

Mary Kennedy

TOBIAS

Voodoo Guardians:
Book 13

JB

Voodoo Guardians

Book TWELVE



Mary Kennedy

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MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage Assignments

G1-8 = Garçonnière

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

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



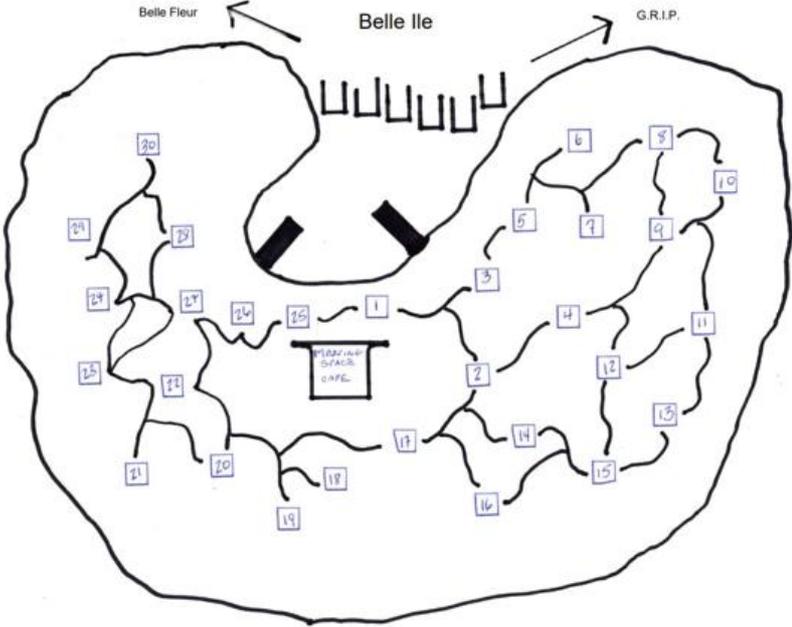
COTTAGE Assignments

<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>	Christian & Winnie	<u>45</u>		<u>76</u>	Cowboy & Autumn	<u>106</u>	Torro & Melanie
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>77</u>		<u>107</u>	Bron & Mila
<u>12</u>	Sly & Suzette	<u>47</u>	Frank & Lane	<u>78</u>	Ian & Aspen	<u>108</u>	Fitch & Carsen
<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
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<u>20</u>	Phoenix & Raven	<u>55</u>	Rush & Caroline	<u>82</u>	Callan & Juliette	<u>116</u>	Bone & Londyn

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Map of Belle Île & Cabin

Assignments



Cabin Assignments for Belle

Île

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

Tobias Franklin Redhawk watched as his twin walked toward him. He was dodging sprinklers on the baseball diamond, trying very hard to not get soaked to death, but also, to get to him. He knew why. He knew why, but he didn't want to talk to him about it. Not now. Not while he was with her. JB would give him a lecture, tell him how stupid he was, and then tell him he should talk to their father or someone. He just didn't want to hear it. Not now.

“Tobias? Did you hear me?” asked Hildi, stomping her foot like a petulant child.

“Huh? Yea, yea, it was a false alarm,” he said, swallowing back the bile rising in his throat. How could he have been so stupid! He knew better than to not wear a condom. It was the number rule for any of them. “That's good.”

“Yea, so we can do it again,” she smiled.

“No. No, I don't think that's a good idea. If we do it again, and that's a big if, I'll be wearing two condoms,” he said, staring at her.

“It’s not a big deal, Tobias. I thought I was protected,” she said with a shrug. “I thought you like the feeling of doing it bare.”

“Yea, I did,” he nodded. “But we’re seventeen, Hildi. I don’t like the thoughts or feelings of having to support a family before I even get to begin my life. Plus, one of us could have had an STD. I mean, I know you’re seeing other guys, and that’s cool and all, but still. Double condom or not at all.” He could see her thinking and didn’t understand why this was such a hard decision. Did she want to get pregnant?

“I don’t like condoms, Tobias.”

“Sorry, Hildi. I’m out.” JB stormed toward them, soaked to the skin.

“Tobias! Do not go with her!” he yelled as water dripped down his face, his t-shirt plastered to his chest. Hildi rolled her eyes at the conservative twin brother. They were both hot as shit, but JB was a real buzz kill.

“Relax, JB. I’m not going anywhere with her.” He smirked at his brother, knowing that his intentions were good, although his actions seemed unnecessary.

“Just because I don’t attend your fancy school, JB Redhawk, doesn’t mean I’m not as good as you are. It damn sure doesn’t mean I’m not good enough for your brother.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” he frowned at the girl. “Is she pregnant?”

“No,” said Tobias. JB let out a long, slow breath, then looked at his brother with a serious expression.

“Did she tell you that she already has a daughter?” Tobias’s head came up, staring at the girl. “Yea, I didn’t think so.”

“God, you’re such a fucking drip, JB. I didn’t say anything because it’s not a big deal. My daughter isn’t your worry.”

“I’m not judging you, Hildi. It takes two to get pregnant. But you weren’t being honest with Tobias, and that’s what makes me mad. I know my brother, and I know what we were taught. Always wear a condom. But according to Dustin Breaux, you refused to let him wear a condom.” She shrugged, looking away from the brothers.

“Whatever,” she said, waving him off. “I like sex and the feel of a man inside my body. I won’t apologize for that.”

“First of all, he’s not a man. He’s a teenager just like me, just like you. And you don’t have to apologize for liking sex, Hildi. It’s natural that we all like sex. But you have to protect yourself and your daughter.” JB was attempting to be respectful and mature, but he was slowly losing his shit. He started to speak again, but Tobias gripped his arm.

“I really wish you would have been honest with me, Hildi. I won’t have sex with you or any other girl again without a condom. I’m sorry.” She said nothing, walking away from the brothers.

Tobias turned to head toward home, choosing to walk the distance today. His brother was slowly following. After walking a few minutes, he stopped and turned to face JB.

“I’d already decided I wasn’t going to do it again with her,” he said.

“Tobias, with her? That means you’re going to do it again with another girl. You’re seventeen! You don’t want to get some girl pregnant!”

“I won’t,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I promise, JB. From now on, I’ll double wrap.”

“You do understand it’s not just about pregnancy? You could get an STD, and not something mild. It could be something horrible, Tobias.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. He swallowed, staring at the familiar face in front of him. His brother was always looking out for him. Always there to clean up his mess. “Listen, JB. I like sex. I mean, I like it a lot. I need it. Taking care of yourself just isn’t the same. I’ll be careful, but as long as there are women out there willing to give it up, I’m willing to give it back to them.”

“What if one of them screams rape?” Tobias stared at him, a pit growing larger in his stomach. He hadn’t thought of that.

“I’ll be careful. I’ll-I’ll choose wisely,” said Tobias.

JB was exhausted from the conversation. His brother wasn’t stupid, but he was making stupid choices. All for sex. As Tobias walked away, JB followed, not saying anything else. When they reached Belle Fleur, JB took off toward the cafeteria, not even inviting his brother to go with him.

Of all the things JB could have done or said, that one cut him like a knife. They did everything together. Everything. Except sex.

“Good afternoon, young Tobias Franklin,” smirked Franklin. Tobias stared at the old ghost and gave him a forced grin.

“Hi, Franklin.” The ghost frowned at him, pointing to one of the stone benches. Tobias knew that this would be a lecture, and honestly, he wasn’t in the mood for it. Not today. “Oh, I have homework.”

“It’s Friday, boy. I’m not stupid. Sit.” Tobias nodded, and Franklin sort of hovered near him. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” he said, looking down at the dirt.

“A boy who’s honest looks a man in the eyes,” said Franklin. “I’m a ghost, Tobias. I tend to see and hear everythin’. You been sleepin’ with that girl?” Tobias let out a long, slow breath. You couldn’t hide anything from these damn ghosts. They were inside your head in a flash.

“I slept with her once,” said Tobias. “We were out by the lake, and she had on a little bikini, and well, things just escalated. I mean, she was rubbing my dick, Franklin. What was I supposed to do?”

“Say stop,” he frowned. “You young folks are all kinds of stupid, sometimes. Bein’ a father is a gift, Tobias. It was the greatest gift of my life, and it was ripped from me. But you ain’t ready for that.”

“I know. I’ll use condoms going forward.” He started to stand but felt as though Franklin had weighed him down with a thousand pounds. Taking his seat again, he looked up at him.

“You shoulda been usin’ them all along. That young girl has a daughter already. I ain’t judgin’ her. Things happen. But she wasn’t worried ‘bout it happenin’ again. You woulda been trapped with a wife and child, Tobias. You woulda been takin’ care of her other child. She sees you as someone with money and a future.”

Tobias realized how right Franklin was. He’d never thought about all of that. Then again, it was hard to think when all the blood was in your penis.

“How do I control it, Franklin? JB seems to be able to, but I get hard when the wind blows right and all I can think about is burying myself inside a girl.”

“Just ‘cause you get hard, don’t mean you gotta take care of it. Focus on somethin’ else. Run. Write in a diary.

Lift weights. Think of your mama or your grandmama. That should do it. Do somethin' other than think with your manhood." Tobias chuckled at his words, nodding.

"But if they're willing, why not?"

"Boy, you don't get it. You gotta be the man. You gotta be the one that has common sense and knows when somethin' ain't right. Look, Tobias. You're gonna go off to the Army soon. Gonna be a lot of pretty girls seein' you in your uniform and wantin' to be with you. But you gotta be strong enough to say no. Get to know them. Make sure they're women you wanna spend time with."

Tobias stared at the image hovering near him, then nodded.

"I promise, Franklin. Thanks for talking to me," he said. Franklin watched as he walked back toward his brother in the cafeteria. He felt Martha, Yori, and Nathan come up behind him.

"Did it help?" asked Nathan.

"I don't think so. That boy's got a powerful sex drive, and he don't know how to control it yet. I have a feelin' he's gonna meet the one he really wants, and she won't have him."

“Well, we did what we could,” said Martha. “The rest is up to him.”

JB stayed mad at Tobias for three days. He worked hard to not give in to his urges with every woman he met, but the female population was not helping his cause.

At some point, JB gave up being his brother’s keeper when it came to sex. But in fairness, Tobias learned to be honest with the women he hooked up with.

“God, you’re sexy,” mewled a woman, rubbing herself on his leg.

“You’re pretty hot yourself. What do you say we go back to your place?” She nodded and started to pull him toward the door, but Tobias pulled her back. “A few rules. I wear double condoms. No staying the night. And when we’re done, I leave. No drama.”

“I can live with that,” smiled the woman.

The sex was good, but like almost every woman he went home with, she couldn’t keep her word. She wanted his full name, where did he live, what was his phone number. Not one woman could just let him walk out the door. You would have thought he’d learned.

“Tobias?” called JB walking into the apartment.

“Yea?”

“We gotta go. Mission in the Bahamas,” said JB.

“Bahamas?” grinned Tobias. “That’s no mission, brother. That’s a vacation.”

“It’s a mission,” growled JB. “Get your shit and meet me at the truck. We’re on a flight in forty-two minutes.”

Tobias watched as his serious brother left the room, shaking his head.

“Spoilsport.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Gail! Do not eat that bread!” yelled her mother.

She set the roll back on the plate, pushing it aside. You would have thought that as a young woman in college, she could choose her own meals. But Virginia Mackenzie had other ideas. Grand ideas of what she thought her daughters should look like, act like, and who they should marry.

“If we can’t have bread, then why do we have it on the table? I mean, shit, if I can’t eat it, and Phoebe can’t eat it, why is it here?” she asked.

“First of all, don’t cuss. Ladies don’t cuss, and they surely don’t cuss if they want to be Miss New York. Second of all, it’s on the table because your father and brother can eat it. Carbs are poison for a young woman hoping to become the next Miss New York.”

“I don’t hope to become the next Miss New York, Mom. You hope that. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to parade in front of pompous, judgmental assholes. I don’t want to put on a bikini and have them scrutinize my body.”

“Nonsense! Your sister was Miss New York. I was Miss New York. Your grandmother was Miss New York. You’ll be the next one, but it’s less than six weeks away.”

Gail only nodded, knowing that any arguments with her mother would be pointless. Her father looked at her sympathetically, shaking his head. Finishing her meal, she pushed back from the table and asked to be excused.

“We have to work on your question responses and your performance for the talent portion of the show.”

“Mom, I have a date,” she said, staring at her mother. At nineteen, Gail didn’t think she should have to tell her mother she had a date. She already made her feel guilty because she was completely immersed in her curriculum at NYU.

“Cancel it.”

“No,” said Gail. “I’m going on the date. Stop trying to control my life.” She turned, storming from the room as her sister, brother, and father watched. All she could hear was her mother screaming at her.

“Gail! Gail, you get back here!” She turned to look at her husband. “Stop her!”

“Let her go, Virginia,” said Jason Mackenzie. “You’ve been pushing your agenda on her, and she hates it. She’s going to end up hating you and leaving the house before she’s ready, and damn sure before we’re ready.”

“This is her legacy! There is a plan in place.”

“No, it’s your legacy and your plan, not hers,” he said. “She’s not Phoebe. She’s not Lucas. Let her be her.”

“Just for the record,” smirked Lucas, “I never entered a beauty pageant.”

“No, but you escorted girls to their coming out debutante ball,” smirked Phoebe. She pushed back from her seat, standing. “I have to go. I have a date with Arthur.”

“This is getting serious,” smiled Virginia.

Gail was hiding outside the dining room, grateful for her sister’s momentary distraction with her mother. Maybe if she and Arthur got engaged, her mother would be so wrapped up with that she’d leave her alone.

Two hours later, Gail was exactly where she knew she’d end up. On her back with her legs wrapped around the hot guy from her biochem class. He wasn’t the most gifted

man she'd been with, but he knew how to use what God had given him.

“That was fun,” she said, sitting on the side of the bed pulling on her jeans.

“Hey, where are you going? Stay.”

“I can't. I have to get home, or my folks will freak out. I'll see you in class,” she said.

“Can I have your number?”

“Look, Joe...”

“Jim. My name is Jim.” She blushed and nodded.

“Right, sorry. Look, Jim, I don't want someone permanently in my life. I like to have a good time when I want, where I want, with who I want.”

“So, you're a whore?” he frowned. Gail laughed, shaking her head as she pulled on her boots.

“Why do all guys do that? You sleep with more women than I do men, and yet that's okay. But when I want the freedom to have fun, you call me a whore.”

“A woman who does one-night stands is a whore.”
Gail just shook her head, staring at him.

“Then I guess I’m a whore. And you’re a man-whore. My body. My body choice. My life. So go fuck yourself, Joe. Oh, right. Jim. Joe was last week.” She slammed the door to his apartment, racing out into the street. She was halfway to the train station when she realized she was crying.

“Men are assholes!” she cried out.

“I agree,” smiled the pretty girl next to her.

“Oh, sorry. Just a bad date.”

“I know what you mean. Every guy wants to get in my pants. No one wants to just get to know me,” she said. Gail nodded, giving a tentative smile. Hell, she didn’t want them to get to know her. She wanted sex. Hot, wild, sticky, wet sex. Then, she wanted them to leave her alone.

“I’m Gail.”

“Dana.”

They talked the entire time they were on the train. When they realized they needed to go their separate ways, Gail to Connecticut and Dana to Philly, they exchanged numbers and promised to stay in touch.

Gail was surprised when Dana called her two days later, letting her know she’d be in town the following

weekend. It was the start of a wonderful friendship. She helped her get through the Miss New York pageant, to which she took third runner-up, much to the disappointment of her mother.

Dana was the best wingman ever. She had a knack for sniffing out creeps and warning Gail to not go with certain men. Sometimes, she was a bit too diligent.

“Gail, I’m worried about you. One of these days, you’re going to meet someone who doesn’t get that you only want one evening. You’re not very big. If someone really wanted to hurt you, they could.”

“You worry too much, Dana. But that’s why I love you,” she said, hugging her friend. “I’ve got pepper spray in my purse, and I run pretty fast. I’ll be fine.”

Dana’s parents were older but had given her a beautiful, wonderful life as her fosters. Gail’s parents were upper-crust New York-Connecticut. They were the family invited to the Governor’s Ball or the Met Gala. They went to charity events dressed in ten-thousand-dollar ball gowns and summered at the Cape. They were definitely from different worlds.

When they finished their degree programs at the same time, they made the decision to celebrate by spending a few days in the Bahamas. They'd spent four days shopping, laying in the sun, eating whatever they wanted, and just having a great time.

Dana had no desire to go out the last night, but Gail convinced her to, working their way to the strip with tourists, bars, and restaurants.

The first two beach bars seemed deserted, with only a few patrons inside. But the third one was a little livelier. A guy with a guitar was strumming beach tunes while hot food was being served as part of the Saturday night happy hour.

"Oooh-la-la," said Gail, nudging her friend. "Look at those sex-bots. Twins! Dana, they're twins!"

"I can see that."

"Oh, one is leaving. Wait, no, he's not. He's walking toward me. I'm going to talk to hot stuff. You talk to other hot stuff at the bar." Dana just stood there, shaking her head. "Go! Look, you're amazing, and you look it tonight. Just say hello."

“God, alright. You won’t stop annoying me unless I do.”

Gail watched as Dana walked away, then waited until she was face to face with the hottest man she’d ever seen. He wasn’t just good-looking. He was sexy, built like a brick wall, and there was a commanding air about him.

“Hi there,” she smiled.

“Hello, beautiful,” he grinned, flashing those obscenely white teeth at her. “Let’s dance.” He pulled her onto the dance floor, his hand resting on the top of her firm ass.

“I’m Gail,” she said.

“Tobias.”

“Tobias. I like that.”

I’ve never fucked a Tobias, she thought. God, he smells good. They danced for ten minutes before Tobias made his move, taking her mouth like he owned it. Gail couldn’t help but follow. Damn, he was good.

Suddenly, they heard a loud sound, like rapid bangs echoing in the air. People were running down the street and then emptied out of the bar.

“What is that?” she asked. He gripped her hand, pulling her toward the beach.

“That is gunfire, and we’re getting the fuck out of here,” he said. He pulled her out the back door and looked in both directions down the beach. He prayed that JB had gone left because the gunfire was coming from the right.

Pulling Gail with him, she tripped and hit the sand.

“Sorry,” he said. “I can carry you.” He hissed in pain, wincing as he pulled her to her feet.

“No. It’s okay. I just need to get these shoes off. What’s wrong? You’re bleeding! You’re bleeding, Tobias!”

“It’s fine. I’m good. Let’s go.”

He stripped her of the shoes, helped her up, and kissed her again quickly. She thought it was the cutest thing ever and sexy as shit that he was protecting her.

Once they found Dana and the hot-stuff brother, they made their way back to the hotel. Finding out the brothers were in security wasn’t surprising. They both had a badass attitude and looked fit enough to take on anyone that came at them. Plus, somehow, they had weapons.

“We need to go back to your hotel and get clothes,” said JB, looking at Dana and Gail. “You stay here with Tobias. Tomorrow, we’ll get you both on a plane headed home.”

Dana insisted on going with him, so when the door closed, Gail wasn’t sure what to do. I mean, she was faced with tall, dark, handsome, sexy, and freaking oozing alpha male goodness. But she was also terrified at what was happening around them.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” asked Tobias.

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Not really. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but can we just talk?” she asked. Tobias laughed, nodding his head.

“Why can’t you believe you’re saying that?”

“I think we’re more alike than you know,” she smiled.

“Oh, tell me more.” He kicked off his running shoes and set his feet up on the coffee table. Gail swallowed, realizing how large those feet were.

“See if I have this right. You go out a few times a week. You find a woman that is ready, willing, and able. She

appeals to you, and you to her. You suggest that you go back to her place or a hotel. Never to your place.” Tobias’s smile faded as he stared at her. “You have a banging good time, no pun intended. Kiss her, thank her, and leave, despite her attempts to get your number or last name.”

Tobias was quiet for a moment just staring at her.

“And exactly how are we alike?” he asked.

“Because I do exactly the same thing with men,” she said. “And don’t you dare call me a whore.”

“I wasn’t going to,” he said, shaking his head. “I think if you both agree, then there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just not what I want to marry.”

“You’ve thought about marriage?” she laughed. Tobias frowned at her.

“Yes. Haven’t you?”

“Not really,” she shrugged. “My sister and brother are both married. Very appropriate East Coast elite. They’ve made Mother and Dad very happy. Me? I’m a disappointment. I wanted a career, not a family.”

“You don’t want children?” he asked.

“I-I don’t know. Maybe one day. Right now, I’m not thinking about that.”

“So, if you and I were to go into the bedroom and have some adult fun for a few hours, you wouldn’t be asking for my number when you left tomorrow?”

“No,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I call bullshit,” he said, feeling somewhat hurt.

“Sorry, big guy, but that’s how it would end. Hot sex for a few hours, then buh-bye.”

Tobias stared at her, then pulled her onto his lap, gripping the back of her neck. He devoured her mouth as their tongues tangled with one another. His cock was rock-hard, and he could feel her wetness.

Shoving her to the sofa, his big hands slid beneath her panties feeling her, and she moaned against him. Gripping his head, she pulled back, staring up at him. No.

“I-I’m sorry, Tobias. I can’t do this.”

“Okay,” he said, looking down at her. He pushed a strand of the long red hair from her face, then kissed her sweetly, innocently. “It’s okay. There’s a lot happening here.”

“Yea,” she said, shoving back against the arm of the sofa. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, swallowing. “Why don’t you get some sleep? I’ll keep watch.” Nodding, Gail curled into a ball and closed her eyes, falling asleep almost instantly. Tobias just stared at her.

What the fuck just happened? He’d never wanted a woman so desperately in all his life. She was smart, honest, direct, and fucking sexy as shit. At some point, he fell asleep as well, only to be woken the next morning by JB.

When Gail was safely checked in and headed to her flight, she hugged Dana, kissing her friend.

“I’ll see you in New York in a week,” she smiled. Turning to JB, she hugged him. “Take care of my girl.”

“I will. Be safe, Gail.” She turned to Tobias and smiled.

“It was great meeting you, Tobias,” she said, giving him a hug. She gripped his hand and squeezed. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” He felt the paper in his hand and shoved it into his pocket. It would be days later that he had the courage

to open it up.

Apologies again. If you're ever up for a do-over. This is my number 212-555-3243.

CHAPTER THREE

“I hate Miami,” said Gail to her brother.

“I know, but we needed to get out of New York for a while. I’m taking Amy and the kids to our place. Phoebe is in Maine. You’ll be fine with Mom and Dad.” He had a strange look on his face, then hugged her tightly. “Really, it will be fine.”

“Says you,” she frowned.

Her brother kissed her forehead, then left them at the waiting limousine. By the time they arrived at the mansion, it was dark, and Gail didn’t even have the energy to do anything except sleep.

Waking the next morning, she looked out her bedroom window to see the bay and city beyond. But it was the green, murky swimming pool that made her frown. Dressed in a light blue sundress, she padded into the kitchen.

“Dad? Why is the pool a mess?” she asked.

“Oh, we’re getting that taken care of. We haven’t been down here in a while, so everything needs work.” He looked

at her, but not directly. She felt as though he were looking over her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” asked Gail.

“Yea. Yea, I’m good. Listen, Gail, you know that I’ve always played the go-between with you and your mother.”

“Yes, and I’m grateful for that.”

“Well, I need you to do one thing for me,” he said.

“Your mother is friends with our new neighbors, and they have a son.”

“Dad,” she started.

“Hear me out. Just have dinner with him, no funny business, and come home. That’s all.”

“Dad, you know how I feel about this. I’m not ready to be married. I’m not ready to date anyone seriously.”

“All I’m asking for is one date, Gail. One. You can do this for me.”

Gail stared at her father, the pleading look in his eyes. Whatever her mother was scheming up, she didn’t want any part of it. But she would agree to just about anything for her father.

“Okay, Dad. One date.”

“That’s my girl. He’s gonna pick you up at eight.”

“Nope. My one rule, Dad. I’ll meet him somewhere, but he’s not picking me up,” she said, shaking her head.

“You don’t have a car,” said her father.

“I’ll take a taxi or something. Let me know what restaurant, and I’ll meet him there.” Gail went back to her bedroom, gathering a few items and calling for a cab. She didn’t bring anything to wear on a date, and if this guy was a neighbor, chances are she would have to dress up.

By the time she’d returned from shopping, she had a note on her dresser that her date, William, would meet her at the Copa. Her parents had gone out for the evening, and she was on her own. Hearing the ping of her phone, she looked down at the message.

Hey Gail – Tobias – just hoping you’re doing alright.

Gail felt the butterflies flying in her stomach and held her hand against her abdomen. At first, she thought she’d make him wait a while, but something made her text him back.

Hi Tobias – all good here. Hope you’re well also.

“God, ‘hope you’re well also,’” she said, talking to herself. He sent back a thumbs-up emoji, and that only made her smile. At least they were communicating with one another.

Dressed and ready for her date, she called the taxi company and then stepped outside the front door to wait.

“Gail?” She jumped, startled by the voice.

A handsome man was walking toward her in a suit. He looked like a banker, nice looking, clean, polished, but there was nothing appealing about him for Gail. In fact, everything about this man was the opposite of appealing.

“Yes, I’m Gail. Who are you?”

“I’m William. I saw the taxi out front, and since I was getting ready to leave, I thought I’d just send him away and give you a lift.”

“That was nice of you, but please don’t do that again,” she said firmly. “I like taking my own transportation to a first date.”

“I understand,” he said, holding up his hands. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

Gail wanted to tell him he wouldn't get the chance again, but just nodded. He led her to his waiting BMW, sliding into the leather seat beside her. She wondered why he had a driver when the car was clearly meant for the driver to enjoy.

The Copa was a Miami Beach staple. A high-end restaurant and club, it was always busy and always jumping. Normally, this would be exactly Gail's scene, but for some reason, tonight, she couldn't think of anything, or anyone, except Tobias.

"Gail?"

"Huh? Sorry, I was distracted," she said, shaking her head as she took another bite of the lamb.

"Yes, you seem to be very distracted tonight," he frowned.

"Listen, William, this is nothing against you. My parents asked me to go on this date as a favor. I'm just not interested in dating anyone right now."

"Right," he nodded. "Well, why don't we head home."

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. Let me pay for dinner."

“Don’t be ridiculous. That would make me look like a fool. Come on.” Suddenly, Gail wasn’t very comfortable with the idea of getting in the car with this guy. His mood had switched dramatically.

“You know what? I’m just going to get a taxi home.” She started to move toward the taxi stand, but he pulled her back.

“Gail, you’re being ridiculous,” he said, waving at his driver. “I brought you. I’ll take you home. Please don’t make a scene. I live here.”

Gail wanted to push away, but she didn’t want to embarrass him. He hadn’t really done anything wrong. He was just odd. Practically shoved into the back seat, the car sped off, and Gail just stared out the window. When she felt his warm hand on her thigh, she jumped, pushing him back.

