir. You’re sending me on a suicide mission,” he frowned.

“Well, you said you wanted to go out with a bang. This will be your last mission, Rush. The last one. Let’s make it a good one. A successful one.”

“Fuck me,” he muttered. “I get all the weapons I want. No questions asked. Transports, jeeps, planes, whatever the fuck I ask for.”

“Done,” he nodded. “Here’s all the intel we have. Since the earthquake, he’s literally sweeping in, taking young boys and forcing them to

join his forces. He's on his way to Ankara now. Turkish forces are trying to stop them, but they need help. If Grigoryan is killed, the others will fall apart and move on."

"I know," said Rush, shaking his head. "He must be seventy now. My father attempted to kill him once."

"Your old man was SOG, right?"

"Yes."

"And RP?" asked the colonel. Rush said nothing, just staring at the man. "It's alright, Anders. I know Michael Bodwick. All those bastards at RP got a raw deal, but they're fucking warriors. Every last one of them. Judging by your performance, I'd say you're at the top of the heap."

"We don't rank our team members," said Rush. "I'm just a man."

"Anders, you're six-feet-eight and two hundred and eighty-five pounds of fucking muscle. You've got a masters in mathematics. You speak five languages. And you're more advanced in every form of martial arts or weaponry than any other man I know. I highly doubt you're 'just' a man."

"Have you said anything to any of the other men?" asked Rush.

"Never. I know the rules, and I do not want to piss anyone off. Especially your family. You've been one of the best, Rush. I shit you not. You're second, maybe only to Trak Redhawk. Someone else you're familiar

with.”

“That’s quite a compliment, sir, thank you.”

“Get what you need and do your thing. Reach out if you need anything at all, but I’ll be here to support you with a team if needed. I just think this is a one-man job.”

“It is a one-man job, but I look like I stepped off the boat with Erick the Red, not Suleman the Great.”

“Keep a hat on,” smirked the colonel.

Rush saluted the man and left to gather his gear. His last mission, if he lived. He could go home and finally speak to Caroline. He could finally tell her why he’d held back, why he was so scared to start something with her.

He just hoped he got the chance.

Rush had the unique ability, despite his size, to blend in. He always sat when he could and made sure he wore a stocking cap. He often carried makeup to darken his face and hands, not wanting anyone to see the white of his skin.

He also was trained in flying jets and helicopters. Getting from Palermo to Ankara would be relatively easy, but then moving around would be more difficult. It wasn’t just finding where Grigoryan was located. It was

maneuvering around the damaged buildings and roads from the earthquake.

With approval to leave the military helicopter at the base in Ankara, he was given a jeep and set out to track down his man. He suspected they were northeast of city, near Gicik.

Parking the jeep, he wandered around the small villages, carrying only his backpack. The weapons were concealed beneath the stealth netting provided by Aunt Montana in his Christmas pack. The others stared at him when he opened the gift, but he could only laugh. Only in his family.

“Coffee,” he said to the waiter.

Nodding, he went inside and brought out the small cup of piping hot energy jolt. He dropped the small sugar cube into the cup and then a splash of milk. He ordered a small platter with olives, dolma, sliced lamb, and fresh tomatoes. Finishing it all, he left enough cash with a small tip on the table and walked further into the village. As he moved, he realized everyone was staring at the giant.

He knew that someone was watching him, following him, and he was content to let that happen. He couldn't pull out all the stops now. So, when two men stood in front of him, their weapons pointed at his head. He froze.

“What are you doing here?” they asked in English.

“I'm just here to help with the aftermath of the earthquake,” he said.

“I’m an engineer. I was separated from my group, and I’m making my way into Ankara.”

“You’re lying,” said one of the men.

“Friend, I don’t lie. Ever. Now, if you’ll get out of my way, I have to get to Ankara, or nothing is going to move.” He tried to move around them, then felt the presence of more men at his back. He looked over his shoulder and shrugged. “Okay. But your president is going to be angry when his roads aren’t fixed.”

Rush knew he had to play it cool for as long as possible. If these men took him to Grigoryan, he’d be face-to-face with the man everyone had been chasing. Instead, they locked him inside an ancient jail cell. There were bars on the windows and doors, but the mud hut was crumbling from the aftershocks of the earthquake.

His pack was lying on a small desk just out of arm’s reach. When the two men left him alone, he gripped the bars and shook hard. The crumbling ceiling and walls cracked, falling to the ground. Three more good pushes, and he’d be free.

Grabbing his pack, he stared out the front to see two men seated on the sidewalk. It was dusk, and if he could get out the back, he’d be able to make it into Ankara.

“Well, let’s see if my old Hulk routine will work,” he frowned.

Taking a running start, he rammed his shoulder into the back wall, watching the crumbling foundation crack. He backed up and ran at it again. This time, the wall fell into pieces, but so did the ceiling. The deafening noise had everyone ducking, thinking it was another earthquake.

Rush took off as fast as his long legs would carry him, trying to reach the winding streets behind him. He felt a sting at his shoulder but continued running until he reached the jeep. Tossing his gear beside him, he took off and then realized his shoulder was bleeding like a stuffed pig.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

Digging into the pack, he pulled out a handful of gauze and packet of wound sealing powder. Gritting his teeth, he poured it over the bullet hole and then slapped the gauze on beneath his t-shirt.

He made it into the city center as darkness fell. It would play well for him, considering most of the power had not returned within the city. But when his jeep suffered a flat from the fallen debris, his luck was running out.

Slinging the pack over his good shoulder, he started walking. Up ahead was a group of men that didn’t look friendly, nor did they appear to be with the Turkish Army.

“Shit,” he muttered.

He could hear them saying the big American was somewhere in the city. Turning the corner, he saw the sign for the zoo and headed in that direction. Hopefully, he wouldn't run into any escaped bears, tigers, or lions. The last thing he wanted to do was shoot an animal.

The entire place looked deserted. Seeing the monkey enclosure, he knew that as long as you didn't stare directly at them in the face or attempt to touch their young, they might leave him alone. Hopping the fence, he crawled into one of the cave enclosures and leaned back. Using his flashlight, he looked at his wound and cursed.

"Fuck me," he muttered.

He attempted to wash it and redress it, but the pain was excruciating. Several times, he had to stop and catch his breath. Using the last of his bottled water, he washed away the blood and tried to redress the wound. He could hear the monkeys chattering and wondered if they were pissed he was in their home.

"I just need to rest," he said quietly. "I promise I'll leave you alone. Just let me rest."

The last thought in his head was that he'd never get to tell Caroline how sorry he was. How he really felt.

Damn.

CHAPTER FOUR

Caroline felt like she had a pound of dirt in her mouth. Her hands and knees were killing her, raw and scratched from the debris. Crawling through rubble, trying to rescue animals that were so terrified they wanted to claw her eyes out, she was covered in dirt and dust.

The earthquake had shaken the entire area, crushing buildings, apartments, homes, and businesses. The zoo was not unscathed. Two Asian elephants had escaped and were finally caught before they destroyed anything.

“I think that’s everything except the lions and tigers,” said Caroline, staring at her supervisor, Dr. York.

“We still have the monkeys as well. We’re working on moving them into small enclosures and taking them by truck to Istanbul,” said Dr. York. A Welshman, he was the zoo’s temporary director until the current director could be found. Everyone was concerned that he’d been killed during the quake.

“Gather your things and put them in your vehicle,” said Dr. York. “Once we have everything ready to go, you’ll follow in your car. Just head to the hotel and take a few days to rest up. We’ll regroup at the Istanbul Zoo in a few days. You’ve done great work, Caroline. You’re going to be a

wonderful veterinarian.”

“Yes, sir.”

Returning to the temporary shelter of the tent she shared with four other women, she gathered her things in her duffel and took them to her car. What she really wanted was a shower, but there was no time for that now. Once in Istanbul, she’d have a hotel room and hot water. Hallelujah!

“Hey, Caroline,” yelled one of the other vet students. “When we get to Istanbul, we’re all going out to celebrate. Wanna come with us?”

He was an Italian student from Rome. Nice-looking and smart but not the man she really wanted. Not the man that set her blood on fire.

“I don’t think so. I’m exhausted. I’ll probably just shower and sleep for a few days. Thank you, though. You guys have a good time.” He nodded at her, but she could tell he wasn’t happy about her response. It wasn’t the first time he’d asked her out in front of the others, always making her feel self-conscious. The other women knew how she felt and usually tried to cover for her.

She watched as the lions and tigers were carefully loaded onto the transports, the big roars making everyone jump then laugh nervously.

“Caroline? Would you mind getting the Mandrills into the pens? We need to get them fed before we load them to head to Istanbul.”

“Of course. Just give me a moment.”

Caroline cleaned the rolling cages and then opened the doors to the rock enclosures. The Mandrills, a type of monkey, would be happy in their new home away from the broken debris caused by the earthquake. Their enclosure hadn't been damaged too terribly, but they weren't safe staying in this location. They'd been able to stay in their habitat, cared for by the dedicated zookeepers and veterinarians, but everyone was leaving, and that meant so were they.

“Come, Chookie, let's go, honey. You're the last one,” she called.

The female Mandrill stared at her, then looked behind her for a moment. Slowly, she moved into her temporary home, grabbing the fruits and vegetables left for her.

The workers wheeled the last of the monkeys toward the waiting caravans, and Caroline went into the enclosure to be sure nothing was left behind. As she started to leave, she heard a moaning from inside the rock enclosure.

“Who's in there? Babbi, are you playing hide-and-seek again? Come on, honey. You have to get to the other zoo.” Caroline stared at the trucks as they began to pull out and saw the small Mandrill that she thought she was speaking to. Backing up, she knelt down and peered inside the darkness.

“Hello? Listen, if you’re a thief, you’d better leave now, or I’m calling over the military guards,” she called. When no one answered, she stood. “Fine. Have it your way.”

“N-no,” whispered the voice.

Turning back to the entrance, she knelt once more, trying to see who had spoken to her. Even in a whisper, there was something about that voice. Something that sent shivers up her spine.

“Who are you?”

“H-help me. Please.” Caroline knew her family would skin her alive for this, but she couldn’t ignore the pain in the man’s voice.

“Alright, I’m coming inside,” she said.

Crawling on her hands and knees, she entered the dark enclosure and turned on her flashlight. Shining it against the walls, she scanned the small space and realized why it felt so small.

“Rush,” she whispered. “Oh, shit. Rush.” She scrambled towards him, seeing the blood-soaked shirt.

“C-Caroline,” he whispered. “You’re here. Why are you here? Never mind, I need you to get the bullet out.”

“Bullet? I’m a veterinarian, not a surgeon,” she whispered.

“Please. It’s getting infected. You have to get it out. They’re after me, and you’re in danger just by being here.”

“I’m leaving tonight because of that danger,” she said. “We’re all heading to the zoo in Istanbul. Who is after you?”

“It doesn’t matter. Bad guys.”

“I can call home,” she said.

He gripped her wrist, causing her to release the phone. It clattered to the floor, sliding down the concrete opening and straight through the grates of the sewer drain.

“Sorry,” he smirked in pain. She frowned at him, shaking her head.

“Alright. Let me get some things from my kit,” she said.

“Can’t tell anyone,” he said, shaking his head.

“I’m not an idiot, Rush. I was raised in the same family that you were. I know what to do. Just let me get my kit, and I’ll get the bullet out and give you some antibiotics. Then you can run, just like you always do.” He still held firmly to her wrist.

“I didn’t run,” he growled. “I did the right thing.”

“No. You did the safe thing. There’s a difference,” she whispered. She could feel the tears building behind her eyes and cursed herself. “I don’t

know why you couldn't just tell me you weren't interested."

Even in all his pain, Rush reached for her neck, pulling her closer.

"Does this tell you how interested I am in you?"

Gripping her wrist, he laid her hand across his hard cock and pulled her mouth to his own. Forcing his tongue between her lips, he inhaled the scent of her, tasting her, teasing her. When she moaned against him, falling into his lap, he held her tightly. Then, he stopped.

"Rush? Rush, why did you stop?" she asked.

Adjusting to the darkness, she saw that his eyes were closed. He'd passed out. Caroline frowned at his handsome face, then tried to free her wrist from his hand. She couldn't budge it.

"Perfect."

She tried to pry her fingers free, but his grip was so tight he wouldn't move. Caroline attempted to get off his lap, but he held her there with the injured arm. She could see it start bleeding again and cursed him.

"Rush. Rush, I have to get up to get my kit," she said.

He nodded, loosening his grip. As she stood, she stared at his beautiful face and wanted to weep. Not now. Now was not the time. In the darkness, she moved toward her small rental car and gathered her medical

kit. She could see the convoy already pulling out and knew they wouldn't wait on her.

Locking the gates behind them, they continued toward Istanbul. Caroline ran inside the evacuated building and gathered bottles of water, nutrition bars, and candy. Anything that could build his strength and energy. Climbing up the steps to the enclosure, she heard men speaking and quickly opened the door, hiding behind it. Locking it from the inside, she moved toward the cave and crawled inside.

Taking the old tarp that was used for playtime with the monkeys, she tried to secure it over the opening, hoping her light couldn't be seen in the darkness. Gently cutting his t-shirt, she removed the gauze and hissed at the red, inflamed wound.

“Idiot. Barbaric, fucking idiot. Think you're some kind of Nordic god. Well, you're not,” she mumbled. Drenching the clean gauze in alcohol, she wiped the wound and grabbed her forceps. “This is going to hurt.”

He didn't even respond as she dug for the bullet. When she hit the unyielding object, she carefully grasped it, slowly pulling it out. Looking up, she was surprised to see him staring straight at her.

Caroline couldn't look away. His blue eyes bore into her own, his lips so perfect. His face was flush with fever and heat, but he was stunning.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. She nodded, cleaned the wound again, and then began stitching it. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

“Don’t. Don’t do this to me, Rush. You made your feelings very clear at The Well when we were both home over a year ago. I’ve made peace with that. Don’t make me feel stupid.” She gripped the tape with her teeth, tore a piece off, and finished dressing the wound.

Rush took the tape roll from her mouth and set it in the kit. Gripping her neck, he pulled her close again.

“You’re fucking beautiful, and I have loved you for twenty years.”

Caroline stared at him, wanting to laugh at first. But seeing the seriousness in his face, she was worried he was hallucinating.

“Rush, you have a fever,” she whispered.

“Maybe. But I know what I’m saying, Caroline. I wish it were over candlelight and flowers and Mama Irene’s pot roast. But it’s here. In fucking Turkey in a chimp cave. I’ve loved you for so long, and it terrified me.”

“Why?” she whispered, shaking her head. “Why, when you knew how I felt?”

“I was worried I would hurt you,” he said, staring into her eyes.

Caroline shook her head, searching his face. Then she understood. She'd heard the other boys talk about it on occasion. She overheard the story of Eric. It stood to reason if he was a big man, he was big everywhere. It never even crossed her mind.

“Rush, you hurt me by pushing me away. The kind of hurt you're talking about would heal. We'd get used to one another, assuming I wouldn't be able to, uh, take, I mean, accommodate you. I'm a woman, Rush. My body is made to adjust.”

“What if I can't stop once we start? What if you beg me to stop, and I can't?”

“You would never, ever push yourself on me. I know you, Rush. We've grown up together. I know your heart,” she said, placing a hand over his chest. “Your heart is beating fast. I need to get you to a doctor.” She tried to stand, but he held her there.

“No. It's beating fast for you, Caroline. My shoulder already feels better. I've wanted this,” he laughed, “being alone with you in a dark place, just the two of us, for so long.”

“Well, it's not exactly what I pictured,” she smirked.

“What did you picture?” he asked, brushing back the hair from her face.

“I don’t know. I guess I pictured us taking a boat ride out on the bayou. Maybe we stop and watch the stars, have a picnic under the sky. Then we make love on the deck. We fall asleep and head back to our cottage.”

“Our cottage,” he whispered. Caroline nodded, feeling the heat from his forehead.

“Rush, I have to get you out of here,” she said. “I heard some men coming into the zoo after everyone left.”

“Do you have a car?” he asked.

“I do. It’s all packed, and I have water and food. Tell me what to do. Tell me where to take you, and I will,” she said.

“Caroline,” he whispered, pressing his sizzling forehead to her cool flesh. “Caroline, if I could, I’d take you to Paris and marry you tomorrow. But there’s something I have to do first. My last mission, and then I’ll be home.”

“Rush, you’re injured. You can’t finish anything right now,” she said, staring at him.

“I have to, Caroline. Please, baby. Trust me.” She nodded, then gathered everything in the cave. “How many men came through the gates?”

“Four, maybe five.”

“Alright. We’re going to head toward your car, but if they come toward you, I’m going to hide. I’ll take care of them.”

“You’re going to kill them?”

“If I don’t, they’ll kill you, or worse. And then kill me.”

She nodded and crawled to the front of the cave, opening the tarp. She didn’t hear any voices and stood, waiting for Rush. Gripping his waist for support, she walked toward the door. He smiled down at her.

“I didn’t need the support, but I’m damn grateful for it,” he said, leaning down to kiss her.

“I can’t think when you do that,” she frowned. “The car is that way.”

They walked down the back road of the zoo, behind all the enclosures, and saw her car. As they approached, four men were standing, peering in the windows. She released Rush and quickly moved away from him.

“Hey! What are you doing? That’s my car, and I have to get to Istanbul with the others. Don’t open that door.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” smirked the man.

“Fine. Your funeral. There are four cobras in the backseat. I trapped them there earlier.” The men stepped back, looking at the car, then at her.

One of the men started to walk toward her.

“Maybe I’ll just show you my snake,” he laughed.

Caroline felt the panic in her throat, then the sounds of bullets fired through a silencer whizzing past her head. All four men dropped. Turning, she looked at Rush, who was reaching for her.

“Are you alright? Did they touch you?” he asked.

“No,” she whispered. “No. They didn’t touch me.” He held her tightly, kissing her forehead.

“I was so frightened for you,” he murmured into her hair.

“Rush? I don’t think I responded to you earlier.” He looked at her with a confused expression. “I love you too, Rush. I always have.”

“I know, baby. Come on. Let’s get to Istanbul.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Any word from them?” asked Luke.

“Nothing, but Caroline’s trackers are working. She’s driving toward Istanbul, so she must be heading to the zoo there. That’s a good sign. Maybe her phone got damaged or something,” said Ace.

“What about Rush?” asked Noah. “Has he called in?”

“No. Nothing yet, but Michael is checking to see where he was sent.”

“I know where he was sent,” said Trak. They all stared at the man, his face dark with concern. “He was sent to kill Grigoryan. In Turkey.”

“Fuck,” said Eric. “You don’t think he and Caroline are together, do you?”

“I don’t know, but I know there’s a way for us to get there,” said Trak. “They need dogs to sniff for bodies. We send Sniff and the team with the dogs, and we’re along for the ride.”

“Trak, you can’t, brother,” said Cam.

“I can.”

“I know you can, but you shouldn’t. We can send Joseph and Nathan and a few others, but you shouldn’t.”

“I’m going. Delta doesn’t leave its men behind. He shouldn’t have been sent on his own.”

“He was sent on his own to kill Grigoryan?” said Luke. “Why the fuck would they do that to him?”

“He’s the best,” said Trak. They all stared at him, open-mouthed. Nathan and Joseph smirked at the men’s expressions. “He is better than me. He doesn’t operate with as much hate and anger. He is focused and trained beyond comprehension. They have been sending him on solo missions almost his entire career. Even my sons were allowed to be together, work together as a team. He has no one. We will find him.”

“Yes,” said Noah. “We will.”

“Shit,” muttered Hex. “Just how many men are we sending over there?”

“I’m going, obviously,” said Sniff. “I have Monster, Beast, Lucy, and Ranger. I think with the four of them, and Red and Moose, it will be enough. We won’t look like we’re overwhelming them.”

“Okay. We’ll have Bodwick call the POTUS and make sure Istanbul knows we’re friendlies. Take all the arm candy you need,” said Luke.

“Bring our boy and our girl home.”

With the gear loaded and the SUVs ready to pull out to the airstrip,

Lauren was standing with folded arms, frowning at her husband. Her daughters were off to the side, frowning as well, while Julia and Katrina glared at Nathan and Joseph.

“Trak, you promised you wouldn’t go out anymore,” said Lauren.

“This is different. He’s one of ours, but he’s also Delta. I won’t leave him out there. We’ll find him and bring both of them home.” He kissed his wife, and when she tried to speak again, he kissed her harder. Julia looked at Joseph, giggling.

“Maybe try that with me more often,” she whispered to him. He smiled at his beloved Julia, holding her tightly to his body.

“I love you more today than yesterday,” he said.

“I know,” she smiled. “I love you, too. I trust you. Do what you need to do.” He nodded, leaving his wife as they loaded up in the vehicle.

Noah hugged Tru, kissing her passionately.

“Bring our son home,” she said, staring at him.

“You have my word that I will not return without him,” he said, kissing her. “Dream of me, and I will be home soon to ravage your body.” Tru laughed, shaking her head. She still had trouble believing that he really wanted her. The big-boned, voluptuous, curvy woman.

The dogs were probably the only ones excited. They knew they were going to get to do what they were trained to do. Beast laid his head on Noah's shoulder, breathing into his ear.

"Must you," he frowned at the big animal. He took that as a sign to lick his ear as well. He could only chuckle, rubbing his head.

Finally, on the plane and headed to Turkey, the men sat at a big table discussing the plan. They would arrive in Istanbul, head to whatever hotel the tech boys booked for them and get set up. Istanbul was a city of nearly sixteen million people, all crammed into a small space near the sea. It was a bustling metropolis with a mix of old and new.

For the most part, the residents were friendly to Westerners, but with the unrest happening in the eastern part of the country and the earthquake, they might not be as welcoming.

"Get some rest," said Trak. "We're going to need it."

Moose, Red, Nathan, Joseph, and Sniff reclined in the seats, turning off their lights. Seated across from one another, Noah looked at the man he most identified with. They'd been the most elite warriors in their respective divisions. More kills, more captures, more everything than anyone else.

"We'll find them, Noah. I promise."

"I believe you."

CHAPTER SIX

It took six stops for Caroline to find a hotel that would take them. The hotel reserved by the zoo was booked solid with displaced people. All others were overrun with people begging for rooms. Their only hope was the most expensive place in the city.

She laid her credit card down, and the man looked at Rush. His face was flush, sweating profusely.

“Is he ill?” he asked.

“No. We’ve been working all day, getting animals out of the zoo in Ankara. He was scratched by a tiger in the shoulder. I just need to clean it and give him another round of antibiotics. Would you mind sending some food up as soon as possible?”

“Of course, madam. What would you like?” he asked.

“Everything,” said Rush. He raised a brow, and Caroline laughed.

“Red meat is always good,” she smiled. “Several bottles of water as well.”

She gathered the key, and they walked hand-in-hand toward the elevators. Others were dirty, injured, and bleeding as well, so she hoped the desk clerk wouldn’t think anything of their appearance.

Inside the elevator, the doors closed, and Rush leaned back against the wall. Caroline reached up, touching his forehead again.

“We’ll get you in a cold shower, and you’ll feel better,” she said. “The fever is going down, but you’re not out of the woods yet.”

“I’m going to need a cold shower if you keep touching me,” he said in a rumbling voice. She could only smile, standing on her toes and kissing him.

“I’ve waited years to hear you say that.”

