

Mary Kennedy

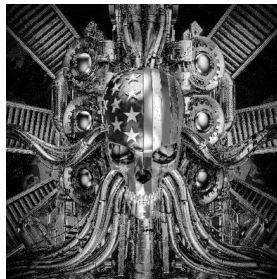
CHASE

REAPER-Patriots:
Book Forty-Seven

CHASE

REAPER-Patriots

Book FORTY-SEVEN



Mary Kennedy

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MAP of Belle Fleur and Cottage

Assignments

Readers – if you’re like me – you’re very visual – I hope this map helps as you’re reading. You will notice the additions of the new homes. *I’ve also added a guide to the families and books at the back. I hope you find these resources helpful.*

G1-8 = Garçonnière

Big House = Belle Fleur – main house of Matthew and Irene Robicheaux, with George & Mary

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



COTTAGE Assignments

<u>1</u>	Miller & Kari	<u>31</u>	Hawk & Keegan	<u>61</u>	Hunter & Megan	<u>83</u>	Sean & Shay
<u>2</u>	Alec & Lissa	<u>32</u>	Eagle & Tinley	<u>62</u>	Cam & Kate	<u>84</u>	Wade & Hannah
<u>3</u>	Gabe & Tory	<u>33</u>	Ace & Charlie	<u>63</u>	Jax & Ellie	<u>85</u>	Parker & Dani
<u>4</u>	Gaspar & Alex	<u>34</u>	Razor & Bella	<u>64</u>	Adam & Jane	<u>86</u>	Eric & Sophia Ann
<u>5</u>	Raphael & Savannah	<u>35</u>	Tango & Taylor	<u>65</u>	Ben & Harper	<u>87</u>	Bodhi & Viv
<u>6</u>	Baptiste & Rose	<u>36</u>	Gunner & Darby	<u>66</u>	Carl & Georgie	<u>88</u>	CC & Eva
<u>7</u>	Antoine & Ella	<u>37</u>	Ghost & Grace	<u>67</u>	Striker & Lucy	<u>88</u>	Sven & Ruby
<u>8</u>	Ivan & Sophia	<u>38</u>	Zulu & Gabi	<u>68</u>	Molly & Asia	<u>89</u>	Michael & Miriam
<u>9</u>	Tristan & Emma	<u>39</u>	Doc & Bree	<u>G1</u>	Hiro & Winter	<u>90</u>	Robbie & Carrie
<u>10</u>	Luc & Montana	<u>40</u>	Paul & Elizabeth	<u>G2</u>	Bron & Mila	<u>91</u>	Cade & Cassidy
<u>11</u>	King & Claire	<u>41</u>	Luke & Ajei	<u>G3</u>	Fitch & Carsen	<u>92</u>	Garrett & Celeste
<u>12</u>	Sly & Suzette	<u>42</u>	Fitz & Zoe	<u>G4</u>	Hex & Gwen	<u>93</u>	Tiger & Hazel
<u>13</u>	Rory & Piper	<u>43</u>	RJ & Celia	<u>69</u>	Kiel & Liz	<u>94</u>	Eric Ryan & Rachel
<u>14</u>	O'Hara & Lucia	<u>44</u>	Carter & Ani	<u>70</u>	Joseph & Julia	<u>95</u>	Hannu & Johanna

<u>15</u>	Titus & Olivia	<u>45</u>	Bull & Lily	<u>71</u>	Wes & Virginia	<u>96</u>	
<u>16</u>	Max & Riley	<u>46</u>	Trev & Ashley	<u>72</u>	Dalton & Calla	<u>97</u>	Jalen & Stormy
<u>17</u>	Stone & Bronwyn	<u>47</u>	Whiskey & Kat	<u>73</u>	Nathan & Katrina	<u>98</u>	Chase & Kennedy
<u>18</u>	Jazz & Gray	<u>48</u>	Tailor & Lena	<u>74</u>	Keith & Susie	<u>99</u>	Sam & Mia
<u>19</u>	Vince & Ally	<u>49</u>	Angel & Mary	<u>75</u>	Marc & Ela	<u>100</u>	Milo & Lia
<u>20</u>	Phoenix & Raven	<u>50</u>	Bryce & Ivy	<u>76</u>	Jake & Claudette	<u>101</u>	
<u>21</u>	Noah & Tru	<u>51</u>	Wilson & Sara	<u>77</u>	Frank & Lane	<u>102</u>	Ryan & Paige
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CHAPTER ONE

Chase Maxwell Green was technically a miracle baby. You wouldn't know it by looking at him. Eight pounds seven ounces and twenty-one inches long, he seemed like an extremely healthy baby. But the doctors had said that his mother wouldn't be able to have children.

Brutally raped and beaten by her stepbrother when she was just a young girl, she thought for certain her chance at happiness was gone.

Then she met Tango. That was his call sign, but his real name was Tyler Green. A former SEAL, he helped to save his friend, Gunner's, girlfriend and, in the process, met Taylor. She had been hiding away in her grandparents' old bakery. Selling muffins and sandwiches, she didn't venture out, but Tango definitely ventured in.

He hated muffins. Almost as much as he hated bad guys, but he walked into her shop several times a week and ordered coffee and a muffin. He was never as happy as he was when Gunner fell in love with Darby and her little girl, Calla. That meant that he could accompany him without any suspicion and get his muffin. And his sighting of Taylor.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy. Nothing ever is in the RP world. At the time, the team was part of the Steel Patriots. When Calla and Taylor were kidnapped, it was Gunner and Tango who ran into danger to save them both. He nearly lost her, and he never forgot that feeling.

It was unlike anything he'd ever felt in his entire life. It was a loss so profound he couldn't breathe, couldn't think clearly. It was as if he were dying with her. Luckily Gabi and Doc wouldn't let her die, and Tango wouldn't let her go off alone.

When the team made the decision to move to Belle Fleur, Chase was just a little boy, barely remembering the move. But he remembered everything after that. Love. Laughter. Food. Heroic men and women. Land so rich it was nearly incomprehensible.

He often wondered why people would ask him, 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'. It seemed the stupidest question in the world. His father was a SEAL. That's what he wanted to be – a Navy SEAL.

Knowing that he had to focus and study hard, Chase avoided dating in high school. He played football and wrestled, but the majority of his time was focused on grades

and building his body for the challenges that were to come. He had dozens of friends, most of whom lived with him at Belle Fleur. It was cool. Although he had no blood brothers, he had brothers just the same.

During his first year in the Navy, Chase discovered what most guys found out in high school. Women who were more than happy to spread ‘em wide for a guy in uniform – be it football or Navy. He’d heard the lectures from his parents, Gabi, and Doc, and he never went anywhere without a half dozen condoms in his back pocket.

“Hi there, handsome,” smiled the young woman nuzzling up to him at the bar.

“Hey, beautiful,” grinned Chase, giving a wink to his friends.

“I heard from my friend, Amber, that you have a nice thick cock.”

“Is that right?” smirked Chase, raising an eyebrow. Chase wasn’t sure how Amber would know, but right now he wasn’t about to argue.

“That’s right, sailor. I need some help with a terrible ache I’m having down there. You feel like meeting me in the

parking lot?”

“Let’s go,” he laughed. Turning to his buddies, he grinned. “If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, come looking for me.”

Chase followed the woman out to her car, watching as she pulled up her tiny skirt. Opening the backdoor, she crawled in and lay on her back.

“Baby, I’m a big man. I’m not sure I can fit in there,” grinned Chase.

“Do your best,” she moaned, rubbing herself. Chase could only laugh, unzipping his jeans and sliding on the condom. Kneeling between her legs, he hunched over in the backseat and felt her hot wetness. She was grinding and moaning, so he picked up speed.

“Yes!” she yelled. He tried to shush her, but she was a loud one, for sure. “More. Fuck me with that big cock!”

“Damn, girl. Settle down,” he laughed. But that only incited her more. She rubbed her clit furiously as he pounded into her. When she released, he tried to move it along, but she pushed him back.

“Get off,” she said.

“Hey! What the fuck? You get yours, but I don’t get mine?” he growled.

“That’s the plan, baby. I told you. I had an ache that I needed you to take care of. I didn’t say I would take care of you. I’ll tell Amber she was right. That’s the thickest cock I’ve ever had.”

“What sort of sick game is this?” he said, crawling off her and out of the car. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you realize that had it been another man, he might have finished whether you wanted it or not?” She laughed at him, shaking her head as she stood, pulling up her panties.

“Honey, I know who to poke and not poke, so to speak.” She looked down at his still-hard cock and reached for him, but Chase backed up. He didn’t even bother to remove the condom. Instead, he tucked it in, zipped up, and walked away.

“Wait! I’ll do you. I’m sorry. Come back.”

“I wouldn’t do you if you were the last woman on earth,” he spat. Then he turned, stalking back toward her. She backed up a step, finding herself against her car. “Bitches like you wonder why guys fuck you and leave you? This is why. Games. Nothing but fucking games. You want mutual

gratification, great, but we play by the rules. One day, you're going to fucking play with the wrong guy, and you won't walk away."

Chase stalked back toward the bar and heard her call.

"Geez! So dramatic. I'm sorry. I said I'd suck you off," she called. He ignored her, heading back into the bar. Unlike most guys who would have bragged about something that didn't occur, Chase told the guys about the girl, and they all shook their heads, frowning.

"You know, I hate that we always get the bad rep for fucking a girl and leaving. I've had it happen more to me since I've been here than in my entire life," said his friend.

"Same," said another guy. "Two chicks last weekend just wanted a fuck. Nothing else. I mean, I guess when I was seventeen or eighteen that would have been great, but I'm getting older. I kind of want one woman."

"You know," started Chase. He was going to say something about RP, then changed his mind, not wanting his friends to know who he really was. "You know, my mom was beaten and raped by her stepbrother. Barely fucking survived. She stayed away from men after that until she met my dad. These girls don't know how lucky they are."

“Damn, brother. Sorry to hear about your mom,” said Bogey. Will G. Humphrey, better known as Bogey because of his smoldering good looks, like the famous movie star Humphrey Bogart. Bogey was a damn sight bigger than Humphrey, and he was a grade A fucking SEAL.

“Long time ago. Besides, she and my old man are so fucking happy it’s disgusting,” he laughed.

“You still gonna try for the SEALs?” asked Bogey.

“That’s the plan, brother. It’s been my plan my entire life.”

“Well, if ever there was a fucker who looked like a SEAL, it’s you. But be warned. If you think you have chicks wanting your dick now, just wait. Put a trident on your chest, and it’s like a calling for all single chicks in the area.”

Chase grinned, nodding. He knew better than anyone how that worked. He heard from his father. His uncles. His best friends. Everyone knew it.

“Well, I won’t be worrying about that,” said Chase.

“Once I make SEALs, that’s it. That will be my focus until the day I decide to leave.”

“Brother, you’re gonna want pussy between now and retirement,” laughed Bogey.

“Yea, well, if I do, I’ll find someone like that girl who’s willing to give it without any expectations.”

It would be almost two years before Chase finally finished SEAL training. Two inches taller, now standing six-foot-five, he was also heavier at two hundred and thirty pounds. Placed on a team out of Coronado, he was close enough to Louisiana that he could go home for a long weekend but far enough away so that he didn’t have Mama Irene trying to find him a wife. He loved the woman, but she was definitely of the mindset that happiness lay in marriage.

His father understood when he wasn’t able to call home very often, but his mother struggled with it. He tried, but he just didn’t want her to worry about him. He was a SEAL, for fuck’s sake. He didn’t need his mommy worrying about him.

Seeing JT and the others at Grady’s was a stroke of luck. They were supposed to be gone, but their deployment had been postponed. He and JT had tried to see one another a million times, but their teams always seemed to be passing

ships in the night. He was happy that he'd found a girl to settle down with.

Raised together along with Eric Ryan, JT's brother, they were as close as two friends could be. When JT announced that they were getting married, he was all set to head to the wedding, but Uncle Sam had better ideas.

"Let's go, Green, we're headed out," said Bogey.

"Fuck, are you serious? I was supposed to go home next weekend for my friend's wedding," he frowned.

"Brother, that's why our lives are lonely. Grab your gear." Chase nodded, grabbing his gear from his locker and heading toward their dispatch room. He shot a text to his father and to JT.

No go on next weekend. You guys get it. Explain it to mom.

CHAPTER TWO

Maeve Korhonen looked up at her grandfather, Otis, and smiled. Her red mittens were warm, lined with several layers of fur and flannel. The outside was wool, treated to withstand the wetness of the snow. Her matching hat had a furry pom-pom at the end of the tip that hit her cheek when she turned too fast.

She loved being here with him. Their long strolls on skis around the property were her favorites. He pointed to the herd of reindeer, and she laughed. Her grandfather had said that Santa got all of his reindeer from right there in their backyard. She'd tried for years to watch for him, to see if he picked them out based on size or speed, but she could never find him.

Back at the cabin, grandmother was making bread that would be hot and ready when they arrived. She would get it buttered, sweet and creamy, perhaps with a little cinnamon and honey today. Her grandmother would kiss her forehead and then lay her mittens and hat near the fireplace to warm.

“No farther,” he said, pulling her hand back. “This is the line, Maeve. A few hundred yards beyond this is no longer

our property, no longer Finland. It's Russia."

"Is that bad, Grandfather?" she asked with childlike innocence.

"The land isn't what's bad, my darling. It's the man who currently rules the country. His men would take you from your grandmother and me."

"I'm scared, grandfather," she said, huddling against his legs.

"Oh, my darling girl, they won't take you as long as I'm here. You are an exceptional skier, Maeve. It's why your parents left you here with me and your grandmother so that you could train nearly year-round."

"I know!" she said excitedly. "I'm going to be in the Olympics one day."

"Yes, my love, you are. For Finland or the United States. You have your choice. But the training is good here. The Russians know how very good you already are, even at the sweet age of just eight years old."

"I love skiing," she smiled, gliding her long skis back and forth as if to prove it to her grandfather. Cross-country skiing was in her blood. Her grandfather had been an

Olympian. Her grandmother had been an Olympian. Her father and mother were Olympians. She would be an Olympic skier as well.

“Would the bad man in Russia take me, Grandfather?” she asked, looking up at him. Tiny puffs of breath froze in the cold air, and he smiled.

“I don’t know what they would do, Maeve. The man who runs their Olympic training program wanted your mother and father to go to their school. They refused and fled to the United States to be trained. He was very angry.”

“But, why? Why, Grandfather?”

“Because your parents were the best in the world, and he wanted them to ski for him. He will want the same once he sees you ski. You are the best in the world, Maeve. You must never, ever cross into their country. Do you understand?” He knew that despite protests from him and his wife, the child’s own parents, the Russians would brainwash sweet Maeve into saying things that simply were not true. Or worse, they would hide her away until she was older and then bring her out as a poor lost orphan that they saved. He would not allow it.

“Yes, Grandfather, I understand.”

Maeve stared at the stark white landscape. There was nothing except snow to the east. Russia. To the north and west were hundreds of lakes and the Gulf of Finland.

“Come along, Maeve. Your grandmother will be worried.”

The following weekend, Maeve competed in her first international competition in Sweden, finishing first ahead of three young Russian girls. She watched as their coach yelled at them, promising hours of brutal practice and drills until they got better. One of the little girls had tears in her eyes, and her coach slapped her face.

Maeve never forgot that moment. She never forgot the fear on the girl’s face and the hatred in the coach’s face. What followed were years of events all over the world. Initially, she competed for Finland but eventually decided she would compete for the U.S. and train in Finland.

As the years passed, Maeve found herself alone. Her grandparents had passed on, and her parents now lived in Barbados, enjoying the warmth instead of the cold. With the last qualifying event before the Olympics looming over her, she focused on training and preparation.

The 10km was Maeve's event. She hadn't lost a race in nearly six years. Truth be told, she was beginning to become bored by it all. She knew that the Russians had two skiers that would challenge her, along with one skier from Sweden. Standing at the start line, this was the moment she missed her grandfather most of all. He would usually be standing to her right, yelling words of wisdom and encouragement. Today there was no one except her coach.

When the starting gun went off, Maeve went into total focus mode. The first three kilometers were easy, the biting cold freezing her face. But she ignored it. By the seventh kilometer, she was ahead of the pack by almost four hundred meters.

As she rounded the last curve, she peeked behind her, seeing no one even close. Smiling, she focused on conquering the ridge in front of her. The problem was she missed the two women coming at her from the left. While one knocked her to the ground, the other took her ski pole and jabbed it into her ankle, and pulled it out.

Maeve screamed, seeing the blood on the end of the pole. It wasn't a regular ski pole. It was modified with a long knife at the end. The woman raised the pole again, driving it

into her ankle once more. Their faces were covered with white ski masks, but their eyes were black with hatred.

What they hadn't counted on were the dozens of cameras watching the course. When first responders came over the ridge and snowmobiles arrived with the police, the skiers couldn't move quickly enough to evade the authorities.

It was a blur of red helmets and ambulances after that. With her ankle wrapped and elevated, the doctors were whispering with her coaches outside.

“Maeve, honey, it's not good,” said her coach.

“I already figured that out for myself. Who were they?”

“What?” he asked, surprised by her question.

“Who the fuck were they?” she asked. “I want to know who hated me so much that they would destroy the rest of my career.”

“The young women were alternates on the Russian team,” said the doctor. “The authorities have them in custody, and they will not be released from jail any time soon.”

“All for what? If they were alternates, why?” she asked, shaking her head.

“Ms. Korhonen, the ankle will need surgery. The tendons and muscles have been torn.”

“Will I ski again?” she asked.

“Not competitively, I’m afraid. You may be able to ski for enjoyment, but any stress placed on the ankle may be too much.”

“When?” she asked, looking at the doctor and her coach. “When is the surgery?”

“Now.”

Five years. It had been five years, thought Maeve, and she was still waking up every morning rubbing cream on her ankle, wincing at the feel of her own hands against the skin. After her surgery, she’d gone to Barbados to spend time with her parents. But the media wouldn’t leave her alone.

At nearly six-feet with a lithe, lean, athletic body, companies were begging for the poor unfortunate Maeve to model their ski attire or anything for that matter. She wanted nothing to do with it. She wasn’t about to become the poster child for the girl that ‘almost’ made it to the Olympics.

It seemed the only place she could get peace and quiet was the one place she didn’t want to go. The one place that

reminded her of everything she'd lost.

Finland.

CHAPTER THREE

“This is a bit different from what we normally do,” said his commander. “You’ll be doing a halo jump into Russia, here.” He pointed to the map, and the men all nodded.

“What are we looking for?” asked Chase.

“We believe they have an underground nuclear reactor that is not listed with the appropriate authorities. We need to know why the military keeps delivering shit to that location. Photos, evidence, anything you can gather, and then get the fuck out.” He turned the map over to Finland and pointed. “Here in Pelkola. You’ll need to hike it, cross the Russian border, change out of your gear, and make your way to the train station.”

“No border checks here?” asked Chase.

“There are some, but you’ll be able to evade them. Get in, get out. There’s a fuck-lot of nothing between you and your destination, so keep your winter whites on, boys.”

The men nodded, checking their gear one more time. Yes, they were carrying weapons, but what they were most concerned about was jumping into Russia undetected. Chase knew that they were using a new scrambling device, as well as

a stealth feature sold to the U.S. military by none other than G.R.I.P. For that reason alone, he wasn't worried.

“Doors opening,” came the call from the front of the plane.

This was the moment Chase loved the most. As they placed their oxygen masks over their faces, the door opened. Frigid, sub-zero temperatures slammed into them. It made him feel alive. Alive and alert. He loved it. One by one, the six men leaped from the plane, their white gear and white chutes blending against the landscape of clouds, falling snow, and snow on the ground. With the stealth features on, they safely landed at their drop.

No one said a word, simply rolling the chutes quickly and shoving them into their packs. They could leave nothing that would indicate they had been here. Nothing. In silence, they moved across the frozen landscape in a slow jog. Following the Vuoski River, they made their way in the darkness toward Lesogorskya, an abandoned school which was thought to be the shell for the underground reactor.

Looking at his watch, Chase realized it was already 2355. He bent his elbow, pumping his fist in the air, indicating to the others that they needed to hurry. They had to make it to

the site, get their photos and get out before dawn. Fortunately, the nights were long at this time of year.

Cresting a small hill, they spotted the old school buildings in the valley below. Bogey took out his camera, snapping several long-range shots. Chase tapped his shoulder, pointing to the truck moving toward the fences. A lone guard opened the gate, leaving it wide as the truck moved in. When it stopped, two dozen young men and women jumped from the back. Chase frowned, staring at his friend.

“A training facility?” he whispered.

“Training for what? And why out here?” asked Chase.

They watched as they lugged large backpacks that seemed heavy and loaded down with equipment. Moving toward the school buildings, the women disappeared on one side and the men on the other.

“We have to get a closer look,” said Mo. His latte-colored skin was covered with a white ski mask, only his lips and eyes were revealed. His real name was Moses Baird, and for Chase, it often felt as though they were following Moses to the promised lands. He was wise beyond his years, thoughtful, spiritual, and deadly.

Following the big man down the hill, the men kept low to avoid any eyes in their direction. Despite the lack of any extensive security, it appeared they did want to keep people out.

Chase and Bogey got as close to the fence line as they could, using the telephoto lens of the camera to get a clearer view.

“What the fuck is this place?” muttered Chase. He watched as the young men stood obediently in line, removing their shirts. They were all different heights and weights, but they had one glaring thing in common. They were ripped. These were men that worked out every day, all day.

“Watch,” whispered Bogey. The doctor ordered the first man to turn, injecting him with something in his arm. He then opened his mouth, shoving two white pills in. The young man pulled his shirt back over his head and walked to the other end of the room, where someone drew a vial of blood.

From there, he moved into another room lined with treadmills. In his outdoor gear, his heavy pack now returned to his back, he stepped up on the treadmill and began to run. This wasn't a slow jog. It was an all-out run.

Chase narrowed his view of the treadmill and muttered to himself.

“He’s running six-minute miles at two a.m. after enduring some other form of training. And what the fuck did they inject him with?”

“Are they training military personnel?” asked Bogey.

“I don’t think so. They’re not carrying weapons of any kind, and they’re not wearing military uniforms.”

“A sports training academy? Like the old ones of Russia?” Chase stared at his friend, then looked back at the building. In comms, he whispered to Mo.

“Mo? What are you seeing?”

“I’m seein’ chicks that have more muscle than me and can bench more than I can. They removed their shirts, all had sports bras on, and they got injections and pills. Now, they’re in a workout room throwing weights like it’s nothing.”

Chase heard a loud noise and grimaced, then heard Mo cursing under his breath.

“Fucking idiot. You’re going to give away our position, Dolt!” Dolt. Of course, thought Chase. Simeon Doltogna was the clumsiest, most awkward, careless SEAL

he'd ever known. Chase wasn't sure how he'd made it through BUDs, but he must be someone's son or grandson.

“Maybe it's a training facility?” said Chase. What the fuck was happening here, and why did they think this was an underground reactor? Was it a cover for what was really happening? “We have to get more photos and send them back.”

The men spread out around the perimeter of the building, seeing only two guards casually walking the grounds. Near any open window, they got as many photos as they could, then moved to the next building. As they reached the last building at the back of the complex, Chase noticed the blacked-out windows and advanced security on the doors and windows.

“Something is in that building,” he whispered. Mo and Bogey shook their heads, pointing upward.

“Not tonight, brother. We're running out of moonlight[PC1],” said Mo. “Let's go.”

Going back the way they came, they attempted to cover their footprints in the snow, at least until they were in a forested area. Once in the forest, Chase looked back at Dolt and frowned.

“Where’s your fucking face mask?” he growled.

“It was hot,” he frowned. “I put it in my pocket.”

“You dumbass! That’s got your stealth technology. If it’s not on your face, it doesn’t work.” It was as if all of Russia knew it. Floodlights lit up the forest and river. The ground was glistening with the light on the fresh snow. In the distance, they could hear trucks coming their way and then snowmobiles.

“Go! Go! Go!” said Chase.

The men scrambled, running in the direction of Finland, hoping to cross the border before the Russians got to them. Turning, he took note of three snowmobiles, the rest of the troops on foot some three hundred yards behind them. They could outrun the ones on foot, but not the snowmobiles.

“Head toward the river,” he said to Bogey. “Stay away from the forest. They know we’re here and wouldn’t expect you to be in the open. Follow it to Finland. I’ll meet you there.”

“No,” said Mo, shaking his head. “We’re a team, Green. We stay together.”

“We are staying together,” he grinned. “I’m just going to take them on a little adventure.” Before Mo could respond, Chase took off in another direction. Bogey and Mo pointed toward the river, slapping the back of Dolt’s head as he walked by.

“Put the fucking mask on, you idiot!” said Mo.

Finding an abandoned stable, the men changed into street clothes, shoving the white suits into their backpacks. Flipping the packs on their sides, they attached long straps to make them look like duffel bags. Leaving the stable, they walked on the outskirts of the tiny village of Svetogorsk and crossed the border.

Finding the first high point he could, Bogey climbed up the structure and scanned the landscape for Chase. He couldn’t see him, but when he heard the whisper of three shots from a high-powered muzzled rifle, his stomach bottomed out.

“We have to go back,” he said, climbing down quickly.

“Are you crazy?” asked Dolt. “We can’t go back!”

“You fucking screw-up!” said Mo, gripping his jacket.

“You’re the reason he’s over there. You’re the fucking reason he’s missing!”

“Get support on the line,” said Bogey.

“Comms are down,” said Mo. “Fuck! We have to find a place to hide until we can get our comms back up. We can’t just walk through town, especially after all that commotion.”



“Have we heard from them?” asked Commander Lott.

“Nothing, sir. Not one word from any of them. Comms on our end is working fine. They haven’t reached the extraction point, and there is no noise coming from Russia that they’ve captured Americans.”

“Shit!”

“Should I contact their families, sir?” Lott looked at the young man and shook his head.

“Not all of them.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t contact all of them. Contact Green’s family and tell them I want to speak with them. Off the record.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Chase scampered through the snow, avoiding the first of the snowmobiles. Ducking behind a large tree, he pulled one of the massive branches toward him and waited until the sound was upon him. When he knew he was close, he released the branch, sending the stunned driver backwards and the snowmobile into the tree ahead.

Ensuring the driver didn't wake up, he inspected the snowmobile and realized it was worthless. The damage from the tree not allowing it to continue. He took off again, looking at his GPS, and realized he was only a mile from the border.

“Come on, Green,” he whispered to himself.

Taking off in an all-out sprint, he knew he was covering a lot of ground, but he couldn't outrun the snow machines. With another fast on his tail, he turned, firing twice into the man's chest. But even with a silencer, the muffled sound in the forest carried, and he'd just given away his position. As he wove and bobbed through the trees, he realized he was just yards from the border.