“Stop! I’ve made it clear to you I don’t want this date to continue.” She never saw the fist coming toward her. She felt his knuckles connect with her nose, his other hand ripping her panties from her body.

“You don’t seem to get it, sunshine. I bought and paid for you.”

Gail didn't remember much of anything else. She woke once, lying on an unmade bed. The driver and William were both naked, looking at her body. Beside her was a black satchel, laid out flat on the bed. She felt the bile rising in her chest as she stared at the objects. Objects, no doubt, meant to torture her.

"P-please," she begged.

"Oh, baby. I'm not nearly done with you yet."

After that, she lost consciousness and slipped away. When she woke, it was still dark outside, or maybe it had been twenty-four hours. Not hearing anything in the house, she tried to stand, her body crumbling beneath her.

Pushing off the floor, she steadied herself against the bed, then looked down to see the blood trickling down her thighs. Her dress was torn, her clutch sitting on a dirty nightstand. Grabbing the bag, she opened the door and looked down the hallway to see if she could hear anything.

Carefully feeling her way along the wall, she got to the front door and started to open it. Hearing a car pull up, she saw the headlights and moved as fast as she could toward the back door. Exiting the house, she ducked behind the

neighbors' houses, working her way toward anywhere but here.

“Where am I?” she sniffed.

Her face hurt her so badly she could barely breathe, and her body was aching. What had they done to her? Unsure of where she was, she just continued walking until she was too exhausted to move any further. Lying on the concrete, she reached into her bag and couldn't believe her phone was still there with an adequate charge.

Staring at the device, she wasn't even sure who to call. Her parents had set up this date. Did they know this would happen? Seeing the text from Tobias, she prayed he might know someone in the area.

“Hello?” He was met with silence, then rustling of fabric and breathing. “Hello?”

“T-Tobias,” whispered the voice.

“Gail? Gail, where are you?”

“Help me.”

The line was still open, but she wouldn't respond to him. He kept talking to her, telling her everything would be

okay. Tobias quickly texted home while leaving the live call open.

“Get a trace on this number. Where is she?”

“She’s about a mile from you,” said Code, tapping into the call. “Looks like she might be in an alleyway behind a convenience store. Do you need help?”

“Not yet.”

Everything inside Tobias just wanted to get there, and it seemed he was driving in quicksand. Seeing the store up ahead, he pulled around behind it and saw the bare legs splayed out in the alley. He couldn’t run fast enough. When he saw the state of her body, he wanted to puke.

“Jesus, Gail, what the fuck happened?” he asked, wiping the blood from her face. Her dress was torn, the earrings she once wore long gone. Torn from her earlobes, the lobes were bleeding as well.

“I-I’m not sure.”

“Who did this to you?” She started to speak, then began crying.

Tobias continued to wipe the blood, then saw the blood between her thighs. He knew she wasn’t a virgin, so the

horrible thoughts began invading his brain. His stomach twisted with bile and fear.

“I need to get you to a hospital,” he said.

She nodded, unable to fight it any longer. Carefully lifting her, he settled her in the back of the car and drove the short distance to Miami General. He refused to leave her side through it all. When they did the rape kit, when they examined her, all of it. He wasn't going to leave her alone.

“May I speak with you outside?” asked the ER doctor. Tobias nodded, stepping outside the room. “She's been brutally raped, son. Brutally. I don't know what they were using, but it wasn't their body parts. They intended to cause as much pain as possible, and they have. Does she have a place to go?”

“Her parents.”

“No,” said the doctor. “She said her parents weren't a viable option for her.”

“Then she can come home with me,” said Tobias, frowning at the doctor. He nodded.

“Alright. I'm going to write out some instructions. She'll need to see a medical professional immediately upon

arrival to be sure the bleeding is under control. I would strongly recommend therapy as well.”

“I can take care of all of that,” he said.

“Be gentle with her, son. This is going to take a long time to go away. Don’t get on an airplane for at least forty-eight hours. Let her body adjust and heal a bit.” Tobias nodded, then went back inside the room.

They’d given Gail something to help her sleep. Her long red hair was splayed out on the pillow, blood caked in the ends of it. She was bruised up and down her arms, legs, and torso. She was a fucking mess.

In his head, Tobias could almost hear what her family had probably said to her. ‘Sleep with a stranger, you get what you deserve.’ But no one deserved this. No one.

And the biggest problem was Tobias didn’t believe she’d slept with anyone.

Not one fucking person.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gail awoke to light filtering through rich velvet drapes. The room was cool, the sheets soft and warm. Trying to sit up, she let out a yelp of pain, then laid back, touching her face. Remembering.

“Hey, hey. Nothing too fast,” said Tobias.

“Tobias,” she moaned. “Why are you here?”

“You called me,” he said with a serious expression on his face. “I generally run when a lady says she needs help.”

“Why are you in Miami? We are still in Miami, right?”

“We are still in Miami. JB and the rest of our family were settling the case that involved Dana. It all ended here. Dana asked that I stay and check on you. I went to your home, but it was dark and empty.”

“No one was there?”

“No, hun. The place was completely dark and locked up tight. The pool was a slimy-green mess. There was no one there.” Gail looked distraught, staring at his face then around the room. “Gail, what happened, hun?”

“I-I don’t know,” she sniffed, shaking her head. “My father told me I had to go on this blind date with a neighbor’s son. William. I didn’t want to go, but he said it needed to happen. I don’t like getting picked up on a first date, so I told him I would meet him at the restaurant.

“When I went out to meet my taxi, he was walking up the drive. He’d sent the taxi home.”

“What happened next?” asked Tobias, trying to control his rage.

“We went to dinner, but honestly, he was boring, and I couldn’t concentrate?”

“Like you were drugged?”

“N-no,” she said, feeling her face flush. “I was thinking about you and the text you’d sent earlier that night. I’m sorry, Tobias.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he smirked. “I’ve been thinking a lot about you as well. What happened next?”

“He got angry because I wasn’t hanging on his every word. I told him we should end the date. When I tried to get a taxi, he got mad at me and said I would embarrass him. I didn’t want to make my parents angry, so I went with him. I

was in the backseat with him, looking out the window, and suddenly, he was gripping my thigh.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. No, that’s not true. He said I was bought and paid for,” she frowned. “H-he said it like I was a whore, Tobias. A wh-whore.” She started crying again, and he pulled her against his chest, rocking back and forth.

“You’re not a whore, hun. Something is definitely wrong here, and we’re going to find out what it is. You’re a mess right now, and you need a place to heal and get right.”

“I don’t want to go back to New York,” she cried.

“You’re not going to New York. You’re coming home with me in a few days. Until then, we’re going to be here. It’s the penthouse condo of a friend of ours. You’re safe, and I’ve got additional security coming. They should be here soon.”

“Wh-why? Why did they do this?” she asked.

“I don’t know, sweetie, but we’re going to find out. I tried calling your parents, and they said you couldn’t come home.”

“I don’t want to go! Please don’t make me go there!” she begged.

“You’re not going there, sweetie. As I said, you’re coming home with us.” He lay her back against the pillow, brushing the hair out of her eyes and the tears from her cheeks. “You’re going to be okay, baby. Gail? What exactly does your father do for a living?”

“Investments and money management,” she sniffed. “I don’t understand any of it, but he owns his own investment firm on Wall Street.”

“Do you know the neighbors?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I hadn’t been down to Miami in years because of school. I can’t get his words out of my head, Tobias. He said I was bought and paid for.”

“I know, hun. We’ll find him. I’m going to have you speak to one of our people and give a description. I’ve checked the address on both sides of your parents’ home. One neighbor is a widower, ninety-two-years-old. The other is a young couple with three little girls.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“Do you remember anything about where they took you?”

“It was an empty house except for the b-bed I was on,” she sniffed. “There were no sheets on it. I remember waking at one point, and William and the driver were naked by the bed, and there was this bag with all these, all these things.”

“Things?”

“Objects. Tools,” she cried. “I think they used them on me, Tobias. Oh, my God! I th-think they used them on me.”

She was fast becoming hysterical, and Tobias wasn't sure what to do. He didn't have any sedatives with him. When he heard the door open, he knew they were going to be okay.

“Tobias?”

“Back here,” he called. Cruz and Kelsey stood in the doorway. “Help her. Please, she needs a sedative.”

“Okay, okay, hun. Hi, Gail. My name is Cruz, and this is Kelsey. We're both nurses.” She just kept crying, sobbing against Tobias's chest. He tried soothing her, holding her, but when Cruz asked her to lie down again, she gripped his shirt as if her life depended on it.

“You’re gonna feel a stick, honey,” said Kelsey. “It’s just a little something to help you sleep.” It was a matter of moments, and she was calm, fast asleep.

“Lie her back, brother. We’ll take a look at everything. We got the hospital records this morning.”

“She’s a fucking mess, Cruz,” he frowned.

“I know, man. I read it all.” Tobias turned, staring at the older man. He hadn’t asked all of the details. Maybe he didn’t want to know.

“What do you mean?” Cruz looked at the younger man, gripping his shoulders.

“Brother, she was brutally, sexually assaulted, and not just by men. And it was at least two men. I know you said she saw two. We heard on comms, but it may have been more. They didn’t just use their bodies, Tobias. Her uterus was damaged.”

“C-can she have children?” he whispered. He wasn’t even sure why he asked that question, but he wanted to hear the answer.

“We’re not sure, brother. Gray wants to examine her when we get back. She and Gabi might be able to help her.

“God,” he whispered. “Who would do that to her?”

He heard shuffling at the bedroom door and turned to see the men he needed most.

“That’s what we’re here to find out.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Dad!” he said, staring at his father.

“Who else did you expect?” smirked Joseph. JB was right behind, smiling with Uncle Nathan, Uncle Eric, Uncle Keith, Billy, and Wilson. His family. His core family was here. But that wasn’t all. Gaspar, Raphael, Gabe, Antoine, and Bull walked in as well. The seniors were out of hiding.

“I can’t believe you all came,” he gasped.

“Let’s go into the living room, and you can explain what you know,” said Eric.

He nodded, looking over his shoulder as Kelsey and Cruz were doing their work-up on her. Taking a seat, he pushed back his hair as his brother sat beside him, slapping his knee.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know, JB. Something seriously fucked up is happening here. She didn’t even know the man. Her folks made her go on a blind date with him. But the guy told her he’d bought and paid for her.”

“What the fuck?” muttered Bull.

“I know,” said Tobias, shaking his head. “I don’t understand any of this. Dana asked me to check on her, and when I arrived at their home, it was empty. No one was there. The pool looks like the fucking swamp. After the docs told me she’d been on a date with a neighbor, we checked on the residents. One is a ninety-five-year-old man. The other is a family with small children.”

“Then who the fuck did this to her?” asked Nathan.

“I hate to say this, but we need to look at her family. Her father owns his own money management and investment company on Wall Street.”

“We heard the comms,” said Antoine. “She could barely speak.”

“Her whole face is swollen and bruised. I’m pretty sure he punched her in the face. She doesn’t remember much except waking to see the guy, William, and the driver standing over her in the nude. She was attacked by two men. Two men who were bigger, stronger, and definitely knew what they were doing.” He looked at the anger in the faces around the room. “And they used more than their bodies.”

“Much more,” growled Cruz, walking out of the bedroom. “Kelsey is cleaning her up. She’s out, but I think

she's having nightmares.”

“How is she?” asked Tobias, swallowing as he stared at the man.

“She's a mess, son. A fucking mess. Records said she had dinner at the Copa. I think we need to send a few guys and take a look at the cameras.”

“No need,” said Gaspar. “Comms? Find the footage and get us his photo. See if you can get a photo of the driver as well.”

“On it.”

“Has anyone been able to locate the parents or siblings?” asked Tobias.

“Not yet,” said Gabe. “We sent Jazz and Phoenix to the brother's address here in Miami, but no one was home. We're sending them to the house in New York. Comms called the sister's home in upstate New York, then to the cabin in Maine, but the staff says they are on holiday in Europe. I think it's awfully convenient that we can't find one fucking family member to answer our questions.”

“The staff? The fucking staff is answering for them while their sister is brutalized, apparently, thanks to the

parents.”

“She needs you to be calm right now, Tobias,” said Joseph. “I know this is terrible, but you can’t help her unless you keep your cool.” Tobias frowned at his father, nodding.

“I won’t promise anything,” he said.

The men all knew what he was feeling. It wasn’t foreign to any man on the team, but it never made it any easier. Kelsey came out, setting the medical kit on the bar top. She looked at all the men, wishing that her big Hawaiian were with them. Instead, she headed to the elder of the group. Gaspar. He knew immediately what she needed, opening his arms and hugging the young woman to his chest.

They watched as the pain etched on her face began to soften. She sucked in a deep breath as Gaspar gave a ferocious expression to the room.

“I’m okay now,” she said, pulling back. “I’m sorry. I just needed that.”

“We’re always here for that,” said Gaspar. “How is she?”

“I’m not sure they touched her at all with their bodies. I think they used – tools. Items. Metal, wooden, anything

other than flesh. When she passed out from the punch in the face, it gave them time, but I think they wanted to enjoy themselves with her awake. That's how she got away."

"She said she woke, and they were gone," said Tobias. "Maybe they were over-confident and thought she would stay out until they returned."

"Maybe," frowned Kelsey. "I don't know, but I'm glad we got that girl before they could get back to her."

"When can we take her back?" asked Tobias.

"A few days, honey. We want to make sure she doesn't start bleeding again. Her nose is broken, but we've set it. She has a few loose teeth, but I think they'll settle, and she won't lose them. The flesh on the inside of her thighs is bruised but also cut."

"Fuck!" yelled Tobias.

JB stared at his brother. He knew that he had feelings for Gail, but his reactions were only confirming it for him. The problem now was Gail might not be able to reciprocate. Ever.

"We'll go grab some food," said Rafe, nodding at Antoine. They left by the private elevator headed down to the

main floor just as the rain began to come down. They both looked up at the sky and frowned.

“Fucking typical.”

Down the road was a local grocery with plenty of food for the team. They bought some food that could be easily cooked, as well as some pre-made sandwiches, chips, snacks, and other items. Twice, Kelsey or Cruz texted them for additional first-aid items. Each time, they got angrier.

The lightning was coming faster and harder, so they wisely stood beneath the grocery awning instead of dashing to the car. Two other men were standing with a sack full of groceries as well. The two men listened to their conversation.

“So, what did he say?”

“He said if I didn’t find her, I’d be fucked up. It wasn’t my fault,” said the first man. “Somehow, she got out of the house.”

“Man, you know how they are. They like ‘em tied down.”

“She was fucking broken,” growled the man through clenched teeth. “I didn’t think she could move.”

“Well, she did, and now it’s his ass on the line. He’s not going to let this go. You gotta find that bitch and end her.”

Antoine nodded at his brother, walking around the two men and casually tagging them with trackers. They followed him as he moved around them, realizing how large he was. When they saw Rafe, they did a double take.

“You guys twins?”

“Something like that,” said Antoine. “Sounds like you lost a girlfriend.”

“Oh, uh, no. No, just someone who owed our boss.”

“Yea? That’s rough, man. Owing money isn’t something to sneeze at.” The two men chuckled at Antoine as he sneered in their direction.

“Something funny about that?” he asked, stepping closer.

“No. Sorry, no,” said the first man. The second man had suddenly slipped back toward the door.

“You goin’ somewhere?” asked Rafe.

The guy took off into the grocery store, and Rafe followed, chasing him through the aisles. Antoine stepped closer to the other man, his face suddenly pale.

“Your friend is nervous. There a reason for that?” He vehemently shook his head. “You better fucking talk now. Why did you attack her?”

“We didn’t fucking attack her! Who are you? What does it matter?”

“You brutalized her,” growled Antoine, gripping his forearm. “Talk, you weasel bastard, or I will make you talk, and believe me, what you did to her will pale to what I’m going to do to you.”

“She was bought by my boss.” He tried to pull free of his grip but couldn’t move an inch.

“People aren’t for sale, you fucking animal.”

“They are when...” Shots rang out, and Antoine ducked, just as Rafe came back through the grocery store.

“Where did they come from?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Antoine, looking at the dead body beside him. “They damn sure weren’t aiming at me. They wanted him.”

“The other one got away,” said Rafe. “Did he say anything?”

“Just that his boss bought her. I said people aren’t for sale, and he started to say something. He said, ‘they are when,’ and then somebody shot at him.” Antoine heard the sirens ringing in the distance and nodded at his brother.

“Call the others and let them know we’ll be a while.”

CHAPTER SIX

Antoine and Rafe walked into the penthouse with their groceries, setting them in the kitchen. Nathan put them away as they sat down, talking to the others.

“We’re trying to get facial recognition on your two guys. One of them looked directly at the camera in the grocery store,” said Gaspar. “Timothy Mayfield. His W2 says he’s an independent limousine driver.”

“Convenient. So, we have no way of knowing who he drove around that night?” said Tobias.

“There’s always a way. We’re still waiting on the footage from the Copa.” Rafe looked around the room.

“Where’s Keith and JB?”

“They went to check out the family home to see if they could find anything. Jazz and Phoenix are waiting outside the home in New York[PC1]. No one is answering the door right now. Seems odd considering they have a fuck-load of domestic help.”

“What kind of people sell their daughter?” asked Tobias. He looked around the room, hoping for some

answers. Wilson gripped his knee, shaking his head.

“Good men don’t know the answers to things like that,” he said quietly. “We have to think like them. Her folks are rich, powerful, Wall Street, upper-crust bullshit. Think about it. If they owed someone money and couldn’t pay it back, what do they use.”

“Normal people would sell their homes, cars, that sort of shit,” said Tobias. “They wouldn’t sell their daughter!”

“Tobias!” scolded Kelsey. “She could wake at any time. Don’t do that to her. She needs you to be supportive until we can get her back to Belle Fleur, where others will take care of her.” Tobias frowned at Kelsey, almost hurt by the statement. Why would others take care of her? Why wouldn’t he take care of her?

“She’ll be scared, Tobias. She’s going to want to be around people she knows,” said Cruz.

“She knows me,” he frowned.

“She does. And she knows JB and Dana. We’ll make sure she’s safe and comfortable. That she heals.” He turned, hearing soft shuffling behind him. She looked so fucking tiny in that moment. So delicate and small.

“Hey, you shouldn’t be out of bed,” he smiled. She looked up and immediately paled seeing all the men. Her body began to shake, and Kelsey rushed to her side.

“It’s okay, Gail. It’s okay. They’re part of the security company,” she said softly. Gail stared at Tobias, and he nodded.

“She’s right, honey. This is my family. You know JB, but he’s out with my Uncle Keith. And I think you met Kelsey and Cruz, our nurses.” She nodded, gripping his outstretched hand. He almost wanted to say ‘ouch’ but wasn’t about to make her feel bad for the vice-like grip.

“This is my father, Joseph. My Uncles Nathan and Eric. This is my grandfather, Wilson; my cousin, Billy; and these are all uncles in a different way. Gaspar, Rafe, Gabe, Antoine, and Bull. They’re the best men I know.” She nodded, staring at them.

“Joseph, Nathan, Eric, Wilson, Billy, Gaspar, Rafe, Gabe, Antoine, and Bull,” she repeated. They all smiled at her.

“That’s perfect,” smiled Tobias.

“Surprising, right?” she said, slowly walking closer to Tobias. “Can I sit out here for a while?”

“You can sit anywhere you like, sweetie,” said Cruz.

“Why are you all here?” she asked. Gaspar chuckled, shaking his head.

“For you, sweet girl. We’re going to find out who did this to you.”

“Why? Why would you do that for me? You don’t know me,” she said with tears in her eyes.

“Dana knows you. And JB and Tobias,” said Rafe. “That’s enough for us.”

“I’m not remembering everything,” she said, staring at them. “I guess that’s a good thing. Or maybe I’m blocking it out. Maybe it’s PTSD.”

“Could be,” said Cruz. “More likely, they gave you drugs that aren’t out of your system yet. You could have been knocked out the entire time.” She nodded, swallowing.

“Not the entire time,” she whispered. Tobias stared at her, his heart cracking for her.

“Gail, what do you know about your father’s business?” asked Joseph.

“I don’t know anything, really. My father was very secretive about his work. He always said he didn’t want to do anything that could jeopardize his company or the interests of the investors. Honestly, it didn’t interest me at all.”

“Did you ever meet any of his business associates?” asked Gaspar.

“I’m sure that I did,” she said, rubbing her temples. “My parents were known for throwing lavish parties, very Great Gatsby like. They would last for days sometimes.”

“Were you at the house during those parties?” asked Bull.

“Rarely. When I was little, we had a nanny that kept us in the nursery most of the time. As we got older, the nanny would take us into the city for the weekend. We would get to stay at the Plaza or the Ritz, have tea at the Russian Room, and go shopping for anything we wanted. It was all a bribe to keep us away, but my older siblings seemed to enjoy it. After they left the house, I was away at school, so I wasn’t there during the parties.”

“*Ask her about her parents’ finances,*” signed Keith as they walked through the door.

“Gail, this is Keith. As you can see, he’s deaf but communicates with sign language. He can also read lips.” She nodded, smiling at him and JB. “He asked if you know anything about your parents’ finances.”

“No. Nothing. They paid for my education at NYU, paid for my apartment in New York City, but I’d just gotten a job and was earning my own money. I made it clear I wanted to make it on my own.”

“Why?” asked Rafe. “I mean, most young women would take that and run with it. Just bank their paycheck and live off Mom and Dad.”

“Living off Mom and Dad requires certain conditions,” she said. “One of those was dating who my mother wanted when she wanted. For the most part, I’ve been able to avoid that.”

“But you didn’t this time. Why?” asked Tobias.

“It was my father that asked me,” she sniffed. “He never asked anything of me. Usually, he was the one trying to keep the peace between me and my mother.”

“*Was there anything unusual at the house when she arrived?*” Tobias repeated the question for her.

“The house seemed fine, but not to the standard that my mother had. Usually, it was pristine, everything in its place. For some reason, it felt, I don’t know. Out of sorts. The pool was disgusting, and she would have never allowed that. Dad said they were getting it fixed, but it didn’t make any sense.”

“Where were your siblings?” asked Bull.

“My brother and his family were at their home further down the beach,” she said. “Should I call them?”

“They weren’t there,” said JB. “We looked for them, but the house was locked up tight.”

“That can’t be,” she whispered. “What about my folks?”

“No one was in the house. No one. There wasn’t even any food in the refrigerator. When did they decide to sell?”

“Sell?”

“Yea. There was a ‘for sale’ sign in the front yard.”

“I-I don’t know. I-I don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head.

“Okay, that’s enough for now,” said Tobias. “Let’s get you back to bed. I’ll bring you some dinner in a little while.”

She nodded as he stood, helping her back to the bedroom, the eyes of his friends and family boring into his back. He lay her back on her pillows, pulling the blankets up to her chin.

“Good?” he asked.

“I’m good,” she smiled. “Tobias? Thank you for answering my call. I don’t know who else I would have called.”

“Then I was the right person,” he smiled. “Get some rest, and I’ll come back in with food in just a bit.” She nodded, closing her eyes as he kissed her forehead. He wasn’t sure why he’d done it, but he needed to. It was bruised with cuts and scrapes, but her flesh was warm and soft.

Stepping back into the living area, he stared at everyone, shaking his head.

“What in God’s name is happening here?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The penthouse apartment had four bedrooms, so the men were able to sleep comfortably with only a few on the sofas. Tobias refused to leave Gail alone, sleeping on the floor beside the bed.

“Tobias? Are you awake?” she asked as the sun rose over the ocean.

“I’ve been awake for a while now,” he smiled. “Curse of being in the military for so long. Do you need anything? Are you in pain?”

“No. Yes, but I don’t need anything. I’m just wondering what’s going to happen to me. I mean, obviously, someone wants to harm me.” Tobias sat up from his blankets on the floor, staring over the edge of the bed at her. He got to his knees and leaned on the mattress with both elbows.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said, taking one of her hands into his own. He sandwiched the small, delicate hand between his large, callused palms, gently rubbing the soft flesh. “We’re going to wait until Cruz and Kelsey say it’s safe to put you on an airplane. Once that happens, I’m taking you back to our compound in Louisiana, where you’ll be safe,

well-cared for, and can heal at your own speed. While you're doing that, we're going to find the men that did this to you."

She stared at him, and he was once again struck by how beautiful she was. Her big blue eyes were rimmed with purple circles, but she was still stunning.

"Then what?" she whispered.

"Then you can decide if you want to stay at the compound and work at our clinic or if you want to go somewhere else." She just nodded, not saying anything.

"What about my family? I'm not stupid, Tobias. It feels as if they are involved in this in some way. Did they sell me to those men?" Tobias stood from the floor, taking a seat beside her on the bed.

"I don't know, honey, but I think you could be right. And, if you are, I will find them, and I will make them pay." She just nodded again, staring at his face.

"You look good with a little facial hair," she whispered. He smirked at her.

"Well, with an indigenous father and grandfather, facial hair doesn't always come easy. Native American men aren't known for having beards."

“Tell me about your parents,” she asked.

“Well, my grandfather was probably the most prolific Delta operative in history.” He stopped, realizing that he might need to back up. “Do you know what Delta is?”

“I think so,” she said. “I mean, I’ve seen movies, and I hear people talk. Also, Dana told me a little. It sounds terrifying and exciting and something that very much fits your personality.” Tobias nodded at her, giving a small grin.

“My father and his twin, Nathan, became Delta as well. Many say they were as good, if not better, than our grandfather. Then, my brother and I became Delta. Our mom, Julia, she’s something else. Beautiful, tall, blonde, and so damn smart. Wilson is her father, our grandfather. He was a Navy SEAL, and he’s a nurse as well.”

“What makes her so special?” she asked.

“Well, one thing is she can see and hear ghosts.”

“Don’t tease me, Tobias,” she said, trying to push herself up off the mattress. He lifted her up beneath her arms, gently setting her back down.

“I’m not teasing you, honey. JB can see and hear them as well. It’s a strange gift, but we have several people who are

able to see and hear them all the time. Our property is hundreds of years old. We have several ghosts who roam on a regular basis, including one of my namesakes. Franklin.”

“Your name is Tobias Franklin?” she smiled.

“It is.”

“It’s very stoic. Very strong.” He nodded, smiling at her. “Tobias? I need to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“In the Bahamas, when we were kissing on the sofa. I stopped, not because I wasn’t enjoying it. I was enjoying it too much.”

“Too much?” he frowned.

“Yes. Like, I’d never enjoyed a kiss so much in my life. It scared me.” He stared at her, seeing the fear in her face. Nodding, he leaned forward, gently placing a kiss on her lips.