When the doors opened, she led them to the expansive suite at the end of the hall. There was a full-service kitchen, living area, grass-lined balcony, and massive king-sized bed with plush velvet drapes and bedding. There were two additional bedrooms that they didn’t need, but since it was the only room available, they were happy for the luxury if only for a few nights.

“This is more like what I pictured our first date to look like,” he grinned.

“Come on, let me get you in the shower,” she said, steering him toward the bathroom. He removed his clothing, and she tried to turn him to sit so she could secure the dressing from the water.

“Caroline,” he whispered.

“Rush, it’s alright. I have a pretty good idea of what you look like. I

felt it. I'm not stupid, and you forget, I am a veterinarian. I know what male anatomy looks like. Well, animal male anatomy." He smirked at her, then turned.

Semi-hard, his cock was jutting out, bobbing up and down. Caroline swallowed, realizing it wasn't just about his length but the girth as well. The purple head was begging for her touch, and as she reached out, the door buzzer rang.

"Room service!" She smiled.

"Let me get that." She turned and closed the door, but Rush cracked it open, standing with his weapon in his hand. The servers brought in four carts of food, laying them out on the dining room table. "Thank you."

Locking the door, she went back into the bedroom.

"Shower with me," he said. Nodding, she kicked off her shoes and removed her dirty clothing. He stared at her gorgeous body, shaking his head. "I want you so desperately."

Caroline took his hand, turning the water to slightly warm without all the heat. It would be cool enough to help his fever without freezing her out. Taking the washcloth, she poured the shower gel into it and gently washed his body, turning him to reach everywhere.

His wide back had scratches and marks on it, the firm ass cheeks like

rocks. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her breasts to his back, and gently washed around his cock.

“C-Caroline,” he croaked.

“I know,” she whispered. “Me too.”

Rush turned then delivered the same care and treatment to her body. The stain of dirt and blood washed down the drain as they stepped from the bathroom into the bedroom.

“Food first?” she asked. He shook his head. “Me first?” He nodded.

Dropping her towel, she lay back on the bed, waiting for him. He stared at her body, the perfectly formed breasts poking straight up at him. The soft auburn landing strip led to what he desired most in this world.

“Have you been with other men?” he asked.

“One. It was a long time ago, but I have a few items from Charlie’s catalog. You might find that they’ve helped our situation,” she grinned.

Rush knelt between her creamy thighs, digging his fingers into her flesh. His cock, so red and painful, knew its way home. He smelled the sex dripping from her, felt its warmth. Gently, he pushed his head inside her body. Moaning with pain and desire, he stilled.

“Rush, please,” she said breathlessly. “More. I need more.”

He nodded, pushing another few inches inside her, rocking back and forth, in and out, as she arched her back toward him.

Realizing that she was close to taking all of him, he gripped her hips, lifting them to rest on his thighs. With this angle, it might hurt less as he made the final thrust. With force but controlled, he pushed forward until he was buried inside her sweet, wet pussy.

“Ahhh,” she gasped.

“Am I hurting you?” he said quickly. She shook her head.

“Just filling me,” she smiled. “Rush, you’re filling me completely. I never, I never knew it could feel like this.”

“You’ve taken me,” he said in surprise. “You’ve taken all of me. Caroline Mullins, you were made for me. You are mine, woman. Mine.”

“I’ve always been yours, Rush. Now make me cum. I so desperately need to cum.”

“My pleasure,” he said, kissing her nose.

Caroline couldn’t believe how patient and compassionate Rush was in bed. He was a generous, sweet lover, always concerned for her comfort. They made love, got up and ate, then made love again and ate again.

After midnight, they realized that neither had checked in with their

family or Rush with the Army.

“My phone is in a sewer drain in Ankara,” she smirked.

“Sorry about that,” he grinned. “I’ll text them.”

He shot a quick text, then rolled over, holding Caroline tightly to his body. This is what he’d been waiting for all these years. This moment where she was his. She knew it. He knew it. And soon, the whole world would know it.

He just never expected that almost their whole world would sneak into their room in the middle of the night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rush heard the creak of the door opening and tried to remove his arm from beneath Caroline's body. She moaned, kissing his chest, and he smiled, pulling harder as she rolled over.

Listening, he thought he heard footsteps. Grabbing the pistol beside the bed, he cracked open the door and saw two familiar bodies digging into what was left of the room service trays.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he whispered.

"Oh, hey, Rush," smiled Nathan. "Thanks for the text and your room number. We're exhausted."

Rush looked around the room, seeing his father, Trak, Red, Moose, Joseph, and Sniff. The dogs were lying on the cold marble floors, grateful for the cold touch. The heat of Turkey was probably miserable for the poor animals.

"Rush, who is it?" asked the sweet voice. They all looked at him strangely, then stared with their mouths open as Caroline stood in the doorway, wrapped in a hotel robe. "Oh. Dad? What are you doing here?"

Sniff stared at his daughter, then at Rush. He started to move toward him, but Rush stood in front of Caroline.

“I love your daughter, sir. I have for years but didn’t think I was the right man for her. I didn’t mean to disrespect you, or her. But she is the love of my life, and I will not let you stand in the way of that. I hope, with your permission, to marry her when we return to Belle Fleur.”

Noah smirked at his son, shaking his head. The kid had balls. That was for sure. In fact, you couldn’t help but know that since they were swinging between his legs, staring at them all.

“Could you put a robe on?” growled Sniff.

Caroline went into the bedroom and brought out the other robe. It wouldn’t even go over his shoulders. Noah tossed a bag toward him, grinning. He picked it up, realizing it was extra clothing. Ducking back into the room, he pulled on the shorts with Caroline standing over him.

“Well, this is going well,” she whispered, giggling as she kissed him.

“Caroline! Your father is out there and wants to kill me. I need to make this right, and I can’t do that if you’re kissing me. My dick is already getting hard again.” She smiled at him, nodding.

“I like your dick when it’s hard.”

“God help me,” he muttered, shoving her toward the door.

“Sorry about breaking in,” smiled Joseph. “We thought we could help out. When we didn’t hear from you and didn’t hear from Caroline, we

got worried. We heard chatter that insurgents had an American soldier.”

“They did, although I wouldn’t classify them as insurgents. They were more like kids playing with guns,” said Rush, still staring at Sniff and his snarling face. “I escaped. They shot me in the shoulder, and I was able to make it to Ankara and the zoo. I was only trying to hide out when Caroline suddenly appeared.”

“Wait, you didn’t know she was here?” asked Sniff.

“No, sir. I had no idea. She was trying to get monkeys in cages to be transported here. I was hiding in the cave, bleeding to death.” Moose pointed to the chair.

“Let me take a look. I’m a medic, and we have some extra supplies.” Rush sat down, and he removed the dressing, looking at Caroline. “Nice job on the sewing.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “Dad, please don’t be angry. I should have said something years ago, but I’ve loved Rush since I was in high school. He never once made a move toward me. Never. In fact, I thought he didn’t like me at all.”

“This is the guy you’ve been mooning over for fifteen years?” he said.

“You knew?” she asked. “I mean, I wasn’t mooning, but you knew I liked someone?”

“Caroline, I’m your father. I’m not stupid. Of course, I knew. I just thought it was someone else. I honestly didn’t know who, just someone else. I think because Rush never once appeared interested.”

“I acted that way intentionally,” said Rush. “At first, I was just too old for her. Then. Well, then, I was concerned about other things.” Sniff raised his eyebrows.

“I see. But you love my daughter?”

“More than anything in this world, sir. I plan on marrying her as soon as I can, but I have to finish this first.”

“We have to finish this,” said Trak. The entire room jumped, gripping their chest. He smirked. “Still got it.”

“Send Caroline home,” said Rush.

“No! No, I’m not leaving you. I’m not leaving all of you. Besides, I still have work to do at the zoo. I can’t leave, or I won’t get credit for my time here.”

Rush cursed under his breath, shaking his head. Sniff looked at Noah and grinned. They understood exactly what he was feeling. What he didn’t know was that he would have to get used to feeling that way.

“Tell her,” he said to Sniff.

“Oh, no. She’s your problem now. My daughter, but your soon-to-be-wife.”

Rush swallowed, staring at Sniff as Moose replaced the last of the bandage. He stood and walked toward the man.

“Shit, he’s grown,” whispered Joseph. Nathan nodded.

“You give me your blessing?” he asked Sniff. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“Rush, you’re a good man, like all the men we raise. You’re strong, capable, seemingly having another growth spurt,” he said, looking up at him, “but yes. I give you my full blessing to marry my daughter. It just shocked me seeing you two together. Coming out of the bedroom. Naked.”

“Thank you, Dad,” said Caroline, hugging her father. The dogs barked, and he shushed them as they swarmed the young couple.

“Oh, and by the way. You get them in your bed now. Good luck. I’m taking a shower and getting some sleep.”

“Same,” said Noah. “Congratulations to you both.”

He hugged Caroline, then hugged his son, kissing his cheek with a wink. When everyone found their space, Caroline and Rush went back into the master bedroom. The dogs were obediently lying on the floor, but they were definitely protecting them from anything that could come their way.

“You’re going to marry me,” she said, sliding back into his arms.

“You’re damn right I am. We’re going to marry and start popping out babies because I want a family with you, Caroline. Not just the hairy kind on the floor, either. I want beautiful auburn-haired babies running around our legs, driving us crazy.” She laughed, kissing his jaw, her hand sliding down his belly.

“I love you, too. Now, make love to me again.” Rush looked at her and shook his head.

“I think I found the cure for my hard-ons. Your father in the next room.” She gasped, laughing at him, but straddled his body.

“Fine, you keep trying to control that hard-on. I’m going to be sitting right here,” she said, lifting up and sliding down his cock. “Right here, just doing my thing.” She rocked back and forth, squeezing her breasts, and Rush cursed under his breath.

“Fuck me. I’m a dead man.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trak, Nathan, and Joseph had the unique ability to blend in with the crowds. Their dark hair, tanned skin, and dark eyes made others believe they were Turkish. Thankfully, they also spoke the language. What they weren't prepared for was when the huge blonde, blue-eyed man with them spoke the language as well.

"Maybe we should dye your hair," said Caroline. "You and your father both. You could wear brown contact lenses. At least you'd be less suspicious."

"I love you, honey," laughed Sniff, "but take a good look at the two of them. Six-feet-seven, and six-feet-eight. Nearly two hundred and ninety pounds. You'd have better luck putting them in giraffe costumes and having them hang out at the zoo."

Noah stared at the other man, shaking his head. It dawned on him that they would soon be in-laws. It pleased him in a way he never thought it would. He and Tru often ate with Lucy and Sniff and spent time out at the animal sanctuary. They were intelligent, kind and had raised a wonderful daughter.

"You need to call your mothers," said Noah, staring at the young people. "They will want to know that you are safe and that you are engaged."

“Oh, shoot!” said Caroline. “I totally forgot about calling Mom. I don’t have a phone. When we were in the cave, Rush accidentally hit my hand, and it slid into the sewer.”

“Lucky for you, we carry spares,” smirked Nathan, handing her the phone from his pack. She stood, kissing his cheek, and walked into the lobby, away from the bustle of the restaurant.

“Hello?”

“Mom, it’s Caroline,” she said.

“Honey! You’re alright. Oh, I’m so glad. Is your father there?”

“Yes. They’re all here, Mom. So is Rush. He’s fine as well. It’s a long story for another time, but I need to tell you something, Mom.”

“Let me guess. You and Rush are engaged.”

“Wait, did Dad call you?” she asked.

“No,” laughed Lucy. “You forget who my grandmother is, and we have Aunt Martha, and Grandpa Nathan, and all the others.”

“Oh my God. I was outed by a group of ghosts,” she whispered. Lucy laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m thrilled for you, Caroline. I know you’ve loved Rush for a long time now.”

“Mom, how could you know that? I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Caroline, you’re my daughter, and whether you believe it or not, I know things that only a mother would know. It seems like only yesterday that I was hiding my feelings for your father. Who, by the way, felt very similar to Rush. He thought he was too old, not good enough, all the things these foolish men think. I love Rush. I think he’s perfect for you, and you’re going to be beautifully happy together.”

“I love you, Mom. Tell great-grandma to start planning the wedding. The minute we’re home, we’re going to get married.”

“I love you, too. Kiss your father for me and congratulate Rush. He got himself a great girl.” Caroline could only shake her head as she headed back into the restaurant. Rush was coming from the other side of the lobby, smiling as well.

“I guess your mom is happy,” he said.

“I hope as happy as yours,” she smiled, kissing him.

“My mother is ecstatic, and she’ll begin wedding plans as soon as she can run to your mother’s cottage. I’m sure Mama Irene will be happy as well.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Caroline, wrapping an arm around his waist. “I’m happy, and I’m madly in love with you.”

“Same, baby. Same.”

“How is the shoulder this morning?” asked Moose as they sat back down.

“It’s fine, brother. Thank you. A little stiff, but definitely feeling like the infection is under control.” He looked at his father. “Mom said to kiss you for her, but how about I just give you a fist bump?”

Noah laughed, nodding at his son.

“Same,” smiled Caroline, “although I’ll kiss your cheek.” Sniff leaned over, letting her kiss his cheek, and the dogs let out a bark.

“Okay, okay, you two,” she said, ruffling their heads. “So, what’s the plan today? What are we supposed to do?”

“Do you have to go to the zoo?” asked Noah.

“No. They got all the animals there last night, and they were placed in the appropriate enclosures. We have a few days free before we get to work helping to determine if the zoo at Ankara can be saved.”

“For now, you’ll stay close to all of us,” said Trak. “Stick to me or one of my sons since we look like we belong, and they’re not looking for us. Yet. Grigoryan will be looking for Rush.”

“Who is Grigoryan?” she asked. Trak looked up and over at Rush,

then down at his plate.

“My apologies, Rush. I thought she knew.”

“It’s alright. I told her bad guys were after me, that’s all. She deserves to know his name. He’s been a pain in our asses for a long time,” said Rush. “His current mission is to gather displaced young men and form another army. He plans to attack the world, one country at a time.”

“Okay. Not someone I care to meet,” she said, shaking her head.

“Can we still stay here?”

“I am afraid not,” said Noah. “This hotel is not exactly subtle, nor is it covert.”

“But isn’t that sort of the point. It’s so elaborate and expensive they wouldn’t expect Rush to be here. They’d look for him in hostels or tiny, run-down hotels. Not here.”

“She has a point,” said Moose. “Someone trying to hide wouldn’t be out in the open like this. Especially when they look like him.” He gave Rush a smirk.

“Not funny, big guy. You’re nearly my size, and if you had blonde hair, we could be twins.” Noah raised a brow, staring at Moose. He was going to save that little nugget for later, just in case.

“Okay,” said Trak. “We’ll stay here for now. Today, we’ll be

scouring the city to see if we can catch any news of him making his way here from Ankara. Noah and Rush, make sure your hair is covered.” They both nodded, pulling out the caps from their pockets. Caroline smirked, admiring the similar mannerisms of the two men.

They shared the same serious expression. The same stoic, straight shoulders. The same gaze from those ice-blue eyes. She reached beneath the table, gripping Rush’s hand. He squeezed her fingers, running his hand up her leg, then stopped, realizing her father was seated at the table.

“I love you more for caring that he’s here,” she whispered.

“I could not love you more,” he whispered back. “It’s not possible.”

“Okay, okay, kissy faces, we get it. You’re in love. Everyone else here gets it too. Can we focus?” said Red.

“Sorry,” blushed Caroline, giggling.

“Caroline?” said a man coming toward the table. Two women and three other men were with him. “Nice to see you. I thought you were going to relax. I guess you found your own group to hang with.”

“Antonio. Hello, everyone,” she said, politely smiling at the others. They all smiled, waving at her. She noticed the women salivating over Moose, Joseph, Red, and Nathan. Then, they caught sight of Rush and Noah.

“Actually, I’m Caroline’s father,” said Sniff. “We’re here to help search the wreckage for survivors. So, you’ll have to forgive my daughter for wanting to spend time with family and friends. I’m sure you understand. Antonio.”

She heard the warning in her father’s voice and just sat back, letting him take control. He wasn’t as big and bulky as Moose, Noah, and Rush, but he was tall like Red, Nathan, and Joseph. Lean like a runner, and he could give looks that made two-hundred-pound dogs stop in their tracks.

“Yea, sure. I understand,” he said, nodding at her. “So, are you with them today? We’re going to take one of the boats over to Varna in Bulgaria. Do a little sightseeing, maybe spend the night. You could join us.”

“No, she can’t,” said Rush. The small Italian man stared at the giant as he stood from the table. Caroline tried to pull on his hand, but it did little good.

“Just wanted her to have some fun,” smirked the man.

“She will have fun,” said Rush. “With us.”

Noah and Sniff smirked at the man, knowing exactly how he was feeling. Their protective instincts were stronger than the dogs, and sometimes their bite was worse than the dogs as well.

“Antonio, come on,” said another student. “Have fun with your

family, Caroline. I guess we'll see you next week."

"Yes, probably," she nodded. The girls waved, making facial expressions and writing on their hands, trying to get her to give the men their numbers.

"Has he bothered you before?" asked Rush.

"He always asks me to join them when they go out, but I never go. He's harmless and, as you saw, little enough that I could handle him just fine. He's Italian. He thinks he's spectacular."

"I don't like him," said Rush.

"I don't imagine you would," she laughed. "Come on. Let's hit the streets and see what we find. Exactly what are we trying to find?"

"Just stick with me, beautiful," said Nathan. "The big grouchy Viking and his father will do their Viking thing. I think it has something to do with pillaging villages and scaring small children and shit like that."

She turned, kissing Rush, and then took Nathan's arm. Rush called to her, and she turned around, smiling at him.

"Caroline? I love you."

"I love you, too."

CHAPTER NINE

“I am very glad you finally decided to tell Caroline how you feel,” said Noah to his son.

“You knew?” he asked with a surprised look on his face.

“Rush, you may share many of my characteristics and traits, my appearance, size. But you share your mother’s ability to show love and affection in your eyes, on your face, without even trying. I saw it when you were a senior in high school.”

“A senior? But I didn’t even ask her out,” he said.

“No. But you wanted to. Your mother was asking why you were not going to senior prom. Your last big dance of your youth. You said there was no one you were interested in taking except someone who would not be able to go. I followed your eyes straight to the beautiful Caroline, walking across the grove. I knew.”

“I can’t believe you remembered that. I wanted so badly to ask her, but she was just fourteen, and I was seventeen. It seemed wrong.” Noah nodded at his son’s wisdom.

“Perhaps in another setting, yes. But knowing her parents so well, and her, we would have all been okay with it,” said Noah.

“I’ve wasted so much time, Dad. I remember you saying that you told Mom almost immediately that you loved her, and I thought, there’s no way I can do that. But it would have made these last few years more bearable for me, knowing she was mine.”

“She was always yours, Rush. She has loved you for a very long time. We all saw it,” smiled Noah, pushing past the people on the street. “I do not like all the crowds. It makes me very uncomfortable.”

“I know, but it’s how Istanbul always is. Let’s move toward Hagia Sophia. If he’s here, he’d be looking for young men who are gathered around the mosque.”

Ahead of them, they could see the magnificent towers surrounding the massive domed building. Not just a center of faith but a center for arts, culture, and much more. The image was renowned. Noah noticed scaffolding being placed around the building, most likely checking for damage from the earthquake.

What both men saw shook them. Thousands of men, women, and children begging for shelter and food. Stations were set up to help people, but the lines were long. On the far side of the square, two men were grabbing young boys, speaking to them. They watched as two little ones ran away, then two teenagers nodded and walked with one of the men to a truck.

The boys took their seats and were handed food and water while the men went back to the lines, searching for what they needed.

“That looks like a good place to start,” said Rush. His father nodded, pulling his cap further down. It didn’t help that everyone stared and pointed at their size and height.

“We need to find a way to be lower, like the rest of the crowds,” said Noah.

Rush looked around the plaza, finding what he needed. Near the medical tent were long rows of wheelchairs. He pointed, looking at his father.

“It feels wrong,” said Noah.

“I know. It is wrong, but it’s the only thing that will put us low and out of sight. Who’s going to think two guys in a wheelchair are anything special?” Reluctantly, Noah nodded at his son, and they took two of the chairs. Despite being seated, it was difficult to not notice that their knees were nearly to their chests.

Rush wheeled up to one of the vendor carts and bought two blankets, giving one to his father and placing them over their knees. As they wheeled closer and closer to the line where the men were, they noticed someone else.

Joseph and Caroline were walking, arm in arm, toward the vendor

carts, slowly getting closer to the two men near the line of boys.

“I know I shouldn’t be, but I’m incredibly jealous right now,” said Rush.

“No, you should not be. Joseph loves his wife. He is doing this to ensure Caroline is safe. Look, he has placed a scarf over her head. He simply looks like a Muslim man with a European wife.”

Rush watched as they casually strolled by all the carts, reaching close enough to the men that they could hear their conversations. Joseph tapped the comms device, effectively allowing everyone to hear what the men were saying.

“We need at least fifty more boys for Grigoryan. Most of these are children. They will do us no good,” said the man.

“Have there been any signs of the big American we shot?” asked the other.

“No. We think he’s dead somewhere. Grigoryan said to leave it alone. He needs men to meet him by Friday in order to attack Istanbul while there is chaos. If he controls this city, he controls the gateway between the West and the East.”

Rush stared at his father, realizing now why he truly wanted the men here. But that meant that he was close. He would want to see the men, see to

their training.

“What are you men doing here?” yelled a police officer. The two men stared at one another, shrugging their shoulders.

“Just looking for sturdy young men to help us rebuild our village,” said one of them.

“Which village? We have work crews out helping everyone,” said the man.

“Fine, fine, we’ll leave,” he said. The police officer watched him leave, and the VG team was frustrated. They wanted to hear what else the men would say. But it didn’t matter. They would be out on another day, and they would find them.

“Let’s make our way toward the water,” said Noah. “Trak says he has found something interesting.”



Trak stood at the edge of the harbor, looking out at the Bosphorus. If you closed your eyes, seeing just the people, shops, and restaurants, you would think you were in any trendy American or European city.

But Trak knew differently. He remembered another time standing in this very spot. There weren’t as many shops or restaurants back then. He was able to hide himself in the darkness behind a long warehouse building.

He'd waited for days for the man to show his face. A man who'd been taking little girls and boys from their schools, using them for his own pleasure, and then selling them. This night, he was planning on taking a group to Belarus on his yacht.

Known for his patience and ability to go without sleep for days on end, Trak waited there for him, watching the yacht. When his limousine pulled up, he gave instructions to the men to bring the children below deck when they arrived.

Trak remembered the churning burn in his stomach. The sick, twisted mind of the man made him physically ill. Stripping off his clothing, he slowly lowered himself into the water and swam silently through the water to the back of the yacht. Tied at his waist and calves, were several lethal knives. Once near the yacht, he climbed aboard, making no sound whatsoever.

The three men who were on board had no idea what was happening. One by one, he slit their throats, leaving them to stain the deck of the multi-million-dollar yacht with their blood. When he found his way below deck, he entered the man's bedroom, only to see him lying naked, readying himself for the children.

Trak held the knife to his throat as the man gasped for air, begging

him to let him go.

“Remember my name in the afterlife. I am Joseph Redhawk. Grandson of Nathan Redhawk of the Navajo people.”

He admittedly went overboard that night. He wasn't sure what it was that sent him into a blood rage, but he left the man in pieces on the bed.