Not wanting to take chances, he continued his sprint until he knew he was safely within the borders of Finland.

Ducking behind a group of trees, he stilled, waiting and listening. He could hear the sounds of the snow machine in the distance, men yelling, and trucks coming toward the border.

He waited an agonizing twenty minutes, then stood and peered around the tree. Seeing nothing, he started his jog again, running toward the meeting point. Just when he thought he was safe, he heard the sound of a rifle before he felt it.

As the bullet pierced through his shoulder, he could already hear his father and the others yelling at him for not wearing the stealth protection beneath the military's protective vest. The searing pain made him gasp. When another shot was fired, the bark of the tree flew across his forehead, slicing a line, and blood trickled down his face.

“Move,” he whispered to himself. “Move.”

He stumbled forward, walking in what he could only pray was the right direction. His head was swimming, his eyesight blurry. Trying to get a read on his GPS, he realized that the crystal had cracked, and he couldn't read it clearly. Moving in the direction he hoped was right, he stumbled through the snow.

It felt like hours, but he wasn't sure any longer. His hands were cold, his feet soaked, and he was dangerously close to freezing to death. Looking up, he saw something or someone walking toward him. He thought he had raised his weapon, but when the figure continued to come toward him, he realized that he'd dropped his weapon somewhere behind him.

"You're on private property," said the voice. He squinted, trying to see who it was, but nothing was clear any longer.

"H-help me," he said, pitching forward. Whoever it was caught him, the strong arms attempting to lift him.

"You have to help me," said the voice.

He nodded, trying to move his feet as the person wrapped an arm around their neck. He wasn't sure how far they'd gone, but now he was prone on a sofa or bed. His boots were off, his bare feet warming near a fire. There was a blanket over his body, and as he turned to see where he was, he was consumed by nothing but darkness.



Maeve stared at the body of the man lying on her bed and felt fear, but also a stirring she didn't know was there. He was beautiful. If it were possible for men to be beautiful, this man was the definition of beautiful. When she'd checked his vitals, she noticed that he was blue-eyed, a perfect match for his shaggy blonde hair.

She knew that he was American because he had a tattoo on his chest with the American flag and one on his bicep that she thought might be something for the military.

It had taken her a while, but she finally dug the bullet from his shoulder and wrapped it, but now he was running a fever. Stepping into the small living room, she dialed her parents' phone.

"Maeve! I'm so glad you called," said her father.
"Your mother isn't here. She's at her surf lesson."

"It's alright, Dad. I'm calling for you."

"Oh, is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure." Maeve told the story of coming across the man covered in blood, and her father made a few grunts and odd noises. "He's running a fever now, Dad. I don't know what to do with him."

“Keep his body as cool as possible but also warm. If he’ll drink, make sure to give him as much liquid as he’ll consume. You don’t want him to become dehydrated. Where are his injuries again?”

“He had a bullet in the shoulder and a pretty nasty head wound. I’ve stitched the head wound, and I’ve gotten the bullet out, but do I just wait?”

“Maeve, this man could be a criminal,” said her father. “You need to call the authorities.”

“I can’t explain it, Dad, but I just know he’s not a criminal. It’s something else. I’m not sure what, but I can’t turn him over to the authorities. He’s not armed, except for a knife, and that seems normal for being out in the woods. I think he might have been a hiker who got lost, and maybe he was shot by a hunter or got too close to the border.”

“Maeve, sweetie, I love your optimism, but if the Russians are looking for him, they won’t hesitate to come across the border and knock on your door or get the authorities to do it.”

Maeve looked into the bedroom at the man once again. No. She couldn’t leave him. She just couldn’t. Then she had an idea.

“Dad, is the halfway point cabin still in good shape?” she asked.

“It should be,” he said. “Your mother and I were there last year, and everything was perfect. Why?”

“I have an idea. I’ll call you later, Dad. I love you.”

Maeve packed as much as she could into the two long duffel bags and tied them to each end of the litter. The hardest part would be dressing the Adonis again. He moaned as she sat him up.

“I’m sorry. I know it hurts,” she whispered. “I have to get you away from here.”

“P-piss,” he murmured. “Have to piss.”

“Oh,” she blushed. “Uh, okay.”

Swinging his legs over the side, she pulled his socks on, then his trousers and boots. Carefully standing him, she ducked under his good arm and realized he must be at least six-feet-five. Walking him to the bathroom, he tried to unzip his pants but couldn’t.

“God, I’m sorry,” she said. Unzipping him, she realized she was going to have to help him do everything. She pulled out his penis, and he wrapped his hand around hers,

forcing her to continue to hold him. Maeve felt the heat of her blush, trying not to look down. His eyes were closed, but she saw it all. Every, single, divine inch of him.

As he finished, he gave a gentle shake, and she zipped him up again. Unwilling to give up hygiene, she washed his hands and then led him back into the living room.

“Wh-where are we going?” he muttered.

“Away from here. You’re too exposed here. I’m going to wrap you up and pull you on the litter.”

“T-too heavy,” he said, shaking his head.

“It’s okay. I’m a cross-country skier, or at least I was.” Wrapped up in her own gear, she wrapped a scarf around his head and another around his neck, then secured his coat. Grabbing three blankets, she led him to the litter out back and helped him to lie down. His head rested on one of the duffel bags, and she tucked the three blankets around his body.

He almost looked dead. Maeve knelt down, feeling for his pulse, and let out a long sigh of relief.

“Don’t quit on me now, mister.”

Locking her own cabin, she put on the backpack and then secured the litter to the harness around her chest. It was definitely slow-going at first. With his weight and the weight of the duffels, she was probably pulling three hundred pounds. Once she got moving and her rhythm was good, she was on her way.

The halfway cabin was a small structure her parents had built for shelter if they were out skiing and got caught in a storm. It was literally halfway between their cabin and the town, but that meant it was farther from the border.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What the fuck do you mean they’re missing?” growled Tango into the screen. Chase’s commander was staring back at him.

“This was an information mission only. Cross the border, gather data and photos, and get the fuck back. None of them have returned yet,” he said. “I haven’t notified anyone else, Tango. We’ve known one another a long time, and I owed it to you to let you know this, but no one else, not even command, knows yet.”

“You know that we’re going after him,” said Luke, staring at his old friend.

“I know, Luke. It’s why I’ve called. We weren’t supposed to be there. Plausible deniability and all that bullshit. The White House won’t help us.” There was commotion behind and whispering. “Hold on. We’ve got his team calling in. We’re going to patch them through.”

“Commander Lott? We made it to Pelkola,” said Bogey.

“Everyone?” asked Tango.

“Who are you?” asked Mo.

“I’m Tango Green, Chase’s father.” The men stared at the screen, then back at one another. Shit. He wasn’t lying. His old man was one of ‘em. Fucking RP.

“Sir, he made sure we got out. Chase went in a different direction. We wanted to call into command and then head back out to find him,” said Mo.

“No,” said Luke. The men looked confused again, and he spoke. “I’m Luke Robicheaux. Don’t go back. You’re not supposed to be there. We’ll have a team in the air and there within seven hours. I need for you to find any intel you can. Check hospitals, anything. Report that you were hiking and lost your friend.”

“Sir, we can do that,” said Bogey, “but you won’t get to Finland in seven hours.”

“Yes, we will,” said Cam. “You just gather the intel. We’ll get there and help you find him. Stay casual, stay low. If you need funds, call us, and we’ll get them to you.”

“What the hell happened out there anyway?” asked their Commander. The men all looked at Dolt, who refused to face the camera. “What the fuck did he do?”

“Asshole took off his mask, sir. The mask with the stealth technology. It gave us away,” said Mo. “I’ll cover for a brother any day, sir. You know that. But not this time. Because of him, Green is lost.”

“Dolt? Get your fucking ass on a plane and get back here. You are on leave as of this moment. And so help me God, if anything happens to Green, I will release these men on you, and you will have nowhere to hide.”

Dolt could do nothing except nod, turn to gather his bag, and leave the room. The others waited until he was gone and then looked at the camera.

“Did he sell you out?” asked Cam.

“I don’t think so, sir,” said Bogey. “To be honest with you, I don’t think he’s smart enough to know how to sell us out. We should have come to you sooner, sir. He’s not SEAL material. I know he had to pass all the tests, but that man does not belong on the teams.”

The commander nodded, frowning at the screen.

“Do as RP says. Stay low, ask questions about your missing friend, but do nothing outside of the town. They’ll be there soon.”



“Why aren’t you going with them?” asked Taylor.

“He’s our son!”

“Baby, I’m well aware that he’s our son. But it’s because of that I’m not going. I can’t fucking concentrate, and I’m liable to do something stupid and injure my teammates or worse. I’ll be here, at the command center, working everything I can. The team going is more than equipped to know what to do.”

“He’s our only child, Tango,” sniffed Taylor into his chest.

“I know, baby girl, I know. But he’s not a child any longer. He’s a grown man.”

“He’s my child!” Tango smiled, chuckling as he kissed the top of her head. Yes, their six-foot-five, two-hundred-and-thirty-pound son was their child. But he was all man, whether Taylor wanted to admit it or not.

“When you’re stressed, you usually bake. Why don’t you do that?” She nodded, wiping her nose and heading toward the kitchen. He watched as she pulled out baking pans and sheets, flour, sugar, butter, and other necessities. Leaving

her to her own therapy, he walked toward the loaded vehicles. Counting the heads, he smiled.

Skull, Striker, Gunner, and Ace were leaning against the trucks. He shook his head, realizing that his old friends were going for him.

“Stay here, brother,” said Gunner. “You won’t be able to think clearly.”

“I know,” he nodded. “I just told Taylor that same thing. I’ll be in the command center. Just bring my boy home.”

“We got it, Tango,” nodded JT. Kiel, Doc, Duncan, Fitch, and Hiro followed him.

“That’s a lot of manpower,” frowned Tango. “Are we expecting trouble?”

“Brother, we’re always expecting trouble,” smirked Fitch. “We got this, Tango. We don’t expect anything except bringing him home safely.”

“I know it’s what we do for one another,” said Tango, “but thank you all. Be careful and know that I’ll damn sure be there if you think I won’t disrupt anything.”

“We’ll call if you’re needed, brother,” said Skull.

Avery gave him another kiss, smiling up at her sexy husband. The boys were already in school, but they thought of Avery as their mother now. They would be completely comfortable with just her for a few days.

“Let’s rock and roll, children,” smiled Savannah. “I’ll be your pilot for this leg of your journey. Keep your seatbelts fastened, hands away from the aisles, and help your damn self to anything in the galley.” The men all chuckled and then saw Evie running toward them.

“Sorry, I missed my line. I’ll be your co-pilot for this trip. Buckle up, buttercup. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride.”

CHAPTER SIX

Maeve stared at the handsome face, wiping his brow once again. It took everything she had to pull him and the supplies to the halfway cabin, but they'd made it without anyone seeing them. She stood and winced, the pain in her ankle and foot telling her that she'd done too much. Pulling the weight of the supplies was one thing, but the weight of a full-grown, extra-large male was an entirely different matter.

Taking a seat, she removed her sock and rubbed the special cream on her foot. It could usually relieve the ache within an hour, but she'd already rubbed the foot twice in the last ninety minutes.

The man groaned, rolling to his side, attempting to sit up.

“Don't move,” said the sultry voice. Or at least he thought it was sultry. He wasn't sure. Hell, he wasn't sure of anything. “You've got a terrible head wound, and I just got that bullet out of your shoulder a few days ago. If you move, it will all come apart. I'm not a surgeon, so I can't guarantee my work.”

“Wh-where,” he said in a croaky voice. “Where am I?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Look, this won’t make sense to you right now, but you can’t leave this cabin. I shouldn’t have you here. It’s dangerous for both of us.”

Chase opened his eyes, finally getting a look at the face belonging to that sultry voice. She was fucking stunning. Thick waves of blonde hair cascaded over her breasts, swinging in his face as she pushed him back, wiping his brow again. Her eyes were a fascinating shade of blue. Standing, she walked toward a sink and rinsed the cloth, filling the bowl with fresh water.

She must be six feet tall, he thought. Her ass curved beautifully. Tight. Round. Perfect. Her long, lean legs tapered into warm winter socks. Winter. Was that right? He couldn’t remember anything. He couldn’t remember anything.

“Where am I?” he said, attempting to get up.

“Whoa, whoa. I told you. Don’t try to move right now. Please, you have to be quiet and let me get you well enough that you can leave.” He gripped her wrists, pulling her toward him.

“Where the fuck am I?” he growled.

“Ouch, you’re hurting me,” she cried. He released her wrists, falling back onto the pillow.

“I’m sorry. Please. Where am I?”

“Finland.”

“Finland? What the fuck would I be doing in Finland?”

“I don’t know. I found you wandering around my property, but I know that you shouldn’t be here.”

“Okay, okay, I shouldn’t be here. I’ll leave as soon as I can. One more question,” he asked the blue-eyed angel. She stared at him, swallowing the big lump in her throat.

“What?”

“Who am I?”

“Wh-what?” she stammered.

“Who am I? I can’t remember anything other than I have a fucking headache that’s killing me.” He looked at the woman and couldn’t help but grin. “Are we an item? Did we sleep together?”

“What? No!” she replied with shock. “I told you. I found you walking around my property and brought you into my cabin. But it wasn’t safe, so we left.”

“This isn’t your cabin?” he asked.

“It is, but it’s the halfway cabin.”

“The what? Back up,” he said, shaking his head. He regretted it, slowed his movements, and then looked at her once again.

“I have a cabin that’s about twenty miles from the Russian border, but I own the land right up to the border. It belonged to my grandparents. The cabin we’re in now is called the halfway because it was halfway between my cabin and the town.”

“Why did we move?”

“I was worried someone might come looking for you. I live in the middle of nowhere, and it would leave us vulnerable. Are the Russians after you? Did they shoot you?” Chase frowned.

“I-I don’t know. Did I have any ID?” he asked.

“Oh, I didn’t look through your things. I mean, I got some clothing out of your pack and washed it only because I

couldn't leave you naked here." He smirked at her.

"I appreciate that," he grinned. "Where's my pack?"

She handed him the pack, and he touched it feeling the weathered surface. It felt familiar, but not. Opening the pack, he pulled out several items of clothing, a camera, a small first-aid kit, a hunting knife, and several nutrition bars. At the bottom were three MREs.

"MREs," he whispered. "These are meals given to military personnel." Maeve swallowed, staring at the handsome man. He dug further into the pack, feeling the bottom. Something was there, but he couldn't figure it out.

Turning it upside down, he felt along the seam, finding the hidden zipper. Opening the bottom of the pack, the dog tags fell to the floor, along with a wallet. He picked it up and frowned at it, rubbing his head.

Green, CM

"Green," he whispered. "Green. CM. Chase. Chase Maxwell Green. That's my name."

"Chase Green," repeated Maeve. She stood, slowly walking toward him with an outstretched hand. "It's nice to meet you, Chase. My name is Maeve. Maeve Korhonen."

“The pleasure is all mine, Maeve. You said we’re in Finland, but you’re American.”

“I’m both,” she nodded. “My grandparents were Finnish, but my parents moved to America so they could ski on the American team.”

“Korhonen. You were the skier that was attacked near the finish line a few years ago,” he said, frowning. “I remember that. Fucking terrible.” She turned away from him, busying herself at the sink. She filled his glass with water and handed it to him. As she sat down, he noticed the pained expression on her face.

“Wait a minute. Did you haul my ass all the way here on skis?”

“I didn’t have a choice. I don’t have a car, and we needed to leave.” Chase stood, walking toward the chair. He kneeled in front of her, took off the sock, and inspected her foot.

“It’s swollen. You shouldn’t have risked so much for me,” he frowned.

“I didn’t risk anything. I can’t compete any longer. It’s fine. I’m done. I needed to get you to safety. For months

now, the Russians have been coming close to the borders watching the cross-country skiers on the trail near my cabin.”

“I don’t understand,” he frowned.

“The competitive skiers have a track that is on the outskirts of my property. There’s a 10k, 20k, and 50k trail. I use them all the time, but I’ve noticed in the last few months, the Russians are watching the skiers.”

“Why would they watch skiers?” he frowned. Maeve shook her head, standing to get some distance between them. The feel of his hand on her ankle was doing strange things to her body.

“When I was a little girl, my grandfather warned me to stay away from the border. He said there was a training facility not far into Russian territory where they trained athletes, but honestly, it sounded more like abuse. He said they were notorious for taking top athletes, brainwashing them, and using them for their own purposes. It’s why my parents left Finland and went to America. I trained here.”

“I remember your story. You were set to become number one in the world when those women stabbed your ankle,” he frowned.

“Yep. That was me,” she said with a painful smile. “I try not to think about it, but I have to admit, every now and then it makes me so angry I just want to scream.”

“Screaming is allowed, Maeve.” She waved a hand in the air and stared at him.

“Why are you here? Why were you shot?” she asked.

“Well, it’s still fuzzy, but if my memory is clear, I’m a Navy SEAL. I was in Russia with my team looking at something that shouldn’t be there. I must have been shot and lost my way. I need to find my team.”

“Where did they go?” she asked.

“We were supposed to meet in Pelkola. Where is that?” he asked.

“It’s about thirty kilometers from here.”

“Wait. You hauled me thirty kilometers? You said this was halfway. You hauled me thirty kilometers?”

“Y-yes,” she stammered. “We needed to get as far from the border as possible.”

“You risked a lot, Maeve. You shouldn’t have done that. I appreciate it, but it was dangerous. I need to get to my team.” She pushed his shoulder back down, shaking her head.

“No. You’re still not well enough to walk that far. I told you. I don’t have a car or snow machine. It’s early morning. I’ll ski into town and see if I can find anyone who is looking for you. Where were you supposed to meet them?” she asked.

“The train station. I don’t know how to explain how they look other than they’ll be built similar to me,” he said. She nodded, reaching inside the pantry door. She gripped the shotgun and handed it to him.

“It’s just an old-fashioned double-barrel shotgun, but it will stop someone coming in the door. Also, you have your knife. Keep the door locked. Don’t answer it for anyone.”

“I know the drill,” he smiled. “Maeve? Be careful.” She wrapped the scarf around her neck, zipping her ski jacket to her neck.

“I promise. Get some sleep. I left some oatmeal and berries on the stove, and there are warm muffins in the oven. Eat something before you sleep.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grinned. She smiled at him, but he noticed that her features were etched with fear and nerves.

“It’s going to be okay, Maeve.”

“Right. It’s going to be okay.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Any signs of him?” asked Fitch.

“Nothing,” said Mo. “I say we head back to the train station and wait. It’s early morning, so he might try to blend in with the crowds.”

“Sounds good,” said Fitch. “I’ll let the others know.”

Although it wasn’t a big city, there were still morning work crowds to push through. The train station was crowded, but the men split up on both sides of the track, just waiting and watching.

“Damn,” said Bogey. “Why do I always have to be working when the most beautiful girl in the world walks into the room.” Fitch turned and smiled, seeing the long-legged woman walking toward them. Skull stared at her and frowned.

“She’s in ski boots,” he said matter-of-factly. “She’s in ski gear. No one else is dressed that way.” Skull walked toward the woman. She looked up at him, swallowing hard, and stopped.

“Hello,” he said. “Have you seen a blonde man about my height? Blue eyes, muscular?”

“Wh-who are you?” she said softly.

“A friend. I assure you.”

“What’s his name? If he’s a friend, you would know his name.” Skull smiled at the woman as the other men surrounded them.

“His name is Chase Green. He’s a United States Navy SEAL,” he said to the woman. They weren’t sure what happened, but she literally crumbled at his feet, sobbing into her hands.

“Whoa, whoa, sweetheart,” said Doc. “Is everything alright? Is he okay?”

“Y-yes,” she said, nodding. “He was okay when I left him. He was walking around outside my cabin, and he was shot and had a cut. I had to stitch his head, and then I got the bullet out, but then he got a fever, and I couldn’t get the fever down. Then I was worried the Russians were going to come for him, so I put him on a litter and skied to our halfway cabin and...”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Skull, chuckling. “Is he okay now?”

“Y-yes. Or he was when I left. He couldn’t remember who he was at first. Then he did. So, I came into town to find someone who knew him. He said he was supposed to meet a team at the train station. Are you the team?”

“Yea, honey, we’re it.” Doc looked at the young woman, recognizing the signs of exhaustion. “Hey? Have you slept at all in the last few days?”

“Not much,” she sniffed as he lifted her from the ground. “We have to get back to him. But there are no roads. You need skis or snow machines.”

“We’ll rent the snow machines,” said Bogey.

By the time there were enough machines for everyone, it was late evening, and only Maeve knew where they were going. Pulling up outside the cabin, she went to the door first, opening the locked door.

“Chase? Chase, it’s me, Maeve. I brought your friends.” Opening the door, she saw him lying on the sofa, sound asleep. Running to his side, she touched his face and then turned to the men filtering into the small space.

“Doc!” yelled Striker.

“Please help him,” she whispered.

“That’s what I’m here for, sweetheart,” he smiled.

“Chase? Chase? Look at me, you ugly bastard.”

Chase opened his eyes, rolling his head to the side.

“That’s it.” Chase’s eyes grew wide, and he stared at the ghostly image above him.

“Am I dead?” he asked.

“Not yet,” laughed Skull, “but when your Mama gets ahold of you, you will be.”

“Is he alright?” asked Maeve. Chase turned toward that sultry voice.

“M-Maeve. You made it,” he said.

“I made it, Chase. I found your friends. At least, I hope they’re your friends,” she smiled. He chuckled, making her instantly feel better.

“His fever is still high, but it looks like you did a great job on everything else,” said Doc. “I’m going to start an IV and get some antibiotics into him, but he should be fine.”

Striker looked around the tiny space, frowning. There were a lot of people in a small space, and they couldn’t leave quite yet.

“I’m sorry,” said Maeve. “I just have the one bedroom, but there’s a small loft space up there. The small Asian man already climbed up the ladder.”

“Small Asian man?” frowned Striker.

“Hey, it’s cool up here.”

“Fuck me!”

“Damn it, Hiro!”

“What? You knew I was with you. It’s nice up here. There are four mats to sleep on. We’ve slept on worse. I’m going to get some drones in the air and see what I can find.”

“It’s plenty of space,” said Skull. “We’ll get some dinner started and let Doc finish with Chase. Fitch? Call home and let them know we have him. We’ll leave in the morning.”

“Oh,” said Maeve, staring at Chase’s face. Skull grinned, nodding at Gunner.

“Honey, we think you should come with us for a while. Let’s let things settle down, and then you can come back.”

“I-I don’t know. I mean, where are we going.” Chase reached for her fingers, gently tugging on her hand.

“Home.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

While Doc did the work-up on Chase, checked his vitals, wounds, and then started the IV, Maeve was able to settle into the sofa and fall fast asleep. No longer worried about the man she'd rescued in the frozen wilderness, exhaustion overcame her. Chase grinned at her beautiful face, then nodded at Skull, who lifted her with ease, settling her onto the lone bed. He covered her with two blankets, tucking her safely into the cocoon.

“She’s something else,” smirked Doc, giving a wink to Chase. He nodded, frowning at his ‘uncle.’

“She cross-country skied with me on a litter and two packs thirty kilometers,” he frowned. “Did you guys recognize the name?” They all stared at him, then shook their heads in confusion.

“Wait a minute,” said Ace. “She was the cross-country skier that was attacked a few years ago. Ended her career and Olympic dreams.”

“That’s her, brother,” said Chase. “She fucking risked everything getting me out of there. I couldn’t remember a

damn thing when I finally woke. Dug through my pack and found my dog tags and wallet in the false bottom.”

“All the more reason we need to get her the fuck out of here with us,” said Gunner. “What the hell did you guys find over there?”

“It damn sure wasn’t an underground reactor,” said Mo. “It was more of a training facility, but they were injecting shit into them and then sending them straight to workouts.”

“Super soldiers?” asked Fitch.

“I don’t know,” said Bogey, shaking his head. “The back building was completely blacked out. Windows, doors, everything. No fucking clue what’s in there.”

“We may have to come back,” said Ace. “Something isn’t right.”

“Take two-hour watch shifts,” said Gunner, nodding at the group. “We leave at dawn.”

Chase fell asleep for what seemed only moments, then heard bustling in the cabin. Opening his eyes, he noticed the men packing the gear and sat up. He felt better. His head was no longer swimming, his fever gone, and the ache in his shoulder less.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Her other cabin, which direction was it?” asked Hiro.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t exactly awake. Why?”

“Yes, why?” asked Maeve, staring at them. She was in pink long johns and a matching thermal shirt with a sweater over it. Her long blonde hair was braided over her shoulder, hanging nearly to her waist. The men all stared at her, and she shrunk back. “It’s northeast. About thirty kilometers northeast.”

“Honey, I think they burned it to the ground,” said Hiro. “I can see a fire on the drone footage.” Maeve swallowed, holding out her hand for the device. The flames were licking the sky, the walls crumbling in on one another.

“My great-grandfather built that,” she whispered. “It was my home. All of my photos, my trophies, my parents’ medals. My life was in that cabin. The only life I’ve known for the last four years.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Maeve,” said Chase, reaching for her hand. She shook her head.

“It’s not your fault. I think I stayed there to prove I wasn’t afraid of them. I wasn’t afraid if a big bad Russian

woman came after me again. I'd do it again. I'd rescue you again. I'm lucky I wasn't there," she said with tears in her eyes and a smile filled with anguish.

"Maeve, honey, we have to go," said Skull. "You have to come with us." She nodded.

"Let me get dressed." Chase followed her to the bedroom while the others gathered the gear.

"Maeve," he said, closing the door. She stilled, then turned to stare at him. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks. "Honey, I'm so fucking sorry."

"No. It's not your fault," she said, shaking her head. "I'm glad I saved you. I'm just sad about everything I lost. I don't have any other clothes, Chase. I have nothing other than what I brought with me. I don't even have a passport."

"Did you leave other personal items in the cabin?" he asked with concern.

"Of course I did," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Like I said, photos, medals, awards, everything. My whole life is in that cabin."

"They'll know who you are. What about the medical stuff? The things you cleaned me up with? Bloody gauze,

that sort of thing.”

“I-I didn’t think of that. I threw the gauze and bandages that were soiled in the fire. The packaging in the trash. I should have burned them, right?”

“It’s okay, honey. You didn’t know,” he said, taking a step toward her. He wanted desperately to wrap her in his arms, but they barely knew one another. Still, there was something so unbelievably beautiful about her. She lifted her head, staring into his eyes. Her blue pools were swimming in tears.

“I’m scared, Chase. I’m terrified.” That was it. That’s all he could stand. Two more big steps, and he pulled her beneath his chin.