“It scared the fuck out of me too, honey. It’s why I didn’t call you right away. I just wasn’t sure what to do with my feelings. You hit it out of the ballpark about me. I don’t usually see women more than once, but I knew that if I stayed with you, it would definitely be more than once.”

“What do we do about that?”

“Not a damn thing,” he smiled. “For now, I just want to worry about getting you healthy and safe. We’ll see how things go from there. No promises. No plans.”

“Right. No promises, no plans,” she repeated. Tobias stared at the disappointed look on her face. He couldn’t believe it. She wanted promises. She wanted plans and damned if he didn’t want them as well.

“I can promise this, Gail. Right now, it’s just you and me. No one else. No other women. No other men. Can you agree to that?” Gail stared at him, wondering what had changed his mind. Then she realized she didn’t care. He’d changed his mind.

“I agree to that. But, Tobias, I’m not sure when I’ll be able to...” He kissed her sweetly again, nodding.

“I’m not talking about sex right now, Gail. That’s not what’s important here. Your health and well-being are what’s important. Let’s just get that right.”

She nodded again, still holding his hand, relishing in the strength and energy coursing through her body.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I think so,” she whispered. “I’m just not sure what I can eat. My nose and cheeks are killing me. I never saw that fist coming at me. I never expected it.” The fury building in Tobias’s chest was almost uncontrollable.

“Anything on the face hurts like a bitch,” he said, shaking his head.

“Did you break your nose against a bad guy while serving?” she asked.

“No. My brother broke my nose for me,” he said, laughing. “I deserved it. I said something stupid to him and really hurt him. I haven’t always been a good guy, Gail. I’ve been selfish. But I can definitely tell you that I was always honest with the women I dated. I never lied to one of them.”

“Same for me. I never lied to any man. I didn’t have a different partner every night or even every week. But if someone was interesting to me, and I felt safe, I just didn’t think it was anyone’s business but my own. I was always careful. Forced them to use double condoms. Sometimes, that made them angry, and they’d leave.”

“I did the same,” said Tobias. “A lot of women didn’t want condoms worn, but I absolutely refused to go bare.” She let out a long, slow breath, shaking her head.

“Why? Why would my parents set me up with that guy? It’s obvious he wasn’t a neighbor. He definitely wanted to hurt me from the beginning. I should have listened to my gut.”

“Why do you think you didn’t?”

“I guess because my dad asked me to do this. Isn’t that silly?”

“Not at all,” he said. “We do all sorts of crazy shit to please the people we love. Enough of that. Let’s get some food for you.”

“Can I go out to the kitchen? I’m tired of being in the bed.”

“Of course. But you get a free ride with that,” he smirked. Tobias stood in his shorts and t-shirt, then gently leaned forward, lifting her in his arms. He could feel the heavy pad at her bottom, and it angered him. She was so frail, so small, and some asshole thought it was okay to hit her, to rape her.

He stood next to the bed with her in his arms, and she stared up at him, wondering why they weren't moving.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Actually, Gail, I don't think I've ever been better.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Well, there she is,” smiled Wilson, walking toward her, still in Tobias’s arms. He touched her forehead, then gently placed his hands on her neck, then up to her face.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a truck,” she said quietly. Wilson frowned, staring at his grandson.

“I know, honey. It will feel like that for a while. We’re going to get you to a place where you at least feel like you. Then, we’ll have you speak to one of our qualified therapists and counselors.”

She nodded as Tobias sat her down at the table. Gaspar placed a platter of bacon, sausage, and ham on the table. Gabe followed with a platter of eggs, and Rafe carried a platter of pancakes. Kelsey was the last with a big bowl of fruit. She shrugged with a wink.

“I try to get them to eat healthy, honey. It doesn’t always work, but it’s my job as part of the medical team.”

“We’ve charged your phone,” said Bull. He looked at Tobias and nodded. “I need to tell you, Gail, we have a

tracker on the phone and a recording device. If anyone calls, we'll hear everything and, hopefully, be able to figure out where they are."

"I understand. I'm okay with that," she said.

"We're going to be looking at some of the video from the Copa to see if we can get a facial read from that night. Had you ever seen either of those men before?" She shook her head.

"Never." A phone began ringing, and she jumped, looking down at the number. "It's my brother."

"Please put it on speaker, and don't tell him we're here," said Antoine. She nodded.

"Hello."

"Gail? Where are you?" asked her brother Lucas.

"Why Lucas? Where are you?" Gaspar nodded at her, giving her thumbs-up. Tobias gently rubbed her back, hoping to give her courage.

"Gail, you need to get back to the house."

"Wh-why?"

“You bailed on your date, Gail. You were supposed to stay with him.” She began to shake, and they worried she would break down.

“Stay with him?” she whispered. “He beat me and raped me. Brutally. Do you have any fucking idea what kind of human he is?”

“Gail, it’s not a big deal. It’s not like you don’t fuck random men all the time.” She gasped, covering her mouth as tears filled her eyes. Her own brother thought these things of her. “This is fucking important, Gail! You need to fulfill this debt.”

There was silence in the room. Complete and utter stillness as she stared at the faces of the men as much in shock as she was.

“D-debt? I have no debt with these men.”

“No, but Dad and I do. You help to pay the debt.”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now? You bartered your sister to pay off your debts? Is that what you’re telling me? Is this fucking medieval Europe?”

“Relax, Gail. He was going to have his fun with you for the weekend and send you back. Debt paid. Yea, you

might have been banged up, but you would have been fine, and Dad and I would be free.”

“You spiteful, twisted, horrible man! He brutalized my body. He and others, Lucas. Not just one man! I may never have children!”

“Pfft! Like you’d ever want to be a mother.” Tobias had heard enough. He grabbed the phone, keeping it on speaker.

“Listen carefully, Lucas.”

“Who is this? Gail, where are you?”

“You won’t ever know where she is. Ever. You fucking piece of shit for an excuse of a man. You and your father both. How anyone could believe that what you did is okay is beyond me. You’re pathetic, and guess what, Lucas? You’re a dead man.”

“Gail! Gail, you have to listen to me. They’re going to come for me and Dad, and if we don’t have their money, they’ll go after Mom and then Amy and the kids.”

“So, you threw me to the wolves instead of Mom, Amy, or Phoebe. You haven’t even mentioned Phoebe.”

“Phoebe,” he stopped, taking in deep breaths. “Phoebe paid a debt about two years ago, Gail. They don’t usually like the same person twice. Except for Amy. Amy has paid our debt multiple times.”[\[PC2\]](#)

“This can’t be real,” she said, looking at the table. “It can’t be.”

“Who are you with? Did you find somebody else to fuck so soon?” Billy quickly stood, lifting her in his arms, and carried her into the other room so she wouldn’t have to hear the rest of the conversation.

“I don’t know what sick, twisted game you’re playing,” said Tobias, “but let me clue you in on something. You’ve fucked with the wrong people. I’m going to hunt you and your family down. And when I’m through, you’re going to wish those men had gotten to you first.”

He ended the call, turning the phone off and sliding it to the center of the table. Kelsey came out from the back room.

“Is she okay?”

“Yea, Billy is sitting with her. She’s scared and confused and hurt. I can’t imagine my own family giving me,

willingly, to men like that. It's just awful," she said, shaking her head.

"Comms? Anything on the locator?" asked Eric.

"Yep. He's on a yacht a hundred miles off the coast of Florida. I'm sending you the coordinates now and the name of the yacht. You're not going to like it."

"I'm probably going to fucking hate it, but what is it?" asked Eric.

"The Trade."

"Get us a fucking boat," growled Tobias. "A boat, dive suits, cannisters, everything."



"Where is she? What did she say?" asked his wife.

"I'm not sure where she is, but she has help. A man was with her."

"Not a surprise," frowned Amy.

"She sounded different. I mean, when I had to tell her why she needed to come back, she didn't give in. She just

blew up.”

“I don’t give a shit, Lucas! I’m not doing it again.”

“They don’t want you again,” he said, looking at his wife. “You know they only like a woman a few times, and you’ve done it several times now.”

“Yes, well, we all have to do what we need to for the family.”

“She said they may have made her unable to have kids,” he frowned.

“Like she would ever have children, Lucas. She’s been sleeping with random men for years. She didn’t even know half those hook-ups were minor debt payments. We were lucky they were all her type. I don’t give a shit,” said Amy. “We need her to come back, Lucas.”

“Where are the kids?” he whispered.

“They’re asleep in their cabins below deck. Are we going to leave for St. Thomas today? We have to get away from here.”

“Yea. Yea, we’re going as soon as the supplies arrive. I didn’t want to risk docking in Miami, so there’s a service bringing everything out to the boat.”

“Okay,” she nodded. Standing, she bent over his chair, kissing his cheek. “I’ll go get everything clean and packed. I wish we still had the maid and nanny, but I understand that we need to cut back for a while.” He got up and looked out the windows.

“Looks like the supplies are here. Let’s get ready to sail.”

CHAPTER NINE

The Florida weather was playing in their favor. Dark storm clouds loomed above them, rain coming down in sheets as *The Trade* bobbed up and down in the ocean ahead. Keith, Eric, Billy, Wilson, and Tobias pulled their masks down. Their faces were blacked out with paint, making them unrecognizable.

Nearing the yacht, they slowed at her rear, near the engines. Carefully stepping aboard, weapons drawn, they slowly made their way to the upper deck. There was no one in the bridge, the gleaming mahogany looking untouched.

Keith turned, shaking his head. No sign of anyone.

Going one deck below, there was a television playing a children's channel. Puppets were laughing having fun with one another.

"I don't like this," said Wilson. "Where is everyone?"

Billy stood at the top of the stairs, looking below deck. His weapon was drawn, but he relaxed, leaving it hanging by his side.

“I don’t think we’re going to like what we find down there.”

The others moved closer to him, staring at the blood-stained carpets, bloody handprints on the walls. Finally making their way to the family cabins, Keith stopped at the first door, setting his weapon down against the wall. He knelt beside the bodies of the two little boys, feeling for a pulse. Turning to the others, he shook his head.

“They’re both gone. Shot in the head.”

“I found the parents,” said Eric.

The others followed him to the end of the hallway. Lucas and Amy Mackenzie were lying side-by-side on the bed, their hands bound behind their backs, their mouths covered in duct tape. Their end was perhaps more merciful than they deserved. One bullet to the head, just like their innocent sons.

“Look,” said Tobias, pointing to the wall.

Your debt is still unpaid. We’ll be back to collect her.

“What the shit?” muttered Wilson. He tapped his earpiece. “Gaspar? We need comms to run financial backgrounds on the entire Mackenzie family. Also, see what they can find out about Jason Mackenzie’s business and how the son was involved.”

“On it,” said Tanner.

“Search everything,” said Eric.

Leaving the bodies as is, they wouldn’t touch them. Later, they would make an anonymous call to the Coast Guard of an abandoned yacht.

The massive yacht had its own office, gourmet kitchen, four bedrooms, and three common rooms. The men wasted no time in gloving up and ripping open cushions, peeling back carpets, and gutting mattresses.

With only one laptop on board, Keith went to work trying to hack into it. It wasn’t any great feat. There was no security when you opened it up. Obviously, Lucas was so confident that no one would come for him he saw no need in securing the laptop.

He connected to the small satellite device, connecting the laptop to the home office in Louisiana. As he scrolled the

files and folders, he couldn't make heads or tails of anything. There were thousands of spreadsheets, which were definitely not his forte. Except one name kept reappearing. Quinn.

“Anything?” asked Tobias, tapping his shoulder.

“I'm not sure. I'm sending everything back home, but look at this. Quinn? Does that mean a company name, or is it a list of investors?”

“I don't know, brother. We're going to find out. We've got stacks of paper files we're taking with us, including some strange letters. Let's go. Comms is making the call now that the yacht is abandoned.”

Keith nodded at his nephew, squeezing his shoulder.

“Do you like her? Is she more than just a case? Gail?”

“I'm not sure, Uncle Keith. We have so much to get through, and I don't know if she'll ever recover from what they did to her. I want to try, but what if I can't do it.”

“Let me ask you something,” he signed. The others were now gathered in the doorway. *“When you think about taking her back to Belle Fleur, letting her heal and get right,*

do you see her staying beyond that? If she decided she was going to get well and leave, how would you feel?"

"I don't want to talk about this," he frowned. Wilson chuckled, shaking his head.

"I think that tells us a great deal, Tobias."

"It doesn't really tell anyone anything. Even I don't know what I'm going to do, so how could you know?" They all snickered, shaking their heads. "What? What's so funny?"

"Oh, Tobias. You're fucking cooked, and you don't even know it."

One by one, they made it topside and to the back of the yacht once again. They loaded into their small boat, turned, and headed back toward Miami. The entire time, they were chuckling at Tobias.

"Stop laughing! You don't know shit!" Eric just shook his head.

"Oh, brother. We know more than you can possibly imagine."

CHAPTER TEN

“Feeling any better, honey?” asked Kelsey.

Gail was curled up on the sofa, a warm blanket wrapped around her. Cruz had made her some tea and tomato soup, then helped Kelsey change her bandages and check her wounds.

“Not much, but I suppose that’s to be expected,” she said, looking at the other woman. “Can I ask how you ended up on the team?”

“Well, I’m not really on the team, per se. I married a man who is on the team.” Gail just stared at her, waiting for her to continue. Kelsey smiled, taking the seat across from her as Cruz and the others worked on dinner. “My mom, Faith, is married to Ian Shepherd. Ian was the commander of a SEAL team. She had just bought this old mansion in Coronado, California, because she was going to be part of the permanent staff at the naval base.

“Ian didn’t have a permanent residence. That’s another long story, but his commander suggested that he visit Faith, and she might have a room for him. Ian thought she was some old lady,” laughed Kelsey. “Truth is, she is older than Ian, but

my mom looks amazing! Anyway, he had been injured, so he needed some help as well. Long story short. He moved in, they became great friends, and then lovers.

“The day my mom was scheduled to start teaching at the base, Ian went back to work as well. She walked into the classroom, and who was sitting there?”

“No!” she gasped, covering her mouth. Cruz smiled at the young woman.

“Yep. Mom walked in looking like a million bucks to teach Ian and all those handsome young SEALs.”

“But, wait. How did that impact you?”

“Oh. Well, I came to Coronado for Thanksgiving, and Ian proposed to Mom. I hate to even say it, Gail, but I was awful to her. I was terrible to Ian, but I was really awful to Mom. There was this huge guy there, a SEAL, who said some things to me that weighed heavily on my heart. About Mom and Ian.

“I went back to Boston, where I was living and working. My boyfriend was getting physical with me, so I wanted to break it off. Anyway, he ended up kidnapping me

and beating me so severely I couldn't move. I was chained inside an abandoned house, naked, beaten, and dying.”

“Oh, my God! Kelsey. What happened? I mean, obviously, you're here, but what happened?”

“Well, Ian, being the amazing, wonderful stepfather that he is, sent a SEAL to look for me.”

“Wait. Not the big one that said things to you before you left?”

“One and the same,” she grinned. Cruz laughed.

“Noa Lim is one of the biggest bastards you'll ever meet. He was a Division One college football player. Had offers to play in the pros and wanted to be a SEAL instead. He found Kels inside that house, lifted her like a baby bird, and got her to a hospital just in time. The men were still after her, but we got a little help from a few friends.”

“That's us,” smirked Rafe.

“Yea, them,” laughed Cruz. “Once it was safe to move Kelsey, they drove from Boston to San Diego.”

“And you fell in love along the way?” smiled Gail.

“Oh, honey. I think I fell in love long before that. Noa was worried it was me falling for my rescuer, not for him. But he was wrong. I loved that man almost instantly. Even when he was saying all those things to me after Thanksgiving, I think in my brain, I was thinking, ‘this is the kind of man I should be with.’ We’ve been married ever since.”

“Wow, that’s just crazy,” she said, shaking her head. She looked around the room at the men. “And are you all married?”

“I’m married to one of the gorgeous sisters to those look-alike idiots over there,” smirked Cruz.

“And damn lucky for it,” laughed Antoine. “I married a woman that I rescued from a trafficking ring. Her nephew was with her, and I was lucky enough to adopt him and make him my son.”

“I married a woman we found hiding on our property. She’d been attacked, brutally. Worse than you, honey. Married her and adopted six of the finest children ever,” smiled Gaspar.

“Met and married the best damn chopper pilot in the world. Savannah is my whole damn world.”

“Same story, different girl,” laughed Gabe. “My Tori is an ex-sheriff’s deputy. She joined our team for personal reasons, so did her brother.”

“I never thought I’d meet the girl of my dreams,” smirked Bull. “I’m old as dirt and feel like it most days. Lily was locked in a shipping container because of something she saw. I rescued that sweet thing and couldn’t leave her.”

“And he sings like an angel,” smirked Kelsey.

“Kels!”

“What? I’m telling the truth. Ever heard of Amanda and William?”

“Oh, my God! I love your music. That album you did with Mia Rogers was amazing. Her violin playing is haunting.” The all smiled at her, nodding. “Wait. Is Mia on the team as well? Isn’t she blind?”

“She is blind,” said Kelsey. “She’s not on our team, but her husband is.”

“That’s just all so remarkable. Tobias said his grandfathers, father, and uncles are all on the team as well. It sounds like a dream to me. I mean, to have family that you’re that close to. That you can tr-trust,” she said with a short sob.

“Oh, honey. Don’t think about them,” said Cruz, gripping her hand. “We’ll take care of them and figure all of this out.” She shook her head, looking at the identical brothers across the room.

“Y-you said you have a sister.”

“Sisters. Plural,” said Gaspar. “We have six sisters.”

“Could you, would you ever...”

“Never.” They said it in unison, and the vibration of the deep bass voices ran down her spine.

“We would never, in a million years, do something so heinous to our sisters, our brothers, our friends, anyone in our family. No one,” said Antoine. “In fact, you can pretty much count on the fact that we wouldn’t even do it to a stranger.”

“Then why?” she said in a barely audible voice. “Why would they do this to me? You heard him. You heard him say that I had to go back to pay a debt. His own wife did it.

[\[PC3\]](#)Why would they do that?” She was crying now. Tears falling freely down her cheeks as her small shoulders shook.

Gaspar stepped forward, kneeling next to the young woman. His heart was cracking in two for her. He had no

explanation for what her family had done. But he would find out.

“I don’t know why, sweetie. It’s no excuse, but I’m gonna guess they’re in a mess of trouble. You let us figure that out. You just get well. We’ll all be right here to take care of you and make sure you’re alright.” She nodded as he gently hugged her. The fierceness of his expression was matched by his brothers and Bull.

“C-can I shower?” she asked. “Please. I need to shower.”

“Okay, honey. I’ll have to help you,” said Kelsey. “Come on.”

Antoine lifted her off the sofa and carried her toward the bedroom. When she was out of sight, Kelsey turned to the men in the room.

“Find her family. And kill them all.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

20 years earlier...

Jason Mackenzie stared at the computer screens, shaking his head. It wasn't possible. There must be something wrong with the formulas, with his screens. Maybe a glitch in his computer system. The investment was supposed to yield more than a seventy percent return. Seventy. Yet, according to all the information coming in, his client was going to lose his entire investment. Millions of dollars. He told him it was a 'sure thing.' He told him to invest it all.

"Jason, we need to leave soon," said his wife, standing in the door, smiling at her husband. She was still so stunningly beautiful. His beauty queen who'd selected him to escort her to Miss New York pageant, which she'd won. He was the luckiest man in New York.

Until today.

"What?"

"We have that dinner at the club for Fred Warren's retirement. We promised we'd attend, and I'm all ready," she said, spinning. He looked at her and frowned.

“How much was that dress?” he asked. Virginia looked at her husband in shock.

“What? Jason, you never ask what I spend on clothing.”

“I’m asking now.”

“Alright. It was sixty-two hundred. But it’s an original. I’ll wear it again.” He stood, walking toward her.

“No, you won’t wear it again. You never wear them again. That’s not your style. It’s not our style.” He heard the maid arguing with someone at the front door, then a very loud voice. He froze, gripping his wife’s arm.

“Go upstairs, Virginia. Don’t come down.” He tried to shove her toward the back access, but she wouldn’t budge.

“Jason! What are you doing?”

“Yes, Jason. What are you doing?” asked the man standing in his office door. Virginia looked at her husband, then back at the man.

“I’m sorry, my husband seems to not be feeling well. I’m Virginia Mackenzie.” She held out a delicate hand, the massive canary diamond gleaming on her left hand, the rubies,

diamonds, and pearls dripping from her neck and ears. The man took note of it all.

“Virginia, go upstairs,” said Jason.

“No, Virginia. Don’t go upstairs. This is going to involve you as well,” said the man.

“I’m sorry, I know nothing of my husband’s business,” she smiled. “Ask him. I can’t even balance the checkbook.” Another man gripped her arm, steering her toward the cordovan leather sofa.

“Jason?” she said, looking at her husband.

“We’ll recoup this, Eddie. I promise. You just have to give me some time.”

Virginia watched the interaction and knew that something was terribly wrong. Her husband was an excellent businessman who knew how to invest his clients’ money, making them ten-fold what was invested.

“I don’t have time to recoup, Jason. So, I’m going to make a proposal to you. Something involving a different part of my business.”

Jason stared at his wife and mouthed the words, ‘I’m sorry.’ She was sympathetic in her expression. But she

wouldn't be for long. In a while, she would hate him. Despise him.

“Please don't do this, Eddie. Please.”

“I have to,” he grinned.

He turned to Virginia and smiled. She was a lovely woman. Probably mid- to late-thirties. Maybe a few too many injections in her face, a nip and tuck here and there, but she damn sure wore that dress well. She wasn't exactly what his clients looked for, but she would do for the weekend. He'd dress her up in something young, something sexy and slutty, or maybe a schoolgirl. They'd love her.

“Virginia? Do you enjoy the theater?” he asked.

Virginia stared at the man, confused.

“Yes, I suppose I enjoy a good production. I particularly like musicals, but Jason prefers plays.” Eddie laughed. So did the two men standing with him.

“No, my dear. Do you enjoy acting? You know, playing a part.” Again, she looked at Jason, begging for clarity. “Let me ask this. Do you and your husband ever role-play in the bedroom?”

“That’s not something I’m comfortable speaking to,” she said with a haughty air. The men chuckled, shaking their heads.

“Well, get comfortable,” growled Eddie. “You see, your husband risked all of my money and lost it. All of it. This weekend, I have some very important clients coming to my mansion in the Hamptons, and you’re going to be the starring attraction.”

“Wh-what?” she whispered.

“Oh, it won’t be so bad. I mean, some of them can be a little rough on occasion, but I’m going to bet you’ll enjoy it and return a totally different woman.”

“Jason?” Her husband just shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Virginia. I’m so fucking sorry, honey.”

“No. No, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying, darling,” smiled Eddie. “You’re going to come with us. My guests will pay one hundred thousand a piece for two hours with you. And they will get to do whatever their hearts desire. Jason over there is going to gather all your jewelry, and my men are going to take the cars. That should cover about a fourth of what I’ve lost.”

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, racing to the wastebasket. She gagged several times as the men watched. Jason went to his wife’s side, rubbing her back.

“Jason, just give him his money back. Give him our money! Give it all! Sell the house, sell everything!”

“I-I can’t. I wish I could. We don’t have enough, Virginia.”

“Daddy? Are you and mommy leaving?” asked Phoebe, standing with her little sister by her side. Eddie’s smile grew wide, and he looked at Jason and Virginia. The woman popped up, shaking her head.

“No! No, you won’t fucking touch them!” she growled. “Phoebe, take your sister upstairs, honey. Go see Nanny. Mommy and Daddy will be up soon.” The little girl turned and walked back upstairs.

“I’ll do this,” said Virginia. “But you will stay away from my children.”

“Virginia, honey, we’ll find another way.” He reached for her arm, and she jerked free, glaring at him.

“Obviously, there is no other way. I’ll do this, but you will never invest for this man again.”

“Oh, sweet, sweet Virginia. That’s where you’re wrong. See, I am the only man that Jason invests for. The only fucking one. The deal is I make him a lot of money, and he makes me a lot of money. When that doesn’t happen, we get our money a different way. For instance, when I wasn’t able to pay his commissions a few years back, I gave him this mansion. When I couldn’t give him a paycheck for three months in a row, I gave him the mansion in Miami. The cars, the jewels, all of it is actually mine. You’re stuck with me. For life.”

On Sunday night, Virginia was returned to her home, unable to walk by herself. Jason took his wife to their bedroom, undressed her, and bathed her battered, bruised body. Fortunately, her face had not been touched, so the children were able to see her. It took nearly a year for her to look at her husband again.

Nine years later, Eddie was at their door again. This time, Virginia was too old for his purposes, and Phoebe was taken. She had just been crowned Miss New York. Two weeks after Lucas and Amy were married, Eddie showed up again.

“Your family has made me a lot of money, Jason,” grinned the man. “I want the younger one. That beautiful redhead of yours.”

“No,” said Jason. “No. Gail is too young.”

“Jason, Jason, Jason. I’m a man with a lot of resources. My man has been following her around, and we’ve been playing a little game. See, your sweet Gail has a ‘type.’ Handsome but not overtly so. He doesn’t have to be rich. He doesn’t even have to be smart. But she likes a man with a really good dick.

“I placed a few of my men in front of her and watched to see who she would take and who she wouldn’t. I have to say, she surprised us all. Your little girl is a wildcat in the bedroom. She likes it fast, furious, and even a little rough. She’ll be perfect.”

“She won’t do it. She’s stubborn.”

“Figure out a way, Jason. Get her to Miami and make sure she’s ready for my clients. Willing or not.”

Eddie and his men left the mansion, leaving Jason to once again wonder why he didn’t just take his own life.

“We can disappear, Jason,” said his wife. “Let’s just take whatever we can, sell whatever we can, and leave.”

“He’d find us, Virginia. You know he would.” She stood with her shoulders straight.

“I heard what you said. I don’t remember you jumping to my defense like that. Or Amy’s or Phoebe’s. You’ve always coddled her.”

“I didn’t jump to her defense, Virginia. I was trying to get him to back off. For fuck’s sake! I’m trying!” he yelled, slamming the desk. Virginia just stared at him, shaking her head.

“Well, try to figure out how you’re going to get Gail to Miami. It’s time for her to contribute to the family business.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

By the time Tobias returned to the penthouse, the group had eaten and were watching a movie. Curled up at one end, with her head on a pillow sitting on Gaspar's lap, Gail was sound asleep. The older man smiled at him, nodding.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"She had a pretty good day," said Cruz. "A few moments of confusion and anger, but that was to be expected. She's doing alright. Did you find her brother?"

"We found the whole family." That was all he needed to say. The others knew. "Coast Guard got an anonymous call, and they're taking care of it. We already asked comms to do everything they could to find the parents, and her sister and husband."

Gail stirred slightly, and Gaspar gently pushed back the hair on her forehead, smiling down at her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, attempting to sit up. "I must have fallen asleep."