When he was done, he went back into the water, rinsing the blood of the men from his body. Climbing out, he dressed and waited for the van with the children.

They were never even removed from the vehicle. Trak killed the driver and passenger before they could open their doors.

Opening the back of the van, he stared at the terrified faces and brutalized bodies. They whimpered at the sight of the dark man, and he tried to smile to help them know he wasn't going to harm them. Most were barely clothed.

Reaching into his pack, he handed them sweets and water, then called the local police. When the lights and sirens were close enough that he felt safe leaving the children, he nodded at them.

“Take care, little ones. You are safe now.”

He wasn't sure that any of the children understood him, but he knew that they understood they were safe. That was all that mattered.

Now, he stood in almost the exact same spot, watching tourists act as if an earthquake hadn't devastated parts of the country. They sipped their coffee or tea, ate their Turkish delight, ordered their drinks, bought their overpriced souvenirs.

All while one man was watching from his perch. A man they all knew was waiting for his time.

Ari Grigoryan.

CHAPTER TEN

“What’s he doing?” asked Caroline, seeing the man pace back and forth on the penthouse balcony.

“He’s probably praying as he walks,” said Rush. “But what he’s really doing is looking for weaknesses. He’s trying to see where the police are, where they come from, how many, all of it. It doesn’t appear that there’s been extensive damage here in Istanbul. He was probably hoping that wouldn’t be the case.”

“Why? I mean, wouldn’t he want a city intact if he was going to take it over?” asked Caroline.

“No. He would want a city devastated so that he could be the hero,” said Noah. Trak nodded at the big man, then looked out at the water once more. “Are you alright, Trak?”

“Yes. Just remembering something that happened here many years ago. I was like your son back then. I always operated alone. Sometimes that’s good. You can get in and out fast. No one sees you. Other times, the burden of what you see, what you do, weighs heavy on your heart.”

“Dad, do you want to talk about it?” asked Joseph.

He smiled at his son, gripping his shoulder. His beautiful ghost-

talking wife had made him a more compassionate man, and Trak was grateful for that.

“One day, we’ll talk about all the evil we’ve stopped. One day, we’ll rid ourselves of it all. But not today. Today, we find out how to stop that man and bring all our children home.”

A few moments later, Grigoryan disappeared from his balcony, and the team stood disappointed.

“It’s nearly dinner time,” said Caroline. “Why don’t we have our meal here with all the crowds. It should be safe. Then we can head back to the hotel.”

“Safety in numbers,” said Sniff.

They were relegated to an outdoor café because of the dogs, but the food was good, and the service was pleasant. When Beast began to growl in a low, rumbling tone, Sniff stiffened, looking around.

Their waiter set a tray of Turkish delight, dates, baklava, pide, and kunefe in front of them. They all frowned.

“I’m sorry,” said Moose, “we didn’t order this. What is it?”

“The very best of our desserts, sir. Delicious Turkish delight, honey-coated dates, baklava...”

“No. I’m sorry. I know what it is, but we didn’t order it,” Moose clarified.

“The man over there ordered it for you,” he said, turning and leaving them.

Grigoryan. He stood and strolled toward the table, the dogs growling. The hair on the back of their necks stood, and the man only smiled at them.

“The dogs have the temperament of their owners,” he said. “I know who you are and why you are here. It is a waste of your time. Go home. This is none of your business.”

“A man trying to destroy countries is our business,” said Noah.

“Americans,” he laughed. “You’re such bleeding hearts. Always trying to save the world when the world doesn’t even appreciate you. This is none of your business. Go home, or you will find that the beautiful woman in your group is suddenly lost.”

Rush shoved his chair back, standing over the man, thereby giving himself away.

“Ah, the giant American that my men thought they killed. I knew you wouldn’t die so easily. I look forward to meeting you again soon,” he said, tipping his hat. “It’s a beautiful night. You should go for a stroll before

returning to your hotel.”

They watched as he walked back across the street, disappearing with several men inside the building once again.

“Damn,” muttered Rush. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“He provoked you, hoping to anger you enough to confirm what he already knew. We need to get Caroline home,” said Trak.

“No! I have to stay and help at the zoo.”

“Caroline, the zoo will be just fine, and they’ll understand,” said Sniff. “We’ll explain it the best we can. For now, he’s right. Let’s get back to the hotel and find a way to get you out of here tomorrow.”

Despite feeling defeated, the walk back to the hotel was pleasant and even somewhat romantic for Rush and Caroline. They were able to walk as a couple, although surrounded by the dogs and their friends and family.

Moose was already hungry again, ordering more food from room service. Caroline sat on the floor, playing with the dogs, when the room service arrived. The man wheeled the cart in and waited for the signature. As Moose reached for the lid of the tray, Caroline stood and called out.

“Stop!” His hand hovered above the dome, and he backed away.

“What the hell? What’s wrong? I’ll share, Caroline,” he said,

frowning at the young woman.

“No. That’s not it. Listen.” The dogs were growling so loudly they couldn’t hear anything. “Quiet, Beast. Hush, Monster.”

“What the fuck is that?” asked Rush.

“I think it’s cobras.”

“Say again?” frowned Nathan.

“Cobras. I-I made a joke about cobras being in my car when I was trying to get Rush away from the zoo. He killed the men who were waiting for us, but there must have been someone nearby that heard my comment.”

“What do we do?” asked Joseph.

“Wheel it out onto the patio. Don’t let the dogs come out here. The snakes will attack them without provocation.”

Noah gently wheeled the cart out to the patio, leaving it close to the edge of the railing. Trak walked out, tying a rope to the handle, then pushed everyone back inside.

Watching safely from the windows, he pulled on the lid, and two giant cobras unfurled, curving their necks as they hissed.

“Shit,” muttered Moose. “They would have bit me.”

“They would have bitten anyone,” said Caroline. “They don’t

discriminate. They'll find their way down the building and avoid people. He was definitely sending us a message. But I might suggest we search the room."

The team turned over every chair, mattress, and carpet, ensuring that there was nothing left in the room that could bite, sting, or otherwise kill them. When another knock on the door came, it was the actual room service delivery.

"Good evening. I have your order," smiled the young man. He removed the dome to reveal several cheeseburgers and French fries. Frowning, he wondered why the Americans jumped backwards but just nodded, leaving them to their meal.

"I guess there's no arguing now," said Caroline. "I'm headed home tomorrow."

"I'll go with her," said Red. "I'll make sure she gets home and then come back. It won't take that long, and you're going to need the help."

Just as Trak was about to speak, there was a pounding on the door. Rush waved at Caroline to hide, and she shook her head. But when Trak stared at her, causing her to cringe, she acquiesced and retreated to the bedroom while the others cautiously opened the door.

"Hear y'all are having a party. We'd like to join."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rafe, Baptiste, Gabriel, Nine, Ghost, Ian, Gaspar, Alec, and Tailor smiled at the men. Behind them, hidden by their bulk, were Eric, Zeke, and Kiel.

“We couldn’t let y’all have all the fun,” smiled Ghost. “Besides, my bones were starting to itch. I needed to scratch them, and this is a good one to do it on.”

“I can’t believe you’re all here,” squealed Caroline, hugging each man. “Does this mean I still have to go home?”

“Yes!” called every man in the room.

“Doug and Chipper will be taking you home, along with Frank and Dalton. They’re staying with the plane at the airport for the time being. Tomorrow morning, they’ll be here before daylight to take you out of here,” said Gaspar.

“The old guys are at it again,” smirked Joseph.

“The old guys will kick your ass,” frowned Ghost. “Damn, I’ve missed this. Grigoryan is a pain in the ass for anyone who has been in the field in the last fifty years. That includes all of us. We heard all the conversations and knew we wanted to be a part of this.”

“Hey, are you guys aware that there are two cobras on your balcony?” asked Rafe, staring out the windows.

“Yes, we’re aware,” said Moose. “Someone tried to ruin my dinner.”

“He knows who we are,” said Trak, quietly sitting in the corner. “He ordered dessert for us while we were at dinner tonight. Had the audacity to come to the table.”

“Always was a ballsy bastard,” frowned Ian. “He’s like a fucking cat with nine lives.”

“Well, he’s going to lose this last life,” said Rush. Alec and Tailor turned and grinned at the young man.

“I sure hope you have better taste in clothes than Tailor in case I need to borrow something,” smirked Alec. Rush could only chuckle, shaking his head.

“By the way, we hear congratulations are in order,” said Nine.

“That’s right,” he grinned. “I almost waited too long. Runty little Italian bastard was sniffing around my girl. I had to set him straight.”

“He was not!” laughed Caroline. “Thank you, Uncle Nine. Yes, we’re engaged, and hopefully, as soon as all this is done, we’ll be married.”

“No hopefully about it,” said Rush. “We’ll be married the minute I

set foot on Belle Fleur land again.” He hugged Caroline, kissing the top of her head.

“You know, I remember when your father came to Steel Patriots,” grinned Ghost. “Stoic bastard didn’t want to say a word. Was pressing all the buttons to see if we’d toss him out on his head.”

“I pressed no buttons,” frowned Noah.

“Glad to see it hasn’t rubbed off on you, Rush,” laughed Gabe. “Do you need to notify your commander of what’s happened and that we’re here?”

“No,” he said in unison with Trak.

Trak stood, speaking to the others. He was taking this Delta mission as a personal one, thinking of Rush as another child or grandchild.

“No. He was sent on this mission alone, which means the country would deny any part in it. That also means that when we kill Grigoryan, and we will kill him, Rush needs to be visible.”

“What do you mean?” asked Caroline.

“He means that I should be in plain sight of lots of people so that his death is not blamed on me, an active-duty U.S. military man.” Caroline reached for his hand again, holding onto his arm.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” she whispered. The others all smiled at the young couple as they turned their backs, whispering to one another.

“Caroline, I am always careful. Believe me. But knowing that I have you to come home to, I will be extra careful. I promise.” He kissed her, then heard his usually quiet father.

“I am going to try and not be offended by that. You do have your mother and I to come home to as well, you know.” They all chuckled, then stopped as Caroline’s phone rang.

“Hi, Mom! How is everything...”

“Caroline? Is my idiot husband there with you?” yelled Grace. She stilled, turning the phone towards all of them.

“Oh, shit,” muttered Ghost. “Uh, hi, babe.”

“Don’t you hi babe me! You guys said you were going on a hunting trip. Hunting! As in hunting moose or elk or something. Not a man! You’re supposed to be retired, Ghost!”

“Yes, Nine, you’re supposed to be retired as well,” said Erin, glaring into the phone.

“Need I add my thoughts?” said Faith. Alexandra was standing with the women, although not saying anything.

“Wow, you guys are in some deep shit,” muttered Moose with a grin.
“I think I’ll eat my cheeseburgers before they get cold.”

“I’ll join you,” said Eric.

“Me too,” said Joseph. Caroline just laughed, shaking her head as she handed the phone off to Gaspar.

“I think we need to order more burgers.”



At 0400, Rush kissed the naked body of his fiancée, rubbing her flesh with his rough hands. She moaned, turning to face him, and wrapped her legs around his body.

“Baby, I wish we could, but Frank is here to get you home.” She stilled, looking up at him with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t make me leave,” she whispered. “I haven’t had enough time with you.”

“Oh, my sweet, sweet Caroline. I will never have enough time with you, even if it’s eternity. But your life is my number one concern right now. Frank and Dalton will make sure you’re safe. Trust that we’ll get the job done here, and then I’ll be home.”

“What about the zoo?” she asked.

“Your mom and dad are fixing that for us. They’ve informed the

program director that your life was threatened, and we felt it best that you return home. You can start the final semester next week.”

“You’ve thought of everything,” she said, hugging him tightly. They smelled of one another, of sex and love.

“Caroline, I will be home. I promise you. I will be there for our wedding. Please, baby. Please.”

She looked up at the pleading expression and almost cried, seeing the fear in his eyes. Nodding, she got up and showered off quickly and dressed. Waiting in the living area of the suite was Frank and Dalton.

Taylor, Noah, and Alec were standing there as well.

“Are you all leaving?” she asked.

“No, baby,” smiled Taylor, “we’re just gonna make sure you get where you’re goin’.” Turning, she hugged Rush one more time.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you more.” He felt the stab in his heart as the men took her from the room, closing the door. When he turned, he was face-to-face with the rest of the team.

“If all the other things hadn’t confirmed it for me, Rush, that confirmed that you are the right man for my daughter,” said Sniff. “You put

her life before your own.”

“I will always protect her, sir. I just can’t breathe right now, and I’m not sure I will ever breathe properly again without her.”

“It will get better,” said Ian. “Not much, but it will get better each time you go out on a mission, knowing that you’re leaving someone irreplaceable at home.”

“It’s why most of us didn’t marry until we were out of service,” said Nine. “We had REAPER or Steel Patriots, but other than Ian and his boys, we all waited. Of course, I also didn’t find the love of my life until I was out.”

“I just have to do this. I just have to kill Grigoryan, and I can walk away,” said Rush.

“Then let’s kill Grigoryan,” said Gaspar. “I have it on good authority if I’m not home within four days, my wife might withhold sex until after Christmas.” Rush frowned at the men.

“Would they really do that?” he asked.

“No,” chuckled Ian. Then he frowned. “Well, maybe, but I’m not risking it.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Why are we on the motorcycles?” asked Caroline.

“Sometimes you need all the bells and whistles, honey. You’re riding with Frank, and I’ll ride in the rear,” said Dalton. “Alec, Taylor, and Noah are riding in the SUV in front of us. The bikes have the ability to go stealth if we need them to. Make sure the helmet and face shield are on and down at all times.”

Caroline nodded, pulling on the helmet as the others watched. Once Frank had the bike started, she noticed the intricate dashboard of switches and tabs.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.”

Despite the early hour, people were already crowding the streets around the hotel. The drive to the airport would be long, fighting the red lights and displaced people. With the SUV in front of them, and Frank and Dalton at the rear, they were comfortable maneuvering around the other vehicles.

Driving past the Kariye Camii, the site of a sixth-century A.D. church, they noted the heavy scaffolding surrounding it. It was such a beautiful,

treasured site. They hoped it wasn't damaged. When they approached the entrance to the freeway, they sped up, noticing a car behind them.

“What’s going on?” asked Caroline in the communications device.

“Just hold on, sweetheart. We’re about to piss some people off.”

Frank pulled in front of the SUV to block him from the view of the car, then hit his stealth button, blurring the image for anyone other than Dalton and those in the SUV.

“We’ve got a car coming up, windows down,” said Tailor.

As the car sped past them, it slowed, staring at the SUV then at the other motorcycle. The passengers were screaming at one another, and Alec noticed the guns in their hands.

“Get her to the plane, Frank,” said Noah.

“On our way.”

“Dalton, follow them,” said Tailor. Dalton hit his stealth button and pulled around the car and SUV, taking off in a cloud of dust. “Let’s have some fun.”

Noah slammed on the gas, swerving in front of the car as the other vehicle tapped their brakes to avoid hitting them. Already pissed that they’d lost the motorcycle, the men decided they’d have a little fun anyway.

Driving alongside the vehicle, they tried running them off the road, but their

little Citroën was nothing compared to the massive, steel-plated SUV.

“Oh, they really want to play,” laughed Tailor. “Okay. Let’s play.”

Noah turned the wheel sharply to the left, the SUV blocking both lanes of the freeway as the small French car’s front end crushed into the doors. The car bounced back, steam coming from its disabled engine. As the men tried to get out, Noah, Tailor, and Alec stepped from the SUV.

“Drive!” yelled the man in the passenger seat.

“I can’t! The car won’t start!”

“You wanna play, little boy?” grinned Tailor. He gripped the man’s shirt, dragging him from the car. “Let’s play.”

Noah ripped the damaged door from the passenger side, gripping the other man by the neck, as Alec took the man in the back seat. They were kids. Barely twenty-five, if that.

“Let us go!” yelled one of the men.

“Like you were going to let our friends go?” said Alec. “I don’t think so, boy. See, where we come from, chasing an innocent woman is an offense worse than theft. In fact, didn’t your own people cut off the hands of thieves?”

“No, no!” he cried.

“Yea, I think that’s right,” said Tailor. “I’m not into knives. I prefer just breakin’ bones and leavin’ men to die on the side of the road.”

“Please, we were just following orders,” said the man.

“Whose orders?” asked Noah.

“Grigoryan. He wanted the girl dead to make the big man, uh, the other big man, angry.”

“Well, you’re going to deliver a message to him.” The three men looked relieved, but then Alec laughed. “Oh, no. Not in person. You’re dying on the side of this highway for trying to kill that girl. But your death will let him know we are not to be fucked with.”

“Please, no! We’ll tell you anything!”

“Where is he training the new soldiers?” asked Noah.

“Bozyaka. There’s an old wool factory there, and he’s got everyone out there. Their only goal right now is to get enough men to overrun the local police and take the city.” The other men nodded at their friend, happy that he gave them what they wanted. “Please, let us go.”

“Sorry. You just betrayed a man that would kill you far more violently than I will. You’ve proven who and what you are. Say goodnight.”

It was fast. No crying, no bleeding, no broken bones. Not for Alec,

Noah, or Tailor. The other three were shoved back in their car with broken necks. Speeding away, they arrived at the airport just as Doug and Chipper were going to close the doors.

“Take the SUV back,” said Tailor. “We chipped the paint, and the boys back home will want to fix it up.”

“Sure thing,” smirked Doug. Caroline hugged the three men, kissing their cheeks. When she got to Noah, she held tighter.

“I love your son more than anything in this world. Please bring him home to me.” Noah smiled down at the beautiful young woman, tucking her hair behind her ear. He thanked God every day he didn’t have daughters, but now he realized that this would soon be his daughter.

“And my son loves you more than anything in this world. I will bring him home to you, Caroline, and you two will make me a grandfather.”

“I promise,” she laughed, nodding at him. “Thank you, Uncle Tailor, Uncle Alec.”

“You’re welcome, beautiful.” They didn’t move until the lights of the plane had disappeared into the dawn sky. Turning, they realized they had no transportation back to the city.

“Well, damn. Now what do we do?” asked Tailor. Noah pointed to a tiny, rusted pickup truck with a ‘for-sale’ sign on it. Shrugging, they all

walked toward the office, laid down the cash, then folded themselves inside the vehicle.

“This cannot be made for humans,” said Noah. Alec and Taylor laughed, shaking their heads.

“It is. Just not humans like us.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Any issues?” asked Rush as they walked back into the suite. Alec smirked at him.

“Well, a few boys in a car that thought they’d have some fun, but they didn’t.” Rush continued to look at him, waiting with anticipation. “Brother, she’s on her way home. Safe and sound. I promise. We wouldn’t have returned without her being safe or in our arms.”

“Thank you, Alec,” said Rush, exhaling. He felt Trak’s hand on his shoulder as the older man looked around the room.

“Now, we hunt,” said Trak. “He’s been hunting us. It’s time we turn those tables. Say goodbye to the suite. We’re staying in a two-bedroom apartment closer to the water. I paid cash for one week.”

“Two bedrooms?” frowned Nathan.

“There are four sets of bunk beds,” said Trak. “The smaller men will need to take the bunks. The others will sleep on the floor.”

“Smaller men? Where do you see smaller men, Dad?” frowned Joseph. He stared at his son, and Joseph stiffened.

“This is not a party! Grigoryan is out to kill us and the law enforcement of this city. If we allow this man to live, he will create chaos in

this region, unlike anything since Constantine.” He took in a deep breath, and Nine, Ghost, Ian, and Gaspar stared at him.

“I didn’t mean to raise my voice,” said Trak. “When I was out finding a new place for us to live, I overheard three men standing outside the gates of the shelter for the displaced villagers. They are planning to gather the women and children, use those they want, and sell the rest.”

“Fuck,” muttered Nine. “Would you remember what the men looked like?” Trak stared at him, not blinking, not saying anything.

“I see. They’re of no concern any longer,” said Gaspar. “Good.”

“The boys that were chasing Caroline said that he’s training men out in a small village at an old wool factory. If they’re in training out there, that means that Grigoryan isn’t there. But it doesn’t mean we can’t get them boys free,” said Tailor. There was a knock at the door, and the men all froze.

“That would be an old friend,” smiled Nine. He opened the door, grinning at the older man on the other side. He was about five-feet-ten, a snow-white beard, ribbons on his chest, and a younger man behind him.

“Kaan Yilmaz, you look exactly the same,” grinned Nine.

“Do not lie to me, old friend. I’m ancient, I have arthritis, I forget where I put my car keys most days, and my wife tells me I get up four times a night to piss. I honestly don’t remember.” The men all chuckled as Nine

pulled him in for a hug. He turned to the younger man, who was smiling.

“Dehmet is my assistant. May he join us?”

“Of course,” nodded Nine. “You do look good, Kaan.”

“So do you, my friend. Too good. You’re still as big as the day I met you, and I still would not want to anger you. But someone has. Yes?”

“Yes,” said Nine. “These are my friends and family. We’ve discovered a problem for your city. Ari Grigoryan.”

“Achhh,” moaned the older man. “Ari has been a pain in my ass for thirty years. He is always creating chaos in this city and the surrounding area.”

“Well, this time, he believes he has the advantage. The earthquake has given him an edge. He’s taking young males displaced by the quake and recruiting them for a new army. He believes he can take this city from you,” said Rush. “With the military focused on maintaining order and control in the outlying villages, all that’s here in the city is your police force.”

“And all of you,” he smiled.

“Yes, sir,” smiled Rush. “But my main goal is to kill Grigoryan. That’s it.”

“That is the goal of every man on the right side of the law, young man. He seems unable to be killed.”

“He can be killed,” frowned Rush.

“How can we help?” asked the younger man, Dehmet.

“We need to stop the supply of young men to his army. If we get those in the plaza and the other meeting areas into a shelter, we can keep them from him. But his men must be kept out of those areas,” said Trak. Kaan turned and grinned at the man.

“Trak Redhawk. I barely noticed you there. Still the trickster in the group,” he smiled.

“Your eyesight is bad, Kaan. I’ve been here all along.” He stared at the older man, then gave a tiny smirk.

“I can alert my men of what’s happening and keep them working longer shifts. They’re exhausted as it is, but if they know what’s coming, they will be willing to keep the city out of Grigoryan’s hands. But why my city?” he asked.

“He believes if he has Istanbul, he will hold the gateway between the East and the West,” said Nine. The two Turkish police officers nodded.

“We’re not going to let him take it.”

“Yes, but what is his plan once he has it. We know Grigoryan, and he does nothing without having a grand plan. So, what is it?” Rush nodded, looking at the other men.

“I’m not sure, sir, but I will find out.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frank pulled the blanket up higher on Caroline's slender body. Smiling, he kissed her forehead and walked back toward Dalton. He'd known her since she was a baby and thought of her as a little sister. The idea of someone trying to kill her did not sit well with him.

"Is she sleeping?" asked Dalton. Frank nodded. "Brother, when I saw that car coming up on you two, my heart stopped. The thought of someone going after Calla makes my blood boil. I can only imagine what Rush is going through."

"Did you ever come up against Grigoryan?" asked Frank.

"No," said Dalton, shaking his head. "But I heard the stories. He's like a locust, diving into countries and using up their people, destroying their systems and infrastructure. And when he has what he wants, whether it's money or power, he leaves. Did you go up against him?"