“It’s okay. You’re going to be safe now. I promise.” He rubbed her back as she sniffed back tears, nodding against his chest. His fingers tangled in her long braid, his groin tightening at the silky feel. He pulled back, grinning down at her.

“I haven’t said thank you,” he smiled. “I owe you my life. I also haven’t told you how fucking beautiful you are.”

“Chase,” she laughed, shaking her head. “My nose is red and swollen from crying. I’m standing here in long johns. I haven’t showered in three days. I’m a mess!”

“Yea? Well, you’re a beautiful fucking mess,” he smiled. He bent down, kissing her softly. Maeve let out a long, hot sigh against his lips, and Chase nearly came undone.

“Chase! Let’s go!” yelled Striker.

“I’m gonna kill him,” he grinned. Maeve laughed, pulling on her clothes and then boots. As they walked out, she zipped her jacket and looked at the men. They all noticed the fresh tears and swollen eyes. Skull stepped up, brushing back her hair.

“You’re okay now, honey. Nothing will happen to you. I promise. Did you get everything you need or want out of this cabin?” She nodded, biting her lip.

“Thank you,” she said with a croak. Turning to Chase, she smiled. “And Chase? I really like your friends. All of them.”

Chase wrapped an arm around her, escorting her to the snow machines. Skull looked at the group of men and then around the cabin.

“Burn it down. We can’t take the chance that they find something.”

CHAPTER NINE

Maeve immediately fell asleep on the plane, tucked into the bedroom at the back of the private jet. Chase kissed her forehead, closing the door behind him. Seated with the others, Gunner and Skull asked for the team to walk them through what they'd seen once more.

“Let me introduce you to my teammates first. This is Will Humphrey, better known as Bogey.”

“Welcome, brother,” said Gunner, reaching out his big bear paw. Bogey shook his hand, nodding at the others. He was a big man, six-feet-five and two-fifty, but some of these guys were as big if not bigger.

“This is Mo. Moses Baird.” Where Bogey was big and lean, Mo was big, wide, and fucking frightening looking. Skull eyed the big man, stood, crooking his neck to the side to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling of the plane. Mo stood, smirking at him, mimicking his actions.

“Sucks being this big, don't it?” he laughed.

“Brother, you'll fit right in,” smiled Skull.

“Those two are pretty quiet. Connor Kelly, but we call him Irish. And that’s Tanner Sung. He’s just Tanner.” Chase laughed, then continued.

“We were told there might be an underground reactor or worse,” said Chase. “Just six of us went. Our fucking idiot teammate was the one that gave us away by taking off his mask. Otherwise, we would have had a helluva lot more information.”

“We’ll get to him later,” said Gunner. “What was in those buildings?”

“We saw a bus pull up with probably two dozen men and two dozen women,” said Mo. “They split into opposite sides of the complex. We spread out, got some photos through the windows. Doctors were injecting shit in their arms, forcing a pill down their throats, and sending the men to treadmills with full gear and the women to weights.”

“What in the ever-loving fuck is going on?” frowned Skull.

“We went to the back of the compound,” said Bogey, “and found an entrance to another building that was standing on its own. The windows and doors were blacked out, but people went into that building.”

“Hiro? Ace? What did you find on the drone footage?” asked Gunner.

“The complex as they described it. A u-shaped grouping of buildings, a chain-link fence that a sixth-grader could get through, two security guards, and nothing on the windows,” said Hiro.

“We got the drones almost directly in front of the windows and saw what everyone described. Men and women working out in full gear. Doctors and nurses were in another room, all watching vitals on the screens.”

“Maybe they’re testing performance-enhancing drugs,” said Mo.

“Maybe,” frowned Kiel, “but if you look at the footage, some of these men look too old for the Olympics. I mean, aren’t competitors usually in their early twenties?”

“Usually,” said the sultry voice behind them. They all turned, smiling at her. “Sorry, I couldn’t sleep, and I heard you talking. May I join you?”

“Of course, honey,” smiled Skull. “This is as much about you as all of us. I worry that they know who you are.”

“They know who I am,” she said casually, taking the chair next to Chase. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. “They’ve always known who I am. It’s why I stayed there. It’s why I continued to use the trails to stay in shape. I wanted them to know that they may have taken my Olympic dreams from me, but they didn’t destroy me.”

“Are you sure they know who you are?” asked Chase. Maeve nodded.

“Sometimes,” she started, taking in a deep breath, “sometimes, they would stand on the other side of the border and wait for me to pass. Usually, they said nothing, just staring at me. Other times, they’d say things like ‘poor, pitiful Maeve, no medal, no career.’ My grandfather said they’d wanted me to join their training program for years. I refused.

“I trained in Finland and lived there, but I skied for the U.S. It only made them hate me more. The two women who attacked me weren’t even on the team. They were alternates. Someone convinced them to throw away their careers so they could eliminate me.”

“Where are they now?” asked Striker.

“They were both sent to a women’s prison in Siberia, but I heard that one was killed, and the other was beaten so

severely she was in a permanent vegetative state.”

“Jesus,” muttered Kiel. “Do you think they’re testing a potential new doping regimen?”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug. “Look, doping is rampant in sports. I never did it, but I was also genetically blessed. My parents and grandparents were Olympic skiers. I was in training from the time I was old enough to ski. I’m tall, thin...”

“You’re perfect,” said Chase, squeezing her hand. She blushed, smiling at him.

“I’m not perfect. But thank you. My point was I didn’t have to because I was blessed with great abilities and a hard work ethic. Almost every country has experimented with it at some point. Someone is always trying to develop a new drug that will go undetected. All for the sake of a gold medal and bragging rights.”

“Or,” said Fitch, “they’re testing the drugs on former athletes and making super soldiers. I mean, you said they looked too old for competition but not old.”

“It’s a thought,” said Gunner. “We won’t know anything until we can get more data and get back over there.”

What I do know is that they damn sure weren't worried about us seeing the facility."

"I'm sorry, but can I ask why you all have such odd names?" Chase laughed, nodding at her.

"Everyone here was, or is, in the military. When you're in Special Forces, which most of us were, you're often given call signs or nicknames. For instance, Skull got his nickname because he was in the Coast Guard and cracked his head on the doorways of the ships." He grinned, knocking a fist on his head a few times.

"Hard-headed, honey, but damn, I smacked myself more times than I care to admit." She giggled, nodding her head.

"I can understand that. I'm just a hair over five-feet-eleven. The world is not meant for women my height."

"I love your height," smiled Chase.

"Because you're extremely tall as well." She looked at the others. "Why Kiel?"

"Oh, that's an easy one. My name is Ezekiel." She smiled at him, nodding, then looked at the others.

“I’ll make this easy for you, honey,” said Gunner. “I’m Gunner, my real name. Then we have Striker, that’s my blood brother, and that’s his real name. Fitch is his last name. Ace, because he’s a fucking Ace with anything electronic. Hiro is short for Hirohito. Duncan, real name. Connor Kelly is Irish, obvious. Moses Baird, Mo, although I have to say Moses suits you. Will Humphrey, Bogey. Tanner Sung is just Tanner. And finally, Doc. He’s one of our medics and nurses.”

“That’s a lot,” she laughed.

“Just wait until we get to Belle Fleur,” smiled Duncan. “There are almost a hundred more just like us, plus all the wives, kids, and various other characters.”

“What’s Belle Fleur?”

“It’s a historic home and property owned by the Robicheaux family in south Louisiana,” said Chase. “The REAPER-Patriots Security organization was founded from three distinct companies. REAPER, Steel Patriots, and a group of SEALs who all retired at the same time. One of the original REAPER members was Pierre “Miller” Robicheaux. He’s one of fifteen children, and his parents wanted everyone home.”

“And they got it,” laughed Skull. “Mama Irene and Matthew Robicheaux treat everyone as their own child, enveloping them into their fold. We all have homes on the property, our own gym, office, cafeteria, hospital, café, salon, tattoo shop, and motorcycle shop. We got it all.”

“It sounds like it,” she said with an awkward smile. “What am I going to do? I mean, I can’t stay there forever. Shit. I don’t have a home to return to. I don’t have clothing. I have nothing.”

“You’ll have whatever you need,” said Gunner. “We’ll all make sure of it.”

“He’s right, Maeve,” said Chase. “The team already knows that you’re coming, and we’ve got two of our teammates’ wives, Sara and Lauren, who are as tall as you. They’re gathering clothes for you, purses, shoes, everything. We’ll help you to get new IDs and anything else you need”

“But,” she started, “what will I do? I can’t ski in Louisiana.”

“Honey, what were you doing other than skiing for pleasure in Finland?” asked Chase, staring at her with a look of sympathy. “You were hiding, Maeve. You said it yourself.

You didn't have a car. You didn't go anywhere. All you did was go out and ski trails now and then."

Maeve nodded, standing to pace the aisle of the plane. She walked all the way to the front, giving a short wave to Savannah and Evie.

"Hi, I'm Maeve," she said.

"We know," laughed Savannah. "We were on the comms devices the whole time. I'm Savannah Robicheaux, and this is Evie Zimmerman. We're part of RP, along with our husbands." Maeve nodded, then sat in the jump seat, leaning forward on her knees. She looked back down the aisle at the men all staring in her direction, then back to the two women.

"What the hell am I going to do?" she said in a shaky voice.

"Oh, sweetie, you're going to do what they tell you. Not because they told you to do it, but because it's the right thing," said Evie. "Mama Irene and the others will make sure you're okay. We'll all be around you, and we'll find something that's right for you. Who knows, maybe Matthew will build an indoor ski thingy." Maeve frowned.

"There's no such thing."

“Yet,” smiled Savannah. “Look, Maeve, I know this must be very scary and confusing for you, but trust me, everyone here has your best interests at heart. You’ll be a part of every decision, Maeve. No one will try and run your life. No one. And if they do, we’ll set them straight. You’ll find something that brings you joy and makes you feel fulfilled. When you do, then you’ll have your place just like the rest of us. Chase isn’t just appreciative of your rescue. He cares for you, Maeve.”

“We hardly know one another,” she said, shaking her head. “He was unconscious most of the time we spent together.” Evie reached for her hand, smiling.

“Oh, honey. That’s how it starts.”

CHAPTER TEN

Finally able to sleep, Maeve didn't even stir when Gunner lifted her from the plane and placed her beside Chase in the SUV. At Belle Fleur, others were anxiously waiting to speak with them, but it was late, and talking would have to wait until tomorrow.

Opening his front door, Chase pointed toward his bedroom, and Gunner grinned. He laid Maeve on the quilt and covered her with the throw. Walking back into the living room, Chase was laying with his head back against the sofa.

"You okay?" asked Gunner. Tango walked in with Taylor, reaching for their son. They gently hugged him, frowning at the obvious injuries.

"I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for her," he said, pointing to the bedroom. Taylor kept her grin hidden. She'd been waiting, praying for the right woman for her son.

"We're just glad you're alright," said Tango. "You can brief everyone tomorrow. Will she be okay?"

"I don't know, Dad. She risked everything to get me out of there. Now, I've taken her from her sanctuary. She's exhausted. Stayed up with me for almost three nights straight,

carried my ass through the snow on a litter while she skied us to safety. I've never met anyone like that."

"And you won't again," smiled Taylor. She stood on her tiptoes, and Chase leaned down so she could kiss his cheek. "Sleep well. We'll see you at breakfast." Tango nodded at his wife, taking the seat opposite his son with Gunner.

"What do you want to do, Chase? Your commander said this was unsanctioned. The White House won't even admit you were there. There could be some shit rolling downhill."

"Isn't there always?" he said with a sarcastic chuckle. "We would have gotten in and out without anyone knowing had it not been for Dolt, my idiot teammate. I can't help but feel as though he has something to do with this."

"Well, trust your gut. You know that. We'll support you and your teammates no matter what." Both men stood, and Tango jerked his head down the hallway. "What about her?"

"She stays here, Dad. No matter what, I need to know that she's safe and out of harm's way."

“And if she doesn’t want to stay?” asked Gunner.

Chase frowned, shaking his head.

“Then I’m sure I’ll do something stupid.” He heard the soft chuckles of his father and uncle and closed his eyes.

Sometime in the middle of the night, he stretched out on his sectional, covering himself with an old blanket. He dreamed of fire and ice, blonde hair and blue eyes, and, of all the strange things, babies. When he woke, the sun was just coming up over the bayou. He missed this. He missed the way the light filtered through the hanging moss. He missed the colors reflected off the water and the smell of fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls[\[PC2\]](#).

Standing, he quietly went to the bedroom and grabbed some of his own clothing to shower in the spare room. When he was done, he stepped back into the living room and checked his phone. The morning meeting would be held later due to the time it was taking to gather data. He heard a soft sound and looked up to see Maeve, her messy blonde hair coming out of its braid.

“Good morning,” she smiled. “Did I sleep too long?”

“No, not at all,” he said, smiling back. “You were exhausted and needed the sleep. I just showered if you want to

do the same, and then we'll head to breakfast. There's a stack of clothes on the chair in my bedroom that the girls brought for you."

"Oh, wow, okay," she said, nodding. "That's really wonderful. Do they, uh, do they just come in and out of your house?"

"They're family, Maeve," he grinned. "We're all family here. But if you're asking, I don't have a family of my own. Just my mom and dad. No girlfriend, no wife, no kids. Just me." She turned a hot pink, and he thought it was the cutest thing he'd ever seen.

"I'll go shower." He couldn't help but smile as she walked away. She might not know it, but she was feeling things for Chase Green, and he was definitely going to let her feel all she wanted. When his phone rang, he knew who it was.

"Commander Lott, good morning, sir."

"Glad to hear your voice, Green. Mo and Bogey filled me in on everything. I understand you're at the RP compound now."

"Yes, sir. They brought us back."

“It might be good for you to stay there a few days. The Russians are claiming someone came across the border and killed two guards. They have no proof of who it was or even if they were Americans, but they’re making a stink. They also said a woman was killed, a Maeve Korhonen. Apparently, two cabins that she owned were burned to the ground.”

“Sir, I’m going to ask that you leave her as dead for now. She’s in danger because she saved my ass, and I damn sure won’t put her in danger because of that.”

“Already done. I spoke to your old man this morning, along with Cam, Luke, and Hex. They’ll tell you what I think needs to be done, and you guys can formulate a plan. I’m letting you and your team be a part of this, but try to remember that you’re still owned by Uncle Sam.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, smiling with relief. “What about Dolt?”

“Dolt is currently on administrative leave pending a full investigation of his actions. The problem is this mission doesn’t exist.”

“We’ve got plenty of things to pull out on him, sir. I hate to bury a man, but he nearly buried all of us. I’d sure like

to know more about his background.” There was silence at the other end of the line, then his commander spoke.

“I can’t authorize that as a military-sanctioned investigation. However, I can’t control what outside entities do.”

“Thank you, sir.” He ended the call just as Maeve appeared from the back room. She was wearing a pretty floral sundress that swept low in the front, revealing beautiful round globes of pale flesh. The skirt stopped about two inches above her knee, modest but sexy as fuck. Her hair was still wet, twisted behind her back. On her feet were a pair of pink flip-flops.

“You look fucking beautiful,” he said in a raspy voice.

“It’s been a while since I’ve worn anything other than leggings or ski pants,” she smiled. “I need to thank your friends for this. It all fits perfectly.”

“No need to thank anyone,” he said dismissively.

“Actually, I need to thank you, too, Chase. If you hadn’t gotten me out of there, I don’t know what I would have done.” She stepped closer to him, and he smelled the scent of her shampoo and a perfume that someone must have left for

her. She gripped his good shoulder and reached up, kissing his cheek.

“I think I preferred the kiss we shared in the cabin,” he smiled. Maeve laughed, nodding. Reaching for him again, she touched her lips to his, tasting toothpaste. His hot, soft lips melted against hers as he pulled her tighter against his body.

Maeve opened her mouth, gasping for air, but instead tangling her tongue with his. With one arm resting at his shoulder, she wrapped the other around his waist and pulled herself tighter against him. She could feel his hardness, the length and width making her melt. He pulled back slightly, smiling down at her.

“That’s more of what I had in mind. I’d love to continue this, but right now, we’re expected for breakfast. Are you okay?”

“I am now,” she said, nodding. “Chase? This isn’t some kind of game for you, right? I mean, what’s happening here. It’s real, isn’t it?”

“Baby, it’s very real. More real than anything I’ve ever known.”

“Good, that’s good,” she said with a smile. “I’ve not dated much, especially since the attack. My experience with men was never good. They either wanted to date the famous skier or wanted to see what it was like dating an Amazon.”

“Well,” he laughed, “I don’t care about you being a famous skier, and I happen to think Amazons are sexy as fuck. Although you’ll laugh when you meet my mother. She’s barely five-feet-two.”

“Oh, my God. How did she give birth to you?” Chase broke out in laughter, taking her hand as they left his cottage.

“Well, I wasn’t always this big. But I’m sure she’ll tell you it’s why they only had one.”

“I think the one they had is pretty awesome,” smiled Maeve.

“I’m nothing compared to you, Maeve.” He stopped on the pathway, ready to wrap her in his arms once again, when he heard the sound that made him want to kill. Skull.

“Chase! Let’s go, brother. I’m hungry.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Maeve knew immediately which of the women was Chase's mother and which were her clothes fairies. Lauren and Sara were nearly identical in height to her. Lauren was probably closer in size, but both women had excellent taste in clothing.

Taylor Green was one of the tiniest women Maeve had ever met. Her blonde hair was so much like her son's. She wanted to reach out and touch it. But when she met Tango, she nearly passed out. He was so extraordinarily handsome, his features so much like Chase's, she could hardly breathe around him. It seemed as though he had a coat of finely chiseled muscle. His face carved from granite. But the way he held his wife at his side told Maeve all she needed to know.

"We're an overwhelming group of people here, Maeve. Just tell us when to back off," smiled Tango.

"Oh, no, that's not it. It's, oh gosh, I'm so embarrassed. It's just that you and Mrs. Green are such beautiful people. I mean, you're stunning."

"See, she's smart and beautiful," smiled Taylor at her son. "Maeve, honey, you're beautiful as well. I think you've

been hiding in Finland too long. Listen, you get some breakfast, relax, do what you need to do at the morning meeting, and then we'll all take you on a tour of the property."

Maeve nodded, taking her seat. The conversation seemed incredibly easy with Chase's friends. Maeve was usually uncomfortable around people, distrusting. Things were different here, and she didn't know why. She looked at Chase, and he seemed to be staring off into space.

"Is everything okay?" she whispered.

"Oh, yea, honey, everything is good. I think you should let our doctors take a look at your ankle. We've got a team here that I'd put up against anyone."

"I don't know, Chase," she said, shaking her head. "I've been down this road before. Get my hopes up, think someone has found something that will help me, and then get let right back down. I just don't think I can take it."

"Give us a chance," smiled Doc. "We met on the plane. Listen, Maeve, I know you don't know all of us very well, but our doctors and nurses are the best in the world, in my opinion. Plus, we've got something no one else has. Belle Fleur." He smiled at the young woman and walked off with Bree.

“Come on,” said Chase, pulling her hand. “Let’s get over to the auditorium and take our seats. Everyone will want to speak with you this morning.”

“You mean this isn’t everyone?” she asked with surprise.

“Well, it’s sort of everyone,” he smirked.

“Chase! Chase!” said Bogey. “That’s Rory Baine over there. And that guy, that’s Nine Dougall. And over there, that’s Alec Robicheaux. The beast of the Robicheaux brothers.” Chase laughed, shaking his head.

“Brother, I’m well aware of who they are. They’re my family.” He slapped Bogey on the back, leading them out the door toward the offices. As Bogey, Mo, Tanner, and Irish walked with them, a strange shadow passed over them. Irish stopped, gripping his chest.

“Uncle Trak, not nice,” smiled Chase. “Giving SEALs a heart attack is not part of today’s activities.”

“Just seeing if they were paying attention.” Trak continued down the path as Chase turned to see his teammates breathing heavily, Bogey leaning over, his hands on his knees.

“Bogey? You okay?”

“T-Trak. That’s J-Joseph Redhawk,” he whispered.

“He knows who he is,” smirked Nathan. “He’s my father. I’m Nathan, and that’s my brother Joseph.”

“Holy shit, I’m having a stroke,” said Mo. The men laughed, continuing to walk with the others toward the offices.

“Listen, I know you guys have heard of all of them, but they’re just regular guys like you and me. They stand to piss. They sit to shit.” Maeve giggled, shaking her head.

“They are not regular men!” said Irish. “Have you lost your damn mind? Those men are in like the spec ops hall of fame or some shit. All of them. Every last fucking one of them. The Robicheaux Rangers and their sons! The Redhawks, Delta royalty. Wolfkill and his son, Green Beret icons. You have the best SEALs that the Navy has ever turned out. I’m feeling incredibly inadequate.”

“Brother, they’re cool. All of them. You’ll see.”

Chase opened the doors to the office, leading Maeve to a seat in the front row. He nodded to his teammates to sit wherever there was an open seat. Tanner sat between Alec and Taylor, smiling up at the big men, hoping they didn’t eat him for lunch. Mo sat next to Carter and Hiro, while Bogey and Irish sat between Gaspar and Nine.

“Maeve, we want to welcome you to Belle Fleur. We’re awful sorry for losing your houses, but we’re damn happy you saved our boy.”

“It was my pleasure,” she said in barely a whisper. Cam smiled at the young woman.

“We’ve been looking over the data the boys got while they were there, and we’ll review that in a few minutes. I know it will be hard for you, Maeve, but we want to hear the story of your accident again. It feels like it might be connected.”

“Oh, yea, sure. If you think it will help.” Hex brought a stool to the front of the room, and she shook her head. “I’ll stand if that’s okay.”

“Whatever makes you feel more comfortable,” said Luke.

“I’m not sure how much you read or saw of the incident,” she started. “It was the final event for qualifying for the Olympics. I was telling the others I’ve been incredibly fortunate and blessed with wonderful DNA.”

“Go Finland!” yelled a man in the back. Maeve stopped, then laughed, shaking her head at the man.

“Hannu, let the girl finish. And she didn’t ski for Finland. She only trained there,” said Cam.

“Same thing. Finland loves you, Maeve.”

“Thank you,” she laughed. “Anyway, my grandparents and parents were cross-country skiers. All won gold medals at the Olympics, and I was on my way to doing the same thing. I hope you won’t think this sounds conceited, but no one could beat me. I’d won my races by hundreds of yards. Not inches, not seconds, but sometimes more than four or five minutes. I was tested more times than I care to count for illegal substances. Every time it was negative.

“This last event, I was so far ahead it was obvious I was going to win. I wasn’t even breathing heavily. I came up a hill, and there was a ridge. Over the ridge was the finish line, media, coaches, that sort of thing. I turned back for one second to be sure no one was near me and then looked back at the hill. I didn’t even see the two women.

“One slammed into me, knocking me to the ground. The other rammed her ski pole into my ankle. Except it wasn’t a regular pole. It had a knife blade at the bottom. She pulled it out and slammed it back in. I was screaming in pain, writhing on the snow as it was soaked with my blood. There

were cameras on the course. It didn't make any sense at all. They saw the whole thing and were there before either could get away.

“I woke up in the hospital, and they were telling me my career was done, and the ankle wasn't repairable.”

“We're so fucking sorry, Maeve,” said Eric. “What happened next, honey?”

“I was hounded by sportswear companies who wanted me to model their clothing, but I just couldn't. I wasn't an athlete any longer. Then it was the networks wanting me to become a broadcaster. It just seemed fake. So, instead, I hid away at my parents' home in Barbados for a while. Then I went back to where it all began. My grandfather's cabin.” There were tears in her eyes, and every man in the room knew why. It was the loss of the one place where she felt at home.

“I know you don't ski competitively, but Chase mentioned that you would ski around the training routes, and you damn sure held your own, hauling his big ass to the other cabin,” said Luke.

“Yes. Hauling him was easy,” she grinned. “It was all the provisions that were heavy. At first, it was just to see if I could still do it. I could ski, but I'd never compete at the level

I was at before. I knew it, and I was okay with it. When the Russians started standing at the border, watching me, I was terrified. Then I knew it was just them trying to intimidate me. I wanted to show them I wasn't going to just hide away." She stopped, looking at Chase.

"But I guess I did that anyway, didn't I?"

"It's natural, Maeve," said a big man in the front row. "I'm Angel. What you did was natural. You were seeking a place to feel comfortable. The cabin was your comfort, and skiing is what gave you joy. Did the Russians ever attempt to come after you?"

"No. Although they did make sure I knew that they could. Border crossings there are easy. I mean, it's not easy if you're a Russian trying to get out permanently, but I'm sure they were able to pass over and back with ease. They would sometimes show up in town when I was there for food. I would just be standing in the market, and they were all at the meat counter or in the produce section.

"I didn't have a car or snow machine. If it was summer, I was using a bicycle or walking. If it was winter, I was skiing into town. At first, I was terrified. But they never came after me. Not once. I suppose there wasn't a need at

that point. I mean, I wasn't going to be able to help anyone win any medals."

"Okay," said Cam, smiling at the woman. "Thank you, Maeve. I know that couldn't have been easy for you."

"It's not easy, but what you all do, what you did, isn't easy either. I don't understand everything here, but I do understand some of it. I just wanted to say thank you for everything and for helping me."

"Our pleasure, sweetie," smiled Hex.

"Oh, and Hannu," she said, turning to the older man. The shocked expression had everyone laughing. "I know of your excellence in sport. Finland was proud of their famous son." With ripples of laughter, Maeve took her seat beside Chase.

"Okay, so here's what we have," said Luke, turning toward the screen. "This is the compound that Chase and his team went to collect intel on. It's nothing from the outside, but heat sensors are showing something happening below the surface.

"The photos taken here by their team show the doctors and nurses administering injections into the men and women

returning to the compound.”

“I-I know them,” whispered Maeve. Eric turned to stare at Maeve. “Those two women were the ones that hurt me. I’d recognize them anywhere. I was told that one was dead and the other in a vegetative state.”

“It could be women who look like them,” said Cam.

“No. That’s them, and those two doctors are the ones that would stand at the border taunting me. And him!” she yelled, standing and walking toward the screen. “He’s the doctor who said there was nothing they could do for my ankle. He was a doctor in Finland, not Russia.”

“Well, this is gettin’ crazy for sure, chère,” said Robbie.

“I don’t understand this,” said Maeve. “Was he working with them all along?”

“Maeve?” called a handsome man in the fourth row. “Maeve, honey, my name is Cruz. I’m one of the medics here with Doc and Wilson. Did you go for any second opinions?”

“Three. I went to three separate doctors. Two other Finnish doctors and one American.”

“Who were the Finnish doctors?” asked Hannu. “If you recall, I was a doctor.”

“Right,” she nodded, frowning. “One was Sofia Helwig, and the other was Onni Warner.” Hannu frowned, shaking his head.