"It's not a problem, honey. I have a wife and daughters, and they fall asleep on me all the time. You needed

the rest.” He helped her to sit up, and that’s when she noticed Tobias.

“Did you find him?” she asked.

“Gail, we found him and his wife and the two boys.”

“Little Jason and Jack,” she said, nodding.

“Yea, honey. I’m sorry, Gail. Someone got to them before we did. I’m sorry.” She swallowed, shaking her head. Wiping her eyes, she stared at the room.

“I’m not crying for him or even for Amy. They obviously knew something was going on. But the boys were just babies. They were only four and seven. What could they have possibly done to deserve that?”

“Baby, they were just born to the wrong parents,” said Eric. “Listen, Gail. We see a lot of shit in this world. We stop human traffickers who aren’t just selling adult men and women but selling children, babies. Babies, Gail. As young as four or five months. We’ve seen the evil, despicable, sick, twisted shit that this world offers.

“But. But we see the good, too. We’re so fucking fortunate that we see the good even more than the bad. Our own family, Gaspar’s parents, are the best this world has to

offer, and they have guided all of us to do what we do. People make choices. Sometimes, they choose to do good, and the ripple effect is astounding and beautiful to see.

“Sometimes, they choose evil. They choose to steal, lie, cheat, abuse, and even kill. And the ripple effect is even more profound. Families, friends, generations are affected by their actions. It’s our job to stop that. It’s what we choose to do. We find the evil, we find the sick, twisted shit in this world, and we stop it.”

“I’m glad you do,” she whispered.

“Honey, that means we will find your parents and stop them. We will stop them in any way that we can. Your sister and her husband as well.” Gail stared at them, nodding. She understood. She agreed with it. She just asked for one thing.

“All I want is to be able to face them myself. I need to know why. Why they allowed this to happen to me.”

“Fair enough.” Kelsey stood and went into the kitchen.

“I think we need some ice cream sundaes,” she smiled.
“It’s good for the soul.”

Rafe and Gabe helped Kelsey get out all the different varieties of ice cream, bowls, and spoons, as well as all the

toppings. They argued about whether peanuts were better on ice cream or pecans.

“Dude, we’re from south Louisiana. It’s obviously pecans,” said Rafe.

“I like pecans in my pralines but prefer peanuts on my ice cream,” said Gabe.

“You always were weird.” Gail smiled at the brothers as they bantered back and forth. “I suppose you prefer vanilla ice cream as well.”

“For a sundae, yes. Vanilla makes sense. Then I can make it into anything I want.”

“But if you start off with Rocky Road, or Praline, or Chocolate and Peanut Butter ice cream, you don’t have to add as many toppings,” argued Rafe.

“Shut up, both of you,” growled Bull. “Strawberry is the obvious choice.”

“Strawberry!” screeched the Robicheaux brothers.

“What are you, a five-year-old girl?” asked Gaspar.

“Don’t piss me off, old man. I can still hold my own,” frowned Bull. “I like strawberry. So does Lily.” Gail stared at them all, realizing they were trying to lighten the mood in

the room. She cleared her throat, and they all turned to look in her direction.

“I prefer mint chocolate chip.” She smiled at them as they all opened their mouths, staring. At first, she thought perhaps she’d interfered in their banter. Then, she knew. She knew she’d been accepted.

“Sweetheart, my grandson may think you’re perfect, but that’s just sick and twisted. Green ice cream tasting like fake mint with a bunch of baby chocolate chips? What is wrong with you?” Gail laughed as the entire room continued to debate the benefits of their favorite ice cream treats.

By the time they were all seated with their bowls, they’d moved on to a more important topic. Ice cream bars, popsicles, and ice cream sandwiches.

“Dude, the bomb pop beats out the orange creamsicle all day long,” said Gabe.

“Jesus, did Mama drop you on your head?” said Antoine. “Nothing beats the strawberry crunch.”

“Back to the damn strawberry,” frowned Gaspar. “It’s no contest. The ice cream sandwich with chocolate chip cookies rolled in chocolate chips. That’s the winner.”

“Sno cone with watermelon and lemon syrup dripping down your hand, all the way to your elbow, sticky and slushy. It’s melting so fast you have to eat it in a hurry and get a brain freeze,” smiled Gail. Billy laughed, shaking his head.

“Watermelon and lemon? No, no, no. Blue raspberry all the way.”

Gail just laughed as their friendly debate continued. It was a pleasant distraction, and she liked being around these men. She stood, moving toward the floor-to-ceiling windows and doors that led out to the balcony.

“Would you like to get some fresh air?” asked Tobias, standing behind her. She hadn’t even noticed that he’d stood with her, steadying her as she walked. His big, warm hand was at her back to ensure her safety.

“Can I?” He nodded, opening the door.

Bull looked up and nodded in his direction, then jerked his head at Nathan and Eric. They went out the bedroom doors, standing at opposite ends of the balcony, just watching.

Gail lifted her face to the cool evening breeze of Miami and the Atlantic. She took in a deep breath, then opened her eyes.

“I used to love coming down here for a long weekend. Dana and I would leave on a Thursday night and get settled into the house, then go out for drinks and dinner, dance a little. We’d lay on the beach all day. I’d burn; she’d tan,” she laughed. “But it was the best time of my life. She’s been an amazing friend to me.”

“I know she’ll be damn happy to have you there for the wedding.”

“Tobias? Do you think I’ll ever be the same?” Nathan and Eric looked toward him, wondering how he would respond. They believed in the truth, and they hoped their friend and brother would believe the same.

“No. I don’t know how it’s possible to be the same as you were a week ago, Gail. You were a different person a week ago. You knew nothing of this kind of evil. You had dreams and visions of a future that might not exist for you today.

“You’ll heal, Gail, but you’ll be a different Gail. Maybe a ‘new and improved’ Gail.”

“I was a different person,” she said quietly. “In the back of my mind, I knew this kind of thing happened to people. I mean, I’m a nurse. I saw this shit in the ER. You

just never think it's going to happen to you. You're right. I did have dreams and visions of a different future. Now, my vision and future have you in it. I hope."

He could see the smirk on the faces of Eric and Nathan, flipping them the bird behind Gail's back.

"I'm damn glad to hear that, Gail. My future includes you as well. I know it does. We'll take all the time you need to heal, but after that, the world is ours," he smiled. She gently wrapped her arms around his waist, leaning her head against his rib cage. Tobias was incredibly tall, and she was incredibly short. She chuckled, looking up at him.

"I think I need to buy more high heels," she grinned.

"Honey, heels, sandals, running shoes. It won't matter to me. Bending down to kiss you will be a joy." He placed a soft, sweet kiss on her lips, then turned so they could both see the stars out over the ocean. Couples were walking the boardwalk below, hand-in-hand, some arguing. Some had their dogs out with them. Others were rollerblading or skateboarding.

"T-Tobias? Do you have binoculars?" Nathan raced inside, then back out, handing her the glasses. She held them to her eyes, adjusting the clarity.

“Honey, what do you see?”

“W-William. That man down there is William. That’s
the man that took me.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Did you find her?” asked William.

“No, sir. She seems to have disappeared. There were no reports at any of the local hospitals of Jane Does or anyone else meeting her description. She didn’t return to the mansion, and the brother had no clue where she was. He said that she was with a guy but didn’t know who he was.”

“She couldn’t have just walked away,” he frowned.

“We have to find her and shut her up, or the boss is gonna fucking kill us.”

“The boss won’t kill you. But I will, you fucker,” growled Tobias, charging toward the shocked man.

He moved so quickly the man didn’t have a chance to get out of his way. Gripping his throat, he lifted him off his feet, shoving him into the sand at the edge of the boardwalk. His muscle reached for his weapon, but not before Bull gripped his wrist, snapping it backwards. The weapon dropped to the boardwalk, his bone poking through the flesh at his wrist.

Billy knelt beside Tobias to dig for the man's wallet. He noticed that his face was turning purple as Tobias gripped tighter and tighter.

“William Burkholdt. Boca Raton.” Billy tapped Tobias's arm. “You can't get information out of him if he's dead. Give him a breath.”

Tobias reluctantly released his hand from the man's throat. He sputtered and coughed, gagging as he rolled sideways. Turning on his knees, he tried to get up and run, but Tobias pulled back on his ankle, face-planting him in the sand once more.

“Don't fuck with me. I'm not in the mood.”

“Wh-who are you?” he gagged.

“Me? Oh, I'm the big badass son-of-a-bitch that's gonna kill you and feed you to the sharks. You hurt someone I care for. Why?”

“I-I don't know what you're talking about.” Tobias reached for his throat again.

“Try again, asshole. Gail. Why did you hurt her?”

“Hurt her? It was a game. I paid for her, and she was supposed to cooperate. That bitch fought me. Scratched the

shit out of my chest.” Tobias doubled his fist and threw the hardest punch he’d ever thrown in his life. They all heard the breaking of the other man’s nose as blood spurted all over his crisp white shirt.

“Who did you pay for her?” He shook his head, the bodyguard crying with his broken wrist cradled at his chest. “I won’t ask again. Who did you pay?”

“Look, it’s all a business deal, okay? Her old man is an investor and money manager, but he doesn’t do his job very well sometimes. He’s so fucking broke it isn’t even funny.”

“What do you mean? They have the mansion here and one in New York.” The man laughed, then sobered when a half-dozen men growled at him.

“Sorry. No, the houses belong to his client. He lets him live there for appearance’s sake, hosts parties, that sort of thing.”

“His client. As in one client?” asked Billy.

“He only has one client. That’s all he’s ever had. Some years, he would make him millions, then the next year, he’d lose millions. That’s how all this started.”

“You need to speed this shit up, boy,” said Bull. “I’m an old man, and I will see you dead before I die.”

“If her old man doesn’t make him money, he uses the wife, daughter-in-law, or daughters to entertain some very high-level, very influential people. They get the entire weekend with the women for a pretty heavy price, and the women have to do whatever they want. This one was the first one who didn’t know the deal.”

“No, she didn’t know the fucking deal,” spat Tobias. “Because it’s not a fucking deal! It’s trafficking!”

“Look, all I know is that I paid half-a-million to have her for the weekend for me and my friends. Cook and I thought we’d have some fun first, you know, break her in.” Another fist came his way, and he cried out. “Fuck! Please, stop! I’m telling you the truth.”

“Oh, I’m damn sure you are telling me the truth,” said Tobias. “It’s just not a truth you’re going to live through.”

“Shit, I’m telling you what I know. We had our...” He wisely thought better of his next words and stopped. “We spent some time with her and then left to pick up the rest of the guys. When we got back, she was gone. Boss has had us looking for her ever since.”

“Boss? Who’s the boss?” asked Tobias. When the man only shook his head, he reared back his fist again.

“Okay, okay! Please, no more. Eddie Quinn.”

“Eddie Quinn?” frowned Billy. “Who the fuck is Eddie Quinn?”

“You would know him more by his businesses than his name. NutriHealth.”

“The healthy food and vitamin company?” frowned Billy. “He has an empire of online workout tools, videos, all kinds of shit. You can have your meals delivered to your home, all customized for you and your health, to ensure you lose weight or build muscle. He’s gotta be worth millions if not billions.”

“He is,” said the man, wiping his blood on his sleeve. “But he also spends and gambles. He makes it, gambles it, spends it, and then invests it and hopes to get a return. When he doesn’t, he takes it another way.”

“Where are the parents?” asked Tobias. William frowned at him. “Where are the fucking parents? The Mackenzies.”

“I don’t know. The old man was responsible for making sure the daughter was waiting for me. I’m guessing they probably left after that. They never stick around to see the outcome.”

“How often have they been used? The wife, daughter, and daughter-in-law. How often?” asked Bull.

“The wife only once. Eddie and his clients want young. The sister was used five or six times. The sister-in-law, at least ten. She was a bit twisted and kind of enjoyed it, got into it.”

“Did you kill them? The brother and his family?” William frowned, shaking his head, and the bodyguard did the same.

“I haven’t seen them in a few years. I spoke to the brother yesterday, but I haven’t seen him,” he said. “If they’re dead, Eddie or his men did it.”

“You called him boss,” said Tobias. “Is he your boss?”

“No. I run a restaurant and club here in Miami, but Eddie likes everyone to call him boss. He gets off on it.”

“Why?” asked Billy.

“Because he’s a shrimp. Napoleon syndrome all the way. He’s about five-four, five-five, something like that. He wears lifts in his shoes, even his running shoes. He works out and eats healthy to give the impression that he’s bigger, but he’s not. So, he gets his ego stroked in other ways.”

“And he doesn’t care that you abuse the merchandise?”
frowned Tobias.

“He wants them broken in,” whispered William. He held up both hands, hoping to deflect any oncoming blows. “His words, not mine. Look, she knew nothing about it. It was planned that way. The father, Jason, he said she would never go willingly, and he was right. She was a fighter.”

“Damn fucking straight she is,” said Tobias.

He looked back at his friends and family, giving the nod that they needed. Nathan and Eric stepped forward as Antoine and Rafe walked across the boardwalk. They’d been watching in the wings the entire time.

“Wait. Wait, where are you taking us?” he screeched.

“Don’t worry, sunshine,” said Eric, lifting him off the sand. “You’ll be well taken care of.”

Tobias looked at Gaspar and Bull. They were the most senior in their group, along with his own grandfather, but he was with Gail upstairs.

“Quinn will have plenty of popular backing,” said Gaspar. “We have to catch this asshole in the act.” Tobias nodded.

“Maybe it’s time a few of us got more interested in our health.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“W-was that him?” asked Gail, looking up at Tobias. He wrapped his arms around her, kissing her forehead.

“That was him, but he won’t ever bother you again.”

“How can you be sure? How can I be sure he won’t come after me again?” she asked with tears in her eyes. Tobias gently led her toward the sofa, taking a seat next to her.

“Gail, I need you to trust me, trust us, in this. Sometimes, I won’t be able to tell you everything, but you have to believe me. He will never bother you or anyone else again.” Gail stared into his eyes, then looked at Wilson, Gaspar, Bull, and the others.

“O-okay. Okay, I trust you.”

“Gail, do you ever remember seeing your sister with injuries similar to your own?” asked Bull.

“Not really, but we weren’t very close. Phoebe was a lot like my mother. She was all about the beauty queen status and marrying the man with the fattest checkbook. She was also a good bit older than me. I think I remember one time

when I was in high school. I came down for breakfast, and my mom was putting something on her face.

“At first, I didn’t think anything of it, but when she turned to look at me, I could tell it was cover-up makeup.”

“Cover-up makeup?”

“Yea. Lots of women use it to cover imperfect skin, blemishes, scars, acne, anything. This was the heavy-duty kind that could cover port wine stains, birthmarks, or bruises. I used it to cover dark circles after a night out,” she blushed.

“That man, William, he said that they used your sister several times. Not just once. He also said that your sister-in-law, Amy, was used multiple times and that she enjoyed it.” Gail nodded, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“Honestly, none of that surprises me. I mean, them using Phoebe more than once is a bit surprising. I mean, why didn’t her husband say something?”

“Maybe she wasn’t married at the time,” said Bull.

“Maybe. I mean, she probably wasn’t married the first few times. Amy? Amy is a different story. She was never someone I liked very much, but Lucas thought she was the best.”

“Why didn’t you like her?” asked Wilson.

“Well, I thought she was only after Lucas’s money, which seemed weird. She came from money. But people, friends, in my parents’ circle were very ‘proper.’ Very conservative in the way they spoke, always doing and saying the right things. Amy didn’t seem to mind ruffling feathers or shocking people.”

“How did she shock them?” asked Tobias.

“She was pretty open about sex and their sex life. Lucas thought it was funny because my mother would always pretend to be shocked. I remember Phoebe telling me that Amy liked it rough in the bedroom. It didn’t make sense to me at the time, but I guess now it does. She said that Amy was going to make it worse for all of us.”

“The men we found said that she was used multiple times and enjoyed it.”

“Geez, that’s sick,” said Gail, holding her stomach.

“You said she came from money. Are her parents still living? Do they still have money?” asked Tobias.

“Her father is living, but I never heard her speak of her mother. In fact, it’s how Lucas met Amy. She’s the daughter

of my father's client, Eddie Quinn.”

“Fuck me,” growled Gaspar.

“Wh-what's wrong? Why did you say that?”

“Honey, we think Eddie Quinn is behind all of this,” said Tobias. “Those men downstairs said that when your father lost his investments, he would ask to be paid in another way. By using your mother, sister, and yourself. And, it appears, he would use his own daughter. Do you remember meeting him?”

“A few times, but always from a distance. I was very little the first time. I barely remember it. Then later, I would see him at these big holiday parties my parents always threw.”

“What was he like?” asked Wilson.

“Small,” she frowned. “I mean, I'm small, but he's not much bigger than me. He would hold himself like he was the biggest man in the room, but he definitely wasn't. He always had two or three bodyguards with him, which I thought was ridiculous. I mean, who was going to kill a guy with a health food company? He was just pompous. Very arrogant.”

“Well, all of that is helpful,” said Wilson, squeezing her hand.

“What happens now? Where do I go? I mean, the men that did this to me are, uh, taken care of. But what about Eddie? If he’s behind all of this, what happens now?”

Tobias smiled at her, then looked at the other men in the room. Kelsey was grinning at him, knowing where all this was leading.

“Well, as soon as Kels, Cruz, and Grandpa give me the thumbs up on your ability to travel, we’ll be going to Louisiana. My home. Where I hope you’ll allow me to offer you a room in my house. If you don’t want that, we can find a cottage for you by yourself.”

“You would want to share a house with me?” she asked quietly. “Even after all this? Even knowing what you know about me?”

“Gail, honey, everything I know about you is why I want to do this. You’re amazing. You’re smart, beautiful, free-willed, you care about others. And you and I both know that we’re perfect for one another. I won’t rush you. Not now, not ever. We get to know one another.

“When you’re ready, we can go up to New York and get all your things. Until then, just enjoy healing and

recovering. You'll be close to Dana and spend the holidays with me and my family."

"I don't think they'll like me very much," she whispered. Tobias chuckled, shaking his head.

"Honey, my grandfather already thinks you're awesome," he grinned at Wilson, who nodded, giving her a wink. "JB thinks you're amazing. In fact, he couldn't figure out why I wasn't blasting your phone after you left. I know that my mom will love you[\[PC4\]](#)."

"But, what about work? I mean, it's obvious my parents have no money. I have to work."

"You don't have to," said Gaspar. "We all make enough money that you would be just fine. But, I have it on good authority that you're a helluva nurse. We can always use a few more of those."

"That's for sure," smiled Kelsey. "Lena has been talking about retirement for years now. So have Wilson and Doc. I'm sure they'd love to work a few less hours."

"Really?" she asked, tears shining in her eyes.

"Really," they echoed.

"Then I guess I'm going to Louisiana."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Thank you, guys, for staying behind,” said Luke.

“It’s not a problem, Luke. What did you need?” asked Rory. He was sitting with Piper, Lucia, Cait, Axel, Jean, Lars, King, and Addie.

“The case that we’re working now is for Dana with her friend, Gail. Well, I guess it’s really become a case for Tobias,” grinned Luke. “Anyway, we need to get behind the scenes with NutriHealth.”

“The food and nutrition company?” frowned Rory.
“Why?”

“We think that Eddie Quinn is behind all of this. The team found the two men that attacked Gail. They’ve been dealt with. But before they were disposed of, they divulged that Eddie’s an egomaniac with a heavy dose of narcissistic tendencies. I’m going to bet that if he sees any of you, he’s going to jump at wanting you on the team.”

“Why am I there?” asked Jean.

“Well, Uncle Jean, in case you’ve missed it, you’re a huge part of this team,” he grinned. “You are insanely fit and

take care of your body. Seriously, you could compete. Plus, we want him to know about your financial abilities. He might just be looking for a replacement as an investment advisor.”

“Great,” frowned Jean. “But thanks for the compliments, Luke.”

“Look, between you, Rory, King, and Axel, I would expect he’d be drooling thinking he could use you on the cover of his ads. He’ll want the girls, but we need to be really cautious about that. He may try to use you in other ways.”

Cait’s head went up, her eyes wide. She’d been beaten before and raped. She wasn’t keen on putting herself in that situation again.

“Cait, I would never send you in without protection. Axel and the others will be there. In fact, Axel and you, Rory and Piper, Lars and Lucia, and King and Addie will all go in as couples. You’ll regale your tales about how his products have improved your lives.”

“Regale?” frowned King.

“Tell a story,” smirked Addie.

“Oh, right. I’m just a Texas boy. Don’t confuse me.”

King was far more than ‘just’ a Texas boy. He was highly

intelligent with a keen sense of street smarts. He was not a man you wanted to underestimate.

“Listen to me, all of you. This man is a master at getting people into positions where they owe him. Then, he uses them, their loved ones, and anyone else to make himself money. I would guess once we get all the financials back, we’re going to figure out that he didn’t lose as much as he led others to believe.”

“What do you mean?” asked Piper.

“Ro and Grace are working on the reported financials right now, but we’re digging for the unreported as well. We think he lied to Mackenzie about how much he lost. Mackenzie should have been smart enough to figure it out, but if he was being denied access to certain files, it’s possible that he wasn’t aware.

“I think he really gets off on these parties where he sells these women to business associates for the weekend.”

“Jesus, this is fucked up,” frowned Rory.

“We’ve done fucked up before, and we’ll do it again, but I want to get some justice for Gail and her family. Even if

they knew, even if they went in willingly, I think this was all still a ruse. A game,” said Luke.

“Well, he won’t be happy when he figures out our game,” growled Axel. “And the good news is, I don’t give a shit if he’s happy or not.”

“He definitely won’t be happy. His headquarters is in New York City. Fifth and Fifty-third, to be exact.”

“Swanky address,” frowned Rory. “That must be costing him a fortune. How many employees does he currently have?”

“There are one hundred and seventy listed at that address, but he has a warehouse where the products are shipped from in New Jersey. Hotel prices are insane right now in New York because it’s so close to the holidays. Be glad we like you,” smirked Luke. “Pigsty was able to get a suite at the Plaza. It has four bedrooms, so plenty of space for everyone to spread out.”

“And how do we know that he is actually looking for new employees?” asked Axel. “Do we just walk in and say we’re looking for a job?”

“No,” said Tanner, standing from the comms desk. He handed them each a packet with information in it. “Inside is an overview of NutriHealth. It’s reported earnings, products, everything. Jean will go in as a possible candidate for an investor relations specialist. Once he sees him, he’s going to ask him to stay on for other reasons.

“The rest of you will go in for various different jobs. He has a pattern. He hires ripped, athletic, gorgeous men and women. None of them are very bright, so you’ll need to dumb it down a bit. Find out what’s really going on at NutriHealth.”

“Alright,” nodded Jean.

“Jean? You and Rory are the seniors on this mission. Watch out for the others, and if at any point in time you feel that your lives are at risk, get the fuck out of there. Quinn and NutriHealth are all the rage. People love him and the products. We have to be very careful about how we do this.”

“Don’t worry, Luke. Not our first rodeo.” Luke nodded, hugging his uncle.

“I know. But you’re my only Uncle Jean.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gail could not believe the luxury of the private plane. She'd flown private jets before, but this thing was next-level. Tobias had carefully laid her on the reclining seat, ensuring she was comfortable. Then, Cruz, Kelsey, and Wilson took over checking her wounds, vitals, and dressings.

She stared up at Wilson, the man that Tobias called Grandfather.

“Staring isn't polite,” he smirked.

“I'm so sorry,” she blushed. “It's just that I'm trying to figure out how it's possible that you're his grandfather. I mean, you're really, really handsome and extremely fit. It's a bit disconcerting to think of a grandfather in that way.”

Wilson wanted to ask, ‘what way,’ but wasn't sure he wanted the answer to the question.

“Thank you,” he chuckled. “Wait until you see my gorgeous wife and his other set of grandparents. We do growing old right at Belle Fleur.”

“I can see that,” she smiled. “The others, Gaspar and his brothers, and Bull, they're all about your age, right?”

“Yea, more or less. Rafe, Gabe, and Antoine are all a bit younger. Gaspar is my age. Bull is a few years older.”

“It’s just remarkable. Whatever you’re doing, you should bottle it and sell it. I know a lot of women who would pay a fortune for your skin.” Wilson just smiled, nodding at her.

“Are you in any pain?” he asked. Gail looked away, biting her lip. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me. I can get Kelsey if you’d rather.”

“No. No, that’s okay. I’m still pretty sore around my vagina and anus,” she blushed. Wilson nodded, the anger building inside him.

“That’s to be expected, Gail. They weren’t kind to you. It will all heal, but it will take time. Does it hurt to urinate?”

“A little, but it’s getting better.”

“Good. If it gets to be too much, let us know.” He started to stand and head to his seat, but she gripped his hand, pulling him back.

“Will it matter to all of you? Tobias’s family. Will it matter that this happened? That I probably won’t have

children?”

“Honey, none of that will matter. I assure you. You heard Gaspar. His wife was attacked, and couldn’t have children after. They adopted six siblings that are all part of our team now. Amazing kids, all of them. Ivan and Sophia, another member of our team. Same thing. They adopted five great kids. Frank and Lane adopted a boy from Haiti. Others adopted nephews. Again, all part of our team now.

“Then we have those who chose to be the amazing aunts and uncles. Jean and Ro, Sly and Suzette, Ben and Harper, Adam and Jane. Having a child doesn’t define you, Gail, and it damn sure doesn’t change our opinion of you in our family.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I guess, just listening to all of you talk about family and how close you are, I thought maybe you wanted blood family only.”

“Gail, you’ll figure this out at Belle Fleur, but there’s no dividing line in our family between blood and non-blood. Mama Irene and Matthew, Gaspar’s parents, they see everyone as their children and grandchildren. They are truly the finest people you’ll ever meet.” Gail smiled up at him.

“How many people live there?”

“Oh, wow. I think I’ve lost count. We’ve gotta be close to three hundred people now, maybe more.”

“No one leaves?” she asked quietly.

“No. We have everything we need right there. All of our men were once Special Forces, first responders, or with an agency. Those are high-pressure, high-stress, overwhelming jobs. Our wives, including my own, all contribute to the businesses on-site. Some are PhDs, MDs, engineers, scientists. It’s an amazing group of people.

“We tend to not like cities or crowds. Belle Fleur gives us all exactly what we need, and we see no reason to leave.”

He looked at her pale features, checking her vitals once more. She was exhausted for all the wrong reasons. She should be making love to Tobias in the back bedroom, securing a great-grandchild for him. Not suffering like this.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared,” she whispered. “I’m scared that Tobias will wake up one day and know that he could have done better. That I’m not what he wants. I can feel myself falling for him more and more every day, and it terrifies me.”