"Yes. More than once," said Frank with a frown. "I'm happy to protect Caroline, but I would give anything to put a bullet in that man's head. I saw what he did to the women and children in a village outside of Al Taibah. I don't ever want to see that again."

"Do you think she'll listen to everyone and stay put?" asked Dalton.

“Yea, I actually do. Caroline is smart, and she’s seen what happens when we aren’t listened to. Besides, there are enough animals to distract her, plus she has her final semester of vet school.”

“Get some sleep, brother. I’ll keep watch,” said Dalton.

Frank nodded, leaning back and closing his eyes. Dalton knew that because of the technology of the jet, they wouldn’t even be seen on radar, let alone tracked. But he didn’t want to take any chances.

He stared at Caroline, remembering his own budding love for Calla. She was so much younger than him, yet had the courage to ask him for coffee one morning. It wasn’t that he hadn’t noticed her. He had. How could he not? She was beautiful and curvy, and, damn, could that woman make his body shake when she walked by.

He would go berserk if someone touched his wife. Knowing how big Rush was, he knew that if anything happened to Caroline, they wouldn’t be able to control the man. Sauntering toward the pilots’ cabin, he ducked his head in, seeing Doug and Chipper at the helm.

“Everything cool?” he asked.

“All good, Dalton. Nothing on our radar, and no signs of anyone attempting to track us. We should be home in a few hours,” said Doug.

“Thank you, Doug. We probably don’t say thank you enough to you,

Chipper, Evie, and Savannah. Molly too, when we need extra pilots. I know we're going to be glad to have Autumn, but maybe now you can relax a bit." Doug laughed, shaking his head, Chipper too.

"Son, you don't get it. This is relaxation for us," smiled Chipper. "I don't have anyone asking me to stay home, but Doug does. But then what? Miguel and him stare at one another for the remainder of their days?" Doug smirked at the younger man.

"He tried to get me to learn mahjong. I thought I'd shove those damn tiles down his throat," said Doug. "I need to fly like you need to train or kiss your wife."

"Now that I understand," smirked Dalton. "Maybe just let the others know you still want to take some of the smaller trips. It's not like we can't use you both."

"We're working on it," smiled Chipper. "For now, how about you get us some food and something to drink. Tomato juice for me."

"Apple juice for me," said Doug.

"Coming right up," smiled Dalton.

By the time they landed, Caroline was awake again, gathering her items. She'd no sooner stepped off the plane when her phone rang.

"Are you alright?" asked Rush. She laughed, shaking her head. It

seemed the tracking tools were working just fine between the two of them.

“I’m physically fine,” she smiled into the phone. “Emotionally, I’m a wreck. I miss you so much already, Rush. I’m aching for you. I don’t like the feeling of being away from you.”

“Fuck, baby. Me too. I know I don’t have to tell you this, but please stay on the property. I wouldn’t put it past Grigoryan to try and find you.”

“I know,” she said, nodding. “Frank and Dalton both talked to me about it.” She looked up, seeing the caravan of ATVs coming toward her.

“I love you, Caroline. I don’t ever want to be without you again. Just be safe, and we’ll be together soon.”

“I love you, too, Rush. If I’m not mistaken, the wedding planning caravan is about to arrive and sweep me away. I feel as though cake, flowers, and taffeta are in my future.” He laughed.

“Go, baby. Whatever you want, that’s what our wedding will be. I don’t care, as long as you’re my wife.”

“I’ll be your wife, Rush. And when you get home, we’re going to practice some more things in our bedroom. Ours. Just to see exactly how far my body will stretch.” Laughing into the phone, she bid him farewell and then ran toward her mother, great-grandmother, aunts, and others.

“Caroline!” cried Lucy. “You had us all so worried, honey. I’m so

glad you're home."

"How is Rush?" asked Tru.

"He's perfect," sniffed Caroline. "He's perfect and beautiful, and all mine and I love him so much my heart is cracking in two." Frank and Dalton chuckled as they passed her.

"I think you're in good hands now, kiddo. Call us if you need anything." She hugged and thanked them, then loaded up with the other women to head to the cafeteria.

"You need a good hot meal, and then we're gonna talk about a weddin'," said Mama Irene.

"I just want to be sure to have Harebells in my wedding bouquet. It's the national flower of Sweden, and I want to do that as a nod to Rush and Noah. It's important to me, Mom."

"Honey, we'll do whatever is important to you. Do you want to wear my gown, or would you prefer one of your own?" asked Lucy.

"I think I want to wear something really simple. Maybe short, at my knees. But nothing too fancy or frilly. That's not me, and it's certainly not Rush."

"I don't think my son would care even if you were wearing a burlap sack," smiled Tru. "He loves you. He's loved you for a long time."

“Why is it that everyone knows of this but never said anything?”
frowned Caroline.

“Because, honey,” said Mama Irene, “they’re all thick-headed and need to be kicked by a mule to get some sense into them. Speakin’ of my idiot boys who went over there. Are they all okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” smiled Caroline. “They’re all fine, and they’re going to handle this problem. I always worried about Dad when he would go on missions with them. I would see Mom get sad, and I could tell she was concerned, but seeing it first-hand, hearing them talk about this man. It’s different. It’s all too real.

“I just want them all home, safe and sound. I want them back here on this property. Then, Rush and I will be husband and wife.”

Lucy nodded, tears in her eyes, and Tru hugged the woman, wiping her own tears. Claudette smiled at the group of women.

“Alright, let’s go. We got a wedding to plan.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Everything okay?” asked Sniff.

“Yea, she just arrived, and they’re already sweeping her away to wedding-land,” he smirked. Sniff and Noah chuckled, staring at the young man. “I know that you both know this, but I love that woman. I love her more than you can possibly imagine.”

“I know, Rush,” said Sniff. “I wouldn’t trust you with my daughter if I weren’t certain that you love her. We’ll fix this shit and get home.”

“What’s the plan for today?” asked Rush.

“We start pulling threads,” said Trak.

He’d become the leader of this op, which was unusual for him. He was always content being one of the team, often a team of one. But taking a leadership role was different for him. For some reason, he wanted to make sure this man was dead and gone.

“Pulling threads? What does that mean?” asked Noah.

“We know where the men are being trained. It’s doubtful that he is out there. Let’s move to our new location. Two men at a time. They won’t be able to follow us all. Stop at a kiosk along the route and buy as many traditional kaftans as you can. We need to at least attempt to blend in.

“Our size is giving us away, but if we dress like the others, it will be less obvious. Buy them in several colors. Black for night ops. Brown or tan for desert ops. White for day ops.”

“You’ve thought a lot about this, Trak,” frowned Nine. “You okay, brother?”

Trak stared at the other men. He wasn’t a share-your-feelings kind of man, but he needed them to understand his drive in this.

“I was here once before. Many years ago. It was my last mission with Delta before coming to REAPER. A man was abusing and training little girls and boys, then selling them to bidders.” The men in the room stiffened, staring at Trak. “I was sent to kill him. And I did.”

“What does that have to do with this?” asked Rush.

“Grigoryan had an older brother,” said Gaspar. “No one ever knew what became of him. They suspected that Ari killed him to gain control of everything, but that’s not true. Is it?”

“No,” said Trak. “I killed Aruf Grigoryan. I cut his body into tiny pieces for every tiny child he ever touched. I killed his bodyguards and men, and I freed those children, and I do not regret my actions for one moment.”

“But?” frowned Tailor at his friend.

“But I am worried that if Ari has knowledge that it was me who killed

his brother, I may be putting you all in danger.” Nine shook his head.

“Trak, when the fuck has anyone ever known it was you that completed a mission? No one. No one has ever known if you were there or not there. You’re like a fucking ghost. No offense to Ghost.”

“None taken,” smirked the man. “But he’s right, Trak. Even if they did know it was you, it wouldn’t change what we’re doing here. We’re in this together. We chose to be here. Old as shit, creaking bones and all. We’re here. As a team.”

Trak nodded at his friends then displayed the map of the small village they were headed to.

“Sniff? Can you get the drones up and see how many people we’re looking at?”

“Of course,” he nodded, going into the other room to gather the cases.

“Joseph, Nathan, Kiel, Zeke, Rafe, and I will go ahead and move into the hills to get a better look. Get settled in our new home, get your new clothing, and we’ll meet you there.”

The six men left the suite as the others gathered the gear. They walked down the stairwell instead of taking the elevator to avoid any crowds. As they left the building, the young man that had approached Caroline the other morning looked at Rush.

“Where is Caroline?” he asked with a demanding tone.

“None of your fucking business,” growled Rush.

“She’s supposed to be working at the zoo with us,” he said, raising his chin upward.

“I’m sorry,” said Rush, walking toward him. “Did I miss something? Are you her professor? Her supervisor?”

“No, but she’s required to do the same work as the rest of us.”

“What she does and does not do is none of your damn business. She has left the country, and her professor is well aware of the reasons. If I didn’t make myself perfectly clear the other day, Antonio, I am her fiancé. If you come near my woman again, I will feed you to the lions.”

“Oh my,” smiled one of the women, fanning herself. “That was exciting.”

“Shut up!” said Antonio. Baptiste reached for the man’s arm, squeezing harder than necessary as he winced.

“If you ever tell a woman to shut up again, I’ll break your fucking arm. You feel me? Boy.”

“Y-yes. Yes. I understand.” He released his arm, and he turned, dashing toward a taxi.

“Thank you for that,” smiled the young woman. “He would never touch any of us, but he definitely had the hots for Caroline. But you should know, she never gave him the time of day.”

“I appreciate that,” said Rush. “If he does ever touch you, report it to the university.”

“We will,” she smiled. “Tell Caroline congratulations.” They nodded as the others piled into the taxi and drove away.

Breaking off into teams of two or three, they took different routes, gathering their new wardrobe along the way. By the time they were in their new digs, they were ready to start hunting. Looking around at the tiny apartment, they all frowned. They were not impressed by the accommodations.

The rotting wooden building along the waterfront had seen much better days and, by all accounts, should be condemned. But the price of only twenty U.S. dollars a day couldn't be beat and would never attract the attention of Grigoryan.

When Sniff walked in with the dogs, they all looked at him.

“You're late,” said Ghost.

“You're welcome,” he smiled, tossing a bag on the table. “I suspected we might need some additional locks on our door. We can tell the

landlord it's a gift when we leave.”

Tailor looked at the three deadbolts and grinned. Taking out the tools in the bag, he quickly put them on the door, and then the men left in groups once again. Using the old truck that Tailor, Alec, and Noah had purchased, they transported several men in the bed of the truck. Rafe bought another truck, doing the same.

Outside of the village, they parked the trucks behind a building, now reduced to rubble. As they began to make their way into the hills, Beast and Monster started crying, making circles around the debris.

“What’s wrong with them?” asked Ian.

“I think they’ve found something. Or someone,” said Sniff. He let the dogs take the lead as they smelled the wreckage, then began to dig.

“Hold, boy. Hold. We don’t want you to cut your paws.”

Gabriel knelt down on the crumbled rock, leaning on all fours. The others were silent as they listened.

“H-help,” came the small voice.

“There’s someone in here!”

“Lift the rubble from the top,” said Noah. “Make a chain and pass it off before moving to the next piece.”

The men did exactly as he said, lifting massive blocks of stone and brick and moving them to the other side of the wrecked building. Every few moments, they would stop and listen, still hearing the pleading voice. Beast and Monster were aching to get inside, but it was still too dangerous. As a massive stone wall was lifted, Moose lay on his belly and stared into the darkness.

“Flashlight,” he called, reaching backward. Red slapped the lantern into his hand, and he shone the light down the dark hole. Looking up at him were huge brown eyes, the face barely visible with all the dust.

“Hold on, we’re going to get you out of there,” he said. The eyes nodded, and the men began moving quicker. When the body became visible, they realized it was a young woman. She was dressed in Western-style clothing but appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent.

“Where are you hurt?” asked Moose.

“I-I’m not sure,” she said. “My leg is trapped, but I can’t feel if it’s damaged or not. What day is it?”

“Wednesday,” said Moose.

“I’ve been in here for four days,” she said as she started to cry. “I’m sorry. I think I’ve messed my pants.” Moose chuckled, shaking his head.

“Honey, I would have shit my pants too, if I’d had a building fall on

me. You're alright." A few moments later, the debris was moved, and Moose crawled down into the hole, checking the woman's injuries.

"How bad?" asked Nine.

"Leg is broken, maybe her pelvis. Get me a backboard so we can get her out of here." Alec and Noah created a makeshift backboard from a door, tying the woman down then lifting her from the hole. Once above ground, they began giving her water, wiping the dirt from her face.

"I can't believe you found me," she said, shaking her head. "I thought I was dead."

"You're American?" asked Gaspar.

"Yes. I was born in America, but my parents are from Turkey. They asked me to come and check on my aunt and uncle. I couldn't find them, but I was searching this building when it suddenly crumbled during an after-shock."

"What's your name?" asked Moose.

"Ece. Pronounced like s-e, two letters," she grinned. "I'm really starting to hurt now."

"Moose, take her back to Istanbul and get her medical treatment. Red? You go with them. We'll let you know where to meet us," said Nine.

“Okay, beautiful Ece, your ambulance awaits. It has bad shocks, no cushion to the seats, and rotten tires. But we’ll get you there. One way or another,” grinned Moose.

The men watched as Moose and Red took off back toward the city with Ece. That was one lucky woman, but they’d spent nearly three hours getting her out of that hole. Moving quickly to the side of the hill, Trak was staring at them like they were late for Sunday church services.

“We found a girl in the rubble,” said Sniff. “I mean, Monster and Beast found a girl in the rubble. Moose and Red are getting her to the hospital.” Trak nodded, then pointed down into the valley below.

Exactly as they’d been told, there was an abandoned wool factory with some of the corrugated sides gone, filled with young men and boys. They appeared to be between the ages of thirteen and thirty, many so thin they could barely stand.

“Are they there willingly?” asked Baptiste. He no sooner finished his sentence when a man slashed a boy with a bullwhip, his cry echoing through the valley. Alec stiffened, turning to his older brother.

“I think that answers your question.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“How many guards?” asked Nine.

“We count seventeen,” said Joseph. “I think between all of us, we can take the guards down, set the boys free, and blow the building. At the south end, you can see they have a stockpile of weapons and ammunition. This will make quite a display for Ari.”

With a head nod, the men slowly made their way down the hillside at dusk. Attempting to mingle with the others, they slumped their shoulders, crouching as low as their bodies could take them. The dim light only made Noah and Rush’s hair stand out further. A man tapped Rush on the shoulder.

“Who are you?” he demanded. Rush said nothing, huddled low, trying to remain docile. “I asked you a question, vermin. Who are you?” He raised a steel baton, drawing it back to strike Rush. Rush stood straight, making the man gasp as he gripped his wrist, crushing the bones beneath his fingers.

Taking the baton, he rammed it down his throat, shoving him to the wall. With an elbow to the baton, he penetrated the back of his neck in a sickening crunch. Noah raised a brow at his son’s handiwork, then nodded as they made their way to the next guard. When they came upon Tailor standing over a man bent backwards in an awkward position, Noah raised a brow at

his friend.

“He called me fat,” frowned Tailor. “I’m just a big boy. I ain’t fat.”

“He did not mean to hurt your feelings, I’m certain,” frowned Noah.

“He won’t call anyone fat again. Besides, we all know that you are just big-boned.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’,” said Tailor, nodding.

“We got them all,” said Gabriel, looking down at the backwards man. He frowned at his teammate, shaking his head. “Really?”

“He called me fat,” muttered Tailor.

“You’re just big-boned like Mama always says,” said Gabriel. They heard Trak calling the men closer and, in their own language, told them they were free to go back to their homes or families but to get out of the building.

Many of the men weren’t sure what to do. They stood staring at their saviors, frightened that if they left, the demon who brought them to this place would kill them all.

“You have five minutes to get as far from this place as you can,” said Trak. “Your captors left food and water behind that screen. Take it and run.”

The men began to move quickly toward the food and water, many having been without for days. As they scattered into the desert, Ghost stared

at the weapons cache, trying to decide if there was anything they could use. Directing some of the younger men to carry the extra rounds, he carefully placed charges on the boxes of weapons, then followed the others into the hills.

“Are we ready?” asked Ian. Everyone nodded. “Light it up, Ghost.”

With a deafening roar, the explosion rocked the already crumbling buildings in the small village, causing them to fall completely into disrepair. The old wool factory collapsed, burning with the fire caused by the weapons. Clouded by the smoke and falling wreckage, the moon was blocked out, giving them clear access to head back to their temporary home.

Grigoryan lost more than two hundred men, thousands of weapons, and a training factory all in one night. Trak looked at his friends, nodding.

“One thread pulled.”



“Are you the man that brought the young woman in?” asked the doctor.

“Yes. We both are,” said Moose, standing with Red. “Is she alright?”

“She will be, thanks to you. We’ve got her cleaned up. She was quite fortunate that only her leg was broken. The pelvis is bruised but alright. The leg was a clean break, and we’ve placed a boot on her for that.”

“That’s a relief to hear. We were concerned for her health,” said Moose.

“We’ve contacted the news agency, and they’re sending a representative,” said the doctor.

“A news agency?” asked Moose, frowning at the man. “Why would you contact a news agency?”

“She’s a correspondent for GNN, Global News Network. She was here covering a story, apparently. I thought you knew.”

“Yes. Of course,” said Moose. “Sorry. Can we see her now?”

“Of course. She’s in room three. We’ll keep her overnight until her assistance arrives.” The doctor returned to the desk, typing his notes into the computer.

“A fucking reporter,” growled Red. “We should have left her there.”

“I’ll be right back,” said Moose.

He stepped toward room three and pushed open the door, closing it and locking it behind him. The woman was definitely cleaned up. Her damp hair was twisted over her shoulder, her pale skin now with a soft pink glow. She wore a hospital gown, the sheet and blanket covering her below the waist.

“My hero,” she smiled.

“Hello, Ece. That is your real name, right? I mean, is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” She stared at the big man and swallowed. “A fucking reporter. Why wouldn’t you tell us that?”

“Look, I didn’t want anyone to know I was out there.”

“Why?”

“Because I was supposed to be undercover.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why are you asking me? What does it matter to you? I appreciate that you got me out of there, but I don’t owe you any explanations,” she said, staring at him.

“Fuck you don’t. We saved your damn life at the risk of our friends’ lives. What the fuck are you doing in the middle of an earthquake/warzone?”

“I’m following a man.”

“A man? You’re following a fucking man? All this, you almost getting killed, is about finding some dick you slept with?” he asked, leaning against the bed. She slapped him so hard he almost wanted to slap her back. Almost.

“Don’t you dare. I wasn’t chasing some asshole that I had a one-night

stand with. Don't confuse me with the women that you sleep with." He raised a brow at her retort. "I was chasing a madman. A killer. He's taken the lives of more displaced people, refugees, homeless, you name it, in the Eurasia corridor than anyone in history. He is Genghis Kahn personified. He conquers, takes, and you either join him or die."

Moose stared at the woman, then pulled a chair closer to the bed.

"Who?"

"You won't know his name."

"Try me. I've read more than just comic books. Or at least that seems to be your opinion of me. Who?"

"Ari Grigoryan."

"Fuck me," he muttered, leaning back. She stared at him and swallowed.

"No, thank you. I don't fuck men who think so poorly of me."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By the time the men were back in their little apartment, they noticed that Red and Moose were still missing. Kiel, Baptiste, and Rafe took the four dogs for a walk and picked up dinner for everyone. Opening the boxes of food, a soft knock came at the door. With weapons drawn, they waited for Rush to slowly open the door.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, opening the door wide. Moose was carrying Ese in his arms, her booted foot hanging over his arm. “I thought you were taking her to the hospital?”

“We did,” said Red. “Big boy there got a wild hair up his ass that she wasn’t safe there.”

“Why wouldn’t she be safe?” frowned Gaspar.

“Jesus, who the fuck are you guys? I guess I didn’t get a good look at all of you when I was pulled out of that hole,” said Ece. She looked down, seeing the dogs, and clung to Moose’s neck. “What the fuck are those?”

“They were your original rescuers,” said Sniff. “This is Beast, Monster, Lucy, and Ranger. I guess now they’ll be your protectors.”

“Moose, explain, brother,” said Rush.

“Maybe she should explain. Go ahead, princess.”

“Shut up. God, you’re so damn annoying,” she frowned. The men all stared at one another and then looked at Moose and the woman. “I’m not a princess. My family are descendants of the Ottoman Empire. We hold no titles, no property. I’m an American but work out of London. I wasn’t lying that I have an aunt and uncle still here, and I was checking on them.”

“But that’s not why she was here,” said Red, taking a bit of the rice and lamb. “Tell ‘em.”

“Ari Grigoryan killed my family. Nearly all of them except my aunt and uncle. They’re now safe in a home we own in another country. But I wanted to stop him. He’s been taking young men, boys, even some women from villages for two years now.”

“He’s been doing it longer than that,” said Rush. She stared at the big blonde and swallowed. Moose was large, but he seemed somehow less violent than this man.

“I work for GNN.”

There were moans and shits and damns heard around the room.

“I want to stop this man. I need to stop him. I followed him across Europe and now into Turkey. When the earthquake happened, it was a sign. He sweeps in like a disease, taking the young men from the villages, promising them work and money to send home.

“Except he doesn’t send anything home, including the men. He uses them to get what he wants, and then either kills them or allows them to continue to work for him. If you disappoint him, you die a painful death. He killed my younger brother while he was trying to help his friend escape. He was just thirteen years old.”

“I’m sorry,” said Rush. “But just what did you think you were going to do to stop this man? He has, had an army behind him.”

“You were right the first time. He *has* an army behind him. He has amassed more than twenty thousand men.”

“What?” said Trak, stepping from the shadows.

“Oh, shit!” she squealed. “I didn’t see him.”

“No one ever sees him,” smirked Rush. “Where are these twenty thousand men?”

“They’re scattered across Europe and parts of Asia and the Middle East. Your friend Moose,” she said, pointing to the big man. He frowned at her, his arms crossed over his chest. “Do you have a real name?”

“That is my real name,” he growled.

“Fine. Mr. Moose.”

“Moose.”

“Fine. Moose said that you were able to get the group out at the wool factory out of the building. That’s good, but now you’ve made him angry.”

“That’s the point,” said Rush. “Listen, I’m glad we were able to pull you out of the rubble, but if you have something of value to tell us, please do it now. We have a lot to get to.”

“He’s trying to take control of Istanbul.”

They all stared at her. No expression. No emotion. They already knew, she thought. How could they know?

“You’re not surprised, which tells me that you know as much or more than I do. Who are you?” she asked, staring at all of them.

“We are a security agency,” said Noah. “That is all you need to know. Does Grigoryan know who you are? That you are after him?”

“Yes.” Again, the groaning and curse words. “Look, I know you think I’m some helpless female.”

“You are,” growled Moose. “Look at your fucking leg!”

“Are you always such an asshole?” she barked at him. He stood, staring at her, then disappeared into the bedroom.

“He’s obviously worried for you,” said Rush. “Maybe cut him some slack. Being protective is in his nature.”

“I went to Grigoryan on the premise of an interview, and he granted it. I took a cameraman with me, and they immediately broke the camera and made him wait outside. Grigoryan said the world would remember his name. They would bow at his feet by the time he was done.”

“He’s psychotic,” mumbled Rush.