“Both Sofia and Onni were Russian-born, Maeve. I’m so sorry, honey.”

“R-Russian? I don’t understand. Were they all working together? So, what does that mean? Did they make my ankle worse? What about the American? His name was Stuart Calvin.” Cam nodded at the geeks in the corner, and the click of the keyboard echoed in the room.

“Stuart Calvin died in a motor vehicle accident three years ago,” said Code. “No spouse, no children. His very hefty bank account was donated to a children’s hospital outside of Hartford, Connecticut.”

“Maeve? Maybe you should head over to the cafeteria for a while. We can send Bree and Ashley over as well.” She stared at Chase, shaking her head.

“No. This is my life. My life and it’s been completely fucked up by people I thought I could trust. I’m not leaving

here.” She folded her arms and looked around the room. The smirks and head nods told her that the men wouldn’t fight her. Shaking a bit, she suddenly felt a rush of comfort when Savannah, Evie, Piper, Kate, and Lucia stood beside her. Piper looked at Chase and the others.

“Do not fuck with our girl.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maeve stayed in the auditorium for another thirty minutes, then decided to leave with the other women. Piper was also tall and lean, just like her. She immediately liked the woman, recognizing someone who had to fight with her body image as well.

“Are they always like that?” asked Maeve.

“Oh, honey. That was tame. Usually, their alpha-asses are so aggressive and demanding they don’t even give us a chance to say no. Although, in fairness, we seem to be able to do it anyway.”

“I guess I’m just not used to it. I mean, my grandfather watched over me when I was younger. My parents had already decided to leave Finland and retired in Barbados. But once my grandfather died, I only had my coaches.”

“That must have been lonely, honey,” said Ashley. She looked down at the woman. She was lusciously curvy with thick brown hair.

“I never really thought about it. I suppose I was lonely, but probably didn’t recognize that it was loneliness I was feeling.” She stared at the faces around her. They were seated

in a place called the grove. Picnic tables were everywhere on a beautifully flat surface, umbrellas blocking the sun, while warm early summer breezes caressed their skin.

“I just don’t understand any of it. Why? Why ruin my career? Why keep me in their sights?”

“Maybe they want something from you,” said Piper.

“I don’t have anything,” said Maeve in frustration. “I have nothing! Even my medals and ribbons from competitions since I was four are ashes now. Ashes! I have nothing! Nothing...” She lowered head and sobbed as fifty women huddled around her. But it was the booming voice of a man that had her lifting her head.

“Who made that gal cry?” growled George. The women all smiled at the older man as he practically ran toward them. “It’s alright, darlin’. Old George is here.”

George pulled her to her feet, wrapping her in his big strong arms. Maeve only cried more, feeling the grandfatherly affection she desperately missed.

“It’s okay, child. It’s okay to be sad,” he whispered. “These men and women will make it alright for you. You’ll

see.” It was a good five minutes before Maeve finally lifted her head.

“Thank you,” she sniffed. George handed her a tissue, nodding.

“You come see me if you need to cry some more.” He kissed her forehead and walked back to the cafeteria.

“I’m okay now. Sorry about that.”

“Honey, you don’t need to be sorry for anything,” said Ani. “We’ve all been right where you are. Some asshole, usually a man, treats us like shit, uses us, tosses us, endangers us, something, and these amazing men sweep in and help.”

“You were all in trouble when you met your husbands?” she asked.

“Almost all of us,” smiled Kate. “Cam and I knew one another our whole lives. So did a bunch of others. Sophia Ann and Eric, Jax and Ellie, Carl and Georgie, Sniff and Lucy, Keith and Susie, Joseph and Julia, Ryan and Paige, Kiel and Liz, Adam and Jane, Wes and Virginia, Dalton and Calla, Frank and Lane, CC and Eva, Garrett and Celeste, Robbie and Carrie. We all sort of grew up together.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Maeve. “I was an only child, and my life revolved around training. Then you all grew up with Chase?”

“We did,” smiled Eva. “Chase and I were part of the Steel Patriots family. My father is Doc.”

“He’s wonderful!” said Maeve. “He was so kind to me.”

“He’s definitely a man who knows how to speak to someone who is hurting. When Steel Patriots moved here, we suddenly had dozens of other children around us.” Eva tilted her head, smiling at the other woman. “Is there something you want to know?”

“I guess I just wanted to know more about Chase. Has he had a lot of girlfriends? Was there anyone serious?”

“Honey, Chase has never brought a woman home. Never,” said Calla. “It’s how we know that it’s serious for all of these men. We don’t tell anyone who we are or where we’re located. When a man or woman brings someone home, we know that it’s the real thing.”

“It all seems very fast,” said Maeve. “My parents dated for more than two years before they were married. My

grandparents knew one another their entire life. Chase seems very certain of his feelings.”

“I think you might need the advice,” smiled Kate. “My beautiful mother-in-law, Erin, she’s the stunner sitting at the end of the table down there.” Erin waved, smiling at the young woman.

“Anyway, she has shared this advice with every woman here, and we are honored to pass it along to you. These men protect so fiercely, so devoutly, it’s all-consuming. And they love the same way. All-consuming. It’s remarkable to watch and a blessing to be a part of it. If you want my advice, don’t question anything. Just let yourself feel. These are special men, and if you don’t mind me saying so, it will sound a bit conceited on my, on our part, but it takes special women to be with them.

“What you have to ask yourself, Maeve, is whether or not you believe you’re that special woman that can handle a man like Chase. Can you love him when he’s deployed for six months at a time? Can you be here for him when he needs you? Can you be loyal, honest, and faithful to him? Because I can guarantee he damn sure will be to you.”

“He seems so certain of how he’s feeling. What if that changes? What if he wakes up tomorrow and thinks it’s all a mistake?”

“What if I wake up tomorrow and realize that you are the woman I’ve waited my whole life for? What if I wake up tomorrow and realize that you’re the only woman for me? Will you be here?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Chase,” she whispered.

“What if, Maeve? What if this is real? A once-in-a-lifetime, like no other, love. Are you ready for it? Because I damn sure am,” he said, taking her hand. Maeve stood, holding tightly to him.

“I’m scared, Chase. You scare me.”

“How do I scare you, honey? Tell me, and I’ll fix it.” She laughed, shaking her head.

“You can’t change who you are, Chase. You’re larger than life, literally. You’re this giant Adonis with all that beautiful hair and blue eyes, and I’ve seen your muscles. I know what you look like beneath those clothes.”

“That’s all superficial, Maeve. It could go away tomorrow. I might get fat and lose my hair,” he smiled. Now all of the women were laughing.

“Obviously not likely, considering what you do for a living, and I’ve met your parents.”

“Baby, just what do you think I see when I look at you? You’re fucking gorgeous. But I don’t care about that.

Your spirit, your bravery is what makes me crazy about you. You're unlike anyone I've ever met, Maeve, and I'd damn sure like to see where this goes."

"Me too," she whispered. Chase kissed her, cheers echoing in the grove.

"I knew it," smiled Ani. "He's too hunky to walk away from."

"Ani! You're getting as bad as Gabi," chided Kate.

"Don't bring me into this," said Gabi. "Besides, I haven't seen his penis since his high school football physical. I'm sure it's grown since then and probably magnificent."

"GABI!" screamed the entire group. Maeve could only laugh, shaking her head.

"Enough of all this mush," winked George. "We're bringin' lunch out here. It's a nice day, and y'all need to relax for a bit and enjoy."

"Thank you, George," said Kate, kissing his cheek as her husband walked toward her. The women dispersed, taking their seats by the men. Chase turned Maeve in his arms.

"You're not leaving me, Maeve. I've made the decision. I can't live without you," he smiled.

“Is that so?” she smiled. “Well, lucky for you Senior Chief Green, I can’t live without you either. But Chase, I want to know what’s happening with this. I want to know what’s going on. I need to feel a part of the solution.”

“I promise, baby.”

“Don’t you lie to that girl, boy,” growled Franklin. Chase frowned as Grip stepped forward.

“I’ll find a way to kick your ass,” said Grip.

“You have that far-off look again,” said Maeve.

“I do? Oh, well, there is something you need to be aware of. It’s one of the many quirks with Belle Fleur.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“Well, we have ghosts. You know, like dead people,” he said casually.

“Dead people? Chase, that’s not funny.”

“I’m not being funny, baby. These are our very own ghosts who are connected to us or the property. They’re all friendly, helpful, and honestly, great listeners.”

She stared into Chase’s eyes, trying to discern if he was lying or teasing her. All she could see was truth. And if that

didn't convince her, the shadowy white figures that seemed to appear out of thin air definitely did.

“A-are they coming for me?” she asked.

“No, baby. They're introducing themselves to you. This is Franklin, Grip, and Tony. Grip and Tony were part of our team before their unfortunate deaths. Franklin has been on the property for over two hundred years.”

“Hello,” she said quietly.

“No need to fear us, child,” said Franklin.

“You need to let the doctors look at your ankle,” said Tony. Maeve stared at the young man, shaking her head. “I just think they might be able to give you some answers.”

“You're very tall,” said a small voice behind her. Maeve jumped, turning to see Claudette. “Hello. I'm Claudette.”

“Claudette. Wait, isn't there a woman here named Claudette?”

“Yes. She was named after me,” smiled the little girl. “I like her very much.”

Enjoying lunch in the fresh air was just the thing Maeve needed. Hunky men, amazing women, delicious food,

and now ghosts were about all a girl could take in one day. When the men all retreated back to the offices, Cruz and Wilson came for Maeve.

“We’d like to do that physical now, Maeve,” said Wilson. “Riley and Gabi are all ready for you. We might be able to help.” Maeve nodded.

“Alright, fine. It’s not like there could be anything else horrible going on in there. Wait. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that,” she said, standing. She looked up at Wilson, shaking her head, then at Cruz.

“What? Why are you looking at us like that?” asked Cruz.

“I’m just wondering what the beauty criteria are for working here? You do understand that you two are beautiful men, right?”

“See, I told you I’d like her,” smiled Cruz.

At the clinic, Cruz drew up several vials of blood while Wilson took a number of x-rays of her ankle and an MRI. When they were done, Gabi and Riley came in to look at the ankle.

“Well, it is a mess in there,” said Gabi. “The knife chipped some bone off the talus, or ankle bone. The muscles and tendons are all fucked up, and I bet they’re a bitch to get stretched out in the cold first thing in the morning.”

“Yep,” nodded Maeve, bending her ankle back and forth.

“I think we try the pond,” said Riley. “It may not make a difference for the talus, but it might relieve her pain and discomfort, and quite possibly, it could correct the damage to the muscles and ligaments.”

“The pond? Is that a code word for something else?” asked Maeve.

“Nope,” smiled Cruz, flashing his panty-melting grin. “It’s just a pond.” He walked out of the room with Wilson, and Maeve looked at the two women.

“That’s why you became doctors, right? So that you could see those two smiling at you all day long. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s like a light switch that goes on. One is blonde and tall and hunky, and the other is a Latin sex kitten.” Riley laughed, Gabi nodding her head up and down.

“Damn right. If I weren’t married to my big chocolate sex stick, I’d be jumping on those two all day long.”

“Gabi!”

“What? You know I didn’t mean it. I would never do that to Camille or Sara. Besides, those two are too honorable to cheat on their wives.” She reached across, grabbing Maeve’s hand. “They’re all that way, honey. I joke, but no man here would cheat on his wife. They’re all keepers.”

“Thank you for that,” she said. “Okay. Let’s give this mysterious pond a whirl.”

Exiting the back door, Wilson and Cruz were ready in the ATV. They wound their way along the trails through the property, pointing things out to Maeve. When they reached the pond, she stood on the dock staring at the water.

“You have to get naked,” said Cruz. Maeve gave him a strange look, and he laughed. “I’m serious. We’ll turn our backs. You get naked and jump in.”

“Fine.”

As promised, Wilson and Cruz turned their backs. When they heard the splash of water, they turned around to see

Maeve beneath the water. She emerged, her head soaked, and smiled at them.

“It’s thermal,” she grinned. “I already feel better. It’s lovely.”

“Just move around a bit,” said Wilson. “Swim back by the falls and then come back this way.”

Maeve did as she was told, swimming to the waterfall and then back to the dock. She noticed immediately the lessening of the pain in her ankle.

“Okay, you can get out,” said Cruz. The men turned around, then heard Maeve climb out of the pond. A few moments later, she told them to turn around.

“How do you feel?” asked Wilson.

“Great,” she laughed. She rotated her ankle back and forth, then in circles. “I can’t believe how good it feels. Oh, my God! Look! My scar is gone.” The men nodded, smiling at her.

“Well, so far, so good. Let’s get a repeat MRI and see what we see,” said Wilson. An hour later, they were all looking at the same thing. No damage. The bone wasn’t repaired, but the muscles and tendons were completely healed.

“How is this possible?” she whispered.

“We’re not even sure,” said Gabi. “But you can’t tell anyone, Maeve. No one must know.”

“So, I can’t compete again?” she asked.

“Honey, I don’t know how you explain the ankle to any medical personnel. Wouldn’t they want to examine it?”

“Maybe,” she said thoughtfully. “I mean, they would want to know what I did to improve it, at the very least.”

“That’s what we mean,” said Riley. “If anyone found out about that pond, they’d be crawling all over this property. We can’t let people know about it, Maeve. We give ourselves to the world, but the pond and this property are sacred.”

“I understand,” she said, nodding at the women. “I’m just glad I can walk without pain now. It’s amazing. Let me know when the blood work is in, just so I can be sure all is okay on that end. I haven’t done a physical in a while. Also, uh, can you help me with birth control? I mean, Chase and I haven’t done anything, but...”

“But that big happy package makes you sweat, right?” grinned Gabi. Riley shook her head.

“Oh, my God, you’re hysterical,” said Maeve.

“Come on, sweet girl,” said Gabi. “Let mommy have the talk with you, and then we’ll figure out what would be best for you.”

Riley, Cruz, and Wilson watched as Gabi led Maeve down the corridor to her office. Riley could only shake her head at her friend and colleague.

“You know, it’s a good thing that woman doesn’t work in the outside world. She’d be fired within days,” smiled Wilson.

“Yea, but she’s so damn good at what she does, I don’t think anyone would care.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Where is the girl?” asked the man in uniform. “I know that she helped the men who crossed into our country. Where did she go?”

“We’re not sure, sir. We burned her cabin down and then noticed another burning further away. It appears to have been a smaller cabin. There was nothing left to indicate who it belonged to. If she’s still in the country, she’s hiding somewhere.”

“Did you check plane and train manifests?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. She was not listed as a passenger on any of them.”

He stood, staring out at the bleak, stark landscape. The snow was melting as early summer approached, but it would remain cold for some time. In the distance, the trainees were running through an obstacle course, their clothing caked in mud. One of the women was shaking from the frigid temperatures.

Walking around the desk, he opened the door and stepped outside. Long strides carried him toward the trainees. As he moved closer, they stiffened in fear. Those that were

moving through the course seemed to give extra effort. The woman he was interested in couldn't move she was shaking so violently from the cold. Or from the drugs.

“Sir, the recruits are doing well this morning,” said one of the doctors. He waved him off, heading straight toward the woman.

“Are they? You appear to be suffering from the cold,” he said to the woman. She stared straight ahead, not daring to look the man in the eyes. He was average height and build, but she was tall, much taller than him, and no doubt stronger. Although, at the moment, she was in no condition to test that theory.

“Answer me,” he said, taking another step closer.

“You appear to be suffering from the cold.”

“I'm fine, sir.”

“You don't appear to be fine. I cannot have shaking, shivering weaklings in my ranks!”

“I am not a weakling, sir.” She dared to look down at him, glaring into his black eyes. She could snap his neck if she wanted to, but then she would be dead. She wanted this

opportunity for her family. She needed this opportunity for her family.

“You want to say something, recruit?” he smirked. She continued to stare, not at him, but just above his head so that she didn’t spit in his face. “Stop shaking.”

“Sir,” said the doctor behind him. “The recruits have been out here since four a.m. It was raining, quite cold, and they haven’t had an opportunity to get warm. Her body is simply reacting to her core temperature being so low. She’ll get warmed up.”

“Fine. She’ll run the long route today.” Her head snapped down, staring at the man in front of her. Inside, she was seething with anger. The long route was more than seventy-two kilometers. After already engaging in training for six hours, it would be nearly impossible to complete.

“Sir, that’s not possible,” said the doctor.

“It’s possible for the weakling...” He didn’t finish his sentence as the woman leaped toward him, slapping her forearm into his throat, her knee into his groin. The other recruits could only stare as the guards pulled her from his body. Kneeling, he coughed and hacked until he caught his breath and stood. With the guard holding her arms, he

slammed a fist into her gut. But she was prepared. Her core tightened from hundreds of hours of training.

Looking around the field, he found what he wanted. Grabbing the iron bar left from the fencing, he swung, slamming it against her face. Blood splattered all over him and the guards as he repeatedly hit her until she finally collapsed.

The doctor ran to her side, feeling for a pulse. Shaking his head, he stood, staring at the attacker.

“You’ve killed her. She was our brightest hope. She was the one that could do this! I explained to you why she was shivering.”

The man swallowed, realizing that he’d allowed his temper to get the better of him. If she was their hope, now they had to start again. Weakness. He hated weakness. He wouldn’t tolerate it, not even in himself.

“Cremate her with the others.” He turned to the group staring at the dead body. Wet, muddy, cold, and tired, he saw the fear in their faces and something else. Something he needed to squash. Free will.

“Let this be a lesson to you all. I will not tolerate weakness. I will not tolerate insubordination. I expect results, and I will get them.” He stormed off toward his office once again. He’d have to explain to Moscow why their promising recruit was dead, but he could make that happen. He was certain of it.

“What do we do now?” asked the nurse. The doctor swallowed, shaking his head.

“Pray that one of the others comes through.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chase entered his cottage to see Maeve seated with her legs curled beneath her bottom, reading one of Charlie's books. He nearly choked at the thought of what she was reading.

"Hi," she smiled with a slight blush. "These books are amazing! I don't know how I've never heard of them before, but Charlie is fantastic."

"Yea, I know that everyone likes her books," he grinned.

"Well, you must. You had three here in the cottage," she smiled.

"Oh, yea, well, uh. Yea. I like the books too. They're great stories, and let's face it, the sex is off the charts. She has a real talent for making things feel real," he laughed. Maeve nodded, setting the book to the side. "How's your foot?"

"Amazing," she said, standing. She wiggled her ankle back and forth, side to side, then jumped up and down. "It hasn't felt this good since before the accident. The tendons, ligaments, and muscles are all healed. The bone is still

chipped, but nothing we can do about that. The pond is miraculous.”

“Yes, it is,” he smiled, kissing her. “I’m glad it helped you. Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” she said, taking her seat once again. “You can ask me anything, Chase. I’m an open book. All you have to do is google my name, and you’ll read all about me.”

“I don’t want to google you,” he grinned. “I want to know the real Maeve. Everything about you. Were you dating anyone at the time of the accident?”

“Yes,” she replied honestly. “Although, I’m not entirely sure it should be called dating. We were both skiers for the U.S. team, and our coaches thought it would be a great story to see us together. We went to dinner a few times, to a few clubs, but it wasn’t anything special. He really wasn’t into me, and I wasn’t into him.”

“Thank you for telling me that. Another question, and it might be awkward.”

“I’m not a virgin, Chase,” she said with a blush. “I-I know that you were worried about it. The little ghost,

Claudette, she told me. She said a lot of the men here worry about that because of their size. I'm not a virgin."

"I know I should be happy about that, but I don't know that I am," he laughed. "I don't want to hear about your experiences. That would only make me insane."

"Same for me, Chase. I know you've had your share of women, but I don't want to hear about them." He nodded, taking the seat beside her again.

"I've dated a few women, but nothing serious, Maeve. Something every man here can tell you is that when you're spec ops, women seem drawn to the uniforms. In the SEALs, we call them frog hogs. Rangers call them Ranger bangers. I'm sure they all have their unkind names.

"When I was first in the Navy, a woman came onto me in a bar. I'm ashamed to admit that I let her lure me to the backseat of a car where she got herself off, and I was left, well, hanging, so to speak. It was a game to her and her friends. A game, Maeve. Had I been a lesser man, I would have harmed her."

"But you aren't a lesser man," she said, gripping his hand. "You're Chase Green. United States Navy SEAL, son of Taylor and Tango, family to all the people here at Belle

Fleur. You're special, Chase. All of you are, which is why I guess I'm feeling a bit inadequate."

"Inadequate? How in the world could you possibly feel inadequate?" he frowned.

"I'm nothing special, Chase. I'm just me. A former competitive skier, daughter and granddaughter of Olympians."

"Baby, you're not 'just' anything. You're amazing. Yes, you were a competitive skier, but you're so much more than that. You're a survivor. You're brave and confident, strong and beautiful. I'm crazy about you, Maeve. Crazy." He pulled her toward him, her legs over his thighs as he pushed her back on the sofa. His rough hand skimmed up the hem of the skirt on her dress.

"Show me," she whispered. "Show me how crazy you are for me."

Chase didn't need to be told twice. Gripping the silky panties, he ripped them from her body, rolling her to her back.

"I need you, Maeve. I don't know if I can be gentle."

"I don't want gentle, Chase. I want you," she said, riding a leg up over his shoulder. Chase could barely think he

was so hot. Unzipping his shorts, he shoved them down, lining his already wet head up to her soaked opening.

His fat purple head broke through, and Maeve gasped at his girth. It felt amazingly wonderful, filling her beyond her wildest dreams. Rocking her hips upward, he smiled down, kissing her chin, then taking her mouth.

Chase wrapped her hair around his fist, exposing her neck and jaw for him. As he rolled in and out of her, he penetrated deeper and deeper until he was fully seated inside her warmth.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he growled, kissing her passionately.

“Chase, Chase, I need this,” she cried, tilting her hips toward him. “You’re hitting it. That perfect spot, baby.”

“Fuck right I am,” he grinned. He was prepared to hold out as long as needed, but when she lifted her other leg over the back of the sofa, he knew she was close. Arching her back, her breasts stretched the top of the sundress, and Chase wanted to explore them later. She closed her eyes, a long slow breath exhaled from her body as her abdomen and legs began to quiver with satisfaction.

As he continued to pummel into her, she wrapped her long legs around his back, lifting her pelvis the way the female character in Charlie's book had. A low rumble began to emanate from Chase's chest, manifesting into a growl like an animal hunting its prey. As he slowed, leaning his forehead against her own, she smiled up at him.

"That was fucking perfect," he grinned, kissing her sweetly.

"Maybe next time we try to make it to the bed," she laughed.

"Damn, baby, I'm sorry. You deserved a bed for our first time, not my couch."

"Was I complaining?" she grinned. "It was perfect, Chase. It's just with me being nearly six-feet and you well over six-feet, a sofa isn't exactly conducive for lovemaking. In fact, I hope you have a big bed."

"If you didn't notice, it's larger than a regular King. Most of us have our beds custom-made since we're taller and bigger. Alec, Taylor, Noah, and the others on Team Big all had to have their beds built inside the house. They wouldn't have fit through the doors."

“Team Big?” she said with a smirk.

“Not that kind of big. Well, maybe,” he laughed. “No, it’s all our guys over six-feet-five. They’re on a special team for special projects.”

“So, you would be on that team when you leave the SEALs?”

“I guess I would,” he grinned, hugging her to him. Realizing they hadn’t discussed what a future would look like for them, he stared down at her sweet face. “Maeve, I want a life with you in it, and I hope you know that I want that life to be here. I’ve got about five months left on my contract, and then I can leave the SEALs.”

“Would I, I mean, could I wait here?” she asked meekly.

“Baby, there is nowhere else I would want you to be. You’d be safe and taken care of here. You can decide what you want to do. You could go back to school if you want or start a training facility for Olympians. I know our gym works with men and women who want to go into the military, spec ops, first responders, helping to prepare them. Maybe you could help out.”

“I didn’t think about that,” she said thoughtfully. “I guess I’ll give it some time and decide what I want to do. I’m going to test out the foot tomorrow and do a run with Shay. I hear she’s wicked fast, so this should be fun. Chase? I need to let my parents know that I’m okay. If the Finnish government has reported me missing or dead, they’ll be horrified.”

“Don’t worry, honey. Mama Irene and Ruby already spoke to them.”

“But my parents don’t know who they are. Why would they believe them?” she asked with concern. Chase laughed, shaking his head.

“You obviously haven’t spent a lot of time around those two women. They are a force not to be reckoned with.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Suzette, staring at the bloodwork results. She moved back to the microscope and looked at the blood and tissue samples on the slides beneath the lens. “Are we sure this isn’t contaminated or that there aren’t any drugs in her system?”

“Nothing,” said Riley. “Gabi, Cruz, Doc, Wilson, and I have all looked at it a dozen times. We were hoping you might be able to tell us something different.”

“I think we know why the Russians were afraid of her. But I’m also going to bet it’s why they kept an eye on her,” said Cruz. “Suzette? Can you help us understand this and why it would matter for an athlete?”

“I’ll give it a whirl,” she grinned. “The endocrine system regulates the production of hormones. As we all know, those hormones can affect a number of different cells. However, they only influence the cells that have specific receptor sites.

“Our hormones control all kinds of physiological reactions in our bodies, including energy, metabolism, reproduction, tissue growth, hydration levels, and, most

important to an athlete, synthesis and degradation of muscle protein. They are responsible for building new muscle as well helping to burn fat.”

“So, these tests are telling us she has an elevated ability to do those things?” asked Doc.

“Not exactly,” said Suzette. “Steroid, peptide, and amino acid hormones are the three things we look at. Each class of hormones has a unique chemical structure. That structure determines how it interacts with the receptors.

“Hormones can either be anabolic, which means they help build new tissue, or catabolic because they play a role in breaking tissue down. Anabolic steroids are often mentioned as a method of cheating by athletes who want to improve performance. The problem is that anabolic steroids are actually natural chemicals produced by the body that are responsible for promoting tissue growth. That’s why it’s been so easy for some athletes to hide the fact that they’re doping to win.”

“How does all this affect hormones and exercise?” asked Wilson.

“That’s a great question with a really long answer, but I’ll try to be short. Insulin regulates carbohydrate and fat

metabolism. When insulin is released, it helps with the storage of glucose. It also helps to ensure that the levels of glucose don't go too high.

“The ugly part of insulin is that it can cause fat to be stored in the tissue instead of being used as fuel. Typically, when exercise starts, the nervous system suppresses the release of insulin, which is why we tell all of you to avoid high-sugar drinks when you're in the field. It could elevate your sugar levels.