“Oh, sweet girl, there is nothing to be terrified about. That is perfectly normal, and I can guarantee you that my grandson knows what he wants. He’s headstrong, like his mother and grandmother.” He gave her a wink and knew she was fighting sleep. It could be nightmares or any other number of things keeping her awake. But he needed her to sleep.

Turning, he spotted Bull and cocked his head. Bull nodded.

“How ‘ya doin’, sunshine?”

“I’ve been better,” she whispered.

“You know what usually helps the ladies fall asleep? A little song,” he smiled.

She graced him with a smile of her own, nodding. Music always helped to relax her. She heard the deep rumbling hum and closed her eyes, then the melodic words flowing from his lips.

His voice was perfect for the song choice. “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails, but he sang the version that Johnny Cash helped to make famous. The words were haunting and beautiful, painful and sorrowful. He watched as she closed her

eyes, then the soft rhythmic breathing. When he finished, the others were all in tears as she slept.

“You get me every fucking time, Bull,” said Antoine.
“Amazing, brother.”

“Thanks, man,” he smirked.

Gail awoke as they were beginning their descent. She used the electronic seat to push herself up and look out the window. There wasn't much to see except clouds and water. She could hear the men in front of her having their usual banter.

“And I'm telling you that pumpkin pie is the official pie of Christmas,” said Antoine.

“What are you, a communist?” frowned his brother Rafe. “Apple is the official pie of Christmas.”

“Apple?” the room smirked.

“Yes. Apple. Apple pie, all American, Johnny Appleseed. Apple!”

“You're all a bunch of dumbasses,” frowned Gaspar.
“It's Mama's chocolate pecan pie with cinnamon ice cream and whiskey-bourbon sauce.”

There were moans and groans, all of them shaking their heads.

“I think it should be cranberry tarte,” said Gabe. Antoine frowned at him.

“What the hell is wrong with this family? I’m tellin’ Mama on all of ‘ya.”

“Cranberries are very American. Just like apples,” he said. “Besides, nobody does a cranberry tarte like George. Damn, that’s good eating.”

Gail smirked at the men debating the finer points of pie. She slowly stood, walking toward them, and they all stopped to watch and be sure she didn’t fall.

“I’d like to weigh in,” she smiled. They nodded. “Mincemeat pie.” Antoine opened his mouth, then covered it with his hand as Gabe gasped. Gail giggled, watching their reactions.

“Blasphemy!” said Rafe. “I’m tellin’ Mama, George, Dylan, AND Sara. You’re gonna have to answer to her.”

In the blink of an eye, they went from pies to types of bread, white meat or dark meat, and then ham. Tobias gently pulled her back, letting her sit on his lap in his seat. She

gently sat sideways, her legs hanging over his things. His big arms wrapped around her, gently ensuring that she was safe and secure in his arms. He kissed the side of her face, then turned her to face him.

“Are you alright?” he whispered in her ear, kissing the spot behind her lobe. She turned to look at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I’m so perfect, it’s terrifying. But every time you kiss me, I’m lost again, not sure that this is real or that this is where I’m supposed to be. I never knew I wanted this, Tobias. I never knew I wanted you or anyone like you. Hell, I never knew that someone like you existed. It’s scary. Absolutely terrifying.”

“Not a damn thing to be terrified about, honey. We go forward from here. Only forward.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Gail really thought that the first person she would see would be Dana. Instead, there was a stunning blonde woman, tall and willowy, standing next to an extremely handsome dark-haired man. If she overlaid their features, she would find Tobias.

“Gail, are you alright?” asked Julia. She nodded, smiling at the woman. “I’m Julia. I’m Tobias and JB’s mother. I hope they were good to you in the Bahamas.”

“They have been nothing but kind, heroic, and gentle. I don’t know where I would be if Tobias hadn’t been in Miami.” Julia grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently. She wanted to know that she was safe. That she was with family. But secretly, she also wanted to know if there were any spirits hanging around her beautiful head. So far, nothing.

“Hello, Gail,” smiled the handsome man behind her. “My name is Joseph, but call me Trak. I’m Tobias’s grandfather.”

“I can tell,” she smiled. “You’re almost identical in size. He might be a bit taller, but I was thinking that if I overlaid your images, I would get his features. JB and

Tobias are the perfect combination of you, and his father. You're all beautiful people."

"Thank you," smirked Joseph. He looked at the two women walking toward them and nodded. "Gail, this is my wife, Lauren Redhawk, and Julia's mother, Sara Anderson."[\[PC5\]](#)

"Oh," she whispered. "Oh, my. You're stunning. You're both absolutely stunning. I mean, I met your husband on the plane, but holy cow."

"Yea, she gets to stay," laughed Sara. They both reached out, giving her a gentle hug.

"Are you alright? I mean, as alright as you can be right now?" asked Lauren. "Do you need anything?"

"I'm afraid that until I get to New York, I'm without clothes," she said, staring down at the sweatsuit they'd bought for her.

"We can take care of that," said Lauren. "I think you met my husband, Trak when you stepped off the plane."

Gail was speechless. She hadn't truly stared at him before, but now, she was stunned. There was something positively mesmerizing about this man. His nearly black eyes

held her gaze, the vague attempt at a smile tugging on his lips. But it was something else that suddenly paralyzed her. This man had endured pain. Unimaginable pain.

Without notice, she stepped forward and fell into his arms, sobbing. She wasn't sure why. She didn't know if it made sense to anyone but her. But she needed to do this, and it felt as though he were the man that could make her fears dissipate.

"It's alright, little one," he whispered, gently stroking her hair. "The pain will go away soon. The hidden pain will need to be dealt with in a different way. But it will all go away."

"We need to get her to the clinic," said Wilson. "I want Gray to check her out." Trak nodded, bending his knees slightly and lifting the still sobbing young woman. He carried her to the cart, where he set her in Tobias's arms and watched as they drove off.

"That was odd," said Julia, looking at her father-in-law. He nodded.

"I think she remembered something. Maybe some of the pain. Either way, she has a long way to go."

“I just hope Tobias sticks with her,” said Joseph. “I love my son, but he can be fickle at times.”

“I think he will,” said Lauren. “Didn’t you see the way he was looking at her? It was as if she were the only person here. She was the only one who existed.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Joseph. “Let’s head up to the clinic and see how she’s doing.”

Tobias waited outside the room while Gray and Lena did the internal examination on Gail. Dana and JB had arrived but were sitting with the others in the waiting area. He hoped that they would clear her to go to the pond, knowing it would alleviate much of the external pain.

Gray and Lena stepped outside the room, looking up at Tobias.

“Come down to my office,” said Gray. He followed her down the hallway as Lena went out to speak to the others.

“You’re scaring me, Gray,” he said, taking the seat across from her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Tobias, what they did to her, it rivals what was done to Alexandra and Rachelle. She won’t have children, honey. Nothing, not even

the pond, can correct that. I'm not even sure she'll have a normal menstrual cycle again.

“If I had to guess, she's going to be plagued with bladder infections, cramping, many things. But the worst of it will be the nightmares and feelings of panic. You've seen this with some of the other women here. You know what to expect.”

“The pond won't help?” he whispered.

“It may,” she nodded. “I just didn't want to get her hopes up, or yours. She needs you, Tobias. She's going to need your strength, patience, and understanding. I delivered you. I've known you your entire life. You're a fine, fine young man, but patience has never been your greatest gift.”

“What are you saying?” he frowned.

“I'm saying look deep inside of you, Tobias. If you can't do this. If you can't be patient, let this girl go.” He stood abruptly, leaning across the desk with a furious expression.

“No. You won't ask me to do that. No. I will not leave that woman. Not now, not tomorrow, not ever. Do I

make myself perfectly clear?” Gray grinned at him, then gave a full-blown smile.

“Yep. That makes me feel much better. I just had to be sure.”



The nurse and doctor left her room, and she pulled the sheet up to her waist. She'd been given the news she dreaded. The news she was certain was coming, but no one had been brave enough to say it outright. She couldn't do this to Tobias. She couldn't strap him with her body.

She tried to sit on the edge of the bed but was so weak, she couldn't slide off the edge of the bed to the floor. The door opened, and a tiny white-haired woman walked in with a robust African-American woman.

“Are you goin' somewhere, baby?” asked Irene.

“I need to leave. Will you help me?”

“Why?” asked Ruby. “Why on earth would you leave when you've finally found the man you've been lookin' for your whole life?”

“You don't understand. I'm not good enough for him. I'm not what he needs.”

“I see,” said Irene. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Irene Robicheaux, and this is my dearest friend, Ruby Norgenson.”

“Oh,” she said with a little gasp. “You’re the mother to Gaspar and the others.”

“That’s right,” she smiled. “All these babies are mine. All of ‘em. No finer men or women in the world. None. And that includes you.” Gail shook her head.

“No. No, you don’t understand. I’m not good enough for him. I wasn’t a good girl. I wasn’t the girl who was a virgin or only slept with three men in her whole life.”

“Pfft! Join the club,” scoffed Ruby. Irene laughed, nodding her head. Gail just stared at the women. “I was a prostitute.”

“Wh-what?”

“That’s right. Husband left me with six babies. Six hungry mouths to feed. I had no education, no job, and no way to earn a livin’, and I wasn’t about to give up my children. So, I did what I could. I did what I knew how to do.”

“Wasn’t that dangerous?” asked Gail.

“Not nearly as dangerous as someone tryin’ to take my babies from me. My sweet friends, Irene and Matthew, they knew what I was goin’ through. Offered to help me out.”

“Stubborn woman wouldn’t take it,” frowned Irene.

“Your kindness in befriendin’ me was enough,” said Ruby. “Showed all them snooty women I wasn’t anything to be afraid of. After a while, I saved enough to buy a little house. Then, I bought my own business. When I retired, I had three strip clubs and a coupla’ sex toy shops down in the Quarter.”

“Wow,” said Gail, staring at the woman.

“My Sven never looked at me like I was anything but a woman,” said Ruby.

“You don’t understand. I can’t give him children. A man like Tobias deserves children. He deserves to have a big family.”

“And he can have one if y’all want,” said Irene. “You can adopt or just be the best Aunt and Uncle to all the babies around here. But don’t run from love, baby. It ain’t all that easy to find. I bet you were workin’ your way through the

male population because there wasn't one that actually made you turn your head or have a second thought."

"You're right about that," she said. "The irony of all of this is that I've never even slept with Tobias. We met in the Bahamas and kissed. That kiss scared the hell out of me. I'd never felt what I was feeling in those moments, just from a kiss."

"That's some kiss," chuckled Ruby.

"I just don't know what I would do if he turns around in ten or twenty years and says he can't do it anymore. I'd die. I just know I would."

"No, you wouldn't," said the big voice coming from the doorway. "You wouldn't because it won't ever happen. You are the other half of my soul, Gail. I think you and I were the way we were because we were waiting on one another."

"Mama Irene would tell you that there is no such thing as coincidence. Everything that has happened was meant to be. Right, Mama Irene? Right, Ruby?"

"That's right, baby," smiled Irene. Ruby laughed, kissing his cheek.

“We’ll be outside if you need us. The others are waitin’ to be sure she’s okay. I think we’re goin’ for a swim.” The two old women left the room, and Gail looked up at Tobias. He had a serious expression on his face as he crossed his arms.

“I’m s-sorry. I got scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared. But don’t you ever think of leaving me again, Gail. Do you hear me? This is where you are supposed to be. Right here. With me. Clear?” She looked up as his face came closer and closer to her own. Reaching up, she touched his cheek, softly touching his lips with her own.

“Crystal clear. Now, what’s this about a swim?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You want me to what?” she asked with shock.

“I need you to trust me,” he said, smiling at her. He turned to the others with a pleading look, and they all just grinned at him. “Trust all of us. Wilson, Cruz, Doc, Lena, Gray, everyone here. They would never ask you to do something that wasn’t for your own good.”

“B-but they’ll see me,” she whispered. “They’ll see what they did to me.”

“Honey, no one will look. They’re going to turn their backs while you and I get naked. I’m going to slide into the water first, then Doc will lift you and hand you to me. I need you to trust me, Gail. This will work.”

“Trust him, honey,” smiled Lena.

She nodded as the others all turned their backs. Tobias undressed first, and Gail gasped at the beauty of his physique. This was not someone she would ever have approached before. He was too perfect, too determined, too smart. Too everything. But seeing the lean, carved muscles and lightly tanned skin, she knew she was exactly where she should be.

He was perfection. Pure and simple. He slid into the water and turned, smiling at her.

“Gotta take it all off, honey.”

She nodded, dropping the blanket around her shoulders. She stepped out of the sweats then pulled the sweatshirt over her head. Tobias saw the horrible bruises, fingerprint marks from their brutal grip on her thighs and behind.

“I-I’m ready, Doc.” He turned, staring only at her face, but carefully lifted her. He’d seen her wounds in the clinic, but this was different, and he understood that. He carefully lifted her in his arms, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

“It’s all gonna be okay, sunshine. You’ll see.” He handed her to Tobias, watching as she gripped his neck.

“Oh! It’s warm! It’s wonderfully warm!”

“Yes,” he laughed. “I guess I should have led with that. We’re not sure why, Gail, but these waters have healing properties. It’s really quite miraculous. Even my own father was healed by them. And I know that you’ve noticed how young everyone looks.”

“Healing properties? Youth? Like the fountain of youth?” He nodded, then his eyes went down to her legs. Gail stared at her legs, the bruises no longer visible. “H-how?”

“We’re not sure. Honestly, I’m not sure we want to know. How are you feeling?”

“The burning,” she blushed. “The burning down there is gone. My body feels normal. It feels whole. I don’t hurt everywhere.”

“Take a few minutes and swim back and forth,” he said, smiling at her. That long, silky, strawberry-blonde hair floated on the water as she gracefully moved. When she swam back to Tobias, he smiled at her, pushing the hair from her face.

“I can’t believe this.”

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said. “I’m crazy about you, Gail. Don’t run on me. Because I’m fucking crazy about you.”

“Oh, Tobias. Me, too. But I can’t...” He held a finger to his lips, kissing her sweetly.

“Listen to me. We will get there. Together. The children thing? I’m not worried about that. Look around you,

Gail. We have dozens of children here, and there are thousands who need homes if that's what we decide to do. Hell, my good friends, the Jordans, triplets mind you, all just gave birth to triplets. Nine babies, Gail! Nine! I'm sure they'd be happy for the help." She laughed, hugging him tightly.

"I don't know what I did to deserve you, Tobias, but I will work for the rest of my life to prove that it's not in vain."

"Hey, love birds!" yelled Cruz. "It's fucking cold out here. Get out!"

Gail endured another examination with Lena and Gray, but unfortunately her internal injuries were permanent. The surface injuries were gone. Miraculously healed. The rest would need to be dealt with in a different way.

"You'll see Rachelle and Ashley at least once a week," said Gray. "No breaking the appointments. Understand?"

"I understand, Gray. I promise I'll take this seriously. I know that I have to work through everything. Have you had others that got through it? I mean, I know about Rachelle and Alexandra. Tobias said there were several women who had been through something similar. But, well, I guess I'm wondering your professional opinion. Will I get through it?"

“Honey, we will make sure of it. Take some time and speak to Alexandra, Winter, and Rachelle. I know that Rachelle will be happy to speak with you during your sessions. Listen. Speak. Take it in.” She hugged the woman and left the clinic, only to find a group of women sitting on the porch.

Lauren, Sara, Julia, and Paige helped her to find clothing and then ordered more than she could possibly need. Gwen made sure that she had a gown for Dana and JB’s wedding. She put her things inside Tobias’s cottage, although she supposed that now it was their cottage.

“It’s really lovely,” she said, looking at him. “I can see why you all stay and never leave. It’s more of a home than I ever had. I mean, my parents had mansions and lake houses. Ridiculous things that were more status symbols. But it never felt like home.”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said, kissing her nose. “It’s our home now. Do whatever you like to it to make it yours, ours.”

“I like it just the way it is.”

With all of the surprises, all of the overwhelming welcoming, it was dinner that shocked her most. So much

food, so many people, and the holiday decorations were everywhere! Tobias introduced her to everyone, including Rachelle and Alexandra, whom she'd heard so much about. The women were empathetic and willing to talk to her beyond the professional realm, should she ever need it.

When dinner was finished, they made their way back to their cottage. Sitting on the porch were Pigsty and Tanner, waiting to give Tobias some information. Gail went inside, washing her face and getting ready for bed. Hearing a loud thud outside, she looked out the window and saw Wilson, Taylor, Nine, and Miller.

Wilson looked up, shocked to see her face staring at him. In an instant, she knew what they were doing and smiled. He held a finger to his lips, and she nodded. [\[PC6\]](#)
[\[MK7\]](#)

“Gail?” called Tobias.

“I’m back here,” she said, walking out of the bedroom. “Sorry, I just wanted to get into something comfortable. Can we stay in the same room? I mean, if that’s going to be too hard for you...”

“Don’t,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to be anywhere else. Ever.”

“Who were those men on the porch?”

“Oh, that was Pigsty and Tanner. They’re both operatives but key to our communications team. They’re digging into your father’s business but also the business of Quinn.”

“Hmmm, yes. The Mackenzie Quinn partnership,” she sneered. Tobias looked at her, then tilted his head slightly.

“Gail? Was your father connected to his Irish roots?”

“Yea, very much so. We were always a part of the St. Patrick’s Day parade in New York. My parents gave faithfully to the Catholic church, and we all went to Catholic schools. I mean, no one spoke with an Irish accent or anything, but we were definitely proud of our Irish heritage.”

“And Quinn? Did he have kids that went to school with you?”

“Amy was the only daughter he had, but she didn’t go to school with me. No. I don’t remember any. Maybe he had some others that went to school with Lucas or Phoebe, but Amy is the only one that I knew of. I never met a wife or girlfriend. He never brought anyone to the parties at my

parents' home, and honestly, I didn't see him as a man who would have anyone permanently by his side. Just a feeling."

"Was he involved in the parade, the church? Did he ever talk about anything to do with the Irish heritage, clubs of any kind in New York?"

"I honestly don't know," she said, shrugging. Tobias just nodded. "Did you find my parents or Phoebe?"

"Not yet, but we will. For now, what do you say we get some sleep?"

"I think that sounds good."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Good morning, everyone,” said Cam. “We’re going to start with Tobias this morning. Tobias? You said you thought of something last night, a lead maybe?”

“Yea, it was after I spoke to Pigsty and Tanner. Gail mentioned the Mackenzie Quinn relationship or business. And it hit me.”

“Westies,” said Rory.

“Yea, or at least the modern-day version of them. Westies were the Irish mafia in New York at the turn of the century until the mid-1950s. They were mostly into organized crime, gambling, running alcohol, prostitution, that sort of thing. But you have to remember that perversion and trafficking women came later in our century.”

“We’ve really evolved,” groaned JB.

“Right. But I think we can all agree that they didn’t just disappear. They became better at staying hidden, just like other organized crime families. The Italians, the Russians, the Chinese. They’re all still out there, but they know how to disguise themselves.

“What if Jason Mackenzie and Eddie Quinn are still playing that game? What if he’s investing money for Quinn and laundering it for the Irish mafia?”

“Pigsty? Any word from the feds on him? Do we know if he was under their watch?” asked Eric.

“Interesting story,” he said, frowning at the group. “The feds refuse to give us that information. They said, and I quote, ‘we cannot confirm for you that they may or may not have been under our review.’ End quote.”

“Jesus, fucking feds. Will they ever learn that we’re on their side?” said Cam.

“Probably not,” frowned Striker. The dog at his side barked three times, nodding his head. The men chuckled, staring at another one of the beasts they were training. “Sorry, he has an opinion about everything. Weird thing is, I think he actually understands everything.”

“What the hell is that?” asked Miller.

“Well, we’re not exactly sure yet,” he said, scratching his head. “Lucy is doing a canine DNA test on him. She thinks he’s part Burmese Mountain, part Mastiff, and possibly Russian Black Wolf.”

“A wolf? A fucking wolf? Like the one that almost ate your ass?” growled Gaspar.

“No, not really. I mean, Thor was a pure-bred beauty. Although looking at Apollo, he could be Thor’s son.”

“Apollo? You named the damn dog Apollo?” frowned Miller. Apollo turned to the man behind him, cocking his head. He stood on all fours, staring over the seat. His snout was lying on Striker’s shoulder as if to dare Miller to touch him.

“He likes his name,” grinned Striker.

“Okay, enough of the dog talk,” said Luke. “We were talking about the lack of cooperation with the feds. We know that we need to get some folks inside NutriHealth and find out what the fuck is going on. Maybe we need to find out what the Irish boys in New York are doing.”

“I’ll go,” said O’Hara, smirking at the group. “I mean, it seems obvious.”

“Uh, hello?” grinned Irish. He nodded to Liffey, Titus, and Dom. “We’ve probably got fifty guys here with Irish descent. I think we can send a team up to see what’s happening.”

“What do we have on Mackenzie’s finances?” asked Hex.

“Let’s just say I’m going to enjoy figuring out how he’s involved with NutriHealth,” said Jean. “Mackenzie actually started out with one of the major big three firms in Manhattan. He was making a killing, literally. In his first year, his W2 statement had him earning more than three point nine million. He doubled that the next year. His third year with the firm, they assigned him one client. Only one.”

“Let me guess. Quinn,” growled Antoine.

“Yep. Quinn. He’d been a client of the firm for a while, always insisting that whoever was handling his money and investments worked with him and only him. Mackenzie doubled his holdings that first year. The next three years were the same. That’s when Quinn asked him to leave the firm and come to work for him by himself.

“Let’s just say, he was given an offer he couldn’t refuse. According to human resource records, Mackenzie was stupid enough to put all the details in his resignation letter. He was being given a car service at his disposal with driver, two vehicles for personal use, a house in the Hamptons, one on Long Island, and one in Manhattan.

“I think we can assume the house in Miami came later. The brother and sister were both given trusts valued at two million apiece. Ironically, Gail does not have one. But I think I know why. The trusts weren’t put into place when they were children. They were put into place later. If my timing is right, it happened after the first time the daughter and daughter-in-law were used. There were several additions made to the accounts. Again, it seems to coincide with the timing of their abuse. I only suggest that because I know when Mackenzie lost money and when he made money. If I go by that as the catalyst, then this is what I get.”

“Fucking unbelievable,” murmured Tobias. JB reached for his arm, squeezing. “She gets brutally raped, beaten, and humiliated and gets nothing. They had the same happen, but by all accounts, agreed to go back for more. We’ve all seen twisted shit in our day, but this might just be the worst.”

“It’s all sick and twisted shit, Tobias,” said Joseph. “But that’s why we’re here. To stop it. Look around you, son. There are men in this room who have seen far worse, and their wives have experienced far worse. Evil is evil. Heinous is heinous. Comparing doesn’t make it any better.”

“I wasn’t comparing,” he frowned. “I’m sorry. I meant no disrespect to any of you. It’s just that I saw her injuries. I’ve heard her nightmares. I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re doing it,” said Hiro. “Be there for her. It took a long time for Winter to trust me, Tobias. It seemed like forever, but I had to allow it to be at her own pace. She’ll recover, brother. We’re all here to make sure of it and help you.”

“I know that,” he said, shaking his head. “I just don’t understand how her father allowed this to happen. I mean, after the first time, wouldn’t you have quit?”

“Maybe he couldn’t,” said Miguel. They all turned to see the older man in the top row with Doug. He stood, staring at the men he’d known for decades. “In the family business, you are not allowed to just leave or quit. You must request it, and it’s rarely granted. Usually, you have to give something in return. A limb. A child.”

“Jesus, this is fucked up,” said JB.

“It is,” said Hex, “but we’re in the business of fixing fucked up, and that’s what we’re going to do. Jean? You and the team head up to NutriHealth. Find a way to get inside and

see what they're really doing. Pigsty? You boys need to get every detail of the financials for Mackenzie and Quinn. Sly?"

"Got her."

"What?"

"You were going to say find the sister. I have her. She's on the phone." Hex nodded for him to place her on the video screen. She looked a great deal like Gail. Her strawberry-blonde hair was shorter, cut in a severe bob at her chin. Her eyes looked more green than blue, and the fine lines around her eyes and mouth told them she was older.

"Phoebe, this is our team," said Sly. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with us."

"I won't tell you where I am. I won't!" she said defiantly.

"No need," said Sly, shaking his head. No need because he already knew. She was in the South of France at a small villa on the coast.

"Why didn't you tell your sister?" asked Tobias. She stared at him, then shook her head.

"Are you her new plaything?" she asked.

“Don’t insult your sister that way, and damn sure don’t insult me. She was fucking brutalized. Raped, sodomized, beaten, and left so that she could endure more. Why would you put her through that?”

“Because I had to do it!” she yelled. She looked behind her, shaking her head. “I had to do it. I wasn’t given a choice. Ever. Six times I had to go with him and his men. Six. The first time, I was only nineteen. I was a virgin. Boy, they really enjoyed that.

“It was two years later that they came again. This time, I was engaged. My poor fiancé didn’t understand, and I couldn’t explain it to him. Amy took my place the next time because they returned for me just two weeks later. I wasn’t even fully healed. I guess I was lucky that she actually enjoyed some of it. Not all.”

“She and your brother were killed, as well as the boys,” said Tobias. She looked off to the side, nibbling on her lip, and nodded.

“I thought so. I couldn’t reach them.”

“So, you tried to reach them but not your sister,” frowned Wes. She stared at the screen, seeing all the angry faces.

“You don’t get it. We didn’t have a choice. Dad knew that Gail would never agree to do this for the family, so he didn’t tell her. Now, she’s fucked everything up. Quinn is after us, and we’re all in hiding.”

“Yea, you look like you’re really suffering, lady,” said Nathan.

“You know what? Judge me all you want. Gail played the field. Daddy’s little baby, she got to do whatever the fuck she wanted. She wasn’t forced to starve herself to death for a fucking crown. She wasn’t forced to marry someone Mom approved of. She got to do whatever, and whoever, she wanted.”

“As was her right as an adult in America,” said Tobias. “You pimped your sister out to save yourselves and your fucking money.”

“She’ll get over it,” she said, staring at the camera. “We all do.”

“Where are your parents?” asked Luke.

“I don’t know. That’s the truth.”

“You better think hard on that response, sweetheart,” said Hex. “You’re currently in a lovely little village in

Farinette-Plage, just off Rue Farret. Your husband, Arthur, is currently playing with your son and daughter. I believe they're six and eight years old.”

Her skin visibly blanched as she stared at the screen.

“If you think Quinn is the devil, you haven't met us,” said Rory, staring into the lens.

“M-my father's health isn't good. They decided to stay stateside. Right now, they're hiding out in the house that belonged to Arthur's grandmother in Newport, Rhode Island. It's been on the market but hasn't sold.”

“You've been very helpful,” said Tobias, gritting his teeth. “Do you have a message for your sister?”