“You would think so, but I’ve seen psychotic men. He appears to be as sane as you or me. When you speak with him, he’s calm, cool, collected. It seems nothing ruffles his feathers, although you might have tested that with your little explosion tonight.”

“Good. If he gets ‘ruffled,’ he’ll start to make mistakes. Tell us something we don’t know,” demanded Rush.

“Alright. He’s not getting his funding from what he steals. He’s getting his funding from major corporations.”

“Corporations?” repeated Rush. “You mean countries.”

“No. He’s almost like a spokesperson for corporations.” The men all stared at her, and she shifted, sitting up straighter. “Have you met him?”

“Yes,” said a handful of men.

“Have you noticed nothing about his person? Aren’t you guys supposed to be observant, notice everything, kind of guys?” They frowned at the woman, looking at one another.

“For shit’s sake, just tell us,” growled Moose.

“Fine. He only wears designer sneakers. One specific designer and only that one. His dress shoes are from one specific designer. He only wears custom suits. One specific custom designer. When he dresses casually, there is one type of blue jean, one type of polo shirt. He has a fleet of luxury cars. All one maker.

“This man literally personifies someone obsessed with labels, but these aren’t just any labels. These manufacturers and designers believe in what he’s doing. They have the same disgusting tastes.”

“Why would these corporations ‘sponsor’ his actions?” asked Rush.

“Simple. Dominance.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hi, Gray,” smiled Caroline as she entered the clinic. “Thanks for making time for me today.”

“Of course, honey. Is everything okay? Are you feeling alright? Did you want to get on birth control?” she asked.

“Oh, no. I think we’re okay letting nature take its course.” She took the seat across from Gray and fidgeted with the hem of her dress. “Rush and I have had sex. Several times in a very short period of time.”

“Then that’s good,” smiled Gray. “That’s what young couples in love do.”

“Yes,” grinned Caroline, “it was very good. However, I may have underestimated the size of my future husband and his impact on my body.”

“Oh.” Gray nodded at her and stood, understanding the dilemma. Unlike Gabi, who would have immediately gone into some dialogue about the size of all the men, including her own husband, Gray just smiled. “Let’s do an exam, honey. Are you hurting?”

“Just a little burning when I urinate. I want to make sure everything is okay.”

Gray had her get undressed and gave her a pelvic exam. Although her

vaginal wall was slightly inflamed, there was no damage or tearing. It was clear that Rush had been gentle with his future wife.

“I think you’re going to get used to accommodating Rush, but for now, I’m going to give you something that will alleviate the burning. I would also advise you to go slowly when he returns. He’s obviously a large man.”

“I didn’t measure him,” blushed Caroline, “but I’d say he was close to the length of my forearm.” Gray’s eyes went wide, and she stared at the young woman and her arm.

“Oh my.”

“I know, Gray, but it was wonderful!” she said, gripping the other woman’s hand. “God, he was so perfect and gentle, and holy shit, his body! I never imagined it could be so beautifully perfect.”

“Yes,” laughed Gray, “I can see the dilemma. You’re just going to have to learn to pace yourself. Too much of anything could be a bad thing.”

“I respectfully disagree,” smiled Caroline. “Maybe over time, I’ll build a tolerance. Not tolerance. You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. Just take it slow for a while. You should be fine by the time he gets home. Don’t be afraid to use a lubricant as well.”

“Thank you, Gray.” Caroline left the clinic and walked back toward the cottages. As she passed the school, Jessica and Elizabeth were walking out and headed home.

“Caroline! It’s so wonderful to have you home,” said Elizabeth, hugging the younger woman.

“Thank you, it’s wonderful to be home. How are you?”

“We’re good. How are you?” asked Jessica, looking back at the clinic. “Are you sick, honey?”

“Oh, no,” she said, blushing. “Rush and I finally, well, we were finally together, and he was more than expected. In every way.”

“Ah,” smiled Jessica. “I remember feeling that way with Lars. I mean, I’m pretty tiny, and he’s six-feet-three of absolute deliciousness. I was sore for the first month we were together, but it was a burden I was all too happy to carry.”

“Me too,” smiled Elizabeth. “Chris is much bigger than me, and I was a virgin when we got together. So, although I don’t have any other men to judge him by, he was definitely the man made for me.”

“It was just so perfect, you guys. I mean, we were in a cave in the monkey pens, and he was shot, but other than that, it was perfect. A few years ago, when I was home on break, we all went to The Well. I thought it

would be my chance to let him know how I felt, so we danced and then started kissing and making out. I think he got scared and pushed me away, but when he was holding me, he was rock hard. I knew he was big, but holy cow. Nothing could have prepared me for what was really there.”

“You know, we’re very lucky,” said Jessica. “I talk to old friends, schoolmates, and some of them have miserable sex lives. I’m talking once or twice a month. Others are still playing the dating game and aren’t happy. I actually spoke with an old friend the other day that said her husband only wants sex with her on top. Not just that, but he’s watching a porn movie on his phone while she’s doing her thing.”

“Oh my gosh!” said Caroline, appalled. “Why would she stay with him? I can’t imagine Rush ever doing that to me.”

“I’m not sure why she would stay, but it’s something Lars and I agreed upon when we married. If we watch an erotic movie, we watch it together, learn together. Same for Charlie’s books. We read them together. I think there’s so much puritanical bullshit still floating through our DNA. It’s as if we’re afraid to talk about the most natural thing in the world.”

“I never thought of that,” smiled Caroline. “I know for a fact that Charlie gives all of the men in her books ample packages. I should go back and read some of them so I can be ready for Rush when he comes home.”

“I’m sure Charlie has some things that could help you as well,” smiled Jessica. They heard the slow rumble above their heads and saw the dark clouds moving in.

“Looks like we’re in for more rain,” said Caroline. “That could be good. I can get the cottage ready for when he comes home.”

The women took off in a slow jog toward their cottages, hoping to avoid getting drenched. Caroline had just closed her door when her phone rang for a video chat.

“Hi, baby,” said the sexy voice of Rush. He sounded like he was in a cave.

“Hi! God, I miss you so much,” she murmured. “I need you, Rush. I’m aching for you.” Despite the fact that her vagina was on fire, she would suffer ten times the discomfort just to be with him.

“God, honey, I feel the same way. I’m like a sixteen-year-old boy. I’m in the bathroom. That’s why I’m whispering.”

“Oh, that’s right. It’s almost midnight there. Are you okay?”

“Just have a dick that could pound nails, that’s all.” Rush actually flushed a bright pink, and something about that sent Caroline’s body into overdrive.

“Show me,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Show me. I need to see you again,” she whispered, although no one was in the cottage. Turning his screen, Rush twisted the phone toward his face, then lower so she could see his erection. Moaning, she could feel herself getting excited.

“Stroke it for me, Rush,” she pleaded. He nodded, gripping the big shaft stroking it up and down. His thumb would roll over the head, the juicy pre-cum leaking from his tip.

“Fuck,” he growled, thrusting his hips forward. The shaky view of the camera did nothing to conceal the hot sex pouring from his body just as Caroline rubbed herself to satisfaction.

“That was as perfect as it could be for us right now,” she smiled.

“I needed that, baby. Thank you. I’ll be home soon. Keep that beautiful ass of yours ready for me. I love you.”

“I love you,” she smiled, blowing him a kiss.

Rush washed his hands, wiping the excess off his thick cock. He was hurting so bad he wasn’t sure what to do, but when Caroline answered the phone looking so damn beautiful and started talking in that sultry voice, he knew he was done. Stepping back into the living area, there were men spread out on the floor with blankets and pillows.

Taking his spot near the window, he stretched out, smiling to himself.
Gabe turned toward him, grinning.

“Next time you want to have phone sex, you might want to turn off your phone speakers.”

“Oh, shit.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Good morning, Rush,” said Sniff, staring at the young man.

“Uh, good morning, sir. Listen, Sniff, I’m sorry if…” He held up a hand, shaking his head.

“Nope. I don’t want to hear it,” he said. “Look, Rush, you and Caroline are obviously very much in love, and having a healthy, happy sex life is part of that. Believe me, I could barely control myself around Lucy. The only thing that stopped me was that!” He pointed toward the frowning face of Gaspar, and Rush chuckled.

“What?” growled the older man. “She’s my daughter, and Caroline is my granddaughter. You might want to remember that.”

“She’s my wife,” said Sniff, “and I won’t apologize for loving her so much that I would give her anything in the world, including a happy, healthy sex life.”

“No offense, sir,” said Rush, looking at Gaspar, “but I feel the same. I know Caroline is your granddaughter, but she’ll be my wife soon, and I plan on loving that woman as often as I can.”

Nine and Ian chuckled, shaking their heads.

“What are you two assholes laughing at?” frowned Gaspar.

“Oh, nothing. Except we both have daughters and know what you’re going through. The great thing about it is we know these men. We know what kind of man our daughter or granddaughter will marry. Can you imagine if you didn’t know Rush?” said Nine. “Look at him, Sniff, Gaspar. Six-feet-eight, two hundred and eighty pounds of some of the finest worked muscle in America. If that walked in your door and asked to date your daughter, what would you say?”

“Get the fuck out,” growled Sniff.

“Exactly,” smirked Ian. “But you know Rush. You know his character, his code, his heart. We’re so fucking lucky that our girls, our daughters, nieces, sisters, granddaughters, have chosen men in our field so that we know what kind of men they are.”

“You do know that I would never harm Caroline, right?” asked Rush. “I would sooner kill myself than harm her.”

“I know that, Rush. I don’t doubt you as a provider, protector, and even as a lover of my daughter,” said Sniff. “But she’s still my only child. My only little girl. That’s hard for any father to let go of.”

“I understand,” smiled Rush. “The good news is, we’ll be living within arm’s length of you. All of you. Right now, all I want to do is kill Grigoryan and get home so I can marry my girl.”

“You shouldn’t be walking!” yelled Moose.

“Stop telling me what to do!” said Ece. “The doctor put a walking boot on for a reason so that I can walk. God, why are you so pig-headed?”

“Because he’s a man,” smiled Gabe. She turned sharply, staring at the older man.

“And what’s with all of you looking alike? I mean, you’re all enormous, but five of you look like twins, and I think those two are twins. What the hell is happening? Are you trying to make me go crazy?”

“It’d be a short trip,” muttered Moose.

“Moose. Brother, give her a break,” said Baptiste. “Ece, these are my blood brothers. Gaspar is the oldest, Alec is the baby, and then Gabe, and Rafe and I are twins. We have four more brothers at home and six sisters. We do look incredibly alike. Nathan and Joseph are the twins of Trak. Kiel is Zeke’s son. Rush is Noah’s son. But as we mentioned earlier, we all work together.”

“And does this one have a brother?” she frowned, jerking her thumb toward Moose.

“No, I don’t have a brother. And my name is Moose.”

“That cannot be the name your mother gave you,” she frowned. “I refuse to believe that.”

“No,” he ground out between his teeth. “My mother named me Major.”

“Dear lord, your name is Major. I’m not saluting you,” she said, staring at him. Moose said nothing, holding back the sharp retort building in his chest. Nine looked at Ghost, who looked at Gaspar and Ian. But it was the silent leader who stepped forward.

“Enough!” said Trak. “We don’t have time for your petty, childlike bullshit.”

“You’ve made my father cuss. That’s not a good sign,” said Joseph.

“We have a killer to stop, and I don’t give a shit about your little love spat.” Ece and Moose both blushed, shaking their heads. “Who are these corporation heads that you spoke of yesterday?”

“I have a list,” she said, pulling out her phone. Sniff immediately grabbed the device. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“You little fool,” said Moose. “Your phone could be tracking your whereabouts and lead them straight to us. Someone could be watching every move you make.”

“No. I-I was careful,” she stammered. Realizing that she might have caused these men to be exposed, she took the seat at the table and lowered her head over her arms. The men all looked at Moose, who shook his head.

From behind him, Noah shoved his shoulder.

“Damn,” he muttered, kneeling beside her. “Ece, look at me. It’s okay. Sniff is turning off all the tracking and checking for anything suspicious. We’re okay. Please, just tell us about the corporate sponsors.”

She lifted her head, wiping the tears from her eyes. The huge brown, almond-shaped eyes stared at him. Moose felt as though he’d been slapped. He jerked backward and stood quickly. Ece just stared at him, then nodded.

“Grigoryan is part of a group of men called The Elite. They are businessmen, manufacturers, that sort of thing, who believe that consumer goods should be dictated by their small group.”

“And, of course, those goods would be their own,” said Sniff.

“That’s right. They’re part of a small society that believes that only the purest should provide food, clothing, shelter, anything really to the masses. These men are all part of an odd religion that combines Muslim beliefs with Judaism, Christianity, Taoism, Fascism, all of it. It’s like they took the worst parts of all religions and made it their own. They call it Elitism, of which they are the heads.

“I went to Grigoryan on the premise of interviewing him about Elitism, but he refused to speak of it, saying I wasn’t worthy of learning about the religion. He spoke of everything except that. He talked about how

they will build thousands of manufacturing sites in different parts of the world, employing millions of people.”

“Yes, but they’ll be putting millions out of work by closing other plants,” said Rush.

“I said the same thing, but he said as long as those workers converted to Elitism, they would be welcomed into their organization. The trick is you must pledge fifty percent of your salary back to the religion.”

“And he honestly believes that these young boys, young men, will help him to conquer the world?” asked Rush.

“He sees it as sending in the innocent to convert the devil. I don’t think he believes in any religion. I think this is a bunch of bullshit to make him appear as some sort of savior. Those kids just see opportunities for money and food, that’s all.”

“So, how do we stop him?” asked Rush.

“You have to get his backers to back off,” said Ece. “So far, nothing seems to faze them, including boutiques and department stores saying they will no longer carry their brands. To them, it won’t matter if Grigoryan creates a society where we’re forced to wear certain labels.”

“This feels very stepford-wife-like,” frowned Sniff. They all looked at him. “You know, a community where men and women are forced to

behave a certain way, dress a certain way, act a certain way.”

“I think that’s exactly what he’s trying to do. If he can make it happen, one country at a time, as his power grows, he’ll be unstoppable.”

“It would never happen,” said Moose. “I mean, think about it. In every age throughout history, someone has tried to dictate what we should wear, how we should speak, how we should live. They created classes to ensure that those who were in upper levels didn’t mix with those in lower levels. For shit’s sake, look at the damn Titanic. Lower class was pushed to the lower, smaller berths, and they all were the first to die. First class was on the upper decks and were able to get into the lifeboats.”

“Yes, but have we learned from any of that?” asked Ece. “I see stories like this all the time. Crazy religious leaders starting sects that force people to do unbelievable things. And people follow them! I started this to avenge my brother, my whole family. Now, I’m just trying to stop him, period.”

“Ece,” said Rush, walking toward the young woman, “with your injury, you can’t be out there with us, and it’s not safe for you to be here alone. He knows who you are and what you’ve seen. You’re a threat to him. I think you should allow us to get you somewhere safe.”

“And where is that?” she asked, tears filling her eyes. “I’ve only felt

safe since being around all of you. My apartment in London was trashed recently. My family is gone. I have nothing else. Even GNN doesn't want me to continue with this, but I feel as though I have to. Not just for my family but all those other families. I have nothing. Nothing." Moose rolled his eyes, shaking his head. He was going to regret this.

"Yes, you do."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I’m not sure who she is,” said Caroline. “All I know is that Moose is supposed to bring her back here to keep her safe. Aunt Claudette is getting a cottage ready for her now. She has a broken leg, so she can’t get around very well.”

“Interesting,” smiled Maggie. “And Moose is coming back with her?”

“Yes,” said Caroline. “Why is that interesting?”

“Oh, I was just thinking, out of all those men, they chose one of the younger, most recently retired ones to bring her back here. Why not send one of the older men home?” asked Maggie.

“That is interesting,” smiled Mattie.

“Agreed,” nodded Skylar. “I wonder if maybe we shouldn’t help to prepare the cottage for two?”

“Don’t you think that’s assuming a lot?” asked Caroline.

“Nope,” laughed Maggie, “I think that’s smart planning.”



“Are you sure this is going to be okay?” asked Ece. “I mean, a strange woman gets dumped into their laps. What will your teammates and

their wives think?”

“It’s not a big deal, Ece,” said Moose, setting the soda and cheese platter on the table between them. “We are a safe haven for a lot of people. But we have some rules.”

“Rules?”

“Yes. No photos, no reporting, no contacting anyone to let them know where we are, who we are, or where you are.”

“Who you are? I don’t know who you are!” she yelled.

“Hey! I’m trying to fly up here,” said Evie. “Keep your arguments to a low roar. Chipper and I will be closing the cabin door.”

“Sorry, Evie,” said Moose. “Now you got us in trouble.”

“I did not... Ohhh! You are so frustrating! Who are you?” She pushed the hair back from her face and leaned back, nibbling on a piece of cheese.

“We told you that we are a security agency, but we are considered the best in the world. That’s not posturing. It’s the truth. It started decades ago with Nine and Trak as part of REAPER, then they added Ghost and his team at Steel Patriots and Ian’s entire SEAL team that retired around the same time. Eventually, someone forced us to go public, so we changed our name. We are now...”

“Voodoo Guardians,” she whispered. “I’ve heard about all of you. About the legends who work with you, but I thought it was all a bunch of storytelling. I’m sorry, Moose. I promise I will not let anyone know where you are or who you are. I would never do that to you.”

He stared at her, unsure of whether or not to believe her.

“I appreciate that. Our anonymity is important not just for our people in the field but for our families back home. We have spouses, children, grandchildren, and a number of businesses that provide support for the organization.”

“You guys were behind rescuing a bunch of children from a ship a few years back,” she said, staring at him, looking at him in a whole new light.

“Yea, I wasn’t part of the team back then. I’ve only recently retired as well. I was a SEAL.”

“Do you have a family?”

“No. I did.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry,” she said, nibbling on another piece of cheese.

“You didn’t pry, Ece. I’m sorry I’m so fucking prickly sometimes. My wife and I were not in a good place the last few years of my deployment. I wanted a family, children. But she didn’t want them, and then I figured out

why. She was having affairs on the side. Enjoying her time alone.

“I thought I was going to do the right thing and retire from the SEALs, make a family and home with her, wherever she wanted. Instead, I found her with a prominent television minister,” he said, frowning.

“Oh, my gosh, I saw that story. I’m so sorry, Moose.”

“No, it’s okay. He basically had beaten her to death during their, uh, enjoyment. I was sad for her death, but not sad for the end of our marriage. I knew it was coming.”

“Still, it must have been hard on you,” she said, shaking her head.

“It was, but my teammates made it easier. And wait until you meet all the amazing wives,” he smiled. “They’re awesome. Beautiful, smart, talented. They contribute to the business in ways you can’t even imagine. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, teachers, even musical artists.”

“You love these people,” she said, smiling at him.

“I guess I do,” he grinned.

“You should smile more often,” she said, staring at him. “You have a beautiful smile. I like the beard, too.” Moose stared at her, then cleared his throat.

“So, is there a mister at home or a wanna-be mister?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I never had the time to date, and once my family was killed, that was my sole focus. Honestly, I’ve been afraid to put myself out there.”

“Why? You’re beautiful.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” she asked.

“Hell, yes. Don’t you think you’re beautiful?”

“I don’t know. I ignored most of the men that tried to flirt with me at work. I didn’t want to be involved with someone I worked with. Occasionally, someone I was interviewing would ask me out, but then it occurred to me that was work as well.”

“How old are you?” Moose asked with a frown.

“Twenty-seven,” she said with a yawn.

“Hey, there’s a full bed in the back of the plane. Let me help you back there, and you can lie down.” She didn’t argue, didn’t complain, just stood as he took her elbow. Realizing the aisle was too narrow for both of them, he picked her up and walked toward the bedroom.

Reaching the bed, the plane hit a pocket of turbulence, and they fell forward onto the bed, Ece on top of Moose. They both laughed, and he pushed her dark hair from her face.

“Did I hurt you?” she whispered against his face.

“Not possible,” he groaned, shifting her hips off his hardening cock.

“You smell wonderful,” she said, staring down at him. “All man and something else. I’ve never smelled a man like you before. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever smelled a man at all.”

“Ece,” he whispered.

She lowered her head, her lips tickled by his beard. When she pressed against him, Moose knew this was the end of his world. At this moment, a new one was beginning. Plying his mouth open with her tongue, she tasted him, nibbling on his lips.

Moose gripped the back of her head, her hair wound around his fist. He turned her neck, running his tongue up and along her jaw, then back to her lips.

“Be sure, Ece. I can’t turn back from this if we move forward.”

“I’m sure. I’m positive,” she said, breathing heavily. “Please.”

He was stripped before she could blink an eye. His thick, wide chest covered in dark hair and tattoos. When his boxers were gone, she noted the thickness of his cock and felt her body aching. He pulled the long dress over her head, heavy breasts bouncing freely from the bra. Pushing her back to the bed again, he opened her wide as he rolled on the condom.

“Moose,” she started.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

“No, I...”

“Then we move forward.” Her wet pussy lips allowed him to push forward with a hard thrust, and then he stilled. Lowering his forehead to hers, he slowed his breathing. “Ece, baby.”

“I was trying to tell you. I’ve never had intercourse with anyone.” He smiled down at her, kissing her sweetly as he tried desperately not to move.

“I’ll try not to hurt you, and I’ll try to be more patient when you’re speaking next time,” he smirked. “Twenty-seven and never touched.”

“I’ve been touched, just not like this,” she grinned. “It’s not burning as much now. Can you please start moving again? It feels amazingly full.”

“Yes, ma’am, I can definitely start moving. But before I do, we have to agree on something. This isn’t a one-time deal for me, Ece. It means something. In my world, you’re mine now. My woman, and hopefully, one day my wife.”

“Y-you want me to be your wife?” she asked.

“Eventually. I get that we need to get to know one another, but yes.

Can you see us together?”

“That’s all I can see,” she laughed. He was hovering above her, resting on his elbows as his big thighs pushed her legs further apart. “My parents had an arranged marriage and learned to love one another. I never wanted that. I wanted to be able to know the man I was falling in love with, and the truth is I’ve been falling in love with you since you pulled me from the rubble.” She rocked her hips upward, and there was a low growl from his chest.

“You keep doing that, and we’ll be back here all night.”

“Would that be so bad,” she asked, kissing him sweetly, running her mouth down his throat to his nipple. “You’re a very virile man, Moose. Sexy. And definitely made to please a woman.” He chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’m made for you,” he said quietly, kissing her again. “I want babies.”

“I want four,” she countered. He smiled down at her.

“Only four,” he said, rocking into her. She moaned, arching her back.

“Five, if they can all be boys.” He thrust harder and harder as she raked her nails down his back.

“I believe we have a deal.”

They never felt it when the plane landed. They didn't even move when they heard the engines cut off. They didn't hear Evie and Chipper leave the plane. But they damn sure heard it when Claudette and Mama Irene opened the bedroom door.

“Hot damn! We got another wedding!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After trying to track down Grigoryan all day, the men were hot, tired, and dirty. They removed the traditional robes and put on their own clothing to head out for food. The dogs were with them, Sniff holding Lucy's leash, Rush with Beast, Noah with Ranger, and Tailor with Monster. Pedestrians moved to the other side of the road, trying to avoid the dogs but also the big men.

"I thought we were trying to stay out of sight," said Rush.

"We are," said Trak. "But we're also sending a message that we're not going anywhere. I've found a place for us to eat and get a good view of the waterfront and the building we saw Ari in on the first day. They've given us a private, screened room."