“Cortisol is a catabolic steroid hormone. It is released when the body experiences too much physical stress or is not sufficiently recovered from a previous workout. Again, it's why we encourage you to rest between long training sessions. It's smart. Although cortisol helps promote fat metabolism, exercising for too long can elevate levels of cortisol to catabolize muscle protein for fuel instead of conserving it to be used to repair damaged tissues.

“There are others as well. Epinephrine, norepinephrine, testosterone, and human growth hormone all play a role in athletes being successful.”

“So, all of those things are what made Maeve such an amazing athlete? It made her able to compete at Olympic

levels without even breathing heavily?” asked Cruz.

“Well, that and something as important. BDNF, or brain-derived neurotrophic factor. It’s a neurotransmitter that helps stimulate the production of new cells in the brain. This not only gives the individual a natural, HGH-like high but improves their cognitive function exponentially. It was what made Maeve so good at quick decisions on courses, identifying her own body’s reactions, and so on. It is exceptionally high in her.

“She is a perfect storm of the body’s chemical reactions and receptors playing in flawless harmony like a world-class symphony. Drugs are usually what athletes have to take in order to have this kind of perfection. Maeve is different. It’s natural, ready, and willing to kick in when she needs it.

“I studied athletes in college for a drug we were testing, and no one even came close to the levels I’m seeing here. I would suspect her parents and grandparents had the same anomaly. You could teach her any sport, and she would be superior to others. Anything.” Suzette emphasized the last word, watching her friends’ reaction.

“That’s why the Russians were watching her,” said Doc. “I wonder if they knew what you found. If they did, she’s not out of the woods yet.”

“They would have to have all our cool equipment,” smiled Suzette, “and not to toot our own horn, but we’re very good as a team. Figuring this out took us all.”

“How would they have gotten a blood or tissue sample from her?” asked Riley.

“Well, they could have gotten it when she was injured, although it would make more sense that they took it before her attack,” said Cruz.

“I’m sure she had to undergo numerous physicals, tests, that sort of thing before competing,” said Gabi. “She also said that she was constantly being drug-tested because of her performance. I wonder if they did it for more than just testing. If they were taking her sample vials and trying to replicate them, that could explain this as well.”

“That takes us back to the compound they found,” said Wilson. “Are they training athletes or super soldiers? Does it even matter?”

“I don’t know,” said Suzette, “but as far as I know, there’s no way to replicate what we’re seeing here in another human being. Everything would be artificial hormones, cortisol, etcetera. It would still show on a drug test unless they’ve found a way to mask it. There are so many variables here. I can barely wrap my head around it.”

“Alright,” nodded Wilson. “Cruz and I are running her through some exercises today. We told her it was just to test out the ankle, but we want to see what her run time is against Shay.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” frowned Suzette. “She still has the metabolic changes from the drug they injected her with.”

“That’s right. Which should mean that she can outrun Maeve. If she doesn’t, Maeve is unlike anyone we’ve ever encountered, and everyone is going to want a piece of her. Literally. We’re also going to have her go against Piper in hand-to-hand. It’s something she’s inexperienced at, so it will be a test on a lot of levels.”

“Okay,” nodded Riley. “Keep a close eye on her. Push her, but don’t make her suspicious. She might want to do this

just to see how her ankle reacts. I don't want her frightened of all of us."

"Will do," said Wilson, grabbing the lab results and securing them in the folder once again. "Let's go, Cruz. Time to be humiliated once again."

"It's cool," he smiled. "I'm used to it."

Riley, Gabi, and Suzette just laughed, watching them leave. Doc looked at the women, frowning.

"We can't let her become a science experiment, and the only way to guarantee that is to ensure she doesn't compete again. Otherwise, someone, sooner or later, will notice." Doc turned and left the women standing in the room.

"I hate it when he's right," said Gabi. "And he's right a lot."

"I know what you mean," nodded Riley. "What now?" Suzette stared at her friends, shrugging her shoulders.

"I wish I knew."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Are you ready?” asked Chase.

“I’m so ready,” smiled Maeve. “It’s been so long since I could really test the ankle. I’m excited to see how it holds up.” She looked to see Shay walking toward them but noticed Clay, Cruz, and Trak all at the start line as well.

“Don’t worry, honey. They’re just running with you to be sure nothing happens,” said Chase. Although, truth be told, he wasn’t sure why they were all there either.

“We’ll run at your pace, Maeve,” said Clay. “You and Shay will lead, and if you feel like you can go fast, go faster. If not, then this is just a jog in the park.”

“How far should I go?” she asked.

“How far would you normally go?” asked Cruz.

“When I was in full training mode, maybe ten or fifteen miles. But I haven’t run like this in years. I still skied cross-country, but that’s different.”

“It’s still a toll on your body,” said Trak. “Just run at your pace.” She nodded at the handsome man. He had a sprinkling of silver running through his long black hair. He

was very handsome, and in spite of his years, he was lean with muscle and a piercing gaze.

“Just two girls out for a run,” smiled Shay. Shay began the slow jog, itching to let go and really run one out today. It had been a while with all the rain and cooler weather. She hoped Maeve would be able to keep up. She loved running but didn’t always want to run with the men.

Four miles in, Trak pointed to his watch and noted to Cruz and Clay that she was running a six-minute mile. She didn’t even know how far they’d gone or how fast she was running.

“Ready to kick it up?” asked Shay.

“More than ready,” smiled Maeve. Kicking her heels, Shay knew she was pushing Maeve, but it didn’t seem to faze her in the least. For the next six miles, they ran close to four-minute miles, leaving the boys in their dust. When Shay kicked it into high gear, Maeve struggled to keep up with her but wasn’t far behind.

Waiting for her at the finish line, she hugged the other woman, laughing at the men coming up behind them. Cruz and Clay ran neck and neck, but Trak passed them both, retaining the title of fastest man at RP.

“That was amazing!” laughed Maeve. “Not even so much as a little twinge. I can’t remember when I was able to run like that.”

“You really pushed it,” smiled Shay. “Were you aware of how fast you were going?”

“Nope, and I don’t care. It was just so much fun!” Cruz looked at Clay and Trak, trying to catch his breath.

“We need to get you to the gym. We’ve got a few more things we’d like to check.”

“Cool,” she said, grabbing her sport bottle and towel. Shay led the way, leaving the men behind them.

“She’s superior to everyone except Shay,” said Trak. “If the Russians find her, they’ll use her, or at least what is in her, for their own uses.”

“Was my stopwatch right?” asked Chase, walking toward them. “I didn’t want her to see me, so I was standing behind the hedges.”

“It’s right, brother. We’re headed to the gym now to see how she does with Piper.”

“I don’t think she’s ever done any hand-to-hand training,” said Chase.

“No, but if her bloodwork is any indication, her cognitive thinking ability is superior to everyone else,” said Cruz. “She thinks quickly, assesses situations, and finds a solution. I think that’s clear from her decision to get you out of the cabin in Finland and further from the border. Even the little things like burning the blood-soaked gauze, taking out your bullet. All of that required her brain to do things it hadn’t done before. Yet she was successful. Every time.”

“Well, let’s see how she does,” said Trak. “Maybe by the time it’s done, I’ll have caught my breath.”



“Maeve, this is something we ask everyone to do on-site. We want our wives, children, significant others, everyone to be able to fend off an attacker,” said Rory. She nodded, staring at him with big eyes.

“H-how am I supposed to bring someone your size down? Anyone here?! They’re all huge, and I’m tall, but I’m thin.”

“You are tall,” smiled Rory, “but you’re loaded with solid, lean muscle. I would never ask you to fight with me

right off the bat. My wife, Piper, is an expert in hand-to-hand and works with all of the women here.”

“Oh,” she nodded, seeing Piper come toward her.

Piper kissed her husband, smiling at his handsome face. “You won’t hurt me, will you?”

“I promise I won’t hurt you, Maeve. If I’m holding too tight or if you can’t get out of the hold, just tap my arm. Gunner and Whiskey are going to show you a few evasive moves first. Then we’ll start.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

Chase and the others watched from a distance as Whiskey and Gunner instructed Maeve on some basic maneuvers. She not only picked them up fast but was able to work out in her head what the next move might be.

“She’s incredible,” whispered Piper. “She’s anticipating their moves without even knowing what the move looks like. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Chase nodded but didn’t like what he was seeing at all. She would want to be part of the girl squad, and he didn’t want that. How in hell was he going to stop her?

“I see your wheels turning, brother,” smirked Cam.
“From one husband of someone on the girl squad to a potential, don’t fight this shit. She’s already showing us that she’s more than capable. Let her find her strength, Chase.”

“I can’t lose her, Cam.”

“Then let her do her thing.”

“Okay, Piper, come on over,” said Rory. “Maeve, this is the most common way an attacker would come at you. From behind. Piper is just going to walk up and...” He waved Piper toward him, but before she could even get her grip around Maeve’s neck, she had her over her shoulder and on the mat.

“Oh my God! Did I hurt you?” she asked as Piper laughed.

“No, that was awesome, by the way.”

“Well done, Maeve,” grinned Rory. “Even I have trouble with that now and then.”

“You didn’t have any trouble last night,” winked Piper.
“This time, I’ll come at you from the front. It would be a bold attacker to do that, but you never know.”

Piper walked a few yards away and then turned casually, coming at her. When she was arm's length away, she gripped Maeve's forearm, pulling her toward her. She attempted to turn her, but Maeve evaded, turned her body under Piper's arm, twisting it behind her.

“Okay, okay,” laughed Piper. “Damn, girl, you're amazing!”

“I am?” she asked, surprised. “I'm not hurting you, am I?”

“Maeve, a little advice, sweetie. Don't ever ask your attacker if you're hurting them. They'll play off your sympathies. You're doing amazing,” smiled Piper. “Let's try something different.” Piper waved over Max, Taylor, and Alec. The big men looked like a wall of testosterone coming toward her.

“Oh, no. No way,” she said, taking a step back.

“Trust me, Maeve. You've got this.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“How did you break your hand?” frowned Lena at her husband. She had his big hand laying on top of hers, the other fisted at her side.

“I-I did it,” said Maeve, sniffing back tears. “I’m so sorry, Tailor. I did what you told me to do. I didn’t mean to break it.”

“Maeve, honey, there’s no need to apologize. You did exactly what we wanted you to do. We’ll teach you control in another session. Besides, I’m sure I deserved this for something,” laughed Tailor. Lena looked at Alec and Max, both with bruises already appearing on their bodies. Max had a cut beneath his eye, and she couldn’t help but laugh at them.

“Maeve, you are my new hero,” laughed Lena. “Let’s go, children. We’ll get you fixed up, and you may even get a lollipop and a superman bandage.”

The others watched as the three behemoths followed Lena to the back. Maeve started crying again, and Chase pulled her into his arms.

“Baby, you heard them. You did exactly as they asked you to do. Well done. It was impressive as hell, and now I

know not to sneak up on you,” he grinned.

“Chase, I had no idea I could do those things. I’ve never done anything like that before in my life, but it seemed natural.”

Gabi, Riley, and Bree stepped forward, smiling at the young woman.

“Maeve, take a seat, honey,” said Riley. They were all still in the gym, so the entire team took their seats, waiting for Riley and the others to tell Maeve about her unusual metabolism. “Maeve, we want to talk to you about your bloodwork and some unusual things we discovered.”

“Oh, God, am I sick?” she asked, panicked.

“No! No, not at all,” said Gabi. “Sorry about that. We think one of the reasons the Russians wanted you and, most likely, your parents are the unusual hormonal reactions that happen in your body.”

“Wait, do I have too much testosterone?” she asked.

“No, why would you think that?” asked Riley, confused.

“A doctor once said it was why I was so good. That I must have more testosterone than other women, but he

couldn't prove it."

"No, that's not it at all," said Gabi. "In fact, your body is in perfect harmony with itself. It provides the right amounts of every hormone at exactly the right time, and, more than that, the receptors are welcoming and firing all the time."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"It's like a great car engine," said Bree. "Even the best car or motorcycle, no matter how superior it is, will misfire now and then. The same is true with athletes. Everyone loses a race now and then. But you never did, did you?"

"No."

"No, you didn't. Because your body doesn't misfire. It doesn't know how to misfire; it only knows how to perform. Your body is so fine-tuned that it allows your brain to absorb information at an alarming rate and assess the situation, reacting appropriately to it."

"Like with them," she said, nodding to the first aid door. "I saw them coming at me and just knew what to do."

"I've never seen anything like it, honey," said Whiskey. "I train these guys and all our new guys. I've been training men for decades now. You not only learned the

moves in one take, you were able to execute them without effort. That's not just about strength and speed. It's about your brain taking in the information immediately and using it."

"B-but what does this have to do with everything that's going on?" she asked.

"That's where I'll come in," said Luke. "We think the Russians want to duplicate what's happening in your body. Somehow, they got hold of your blood or tissue samples. They saw something unique and wanted it for themselves. I would imagine when they were unable to logically explain why you were beating their athletes, they went searching for answers."

"They want to replicate me?" she asked with a funny expression. "Why on earth would anyone want to do that?" Chase chuckled, kissing her cheek.

"Because it's like I told you. You're perfect."

"He's not far off," smiled Wilson. "Your body works the way we all wish ours did. Were you aware you were running four-minute miles today?" Her eyes grew huge, and she shook her head.

“We didn’t think so,” smirked Cruz. “You smoked my ass. That’s for sure. And the fact that you beat Clay and Trak is a miracle.”

“I’m so confused right now.”

“It’s okay to be confused,” said Bree. “If you want, we can go sit down with Riley and Gabi and talk some more. Would you like that?”

“Y-yes,” she nodded. Turning to Chase, he smiled at her. “Will you wait for me?”

“I’m not going anywhere, honey. I’ll be right here.” He watched her walk away with Riley, Gabi, and Bree and turned to Luke. “My commander is going to want us back soon. They’re going to send another group into that compound.”

“Not before we get there,” said Hex. “Although the commander wanted the White House to have plausible deniability, we don’t give a fuck. We called the POTUS. He wants us to go in and see what the hell is happening there.”

“But is doping Olympians a national security issue?” asked Chase.

“No. But creating soldiers with that kind of strength, stamina, and critical thinking ability is probably right up there.”

“Alright. Let’s talk.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Hiro? Bring up the images you guys got from the satellites and drones,” said Cam. “Most of it is what you all saw when you were there. People going in and out. Until two days ago when this man, General Victor Pegoski, beat a woman to death with a piece of metal rebar.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” muttered Bogey. “Those men just held that poor woman while he beat her to death.”

“They did,” nodded Eric. “Then they took her to the building in the back. The one with all the blacked-out windows.”

“Were they going to perform a Frankenstein on her?” asked Irish with confusion.

“That’s what we’re not sure of,” said Sly. “The thermal imaging is still showing increased heat coming from beneath that building. But here’s the thing. It’s not nuclear heat. We were able to get a drone close enough and took some readings. There is no radiation coming from that building.

“If they had a nuclear reactor down there, a core, anything, it would have sung like a canary. But it didn’t.

Increased temperatures in the surrounding area? Yes.

Nuclear? No.”

“Then what is it?” asked Mo.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” said Cam.

“Wait a minute,” said Chase, stepping forward. “This was our mission, and I have a bone to settle with the asshole that shot me. I took my dips in the pond, and I’m doing great. No limitations, according to Riley.”

“The pond?” frowned Tanner.

“Later,” said Eric, staring at the younger man. “Listen, Chase. We know that you all probably want to finish this. It’s your mission. It’s in your nature to want to finish it. But this is not a mission that the White House is willing to back. Does the POTUS know? Yes, now he knows. But he only knows about it from us, about us.”

“If you go, son,” said Tango, “and you were to be captured, it could be an international incident of epic proportions. You would be sent to the worst prison in the country, and there would be no hope of getting you back.”

“I understand, Dad, but I’m not going to just sit here and wait it out. Besides, if my team is with me and an RP

team, there's no danger of me being captured."

"I won't sit here either. Sir," said Bogey.

"Ditto," nodded Irish. Tanner stood, followed by Mo.

"Bastards stick together," smirked Tango, nodding at Whiskey and Ghost. "It's what makes you great teammates. We understand that and admire it. You're right, Chase. This was your mission to start with, and you deserve to finish it. You need to all understand that if you're photographed or caught, your career as a SEAL is done."

"I got two months left, sir," said Bogey. "I'd like to do something different when I'm done."

"Same," said Mo. "We didn't know about Chase and his interesting family, but we'd damn sure like to be considered for this team."

"Don't count me out," smirked Irish. "Everybody needs a little Irish on their team."

"You could add me as the token Asian," smiled Tanner.

"Hey, what that fuck am I?" said Hiro.

"Shit!"

"Son-of-a-bitch!"

“The fucking sneaky bastard!”

“Hiro, I’ve told you before,” said Ian, “you scare me like that again, and I’ll shoot you myself.” Hiro acted innocent but winked at Tanner.

“Sorry, brother, didn’t know you were there.”

“No one knows where the little bastard is hiding or when he’ll come at you,” frowned Luke. “Well, let’s get this out of the way. Bogey, tell us about yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Born and raised in Glenrock, Wyoming, home to two campgrounds, one bank, one dinosaur bone museum, a cement company, and a golf course. I was raised by my grandmother. Never met my folks. Got a degree in business online while in the Navy. Been a SEAL almost twelve years, five of those on Chase’s team.” Cam nodded toward Mo.

“Yes, sir.”

“Stop right there,” said Cam, shaking his head. “We’re not your superiors here. We operate on the premise that everyone here is a professional and knows how to do their fucking job. I’m just Cam. He’s just Luke, and so on.”

“Yes, sir,” grinned Mo.

“Smart-ass.”

“Moses Baird, raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, don’t hold that against me,” he grinned. “My mother was a second-grade teacher. My father owned a landscaping company. They’re both retired now and live in south Florida. I’ve got a degree in criminal justice, and I’ve been in the Navy almost fifteen years, ten of those as a SEAL. The last four have been on Chase’s team.”

“Next,” smirked Hex, staring at Irish.

“Connor Patrick Kelly, at your service,” he smiled.

“Gotta have a redhead in the group for good luck.”

“Dude, there are like three redheads here,” frowned Sly.

“My bad. Yea, anyway, Connor Patrick Kelly. Born in Cohasset, Massachusetts. That’s where the stereotypical Irish ends. I wasn’t raised by my mother but by my father. No siblings. No grandmother making Irish soda bread. No mother telling me stories from the old country. Just an old man who worked fifteen hours a day to put food on the table.”

The other men were quiet for a moment, waiting to see if Irish would continue.

“He died. Last year.”

“We’re sorry, brother,” said JT.

“Yea. I was deployed when it happened. Sucks to not be able to say goodbye.”

“That makes you last, Tanner,” said Luke, staring at the man. Like Hiro, he was extraordinarily quiet when he wanted to be. He seemed to just slip into the background, acting like wallpaper if necessary.

“Tanner Sung. I was born in North Korea, placed on a fishing boat by my parents, who wanted me to have a better life. I was six. I don’t remember much of anything from Korea. When I got to America, the fishing boat captain was able to get me adopted by a Korean family he knew. They told the authorities I was their nephew and my parents had died.

“I wasn’t sure if they had or not, but I knew enough that once the government found out that they let me leave, they would be dead. My adopted family was great. Raised me to understand my Korean heritage, as well as American. I have a PhD in mathematics. I’ve been in the Navy sixteen years, twelve of those as a SEAL.”

“A PhD in math?” frowned Hex. “What the fuck for?” Tanner smirked, letting out a little chuckle.

“I like math. It makes sense to me,” he said, shrugging.

“You might have a place at G.R.I.P.,” said Doug, grinning at the young man.

“G.R.I.P. You mean, the weapons developer that does all that cool shit?” asked Tanner.

“One and the same. It’s our company,” said Doug. “We can always use brilliant minds. Doesn’t mean you still couldn’t do missions with the teams, but you could be doing other things with us as well.” Tanner stared at the man in awe.

“I think I might have just peed my pants.”

“No pissing your pants here,” laughed Cam. “Listen, I know you all have various amounts of time left, but it sounds like you’ll be getting out within the next two to six months. We seem to be busier, not slowing down. Six security agencies have gone belly up in the last year, and all their contracts came crawling to us. We need men. Men willing to do the same shit that they just left.”

“I assume the pay is equal to SEAL pay,” said Tanner.

“Brother, we blow SEAL pay out of the water,”
laughed Luke. He handed each of the men a sheet of paper
with starting salaries, benefits, and the amenities of Belle
Fleur. Mo looked up at the men and over at a smiling Chase.

“This is a joke, right? You’re fucking with us. We get
a house on-property?”

“It’s no joke, brother. Matthew and Irene are
incredibly generous, along with their children. We make a
shit-ton of money on our businesses, and we’re willing to
invest in our people,” said Cam.

“I get to eat at that cafeteria? Every day?” asked Irish.

“Every day, brother,” smiled Ghost.

“Fuck me. I wonder if I can call in sick for my last
three months as a SEAL.” Cam smiled at the man, nodding
his head.

“No need to do anything drastic. Let’s finish the
business at hand, and then we’ll deal with the rest. Those
sheets are confidential. Memorize the information and then
burn the documents. We don’t want every swinging dick
getting out of the military to think he’s RP material.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was dinner time before Chase saw Maeve again. As expected, she was surrounded by the RP sisterhood, laughing and looking vibrant and alive. She'd obviously showered after her workout, her hair hanging loosely down her back. Her long legs were in a pair of cut-offs that he wanted to rip off of her, the tight Mardi Gras t-shirt hugging her perky breasts.

“So, while I was working on him in surgery, I obviously saw that big chocolate sex stick of his. I knew I had to make him mine,” said Gabi.

“Gabi! Seriously, you have to stop telling that story,” laughed Riley. “If the medical review board ever got a hold of you, you'd lose your license.”

“Who's going to report me? The man married me,” she smirked. “Besides, they all have beautiful penises. All sizes, shapes, and colors. Some that are straight, some that bend, but they're all beautiful.” The woman all giggled, shaking their heads.

“Wait, you've seen every man's penis?” asked Maeve.

“Physicals, honey. I do all the physicals here at RP. Men and women. We've got beautiful penises and muscle on

our men, and gorgeous breasts and...”

“Gabi!” yelled the table of women.

“Okay, okay, TMI, I get it. You know it’s natural, right? Seeing naked bodies and talking about them is healthy.”

“Maybe for you,” giggled Maeve, “but in my family, we never spoke about it unless it had something to do with our training.”

“Well, that’s just a shame.” Gabi frowned at her, shaking her head as one of their favorite geeks walked toward the table.

“Hey, Maeve, my name is Pigsty. I’m not sure if you remember me from the hundreds of faces.”

“Yes. Wes, right? I’m not a fan of Pigsty,” she smiled.

“Well, I’ve sort of outgrown it, but nicknames tend to stick. Listen, we’d like for you to wear this necklace and bracelet. They have a tracking device in them so that if anything should happen, we would find you within minutes.” He handed her the gorgeous pieces, and she touched them reverently.

“They’re beautiful,” she said.

“We used to have these very plain, very identifiable pieces that just looked like plain stones. Then when Ela, Shay, and Brit came, they started painting and designing different things. Ela decided to help us redesign the jewelry.”

“Well, I have you to thank then,” she said, smiling at the beautiful indigenous woman. “These are really beautiful.”

“Thank you,” smiled Ela. “I have to admit. Creating jewelry that hides trackers wasn’t exactly on my bucket list, but it was fun and challenging.”

“If you’re in trouble, Maeve, just depress the buttons on the back of either one. It not only turns on the GPS, but it allows for us to hear any communications where you are.”

“That’s amazing! Do you realize that this could be used to help skiers and climbers on the mountains?” Pigsty stared at her a moment, then looked at Code, Sly, and Hiro. “Think about it. They go up those mountains and sometimes don’t return because they get lost or are inexperienced. Even the most advanced climbers go up Everest every year and don’t return because they get caught in storms, fall, or just simply lose their way. This could prevent that.”

“Interesting,” said Doug, nodding to the tech team. “We wouldn’t want to make it jewelry and give ourselves

away, but we could do something else.”

“Just make it something that clips to their helmets or hats,” said Maeve. “I’m telling you, it would sell like crazy.”

“Maeve, you might have just given us our next multi-million-dollar idea,” laughed Doug.

She watched as the handsome older man walked off with his partner, hand in hand. Chase told a little of the story of the two of them and how they’d met under the most tragic circumstances. The love they showed made it obvious to all how they felt about one another.

“Hi, baby,” said Chase, giving her a kiss. “Did you have a good rest of your afternoon?”

“I did,” she smiled. “I’ve learned a lot from Gabi.”

“Oh, damn,” muttered Chase. Gabi frowned, giving him a light punch in the bicep.

“Ha, ha, stud muffin. You know I only speak the truth. Speaking of stud muffins, where is my double-chocolate chip? There he is!” Maeve just laughed.

“She kills me,” she giggled. “Her features are so unique and absolutely stunning.”

“They are that. She delivered me, so unfortunately, she knows everything about me. And I do mean everything.” He shifted uncomfortably as Maeve laughed.

“I like them, Chase. All of them. They’ve made me feel so welcome. Your mom and I walked around the gardens today with Grace, Faith, Erin, and Alexandra. They’re all so lovely and accomplished. Your mom is the absolute sweetest. They helped me to order new clothes and some personal items I needed. She said it was part of their charity fund for new members.”

Chase smiled at her, turning to look at his mother and the senior wives. He loved them all for making his girl feel welcome. There was no charity fund except the one created by the senior wives. He loved them all the more for that.

“Did you guys figure out anything useful today? Anything we could use?” she asked.

“We’re still not sure. The local authorities are asking questions about the two burned cabins and your whereabouts. They called your parents in Barbados, and, lucky for you, they’re apparently stellar actors. They cried, demanded answers, even accused the Russians of being in on it all.”

“I’m glad they understand the severity of it all,” she smiled. “I miss them. I haven’t seen them in almost three years. They don’t like coming back to Finland, and I didn’t like leaving. No. That’s not right. I just didn’t leave. I was so intent upon making the Russians believe they couldn’t affect me, I was being stubborn and staying in Grandpa’s cabin.”

“It’s okay to be stubborn now and then,” grinned Chase. “What else did you learn from the girls today?”

“Well, I got to meet all of the ghosts. I really like Grip and Martha. Nathan is very mysterious, sort of a dark and dangerous vibe to him, but incredibly handsome.”

“He is my grandfather,” whispered Trak from behind her. Maeve jumped as Chase cursed his ‘uncle.’

“Will you ever outgrow that bullshit? You and Hiro, scaring the fuck out of all of us.”

“No, I will not outgrow it. It has saved my life many times,” he said, frowning at Chase. He turned to Maeve and gave her a small wink. “My grandfather likes you as well.”

“Oh, wow, he’s really sexy,” said Maeve.

“I’m right here, honey.”