“Yea. Tell her thanks a lot.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tobias elected not to tell Gail anything about their conversation with her sister. It would kill her to know how she felt about her and what happened to her. It was killing him.

“Hey, Tobias. Not all siblings are like us,” said JB, running on the path toward him. “You know I would never, ever leave you high and dry like that, right? Not to mention that Mom and Dad would have never allowed something like that to happen.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. “I just don’t get it, that’s all. I mean, what the fuck would make people act like that?” Slowly, the others started coming toward them as well. The wind whipped out of the north, making all of them shove their hands into their pockets.

“Money. Unfortunately, it was all money-motivated,” said Luke. “We saw the deposits and can conclude they happened right after each time they were used. Lucas and Amy’s accounts were padded more than the others.”

“I want to go find the parents,” said Tobias.

“I know you do, and you will. But I need for you to keep your wits, Tobias. I can’t have you going rogue on us. I need to know everything that Jason Mackenzie can tell us about Quinn. If he’s the one that’s been investing for him, then I suspect there’s something to it all. It can’t just be about losses and gains.”

“Then let’s go find him,” said Tobias. He packed his gear and tried his best to explain to Gail why he had to leave for a few days. He promised he’d be back by Christmas, and they would celebrate JB and Dana.

“I’m scared, Tobias. You’re leaving me here alone after only knowing everyone for a short time. I know they’re wonderful people, but still.”

“Honey, they adore you. You are considered one of ours now. Just take care of yourself, get healthy. Don’t miss your sessions with Ashley and Rachelle. Believe me, they’ll help tremendously. When I return, we’re going to start planning our life together. You and me, baby. You and me.” She looked up at him with those big blue eyes filled with tears and nodded.

“You and me, Tobias,” she smiled. He kissed her and opened the front door, only to find thirty women smiling at

him. They each had a dish or plate of something delicious, kissing his cheek as they passed by him and entered the cottage.

“Looks like you’re going to be well taken care of,” he smiled.

“Hello,” she said, staring at the all the women.

“Don’t worry, honey,” said Julia. “This is our version of the Belle Fleur welcome wagon. We’re going to have a feast, eat everything we shouldn’t, watch a movie or two, and just enjoy ourselves.”

“We may do some Christmas shopping as well,” smiled Lauren.

“Oh, this is exactly what I needed,” she grinned.

“That’s what this cottage is missing. Christmas. I don’t know if he has a tree or if he decorates or not.”

“We always decorate,” said Sara. “I’m sure it’s just been that he’s been gone so much he hasn’t had the chance. Usually, the trees are delivered, and then we get to work decorating.”

As usual, right on cue, there was a knock at the door. Phoenix and Trevor waived at the ladies, moving the massive

eight-foot tree into the living room.

“Where would you like it, hun?” asked Trev.

“Oh, wow. I’m not sure. Maybe in front of the window so everyone can see when the lights are on.”

“I love that,” smiled Julia.

“What do we do about decorations?” she asked.

Again, eerily, the door opened with Baptiste and Alec standing with three boxes of decorations.

“Mama said you’d need these,” said Baptiste.

“H-how would she know that?” whispered Gail.

“Best that you don’t ask,” giggled Megan. Georgie and Ellie were standing beside her, laughing, nodding their heads.

“This is the strangest family I’ve ever met,” she smiled. “But I think it’s wonderful.”

“We were promised cookies,” said Baptiste with a little boy frown. Phoenix and Trevor nodded, holding out a hand like little boys.

“You guys are worse than the children,” said Faith.

“We are children,” said Trev. “You know that. We might be big, but we act like little boys and usually get exactly what we want.”

Erin handed them each a cookie and shoed them out the door. Gail could only laugh as they chomped down on their prize cookies. While some of the women put out all the food, the others began unboxing the decorations. Gail laughed as Sophia Ann, Susie, and Paige argued the best way to strategically string lights for the best effects. The engineering minds were taking over.

When that was done, one-by-one, they grabbed an ornament and began circling the tree. Gail stared at one of the ornaments and laughed. It was a handprint in clay, the fingers representing a reindeer’s antlers. The palm was the face, with big black eyes, a red nose, and a tiny mouth.

“Oh, my God, this is so cute,” she laughed. Julia nodded, smiling at her.

“Tobias and JB did those in first grade. Dana has JB’s, and now you have Tobias’s.”

“Oh. No. These belong to you,” she said, handing her the ornament. Julia wrapped Gail’s fingers around the ornament and pushed it back toward her.

“No, honey. They’re yours now. For you and your family. For you and Tobias.” Gail wasn’t sure why it was happening, but suddenly, the tears came, slowly turning into sobs, then breathless gasps. She crouched on the floor, hiding her face from the other women. But it was useless.

She felt hand after hand, touching her, patting her back, kissing the top of her head. Finally, Rachelle sat down next to her, gripping her hand in her own.

“The holidays always make us think of things we don’t want. They’re wonderful and brilliant and full of joy and laughter. But that also makes us think of the times that weren’t full of laughter. The things we’re missing out on or didn’t do this year. Our grand plans on New Year’s seem far away.”

“It’s not that,” she hiccupped. “I’m so sorry, all of you. This is wonderful. Amazing, in fact. I’m not sure why it never bothered me before, but my family didn’t do this.”

“They didn’t celebrate Christmas?” asked Grace.

“They did, but we didn’t do this. My mother would hire a decorator who bought the tree, decorated it, and then we were told not to touch it. Cookies were made by the chef, and we couldn’t have one unless my mother said it was okay.

“Gifts were always outrageous gifts. I mean, who gives a ten-year-old little girl an Hermes bag?” she asked the room.

“I’ll pretend to be ten if that helps,” smirked Hazel. Gail chuckled, nodding her head.

“I know. Dana and I spoke about this several times, and she said the same thing. I should be grateful for it, but knowing what I know now, well, I just can’t be.”

“That stands to reason,” said Bree. “You’ve been a pawn in a very nasty, very dangerous game. What we can assure you, Gail, is that you will never again be used in that way. Never. Tobias, all the men here will make sure of that.”

“Did they love me at all? Any of them?” she asked, looking up at the beautiful faces. Claudette kneeled in front of her, gripping her hands.

“Baby, they loved you the only way they knew how. Good or bad, that’s all we know. But the beautiful thing is that you will be loved here exactly as you should be. You will be cherished, hugged, kissed, guided. There is no other kind of love like the love of our Belle Fleur family.”

“It’s all so fast,” she whispered. Claudette smiled, turning to Erin and Kate.

“That’s where we come in,” said Erin. “I’m going to give you a piece of advice, and then Kate will give you her generation’s advice. It’s similar, yet not. Ready?”

“Ready,” smiled Gail, wiping her tears.

“Sweet Gail, 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. 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.” Erin nodded at Kate as she stepped forward.

“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.”

“God,” she whispered. “I wish I had known you all ten years ago.”

“It wouldn’t have meant as much ten years ago, honey. It wouldn’t have sunk in. It wasn’t the right time to hear that,” said Erin. “Tobias chose you, Gail. He. Chose. You. You are already loved and treasured. Accept that gift for all that it is.”

“You can be sure I will,” she said, pushing off the floor.

“Alright,” said Camille. “Let’s decorate this tree!” Faith was looking out the window as Ghost, Ian, Gaspar, Miller, Nine, Tailor, and Alec were pushing a massive wagon on wheels. It was covered in a weather retardant tarp, tied down.

“What are those fools doing?” she mumbled.

“They’ve been acting weirder than usual,” said Grace.

“Very suspicious, all of them,” said Claudette. They turned to see a smile on Gail’s face.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, shrugging. “You know how men are. Strange.” Mama Irene looked over at her with a grin, then turned to stir her gumbo.

“Strange indeed, child. Strange indeed.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“You gonna marry that girl?” asked Kiel.

“Of course!” yelled Tobias at his teammate. “I just need to allow her some time to heal. I may buy a ring for Christmas, but I don’t want to push her.”

“Good man,” nodded Ian. “Aspen was about the most stubborn woman on the planet. Sometimes, you have to take your time and just let things happen.”

Tobias nodded, staring at the faces he knew so well. Some were older, some his own age. But they’d all grown up together. They knew one another’s parents, siblings, friends. Because they were all the same. The existence that Gail lived was so very different from their own, and he was grateful for it. But they, he and Gail, were more similar than either cared to admit or see.

“We were alike,” he said quietly. “We were choosing the safe partner for the night to scratch our itch. The one that we could push out the door at the end of it and say, ‘thanks.’ No goodbyes, no asking for phone numbers, no asking to see us again.”

“Why do you think that is?” asked Carl.

“I don’t know,” he said, shaking his head. “I think I just thought if I moved from one to the next, I would have time to figure out which one was the right one. Or maybe avoid the right one.”

“Then how did you know that Gail was the right one?” asked Marc.

“I kissed her. I fucking kissed her and thought my entire world would explode. JB and Dana had gone to her hotel to get their things, and we were just talking. I figured we’d have some fun, but when I kissed her, everything changed.”

“Did it for her as well?” Tiger stared at him, waiting for the response.

“Yea. In fact, she pushed back and said she couldn’t do it. I didn’t even try to persuade her. Normally, I would have turned on the charm, made them feel comfortable with me. God, what a pompous asshole I am. Not with her. I didn’t ask for her number, but at the airport, she handed me a slip of paper with her number on it. It just said if I ever wanted to try that kiss again, call her.”

“You obviously did,” smirked Wade.

“I did, but I was nearly too late. I texted her, and she texted back, just silly stuff. It was that text that saved her life. It was the only number she had in her phone of someone she thought might help her. One fucking person. How does that happen?”

“Not all families are like ours, Tobias. You know that,” said Benji. “We’re unique in so many fucking ways, and we can thank our parents, grandparents, and Irene and Matthew for that. I can tell you that all I ever wanted to do was come home. I wanted to be back at Belle Fleur, and I’m fucking lucky I made it.

“I think about all the men we served with that didn’t make it. The ones so close to coming home, they could taste it. They’d started packing, buying souvenirs for the family. Then a week before, hell, a day before, it all ends.”

“That’s true,” nodded Wade. “Then there were the ones that got home, and it wasn’t what they left. The girlfriend or wife was different. The kids didn’t recognize them. Their parents didn’t understand them. I think if I had a Christmas wish, it would be to duplicate what we have at Belle Fleur.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” said Adam. “I think we were blessed with one-of-a-kind parents, grandparents, and, of course, Belle Fleur. Grandma and Grandpa are definitely unique, and they make sure that we’re all safe and protected in their own ways. All I know is that when I’m feeling off-center, just out of sorts, all I have to do is see them, touch them, say a few words, and my world is right again.”

The men all nodded, agreeing with Adam.

“Do you think they’re both voodoo?” asked Benji.

“Brother, I have no idea, and honestly, I don’t care. They could be leprechauns for all I care. They’re ours, and I will fight to the death for them,” said Tobias. He looked around the plane and counted the heads. “This is a lot of men for one couple.”

“Half are going to New York,” said Adam. “We’re going to figure out what sort of shit they’re into and stop it. I won’t lie. I want to beat the fuck out of her parents, but I’ll leave that to you. But I will get me a piece of Quinn when it’s time.”

It was bitterly cold in Rhode Island. The men were all wearing the new high-tech cold weather gear created by G.R.I.P. It was thin, like the material of running tights, but the

moment you pulled it on, it felt as though a heater was warming your body. You never got too hot or too cold. Through a microscopic [\[PC&\]](#)temperature control feature, it judges your body's needs and cools or heats to the needed temp.

Although Rhode Island wasn't necessarily anything to write home about, the massive mega-mansions of the old upper crust of the Northeast were something to behold. Vanderbilts, Gettys, and so many more. Homes built to impress, brag, show wealth, and prosperity at a ridiculous level.

Sandwiched between Rosecliff Mansion, built for a silver heiress, and Marble House, built for William Vanderbilt, was Shannon Manor.

"I'm catching a theme here," frowned Benji, pointing as he spoke. "Shannon, as in Shannon Ireland. The iron gates have shamrocks on them. There are no less than twelve statues of saints in the gardens. And look, Irish Wolfhounds lying at the door."

"Well, they're gonna shit when they meet him," said Tobias, pointing to Apollo.

“Oh, come on, he’s just a baby,” said Striker. “He won’t kill anyone unless I tell him to.” They walked slowly up the drive, the wolfhounds watching them carefully. Apollo gave a low, guttural growl, and the wolfhounds sat on the steps, almost giving a venerable bow to him.

“How the hell did he do that?” asked Tobias. Striker just laughed, shrugging his shoulders. The massive doors opened, and a man and woman stood, waiting.

“We’ll go with you. Just don’t hurt my wife,” said Jason Mackenzie.

“Don’t hurt your wife? That’s fucking hilarious,” said Tobias. “Yet you let those damned animals feast on your own daughter’s flesh.”

“You’re not with Quinn. Who are you? Do you know where Gail is?” asked Virginia.

“You’re fucking right I do,” he growled.

“She needs to come home and finish this. She owes it to her father and me to do this for us!” Tobias stepped forward, his brother attempting to grip his shoulder and failing miserably. He stood in front of the woman, glaring down into her face.

“I have never wanted to punch a woman in the face so badly in all my life,” he said. “You’re a fucking despicable bitch. They nearly killed her and hadn’t even gotten past the first two men. She will never have children. Never.”

“Dear God,” whispered Jason. His wife frowned at him.

“No. No, you don’t get to feel sorry for her when I had to endure the same. Phoebe and Amy as well. We all did it, and she has to do it as well. We have a lifestyle to maintain.”

“As much as I love this banter,” said JB, “I think we should go inside away from prying eyes.”

The wall of men in front of the older couple followed them inside. The home had been staged beautifully for potential sale, and the Mackenzie’s were definitely making the best of their situation. They took their seat on a long, ridiculously patterned sofa and waved to the seats around the room. Most of the men stood, but Striker, JB, Tobias, and Adam sat near and around the Mackenzies. The others blocked the doors and exits.

“How is she?” asked Jason Mackenzie. Tobias folded his arms over his chest, growling at the man.

“She’s fine.”

“We don’t allow dogs on the carpet,” said Virginia, staring at Apollo. “You’re going to need to move him.” Striker smirked at her, shaking his head.

“You tell him that, lady. He’s not fucking moving anywhere.” Virginia Mackenzie stared at the dog, then the man, finally relinquishing her quest for power.

“How could you do that to your children?” asked Tobias. “How could you send her to those men knowing what they would do to her.”

“Please, it’s not like she wasn’t working her way through every single man in Manhattan,” said Virginia.

“Lady, I’m only going to warn you once. You speak of Gail that way again, and I will forget my vow to not harm women and children. Because I will take joy in fucking torturing your ass and chopping you in little pieces.”

“Please, enough of the threats,” said Jason Mackenzie in a tone of exasperation. He seemed like a man who had reached his limits. He definitely appeared older than his years, lines and wrinkles covering his ashen face. “I suspect you know why we had to do it. Quinn owns me and, by proxy,

owns my family. We heard that our son and his family were murdered. Did you do that?"

"No. We didn't kill them, but I suspect Quinn did," said Adam. Jason nodded, sighing.

"He's angry that Gail got away. He's got men out searching for her and now for us. I can't do it anymore. I just can't."

"Now you get a conscience?" said Tobias. "After you destroyed your wife, your children? Now you get a conscience?"

"Don't judge me. Don't you dare judge me, young man. I made Quinn millions in those first few years. I had no idea at the time that he had a gambling problem and a spending problem. As fast as he could earn it, he was spending it. When he offered me that job to leave the firm, I had to take it." He looked at his wife, and suddenly they all knew. She was the one controlling this entire puppet show.

"You sold your children for a lifestyle?" frowned Tiger. She didn't respond, jutting out her chin. "You knew what Quinn was like. You saw it, you heard about it in your fucking social circles, and yet you still did this. You're sicker than I thought."

“Why didn’t you tell Gail what was happening? Everyone else knew. Why not her?” asked Tobias.

“She wouldn’t cooperate,” said Virginia. “She never cooperates. Beauty pageants, talent shows, university choices, hell, husband choices. That child is as stubborn as a bull.”

“That *child* is a grown woman with a mind of her own. Had you taken the time to get to know her, you’d know that she’s fucking amazing. Brilliant, beautiful, intelligent, kind.” Jason Mackenzie stared at the young man.

“You’re in love with her,” he whispered.

“Love?” screeched Virginia. “Young man, you will be sadly disappointed in my daughter. She doesn’t have the capacity to love, only to fuck!” Jason never attempted to stop the man, knowing he didn’t have the strength.

And that was it. That was the straw that broke Tobias’s back. He slapped Virginia so hard her head snapped back against the sofa. She gripped her cheek, completely in shock by the action.

“You ever speak about my future wife that way again, and I’ll kill you.”

“Please, we’re just scared,” said Jason.

“You should be. Quinn has a massive manhunt out for you, and he will find you.”

“He’ll find her too,” said Virginia defiantly with tears in her eyes. “He’ll find her and finish what he started, and then we’ll be back to normal.”

“You will never be normal, lady,” said Carl. “They won’t find Gail. Ever. Neither will you.”

“What investments were you making for Quinn?” asked Tobias.

“Nothing suspicious. They were all legal companies, legal investments that yielded good returns. The problem was he was gambling with other people’s money. He was making investments for foreign businessmen, playing with their money because they couldn’t trade on the U.S. stock exchange. I didn’t know that originally, then I figured it out.”

“He was using his money to launder their money,” said Ian, nodding at the others.

“What? No, I-maybe,” said Jason, shaking his head.

“Who were the other investors?” asked Tobias.

Jason Mackenzie opened his mouth to say something, to give one last piece of evidence that might save his

daughter's life. Instead, the splatter of blood and brain stained the Aubusson carpet.

Virginia Mackenzie didn't even move. She stared at her husband's dead body, then closed her eyes, waiting for the inevitable. With a single shot, she rolled left into her husband's body. Both of them dead.

Ian, Mark, and Tiger raced around the back of the mansion to see if they could find where the shots had been fired. Out on the frigid waters of Easton Bay, a massive boat sped away, no doubt carrying the shooters.

“What do you want to do?” asked Benji. Tobias just stared at them, unable to comprehend how they could treat their children in such a manner.

“Nothing. Leave them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

While Jean and the others interviewed at NutriHealth, the Irish of Belle Fleur made their way to the area of Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan. Once upon a time, it held the Irish gang known as the Westies. Today, it was trendy shops, restaurants, over-priced apartments and townhomes, and an underbelly of organized crime.

They weren't exactly sure of what they were looking for or what they would see, but when they made a left at 49th and 10th, they were shocked to see the variety of ethnic restaurants. Indian, Persian, Thai. Everything except an Irish pub.

"Maybe we're in the wrong place," said Liffey.

"No. We're in the right place," said Irish. "Look." He pointed to the sign above the Indian restaurant. *Delhi a Quinn Restaurant.*

"Okay. Let's have Indian food."

The smells of the Indian cuisine assaulted before they even opened the door. The rich fragrance of cardamom, curry, and spice had them all hungry. Taking their seats, the waitress

brought them water and asked if they wanted anything else to drink.

“No. Just water,” said Irish.

“I’m sorry. The owner requires that you drink something other than water,” said the young woman cautiously.

“Fine. Iced tea for everyone.” She frowned at them, then returned to the kitchen where they could see her whispering to the chef.

“I think this lunch is going to be short and sweet, boys,” said Dom.

“Rules of the house,” growled the chef, “order some fucking liquor or don’t eat here.”

“You can stick the rules of the house up your ass,” smiled Liffey. “Water or iced tea, that’s what we want. Now get us the fucking drinks and our food.”

“You’re going to regret that,” he smirked.

“I’m really sorry,” said the waitress. “I know it’s a silly rule, but we have to enforce it, or Mr. Quinn gets angry.”

“We know it’s not your fault,” said Titus. “Do we dare order any food?” She gently shook her head.

“Not unless you want diarrhea for the next four days.”

“Lovely,” smirked O’Hara. They heard the doors open, and four men walked in, all carrying police batons. It was very old school, classic 1950s gangster movies. They all laughed, watching as the men swatted their own hands with the batons.

“You were told to order liquor or leave. Now you’re going to leave the hard way,” said a big man with no neck and eyebrows that met in the middle of his forehead.

“Oh, I think not, my friend,” said Titus, standing to his full height of six-feet-six. His son, Dom, stood beside him. The men all shuffled on the balls of their feet as each man stood, towering above them. No doubt the gangsters outweighed them, but there was nothing that could take the place of their training and abilities.

“One chance to rethink this really stupid move,” said Irish. The big man smirked at him, raising the baton above his head. Before he could even make a move downward, Irish had it ripped from his hands, tossing it through the window of the restaurant. Glass shattered, forcing cold air into the restaurant.

The second took a run at Titus, and he only laughed, moving aside like a matador at a bullfight. Gripping the back

of the chair, he slammed it over the man's head, then swept his legs from beneath him. Face down on the floor, he zip tied his hands.

When the third man saw the fate of his friends, he hesitated but must have been weighing the options he would be left with if Quinn found out. Reaching toward the back of his jacket, he felt for the pistol that was always there. Instead, it was swinging from the finger of Dom.

“Lose something?” he asked. Liffey gave a fast roundhouse kick, dropping him to his knees, his face covered in blood. The fourth man stood with his mouth open, shaking his head.

“You have no idea what you've done. This wasn't personal. It's our jobs. A job we're forced to do. Quinn will come for you.”

“Call him,” said Titus. “Call him right now and let him know where we are. I'd like to meet this man.”

“Mister, you don't want to do that, I promise you.”

“Call him, or I'll burn the whole fucking place down.”

The man nodded, stepping aside and making the call. They

could hear Quinn's voice screaming over the phone and grinned at one another.

“He's on his way. Give him about forty-five minutes.”

“Okay. Now tell that fat fuck back there cooking to make us some lunch. If he so much as sweats a drop on my plate, puts anything disgusting on it, I'll blow his brains out,” said Dom.

“Fix them some lunch,” said the man. The chef nodded, and the young waitress gave them a look to let them know she would watch him.

“Why do you have to work for him?” asked Liffey.

“Working off a debt, man. That's all. All of us. He gets us into these investment schemes, or some of the guys lose to him in poker or with the ponies, and then he owns you. Interest so high it can't ever be paid back. And God help you if you've got kids. Especially a wife or daughters.”

“And do you?” asked O'Hara. “Do you have a wife and daughters?”

“Not me,” he said, shaking his head. “They do.” He nodded toward the men on the floor, and Irish stood, cutting the zip ties from their hands.

“Does he have them?” he asked the first man.

“Not now. It’s been years for me. Once my wife was over forty, he wouldn’t touch her. So, she left me. Rightfully so. But he took my little girl. She was just eighteen. Fucked her up so bad, she’s in an institution for the rest of her life.”

“Why haven’t you gone to the cops or to the feds?” asked Dom.

“You really don’t know who Quinn is, do you?” said one of the men. “He’s got people in his pocket everywhere. Everyone owes him money or a favor. Everyone. Cops, judges, feds, they all are at his mercy because he’s got photos of them with women or records of their gambling debts.” Titus knelt in front of the four men, handing them a stack of bills and a plain white business card.

“Call that number and explain what happened here. Take the money, get your families, and drive. Don’t buy a train, plane, or bus ticket. Just drive wherever you need to go. When you’re a few states away, lose the car and buy another. Don’t come back.”

They all stared at Titus, unsure of what to do. Was this a trick to test their loyalty?

“He doesn’t offer a free ride to everyone,” said Irish.

“Take it and get the fuck out before he gets here.”

The four men stood, taking the card and the cash. The man who had no wife or children just stared at him.

“I don’t know who you are, but you should leave before he gets to you. You’re good. Obviously, a helluva lot better than us, but he’ll find a way to own you.”

“Nobody owns us,” said O’Hara. “Nobody.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

“These are my new recruits!” said Quinn excitedly, staring at the impressive specimens in front of him. “You must all partake of my protein Xtreme. You certainly have the bodies for it.” His tongue was practically salivating as he stared at Piper, Cait, Lucia, and Addie.

“We use your products,” smiled Rory. “So do our wives.”

“Ah, I see,” he smiled. “Package deals. That’s okay. That could be useful for me in the future. I understand that you’re the man who is a whiz with numbers and investing.” He stared at Jean as he stood, walking toward him. Quinn visibly swallowed, unsure of what to do as Goliath came closer. Jean stared down at him, judging him to be about five-foot-six, with lifts in his shoes. He reached out his massive paw and shook the man’s hand.

“I’m not a whiz. I’m a genius. There’s a difference,” he smirked. “Jean Honeycutt is my name.”

“Yes. If you don’t mind, please back up a bit. I don’t like people too close to me,” he frowned. His face was flushed, and Jean could only smirk at him, nodding.

“Of course. I never meant to make you uncomfortable.”

“Are you guys taking steroids?” he asked.

“We’re clean. All of us,” said Piper. “We’re happy to take any tests you need us to take. We’re fans of your products and systems and just want to work in an environment where our skills will be utilized.”

“And you all came in together?” he asked suspiciously.

“As my husband said,” smiled Piper, “we’re all friends. We ran a gym together in Pennsylvania, but our lease ended, and we couldn’t get another. Rory and I are married, Cait and Axel, Jean and Addie, Lars and Lucia. King is our only bachelor in the group, but we’re working on finding him Mrs. Right.”

“Mrs. Right isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” smirked Quinn. “No offense to all of you. Sometimes, it’s better if it’s just you to worry about. You know what I mean?” King nodded, flashing that big, bright smile of his.

“Sir, I’m sorry to interrupt, but there’s a problem at Delhi.”

“Take care of it,” he frowned.

“Sir, I think you may want to take care of this,” said the man.

“Excuse me one moment.” He stepped out of the conference room, and they all looked at one another, then spoke in casual conversation. They were almost certain that they were being recorded. Next time, they would damn sure make certain that the electronics were interfered with.

“I’m sorry, but business is calling. I need to visit one of my restaurants. It appears there are some, challenges. Mike will show you around. You,” he said, pointing to Jean. “I’ll use you for many things, but get him in to take a look at the investments and the books. Make sure they all sign a confidentiality agreement before you begin.

“Ladies, I look forward to seeing you at one of my upcoming parties. Perhaps after the holidays.” He scurried off, and they all gave a little shudder, glad he was no longer in the room.

“If you’ll come with me, I’ll show you where everything is. You’ll have a private office to be able to look at the books and the investments. Good luck with that. The rest of you will be taking part in our streaming channel for exercise videos and diet advice. You’ll need to get changed into some of our workout gear.”

“We like our own,” said Rory.

“Boss likes his own.”

“Boss isn’t wearing it,” said Axel. “We’ll wear our own.”