Obediently following their friend, the men were happy to see food already out on the table, ready for them. At first, the restaurant wanted them to leave the dogs outside, but somehow, Trak convinced them it wouldn't be safe. For others.

"We haven't seen him since the first day," said Trak. "But today, as we were in the plaza once again, we overheard the men that were recruiting the boys speaking about something big coming up. I phoned home and asked for some help with the manufacturers."

From the tablet, they had a dozen split screens showing the major manufacturing sites for all of the players. The first one showed Antoine, Ryan, Keith, and Jak. Antoine flipped his brothers the middle finger and then waved as they took off running toward a nearby lake. Jumping into the small inflatable, they sped off just as the camera shook with force, and the factory disappeared.

In the next photo were Miller, Gibbie, Angel, Luke, and Phoenix. In a similar scenario, they flipped their teammates off and then ducked for cover as the entire plant exploded. Titus, Max, Stone, Eli, and RJ took the next one, saluting their friends as the plant was shredded to pieces.

Tristan, King, Rory, Stone, and Jazz weren't in front of the plant. Instead, they were on the side of a mountain. On the opposite side was the plant. With five rocket launchers pointed directly at the side of the mountain, they let the rockets release and then waited as the entire mountainside came crumbling down around the factory.

Gibbie, Griff, Axel, and Blade. Then Tango, Razor, Eagle, Hawk, and Garrett. Griff, Bryce, Hunter, Jax, and Jean. Dex, Cam, Luc, Jean, and Eric. And finally, in what could only have been described as the prettiest explosion in history, Piper, Addie, May, Paige, Lucia, Tori, Evie, and Savannah. But no one gave a middle finger. Instead, May smiled into the camera along with Paige.

“What the hell?” muttered Alec.

Watching the video, the top of the building suddenly imploded inward to the factory, with massive vats of pink paint spilling on the designer leather goods. Cranes operated by remote control dropped industrial bladders of pink paint all over the factory, destroying anything inside or outside.

“That’s how it’s done,” smirked Paige. “Girl Squad wins the award for style.” She blew a kiss to the camera, and they signed off.

“That was fucking cool,” laughed Nine.

“Now, Grigoryan will be angry,” said Trak. “Angrier than just his men being released from their prison. Sly, Code, Pigsty, and Ace are searching for the locations of his other troops. Once we have that, we can go in and destroy their training grounds. By air, by sea, or by land. Much to my disappointment.”

The SEALs in the room laughed, knowing he was taking a stab at the SEAL acronym. In actuality, Trak was probably as good as any SEAL, Ranger, or other Special Forces. He was in a league by himself, even at his age.

“Nicely done, brother,” smirked Nine. “Had I known you had all these skills, I could have stepped down years ago.” Trak stared at the man, a small grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“I never wished to be the leader. You did that well enough,” he said. “But this is different. I have history with Grigoryan, and so do all of you.”

“We’ll get him, brother.”

The men ate, enjoying the Mediterranean food. Fresh slices of cucumber and tomato were sprinkled with a delicious seasoning, as different types of olives, dates, dolma, lamb, chicken, and other delicacies were laid before them.

There was a soft knock on the door, and a little boy of about nine walked in with an older boy, perhaps in his late teens, both smiling at Trak. He waved them over, and the older boy whispered in his ear.

“Trak, what’s up?” asked Alec. The little boys smiled at the men.

“The nice man bought food for everyone at the camp,” said the little boy. “He said we shouldn’t go to work for anyone if they ask. He would send food, and he did.”

The men all looked at Trak, wondering how much that must have cost him. He only stared at them as if to say, ‘what?’.

“The ships have arrived to get us to safety, just as you said. My parents wish to make a gift to you,” said the older boy. “They were able to save this from their home. It belonged to our great-grandfather.” He opened the cloth, and there was an ancient medal on a tattered ribbon. Trak smiled at

the young man, touching his cheek.

“This medal is worthy of a warrior,” said Trak, pushing it back into the boy’s hand. “It is a medal of honor, and your great-grandfather must have been a heroic man. You will follow in his footsteps by getting your families on the ships. They will take you to safety until you can return.”

“At least take this,” said the boy. “It’s sweets that our mother made.”

“Oooh,” said Tailor with big eyes.

The little boys laughed, smiling at the big scary men. Although they didn’t seem so scary. The older boy took the younger one’s hand and started to leave, then turned and hugged Trak.

“I hope I am as brave as you when I am older.” Trak just smiled at the young man, looking down into his sweet eyes.

“Be braver.”

When the boys were gone, the men all stared at their friend, who continued to eat his meal. Looking up, he shrugged his shoulders.

“What was I to do with all that money? My children and grandchildren don’t need it. It served a good purpose, feeding all those people today. I made a few phone calls of my own as well. You’re not the only ones with contacts, and Gwen helped me.

“Several manufacturers who suspected what those on the screen were doing lent me their ships to transport the people out of here and to safety until we can deal with Ari Grigoryan. When his men arrive at the plaza tomorrow to recruit more soldiers, they will be very disappointed in what they find.”

They all stared at Trak, shocked that he had gone to such extremes to get the families and children out of the city and out of the reach of Grigoryan. Not that he wouldn't do whatever was needed, but he was a quiet, shy man who never put himself out in front. This was different.

“That's pretty fucking cool, Dad,” smiled Joseph. He tilted his head at his son and nodded.

“No. That is who we are.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Walking back to their tiny apartment, the men were able to move a little easier as the streets began to clear. Rush was grateful for this alone time with his father.

“I’m glad I’ll be coming home soon, Dad. I’ve missed all of you.”

“Especially one,” smiled Noah.

“Yea, especially one. I shouldn’t have waited so long. I might have missed my chance with her, and that wouldn’t have been good for anyone. I should have been more assertive like you were with Mom.”

“I was not assertive. I was sure.”

“Dad, you were assertive. Uncle Blade said that you told her you loved her right away, and you were freaking her out that first night in the restaurant, staring at her the whole night.”

“I did, and I do not regret it. What I regret is ever leaving her alone in Louisiana. When I found out that she had left, believing that she was safe, I knew I had to find her. We were lucky that between Ace and Skull, they found that clunker of a car she owned.”

“Is that why you always made sure she had a new car?” laughed Rush.

“Yes. That, and you. You and your mother are the two most important things in my life, Rush. I was an only child, and I don’t think I appreciated how much that must have impacted my parents. Watching you grow into the fine man that you have become has been the highlight of my life. Loving your mother has been my greatest honor.”

“Who knew under all that Viking armor was a poet,” smirked Rush.

“I am many things,” laughed Noah, “but a poet is not one of them. You have done great work here, Rush. I often let my temper guide my thoughts, and it nearly ruined my life. When I went to the Steel Patriots, I thought they would turn me away. Force me to leave.”

“That was never gonna happen,” laughed Ghost behind them. “Sorry, couldn’t help but overhear the conversation. Nothing you did in your career was going to chase us away, Noah. You’re a fucking warrior all the way, and we admired the shit out of you for what you did.”

“The kids, right?” asked Rush.

“Yes, the children. Those beasts. Those animals brutalized those children. Babies barely starting their lives, Rush. I had no children at the time, but all I saw was red. In that moment, more than any other in my life, I felt like my Viking ancestors. I felt like a berserker. Someone who goes wild with anger and vengeance on his mind.”

“Are you finally gonna tell us how you killed all those men?” asked Tailor.

“He used his skill,” said Trak, standing amidst the circle of his friends. Noah looked down at the dark warrior. “You killed eleven with knives from a distance. That left seventy-three more. As you moved into the building and passed your knives, you removed them, throwing them at another man and then another, repeating as you went. Taking a machete, you hacked your way through the men in the darkness, cutting off limbs and heads. Even when you were done, you returned and made sure. All but one.”

There was an eerie silence among the group, all staring at Noah. He knew they didn’t judge him for what he did. Those men had raped, beaten, starved, and killed more than twenty children.

“How did you know that?” asked Noah. “I gave no account of how I did that.”

“I looked at the records and the photographs,” said Trak. “A man who is proficient with a knife recognizes another. Your skills would have made your and my ancestors proud. I would have done the same thing. I admire you, Noah. You were made to be one of us.”

“I’m proud of you, Dad,” said Rush. “I’d like to believe I would do the same thing. Thanks to you and Uncle Trak, I’m pretty damn good with a

knife as well.”

“You’d do the same,” said Gabe. “We all would. Some of us are better with rifles or explosives, others are better with handguns and knives. It’s why we’re such a good team.”

“We’re a good team because we have the same mindset,” said Ghost.

“And we respect one another,” said Ian. “So do our wives. I think that more than anything amazes me. A hundred guys together, and if they argue, they just fight it out. Women can get crazy as shit vindictive. Not our women.” He looked at Alec, Gaspar, and the other brothers.

“What? What did I do?” asked Gaspar.

“Nothing, but I still can’t help but think your Mama had something to do with all of this,” said Ian.

“How? She didn’t know a lot of you,” said Gabe.

“I know, I know, but still. Something always gives me the feeling that she’s involved. Almost like she’s watching us from afar,” said Ian.

They started to walk again and passed the entrance to the ancient underground market. It had been in place since the time of Christ, still boasting stalls of carpets, lanterns, jewelry, spices, and more. When Noah hit the entrance, he stilled, gripping his son’s shoulder.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” asked Rush. He looked at all the men, smiling.

“There are thousands of years of ghosts in this place. They have been relatively quiet so far. But now they are all shouting a message. A message I have just received from Mama Irene, via Martha, to my new friend, Babinar.” Noah nodded at the empty space, and the others all stared at him, then looked around to be sure others weren’t watching.

“I hear you, friend; I do not need you to yell at me. Yes, I understand that the old woman was insistent and woke your slumber. My apologies. Look, I am not in the habit of arguing with ghosts. What is the message you have for me?” Noah nodded, listening carefully.

“We are to gather a list of spices that she has just sent to Gaspar’s phone.”

“She didn’t...” *Ding!* “I’ll be damned. Red pepper flakes, cumin, saffron, cardamom, sumac, urfa pepper, aniseed, black cumin seed, and a bunch of other shit I don’t know.”

Noah smiled at the man, then began to laugh. The others could only follow suit, nearly crying with laughter. Rush just shook his head.

“Now, are you going to tell us she has nothing to do with all of this?” Gaspar looked at his brothers, and they all shrugged.

“No. I don’t think I am.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“So, you and Moose,” smiled Caroline.

“God, I’m so humiliated,” said Ece, shaking her head. “Your great-grandmother and aunt finding me in bed with a man I’m not married to!”

“Ece, we don’t judge here. We’ve all been with our husbands before we married. We understand that your family’s culture might frown on that, but we don’t.”

“I was raised in a Western culture,” said Ece. “My parents didn’t speak much about it, other than they had an arranged marriage but wouldn’t force me into one. I just couldn’t seem to let go of him. We were sleeping, and I felt the plane land, but I didn’t care. What kind of woman does that make me?”

“Normal,” laughed Kennedy. “It makes you completely normal. I’m Kennedy Stanton. My husband is JT. I think you met his father, Ghost, in Istanbul.”

“I met a lot of men, but that name does sound familiar,” she said, nodding at the beautiful young woman.

“I’m one of the doctors here, so I’m just going to check the leg while you continue to chat.” Ece nodded as Kennedy removed the boot and looked

at the leg for swelling or unusual redness.

“Moose is a wonderful person,” said Caroline. “I’m sure you’ll be very happy here, but don’t feel as though you have to get married right away. They wouldn’t push you to do that.”

“Is it bad that I don’t mind that they want me to marry him? I mean, the first few days, we were constantly at one another’s throats, fighting with each other. Then suddenly, we were alone on that plane, and all I saw was this incredibly handsome, virile man. I acted so brazenly.”

“It’s not brazen to ask for what you want,” said Caroline. “I did. I was the one that made the first move with Rush. He was a gentleman and realized it wasn’t the right time. He pushed me away.”

“Oh, no,” said Ece. “That must have been painful.”

“It was, but it also was the right thing to do at the time. He knew that better than I did. The way we connected this time, minus him getting shot and the psycho after us, that’s how it was supposed to be.” The women all chuckled, nodding at Caroline.

“Ece, it might help for you to understand about Moose’s ex-wife as well,” said Kate. “She was pretty demanding of him and didn’t want him to continue as a Navy SEAL. She found the lifestyle difficult. Unfortunately, her way of dealing with that was screwing around on him.”

“He did mention something about that, but I was so distracted by his body and lips I couldn’t think straight,” said Ece. “If I stay, what then? I can’t not work. I’m a reporter. I can’t report on the work that you do here, so what do I do?”

“Well, maybe you could help us with news stories that go out and attempt to shine a light in a different direction, and not on us,” said Faith. “It’s not that we don’t want people to know that good deeds are happening, but we don’t want them to know it’s us. Maybe you could report the story as an anonymous source to other agencies or as the reporter that only writes about the feel-good stories.”

“I never thought of that,” said Ece. “I could manage the reporting from a place of first-to-know kind of thing.”

“We would support that,” said Grace. “I know we would. We just can’t mention their names or the name of our business.”

“I know,” she said, nodding. “Moose was very clear about that. He’s so beautiful, you guys. When I saw him above me when they were digging me out of the rubble. I kept thinking that someone sent an angel for me. He’s so big, strong, and handsome. He makes me feel special and safe.”

“That’s because you are,” said Caroline. “Believe me, Rush makes me feel the same way.”

“Will they be alright over there alone?” asked Ece.

“Oh, honey, they are never alone,” said Erin. “There are always men and women ready to rush in and rescue them if needed.”

“He asked me to be his wife, but he never mentioned love. I want to be in love. Isn’t that something that takes time?”

“It can,” smiled Caroline. “You’re going to get a double whammy today. I’m going to give you some advice from Kate and Ajei. Then, I’m going to let Erin give you the advice she gave to all of our mothers and even grandmothers.”

“Alright,” smiled Ece.

“Kate and Ajei say that love is so very hard to find that when you do, recognize it as the gift it is. You should hold it gently. Don’t squeeze too hard, but don’t let it go. These men are different in every way. Their lives have been entirely about protecting others, with no thought as to who would protect them. Expect that they’ll be overbearing, alpha in every way. But recognize how unbelievably special that is and that they’ve chosen us to be by their sides. He will protect you, but you will protect him as well. He will drive you mad with his overprotection, but he will soothe you with his love and adoration of you. And there is nothing like the love of one of these men.”

“That’s beautiful and a little scary in some ways,” said Ece, turning to look at Erin. “What’s your advice?”

“It’s similar but yet different. Here’s what you need to know. These men, these men protect so fiercely, so devoutly it’s all-consuming. And they love the same way. All-consuming. It’s remarkable to watch and a blessing to be a part of it. If you want my advice, don’t question anything. Just let yourself feel. These are special men, and if you don’t mind me saying so, it will sound a bit conceited on my, on our part, but it takes special women to be with them.

“You’re special, Ece. Moose chose you to be his wife. To spend your days wrapped in his arms, loving one another. I hope you know what a gift that is.”

“I know,” she nodded, seeing the men enter the building. He was with a very large man named Frank. She’d met him and his beautiful wife and son earlier in the day. “Excuse me, ladies. And thank you.”

Ece rose from the table and limped toward Moose on her boot. When she reached him, she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him passionately. Moose lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist, and carried her to their cottage.

“I can’t wait until that’s me and Rush,” said Caroline.

“It will be the two of you soon enough,” said Lucy. “For now, how about you come out and help me with a llama named Gertrude.” Caroline laughed, shaking her head.

“Mom, you know that if you name the animals, you’re never going to let them go.” Lucy looked at her daughter and smiled.

“I know. But your father doesn’t know that yet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Kaan and his officers have blocked the city. No one enters or leaves without going through a checkpoint, including at the harbors. He had basically instituted martial law. He told the press it was due to the earthquake and possible looters and criminals coming into the city. Now, Grigoryan will be seriously pissed off. He’ll have no way to get in or out, and he won’t be able to recruit in the city,” said Nine.

“He’s also going to be pissed that the military has called back two thousand troops who were helping with the earthquake,” said Rush. “Now, we have him angry. We just need to find him and stop him completely. How are we looking at where his other men are?”

“I think we need to go back to the plaza and see if his men are still there. Those who were displaced have been moved to safety, but that might not stop them from trying to recruit local, radical young Turks,” said Trak.

“Let’s go,” said Alec. “I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” frowned Tailor.

“So are you!”

“Children, could we rein it in just for today?” frowned Trak.

“Aw, we’re just teasin’, Trak,” smiled Tailor. “You know you love

me. You can't imagine a day when you don't hear my big feet sneakin' up on you." Their sons all laughed, shaking their heads. Trak had a frown, then a smile that turned serious.

"You are right, my big friend. I cannot imagine a day where I do not hear that. I hope that I will hear it always."

Trak walked out the door, and Tailor looked at Nine and the others, frowning. He was much too serious. More serious than his usual self.

"Keep an eye on him," said Ian. They all nodded, following the others out into the street. In the plaza, there were considerably less people milling about. It appeared it was only tourists and the occasional local person just passing through.

As the men split up and wandered the blocks around the Hagia Sophia, Noah spotted the two women who had been with Caroline's group the morning they saw them at breakfast.

"Hello," he said, standing near them. "I'm Rush, Caroline's fiancé."

"Yes! Oh, my gosh, is she okay?" asked one of the women.

"Yes, she's wonderful. She's back home now because someone threatened her. She's safe. Is something wrong? Has someone threatened you?"

"No, not us," said the girl. "I'm Toni, and this is Gail. We went with

the others the other day to Varna. While we were there, the girls wanted to split off and go shopping, and the guys were going to do some sightseeing. But they never met us back at the hotel. We've been trying to call them, but they don't answer."

"Did you report this to the authorities?" asked Eric, standing behind him.

"We did. They said they probably came back here. So, we came back and asked our supervisor on the zoo project. He said they hadn't reported in to him. Yesterday, we received a note at the hotel that said we should come here to meet a man that knew where they were."

"You need to leave," said Rush. "Now."

"What? No! We have to find our friends," said Gail.

"We'll find your friends. You need to leave this plaza and this country as soon as you can. Trust me in this," he said.

"What time were you meeting this man?" asked Eric.

"Eleven. We're more than an hour early, but we wanted to be sure we knew where we were going." Eric waved over Rafe and Baptiste.

"My friends are going to get you to your hotel and then to the airport," said Eric. "Do whatever they say, and you'll be fine. We're going to find your friends."

“This is crazy! We can’t leave, or we won’t get credit for this work,” said Toni.

“We’ll take care of that as well,” said Rush. “Please, for your own safety, go with these two men, and they’ll make sure you get home.”

“Okay,” they said, nodding.

“How were you supposed to know these men?” asked Rush.

“They told us to meet them on the bench in the corner over there by the carpet vendor. He said to sit on the bench, face the mosque, and a man named Erzi would take us to our friends.”

“Thank you,” said Rush. “We’ll take it from here.” As Rafe and Baptiste guided the two women to a taxi toward their hotel, the others were listening intently on comms.

“He’ll be looking for two women,” said Eric.

“I know, and there’s not one of us that looks like a woman,” frowned Rush. “Maybe we can ask someone to just have a seat on the bench and wait, hoping they’ll approach them.”

“Maybe,” nodded Eric. “Everyone spread out. Find two women in Western attire. Offer them five hundred dollars to just sit on the bench until a man approaches them. When the man does, tell them they should get up and walk away. Let’s move.”

For thirty minutes, they casually approached women, asking one simple favor. Would you please sit on the bench and wait. You would have thought they were asking them to have their baby. In some cases, the women would have been happier with that.

“Any luck?” asked Rush.

“Well, if it counts, I had three marriage proposals, five proposals for a nice roll in the hay, one offer of a blow job, and an offer to do something with handcuffs and glass balls. I didn’t ask,” said Red.

“Shit,” muttered Rush. “We’re running out of time.”

They scanned the plaza, now getting more crowded, and looked toward the bench. There was a woman seated, her legs crossed. Her long dark hair was down her back, a scarf covering the top of her head and tied around her neck. She didn’t appear to be terribly attractive, but she might do.

“Who got the woman?” asked Rush. “Anyone? Who knows who that is?”

“Stop yelling,” said Trak. “I hear you loud and clear.” They all turned and stared. Holy shit!

“Dad? Please tell me that’s not you,” said Nathan.

“We are out of time. It’s me. One of the women had dark hair, so perhaps he’ll think it’s her. Just be nearby. Once he approaches me, we’ll be

taking a walk behind into the alley on the other side of the plaza.”

“I don’t know,” smiled Taylor, “he’s kinda pretty. I mean, he’s a lot taller than Lena, but with all that black hair...”

“If you finish that sentence, I will release my knife into your body,” growled Trak. Taylor could only laugh, nodding at Alec and Noah to follow him into the alley to wait for their friend.

“Look alive, everyone. It’s two minutes to eleven,” said Rush. The men moved into position, strategically hiding their large bodies behind vendor carts, buildings, anything that might conceal their size and bulk.

Trak was hunched over, his crossed legs, pretending to be digging in a carpet bag, most likely empty. It made him appear smaller and more feminine. When he heard a voice behind calling the woman’s name, he knew his mark had arrived.

He wasn’t prepared for who he saw.

“Hello, Antonio,” said Rush, standing next to the man. Trak stood, pushing off the scarf and shoving it inside the bag. Walking toward the closest kiosk, he handed it to an old woman and gave her a hundred dollars.

“Thank you,” he nodded. She smiled at him, probably happy that her day’s sales were made.

“Why are you here?” he questioned.

“Let’s go for a walk, Antonio,” said Rush, gripping his arm as they walked across the plaza. He pathetically attempted to break free from Rush’s hold, even crying out that he was hurting him.

“If you don’t let me go, I’ll scream!” he threatened.

“Do it,” growled Rush. “I dare you. Do it, and I’ll have you jailed so fast it will make your head spin.” He thrust the man against the wall of the alley, finding himself surrounded by another wall of the human variety.

“What do you want?” he asked in a panicked voice.

“Why did you make the women think you’d disappeared? Where are your friends?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, shaking his head. Trak stepped forward with the large knife spinning in his hand. Sunlight gleamed off the blade, catching the eye of the little man against the wall.

“I think your memory had better return, or I’m going to send pieces of you back to Grigoryan.” Antonio’s eyes went wide as he swallowed.

“He’ll kill me,” he whimpered.

“I’m going to kill you, so you can choose which one of us gets the honor,” said Rush calmly. “Where are the other men, and how do you know Grigoryan?”

“He’s my uncle,” he said, looking down at his feet. “My mother is his half-sister. I’ve always admired him and thought he was a smart man. I wanted to be like him.”

“Are you stupid or something?” frowned Ghost.

“I’m not stupid,” he said, jutting his chin upward. The men just cocked a brow, glaring at him. “He needed help finding men, and those two guys were useless helping at the zoo. I told my uncle that Toni and Gail could help us get men. You know, like attract them in the clubs or something.”

“Why were you going after Caroline?” glowered Rush.

“She’s hot,” he smirked. Rush slammed a fist so hard into his gut, Antonio couldn’t breathe. He fell to the ground, gasping for air, spitting, and coughing. Looking up, he realized there were four massive beasts growling into his face, and they were not human beasts.

“Again. Why were you going after Caroline?”