“I know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“So, based on everything you saw today and adding in what you found in my bloodwork, you think I could perform at peak levels in many sports?” asked Maeve over a bite of pecan pie.

“Well, it seems logical,” said Riley. “I think you were even surprised today by your performance with Shay and Piper. Not to mention what you did with the big boys in the hand-to-hand.” Maeve winced, looking behind her to see Taylor’s hand in a cast.

“I feel awful for doing that,” she said.

“Maeve, the bone is healing already. We dumped him in the pond, and most of the damage was healed. We’re just using the cast as a precaution. I’m going to look at it again tomorrow and decide if we can take it off. Taylor’s a big man, and I don’t know how the wrist would react if he pushed himself up on the hand.”

“I never knew I had any of those abilities. I mean, training was always easy for me, but not what we did.”

“Explain that to us,” said Wilson. “When you say training was easy for you, what do you mean by that? I was a

college volleyball player, and training kicked my ass all the time. You have your good days and bad days.”

“I guess that’s it. I didn’t have bad days. If the coach said I was running and doing weight training, that’s what I did. If I was skiing certain distances, I just did it. The day of the incident when those women attacked me, I was almost feeling bad. It was easy. Too easy. I was maybe a quarter mile in front of the rest of the pack. I never questioned it because I was in the middle of it, but I can see now why others did.”

“It’s really remarkable, Maeve,” said Luke. “We’re trying to figure out what the Russians were doing there. They could be hoping to create better athletes, or they could be creating better soldiers.”

“How would this help to create better soldiers?” she asked.

“Well,” said Hex, “you don’t have any issues with your body responding to stress, competition, requests for your body to work harder. Those are exactly what we want in Special Forces. A SEAL, Delta, Green Beret, MARSOC, or Coastie are all asked to perform under pressure.

“Sometimes, that pressure is unrealistic. You’re in a dark alleyway in the middle of a desert village with insurgents all around you, shooting with only one thought in mind. Survive. They’re all shooting with only one thought in mind. Kill the Americans. Kids are playing in the street as a distraction. Women are shopping at the market. You have to be able to hold it together long enough to figure out who are the innocents and who are the bad guys.”

Maeve stared at the man and nodded. He looked so much like his father, but she’d learned that he wasn’t his biological son. Their appearance was remarkable.

“I can’t imagine being placed under those kinds of conditions. I don’t know how I’d hold it together,” she whispered.

“Yes, you do,” smirked Alec. “You were placed in a ring and in a maze, waiting for an attacker three times your size to come at you. You kept your heart rate down, your adrenalin at appropriate levels. You didn’t allow cortisol to drown your body, and you reacted appropriately. That’s fucking amazing.”

“But I don’t know how I did it,” she said, staring at the group. “I didn’t intentionally do any of that.”

“Don’t you see, Maeve,” said Riley, “that’s the beauty of it. Your body responds to the stressors naturally. That’s what’s so unique about you. No one had to train your mind or body to do those things. It happened on its own.”

“Okay. Then if the Russians want me or my blood or my tissue, why? Is this something that can be transplanted?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” said Chase. “Riley, Gabi, Suzette, all of the medical team here, don’t feel like there’s a way for that to work. However, if the Russians believe there is a way, they will keep coming at you.”

“Hi there, what did I miss?” asked Kennedy. “Hi, Maeve. We haven’t officially met yet. I’m Kennedy, JT’s wife. Sorry I’ve been MIA. I was taking final exams this week.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. Nice to meet you.” While Kennedy ate her dinner, Riley explained what they identified in the tests earlier in the day. She slowed her eating, looking up at her husband and then back at Maeve.

“What’s your blood type?”

“What?” asked Maeve.

“Your blood type. What is it?”

“I’m O negative. Why?” said Maeve.

“Because that means your blood can be used in anyone. There’s a university in Germany that’s been working on transferring blood to rabbits and mice to inject things like super antibodies to help the body’s defense system. They already know that when injecting them with disease, it takes over. If Maeve’s blood type can be used in anyone, and we already know that it can, maybe they’ve been injecting people with small amounts of her blood, hoping it changes their biology.”

The entire room fell silent, staring at Kennedy. Taking her last bite of pasta, she looked up at the dozens of pairs of eyes.

“What? What did I say?”

“You’re fucking brilliant,” smiled JT. He kissed her, wiping off the pasta sauce from her face. “It’s one of the many reasons I love you.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t think of that,” said Gabi.
“They must think it’s something in her blood, not in her body. They’re stealing her blood from these physicals and blood samples and injecting it in others.”

“It probably shows anomalies, but they can’t identify them,” said Riley.

“I’m confused,” said Maeve. “All these blood tests, all the samples they’ve taken from me, they’re using?”

“Yes, but that’s not nearly enough blood,” said Wilson. “Wait. Do you routinely give blood at a medical center or through a community blood donor group?”

“Yes. After my surgery, it was something I told myself I would do more of. I give every month.”

“Every month. That’s thirty-six bags in the last three years,” said Chase. “That’s a lot of blood.” Riley nodded.

“That’s a lot of blood.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Chase and Maeve strolled along the path toward their cottage, hand in hand. Stepping onto the front porch, Chase smiled at Grip, seated in one of the rocking chairs.

“Can I help you, Grip?” asked Chase.

“No. Just hanging out. Making sure everything is good.”

“Can ghosts make sure everything is good?” asked Maeve, smiling at the man.

“We’re more capable than you might think,” he smiled.

Inside the cottage, the warm breezes of summer floated throughout from back to front and side to side. Maeve kicked off her sandals and took a seat on the sofa while Chase poured them a glass of wine.

“You doing okay, baby?”

“Yea, I guess. I’m just trying to run all this through in my head. I can’t help but wonder if my own coaches and trainers didn’t know this. And if it’s hereditary, did my parents know but didn’t tell me?”

“I’m not sure,” he said, handing her the glass. “It’s all something we’ll have to ask about later. Right now, my only concern is keeping you safe. If they truly think you’re the key to making everyone have these abilities, there’s no way of knowing how desperate they are to get to you. I didn’t realize that Olympians were so cutthroat.”

“Are you kidding me?” she scoffed.

“No, seriously. I mean, it’s not like you get paid.”

“No, we don’t get paid, but there’s the potential for millions in endorsement deals, hosting opportunities, sportswear with our name on it. Don’t you remember what happened with that figure skater? All for a gold medal and future opportunities.” She shook her head, taking a sip of the wine.

“You know, when my father was competing, there was a Russian who was also in the military. It’s not uncommon in some countries, but he was basically told if he didn’t win, he’d be demoted or worse.”

“And was he? Was he demoted?” asked Chase.

“My dad said that he won silver behind my father. He hugged him on the podium, and the man whispered in his ear

to help him. My father was so confused. He didn't know what to do, so he told his coach. The coach notified someone at the U.S. embassy, and they got word to the athlete that he could defect.”

“Did he?”

“No. He was killed in a hit-and-run before the games ever finished. In many ways, it's more competitive than professional sports. I've watched women who competed with me lose and withdraw from society, humiliated by their showing at the games. I wanted to win. I'm as competitive as the next person, but I knew that if I didn't win, there was something else out there for me.”

“Why would the Russians want to create a team of athletes like you? Are they so determined to win gold medals that they're willing to do this?”

“I don't know,” she said, shaking her head. “I don't think it's just about medals. I think a lot of it is winning against the U.S., humiliating us and our athletes. Face it. They haven't exactly been winning any races lately. The Soviet Union split, so they lost a huge number of top-tier athletes. Their old school training programs were disbanded,

and although they still have state schools that train future Olympians, it's nothing like it once was."

"You know, we only pick the best possible candidates for SEAL training. Once we have the best, we're put through a training that's nearly impossible to succeed in. It's meant to break a man mentally and physically. When by some miracle we survive, we determine that we're the best. I wonder if maybe we turned away someone that was as good because we weren't looking for the right things."

"I can't answer that, Chase. I wouldn't look too deeply into all of this. We'll figure out what they're doing."

Cuddling into his side, they listened to the cicadas singing their song while the bullfrogs and gators chimed in, an occasional owl letting them know they were not alone.

"Whatever happened to the guy that screwed up that night? You know, the night I found you?"

"Dolt," frowned Chase, nodding his head. "He was put on administrative leave and is under investigation."

"But how did he make your team if he was so inept? I mean, I see Irish, Mo, Tanner, and Bogey. Along with you,

they're like this super fit, super intelligent group of men. How did someone so incompetent get on your team?"

"It's a great question. Maybe I'll have the tech team look into him." Maeve slid a hand down Chase's abdomen.

"I think I'd like a hot bath, Mr. Green."

"Yea? I think I'd enjoy that as well, Ms. Korhonen. You run the water, and I'll get us a refill." Maeve started the tub, dropping a splash of bath salts in that had the entire room smelling of lavender. By the time Chase came in, she was naked, dipping her long body into the extra big tub.

"I like the specially-made tub," she smiled. "I can actually stretch out my legs."

"Curl those gorgeous legs up, honey. I'm joining you." He set the glasses on the teak stool and stripped down, his cock already hard and ready. Before he could dip into the water, she was stroking him, flicking her tongue over his head, kissing, sucking, and tugging on him.

"You taste so good," she smiled.

"Fuck, baby," he gasped. "You're gonna make me cum, Maeve."

“No. Not yet,” she smiled. She released him, lifting her long legs and letting them fall over the sides of the tub. Chase grinned, lowering his pelvis between her thighs. He lined up his head and slammed into her.

“I don’t think we need a fucking bed,” he growled.

“We’ll get to the bed later,” she smiled. “You feel so good, Chase.” His mouth covered one pert nipple, sucking and tugging with his teeth. One big hand flicked at her clit as she writhed, praying for relief.

“Get on your knees,” he ordered. “Bend over the end of the tub.” She did as he asked, sticking that beautiful ass in the air. Gripping her hips, he pulled her back and slid his hard cock into her again.

“Rub yourself, baby. Cum for me,” he demanded.

Maeve couldn’t do anything except rub herself. She was so hot and desperately needed relief as he pounded into her. As she rubbed, her long fingers would slide into her pussy with his cock. Reaching back, she gave a gentle squeeze to his balls, and he howled, spilling himself inside her. Maeve immediately followed, the flood of relief and pleasure coating her body like chocolate.

Chase gently turned her in his arms, sloshing into the water as he kissed her face, neck, and chest.

“You’re so fucking perfect for me, Maeve. I love you, honey. I love you more than anything in the world.”

“Chase, it’s so fast,” she said, staring at him.

“Not fast at all. You’re my girl, Maeve. Mine. I’m gonna marry you, so you might as well admit that you love me too,” he smiled. Maeve laughed, shaking her head at him.

“You’re so arrogant. Yes, I love you, too. I’m scared and can’t believe this is real, but I love you more than I could have possibly imagined.” Gripping the back of her neck, he kissed her again, his tongue dancing with hers. “Now, what do you say we dry off and do this again? In a bed.”

“Fuck yes!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

When the morning meeting began, the tech nerds and leadership team were hovered over a table, looking at the images that had come in from the satellites and drones. Chase made sure that Maeve was in the good hands of his mother and the other women. Once everyone was seated, Luke turned to the group.

“Overnight, we’ve had a few developments,” said Luke, depressing the key on the computer. “These images were taken every five minutes at the compound. We’re seeing them continue with the training, injections, everything. Two things worry us.” He nodded to Hex.

“At 0400, the doors of the back blacked-out building were opened, and two barrels wheeled out on a dolly. The dolly was loaded on this truck, taken to the river, and dumped.”

“Is that ash?” asked Chase.

“We think it’s human remains,” said Eric. “That’s why we’re picking up heat below the building. We know there’s a crematorium with massive furnaces. After some stellar research by the geeks...”

“We’re right here, you know,” said Sly.

“We know,” grinned Eric. “After stellar research by our technologically superior friends.”

“Better,” smiled Code.

“We discovered that this wasn’t always a school compound. In the forties and fifties, this building was used as a medical research facility, testing vaccinations and other drugs. On animals.” The growls of the dogs could be heard from the back row. Everyone turned, grinning.

“What?” smirked Sniff. “They understand, you know. Beast and Monster are not happy about what they’re hearing.”

“Neither are we,” said Cam. “If those barrels contained the ashes of human remains, do you understand how many people that could be? How many of those men and women have they killed?”

“I’m not following this at all,” said Chase. “I asked this of Maeve last night. Why on earth would this matter so much?”

“It’s a great question, and one we think we have an answer to,” said Eric. “Unfortunately, we also have to have a history lesson in order to understand it all. The Nazis were

determined to create the perfect race. They wanted superior humans only. If you were old, sick, slow in mind or speech, you were eliminated. They also only saw those with blonde hair and blue eyes, tall and muscular, as superior. This, despite the fact that Hitler himself was short, brown-haired, and blue-eyed.

“Based on the data from the drones, we’re able to estimate that every woman at that compound is over five-feet-nine, and every man is over six-feet-two. Of the fifty-three we saw, forty-eight are blonde. We couldn’t determine eye color, but it’s a safe bet they’re blue.” Eric let all of that sink in and then looked at Chase.

“Maeve,” he whispered. “She has blonde hair and blue eyes. She’s five-feet-eleven, and she’s a superior athlete. It’s not just about her blood work.”

“No, we don’t think it is,” said Cam. “We think they’re not only creating superior athletes as well as soldiers, they’re attempting to create superior human beings. We still believe that they used Maeve’s blood to attempt to replicate what was happening during performance, but I’m not sure they’ve figured any of it out yet.”

“Why was my team sent in there?” asked Chase. “It doesn’t sound like something a SEAL team should be sticking their toes into. It sounds like something a NATO or a human rights team would look into. Why us? Why risk it?”

Cam looked back at the tech team, nodding at Hiro. He connected his laptop and brought up several photos.

“Fuck me,” said Irish. “That’s Dolt.”

“This photo was taken two days ago. If your boy, Dolt, is on administrative leave, he wouldn’t be allowed to leave the country or the area around the base, for that matter. No passengers were found with his name; however, a passenger was found with the name Simeon Golitz.”

“Golitz? As in one of the Nazi death doctors? That Golitz?” asked Wilson.

“One and the same,” said Hiro. “We believe he’s the great-grandson of Golitz. General Victor Pegoski, the man we see running the compound, is his grandson. They’re related, but not a direct line. Dolt flew into Finland on a private jet and was immediately whisked away. No customs, nothing. The vehicle drove him to the compound, where he was greeted with a big hug and kiss from Pegoski. They disappear inside for two hours and seventeen minutes. Dolt is then driven back

to the same plane and returned to Coronado. No one is the wiser. Except us, of course.”

“So, Dolt and Pegoski have been in on this from the beginning? Did Dolt feed information to the U.S.? Why? Why us?”

“Dolt knew who you were, Chase,” said Hiro.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No. He never once said anything to me. Never.”

“How did he get on the teams?” asked Mo. “He was a fucking train wreck. How?”

“That’s a different story. He was attending the American University in Washington, D.C., studying international diplomacy. He wrote a paper on studying Special Forces in America and how those Special Forces impact the world. It caught the attention of someone behind a desk in D.C. They proposed that Dolt go into the teams as an observer for research purposes.”

“Do they understand how fucking dangerous that was? How many lives they put at risk, including our own?” fumed Bogey.

“No, they don’t understand,” said Hiro. “They don’t understand because no one was told. Somehow, D.C. forged papers on Dolt that said he’d gone through BUDs in Virginia. No one questioned it. He was put through rigorous physical training to get him in shape, but he never had the mental fortitude of a SEAL.”

“I’m still not following,” said Tanner. “Why make him a SEAL? He didn’t know about Maeve, did he?”

“We don’t think he did, but he knew about Chase and his family history.” Hiro waited, letting that sink in for a minute.

“Fuck me. I’m blonde. Blue eyed. Tall and from an entire fucking family of Special Forces. But we’re not all blood,” he said, looking at Hiro.

“No, but they didn’t know that. He knew who Tango was, but he had no idea that you weren’t blood-related to the rest of us.”

“That’s fucking crazy! Did he think we were a bunch of incestuous animals?” Hiro shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not sure, but he needed you to be at that compound and to be captured. Maeve destroyed his plans,

except he didn't know that. Remember, you all put him on a plane before the rest of the team discovered what happened. Then we got there. Maeve was already hauling your ass out of her cabin to the halfway cabin.

“Chase, we think when they figure it all out, and they most likely will, they're going to want both of you. Think about it. You're both blonde, blue-eyed, tall, exceptional physical specimens. It's going to be hard for them to turn their backs on that,” said Hiro.

Chase stared at his notes, then looked at his SEAL teammates, then toward his father. He was an exceptional physical specimen because of his hard work but also because of his parents. His father was still a badass, and his mother was a little spitfire of cuteness.

“What do you want to do, Senior Chief?” asked Mo. Chase chuckled, shaking his head.

“You've never called me Senior Chief, Mo. Don't start now. We make this decision as a team. If we go back, we'll be violating every order we've been given, and we're risking our careers. If we don't go back, Maeve and I will be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives.”

The doors of the auditorium opened wide, and a dozen women stood with their hands on their hips.

“Then I guess we’re going back, aren’t we?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Are you settling in, Maeve?” asked Taylor.

“I am, thank you. The clothing arrived this morning, and it all fits, which is a miracle. Chase has asked me to modify the cottage in any way I want. I don’t think I’ll do that until he has to go back to Coronado, but there are a few things I’d like changed. It’s just overwhelming. Having all of you around me, supporting me, it’s unbelievable.”

“We’re family, honey. That’s what we do,” smiled Camille.

“You know, I’ve trained around women my entire life. I even lived with them or roomed with them for events. But I’ve never been around women like all of you who support one another so unselfishly, no competition, no fear. It’s very un-woman-like,” she laughed.

“I think we can probably thank our mentors for that,” smiled Taylor. “Mama Irene, Erin, Faith, Grace, Alexandra, Lauren, all of them. It was unspoken when we all got together. We don’t compete against one another. We aren’t after the other person’s man. We don’t take stabs at one another. It’s really remarkable.”

“It truly is,” nodded Maeve. “I’ve learned so much about all of you these last few days. Your remarkable careers and skills. You’re all intelligent and capable in different ways. Working out with Piper, Kate, Lucia, Addie, and Hazel has shown me how strong and capable women really are.

“But it’s more than that. The incredible minds of all of you. Montana and the girl crew out at G.R.I.P. I mean, weapons design, technology advancement, it’s mind-blowing!”

“We couldn’t agree more,” smiled Marie. “I’m amazed every day by something my sisters do. Not just my blood sisters, although they’re badass. But everyone here. Medical advancements, law, technology, it’s everything!”

“I was shocked to learn about the ghosts,” smiled Maeve, “but I had the opportunity to take a walk with Martha and Claudette. It felt like a living history lesson. What she accomplished as a woman on her own, running this entire property, was just remarkable. And although Claudette was just a young girl, she showed tremendous maturity and emotional intelligence by writing the letter to keep others off the island until the disease had died. I can’t imagine having that type of courage.”

“You know,” smiled Gwen, “I wonder if that’s why they’re all still here. I mean, they all showed tremendous courage in their lives. Giving their lives for others. Maybe that’s why they’ve been granted continued existence here.”

“That’s a beautiful thought,” smiled Irene. “If that’s true, then you’ll all be here for eternity, every last one of you.”

“You too, Mama,” smiled Adele.

“Oh, I know that,” she laughed. “I’ll be hauntin’ y’all for all eternity when it’s my time. I won’t be gone from here. No, sir. I’ll be right here followin’ you children around.” She laughed, taking the hands of her dear friends, Ruth and Mary, and walking back to the big house.

“Is anyone else frightened that Mama is going to be haunting us forever?” asked Rachelle.

“Oh, I definitely am,” smiled Winter. “But I’m also comforted by it. It’s funny. I’ve always been comforted by Hiro being near me, close to me, and protecting me. But I get this additional, different kind of comfort by being around all of you.”

“It’s the girl power,” smiled Lauren. “Erin knew it from the beginning. Women supporting women, caring for

women, and loving them is what we all needed. No jealousy. No fighting. No lies.”

“It’s a magic formula,” smiled Maeve. Then she frowned, shaking her head. “It’s a formula that the Russians would never want. They want their people fighting one another for superiority.”

“Indeed, they do,” nodded Martha. “Men have been playing these games for centuries. It is nothing new, I assure you. Wars are created by men, fought by men, and fueled by the egos of males. Women were pushed to the back. You are changing that.”

“That’s so true,” nodded Piper, looking at the friendly ghosts, “but women can end it. Claudette? Can you see what’s happening in the office? Will you do a little spying for us?”

“I’m very excited about this,” smiled the ghostly little girl. “Will I get to see the men without their trousers?”

“Claudette! We’ve spoken about this,” said Riley. “I understand that the men are appealing to you, but you cannot invade their privacy in that way. It’s not right.”

“I know, I know,” she said in frustration. “But the new one, Mo, he is beautiful. It’s very long and very thick. It makes my lower, what does Gabi say, oh yes! My girl parts sing!”

“Dear Lord,” muttered Riley. “Gabi, stop training the ghosts to be perverted.” Gabi simply shrugged, winking at Claudette as she disappeared into the office building.

“You know,” said Lena, “I do wish we could help her. I mean, Martha and Nathan are having a sexual relationship in the afterlife. I wish we could help Claudette.”

“But she’s only thirteen,” said Maeve.

“Technically, she’s two hundred,” said Erin, “but I know what you mean. I suppose in her time, though, young women were marrying at fourteen and fifteen. I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that question. It seems like she could have a relationship, but should she?”

“I think she’s cute,” said Tony. All eyes turned to look at Tony. “I mean, I was only eighteen. In her time, we would have been married. We spend a lot of time together. I think she’s wonderful.”

Just as Erin was about to speak, Claudette reappeared.

“I think you should get over to the offices, now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Then I guess we’re going back, aren’t we?” said Maeve, staring at Chase.

“No. Fuck no. Hell no. Hell to the fucking no,” said Chase. Tango chuckled behind him and then saw his tiny wife pushing her way through the Amazonian wall.

“Don’t think I’m being left out of this, Tango. This is our son and future daughter-in-law we’re talking about. They want blonde and blue-eyed, or at the very least tall and light-eyed. Well, look around. We’re it.”

“Fuck!” growled Tango. Other men began to rise, not liking what they were seeing. The girl squad was definitely standing strong. Savannah, Piper, Lauren, Sara, and Maeve all looked similar with their light hair and eyes. Lucia winked at O’Hara.

“Don’t worry, stud. I’ll be their backup.”

“Not funny, Lucia. This isn’t a game. We’re talking about Russians wanting to biopsy everything in their bodies.”

“We know,” said Lauren. She knew it. She could feel him. Turning, she wrapped her arms around Trak’s neck.

“Hugging me will not make me okay with this, little one.”

“Trak, we have to do this. Hazel, Kate, and Addie have a plan.” Trak buried his face in her neck, inhaling her scent. Turning, he saw the image of his grandfather and smiled.

“She will be alright. I promise.”

“Listen, we think we’ll go in as simply a bunch of girls enjoying the village,” said Hazel. “I’m definitely not what they’re looking for, other than physically. But the others fit the bill entirely. Faith is going to get a message to your SEAL commander, asking him to let it slip to Dolt that the team is going back over just so they can thank the beautiful woman who rescued you.

“If he’s as stupid as you say...”

“He is,” came the chorus of voices.

“Good to know,” grinned Hazel, “since he is as stupid as you say, he’ll have them believing that it will be an easy snatch and grab. Except it won’t be as easy as they think. With all of us, we’ll be able to prevent them from taking anyone.”

“Do you realize you’re going up against a bunch of huge, drugged-up people who are trained?” said Chase.

“Chase, we know that,” said Maeve. “I understand exactly what I’m facing, and I’m scared. I won’t lie about that. But as you said, we’ll be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives if we don’t end this. We need to catch Dolt and Pegoski together.”

“Have you been taking classes from them?” asked Chase, pointing toward the girl squad.

“Yes,” she smiled, nodding at him.

“She didn’t need any classes, Chase,” smiled Sara. “She’s strong, fast, quick-thinking. She’s superior to every one of us.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better, Sara.” He paced back and forth, finally looking at the leadership team. “Luke? Eric? All of you, what do you think?”

“I’m not sure we have a choice, Chase,” said Hex. “They’re right. Bringing all of them over, showing off some of their physical superiority, would draw them in like flies. It would be too easy. Especially if we know Dolt is feeding information to them.”

“We’d have a team there, Chase. With the snow melting, we won’t be able to ski on the courses, but we could run or bike as a team. It would look like teams just training for something,” said Luke.

Chase walked toward Maeve, pulling her into his arms. Leaning against the side of her head, he whispered.

“I can’t lose you.” She pulled back, smiling at him.

“Then don’t lose sight of me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Commander Lott nodded at the screen, seeing Chase and his team.

“Once Dolt is in the room, sir, we’ll black out what’s behind us. After that, it’s up to you to give the performance of your life,” said Chase.

“I think I can handle it, Green. I once convinced your old man that the training pool was heated, and he jumped into thirty-degree water.”

“You’re an asshole!” said the distant voice. Chase chuckled as Lott smiled with a wink at the group.

“He’s here. Come in!” he called.

“Sir, you wanted to see me,” said Dolt.

“Take a seat. I’ve got the other men from your team on the line.” He turned the screen, pointing it toward Dolt so he could see all of the faces, but especially Chase’s.

“Green! You’re alright,” he said, shocked.

“I’m peachy keen, Dolt. No thanks to you, but I’m healthy as a horse thanks to my teammates and a stranger.”

“Look, it was an accident, Green. I was hot, and those hats are itchy. I took it off. I’m sorry. I never thought it would lead to you being harmed.”

“I didn’t say I was hurt,” frowned Chase. Lott waited a long breath, then cleared his throat.

“Your team is going back,” said Lott. “We have unfinished business in Russia, and we’re going to complete this mission.”

“I see,” said Dolt, staring down at his hands. Lott looked at the digital watch, seeing text messages coming through like feeds from the stock market. He wondered if the watch was capable of transmitting a recording of the meeting. “Will I be going with them?”

“No,” said Chase definitively. “You are a liability for any team. It would endanger us and those around us.”

“I understand,” he said, standing. He stared at Lott. “May I be excused now, sir?”

“Yes, you may be excused. But let me remind you again, Dolt. You’re confined to this area. If you leave by plane, train, or automobile, I better be aware of it. If you do so without telling me, I’ll ensure a complete court martial.”

They knew Dolt wasn't worried since he wasn't exactly in the military. But someone was going to catch hell about the forged papers and allowing this man into their system. When the door closed, Lott held up a finger, walking around his desk to ensure there were no listening devices left. As he ran his fingers on the underside of the desk, he felt the circular device and pulled it from its place.