“Your funeral,” shrugged the man. He led them to a massive open floor where lights and cameras were set up in small spaces partitioned off. “We do twenty-two live podcasts per day. The nutrition and exercise specialists give advice to anyone struggling with our programs. You’ll be part of that. It includes demonstrating exercises, answering nutrition questions, giving advice.”

“What kind of advice?”

“Anything from food to sex. We don’t discriminate here. When they log on, they give the right for their image to be used in advertisements or other promotional videos.”

“Even if their question is personal fitness or personal around the exercises themselves? I mean, what if what we’re demonstrating is uncomfortable?” asked Cait.

“Yea, even then. And get comfortable, beautiful.”

“That seems cruel,” said Lucia. “In my experience overweight...”

“Fat,” smirked the man.

“Overweight individuals don’t go to gyms because they’re embarrassed to do certain exercise routines. Why would we film them, making them even more uncomfortable?”

“Most have no clue. They sign that first document and never read it. Is what it is, sugar tits.”

“Don’t speak to my wife that way,” said Lars. The man stared at him. For just a moment, there was a glimpse of someone contemplating a challenge. In the end, he decided it wasn’t the day.

“Of course. My apologies. You guys are gonna need to loosen up if you’re gonna fit in here. We’re a group that enjoys playtime, and we do a lot of playtime.” He looked at Jean and nodded toward an office door. “That’s you. All the logins are beside the computer. If you need help, just call

Marilyn over there. She's always happy to do whatever you need. And I do mean whatever."

He left them standing there, and they all looked at one another.

Comms has all audio and cameras blocked. Their videos are going to yield nothing.

"Thanks, Pigsty," said Jean. "This is no more than a fucking porn shop. They're videoing these people doing all kinds of shit. Look. Look at that guy over there."

"I know it's uncomfortable, Wendy, but sometimes doing these activities in the nude will allow me to see where you might need the most help. You're almost there, just the panties, and we'll be good. You're a stunner, and I know we can get you to where you want to be. That's it. Good girl. Very good girl," he moaned, rubbing his crotch. "Alright, let's stretch. Open those legs for me. That's it."

"Jesus," whispered Addie. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I think we need to make this fast," said Rory. "Jean? Find out whatever you can. If comms can make magic happen and download everything on the server, let's do it. See if you

can find a way to get the videos. Mingle, but don't be obvious. We're not staying."

"What about the others?" asked Cait.

"If my spidey-senses are correct, I think that's why Quinn had to leave. I believe our boys have a little surprise waiting for him at the restaurant," said Rory. Jean nodded, frowning at the dozens of cameras.

"Let's do this."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The chef watched as the food was set in front of the men. He nudged his sous chef, nodding toward their table.

“Bastards won’t know what hit ‘em. Made that shit a level five on the heat scale.”

“Hey, man!” said Liffey. “This shit is good. Nice job.”

The chef frowned at them as they gobbled the food down. Not one of them seemed bothered by the heat, and not a damn one of them was sweating or red-faced. Who the fuck were these men?

Outside, a black town car parked half on the curb, half in the street. They all just shook their heads, chuckling.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” said Quinn, pushing through the door. They all ignored him, taking another bite of food. “I’m not in the habit of repeating myself.”

“I’m not in the habit of people interrupting my meal,” said Irish.

Quinn's face flushed a bright pink, and he nodded to the man next to him. Stepping forward, he gripped Irish's shoulder. Irish quickly reached back, twisting his arm until he dropped to one knee screaming.

"Don't touch me again, or you'll lose that arm," said Irish. The man screamed in pain as he continued to twist. Quinn only watched, then nodded to the other man. Titus laughed, shaking his head, and stood as he came toward him.

"I will kill you. Take a seat." The bodyguard wasn't sure what to do. It was obvious that these men were skilled, but Quinn would end his life either way.

"Let him go," said Quinn. "You've made your point. Do I want to know where my other men are?"

"You're not a very smart businessman, Mr. Quinn," said Titus. "By the way, Quinn is my last name. My family would be worried about you carrying on our legacy. Either way, forcing patrons to drink alcohol in your establishment is stupid."

"Stupid?" he spat.

"That's right, stupid. Lots of folks don't like to drink. Strange, I know, but it's true. Now, see, in this place, what I

would do is give people milk to drink when that fucked up chef of yours over-spices the food. Find someone better. Perhaps someone of Eastern Indian descent. Dial down the heat, kick up the salt. They'll be thirsty. They'll drink. Pretty fucking simple.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve coming into my establishment, not complying with my requirements, obviously chasing off my men, hurting these men, and all in front of me. Do you have any fucking idea who I am?” he snapped.

“Yea,” laughed Dom. “You’re the five-feet-four pip-squeak, five-six in those lifts, who thinks he’s a tough guy but gets the big guys to do the tough work. You’re the man that thinks he can manipulate people. You’re the man who creates porn videos in his studio masquerading as exercise and diet assistance. Clever, by the way.”

“Who the fuck are you guys?” he growled.

“We’re from home,” smiled Liffey. “And the boys of Shannon aren’t happy with you.” That seemed to get his attention. His head popped up, and he stared at the men, then slowly took a seat at the table next to them.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“Friends,” smiled Liffey.

“I don’t have friends.”

“Aw, that’s just sad,” said Irish. “Everyone needs friends. Maybe if you had more friends, you wouldn’t be screwing up your business so much. See, we heard that your little side venture caused quite a stir in Miami.”

Quinn stiffened, straightening his back.

“We’re looking for her. She won’t get far.” Irish nodded, smirking at O’Hara.

“Oh, but she did get far. She got far, far away and told someone very influential about your little game. She was very convincing, and those men are not men you want to fuck with. They will destroy you.”

“She’s lying.”

“Not sure she’s lying when her entire family can back her up,” said O’Hara.

“Not the entire family,” smiled Quinn. “Her brother and his family are no longer an issue.”

Score one confession, but I need a bit more.

“They are an issue as long as they’re able to identify you or your men,” said Titus. “The mother and father, the sister. It’s not just heard.”

“They can’t identify anyone if they’re dead, and the parents are taken care of as well. They won’t be identifying anyone.”

There was a hint of an Irish accent in that last sentence for Quinn. They all heard it and wondered if, in fact, he wasn’t just an immigrant who’d come to America to make a living and went in the wrong direction.

“Dead is good,” smirked Liffey. “But you were supposed to be making money in the stock market, investments, that sort of shit. Now you’re off pimping women to your buddies.”

“They’re more than willing,” he scoffed. “They enjoy every moment of it, and they get to keep their cars and furs and diamonds. I don’t want to hear any of them bitch.”

Confession number two.

“Boss, we have to get to that meeting on the other side of town,” said one of the bodyguards, still grasping his arm.

“Right. Business. Gentlemen, you’ve intrigued me. Whether you’re here from Shannon or not, I’m happy to let you see what I really do. I’m giving a party tomorrow night. Sort of a Christmas Eve Eve party. This is my address,” he said, handing Titus the business card. “Please come dressed appropriately. I’m sure the ladies will appreciate it. I’m going to bet you are fine specimens beneath those dreadful clothes.”

He turned and left with his men, one of them looking back at them as if he were pleading for help.

“I hate that little fucker,” said Irish. Dom nodded.

“I think that’s the idea,” said Dom. “Whatever we thought our original plan was, telling him we were from Shannon was a good move. He seemed to look a little worried when we mentioned that.”

“Funny, he didn’t question no Irish accents on any of us,” said Irish.

“Maybe these guys aren’t necessarily from Ireland,” said Titus. “Maybe they live here, work here, and do business here. Sort of the mafia homegrown. Comms? I need you to check and see who the new head of the Irish mafia is. Ask Katarina if she can reach out to the Laughlin family. I’m not

sure who's in control any longer, but they may know something about this bullshit.”

“On it.”

“What about this fucking party?” asked Liffey.

“I think we plan on going,” said Titus. “Let's head back to the hotel and meet up with the others. Hopefully, they've found something that will help us end this shit tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gail was surprised at how great she was feeling. She thought the effects of the pond would be short-lived, but each day proved to be better and better. It was fortunate that she didn't remember any of the details of the actual attack. They'd drugged her, knocking her out for the duration, and it was the only good thing they'd done for her.

The thing she was most struggling with was what her family had done to her. The secrets and lies, the knowing. They'd allowed her to believe she had a normal life, a normal upbringing. More or less.

Her sessions with Rachelle and the other therapists had gone well, but she had a long way to go. Mama Irene told her she needed to forgive before she could move on, but that was going to be difficult, considering the way they'd treated her, the things they'd said about her.

The day before, just after Tobias left, she'd received a call from her sister. Because the comms team had her phone, she'd left a message, which was filtered by the team. Rightfully so. The things that Phoebe said were horrible. She had no idea that her sister despised her. They'd never had a

great relationship, but she didn't believe she'd hated her all these years.

"Hi," smiled Julia, walking toward her.

"Oh, hello," she said, wiping her eyes. She shook her head in apology. "I'm sorry. I'm such a mess, but I promise I won't be like this when Tobias and I get married."

"Gail, you will be a wonderful wife for Tobias. You're entitled to be a mess now and then; lord knows he probably will be as well. Your partnership is going to be amazing, and I cannot wait to see all the changes you're going to make at the clinic. We're growing so fast it's difficult to keep up with everything, and I know that Lena, Kelsey, Allie, and the others will be happy to have your help and support."

Gail stared at her future mother-in-law. She looked twenty-five. Her skin was perfect, her hair shiny with full, bouncy curls, and her body was amazing. Long and lean, she looked like a model for swimsuits.

"You're staring," she grinned.

"That's funny. Your father said the same thing to me. You look like him, and you're both absolutely stunning. Paige

looks more like your mother, so beautiful, but in a completely different way.”

“Thank you, Gail. But you’re beautiful as well. You remind me of Elizabeth when she and Chris met. She looked like a teenager. He was this big, burley SEAL, and she was this little, bitty thing. They’re a wonderful couple, and she’s an amazing teacher.”

Gail nodded, giving her a weak smile.

“Are you not feeling well?” she asked.

“I’m physically fine, Julia. It’s my head that seems slightly cracked,” she smirked.

“It’s not cracked, honey. You’re hurting and don’t know what to do about it. That’s understandable, considering what your family did to you.”

“Tobias said that you speak with ghosts. He introduced me to a few of the ghosts on the property, and they’re honestly the most wonderful characters I’ve ever met,” she laughed. “But I was wondering, have you seen or spoken to my brother or his family? Anyone?”

“Sometimes it’s not cut and dry,” said Julia.

“Sometimes we get these strange messages from people we

don't know, or that aren't related to us. Martha and the others describe it as a ghost network. If the ghost can't find their way here, they sort of send along a message for someone through the other spirits."

"That must be exhausting for you," said Gail. Julia nodded, pulling the collar of her coat up around her neck as the wind whipped past her.

"It was almost unbearable. Until Joseph. He was like a calm stream in a hurricane. All I had to do was touch him, and suddenly, the spirits would be at ease. His father was able to do it as well. Neither knew what they were providing for me, not really. Not until much later. You can only imagine what it was like for me as a child."

"Did no one know?"

"My sister," she smiled. "Paige was my best friend in the whole world, and she knew. She kept my secret until I was ready to reveal it. I'll never forget that."

"That's lovely," whispered Gail.

"Were you and your sister close?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not sure we were ever close. Phoebe is six years older than I am, so we

didn't attend the same schools at any point in time. She was my mother's perfect mini-me."

"How so?" asked Julia.

"Well, Mom was Miss New York, runner-up for Miss America. All she ever wanted was for one of her daughters to do what she couldn't. Phoebe was all in. Starved herself, went to ballroom and ballet lessons, wore all the gowns, went to every damn pageant, every damn weekend. In the end, she won Miss New York but was also runner-up for Miss America."

"And you?"

"I was third runner-up for Miss New York," she smirked. "My father convinced me to do it to please my mother. I was never so happy as when it was over. I hated every moment of it. I didn't have any great talent. I didn't want to wear the ballgowns and those ridiculous heels. I hated all the makeup. It just felt so fake for me. I mean, it's fine if Phoebe loved it, but not me."

"Were they okay with you going to college?"

"Sort of. Phoebe went to Wellesley. Got a degree in interior design that I don't believe she's ever used except to

purchase expensive shit for her own home. Getting a master's in nursing seemed very common, to my mother anyway. I just wanted to do something where I was going to be helpful to the rest of the world."

"Did you know your grandparents?" asked Julia, cocking her head slightly.

"No, not really. My mother's parents died when she was very young. My father's parents were alive when I was little, but I didn't see them much. My mother didn't like them. My grandfather was an electrician. He worked on the subway systems in New York. My grandmother was a homemaker. Very common." She rolled her eyes, waving her hands in the air.

"Was your grandfather's name Henry?"

"Yes. How did you know that?" asked Gail. "Oh my, God! Is he here? Grandpa?"

"No. No, no, I'm sorry, Gail. He's not here, but he sent a message through another ghost."

"Oh," she whispered in disappointment.

"It's pretty simple. He just wants you to know that you are not responsible for the actions of your parents. You did the

right thing in making your own choices. He also says that Tobias is a good man.” Gail tilted her head at Julia, rolling her eyes. “I swear! It’s not me. He really likes him.” Julia laughed at her expression.

Coming out of the maze were Miller, Antoine, Sven, Whiskey, and Hannu. They were carrying several large boxes on their shoulders, whispering amongst themselves as they headed toward the dock.

“Whiskey!” yelled Kat. “Hi, Julia. Hi, Gail.”

“Hi,” they said in unison.

“Whiskey English, stop right there!” she yelled, running toward him.

“Sorry, babe, I can’t hear you. Gotta run.”

“Ohhhh, they are so infuriating,” she said, stomping her foot. “I’ve been trying to get him to help me with something in the house for a week, and he always has some lame-ass excuse. What the hell are they creeping around here for?”

Gail just shook her head, smiling at the woman. Another beautiful woman at that. Julia shook her head as well,

then watched as Kat stormed off toward the cafeteria. They smiled at one another but said nothing.

“Listen, Gail. I have no idea what you went through and no clue how to make you feel better about it, or if that’s even possible. But I can tell you this. Your inability to have children of your own truly does not matter to Tobias. Nor does it matter to Joseph and me. You are his choice, and we love you.

“The only thing you need to worry about is getting your mind right. Your parents screwed with your life, no doubt about that. I don’t understand it. Very few of us would, although we have a few that had similar experiences. You should speak to Aiden. He was a trust fund baby, upper echelon Boston snob. Not him, really, but his parents. They turned out to be something else. Disowned him when he joined the military. They turned out to be the disappointments, not him.”

“That reminds me,” she said, looking down at her phone. “I think my trust is still in effect. It was never under my father’s name. Maybe that was the one favor he did for me. Yes!” She turned the phone for Julia to see.

“That’s a lot of zeroes,” said Julia. “I’ll bet you could do some real good with that.” Gail nodded, then looked toward the docks and the disappearing boat.

“Yea. What do they say? Out of tragedy rises triumph?”

“Something like that,” smirked Julia. “For now, how about we head to the cafeteria and enjoy some hot gumbo, beignets, and wait for your man, my son, to come home. Besides, we have a wedding in two days. There’s still a lot to do.”

“There’s Dana!” she stood to run toward her friend, then turned back to Julia. She hugged her, kissing her cheek. “Thank you, Julia. I’m so glad I get to be a part of your family.”

“Me, too, honey.” Gail ran toward Dana, hugging her as they laughed their way into the cafeteria. Julia felt strong hands at her shoulders and reached for the fingers.

“You know, you’re still the sexiest fucking woman alive,” growled Joseph. Julia stood, turning in his arms.

“And you are the sexiest, most amazing man ever. I’m not quite hungry yet. How about we work up an appetite?”

He lifted Julia over his shoulder and ran toward their cottage.

“Done!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Man, this is seriously fucked up,” said Tobias.

“Quinn is making quasi-pornographic films by convincing online users of his exercise platform to bend, twist, and strip for better results. He films the whole damn thing, sells it to the perverts he works with, and isn’t liable because the customer signs a waiver at the beginning of the online training experience.

“He makes a shit-ton of money, but he’s got some serious spending and gambling habits. To offset that, he uses the men and women who work for him, plus their families.”

“You forgot the part about him actually working with the Irish mob,” frowned Titus.

“Right,” nodded Tobias. “Kat confirmed that a while ago. Did we get anything off the servers?”

“More than we wanted,” said Jean, coming into the room. “Sorry I’m late. I was finishing something at the office. I’ve reimagined Mr. Quinn’s books.”

“What do you mean?” asked Rory.

“Well, he’s cash-strapped all the way. He’s literally robbing Peter to pay Paul, and he knows it. What we didn’t know was that he owes some pretty territorial people. Not only does he have to make seven-figure payments to the boys back home in Eire. He has loans to the Branzino family, the Nguyen family, and get this, the U.S. government.”

“What?”

“Yea, somehow Mackenzie was able to secure a government loan in the amount of eight-point-nine million, citing that it was an immigrant loan to help start a business. He’s been defaulting on the loan for three months now.”

“He’s in deep shit,” growled Dom. “What did you do?” Jean smiled at them.

“I filled his accounts?”

“You did what?!” they yelled.

“I filled his accounts. Sort of. When Quinn looks at his banking tonight, and he will, he’s going to see the bank account of his dreams. I sent him a message earlier this evening saying I believed there was a problem with the program they were using, and it wasn’t showing the true assets of NutriHealth.

“If history tells us anything, Mr. Quinn is going to be writing checks that his ass can’t cover. In fact,” said Jean, tapping a few keys, “it appears that he’s ordering new camera equipment, new office furniture. Oh, he also purchased a brand-new Bentley this afternoon. He spent, whoa, more than thirty-seven thousand at Barney’s. And finally, placed an online bet for the game this weekend. A bet he won’t be able to cover.”

“Even if we don’t kill him, someone else will,” smiled Tobias.

“We have a few things you need to be aware of,” said Piper. “I know that Jean sent everything from the servers to our team, but they’re doing more than just filming these poor women and men. The trainers, and I use that term loosely, have some colorful backgrounds. Former convicts, pedophiles, rapists, and, of course, the occasional investor from Wall Street.

“And it’s not just the men. Brooke Davies is a former Pilates instructor and high school English teacher. She was convicted of luring her students to her townhome and giving them private lessons. She filmed them, all of them. Worse is, she taught the boys to use sex toys and torture devices on her.

The ones who really got off on it were the ones she filmed the most.”

“Please don’t tell me it was her defense when it went to trial?” said Irish.

“She told the jury that the boys were the ones who tied her up, used the toys on her, whipped her, and then left her there. Of the eleven who filed rape charges against her, only three were admissible,” said Lucia. “She’s going to have a private encounter with me at the party.”

Jean stared at all of them, then turned to Liffey and the others.

“We’ve got tuxes and gowns for everyone. Tobias, you and the others will be attending the party as well, but you’re going to do a little creative divide and conquer.”

“Okay, sounds fun,” he smirked.

“Ladies, remember. You go nowhere without one of us on your arm. Do not let this man or his guests get you alone. Judging by those photos, we know what he does when he can get women alone or separated from the group.

“I’ve arranged for a few extra surprises tonight. His biggest creditors will be in attendance this evening, including

the bank that owns the mortgage on his home. By midnight tonight, Eddie Quinn will either be dead or in jail.”

“He’ll be dead,” said Tobias resolutely.

“Dead works for me,” said Jean. “I’m going to take a nap. I’m old, so shut the fuck up. Be ready to leave here at 1730. We’re taking a large limousine bus out to the Hamptons.”

While Jean closed his eyes for a while, the others either spent time with one another, read the information they’d extracted from the computers, or showered and began getting ready.

At precisely 1730, the limousine was ready downstairs. The striking vision of the men and women walking through the hotel lobby had everyone stopping to stare. The men were disturbingly handsome, while the women looked as if they belonged on runways.

Jean had rented fur coats for the women while the men dressed in traditional black tuxedos. The weapons were easily hidden on their bodies, with small cameras placed in the buttons and in the women’s clutches.

“I do have to say,” smirked Cait, “you all look very handsome. I can see why someone would want to film you all naked.”

“Easy, babe. I’m not stripping for anyone but you,” smirked Axel.

“Same,” said Piper. “We had to do that once before.”

“What?” frowned Addie.

“I had a SEAL teammate who committed suicide because he was under the influence of a Colombian drug lord. One of the things he really enjoyed was an adult sex club. It was by invitation only.”

“Oh, God,” muttered Addie.

“Yea. Rory and I didn’t know Lucia and Piper then. Well, Rory knew Piper, but that’s a different story. We went down as husband and wife. Me and Lucia. Rory and Piper. We had to dress in BDSM outfits, walk around naked, that sort of thing. Then we got a private invite to dinner with the sick bastard.” Lucia kissed his cheek.

“We were forced to touch the other,” said Piper. “By that time, Lucia and O’Hara were committed to one another, and so were Rory and I. But it didn’t matter. He wanted to

see us with the other person's partner. I-it wasn't easy. I mean, we knew it wasn't real, but still..."

"You're not wired that way," said Addie. "None of you. You're not wired to cheat or touch someone other than your partner or spouse. I get it. If someone asked me to touch a man other than Magnus, I'd have a very difficult time with that. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Me too," said O'Hara. "But we killed the man that caused my friend to take his own life. That gave me some satisfaction."

"Well, I think there are enough of us tonight to ensure that no one has to touch anyone unless it's to nail their ass to the wall," smirked Rory.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

“Mr. Quinn, what are you doing?” stammered the former head of accounting as Quinn pulled up in his new Bentley. “Sir, you don’t have that kind of available cash.”

“Nonsense. I’ve got more cash than you can possibly imagine. Obviously. It seems you didn’t know enough about the computer software to properly handle my money. I’ve found someone who does know. You’re being demoted.”

“B-but, sir,” he started.

“Get him out of here,” said Quinn.

The man was escorted out of the building, and Quinn sat down at his desk, thrilled to be able to finally spend the way he wanted to. He ordered several suits, a watch, and five pairs of shoes from Barneys. Then, he added lobster tails to the menu for the party tonight. After that, he placed a four-million-dollar bet on the football game this weekend and another two million on the soccer game.

Using his online banking tool, he sent five payments to each of his major creditors. Two would wipe out his debt.

There was a strange message that stated the ACH would not allow the option, but he continued anyway then closed the account down.

“Croy?” he called to the bodyguard.

“Yes, sir.”

“Make sure that the playrooms are ready should my guests need them. We’ve got a few willing daughters this evening, including a very young, fresh one.”

“What about the new employees you invited?”

“What about them?”

“Sir, we don’t know a lot about them yet. Should we keep them away from that part of the house?”

“They won’t wander far. Let them have a look see if they want. It might pique their interest. They’d all make great additions to our online tools,” he chuckled. “I’ll bet that big one, what was his name, oh yes, Rory. I’ll bet his tool is about as big as they come.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, nodding. Clearing his throat, he handed Quinn a small bag and left the room. Quinn blushed, but he knew what was in it. He wasn’t old, but he was older

and needed a little help in keeping it up for long periods of time.

There was also a new little gem in there from his own pharmacist. Before heading downstairs tonight, he'd place the device over his testicles and penis. The stimulator would force blood flow to his organs, causing them to swell and appear larger than they actually were. It was uncomfortable, but the results were amazing.

Back at the mansion, he made sure the final touches for the evening were ready. No one would be disappointed in this party. No one. He retreated to his private suite, popping a few of the little pills and then sitting back on the bed, naked.

Placing the device over his testicles and penis, he turned on the switch and let it do its magic. He stared at his tiny penis, then looked down at the tiny feet to match. He'd worked hard to keep his body lean and muscular, but it didn't hide the truth of who he was.

Born to parents who were considered little people, he was lucky he'd grown to five-feet-four. Teased throughout school, he had no talent for comedy or acting, no athletic talent to speak of, and he wasn't the brightest kid in school.

He was, however, crafty. Some would say clever or devious. Either worked for him. He learned to find opportunity when there was none. If there was a need, he would find a way to fill that need. Meeting the men from Shannon proved to be perfect for him.

At first, they used his height to get him into places unnoticed. He could work a room at an event or party, picking wallets, watches, and jewelry, and was never noticed. But he wanted more. He wanted to do more.

Discovering that lifts could make him several inches taller was a game-changer for him. The shoes needed to be custom-made, and it was expensive, but taking him from five-foot-four to five-foot-six or -seven was what he needed.

He took to the gym and began working out like a beast, taking steroids and supplements to build his body. When he nearly died of a heart attack due to the 'roids, he backed off and looked for alternatives. NutriHealth was his ticket.

In the first year, their profit alone was in the millions. In the second year, adding private consultation and training, he was close to a billion. By the third year, he was nearly broke again. The mansions, yachts, trips, clothes, watches, and

jewelry were too much. But he needed them. He needed to prove to the others that his height meant nothing.

When one of the fitness trainers suggested that they film the sessions, he had an idea. These women were willing to do anything for the chance to spend time, even if remotely and on camera, with their handsome or beautiful trainer.

Men and women lined up for the thousand-dollar-an-hour session, willing to take off their clothing, stroke their bodies, and sweat. All in the name of beauty.

He could feel his testicles and penis swelling and wiped the sweat from his brow as the engorged body parts filled the plastic.

He'd been through three wives, all who ultimately fucked around on him with men that had big dicks. He'd looked into penile implants, but with a three-inch penis, you could only go so far without aggressive and painful tactics. Instead, he waited patiently until someone could figure out how to do a penis transplant.

In his world, you needed three things. Money. Height. And a big dick. He was aiming for all three.

Finally done with the process, he removed the device and gently touched his dick. It was probably a good six inches, painful and red, but it would be hard as soon as he found the woman that would satisfy him tonight. He wished it were the Mackenzie girl. He'd been looking forward to having her.

Having seen her grow up, he knew that she would be a delicious little morsel when she was old enough. His men had followed her around, trying to figure out her type. Her type turned out to be men who weren't clingy.

He'd laughed about that. Clingy was the last thing he was. He'd take her to one of the playrooms, whip her until her flesh was peeling from her body, then enjoy every hole on her body. She'd be lucky to live through it all just because of her arrogance.

Although she'd politely nodded at him every time he was at one of her parents' snobbish parties, she refused to speak with him for more than three seconds. She'd change her tune when he got a hold of her. Burkholdt had been good enough to send the first video of their enjoyment together.

It was beautiful to watch and had him excited from the moment he began playing it. When they left to get the other

men, they should have tied her up. Instead, somehow the bitch got away. She couldn't have gotten far, although the men in the restaurant said she'd never be found again.

Feeling his cock begin to harden, he stopped. Thinking about Gail Mackenzie would only make him hard. He needed to dress and greet his guests.

Tonight would be the greatest night of his life!

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

The sprawling mansion nestled in the corner of a dead-end street had a massive iron gate leading to a circle drive. The same symbols of shamrocks, saints, and Ireland were everywhere on the property. In the gardens, on the gates, doors, even a massive crest above the five-car garage.