“My uncle wanted her. I don’t know why, but she wouldn’t give me the time of day. I could never get her alone, and she always was carrying some sort of weapon.”

“That’s my girl,” grinned Sniff.

“Where did he take the other men?” asked Noah. Antonio stared up

at him and knew instantly who he was. Why were these men so large?

“We had them out at an abandoned factory, but something happened to it. My uncle was furious. Then, something went wrong with his business. Something about industrial espionage or something. I’ve never seen him so angry.

“He asked me to bring them all to him in Sozopol, south of Burgas. That’s where all the other men are now. I called him this morning and told him they wouldn’t be able to get into the city because the police and military have it locked down. I got in because I have my work papers for the zoo.”

“What did he say?” asked Rush. Antonio stared at him, confused. “When you told him about the city being locked down. What did he say?”

“He said he’d find another way in, even if he had to create it himself.” Antonio saw two strangers walking toward them and frowned, seeing the one in a police uniform. “No. No way! I told you what I knew.”

“And we appreciate it,” said Rush. “Our friends here are going to keep you nice and safe until it’s time for you to be tried in a court of law. A Turkish court of law. Your uncle is going to be very disappointed, Antonio. Very, very disappointed.”

“I knew Caroline was trouble! I knew it! She was such a stuck-up bitch!”

“Why?” growled Rush, pushing toward the little man. “Because she ignored you and your pathetic ass? No, she isn’t stuck-up. She’s smart, and she knew deep down in her soul, she knew that you were no good.”

As Kaan and his officers took him away, the others stayed in the alley, searching the plaza to be sure there were no others that looked suspicious.

“What now?” asked Rush, looking at the others. Trak stepped forward, pulling his long hair back up in a tight bun.

“Now, we go to Bulgaria.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Moose found Ece sitting in the gardens on one of the stone benches. She seemed deep in thought, and he almost left her there, concerned that he would interrupt.

“Hi,” he smiled.

“Hi,” she said, standing to hug him. The smell of him, the feel of him, made her whole body shake, and she knew that she had to have this conversation with him now before it was too late.

“I’m glad that was my greeting,” he chuckled. “I was worried that maybe you’d changed your mind about us.”

“No. No, I don’t think I could ever change my mind about us, Moose. Can I call you Major?” He laughed, nodding his head. “I think I like the sound of that better. Major. Very commanding.”

“I can command if you like,” he said in a raspy growl, hugging her closer.

“I think I do like that, but could we talk for a moment?” He nodded, swallowing as he took the seat beside her. He was internally preparing himself for bad news. She wanted to go home, or she’d made a mistake allowing him to bring her here. Or worse, she’d notified the press of where

they were.

“I’ve been thinking about everything. About how we got together, about you telling me that I’m ‘yours,’ and about you saying you want to make me your wife.”

“What about it?” he asked quietly.

“I wouldn’t change anything, Major. Nothing, except that I want to marry someone who loves me. Not someone who thinks they have to marry me because they took my virginity. I want the man I marry to feel passion for me. I want him to want me to come home at night. I want him to be in a room full of people and only see me.”

“And you think I don’t feel those things?” he asked with a serious expression.

“I don’t know, honestly. I mean, you haven’t said anything to me.” He nodded, standing to pace in front of her. He’d done this all wrong. He’d ridden in on the Voodoo Guardian love train and swept her off her feet, disorienting her.

“First, let me apologize for the asshole that I was in Turkey. I didn’t realize what was happening, but from the moment I could see your face in that hole, I knew that you were meant to be mine. This won’t make a lot of sense to you, Ece, but my first wife and I were best friends before we got

married. When I became a SEAL, she thought it would be a good idea to get married, and I thought, ‘why not.’ I mean, we got along well enough, and we’d been friends forever, sometimes friends with benefits.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but she wanted to get married as a status symbol. She was married to a SEAL, and she wore that badge like a designer handbag. I think she loved me in her own way, but she wasn’t in love with me. I don’t think I was in love with her, except as a friend. I thought having children, creating a family would change all of that, and I was really pushing for it. All the while, she was pushing me to get out of the Navy and move to Florida to be closer to her parents.

“I did get out of the Navy. When I look back, it wasn’t because I loved her and wanted to make her happy. It was because I didn’t want to fail at marriage. When my marriage imploded, almost live on national television, I just figured I wasn’t meant to find love.”

“That’s crazy! You’re the most wonderful, handsome, sexy, intelligent man I know. Of course, you were meant to find love.” Moose smiled at her, kissing her forehead.

“We move at the speed of sound around here. Sometimes it’s too much. I did everything backwards. I should have explained that I was feeling protective of you because I had feelings for you. Deep, passionate,

genuine feelings that were making me possessive of your well-being.

Believe me, honey, I've never felt that way with anyone else. Never.

“By the time we were on the airplane, I knew I was gone. I knew that you were the only woman I was ever meant to be with. Then, to realize that I was the only man that you'd ever been with, well, that sealed the deal for me.

“You are mine, Ece. My woman. But you are also the woman I am madly, passionately, crazy in love with. I know it seems impossible, but I am in love with you, and I want to spend the rest of our lives right here being happy and making babies.”

“Oh, Major,” she whispered.

Standing, she wrapped her arms around his body, and he lifted her, taking a seat again with her on his lap. He kissed her fervently, one hand wrapped around her waist, the other creeping up the front of her shirt.

“I love you, woman. I want you to be my wife. When you're ready.”

“I'm ready,” she smiled.

“What?” he asked, not sure if he heard her correctly.

“I'm ready, Major. I'm sorry if I made you think I wasn't. I've been in love with you since you pulled me out of the rubble. You were infuriating and frustrating and distracting. But you were also kind, protective, and

loving. You are everything I dreamed my husband would be.

“I’m ready, Major. I’m ready, and I love you, and I want to make love to you without a damn condom between us. So, can we please hurry this along?” She watched as he pulled out his phone. Frowning, she thought it was an awful time for him to be texting someone.

“Major?”

“Sorry, I just needed to let Mama Irene know that she needed to call the priest. We’ll be getting married at dinner this evening.”

And that was it.

Simple as that.

By three o’clock, Ece wore a beautiful sapphire and diamond ring and a simple cream-colored wedding dress. By four o’clock, she kissed her new husband. By five o’clock, they were eating with their friends, laughing like it had been this way for decades.

At eight o’clock, they waved to everyone, walked to their cottage, and disappeared as Mr. and Mrs. Major Sculler.

By midnight, they were on their fourth attempt at creating the first baby Sculler.

And that’s how you do it Voodoo Guardian style.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It took the team four hours to drive to Sozopol, Bulgaria. Kaan let them know that young Antonio's phone was blowing up with messages from Grigoryan but also his mommy. The young man was in a pool of tears in their overcrowded holding cell as other men tried to get to know him. Intimately.

Earthquake victims had come this far as well, seeking shelter until their own villages could be deemed safe or rebuilt. Determining that they needed to avoid hotels in case Grigoryan had placed spies in the area, they decided to rent a small home from an elderly woman.

"I am Malyna. I own this house and the guest house. Just me, so don't try funny business. Five hundred," she said, staring up at the big men. "And don't break my toilet."

"Break your toilet? What the hell? How in the world would we break your toilet?" said Gabe.

"I had big boys. Big boys sometimes plop on the toilet and crack it. You have big boys. You're all big boys. Don't plop. Sit. Gently." Rush just shook his head, handing over the cash to the woman. Ghost pulled her aside to ask a few questions about seeing any strange groups of young men.

“Da, da,” she nodded. “Ten, maybe twelve at a time. Younger than him.” She pointed at Rush, then looked at all the men, shaking her head.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“You like boys? You come here to buy the boys?”

“Jesus! No! We are not here to buy boys. We’re here to save those boys. We want to get them home to their families, safe and sound. And we’re here to stop the man that took them. He’s planning something terrible, and we want to prevent that from happening.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” frowned Tailor.

“Da. Okay. Come. I’ve made cabbage rolls. You eat, then you go find the bad man and help the boys.”

“Yes! I love cabbage rolls,” said Tailor.

“Hold up there, big man,” frowned Alec. “We both know what cabbage does to your stomach. I’m not sure that’s a good idea, considering we’re five men in a room.”

“Bah!” scoffed the old woman. “Gas is no good in. Better out. Good for him. Come.”

“Easy for her to say,” frowned Baptiste. “She’s never had to sleep in

the same room as him.”

With dinner done, Red and Gabe took dish duty with Malyna. She was more than happy to have the handsome men in her kitchen, telling stories of when her own two sons were home. Both were now living in other parts of Europe. She wasn't sure where her husband was, nor did she seem to care.

“Kiel, Nathan, and I are headed out to see if we can find where they're camped. If we find them, we'll get a headcount and either come back to all of you or let you know where to find us,” said Trak.

“Trak, don't get hurt for this,” said Rush. “This was my problem to deal with, and it's my fault I was shot.”

“It wasn't your fault. It was Grigoryan's. You are the son of my teammate and friend, and you are Delta. I will not let that pass. And, as I've said, I have a history with this man. I wish to end his bloodline. Sooner rather than later.”

Rush watched as the three men set off in the darkness. With their black hair and darker skin, they were difficult to see in normal circumstances. Tonight, they were entirely dressed in black tactical gear and blackface grease.

“He needs to do this,” said Noah, gripping his son's shoulder. “It is your operation, and he knows that, but this man affected him in a way that

you or I cannot understand.”

“I do understand, Dad. I see it all the time.” The others turned to look at him. “You guys honestly believe that when you go out and rescue beaten, abused, abducted children that the stress of that doesn’t show on your faces when you return? Everyone sees it, but we say nothing.

“Our mothers see the pain etched in your faces. When you come home and hold us tighter, follow us to school more frequently, spend more time with us. We saw it. The time that you all found those children in the railway cars, I was maybe ten or eleven. Hell, there were a bunch of us around that age. You wouldn’t let us out of your sight.

“I remember when you didn’t get there in time for the women in Peru. You came home and held mom so tightly, she started crying, worried that you were sick.”

The men just stared at Noah, and he shook his head.

“Do you honestly believe that Irene and Matthew did all of this just because they wanted their children close?”

“Well,” frowned Alec.

“They love you. They love us. We all know that. But what they didn’t want to happen was for any of us to become one of the lost. One of the twenty-two.”

“Rush, how do you know all of this?” asked Baptiste.

“Maybe I wasn’t supposed to know,” he said, taking a seat, “but when I was in high school, I asked Mama Irene if I could use the library. I was looking up something for a project and saw this interesting book, like a notebook or ledger. On the front of it was a title. Peaceful Farms.”

“Peaceful Farms? I don’t know what that is,” said Rafe.

“I didn’t either,” said Rush. “I looked it up. Peaceful Farms is up near St. Francisville. Mr. Matthew bought five hundred acres and brought in more than two hundred tiny homes. You know, those little bitty trailer things.”

“I know,” said Alec, frowning. “Why wouldn’t he tell us?”

“I’m sure there’s a lot your parents don’t tell us,” smirked Rush. “Anyway, I did some research on it. It’s a place that veterans can go to get themselves right. There are counselors, job support personnel, even medical personnel. The conditions are simple. No drugs. No alcohol. No violence.”

“I don’t understand at all,” said Gaspar. “Why not tell us? We would have helped with something like that. When did this place open?”

“Four months after Garcia hanged himself.”

“Dear God,” muttered Ian, rubbing his chest. “It wasn’t their fault. Garcia had so much baggage with his family he couldn’t get himself straight.

He was in deep and didn't know what to do. They couldn't have done anything any differently."

"I don't think they saw it that way," said Rush.

"Son, why did you not tell us this?" asked Noah.

"Because Mama Irene made me promise I wouldn't. I've kept that promise until now. They see everything that's happening to all of us. They see it in our faces, your faces. They are there when we return to pick up the pieces. They are there when we are gone to support the wives and children. And damn if I know how, I believe they will be there when we all join Martha's crew."

The men let out a nervous chuckle, nodding their heads at Rush.

"I understand why you didn't say anything, Rush. I just wish we'd known sooner. We could have sent some resources up there." Rush just laughed, shaking his head.

"You did. New computers, alarm systems, all of it."

"Well, then someone had to have known."

"Someone did. Julia," said Rush, looking toward Joseph. He just smiled, shaking his head. Of course, his angelic wife, who speaks to spirits like others talk on the phone, would know about their project.

“How did she know about this?” asked Noah.

“She received a message from some spirit or ghost, or some shit, that there was a veteran contemplating suicide. She ran to Matthew, and he went to the location and found the man. He was on the levee, just sitting there with a gun on his knee. Matthew sat with him for five hours talking to him. I guess he got him to safety and checked on him for several days, then realized he needed more than just a few days. Peaceful Farms was born.”

“Unbelievable,” said Gaspar, shaking his head. “Just when I think I have those two old people figured out, they surprise me with this kind of thing.”

“Well,” smiled Rush, “now you know. You don’t have to hide things from the wives. They know. They might not know the details, but they know the expression on your face. They know if it was children or adults. They know if it was guns or bombs. They know if it was bad guys or bad governments. They know.”

No one said anything, letting all of that information sink in. They immediately went to their phones, searching for information on Peaceful Farms. Sure enough, it was a non-profit run by the Anthony Garcia Foundation.

“Un-fucking-believable,” smirked Ian. “They started a foundation in

his honor. Man, I love those people.”

“Get some sleep,” said Nine. “When Trak and the others return, hopefully, we’ll have our answers and their location.”

Rush sent a text to Caroline, short and sweet.

I love you. Be home soon to marry the only woman in the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Trak, Kiel, and Nathan sent a drone up, scanning the area for the most logical sites where Grigoryan would be with the boys. Most of the terrain was flat farmland, a few rocky hills here and there. The homes were small farmhouses or villages with houses close together. All except one.

“I think we found our man,” said Kiel. “Look at the size of this house. This is his home base. It’s not just a temporary location.”

The mansion was set back off the road, high on one of the many hills. There were at least a dozen guards out front and another dozen in the back. The thing that stuck out for all of them was the massive barn-like structure that they were guarding.

“That’s where the boys will be,” said Trak.

Moving closer to the property, Kiel removed the tablet from his pack and scanned the area for security devices. He found one major one around the perimeter, which could easily be disrupted by their system. Another was on the house and would require a little more time. He continued to scan, then heard Nathan.

“Dad,” he whispered. “Dad! Get back here! Dad, what are you... Fuck! What is he doing?”

“I don’t know, man. That’s your father, not mine, but I’m not stupid enough to get in his way. If he needs us, he’ll tell us. This does make things easier for Rush, though. We can make this scene look like an all-out rival war.”

Nathan nodded, trying to see where his father had gone. Realizing he could track him on the tablet, he switched screens and watched as his father darted behind trees and bushes, moving around the security system.

Trak moved along the front of the mansion, finding himself huddled below the windows of the main dining room. He could hear dishes clinking and knew that the sound was of domestic help clearing the table.

Moving along the front of the home, he crouched as two guards walked past him. He heard nothing in the next room and moved on. In the last room, it appeared Grigoryan was not alone.

“Where is my idiot nephew?” he growled.

“I don’t know, Ari,” said the woman. “He’s not answering my calls or text messages. He never does that. And stop calling him an idiot. He’s trying to please you.”

“Had he wanted to please me, he would have brought me the woman. She was important, and I needed her for my plans. Now, my supporters and their factories are destroyed, and they blame me! I have nothing to show for

all my efforts except a barn full of boys that are hardly able to lift a rifle, let alone shoot one!”

“You always need a woman; this one was nothing special. You definitely have our father’s libido,” she scoffed.

“Do not tell me what I need or what to do, Fariha. You are still just a woman. Beneath me and beneath my men. Just because I allow you to be part of the business and have whichever of my mine you choose does not mean that you can tell me what to do.”

“I didn’t tell you what to do, Ari. My apologies. I didn’t mean to offend you. Antonio is impulsive, and he liked the girl as well. He said that one of those big men was her boyfriend. Perhaps he met up with the other two women and went to have a good time.”

“No. No, it’s something else, someone else, and I think I know who. I cannot locate them, and that worries me. They don’t know we are here, but I feel certain they are searching Istanbul.” There was a knock at the door, and Ari yelled. “Enter!”

“My apologies, sir,” said the guard. “We have all the boys fed and sleeping. The doors are locked, and the guards are aware to be vigilant.”

“Thank you, Victor,” smiled Grigoryan. “Victor? Did you enjoy my half-sister the other night?” The bodyguard looked at the woman and smiled.

“Very much, sir.”

“Good. I’d like to watch the two of you this evening. Both of you, go bathe and prepare for me in my suite. Make it good this evening, and I will reward you both.”

“Of course,” nodded the man. He opened the door and waved for the woman to follow. She turned to her brother and grinned.

“You think this is a hardship, but it’s not. Victor has a beautiful cock, and I enjoy it very much.”

“Good, then you’ll enjoy what I have planned for you tonight.”

Trak heard the door shut and caught the smell of a cigarette being lit inside. Following his path back the same way, he met up with Kiel and Nathan once more.

“Let’s call for the others.”

“Shit!” muttered Kiel, gripping his chest. “Do you have to do that? I mean, can’t you let us know you’re there?” Trak stared at the younger man as if he’d lost his mind.

“No. Call the others. They need to be here in thirty minutes.”

Kiel looked at Nathan, who was smirking at his friend.

“You call them,” he frowned. “I’m going to check and see if I

messed my pants.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The men gathered their gear and silently stepped outside the small guest cottage. It was crowded, but the air was cooler here, and they were glad for the warmth of the fire. Just as they were ready to move, a shadow appeared to their right.

“Here. You need food. Big boys get hungry.” They stood with their mouths wide open at Maryna. She handed them a sack filled with warm bread and a huge salami roll. The men all eyed the woman and then one another.

“How did you know to do this?” asked Gaspar. She shrugged her shoulders.

“I have a feeling. Mothers know these things. Go. Be safe.” She turned in her worn woolen housecoat and went back inside her own home. Shaking their heads in wonder, they followed the directions toward Trak and the others.

It didn’t surprise Rush to see the mansion in front of them. He knew that wherever Grigoryan called home would need to be a place of luxury. Huddled across the road in a dark field, Trak drew the layout of the home.

“We can take the guards silently,” he said, looking at Rush. “There

are twenty-seven guards on the property. Use only your hands or a knife.

We cannot have anyone alerted. Rush? Do you wish the kill?”

“I appreciate you asking, Trak, but I honestly don’t think it matters at this point. Whoever gets to him first can have him. Just make sure it’s a done deal. He cannot live through another attempt on his life.”

“He will not live.” The black eyes of Trak stared at the mansion, then looked back at the men. “Right now, he has his half-sister and a bodyguard in his bedroom, entertaining him. He will be distracted, and we will be able to clear the yard.”

“Paint them,” said Zeke, pointing to Noah and Rush. Nathan nodded, placing the black paint on their faces to dull the color of their skin in the moonlight.

“Seniors, it would sure be great if y’all got the kids out,” said Rush. “Leave Grigoryan to me and Trak.” They nodded, turning to face the mansion.

“Silent feet, big man,” smirked Sniff at Tailor. “The dogs know to be quiet. If there is an issue, I’ll send the attack call. Otherwise, just know that if they pull you back, it’s for a reason.”

With the perimeter alarm turned off, the men carefully made their way across the street. Picking off the guards one or two at a time was easy. Using

a knife to the throat or heart, hand over their mouth, they were done. For Taylor, Alec, and Noah, it was a twist of the neck, then lying them face down.

At the back of the house, they did the same, moving from one man to another until all the heat signatures on the tablet were taken care of. All except those in the barn.

Using sign language, Baptiste indicated that there were six men standing against the walls, which would probably mean they were guards. The other bodies were prone on the floor. Making sure there was no alarm on the barn, Sniff entered first with Nathan, Joseph, and Kiel. Quietly, they moved through the room.

“Koï e tam,” whispered one of the men. ‘Who is there?’

Before an answer could be given, he was face down on the floor, gone from this world.

Gently waking the more than one hundred boys, the men opened the back of the barn and took them out through the forest and back around to the field in front of the house.

“Who are you?” asked one of the boys. “I want to go home.”

“You’re going home, son,” said Rafe. “We’re just waiting for our friends. Then we’ll take all of you home.”

“Those men said they had a whole bunch of men in tents,” said another boy. Rafe looked at the others and rolled his eyes.

“Where?”

“He said at the castle of Ravadinovo. It’s not far from here.” Rafe nodded. He knew where the castle was. Surrounded by a tiny village with less than a thousand inhabitants, they could probably hide out and never be seen.

“We’ll get the boys back,” said Nathan, seeing the need in the faces of the older men. “You guys get to the castle and stop those men from heading this way. Stop them from doing anything.”

“This is gonna be so much fun,” smirked Alec.

“Yea, fun,” smiled Eric. “Let’s just not get killed. Dad? Don’t make me have to tell Mom you got hurt.”

“I ain’t that old,” he frowned. “Get the boys to safety. We’ll meet you at the rental.”

Eric, Kiel, Joseph, Nathan, Sniff, and Red marched the boys toward three waiting trucks. Helping them into the back, they took them into town, loaded them on trains headed back to Istanbul.

“Go straight to police headquarters and ask for a man named Kaan Yilmaz,” said Eric. “Tell him that Nine sent you.”

“Nine? Like the number?” asked a boy.

“Exactly like the number. Stop for no one. Just get off in Istanbul and find a policeman. Kaan will know how to help you.” Once they were certain they were safely on their way to Istanbul, the men turned toward the direction of the castle.

“Should we join them?” asked Eric.

“Hell, yes!”



With no guards to impede their progress, Rush and Trak walked silently through the mansion. A servant was seated at a small table in the kitchen, and Trak held his fingers to his lips.

“Are there more?” The man shook his head.

“Only me, sir.”

“Leave. Leave and don’t return,” he said.

“Gladly.” The man moved so quickly you would have thought there was a fire under his ass. Certain that the first floor was clear, they quietly made their way upstairs. Once there, it was no task to figure out which room Grigoryan and his half-sister were in.

The sound of a cracking whip and muffled cries sent chills up their spines. The man hadn’t even bothered to shut the door. From their vantage

point, they could see the woman lying face first on the bed, her legs spread wide, tied to the bedposts.

Her bottom was a bright red. The backs of her legs bleeding from the split flesh. Grigoryan was lying across the pillows, stroking her head as she whimpered in pain.

“It’s alright, dear sister. You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” he asked. She nodded, and he laughed. “Of course you are. Just like your whore of a mother. Did you know that she was the whore for my brother and I? We enjoyed her immensely. In fact, it occurs to me that we should have done a DNA test on you. You could be mine or his, not father’s.”

“What would you like me to do now, sir? She’s bleeding, so I don’t want her to pass out.”

“No, we wouldn’t want that, would we, Victor? She said you had a fine cock. Take it out and show me.” The man didn’t hesitate, unwrapping the towel from his waist and showing the man his hard cock. He raised a brow, nodding appreciatively.

“Do you approve, sir?” he asked.

“I approve, Victor. Fuck her ass.” The woman cried out, shaking her head. Grigoryan gripped a handful of hair, tilting her head in an awkward position. “You get no say in this, you whore. I say what will be done to

you. And what will be done is whatever pleases me.”

As Victor began to kneel before her thighs, he noticed that Grigoryan was leaning on his sister’s neck. Her face was turning purple as she gagged, struggling to breathe.