Back in his seat, he held up the disc, then crushed it with the paperweight on his desk.

"Hold that up again, Lott," said Nine. All eyes looked at the crushed disc, frowning. It wasn't destroyed enough to hide its identity. It was very plain to those in the room.

"It's one of ours," said Sly. "That's one of our fucking discs."

"That's why I looked for it," said Lott. "His watch was pinging like crazy with text messages. I think he had an open line to his friends. My office has one of your scramblers in it, so my guess would be they were telling him they couldn't hear."

"How in the hell did he get our equipment?" asked Doug.

“Who was it in D.C. that forged his papers?” asked Luke.

“Karen Brant on the defense committee,” said Hiro. “She has access to the contracts we provide to the DOD and what types of gear we send. It’s possible she got hold of some of the goodies and gave them to Dolt.”

“Fuck me,” muttered Eric. “We need to let the POTUS know he’s got a problem, but we also need to know what else he got his hands on.”

“That might take too long,” said Chase. “I think we have to assume he got it all, and we need to be prepared for that.”

“Chase, you know I’m going to say this, but we need to get Maeve weapons capable. She’s more than capable physically, even hand-to-hand, but she needs to be prepared to use a knife or gun.”

“I’ll train her,” said Trak. Chase stared at the man he thought of as an uncle and nodded. “I will make sure she is ready.” He could only nod, knowing that it was going to be necessary. He just didn’t want to see her have to carry a weapon.

“I’m going to let my superiors know that we’re sending you all back to arrive within thirty-six hours. Just my suggestion, get the women there at the same time on a commercial flight. A girls’ weekend or some shit. And Green? Bring the big boys.”

The screen went dark, and Chase turned to see the smiling faces of Team Big. Alec nudged Taylor, his hand now just taped, no longer in the cast.

“We’re going on a trip, Dad,” smiled Titus, nudging Max.

“Don’t be a little shit. I’d hate to kick your ass.” Max looked around him at his fellow team members and smiled. “But yea, we’re going on a trip, and I want to kick some ass.”

Bogey, Mo, Tanner, and Irish stared at the mountain of men, leaning back slightly to stare at Chase.

“What the fuck is that?” whispered Irish. Chase laughed, shaking his head.

“Be nice, brother. They might eat you if they’re hungry enough. That, my friends, is Team Big. The biggest of all of RP. I’m proud to say that one day I hope to be a part

of their team. You must be over six-feet-five and pass their insane tests.” Tanner, Bogey, and Irish stared at Mo.

“What? I’m over six-feet-five. I get it. But I’m not even close to those men.”

“Brother, it doesn’t work that way,” smiled Rory. “It is about height, but it’s about soul and heart as well. We take on the jobs that require big beef. We do a lot of protection details and, one of my favorites, rescuing kids.”

“I can get down with that,” grinned Mo.

“Okay, children,” smiled Savannah. “Evie and I will be readying the jets. Get your gear and decide what you can take with you that won’t be compromised. The systems on the jets are fail-safe, and we’ve added a few additional protections. Just make sure your equipment is the same.”

“Are you both taking us?” asked Mo.

“Evie will be taking all of you,” said Savannah. “I’ll be taking the girls on another jet. Private jet, private girl party, that sort of thing. Since I’m also blonde, although sadly with brown eyes, I’ll join the girls for our little girl time fun. You boys just make sure you’re there before us, scatter, and make a plan.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Mo. Savannah laughed, shaking her head.

“No ma’ams, or you’ll give us away. According to Maeve, there’s a hotel near the city center with a hot nightclub in it. She never went because the Russians were frequently in the club. We’re going to that club. All of us, so I suggest you boys brush up on your dance moves. Some of us will be lucky enough to have our husbands there, but you’re going to need to feel comfortable picking a partner and dancing with her.”

“Yes, ma... Savannah,” smiled Mo.

“You’re cute. You’ll make it,” she laughed. She kissed Rafe, smiling as he patted her ass when she left. The other women followed, ready to prepare. Trak and Zeke stood, walking toward the doors. They stopped near Chase.

“We’ll make sure she’s ready, brother,” said Zeke.

“I know you will. I just...” The chorus of voices that assaulted wanted to make him cry, but instead, all he could do was laugh.

“Can’t lose her!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“What do you mean they’re coming back?” asked Victor, staring at Simeon.

“I just left Lott’s office. They’re going to send the team back to determine what’s in that compound. You didn’t kill Green. He’s alive and well. Nothing wrong with him. They can’t get back near that compound,” said Dolt.

“I’m well aware that they cannot get close,” frowned Victor. “We need him and the woman. Where is she?”

“I don’t know. That wasn’t discussed at all. She must still be in the area. All I know is that Green is coming back with his team.”

“I need you here,” said Victor.

“I can’t do that. If I leave, they’ll arrest me,” said Dolt.

“You’ll be here, in Russia, where you belong. Together we will get this program off the ground. We’ll capture your SEAL and find the woman. Perhaps we can mate them.”

“They’re not monkeys, Victor. You can’t force people to mate.”

“Of course not. But we can inseminate her. Think of it, Simeon. Two blonde, blue-eyed people of superior physicality and ability. We can finally find out what made Maeve so superior to her competitors and duplicate it.”

Dolt let out a long slow breath. He believed in what his uncle was trying to do, but he wasn't sure this was the way to do it. Chase Green was a well-trained SEAL, but what really made him better than all the rest was his family heritage and the training he received at home.

“I'll see what I can do about getting there,” said Dolt. He ended the call, staring at the still full bag on his sofa. This had all gotten so out of control. He wasn't sure what to do about it.

Training for weeks before he could infiltrate the team, he still wasn't even close to their abilities and skills. And worse, they knew it. He was constantly making errors, not where he should be, not understanding signals. It was beyond his abilities, and he hated admitting that.

What he was grateful for were the little toys that his side-pussy got for him. He grinned to himself, rubbing his hardening cock. Karen Brant was a fifty-two-year-old member of the defense committee. When he asked for an

interview for his PhD paper, she was more than willing. What he hadn't expected was a woman with a libido like a teenager.

With the door locked to her office, she'd kneeled in front of him, pulling out his cock and going to town. She was insatiable. Although fuller than most women he liked, she was good at what she did, and her pussy was hot and wet all the time.

Knowing that he had her in the palm of his hand, he used his dick to get what he wanted, and she was more than willing to provide it. He jumped as his phone rang, then he smiled.

“Karen, baby, I was just thinking of you,” he smiled.

“You were, huh?” she grinned. “How is it going?”

“It's going, thanks to you. Show me what I'm missing,” he smiled. She turned the camera downward, and he chuckled, seeing her in the thigh-high stockings, garter, and lace panty. Her massive breasts were straining the thin lace bra.

“Oh, yea, that's it, baby. Open wide,” he groaned, reaching for his cock.

“Stroke it,” she whispered. “Stroke it, and let me see you cum. You know what that does to me.”

“I know, I know, baby,” he smiled, tugging his meat. He wasn’t big, but he wasn’t small, and she certainly seemed happy with it. He watched as she rubbed her clit, then, grabbing a finger vibrator, went to town. She wouldn’t last. She never did, which was why he was happy to do these little sessions. They took no time at all.

“Oh, Sim,” she moaned. “Sim, I’m cumming.”

“Me too, me too. Open more, wider. That’s it. Ram your fingers in,” he moaned. She was compliant as always, screaming her satisfaction, then licking herself from her fingers. It always did it for him. His cum squirted straight up, landing on his abdomen as she oohed and ahed.

“Fuck, I needed that,” he laughed.

“Me too,” she mewled. “When will you be back in D.C.?”

“Oh, I hope soon,” he smiled. “Listen, you do that again and send me the video. I want to be able to jack-off tonight.”

“No problem, sweetie. Stay safe.” He blew her a kiss, grinning to himself. She didn’t know it, but he’d recorded every conversation they had. If he went down, she was going down with him. Wiping his own cum from his body, he changed his clothes, packed another bag, and waited for the indication that his jet was ready for him.

Time to make the family proud.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Your ability to be silent will save your life, Maeve,” said Zeke. “I’m good, but Trak is the best. We’re just going to do a simple exercise on a run. You need to get past us before we realize that you’re approaching.” Maeve nodded and took off on the run, while Zeke and Trak went a different way. She knew that both men were exceptional at what they did, so she felt confident in their hands.

What she wasn’t confident in were her own abilities. If it were skis and snow, she’d blow them away. She could be eerily silent on skis, often coming upon her competitors and scaring them, she thought to herself and smiled.

Rounding the curve around the family plot, she concentrated on her steps and her breathing. Passing the large cypress tree, she spotted Zeke just as she was out of his reach. He cursed behind her, and she smiled. Beating him was one thing, but beating Trak would be different.

Running for another two miles, she finally came back around the family plot and spotted Zeke standing with a smile on his face.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to just be standing in front of me,” she grinned. “I beat you once, and I guess I beat Trak.” Zeke laughed, shaking his head. He pointed behind her.

“Jesus! Were you behind me all along?” she asked.

“Since you passed Zeke,” he smirked. “You are good, very quiet, and might survive most men. I fell in behind you, keeping step with you, which was no easy task. It ensured that you couldn’t hear me.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” she said, shaking her head.

“Always remember to do what you’ve been trained to do. Control your breathing, making your movements smooth and light.”

“I will,” she nodded. “Now what?”

“Now, we work with knives and guns,” said Zeke. “Trak is the expert with the knife, but I’ll teach you to use a weapon.”

“Why won’t Chase teach me?” she asked.

“It’s not a good idea,” said Zeke. “Teaching the woman you love how to handle a weapon is a double-edged

sword. It might save her life, but if she's pissed enough, it might take your own."

Maeve laughed, following the men to the training range. Trak had an entire table of different types of knives and guns.

"Why so many different types?" she asked.

"A knife is easy to conceal," said Trak. "If you're wearing boots, you can hide it in a boot or a bustier or bra. A small knife will injure enough to escape unless you know exactly where to hit the other person causing him or her to bleed out.

"Guns are different. These rifles are for long-range, preferably. You may not always get the choice. A pistol is better for short-range shooting. These smaller ones can be hidden in a purse. We have something called stealth netting that will enable you to take weapons into the club.

"If you're forced to use them, you must be sure, swift, and walk away. Don't wait to see if you've made the kill. Chances are it will take them a while to die."

Maeve nodded, touching the knives and guns lightly with her hand.

“Here,” said Zeke. “These are plastic and won’t hurt if you make a mistake. Slash, don’t jab. Slashing allows you to hit more of the body and possibly cause more damage. The only time you jab is if you’re close enough to hit exactly what you want.”

“I hope I can do this,” she whispered.

“If you or someone you love is in danger, you will be able to do it,” said Trak. “Let’s try a few routines.”

A few routines turned into three hours. Maeve was a fast student, catching on quickly to the tactics. She was immediately proficient with a gun but less confident with the knives. Trak continued to develop that confidence by allowing her to come at him time and time again.

“Always keep the netting over it in public,” said Zeke. “Other than that, you’re going to do great.”

“I can’t thank you both enough for all the time you’ve spent with me. I’m scared, but I also know how amazing all of you are and the women who will be with me.” Zeke nodded, looking at Trak, who had the look. The one that said he had something on his mind.

“Is something wrong?” asked Zeke.

“No. Just don’t risk your life or anyone else’s. If you see trouble, tell someone with greater experience than you. Don’t try to be the heroine. It won’t end well.”

“I promise, Trak.” He gave a curt nod, and she reached for his hand. “I won’t risk Lauren or any of the women.” Kissing his cheek, she pushed past him, kissing Zeke’s, and left the training facility.

“It’s hard to believe she’s never had any training,” said Zeke. “She catches on quickly. With the others around her, she’ll be alright.”

“Maybe. I hope so,” said Trak.

“We’ll make sure they’re all okay, brother. All of them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“We’re leaving tonight,” said Chase, holding Maeve’s naked body next to his own. “We’ll go in under darkness, split up, and make it appear as though we’re just a bunch of travelers.”

“Really? Chase, those men, the ones on Team Big can’t hide anywhere. They look like trees.”

“Fortunately for us, Finnish men are taller than the average male. We’re hoping we’ll fit in,” he smiled, kissing her again. “Just remember, if you see us, don’t look at us. Don’t smile. Don’t wave. The only time you can speak to us is when we approach you all in the club. I’ll ask you to dance, but as much as I hate it, if someone else asks, you’re going to need to accept the invitation.”

“I don’t like that at all,” she said, shaking her head. “Besides, I’m a terrible dancer.”

“I don’t think we’re worried about that,” laughed Chase. “Just do as the other girls tell you. Keep your communications device on at all times, and you’ll hear us. Also, don’t take off the trackers.”

“Chase, I know,” she said, smiling up at him. She lifted her chin, kissing him passionately as their tongues teased of another evening of pleasure. They’d already made love twice, ironically, both times in the bed. Now, she was aching for him to be inside her again.

“Mmm, baby, I want to more than anything, but I need to shower and get my gear. Save this for when we return.”

“Okay,” she smiled. “Be careful, Chase.”

“Always, babe.”

She heard the shower start, and the sound of the water lulled her to sleep. In her dreams, she thought she felt him kiss her but couldn’t be sure. Looking back at her from the doorway, Chase sent up a silent prayer, then stepped out of his cottage to find Grip on the porch once again.

“Do ghosts ever sleep?” he smirked.

“We do. Sort of. Remember your training, Chase. She’ll be fine with the others. Don’t get distracted and lose your way.”

“Do you know something I don’t know, Grip?” he asked, frowning at the ghost.

“Of course I do. I’m old as shit and dead. I know a lot that you don’t know. But I don’t know anything about this op. Just keep your focus. That’s all I’m saying.” Chase grinned at him, nodding.

Loading his gear with the others, they took off toward the planes. With Evie flying them on this route, she needed a co-pilot, and Savannah was busy. Doug would be Savannah’s co-pilot, but Molly was coming with Evie.

“Asia pissed at me?” smiled Evie.

“No, but she’s damn sure pissed at me,” said Molly. “My ops are few and far between now. We love taking care of the kids at the school, but I need this once in a while, Evie. I need to feel the controls in my hand and the vibration of the jet or chopper beneath me.”

“I get it. You don’t have to explain it to me. Let’s just be sure we come back in one piece, or there will be a whole bunch of pissed-off spouses when we get back.”

Chase’s team boarded the jet and stared at the modified commercial liner. Mo ran his hand over the leather seats, larger, wider, more legroom for the obviously large team. In the back of the plane were four bathrooms, a bedroom, and a

galley with so much food he didn't think they'd ever be able to eat it.

Irish stood at the cockpit door, staring over Evie's shoulder.

"Red, if you want to see my stuff, you have to ask nicely," she smirked.

"Oh, sorry. I've never seen a plane like this."

"And you never will," grinned Molly. "These are all custom-made for us, by us. Everything on this jet is top secret and proprietary. Understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

"Take your seats," said Luke. "Chase, for the benefit of your team, I'm going to review some of our amenities. This jet is equipped with stealth technology, unlike anything you've ever seen before. We are able to hide from any radar system known to man. We have multiple weapons on board, including rockets and the ability to have a nuclear device."

"Holy shit," muttered Mo.

"We're going to land at an airfield off the grid. It's owned by someone Hannu knows. We'll keep the plane dark and travel into the city in separate vehicles. No fewer than

three men together at any time. I don't care if you're just going for a piss. Take a buddy."

"Chase," said Hex, "you and your team will remain together. It would look strange if you were with any of us. If anyone stops you or asks why you're there, just tell them you have leave and are exploring the area. If they call it in, it will be verified that you are stationed at the base in Germany."

"SEALs?" asked Tanner.

"Go with it," frowned Hex. "The other teams are as follows. Bodhi, Max, Titus, Rory, Noa. Team two is Noah, Cade, Tailor, Alec, and Skull. Team three is Parker, Frank, Zulu, Magnus, Trak, and Dalton. Luke, Cam, Eric, and I will be the home team. We'll be staying in the hotel or on the jet unless you need us."

"The hotel is here," said Eric, pointing to the screen on the jet. "We'll be sharing rooms so it looks like a true boys' getaway. The compound is roughly fifty miles from the center of the city. When we land, drop your shit, and change your clothes. We're going to make ourselves seen on the trails. Noah, brother, you're a prime target for them."

"I understand," he said, nodding. "I'll wear a ball cap."

“It won’t make a difference,” smirked Irish.

“We run the trails, but that’s all. Trak will be scouting as we move. We’ll be able to know exactly who is watching, if they are at all.” Cam stopped, grinning at himself for knowing this. “Hiro?”

“Hey, you knew I was here,” he smiled.

“I knew you were here, brother. Use your magic and send the drones in to see what we’re dealing with. If Dolt is here, we might have a bigger issue because he’ll recognize all of you.”

“It won’t matter,” said Chase. “I’m going to kill the little fucker.”

“Don’t kill him yet,” smirked Cam. “We need him to testify against Brant. I also want to know everything we can on Victor. The unknown in all of this is the reaction we might get from those at the compound. We have to be able to get back across the border unseen and hope we gather enough evidence to fry the little asshole.”

“We need proof of what they were doing at that compound, Cam,” said Chase. “Without that proof, Maeve may still be in danger.”

“I know, brother, I know. We’re going to do all we can once we’re on the ground.”

Evie dimmed the lights and engaged the stealth shields. With her course set, she gave a nod to Cam to indicate that the men should catch some sleep.

“Get some shut-eye. You’ll be awake soon enough.”



When the plane touched down on the remote runway, the men quietly made their way to the vehicles provided for them. Taking off in different directions, they made sure to appear like groups of businessmen, old friends, or college buddies.

Arriving at the hotel separately so as not to overwhelm the staff, they checked in, then drove toward the training routes. Parking their vehicles, they took off in their designated groups, running the trails, laughing, and joking.

Each group noticed the cluster of men on the other side of the border, watching them carefully as they ran by. Tailor gave a casual wave, smiling at them.

“How y’all doin’?” When they appeared confused by his friendly actions, he only laughed. “Y’all have a good day!”

“I know you can all hear me, but Tailor’s friends were filming you as you ran by. I ran interference, literally. When they look back, there won’t be anything there,” said Hiro.

“Thanks, brother,” said Tailor.

“There was more,” said Trak, jogging up to the team. They all jumped, and all Hiro could do was laugh. “They were timing us as well. Twice, the man at the front was pointing to our men. They particularly liked Noah, Dalton, and Cade.”

“Never the ladies,” frowned Cade. “Always the dudes checking me out.”

“This is not funny,” said Trak, stopping on the trail. They were nearly back to their vehicles as he addressed all of the groups. “In twenty-four hours, our wives, sisters, loved ones will be here, ready to put their lives on the line. This is not funny, and you will take it seriously, or I will gut you in your sleep.”

“Brother, we meant nothing by it. You know that,” said Cade. “We joke to relax. That’s all. I’m sorry. I promise you, Trak. I’m taking this very seriously.”

Trak said nothing, pacing back and forth in front of the men. It was unlike him to waste so much energy pacing. He finally stopped, staring at the men.

“I’m sorry. We are far from home, and this concept of the girl squad makes me very nervous. It’s not natural,” he frowned.

“Don’t let them hear you say that,” said Zulu. “We get it, Trak. I don’t like it either, but they are capable, strong, smart women. We’ll be here for them if they need us.”

He nodded at his friend, then turned, looking around the trails.

“We run them again. We’re going to show them just how good we are, which might keep their eyes off the women.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Parker, Frank, and Magnus were seated in the lobby of the hotel, laughing about some ridiculous story, when the women walked in. Parker nudged Frank, smiling at the beautiful women.

“Things are looking up, brother,” he laughed.

“Damn, that’s some beautiful women,” smiled Frank. The women gave the obligatory giggles, signing the check-in cards. When they entered their rooms, they left their bags and then ventured out to walk the streets to be seen.

Occasionally, they would pop into one of the small shops, stop for coffee, or take group photos, but most of it was simply walking around. That is until Maeve heard the familiar voice.

“Well, if it isn’t Maeve Korhonen. Poor pitiful, Maeve,” smirked Victor. Maeve turned, giving a sly grin to the man.

“Ladies, this is General Victor Pegoski of the Russian Army. He’s a liar, a cheat, and enjoys doping men and women. I guess you can’t account for tastes.” Pegoski nearly exploded with anger right there on the streets.

“You will regret that,” said Victor.

“I live with no regrets, Victor. I’ve had a life filled with wonderful events, family, and friends. I am content.”

“Don’t look now, ladies, but I believe you have a rescue party coming your way.” They heard the sound of Hiro’s voice and grinned internally.

“Ladies, is this man bothering you?” smiled Zulu. Pegoski stared at the large black man with disdain, then at the women.

“I believe he was just leaving,” said Maeve.

“One man would not deter me from what I want, Maeve,” said Victor.

“He ain’t one man, comrade,” said Tailor in a bear-like growl. Victor stilled at the rumbling in his chest, then turned to see another black man more like a mountain. There were two larger men behind him. One with auburn hair and whiskey-colored eyes, the other a beast, the likes of which he’d never seen.

“I meant no harm. Maeve and I are familiar with one another.”

“No, we’re not,” said Maeve.

Victor turned, taking long strides down the street toward a waiting SUV. Climbing into the backseat, the vehicle sped off as the others watched.

“If he’s in town, he’ll be at that club tonight,” said Maeve. “I know for a fact it was one of his favorite places to go.”

“Then I’d say let’s all go back and make ourselves look spiffy,” said Alec.

“Spiffy?” giggled Maeve, wrinkling her nose.

“Hey, it’s a word.”

“Whatever you say, big man. Whatever you say.”

By the time all the women were dressed and ready to go, most of the men had walked to the club and taken their seats. Chase and his men were inside the club, but Trak, Zeke, and Max stayed behind, waiting to follow the women.

When they came downstairs, all eyes turned to see the assortment of stunning women. Hazel, having long since removed most of her piercings, was in a black catsuit cut nearly to her navel. The four-inch spiked heels made her look like a dominatrix. The others were all dressed in club-appropriate attire, showing a lot of leg and chest.

“I know I shouldn’t say this, Trak, but your wife looks fucking gorgeous for a woman who’s had two sets of twins and is a grandmother,” said Max.

“Yes. I’m aware,” he said through gritted teeth. “But if you haven’t noticed, all of our women seem to age far more gracefully than us. They still look as if they’re in their thirties.”

“That could play well for us here,” said Max. “Let’s go. We follow the girls from a safe distance, although I’m sure they can handle themselves.”

“Where are they hiding their weapons?” frowned Zeke. “Do I want to know that?”

“No, I don’t think you do.”

The short walk to the club appeared to be safe, but they weren’t about to let the women out of their sight. The high-end boutique hotel had a roof-top club that you could feel the bass booming from street level.

Crowding into the elevators, Max, Trak, and Zeke pushed in as well.

“Sorry, ladies, we didn’t want to wait until the next elevator,” smiled Zeke.

“It’s alright,” blushed Lauren, plastered against the back wall, Trak looking down at her. His expression was one of lust and desire. If she didn’t know better, it looked like her husband was ready to eat her alive. The royal blue mini-dress showed off her exceptionally long legs and still delightfully full breasts.

“You look stunning,” he growled, his hot breath coating her face.

“You’re pretty handsome yourself. Maybe you should save me a dance,” she smiled. The elevator door opened, and the women filed into the dark space. Lights were flashing, the music pumping furiously.

“I hate fucking places like this,” said Zeke.

“Same, brother. Too many variables. Let’s keep a close eye on them and, when we can, get them up and dancing with only us. Eyes wide,” said Max.

They spotted the women, all seated together on a big sectional sofa, laughing, and apparently enjoying the annoying music. When the waitress came to take their drink orders, Max had a terrible feeling in his gut until Zeke nudged him.

“All good, Max.” Max looked behind the bar and smiled to himself. Cam, Luke, Hex, and Eric were bartending. How the fuck they got there was beyond him, but he was happy to see them.

When the music finally slowed, Trak was the first to step up to Lauren, taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor. The others slowly approached, asking a different woman to dance, leaving Maeve for Chase. But when a large blonde man approached her, she wasn't sure what to do.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I'm waiting for someone,” she said.

“You're waiting for me,” he said in a deep voice.

“I don't know you, and I'm not waiting for you. I'm waiting for...”

“Me,” said Chase. “She's waiting for me.”

He held out his hand, and Maeve gladly took it, standing next to him. The blonde, not quite as big as Chase, stared at the man, frowning in her direction. Turning swiftly, he walked to the other side of the club as Chase pulled her to the dance floor.

“He was scary,” said Maeve.

“Nothing to worry about, babe. We’re here.” Maeve closed her eyes, enjoying the moment of being in Chase’s arms, the music calm and slow. Chase looked at his teammates and wanted to laugh. He wasn’t sure they understood whose wives they were holding.

“You’re Mo, right?” asked Sara.

“Yes. I think I heard someone call you Sara. Who is your husband?” he asked.

“Wilson. I mean, that’s not his real...” Mo shook his head.

“No need to tell me I’m a dead man. I know who he is. He’s one of the best medics ever to come from a SEAL team, but he’s also a huge bastard. Shouldn’t he be here?”

“I am here, sunshine. In your ear,” said Wilson. “You always need a few medics on the ops. Hiro is pretty fucking good, but I’m here to help. You wanna take your hand off my wife’s ass?”

“Wilson! He does not have his hand on my ass. It’s respectfully at my lower back, and if it were any higher, people would think he’s dancing with his mother.”

“I don’t think anyone would think that,” laughed Mo. As the song concluded, the horrible beating bass of the techno music began again. Mo looked at the doorway and saw the big man who had approached Maeve, speaking with Victor.

“Our boy is here,” he said into comms.

“Got him,” said Hiro. “I’ll follow him on cameras and drones. You guys get ready to get the hell out of there.”

Knowing they couldn’t leave too soon, they endured the horrid music for another hour before finally deciding to leave. This time, Chase and the other men that had danced with the women escorted them back to the hotel. If there was safety in numbers and safety in size, this group was about as safe as you could possibly be.

“Stay in the room,” said Chase, kissing her goodnight. “Zulu, Max, and Dalton will be staying back to guard the hallway. The hotel will have malfunctioning elevators tonight, as well as problems with the stairwell doors. If anything happens, if anything goes wrong, they’ll be here to ensure that you get out and to the airstrip. Whatever happens, don’t leave this hotel without them.”

“I love you, Chase,” she whispered, kissing him again. “Be careful.”

“Oh, baby. That’s sweet, but my family is never careful. It’s against our nature.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“There are cameras and trip wires at the border,” said Hiro. “I can disrupt the cameras, but the wires will be harder.”

“No need,” said Irish. “You guys need to learn to use the fun tools. I have five zip lines stretching from the trees on this side to the trees on that side. The wire your team provided holds up to a thousand pounds. At least two men at a time. Let’s go.”