“Suspicious to anyone but me that this looks very similar to the things we saw at the mansion where we found the Mackenzies?” asked Tobias.

“Highly suspicious,” nodded JB.

“I don’t think little Phoebe was helping her parents out at all. I think her husband is connected to Quinn.”

“I’d agree with that,” said Jean. “For now, we go in as guests. Mingle, smile, be friendly, but not overly so. Stay clear of Quinn unless he speaks to you directly.”

“When we will know it’s time?” asked Tobias. Jean just grinned. “You’ll know.”

The door opened, leading into a large foyer. The enormous crystal chandelier hanging above the round table must have weighed hundreds of pounds. The table was stacked with champagne glasses, constantly being replenished by a maître-d.

Next to the wide, grand staircase was a twenty-foot blue spruce. The gold and crystal ornaments were expertly hung, glimmering in the light of the room. Beneath were wrapped gifts with the perfect accompaniment of a bow. Whether they were just for show or not, it was impressive to see.

Quinn was speaking to the Assistant Mayor of New York City but waved as they entered the house. The team separated, trying to get an idea of who was in the room and what their role was.

“Your gown is lovely,” said one of the trainers Piper had seen earlier. The trainer touched the neckline of her dress, grinning at her, and Piper smiled. Gripping her hand, she squeezed her fingers, hearing the loud crack.

“Oh, sorry. Was that too hard? I don’t like people touching me, except my husband.” The woman pulled her hand back, rubbing the sore knuckles.

“Damn, you didn’t have to be so aggressive,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just admiring things.”

“Yes. My things. Not yours. I don’t like to play.”
Rory kissed the side of her forehead and let a low growl emanate from his throat. The woman jumped back, turning to head in another direction.

“I’m going to have to kill someone before tonight is done,” he frowned. Piper giggled, kissing him.

“Well, that’s an obvious,” she smiled. “Besides, I like it when we get to kill bad guys. And I believe there are a lot of them here.”

“Yea, me too.” Jean walked toward them to say something but was interrupted by Quinn.

“You’ve proven yourself to be invaluable,” he said, smiling up at the man. He was craning his neck, and he didn’t like it. It would make others see the disparaging height difference. “Have a seat, and we’ll chat.”

“I’m good,” said Jean, shaking his head. He stepped closer to Quinn, who took a step backward. “How have I proven myself invaluable?”

“The books,” said Quinn. “You’re taking over as head of finance and accounting. The money that you showed in the accounts made my holiday!” Jean smiled, nodding at him.

“I’m glad I could help.” The stare of a Robicheaux was something that made all men cringe, but for some reason, Jean’s stare cut through men. He was never the operative that the others were, yet he was bigger than most, stronger, more intense, and the quiet concentration of thought made him appear immovable. Tonight, it was making Quinn uncomfortable.

“Well, alright then. Have a great time.” Quinn started to touch his arm, then pulled back, walking toward another group of guests.

“You might want to lighten up, or you’re going to make the little man piss his pants,” said Tobias.

“I’m going to make him do a lot more than piss his pants. Listen,” said Jean, cocking his head to the left.

“Mom, I don’t want to be here. Please, let me leave,” said the young woman.

“Listen to me. You are going to do this for your father and me. We’ve given you a great life, and if you want to

continue with that life, then you have to be here. Quinn isn't going to touch you tonight."

"No, but these other latches are," she frowned. "I've done my duty, Mom. This is my fourth party of his, and I'm done. I have a boyfriend now, and I do not want to tell him about this."

"You'll tell no one," said her mother, gripping her upper arm.

Out of nowhere, a tall, dark-haired man with caramel skin wove through the crowd. Jean almost opened his mouth but thought wiser of it, watching him. He took the young woman's hand, pulling her away from her mother.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I thought the young lady might like to see the tree in the library."

"Oh. Oh, yes," smiled her mother. The girl teared up but nodded, taking the man's hand. As they left the main living area, Tobias followed them. Entering the library, he closed the doors then readied for the person coming behind them.

"Hello, Nate," grinned Tobias.

“Fucking asshole. You scared the shit out of me. I thought I’d have to kill you, too.”

“Please, please don’t hurt me,” pleaded the girl.

“Sweet girl, I’m not going to hurt you. My car is right out that door,” he said, pointing to the side door. “White Mercedes with tan interior. License plate is on the keys. You take the car and get as far from here as you can. There’s an envelope in the armrest with ten thousand in it. It will get you away from your family. Once you find a place where you can leave the car, send a text to this number.” He handed her a white card with a number, and she stared at him.

“Wait. You’re not going to t-touch me. To use me?” she asked.

“No, sweetie. I’m not into sex with children.”

“As much as I’m relieved by your statement. I’m twenty-four,” she said. “Why are you doing this? Quinn will have your head.”

“Not before I have his,” said Nate.

“We need to get back out there,” nodded Tobias, peering out the door. “Take care of yourself.”

“Go. Do as I said,” said Nate. “You’ll be okay now.”
He turned to leave, but she called after him.

“Hey, watch your back. The people who work for him are vicious and don’t mind stabbing anyone in the back. Or anywhere else.”

“Thanks for the tip, but I think I’m good.”

“What’s your name? Can I at least know that?” she asked.

“Nate. What’s yours?”

“Harlow. Thank you, Nate. I won’t forget you.” Nate stared at the beautiful dark-haired woman as she left the library, running through the snow toward his car. As he sauntered back into the party, her mother looked at him with a pained smile.

“She’s gonna be a while,” he said. “Leave her alone.” The woman only nodded, turning and walking into another room.

“Nate, what the fuck are you here for,” said Tobias.
“I’m not aware of Delta taking on this kind of shit.”

“I’m not here for this kind of shit,” he said. “I’m here for that kind of shit.” He nodded toward the doorway, where a

big man dressed in a gray suit stood. He had silver hair and piercing blue eyes.

“Who is it?” asked Tobias.

“Admiral Jonathon Garvin.” Tobias stared at the man who was part of the joint chiefs. He’d heard the name but never met the man in person. He was supposed to be next in line for the presidency. He nodded to one of his men, and they began to move toward the door.

“Gotta run,” said Nate.

“Hey, you don’t have a car,” whispered Tobias. Nate smirked at him, shaking his head.

“Brother, you forget we come from the same family. There are dozens of cars out there waiting to be hotwired. Check you later. Kiss everyone back home for me and tell them Merry Christmas.”

Before Tobias could reply, Nate was gone. He’d saved the girl and now was after Admiral Garvin. Something was definitely wrong. Unfortunately, he couldn’t help Nate right now. And if Nate were here, that meant Mike was nearby as well.

“Was that Nate?” frowned Rory.

“Yep.”

“What was he doing here?” Tobias shrugged, staring at his friend.

“Saving a girl and chasing a bad guy. What else.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Every VG person in the room watched as Quinn made his way to each of his guests. He'd laugh with some, sneer at others, practically bring them to tears. He enjoyed making people feel small. Smaller than him.

Tobias wanted to snap him in two, but with all the eyes, he had to wait. Jean had assured him that this would play out well for all of them. Jean tapped his earpiece, then gave a nod to everyone to come closer to him.

Gathered at one end of the room, he watched the door, the others mimicking his gaze. When a blast of cold air hit the room, all eyes turned to see several men covered in snowflakes standing in the foyer.

“Mr. Laughlin! I-I wasn't expecting you tonight,” said Quinn nervously.

“No, I don't suppose 'ye were,” smirked Laughlin.

Sean Laughlin was the grandson of Conor Laughlin, the longtime friend and confidante for Kat and Whiskey. His help over the years had been immeasurable. They all held in their grins, knowing exactly what Jean had done.

“I’m sorry, did my team know you were coming?” he asked.

“No. The boys in Shannon asked me to come.”

“I don’t understand. I thought you only handled business in Ireland and Great Britain,” said Quinn nervously.

“Oh, yea. ‘Tis true, but I wanted to branch out. I took a look at what you were doing here and decided it wasn’t the best way to represent our people. I bought the business for the U.S. from the team back home.”

“Y-you what?”

“Surprise!” he smirked. “I’ll be takin’ over the business here. And the first step in that is firing everyone who works for you. Also, anyone here who was told to be here with their daughters or wives to entertain clients, leave. Leave now, and don’t come back here. Don’t speak with this man, don’t give him any money, don’t do as he says. If he bothers you, I encourage you to contact the federal authorities or me.”

The evil grin on Laughlin’s face told Quinn that he wasn’t going to get out of this one.

The look on Quinn’s face was priceless. The grayish color of his skin, the nervous shifting from foot to foot, all

indications that Eddie was about to lose his shit.

“You can’t just take over my business! It’s mine!”

“It was yours,” said Sean. “Now, it’s mine. Well, mine and the federal government’s. You see, earlier today, you tried to transfer money that you didn’t have. Millions, in fact. You sent the team back home a very hot check. I believe you sent checks to these men as well.”

He turned as his men escorted Nguyen and Branzino through the door.

“You owe more than you did beforehand.”

“No,” he said in a panic. He looked around the room, finding Jean’s face. “No. He did this! He told me I had money.”

“I didn’t tell you anything,” said Jean. “I was working on the books. I wasn’t done with them. You assumed I was. Not smart.”

“This can’t be happening. It can’t be,” he whispered to himself. When another man entered the picture, he nearly crumbled to the floor.

“Mr. Edward Quinn? Agent Thompson with the IRS, and this is Agent Roberts with the Federal Trade Commission.

You're under arrest. We'll be confiscating the house, the cars, and your business. Our apologies, Mr. Laughlin. It seems you've bought a dud."

"Aye, no worries," he grinned. "Not much on the weather in America anyway." He winked at Jean and started to walk out the door.

"You planned this. You planned the entire thing!" Tobias stepped forward.

"I planned this. You fucked with the wrong girl. My girl." Quinn frowned at him, tilting his head. "See, you fuck with so many people you can't even put your finger on it. Gail Mackenzie is my girl. Mine. And no one fucking touches her."

The slimy instructors, fitness experts, and porn promoters started to slip from the room. Unfortunately, they met with Rory, Titus, Irish, and Dom. Behind them were dozens of federal agents.

"You're all under arrest," smiled Tobias. "You're going to spend a long, long time in prison with a man named Bubba, who is not going to be happy with that little, tiny dick of yours."

“No. No,” he said, shaking his head. “I won’t go down like this. I won’t!”

One thing his size gave him an advantage on was avoiding those bigger than him. Sliding between legs, rolling around bodies, and heading out the side French doors, he ran out into the snow toward the boat house.

Jean grinned at Tobias and JB, both men following him. He was slipping and sliding in his dress shoes, falling into the snow as he slid on his bottom toward what he believed was his escape. Looking back toward the house, he could see the identical men walking toward him and thought he was losing his mind.

Swinging open the doors, he gasped when he discovered the boat was no longer there.

“Sorry, Quinn. The feds got to the boat earlier. It’s gone.”

He had nowhere to go. Nowhere. Staring at the ocean beyond, he looked up and saw the small kayak. Racing down the wooden dock, he didn’t expect to hit the icy, slick wood slats, sliding right into the ocean. When he hit the water, he gasped, coming up for air.

“Help me!” he yelled. Tobias kneeled at the end of the dock.

“You mean like you helped Gail. Like you helped her mother, her sister, her sister-in-law. Your fucking daughter! You did that shit to your own flesh and blood.”

“They wanted it! They all wanted it and knew they were going to be filmed! Amy was always wild, so I put her to good use,” he screamed. His lips were turning blue, his body shivering. The water was below thirty degrees, so he wouldn’t last long.

“No one wanted to be a part of your sick game. You brought all of this on by spending too much, gambling too much, wanting too much. Even if we helped you out the water, you’ve got a bunch of seriously angry people coming for you.”

Quinn saw the men walking toward the boathouse. They wouldn’t let him live. They wouldn’t be so kind as to use his body for others. He couldn’t do it. He just couldn’t do it. He pushed back from the dock, shaking his head.

“I’m not going out like that,” he said. His teeth were chattering so loudly, they could hear it up at the house. Tobias and JB watched as he tread water for a few minutes, then

pushed further and further out into the frigid, frozen water. His head bobbed up and down, his legs cramping from the cold. Gulping for air, he came up, then back down.

When his head finally disappeared, Tobias stood for another twenty minutes to be sure he didn't appear again. Feeling confident he was gone, he turned to face his teammates.

“Let's go home. My brother is getting married.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was close to 0400 by the time Tobias slid into bed, hugging Gail tightly. She was still dressed in her ridiculous flannel pajamas, and all he could do was smile. It was perfect. If he could just have this for the rest of his life, everything would be perfect.

She rolled over, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

“I wish I were ready, Tobias. But I’m not.” He held a finger to her lips, kissing her.

“Shhh. This is perfect. If this is what I get to have for the rest of my life, it’s perfect. There is nothing better. Nothing. I love you, Gail. You will have nothing to worry about for the rest of your life.”

“Quinn?”

“He’s gone. He will never bother you or anyone again. Trust me. Believe in me.”

“I’ve never believed in anyone as much as I believe in you, Tobias.”

“Get some sleep. We have a wedding tomorrow, and it’s Christmas Eve. You never know what will happen at Belle Fleur.” She smiled, rolling over to spoon against him.

“No, you never know,” she smiled. Tobias looked down at her.

“Hey, what do you know?”

“Good night, Tobias.”

“Wait.” She closed her eyes, and he frowned. “I’ll be damned. She knows more than I do.”

The wedding of JB and Dana was a magical affair. They wanted to be married outside, in spite of the cold temperatures. With her white velvet coat and faux-fur stole, she strolled between the trees toward her husband, smiling.

Gail and Tobias were the attendees, both dressed in black. With a wink, he nodded at them, and she laughed. JB looked happy. Happier than his twin had ever seen him, and that made his heart sing. Dana was the right girl for him, and he knew in his heart that Gail was the right woman for himself.

Beneath the lights of the tent, they danced, ate, laughed, and danced some more. When it was nearly

midnight, Gail watched as Taylor, Gaspar, Nine, Miller, and a dozen other men slipped out of the tent.

“Now, where in the hell are they going?” frowned Alexandra.

“They’ve been sneaking around here for weeks now,” said Kat. “I’m at my wits end with them. This isn’t funny anymore. What are they doing?”

“Maybe it’s time we did a little recon of our own,” said Erin.

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” said Gail.

A dozen pairs of eyes stared at her as she squirmed in her seat. Tobias looked at her, and she shrugged her shoulders.

“Gail, if you know something, please tell us,” said Sara.

“Maybe I should show you,” she said. “We’re gonna need a boat. A big one.”

Tobias brought around the largest barge that Belle Fleur owned, loading it with dozens of people to make the slow, steady drive.

“It’s on Halo Island,” she said, looking at Tobias. He stared at her, shaking his head.

“How in the hell do you know about Halo Island?”

“Your grandfathers. And a few others,” she smiled. “I hope they won’t be angry with me for telling you.”

“What exactly are you telling us?” said Lena.

“That,” smiled Gail.

She pointed up ahead to the island. There were dozens of Christmas trees lit up, shining brightly in the darkness. Cleared paths lined with gravel wound through the island, guiding all to a covered pavilion where the men were all standing. In the distance at the shore were small shacks all lit up with holiday lights.

“What on earth?” whispered Lauren. “What are they doing?”

“You know,” said Gail, “sometimes, we don’t need to know. Sometimes, we just have to trust. It will all come to light tomorrow. Trust me.”

Tobias looked at Gail, shaking his head. Laughing, he hugged her tightly.

“I love you, Gail Mackenzie,” he smiled, kneeling on the deck of the boat. He pulled out the rich black velvet ring box, opening it to reveal a stunning emerald surrounded by

pearls. “You are the most perfect woman in the world, and I want you in my life forever. It doesn’t have to be now. It doesn’t have to be next month or even next year. But will you, please, please, be my wife?”

The women all stared at Gail as she gasped, shaking her head.

“You can’t possibly mean it,” she whispered.

“He means it,” smiled Julia. “You’re his choice, honey. Don’t leave him miserable.”

“Tobias, are you sure? Me?”

“You and only you, Gail. I’ll wait forever if I have to.”

“Oh, Tobias,” she sniffed. “Yes. Yes, I’ll be your wife. I love you. I love you so much!” He lifted her, hugging and kissing her as the women clapped. Grace, Faith, Erin, and Alexandra stared at the island, then at the shacks lining the shore.

“You know what,” smiled Grace. “They’ll tell us when they’re ready. I think we should all get home and be ready for Christmas morning.”

“I agree,” nodded the others. He turned the boat, heading back toward Belle Fleur.

Tobias docked the boat, securing it in the slip. As the others all walked toward their cottages, softly singing Christmas carols, JB and Dana retreated to their home.

Irene and Matthew watched their children making their way home. Laughing and singing Christmas carols.

“Another year, my love,” said Matthew.

“I know. Can you believe it?” she whispered. “We’ve had more years than we deserved, Matthew.”

“Nonsense, my darlin’. You deserve to live on this earth forever. To see what you’ve grown.”

“What we’ve grown,” she smiled, hugging him tighter. “It’s gonna be another long night. I’ve made you some hot cocoa and packed a few snacks. I’ll be waitin’ for you when you get home. Be careful. I love you, my sweet Matthew.”

“Oh, my precious,” he said, kissing her. “Not nearly as much as I love you. I’ll be home soon enough.”

He was gone in the blink of an eye, disappearing into the night. Irene stared up at the sky, seeing the magnificent twinkles of the stars. She looked for the north star and smiled, nodding. Yes, sir. It would always guide him home. Always.

“You okay, Mama?” asked Claudette.

“Oh, I’m perfect, my love. Just perfect. I’ll be makin’ my way back home now. I’ll see y’all in the mornin’.”

Claudette watched as she walked away and then hollered after her.

“Mama? Where is Daddy?”

“Sorry, baby, I can’t hear you. Merry Christmas!”

Claudette shook her head, smiling at the older woman.

“Merry Christmas, Mama. Merry Christmas.”

EXCERPT from

OPERATION PÈRE NOËL

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

Luke stared at his father, wanting to cry for the first time in many, many years. All the toys they’d purchased for the orphans, the clothes, the toys, the bikes, all of it was gone. They’d been storing everything in a locked storage facility about a mile from Belle Fleur. When the boys went to add a few things earlier today, it was gone.

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

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

“We’ll find him,” said Parker. “If they’re breaking into those storage units, we’ll be able to figure out who did it. In the meantime, I’ll get some of the guys to go out and buy new stuff.”

“It’s not the money for buying new things,” said Gaspar, “it’s knowing that people are willing to do this shit at Christmas. Those little boys and girls got nothing except us. They don’t have parents, grandparents, no one who cares. This was the one thing we could do for them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SERIES AND FAMILY

GUIDE

Key:

RS = Reaper Security

SP = Steel Patriots

MSB = My SEAL Boys

RP = REAPER-Patriots

VG = Voodoo Guardians

(d) = deceased

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RS 1</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
			Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
<i>RS 2</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
			Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
			Nathan	Katrina Santos
			Joseph	Julia Anderson
<i>RS 3</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
<i>RS 4</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
			Julia	Joseph Redhawk
<i>RS 5</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
			Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
			Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
	Will 'Code' Erickson	Hannah Jordan		
<i>RS 6</i>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RS 7	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
RS 8	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
RS 9	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
RS 9	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
RS 9	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
RS 9	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
			Carl	Georgianna Jordan
			Ben	Harper Miller
			Adam	Jane Wolfkill
SP 19			Violet	Striker Michaels
RP 6			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins
RS 10	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
RS 11	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
RS 12	Raphael Robicheaux	Savannah O'Reilly	Ian Luke	Aspen Bodwick
			Katherine Gray "Kate"	Cameron Dougall
	Doug Graham	<i>Deceased partner – Grip</i> Current partner – Miguel Santos		
RS 13	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
RS 14	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
RS 14	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
RS 15	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
RS 16	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
RS 16	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RS 17</i>	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
			Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
<i>RS 18</i>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
	Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
<i>RS 19</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	Crow Foster			
<i>RS 19</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
<i>RS 20</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ("Kiel")	Liz Divide
			Jane	Adam Robicheaux
<i>RS 20</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		
<i>RS 20</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
<i>RS</i>	Chad Taylor			
<i>RS</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
<i>RS</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
<i>RS</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
<i>RS</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
<i>RS</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
<i>MSB 1</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
<i>MSB 2</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
<i>MSB 3</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
<i>MSB 4</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
<i>MSB 5</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB</i> 5	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
<i>MSB</i> 6	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>MSB 7</i>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
<i>MSB 8</i>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
<i>MSB 8</i>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
<i>MSB</i>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
<i>SP 1</i>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
			Jack Tyran "JT"	
			Eric Ryan	
<i>SP 2</i>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	
<i>SP 3</i>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
<i>SP 4</i>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
			Tyler Gunner	
<i>SP 5</i>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
<i>SP 5</i>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
<i>SP 7</i>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro	Abraham	
<i>SP 8</i>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
<i>SP 9</i>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
			Hawk Gunner	
			Benjamin Scott	
<i>SP 9</i>	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
<i>SP 10</i>	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
			Kevin Alexander	
<i>SP 11</i>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
<i>SP 12</i>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	

<i>SP 13</i>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
<i>SP 14</i>	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
			Benjamin	
			Celeste	
			Cassidy	
			Carrie	
SP 15	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
SP 16	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
SP 17	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
SP 18	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
<i>SP</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	Michael	
<i>SP</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
<i>SP</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
<i>SP</i>	James Scarlatti			
<i>SP</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
<i>SP</i>	Ian Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Conor Laughlin			
<i>SP</i>	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
<i>SP 19</i>	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux	Grayson Matthew	
<i>RP 1</i>	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
<i>RP 2</i>	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
<i>RP 3</i>	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
<i>RP 4</i>	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
<i>RP 5</i>	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
<i>RP 6</i>	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	
<i>RP 7</i>	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
<i>RP 8</i>	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
<i>RP 9</i>	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
<i>RP 10</i>	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
			Tobias Franklin	
<i>RP 11</i>	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
<i>RP 12</i>	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	

			Michael Douglas	
RP 13	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
RP 14	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller	Brooke Elizabeth	
RP 15	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
			Eastman Matthew	
			Ethan Ezekiel	
RP 16	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
RP 17	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
RP 18	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
RP 19	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
			Christopher Luke	
			Sadie Allison	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
RP 20	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
RP 21	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
RP 22	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
RP 23	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn	Pierre	
	Jake Fernet	Claudette Robicheaux		
RP 24	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
RP 25	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
RP 26	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
	Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
RP 27	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Alistair Thomas	

RP 28	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
RP 29	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
RP 30	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
RP 31	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
RP 32	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
RP 33	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Forrest Pierre	
RP 34	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
RP 35	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
RP 36	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson	Leif Frode	
RP 37	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
RP 38	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Patrick Garr	
RP 39	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers	Macie Gray	
RP 40	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream	Brixton Fox	
RP 41	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters	Major Raine	
RP 42	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
RP 43	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	
RP 44	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin	Christian	
RP 45	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		
RP 46	JT Stanton	Kennedy Rice	Maverick	
RP 47	Chase Green	Maeve Korhonen		
RP 48	Will Pechkin	Brooke Ford		
RP 49	Benji Pechkin	Annie Lott	Paxton, Braxton	

Book	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
<i>RP-50</i>	Will 'Bogey' Humphreys	Alice Evans	Patrick	
<i>RP-51</i>	Tanner Sung	Micaela Vonn	Mattie	
<i>RP-52</i>	Moses 'Mo' Baird	Ophelia Baldwin		
<i>RP-53</i>	Ethan Dunvegan	Koana Ogi Milner	Ulani	
<i>RP-54</i>	Connor 'Irish' Kelly	Lucinda Harwell		
<i>RP-55</i>	Benjamin 'Hoot' O'Neal	Scout Blevins		
<i>RP-56</i>	Alexander 'AJ' Mills	Skylar Teller		
<i>RP-57</i>	Tyran 'Bone' O'Neal	Londyn Vacarro		
<i>RP-58</i>	Hawk 'HG' O'Neal	Maggie Turner	Wyatt	
<i>VG-1</i>	Joseph Alec Keith Robicheaux 'JAK'	Mattie Smythe		
<i>VG-2</i>	Ian William 'Gator' Dougall	Dylan Meeks	Joey	
<i>VG-3</i>	Hamish Angus 'Ham' McDonald	Sadie Jordan	Ambry, Bailey, Cole	
<i>VG-4</i>	Patrick Jordan	Margo Fleming	Quinn, River, Finnegan	
<i>VG-5</i>	Christopher Jordan	Ramey Curry	Brooks, Mitchell, Marissa	
<i>VG-6</i>	Matt Crawford	Summer Christensen		
<i>VG-7</i>	Kev Crawford	Tila Blackwater	Willa Avery (Wavy)	
<i>VG-8</i>	Benjmain 'Cowboy' LeBlanc	Autumn Zellers		
<i>VG-9</i>	Rush Anders	Caroline Mullins		
<i>VG-10</i>	Christian Martin	Winnie Pasko		
<i>VG-11</i>	Billy 'BJ' Bongard	Janine Corvallo		
<i>VG-12</i>	Joseph Billy 'JB' Redhawk	Dana Vaughn		

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Chris

O'Hara

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Gunner – Book Five

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Frank – Book Twenty-three

Hiro – Book Twenty-four

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Bron – Book Twenty-six

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Strange Gifts

Dark Visions

Dark Medicine

Dark Flame

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to three beautiful grandsons. She works full-time at a job she loves, and writing is her creative outlet. She lives in Texas and enjoys traveling, reading, and cooking. Her passion for assisting veterans and veteran causes comes from a strong military family background. Mary loves to hear from her readers and encourages them to join her mailing list, as she'll keep you up-to-date on new releases at <https://insatiableink.squarespace.com>. You can also join her Facebook page at Insatiable Ink.

Dear Readers,

I love hearing from you and encourage you to visit my website insatiableink.squarespace.com. Let me know your thoughts and ideas on new books or expanding on characters. It's also a safe space to give your own feelings, like those of the characters. I love reading about how you relate to the stories because as we all know, there's a little of each of them within us.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!

[PC1] This is the next spot where Jazz and Phoenix's location is mentioned.

[PC2] Gail's discussion with her brother. See below.

[PC3] In the above conversation, her brother never mentioned his wife also doing it. (I'm sure *someone* would notice it!)

[PC4] I removed "and dad" because Joseph is with them and already knows her.

[PC5] Joseph was in Miami with them, so he would have been getting off the plane too.

[PC6] I don't get it. Should I know what they were doing?

[MK7] Nope. You don't get to know what they were doing yet

[PC8] Just want to make sure you meant visible by the naked eye or large. I thought it might have been autocorrect again!