“Sir...”

“Shut up! She will learn.” Distracted and unaware, he practically screamed at the sound of the knife going through Victor’s neck just below his ear, all the way to the other side. His eyes bulged in disbelief as he gurgled, choking on his own blood. The big, naked body hit the floor, and Grigoryan pushed off his sister’s neck, the sound of a snap echoing in the room.

“You made that much easier for us,” said Rush.

“Guards!” he screamed.

“Do you honestly believe we would leave guards? They’re dead. All of them, including those in the barn. The boys are on a train to Istanbul, and your men at the castle will soon be dead as well.” Grigoryan just stared at the two men, shaking his head.

“Why? Why were you so intent on stopping me? Have you run out of gangsters in America?”

“Aruf,” said Trak, his black eyes boring holes into the man.

“Don’t speak my brother’s name. You are not worthy!”

“I am more worthy than anyone. I killed him,” he said defiantly. Ari could barely breathe as he pushed from the bed, standing to stare at the men.

“No. No, it’s not possible,” he said, shaking his head. “That was years ago. You weren’t even born. You would have been a boy.”

“I was not a boy. I was a full-grown man sent to stop his disgusting ways. I killed him, and I freed those children. Just as I have done today.”

“You won’t kill me,” he smirked. “You Americans are too gentle. You don’t know how to punish properly. How to make others stay in line.”

“Like your sister?” frowned Rush.

“She is not my sister. She’s my daughter,” he smirked. “If you were listening, you heard me. Her whore of a mother fucked our father, Aruf, and me. She often did us all on the same night. She was quite talented, and her whore of a daughter was learning the trade. I had high hopes for her, but things got out of hand. She was making me angry.”

Neither man said a word, staring at him.

“Your time is done,” said Rush. “You will have nothing.”

“There will be others to take my place,” he smirked. “Others, more dangerous, more willing, more capable even. It won’t end.”

“Maybe not, but we won’t stop either. Whoever is foolish enough to take up your sick cause will find us at their doorstep.” Grigoryan reached behind him, feeling for the pistol in his nightstand, but before he could even get his hand in the drawer, Trak was upon him.

“When you see your brother in hell, tell him I said hello.”

Rush watched as the man drove the knife through his neck and then forcibly pushed the blade to one side. His head hung precariously to one side, then Trak pushed to the other side, taking his head off. When it rolled to the floor, Rush raised his brows.

“He won’t walk away from that one,” said Rush. Taking a photo of the man, they left the bodies where they lay and walked out into the cool Bulgarian night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The tents strewn across the grounds at Castle Ravadinovo indicated about five thousand men. If there were more, they hadn't arrived, and when they did, they would discover their leader dead.

With speed and precision, the men were able to set explosives at the perimeter, basically trapping the men within the inner circle. When the charges went off, they scrambled. Untrained for the most part, they were tripping over one another in terror. But when they saw the dark giants walking toward them, the men fell to the earth crying about some legend of the black sultan of Constantinople.

“What’s he wimperin’ about?” frowned Tailor.

“He thinks you’re the ghost of a legend. Some black sultan or something,” said Ian, staring up at the big man and nodding. “I can see you as a sultan.”

“Yea? Thanks, man. I tell Lena that all the time, but she ain’t buyin’ it.” He kicked one of the men. “Get up. Leave here now and don’t return. Grigoryan is dead.”

More than half the men fled on foot, the others still standing there staring at the small group of men. Ian could hear them whispering about how

they could take the men. They were old, they were small in number. But when Eric, Joseph, and Nathan took out thirteen men in rapid fire in less than sixty seconds, the men had different thoughts. They dropped their weapons and ran for their lives.

“That’s what you call a come to Jesus meetin’,” said Tailor. “Go home!” With minimal dead, the men fled the grounds, leaving nothing except their trash, a few articles of clothing, and hundreds of tents.

“Kaan has the children,” said Nine. “They’ve arrived safely, and they’re making arrangements to get them home.”

The night was lit up with their smiles as they walked back toward the cottage where the others would be waiting. Trak and Rush were already there, washing the blood of their kill from their bodies. Neither said anything as they gathered their gear, wanting to be gone before dawn.

Rush wrote a note to Malyna, thanking her for her hospitality. In an envelope, they left her more than five thousand in American dollars. He simply signed the note, *your group of boys*.

No one spoke as they made their way back to Istanbul, waiting at the airport for Evie and Autumn. Lying on their bags with their eyes closed, they reminisced about all the other missions where they waited for their ride home. Sometimes, it would take the military days to get them out.

Sometimes, it was immediate.

Tonight, they knew that their ride would arrive on time. Rush's phone rang, and he looked at the number of his commander.

"Civilian Rush Anders, sir," he smirked. There was laughter on the other end of the phone.

"You deserve that, Rush. We saw the photo, and we've verified that Grigoryan is dead. So is his nephew, apparently."

"You knew about the nephew?" he frowned.

"Yes, but he wasn't our target. I hope you understand."

"No, I don't understand. You put someone I love in danger. I don't appreciate that, sir." The others stared at him, angry for him.

"Well, it's done now, and you can retire as requested. Although, we're prepared to offer you a hefty retention bonus if you'll stay."

"No, thanks. I have other plans." He hung up the phone and nodded to everyone. Walking toward Trak, he gripped the other man's shoulder and lowered his forehead to his. "I am honored to have worked with you tonight, Trak. I hope this brings you peace."

"My sons and the sons of my friends being safe and alive brings me peace, Rush. You are a great warrior. Perhaps the best. Our team needs you

now.”

“Our team needs all of us.”

Evie opened the doors to the jet and waved everyone on board. When every seat was filled, they relaxed, lying back and immediately falling asleep. Evie and Autumn talked non-stop about the jet and flying. For Evie, it was like having a little sister.

Arriving at Belle Fleur in the early afternoon, they landed just before a major thunderstorm approached. For Rush, it was perfect. He was going to lock himself inside the cottage with Caroline and not come out until the wedding.

Caroline ran out the front door and toward Rush. Leaping into his arms, she planted kisses all over his face as her father walked by.

“I’m fine, honey. Don’t worry about me,” he smiled.

“Hi, Dad. Love you, too.”

“Baby, let’s get inside,” he moaned against her mouth. She nodded as he walked in, still holding her, stripping her and himself as they went.

It was the shower first, where the water turned cold before they were ready to get out. Then it was the bed. Then they were hungry and made their way to the kitchen, which only made them hungry to be on the counter.

Then it was in front of the fire, then the sofa. When the storms made the lights flicker, they were both so excited they could barely breathe. Finally, they rested.

“Did you hear about Moose and Ece?” asked Caroline.

“What? No, what happened?”

“They got married,” she laughed. Rush stared at her in disbelief.

“Yep. They were in the private cabin when Mama Irene walked in on them. I have to hand it to Moose. He really handled everything well. I think they’re truly in love.”

“No one is as much in love as I am,” he whispered against her neck.

“Oh, I disagree, kind sir. I’m in love way more than you are,” she smiled.

“Okay, let’s agree we’re both madly in love and call it even.”

“I can live with that,” she grinned.

It would be three days before the rains finally ceased, and everyone was able to get outside. In spite of the fact that the new babies were all infants, Mama Irene wanted the whole place decked out for Halloween once the wedding was done.

The following weekend, Caroline Willa Mullins became Mrs. Rush

Anders. Instead of rushing back to their cottage, they took that boat ride on the bayou, ate a picnic beneath the stars as they made love, then returned to their home. Together.

She was working full-time at the animal center, having been able to apply her hours there to credits for graduation. Soon, she would be Dr. Caroline Mullins Anders, DVM.

“Everyone ready for the morning meeting?” asked Cam. He heard responses and saw head nods as usual, but before he could even begin to hit the topics on the agenda, Ally came through the door.

“Ally? Baby, are you okay?” asked Vince.

“No. No, I’m not okay. I’m not okay,” she said, feeling panicked. “You know I never get like this, Vince. Never.”

“Ally, what’s wrong, hun?” asked Hex.

“I had a dream. A nightmare. It was horrible, and Christian was shot. I tried texting him, and he almost always texts me back right away. He hasn’t answered, and that was three hours ago.”

“Baby,” chuckled Vince. “If he’s in the field on a mission, he can’t respond. You know that. Give him some time. It was just a bad dream.” Vince kissed his wife, and she nodded.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, everyone. I didn’t mean to interrupt the

meeting.”

“It’s all good, Ally,” said Hex. She left the room, and the men were stone-silent, then looked at one another and then down to Vince.

“I have a bad feeling about this.”

EXCERPT from CHRISTIAN

“Son-of-a-bitch, you’re heavy,” muttered the woman above him. She had him by the hood of his sweat jacket, dragging him across a floor. How the fuck did he get on the floor, and more importantly, where the fuck was he?

She leaned him against a sofa, then straddled his thighs. Putting her arms beneath his armpits and using her butt and thighs, she lifted him high enough to push him back on the sofa. When she started to remove his jacket, he gripped both her arms and twisted her beneath him.

That’s when he knew what she was doing. His thigh screamed at him in pain. The searing heat of a bullet wound reminded him of where he was and what was happening.

“Who the fuck are you?” he ground out between his teeth.

“I guess I’m the dumb-ass woman who was trying to do a good deed for the idiot who got himself shot!” she fired back. He stared down into her blue eyes and shook his head.

“How did I get shot?” he asked, feeling confused.

“You were in the middle of a drug sale, or did you forget that you needed your fix,” she frowned. He loosened his grip, and she wrestled her

arms free. “Let me get the bullet out of your leg, and I’ll wrap it, and you can leave and go buy your fucking opioids.”

“I wasn’t buying them. I mean, I was, but I’m not here for that.”

“I think you’re delirious. You were buying them. You had a roll of cash bigger than anything I’ve ever seen. That’s how you got shot. You were stupid enough to actually pull it out and show them.”

“And why were you there? Are you an addict?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then why?” She took the scissors and cut the denim from where the bullet had gone through all the way to his boots. Pouring the whiskey over the wound, he winced, and she couldn’t help but smirk at him. “Why?”

“I was going to kill the man that shot you. I have my reasons, and they’re not important to you or you leaving my home.”

“Who are you?” he asked, tilting his head sideways.

“Winnie. Winifred, but my friends call me Winnie. Who are you?”

“Nope, you’re not done. Winnie who?” She stared at the man, not believing his audacity. He was in her home, shot, and she was helping him. How dare he demand anything of her.

“Winnie Pasko.” Christian closed his eyes, shaking his head. What

in the fuck was happening here. “Fair is fair. Who are you?”

“Christian. Christian Martin.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|--------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| RS 1 | Joe "Nine" Dougall | Erin Richards | Joy Elizabeth "Ellie" | Jackson "Jax" Diaz |
| | | | Cameron | Kate Robicheaux |
| RS 2 | Joseph "Trak" Redhawk | Lauren Owens | Sophia | Eric Bongard |
| | | | Suzette | Keith Robicheaux |
| | | | Nathan | Katrina Santos |
| | | | Joseph | Julia Anderson |
| RS 3 | Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard | Cholena "Lena" Blackwood | Eric | Sophia Ann Redhawk |
| RS 4 | Dan "Wilson" Anderson | Sara MacMillan | Paige | Ryan Holden Robicheaux |
| | | | Julia | Joseph Redhawk |
| RS 5 | Luke "Angel" Jordan | Mary Fitzhugh | Marc (Luke) | Ela Wolfkill |
| | | | Georgianna | Carl Robicheaux |
| | | | Wesley | Virginia Robicheaux |
| RS 6 | Peter "Miller" Robicheaux | Kari LeBlanc | Frank Gaspar | Lane Quinn |
| RS 7 | Rachelle Robicheaux | Frank "Mac" MacMillan | Danielle (Dani) Marie | Dev Parker |
| RS 8 | Adele Robicheaux | Clay Duffy | | |
| RS 9 | Gabriel Robicheaux | Tory Gibson | | |
| RS 9 | John "Gibbie" Gibson | Dhara | Dalton | Calla Michaels |
| RS 9 | Antoine Robicheaux | Ella Stanton | Ryan Holden Robicheaux | Paige Anderson |
| RS 9 | Gaspar Robicheaux | Alexandra Minsky | Luke | Ajei Blackwood |
| | | | Carl | Georgianna Jordan |
| | | | Ben | Harper Miller |
| | | | Adam | Jane Wolfkill |
| SP 19 | | | Violet | Striker Michaels |
| RP 6 | | | Lucy | Alex "Sniff" Mullins |

| | | | | |
|--------------|----------------------|----------------|--|--|
| RS 10 | William "Bull" Stone | Lily Bennett | | |
| RS 11 | Luc Robicheaux | Montana Divide | | |

| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| RS 12 | Raphael Robicheaux | Savannah O'Reilly | Ian Luke | Aspen Bodwick |
| | | | Katherine Gray "Kate" | Cameron Dougall |
| | Doug Graham | <i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos | | |
| RS 13 | Jasper "Jazz" Divide | Gray Vanzant | Virginia | Wes Jordan |
| RS 14 | Baptiste Robicheaux | Rose Ellis | Elizabeth Irene "Liz" | Kiel Wolfkill |
| RS 14 | Alec Robicheaux | Lissa Duncan | Keith | Susie Redhawk |
| RS 15 | Stone Roberts | Bronwyn Ross | | |
| RS 16 | Suzette Robicheaux | Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco | | |
| RS 16 | Max Neill | Riley Corbett | CC | |
| RS 17 | Titus Quinn | Olivia Baine | Lane | Frank Robicheaux |
| | | | Dominic | Leightyn Dooley |
| RS 18 | Axel Doyle | Cait Brennan | Corey | |
| | Vince Martin | Ally Lawrence | Christian Martin | |
| RS 19 | Phoenix Keogh | Raven Foster | | |
| | Crow Foster | | | |
| RS 19 | Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal | Aasira "Sira" Al Aman | | |
| RS 20 | Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill | Noelle Hart | Ezekiel ('Kiel) | Liz Divide |
| | | | Jane | Adam Robicheaux |
| RS 20 | Elias Haggerty | Janie Granier | | |
| RS 20 | Russell "RJ" Jones | Celia Granier | | |
| RS | Chad Taylor | | | |
| RS | Woody "Doc" Fine | | | |
| RS | (d) Tony Parks | | | |
| RS | (d) Alan Haley | | | |
| RS | Michael Bodwick | Miriam | Aspen | Ian Robicheaux |
| RS | Miguel Santos | Doug | Katrina | Nathan Redhawk |
| RS | Luke Robicheaux | Ajei Blackwood | Garrett | |
| MSB 1 | Ian Shepard | Faith Gallagher | Kelsey Gallagher | Noa Lim |
| MSB 2 | Noa Lim | Kelsey Gallagher | | |

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| MSB 3 | Dave Carter | Ani Lim | | |
| MSB 4 | Lars Merrick | Jessica Fisher | | |
| MSB 5 | Trevor Banks | Ashley Dalton | | |
| MSB 5 | John Cruz | Camille Robicheaux | | |
| MSB 6 | Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry | Zoe Myers | | |
| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
| MSB 7 | Chris Paul | Elizabeth Broussard | | |
| MSB 8 | Luke O'Hara | Lucia Salvado | | |
| MSB 8 | Rory Baine | Piper Colley | | |
| MSB 8 | (d) Anthony Garcia | | | |
| MSB | Eric & Anna Tanner | | | |
| SP 1 | Eric "Ghost" Stanton | Grace Easton | (d) Faith & Hope | |
| | | | Jack Tyran "JT" | |
| | | | Eric Ryan | |
| SP 2 | Jack "Doc" Harris | Aubrey "Bree" Collins | Eva Irene | |
| SP 3 | Wade "Whiskey" English | Katarina Krevnyv | Juliette Rose | |
| SP 4 | Quincy "Zulu" Slater | Gabrielle London | Wade Eric | |
| | | | Tyler Gunner | |
| SP 5 | Gunner Michaels | Darby Greer | Calla | Dalton Gibson |
| SP 5 | Tyler "Tango" Green | Taylor Holland | Chase Maxwell | |
| SP 7 | Diego "Razor" Salcedo | Isabella "Bella" Castro | Abraham | |
| SP 8 | Alex "Ace" Mills | Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor | Alexander John "AJ" | |
| SP 9 | Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal | Tinley Oakley | Tyran Eagle | |
| | | | Hawk Gunner | |
| | | | Benjamin Scott | |
| SP 9 | Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal | Keegan Oakley | | |
| SP 10 | Scott "Skull" Crawford | Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor | Mathew Scott | |
| | | | Kevin Alexander | |
| SP 11 | Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc | Suzette Doiron | Benjamin Alfonse | |
| SP 12 | Noah Anders | Tru Blanchard | William Rush | |
| SP 13 | Tristan Evers | Emma Colvin | Hannah Ivana | |
| SP 14 | Ivan Pechkin | Sophia Lord | William | |
| | | | Benjamin | |
| | | | Celeste | |
| | | | Cassidy | |

| | | | | | |
|-------|-----------------------|----------------|--------|--|--|
| | | | Carrie | | |
| SP 15 | Griffin "Griff" James | Amanda Nettles | | | |
| SP 16 | Bryce Nolan | Ivy Brooks | | | |
| SP 17 | Kingston Miles | Claire Evers | | | |

| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|--------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| SP 18 | Grant Zimmerman | Everly "Evie" Johnson | | |
| SP | Molly Walker | Asia | Michael | |
| SP | George Robert Williamson | Mary | | |
| SP | (d) Axel "Axe" Mains | (d) Decker "Ice" McManus | | |
| SP | James Scarlutti | | | |
| SP | Chen Wu | | Choi Wu | |
| SP | Ian Laughlin | | | |
| SP | Conor Laughlin | | | |
| SP | Vincent Scalia | | (d) Isabella | |
| SP 19 | Strikers Michaels | Violet Robicheaux | Grayson Matthew | |
| RP 1 | Dexter Lock | Marie Robicheaux | | |
| RP 2 | Jean Robicheaux | Rose "Ro" Evers | | |
| RP 3 | Jackson "Jax" Diaz | Joy "Ellie" Dougall | | |
| RP 4 | Hunter Michaels | Megan Scott | | |
| RP 5 | Carl Robicheaux | Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan | | |
| RP 6 | Alex "Sniff" Mullins | Lucy Robicheaux | Caroline Willa | |
| RP 7 | Cameron "Cam" Dougall | Kate Robicheaux | Ian William | |
| RP 8 | Keith Robicheaux | Suzette "Susie" Redhawk | Joseph Alec Keith (JAK) | |
| RP 9 | Eric Bongard | Sophia Ann Redhawk | Billy Joseph | |
| RP 10 | Joseph Redhawk | Julia Anderson | Joseph Billy (JB) | |
| | | | Tobias Franklin | |
| RP 11 | Ryan Robicheaux (Holden) | Paige Anderson | Dan Antoine | |
| RP 12 | Nathan Redhawk | Katrina Santos | Nathan Luke | |
| | | | Michael Douglas | |
| RP 13 | Ben Robicheaux | Harper Miller | | |
| RP 14 | Sean Liffey | Shay Miller | Brooke Elizabeth | |
| RP 15 | Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill | Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux | Everett Baptiste | |
| | | | Eastman Matthew | |
| | | | Ethan Ezekiel | |
| RP 16 | Ian Robicheaux | Aspen Bodwick | | |
| RP 17 | Adam Robicheaux | Jane Wolfkill | | |
| RP 18 | Marc Jordan | Ela Wolfkill | | |
| | | | | |

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|--------------|------------|-----------------|------------------|--|
| RP 19 | Wes Jordan | Virginia Divide | Patrick Jasper | |
| | | | Christopher Luke | |
| | | | Sadie Allison | |

| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|--------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| RP 20 | Aiden Wagner | Brit Elig | | |
| RP 21 | Devin Parker | Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan | | |
| RP 22 | Dalton Gibson | Calla Michaels | | |
| RP 23 | Frank Robicheaux | Lane Quinn | Pierre | |
| | Jake Fornet | Claudette Robicheaux | | |
| RP 24 | Hirohito Tanaka | Winter Cole | | |
| RP 25 | Dominic 'Dom' Quinn | Leightyn Dooley | Conor Dooley Quinn | |
| RP 26 | Bron Jones | Mila Lambton | | |
| | Thomas Bradshaw | May Wong | | |
| RP 27 | Patrick Fitch | Carsen Benoit | Alistair Thomas | |
| RP 28 | Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill | Eva Harris | | |
| RP 29 | Callan Battle | Juliette English | | |
| RP 30 | Duncan Adams | Lindsay Pollard | | |
| RP 31 | Remy Robicheaux | Charlotte Guthrie | | |
| RP 32 | Garrett Robicheaux | Celeste Pechkin | | |
| RP 33 | Robbie Robicheaux | Carrie Pechkin | Forrest Pierre | |
| RP 34 | Cade Norgenson | Cassidy Pechkin | | |
| RP 35 | Bodhi Norgenson | Vivienne Green | Walker Sten | |
| RP 36 | Magnus Bridges | Addie Patterson | Leif Frode | |
| RP 37 | Hex Vernon | Gwen N'hana | Sebastian Tadzee | |
| RP 38 | Wade Slater | Hannah Evers | Patrick Garr | |
| RP 39 | Sam Cooper | Mia Rogers | Macie Gray | |
| RP 40 | Tiger Slater | Hazel Bream | Brixton Fox | |
| RP 41 | Jalen Carson | Stormy Rainwaters | Major Raine | |
| RP 42 | Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton | Rachel Davis | Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia | |
| RP 43 | Matthew Robicheaux | Irene Hebert | Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec | |

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|--------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--|
| RP 44 | Milo Abbott | Lia Goodwin | Christian | |
| RP 45 | Nic "Torro" Torres | Melanie Fairfield | | |
| RP 46 | JT Stanton | Kennedy Rice | Maverick | |
| RP 47 | Chase Green | Maeve Korhonen | | |
| RP 48 | Will Pechkin | Brooke Ford | | |
| RP 49 | Benji Pechkin | Annie Lott | Paxton, Braxton | |

| Book | Character Name | Spouse | Child | Child's Spouse |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| RP 50 | Will 'Bogey' Humphreys | Alice Evans | Patrick | |
| RP 51 | Tanner Sung | Micaela Vonn | Mattie | |
| RP 52 | Moses 'Mo' Baird | Ophelia Baldwin | | |
| RP 53 | Ethan Dunvegan | Koana Ogi Milner | Ulani | |
| RP-54 | Connor 'Irish' Kelly | Lucinda Harwell | | |
| RP-55 | Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal | Scout Blevins | | |
| RP-56 | Alexander 'AJ' Mills | Skylar Teller | | |
| RP-57 | Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal | Londyn Vacarro | | |
| RP-58 | Hawk 'HG' O'Neal | Maggie Turner | Wyatt | |
| VG-1 | Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK' | Mattie Smythe | | |
| VG-2 | Ian William 'Gator' Dougall | Dylan Meeks | Joey | |
| VG-3 | Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald | Sadie Jordan | Ambry, Bailey, Cole | |
| VG-4 | Patrick Jordan | Margo Fleming | Quinn, River, Finnegan | |
| VG-5 | Christopher Jordan | Ramey Curry | Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa | |
| VG-6 | Matt Crawford | Summer Christensen | | |
| VG-7 | Kev Crawford | Tila Blackwater | (preg) | |
| VG-8 | Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc | Autumn Zellers | | |

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

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