“He’s fun,” smiled Tailor. “I like you, little man.” Irish stared up at Tailor.

“Thank God.”

One by one, the men used the zipline trolley to get to the other side. Getting back would be another issue, but for now, they were all in Russia. Following Chase and his team, they moved through the forest toward the compound.

“Still the same security,” said Hiro. “One gate, three guards on the outside, a few cameras which will be non-functioning... now.”

“Get inside those dorms and get someone to talk to you. If they fight, kill them,” said Cam. “Parker? Take Mo

and figure out what the fuck is in that blacked-out building. Get evidence.” The big man nodded, gripped Mo’s shoulder, and disappeared.

Staying as low as possible, Irish cut an opening in the fence. All of the men were wearing the stealth technology, hoping they would remain unseen. Just beyond the fence, Irish and Cam froze as one of the guards walked toward them. He stopped at the fence, staring at the opening, reaching for his walkie. Cam dove for him, twisting his neck until he heard the snap. He dragged the body toward the building, sitting him against the brick. Irish just stared at him, not believing how fast he was.

Moving toward the dormitories, Alec saw the rows of tall, well-muscled men lying on their bunks. Grabbing the one closest to him, he covered his mouth, dragging him from the bed and out the door. Magnus watched to make sure none of the other men moved. They were probably so tired they couldn’t function.

“Do not scream,” said Alec in Russian, still holding his hand over the man’s mouth. “I want to help you. I will help you get out of here.”

The man's eyes narrowed, staring at Alec, then seeing the other men behind him. He shook his head, but Alec stayed the course.

"I'm not your enemy. What are they injecting into you?" He felt the tension from the man lessen and slowly released his hand from his mouth.

"You're Americans?" They all nodded. "He will kill me. It won't matter if I scream at this point or not. Because I didn't wake and alert the others, I will be killed."

"Not if you tell us what's going on in there," said Alec. "What are they injecting you with?"

"Animal hormone."

"Animal hormone? Like gorilla or elephant?" asked Bodhi.

"We don't know. They won't tell us. We get blood injected into us once a week and the hormones twice a week. It's supposed to make us faster and stronger without being detected by blood tests."

"And are you?" asked Alec. "Are you faster and stronger?"

“Not really. We were all top athletes or soldiers, already strong and fast. The general believes this will make us superior. It only makes some of us sick. Others have odd side effects. Rashes, blistering, weakened eyesight. It doesn’t work, but he continues.”

“Will the others leave with us?” asked Alec.

“No. They would rather die in Russia than be labeled as traitors or risk their families dying. I cannot leave with you either. I won’t fight you, but I cannot leave.”

“We can help you,” said Cam. The man looked at the faces of the men, settling on Chase.

“He’s looking for him and a blonde woman who lives in Finland. He wants to mate the two of you.” Chase started to speak, then heard rustling in the dormitory room. “I will try to buy you time. Go.”

Slipping back through the door behind him, they heard yelling and then someone asking the man where he’d been. He did as he promised. He lied.

“I had to use the latrine, sir,” he said.

“You’re lying,” said Victor.

“I assure you, sir. I had to use the latrine.” Hearing the sound of a gun, they winced, realizing that the man had lied for them, giving his life. None of these people were going to willingly leave the facility. Cam heard confirmation from Cade and Skull that the women were the same. They wouldn’t send out the alarm, but they couldn’t leave with them.

“We got the evidence,” said Parker. “Get the fuck out of there.”

“Not until I kill Victor,” said Chase.

“Save it for another day, Chase. We have our evidence.” Chase frowned at him. “While we were busy with the men and women, Trak and Zeke grabbed the vials and set explosives in the lab. We need to go, brother. If he survives, we’ll come after him again.”

Following the same path that they’d used to arrive, they slipped through the fence. As Chase covered the rear, he heard a familiar voice and stopped. Dolt. Standing outside the gate, he was speaking to one of the guards, laughing and telling him of how stupid the Americans were.

“Chase, don’t do it, brother,” said Mo.

“Gotta do it,” he whispered.

Carefully walking the fence line, the stealth still in place, Chase circled the two men. The guard lifted his nose as if smelling something unfamiliar. With a tight grip on his artery, he was out within seconds, leaving Dolt standing to wonder what had happened.

Chase stood behind the man, whispering in his ear.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know, Dolt? Did you think I wouldn’t come for you?” He jumped, turning in every direction, reaching for the voice.

“Who’s there? Green? Is that you?”

“You’re a fucking disgrace. How dare you put the uniform of an American SEAL on your body. How dare you pretend to be able to even carry my balls, let alone my trident.”

“It’s not what you think, Green,” he said, speaking to the darkness. “It’s not what you think.”

“It’s exactly what I think.”

Chase gripped the knife, running from one ear to the other, then dropping Dolt against the fence. Satisfied that he’d settled one score, he ran toward the trees and his teammates. By the time they reached the border, they could hear the

sounds of the alarms, lights glowing in the night sky, and then an explosion, glowing orange and yellow.

“We left Victor alive,” said Chase. Cam nodded.

“Maybe. Maybe not. If we did, it’s an op for another day, brother. Let’s go get the girls.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Maeve woke to butterfly kisses at her neck, smiling as Chase whispered in her ear.

“Wake up, sleepy head. We’re getting out of here.” Slowly opening her eyes, she realized that the lights were on, the other women already gathering their gear.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Let’s talk later. We need to go now.” She nodded, dressing quickly and following the others out of the hotel. Once in the SUV, Cam relayed what had occurred to them all.

“We were able to confirm a few things. Once the labs were blown, the chaos we heard when we left was the entire compound losing their shit. Whatever they thought about coming with us, they were obviously willing to do something far worse. They rebelled and killed Victor, the doctors and nurses, and the guards. According to Russian news media, the men and women were drug-addled rejects from their amazing sports program.”

“That’s a lie! Some of those people were amazing athletes,” said Maeve.

“We know, sweetie,” said Luke, “but we can’t change the minds of an entire nation. Especially when we’re the enemy.”

“I can’t believe this. Injecting people with animal hormones? That’s just cruel!”

“It’s not unusual, Maeve. In the eighties, bodybuilders were injecting themselves with horse hormones to build muscle and speed, as well as to help with their sexual performance. It didn’t work except to build the muscle, but it was short-lived. Many of them died of heart disease or strokes.”

“I don’t understand why anyone would want to do that.”

“Not everyone is blessed with your abilities,” said Kate. “People will go to many lengths to be the version they think is superior. Whether it’s plastic surgery or drug enhancements, it’s out there and available.”

“The good thing,” said Piper, “is that we have the evidence from the crematorium, the photos, the syringes and vials, and all of our film. The U.S. will file a formal grievance with NATO, the UN, and other agencies. They’ll handle this from here.”

Maeve nodded, leaning her head on Chase's shoulder. It wasn't even 0500, the sun just barely coming up over the barren landscape. Once on the plane, she passed out completely, happy to be safe and catching up on her sleep.

"Something still isn't sitting well with me," said Chase to Cam and Luke. "Dolt getting onto a team seemed too easy. I get that Brant was helping him, but even that is too convenient to just buy."

"We'll make sure all the loose ends are tied, Chase. Don't worry. Get some sleep for now. It'll be a long flight home, and then we've got to report to the POTUS." Cam nodded at his friend, took his seat, and reclined back.

By the time the planes had landed, the gear unloaded, and the cars back at Belle Fleur, it was nearly dinner time. Everyone grabbed a quick shower and met in the auditorium, complete with food delivered to them.

Calls were made to the president, and then Chase made the call to his commander, hoping that they would be cleared to come back and finish their time.

"You caused quite a stir, Green," said Lott.

“Sir? We were doing nothing other than what we were ordered to do.”

“Ordered? You weren’t ordered to do anything,” he said. Chase stared at the man on the screen, swallowing hard. They’d been played. His teammates stared at him, the others listening carefully. Hiro rolled his fingers, hoping that he could keep him on the line a little longer.

“No disrespect, sir, but you ordered us to do what was necessary. To handle Dolt and to manage the situation with Victor Pegoski, getting evidence from that training facility.”

“From all reports, you murdered Dolt and Pegoski, stealing items from the Russian compound and setting charges to blow the evidence that you were there.”

“I’m not sure what your game is, commander, but if you think for one moment I don’t have evidence of our conversations, you are seriously mistaken.” Lott’s face froze, his brow now creased with worry. “Did you forget who my family is, sir?”

“No. I didn’t forget. Your old man always was a pain in my ass.”

“I’m going to be a bigger pain in your ass,” said Tango. “I’m coming for you, Lott. And you have nowhere to hide.”

The screen went black, and Chase leaned back in his chair, exhaustion and disbelief on his face. He looked at the others and didn’t know what to say.

“Not your fault, Chase,” said Mo. “If the Navy says we’re gone, we’re gone. I’m done either way. This was it for me.”

“Same,” said Tanner. “I’m done, Chase. We’ve got the recordings of the conversations with Lott. We’ll be exonerated, and then we’ll find him.”

Two days later, Chase and his team returned to Coronado by command of JAG corps. Their team and Commander Lott were under investigation. Three weeks. Three long, agonizing weeks of interviews, reviews of their operation, questions for the RP team, and finally, the interviews with Karen Brant.

It was a shock to them all that it was her testimony that set them free. She crumbled under the first questioning, revealing everything she’d given to not only Dolt but also to

Commander Lott. It seemed Karen Brant had a serious sexual appetite for men in uniform.

“You are all free to go,” said the new commander.

“Go? As in leave the Navy, sir?” asked Irish. He looked at the team and frowned.

“I’d be damn sad to see you all leave. We need great teams, and you were one of the best, but I understand what’s happened here, and you are probably a little jaded at this point. If you want early release, I’ll grant it.”

As the men left the building, Chase took in a big gulp of Pacific air. They were free. They were free to go home. Free to do whatever they wanted. He was free to marry Maeve and begin a life at Belle Fleur.

“I’m with you, brother,” smiled Irish.

“Same,” said Tanner.

“Me too,” grinned Mo.

“You’re not getting rid of me,” said Bogey. “Take me home to Mama Irene, my new girlfriend!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

By mid-June, Maeve's parents had arrived from Barbados for their wedding. They were thrilled to meet the handsome man that had stolen their daughter's heart. They were also shocked to see her so physically fit, watching her on her early morning runs as if nothing were wrong. Chase convinced Maeve to keep this one secret from her parents, and she agreed.

Well, that and the ghosts. They wouldn't understand.

Lott was in the wind, nowhere to be found. Although his days were numbered, and RP was already working on a plan to get to him.

It was an unusual treat to have all of the sons home from the military. Will and Benjamin Pechkin, both MARSOC Marines, looked like poster boys for the Corps. AJ Mills, a SEAL, was also home, looking as handsome as his father and almost as shy. HG, Benji, and Ty O'Neal, also MARSOC, were so strikingly handsome every woman on the dance floor swooned for them. Fortunately, they hadn't inherited their uncles' man-whore ways.

With her father at her side, Maeve walked down the aisle to become Mrs. Chase Green. Taylor cried. Her mother cried, and their fathers both fought back tears. When all the ‘I do’s’ were said, the rings exchanged, the kisses given, Mr. and Mrs. Green celebrated with their families.

“We still have to worry about Lott,” whispered Irish as if no one would hear him.

“We’re well aware,” said Cam, making the men jump. “We’ll be making a plan to get Lott, but for now, enjoy the festivities.”

“Weddings aren’t really my thing, Cam,” said Irish, frowning. Cam and Luke laughed, doubling over at the absurd comment.

“Brother, you need to get used to them. We have two to four a year.”

“What?” gasped Irish. “Holy shit, I knew there was a negative somewhere in this deal.”

While everyone danced and enjoyed the amazing food, Sara managed the catering, although her staff was more than capable. She pointed to where items needed refilling or plates picked up, but her team was used to these big events. Seeing

something that didn't sit well with her, she walked toward the back of the tent.

"Brooke, are you okay?" she asked the young woman. She'd been working part-time at the café for almost four years now. Attending the University of New Orleans part-time and working part-time was exhausting for the poor woman, but Sara always felt like there might be something else there.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I'm just not feeling well tonight."

"Honey, why didn't you say something? Let me get Riley or Lena to take a look at you."

"I don't want them to miss the party."

"There's always a party here, Brooke. You know that," she smiled. Taking her by the hand, Sara led her through the crowds. As they passed Will, Brooke looked at the man and smiled. He probably wouldn't remember her. He was a lot older and had barely looked her way when he was home on leave.

For Brooke, he was the epitome of the type of man she wanted in her life. He was strong, handsome, big, smart, and kind. He was always kind. She'd watched him with others, always appreciative for their service. Even more wonderful to

see was the kindness and gentleness he showed his mother, Sophia.

“Riley, I hate to ask this, but Brooke isn’t feeling well. I wondered if you could take a look at her.”

“Of course, honey. Brooke, why didn’t you come to me sooner? You know we’re always willing to treat our staff.”

“I know, but the wedding and all the people. It just didn’t seem the right time.”

“Alright, let’s go to the infirmary in the office,” said Riley.

“The infirmary? Wait, do I need to undress?” she asked.

“Is that a problem?” said Riley.

“I-I don’t think it’s a good idea. I’m okay, really.” She stood and started to walk back to where Sara had found her standing.

“Brooke!” called Sara.

“I’m sorry, Sara. I have to go.”

Will watched the young woman leave the tent and followed. Sara looked at Riley with a raised eyebrow and

smirked.

“That’s interesting.”

“Very. But the bruises on her neck were far more interesting,” said Riley.

“Oh, damn.”

“I’ll go tell Max. You go let Wilson know. I’ll see if I can follow the two of them.”

“What do you think is happening with them?” asked Maeve, watching Sara and Riley fuss over Brooke, then watched her disappear. Chase watched as Will followed the young woman and smiled, shaking his head.

“If I had to guess, another wedding. But honestly, I don’t care. What I really want, Mrs. Green, is to take you out to the island mansion for a few days where no one will bother us.”

“Lead the way, husband. Lead the way.”

The ghostly team stood to the side of the tent, watching the festivities. Martha and Nathan were dancing to a slow song. She’d learned to like the new music, mostly because it allowed her to be close to Nathan. Tony and Claudette were also dancing. He was looking down at her, smiling, and she

was staring at him as if he were the only man on earth. But they were children. Weren't they?

“Should we be concerned?” asked Grip, watching as Will followed Brooke out of the tent.

“They know what they're doin'. Let 'em do it,” said Franklin. “Besides, that boy needs that girl to get himself right.”

“I wish we could do more,” Grip mused.

“We're ghosts, Grip. Ain't nothin' more we can do other than help to guide these children. Lord knows it's a full-time job. I'm gonna get me some roast beef.”

“We can't eat,” smirked Grip.

“Don't take away my dreams, boy, and I won't take away yours.”

EXCERPT from WILL

“Brooke, what is this? Are you being abused?” asked Riley, staring at her arms.

“You don’t understand, please,” she said, trying to pull her arm back.

“Honey, we can help you,” said Sara. “This doesn’t have to continue. In fact, it won’t continue.”

“I agree,” said Max. “You’ll stay here with us until we can figure out what’s going on. No one will touch you here.”

“It’s really not what you think. Please, just take a look at my abdomen. Please,” she asked. Riley nodded, lifting her shirt as the men cursed behind her. The yellow, green, and purple indicated that she had been hit, kicked, or beaten in some way.

“Shit,” said Wilson. “You may have damaged your kidneys. Are you having any difficulty going to the bathroom?”

“Some,” she said with a blush. “I mean, I’m going, but I do have some blood in my urine.”

“Honey, this is serious,” said Riley. “I’m going to need to do a complete work-up on you. You need to stay here, Brooke. I’m not taking no for an answer. I don’t want to have to force you to be here, but I will if I need to, and I can make Max and Wilson help me.”

“You can’t force me to stay, Riley. I need to get home. I have things I need to do.”

“Nothing is worth your life, Brooke. This could kill you,” said Wilson.

“Fine, I’ll stay but only for one night.”

“Brooke, this may take several nights to get to what’s happening,” said Max. “Listen to Riley and Wilson. They know what they’re doing.”

“One night.”

“She’ll stay as long as you need her to stay, even if I have to tie her to my bed.” Brooke stared at the handsome face of Will Pechkin, swallowing as he looked at the bruises on her abdomen.

“Will.”

“You’re staying.”

SERIES AND FAMILY GUIDE

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
1	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Joe "Nine" Dougall	Erin Richards	Joy Elizabeth "Ellie"	Jackson "Jax" Diaz
				Cameron	Kate Robicheaux
2	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Joseph "Trak" Redhawk	Lauren Owens	Sophia	Eric Bongard
				Suzette	Keith Robicheaux
				Nathan	Katrina Santos
				Joseph	Julia Anderson
3	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Billy Joe "Tailor" Bongard	Cholena "Lena" Blackwood	Eric	Sophia Ann Redhawk
4	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Dan "Wilson" Anderson	Sara MacMillan	Paige	Ryan Holden Robicheaux
				Julia	Joseph Redhawk
5	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Luke "Angel" Jordan	Mary Fitzhugh	Marc (Luke)	Ela Wolfkill
				Georgianna	Carl Robicheaux
				Wesley	Virginia Robicheaux
6	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Peter "Miller" Robicheaux	Kari LeBlanc	Frank Gaspar	Lane Quinn
7	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Rachelle Robicheaux	Frank "Mac" MacMillan	Danielle (Dani) Marie	Dev Parker
8	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Adele Robicheaux	Clay Duffy		
9	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Gabriel Robicheaux	Tory Gibson		
9	<i>Reaper Security</i>	John "Gibbie" Gibson	Dhara	Dalton	Calla Michaels
9	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Antoine Robicheaux	Ella Stanton	Ryan Holden Robicheaux	Paige Anderson
9	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Gaspar Robicheaux	Alexandra Minsky	Luke	Ajei Blackwood
				Carl	Georgianna Jordan
				Ben	Harper Miller
				Adam	Jane Wolfkill

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
	<i>Steel Patriots</i>			Violet	Striker Michaels
6	<i>Reaper Patriots</i>			Lucy	Alex "Sniff" Mullins
10	<i>Reaper Security</i>	William "Bull" Stone	Lily Bennett		
11	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Luc Robicheaux	Montana Divide		
12	<i>Reaper Security</i>	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		
13	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Jasper "Jazz" Divide	Gray Vanzant	Virginia	Wes Jordan
14	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Baptiste Robicheaux	Rose Ellis	Elizabeth Irene "Liz"	Kiel Wolfkill
14	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Alec Robicheaux	Lissa Duncan	Keith	Susie Redhawk
15	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Stone Roberts	Bronwyn Ross		
16	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Suzette Robicheaux	Sylvester "Sly" DiMarco		
16	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Max Neill	Riley Corbett	CC	
17	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Titus Quinn	Olivia Baine	Lane	Frank Robicheaux
				Dominic	Leightyn Dooley
18	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Axel Doyle	Cait Brennan	Corey	
		Vince Martin	Ally Lawrence	Christian Martin	
19	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Phoenix Keogh	Raven Foster		
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Crow Foster			
19	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Wesley "Pigsty" O'Neal	Aasira "Sira" Al Aman		
20	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Ezekiel "Zeke" Wolfkill	Noelle Hart	Ezekiel ("Kiel")	Liz Divide
				Jane	Adam Robicheaux
20	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Elias Haggerty	Janie Granier		

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
20	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Russell "RJ" Jones	Celia Granier		
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Chad Taylor			
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Woody "Doc" Fine			
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	(d) Tony Parks			
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	(d) Alan Haley			
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Michael Bodwick	Miriam	Aspen	Ian Robicheaux
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Miguel Santos	Doug	Katrina	Nathan Redhawk
	<i>Reaper Security</i>	Luke Robicheaux	Ajei Blackwood	Garrett	
1	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Ian Shepard	Faith Gallagher	Kelsey Gallagher	Noa Lim
2	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Noa Lim	Kelsey Gallagher		
3	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Dave Carter	Ani Lim		
4	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Lars Merrick	Jessica Fisher		
5	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Trevor Banks	Ashley Dalton		
5	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	John Cruz	Camille Robicheaux		
6	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Alec "Fitz" Fitzhenry	Zoe Myers		
7	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Chris Paul	Elizabeth Broussard		
8	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Luke O'Hara	Lucia Salvado		
8	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Rory Baine	Piper Colley		
	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	(d) Anthony Garcia			
	<i>My Seal Boys</i>	Eric & Anna Tanner			
1	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Eric "Ghost" Stanton	Grace Easton	(d) Faith & Hope	
				Jack Tyran "JT"	
				Eric Ryan	
2	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Jack "Doc" Harris	Aubrey "Bree" Collins	Eva Irene	

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
3	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Wade "Whiskey" English	Katarina Krevnyv	Juliette Rose	
4	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Quincy "Zulu" Slater	Gabrielle London	Wade Eric	
				Tyler Gunner	
5	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Gunner Michaels	Darby Greer	Calla	Dalton Gibson
6	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Tyler "Tango" Green	Taylor Holland	Chase Maxwell	
7	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Diego "Razor" Salcedo	Isabella "Bella" Castro		
8	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Alex "Ace" Mills	Charlotte "CC Robot" Tabor	Alexander John "AJ"	
9	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Tyran "Eagle" O'Neal	Tinley Oakley	Tyran Eagle	
				Hawk Gunner	
				Benjamin Scott	
9	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Ryan "Hawk" O'Neal	Keegan Oakley		
10	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Scott "Skull" Crawford	Willa Ross (deceased) Avery O'Connor	Mathew Scott	
				Kevin Alexander	
11	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Benjamin "Blade" LeBlanc	Suzette Doiron	Benjamin Alfonse	
12	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Noah Anders	Tru Blanchard	William Rush	
13	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Tristan Evers	Emma Colvin	Hannah Ivana	
14	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Ivan Pechkin	Sophia Lord	William	
				Benjamin	
				Celeste	
				Cassidy	

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
				Carrie	
15	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Griffin "Griff" James	Amanda Nettles		
16	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Bryce Nolan	Ivy Brooks		
17	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Kingston Miles	Claire Evers		
18	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Grant Zimmerman	Everly "Evie" Johnson		
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Molly Walker	Asia	boy	
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	George Robert Williamson	Mary		
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	(d) Axel "Axe" Mains	(d) Decker "Ice" McManus		
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	James Scarlutti			
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Chen Wu		Choi Wu	
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Ian Laughlin			
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Conor Laughlin			
	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Vincent Scalia		(d) Isabella	
19	<i>Steel Patriots MC</i>	Strikers Michaels	Violet Robicheaux		
1	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Dexter Lock	Marie Robicheaux		
2	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Jean Robicheaux	Rose "Ro" Evers		
3	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Jackson "Jax" Diaz	Joy "Ellie" Dougall		
4	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Hunter Michaels	Megan Scott		
5	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Carl Robicheaux	Penelope Georgianna "Georgie" Jordan		
6	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Alex "Sniff" Mullins	Lucy Robicheaux	Caroline Willa	

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
7	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Cameron "Cam" Dougall	Kate Robicheaux	Ian William	
8	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Keith Robicheaux	Suzette "Susie" Redhawk	Joseph Alec Keith (JAK)	
9	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Eric Bongard	Sophia Ann Redhawk	Billy Joseph	
10	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Joseph Redhawk	Julia Anderson	Joseph Billy (JB)	
				Tobias Franklin	
11	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Ryan Robicheaux (Holden)	Paige Anderson	Dan Antoine	
12	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Nathan Redhawk	Katrina Santos	Nathan Luke	
				Michael Douglas	
13	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Ben Robicheaux	Harper Miller		
14	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Sean Liffey	Shay Miller		
15	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Ezekiel 'Kiel' Wolfkill	Elizabeth 'Liz' Robicheaux	Everett Baptiste	
				Eastman Matthew	
				Ethan Ezekiel	
16	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Ian Robicheaux	Aspen Bodwick		
17	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Adam Robicheaux	Jane Wolfkill		
18	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Marc Jordan	Ela Wolfkill		
19	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Wes Jordan	Virginia Divide	Patrick Jasper	
				Christopher Luke	
				Sadie Allison	
20	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Aiden Wagner	Brit Elig		
21	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Devin Parker	Danielle 'Dani' MacMillan		
22	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Dalton Gibson	Calla Michaels		
23	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Frank Robicheaux	Lane Quinn		

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
		Jake Fernet	Claudette Robicheaux		
24	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Hirohito Tanaka	Winter Cole		
25	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Dominic 'Dom' Quinn	Leightyn Dooley	Conor Dooley Quinn	
26	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Bron Jones	Mila Lambton		
		Thomas Bradshaw	May Wong		
27	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Patrick Fitch	Carsen Benoit	Preg.	
28	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Charles Corbett 'CC' Neill	Eva Harris		
29	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Callan Battle	Juliette English		
30	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Duncan Adams	Lindsay Pollard		
31	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Remy Robicheaux	Charlotte Guthrie		
32	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Garrett Robicheaux	Celeste Pechkin		
33	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Robbie Robicheaux	Carrie Pechkin	Preg.	
34	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Cade Norgenson	Cassidy Pechkin		
35	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Bodhi Norgenson	Vivienne Green	Walker Sten	
36	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Magnus Bridges	Addie Patterson		
37	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Hex Vernon	Gwen N'hana	Sebastian Tadzee	
38	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Wade Slater	Hannah Evers	Preg.	
39	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Sam Cooper	Mia Rogers		
40	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Tiger Slater	Hazel Bream		
41	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Jalen Carson	Stormy Rainwaters		
42	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Eric Ryan "Chief" Stanton	Rachel Davis	Ellie, Maddie, Emelia, Magnolia	
43	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Matthew Robicheaux	Irene Hebert	Gaspar, Pierre, Marie, Luc, Antoine, Claudette, Camille, Jean, Adele, Rachelle, Gabriel, Raphael, Baptiste, Suzette, Alec	

(#) Book in Series	<i>Name of Series</i>	Character Name	Spouse	Child	Child's Spouse
44	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Milo Abbott	Lia Goodwin		
45	<i>Reaper-Patriots</i>	Nic "Torro" Torres	Melanie Fairfield		

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[Trevor](#)

[Fitz](#)

[Chris](#)

[O'Hara](#)

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Magnus – Book
Thirty-six

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Kennedy is the mother of two adult children, has an amazing son-in-law, and is grandmother to two 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,

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I look forward to hearing from you and hope you enjoy other books in my collections.

Explore... and enjoy!

[PC1] Is he just using "daylight" as a term? Or maybe it should be "moonlight"? Or maybe "running into daylight"?

[PC2] If he was just waking up and Maeve wasn't up yet, where did the smells come from? He's talking about things he misses